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Idaho Court Assistance Office Project (CAOP) Update

by Patrick Costello

A pilot project funded by the State Justice Institute (SJI) has been found to be overwhelmingly popular with the self-represented litigants it served, according to an independent evaluation by the Justice Management Institute.

The Idaho Court Assistance Office Project (CAOP) was designed to assist self represented litigants by linking them to attorneys where possible, and to provide informational resources to assist them in representing themselves where attorney representation was unavailable or not desired. The Justice Management Institute of Denver, Colorado (JMI) evaluated the CAOP, in January 2000, following the end of the pilot project period. The final evaluation report, "Helping Self-Represented Litigants in Idaho: An Evaluation Report on the Idaho Court Assistance Office Project," which was recently released by SJI, found that the CAOP has been very successful in delivering the services for which it was designed. In their first six months of operation, the court assistance offices serviced 664 first-time and repeat visitors. In a follow-up public satisfaction survey sent by JMI to many of the office users, 98% reported that they found the service to be helpful and that they would use a CAO again. Ninety-three percent of the users reported that their use of the service increased their satisfaction with the court process.

The Idaho Supreme Court obtained funding from the State Justice Institute to conduct a six-month pilot project to establish court assistance offices in three pilot counties from July through December 1999. Outside funding was obtained to add two additional pilot offices. The five offices served ten counties around the state, ranging in population from 5,000 to 80,000. The purpose of the pilot project was to test various staffing models and to develop the array of services that would provide the most effective service to pro se litigants, primarily in family law cases. The project's oversight committee included representatives of all of the major agencies and organizations involved in assisting pro se litigants in Idaho: judicial personnel, the state Bar, the Department of Health And Welfare, the University of Idaho College of Law, the Idaho Council on Domestic Violence, and Idaho Legal Aid Services.

Both the JMI Report and the project's oversight committee concluded that the full range of services developed for use in the Court Assistance Offices resulted in effective assistance, both in the eyes of the self-represented litigants themselves, and in the view of judges, clerks and other court personnel. Those services included:

- Information on attorneys and types of services they can provide (i.e., pro bono and reduced rate representation, unbundled services)
- Referral to mediators
- Application for direct legal services for low-income individuals (i.e., Idaho Legal Aid Services, Idaho Volunteer Lawyers Program)

- Toll-free Legal Resource Line for brief legal consultations (operated by the Idaho Law Foundation), domestic violence hotline (through Idaho Legal Aid Services) and legal research line (from the Idaho State Law Library)
- Information on services provided by government and private agencies
- Court forms and instructions for many types of civil cases, with an emphasis on family law
- Review of completed court forms
- Written instructions on how to proceed with many types of civil cases, including which forms to use and how to fill them out
- Use of computers to prepare court documents, and research and access other Internet resources
- Informational brochures and pamphlets on a variety of legal topics, organizations and agencies
- Information on pro se litigation workshops sponsored by Idaho Legal Aid Services and Idaho Volunteer Lawyers Program
- Information and referral to resources to protect children in high-conflict cases (e.g. visitation supervisors)
- Instructional videos, with accompanying brochures on topics including an introduction to the court system, family law, and domestic violence
- Workshops on obtaining a divorce, and on modifying and enforcing divorce or custody decrees

Many materials are available in both English and Spanish, and a certified Court interpreter is available by telephone through the CAOs.

In addition, the oversight committee concluded that a regional approach was an effective method to deliver these services, with a trained professional Court Assistance Officer in each judicial district coordinating services and training with court clerks in every county.

The CAOP was selected by the American Judicature Society as one of the projects to be showcased at the National Conference on Pro Se Litigation, held in Scottsdale, Arizona in November, 1999. The National Association of IOLTA (Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts) Programs selected the CAOP as one of six innovative pilot projects to be featured in its report, "Replication and Innovation in Legal Services," published in July, 2000.

In addition to the JMI evaluation report, other grant products include a "Directory of Idaho Legal Services," which provides a comprehensive guide to legal and related services available in Idaho, and a "Training Curriculum and Reference Guidebook on Public Service for Court Assistance Officers," which contains office specifications, materials inventory, pamphlet index, intake forms, a "Guide to Providing Service to the Public" eligibility criteria for various legal services programs, Internet

links, instructions for court forms, and other information. Copies of these products are available from the State Justice Institute or from the Project Director at the University of Idaho College of Law.

The final project product is a CAO Website to access the array of CAO services and to download court forms, instructions, and other CAO resources (<http://www2.state.id.us/cao/>).

Operation of the five pilot offices continues and the host counties have begun to participate in their funding. The Idaho Supreme Court will open five new Court Assistance offices around Idaho this year.

For further information on the Court Assistance Office Project, please contact:

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