How to Collaborate With Community Partners to Improve People’s Access to Legal Support Resources
Steps for making civil courts more effective

Overview
Courts that collaborate with community organizations to make legal assistance and other support mechanisms available and accessible, especially for litigants without attorneys, can help people resolve legal issues before they become court cases, prioritize court resources for more contentious and complex cases, and reduce costs for all involved. And when people receive legal assistance before coming to court, they are better prepared and empowered to participate in their cases, and the time they spend engaging with the court is shorter and more productive.

Courts seeking to improve access to legal resources through collaboration with community partners can begin by implementing two key practices:

- Make legal assistance, social services, and financial supports (e.g., rental assistance and financial counseling) available to court users who want it.
- Connect people to court resources to reduce case volume.

After extensive research, The Pew Charitable Trusts has developed a framework outlining how and why courts should modernize. These steps arise from that work and can help programmatic and operational court staff, along with court leadership, assess state courts’ current level of collaboration with community organizations; identify ways to improve those partnerships to expand court users’ access to needed resources; and decide—with input from relevant stakeholders—which of those opportunities to pursue and how.
Step 1: Bring together relevant court staff and external stakeholders

These groups can contribute important perspectives and insights about how to collaborate with community partners to support greater access to resources.

Court users can provide feedback about which court-provided resources they found most helpful and most challenging when looking for help.

Leadership/administrative officers can champion and scale pilot programs that increase access to legal resources, push for regulatory reforms to enable nontraditional organizations and businesses to provide legal assistance, and support the use of mediators when appropriate.

Clerks can share information about available resources with court users who need help and ensure that data on the type and breadth of legal assistance that users receive is accurately coded in the case management system in line with data standards.

Access to justice staff can identify gaps in legal assistance resources and champion solutions, such as partnering with community organizations to provide assistance and improving forms to include information about available assistance.

Self-help staff can compile resources for court users (e.g., FAQs about court services and legal information fact sheets), develop bench cards for judges with information about available social services, and partner with external organizations to refer court users.

Research staff can compare how jurisdictions with and without external partnerships handle cases and share this information with court leaders and access to justice staff to bring successful collaboration models to scale.

Community partners can conduct community outreach to identify legal issues and potential solutions and connect people with court resources, social services, and financial assistance.

Legal stakeholders (e.g., civil legal aid, bar foundation, law firms) can partner with the court to offer brief legal assistance (e.g., a "lawyer-for-a-day" booth outside a courtroom where litigants can ask questions or get help negotiating a settlement), provide input about how to connect court users with legal resources, develop guidance on reforms to expand the availability of legal assistance (e.g., reviewing regulations on unauthorized practice of law), and support diversion and other alternative dispute resolution efforts.

Step 2: Assess current practices and set next steps

The following set of key metrics can enable courts to assess their progress toward collaborating with community organizations to improve access to resources. (See Tables 1 and 2.)

For each metric, determine whether the answer to the initial question is yes or no using the suggested measure. When the answer is no, the court should pursue the suggested next steps in collaboration with staff and stakeholders. The suggested steps are not prescriptive; instead, they provide ideas and options for getting started. The included state examples can help courts determine what actions are feasible given available resources.
Table 1
Courts Should Connect Litigants With Legal and Social Services
Metrics, suggested steps, and state examples and resources

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<th>Metric</th>
<th>If not, suggested next steps</th>
<th>Examples and resources</th>
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| Do litigants receive any type of legal help during their cases? | • Partner with local legal aid organizations or pro bono attorneys to develop lawyer-for-a-day initiatives.  
• Pursue rule changes or pilot programs to allow nonlawyer legal professionals (e.g., paralegals) to provide limited legal assistance.  
• Launch or expand a virtual or physical self-help center where court users can receive free legal information, service referrals, and, depending on court rules, assistance completing forms.  
• Dedicate virtual or physical space for private conversations between lawyers and their clients.  
• Promote legal assistance and mediation programs, such as including information with the summons and complaint, having judges share information from the bench, and posting information on court websites and social media accounts.  
Who’s involved:  
- Access to Justice  
- Clerks  
- Judges  
- Leadership  
- Researchers  
- Legal stakeholders | • In July 2022, the Oregon Supreme Court authorized paralegals to provide limited legal assistance in family and landlord-tenant cases, joining several other states with similar programs, including Arizona, Minnesota, and Utah.  
• The National Center for State Courts (NCSC) offers guidance on partnering with legal and social service providers.  
• NCSC compiled a list of 20 pilot projects, rule changes, and court innovations to improve access to the courts and resolution of legal issues, including streamlining case flows and launching easy-access self-help resources. |
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<td>Do courts regularly refer users to social services, when appropriate, to resolve their issues?</td>
<td>• Develop referral protocols and relationships with community agencies to address underlying problems (e.g., connecting a mother who lost her job with rental assistance to prevent eviction, keep her child in school, and avoid child welfare involvement).&lt;br&gt;• Create a pilot program for courtroom navigators or other justice workers to connect court users with social service resources.&lt;br&gt;• Collect feedback from court navigators, self-help staff, mediators, and volunteers about which aspects of their work are most helpful to court users without lawyers and which could be scaled up, reduced, or improved.&lt;br&gt;• Collaborate with community partners to develop and review public-facing information and outreach materials for plain language, readability, accessibility, and translation into various languages.</td>
<td>• Michigan’s 54-A District has a formal relationship with a nonlawyer eviction diversion counselor who screens cases, schedules financial counseling appointments, connects tenants with homelessness services and shelters, and alerts clients about food and clothing drives.&lt;br&gt;• The Las Vegas Justice Court’s eviction diversion program requires tenants to file an answer form that doubles as a screening tool, which court staff members use to connect individuals to county-level social services, as needed.&lt;br&gt;• NCSC developed best practices for connecting litigants with eviction diversion resources and for determining whether tenants and landlords should engage with these programs before or after a case is filed.</td>
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How to measure it:<br>Analyze court data or track referrals from self-help staff, courtroom navigators, and judges.

Who’s involved:
- Access to justice
- Leadership
- Researchers
- Self-help
- Community partners
- Legal stakeholders

Sources: Supreme Court of the State of Oregon, “In the Matter of Approval of Rules to Implement Paralegal Licensing in Oregon” (2022); Tara Hughes and Joyce Reichard, “How States Are Using Limited Licensed Legal Paraprofessionals to Address the Access to Justice Gap” (Sept. 2, 2022); National Center for State Courts, “Building Eviction Diversion Referral Partnerships”; National Center for State Courts, “Appendix D: Pilot Projects, Rule Changes, and Other Innovations in State Courts Around the Country” (2016); M. Begay, “54-A District Court Receives Funding for Program to Reduce Evictions in Lansing” (July 20, 2022); “Eviction Diversion Program: Las Vegas Justice Court” (2023); National Center for State Courts, “Eviction Diversion Best Practices—Timing Considerations”

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| Are civil legal issues being resolved outside the courtroom? | • Leverage trusted community groups who can conduct culturally appropriate outreach to those at highest risk for civil legal issues, such as eviction.  
• Adopt rules or policies that encourage early resolution and information sharing (e.g., requiring that information about diversion be sent to the defendant).  
• Identify whether regulatory barriers or state and local laws prevent diversion, or other programs from being launched.  
**Who’s involved:**  
[Access to justice] [Leadership] [Researchers] [Community partners]  
[Legal stakeholders]  | • NCSC’s Eviction Diversion Initiative helps jurisdictions build, sustain, and expand eviction diversion programs.  
• NCSC outlined and posted two videos on best practices and considerations for pre- or post-filing eviction diversion programs.  
• During the COVID-19 pandemic, Oregon developed an eviction prevention program in which the Oregon Housing and Community Services and the Oregon Law Center partnered with trusted community groups, including the Urban League of Portland and the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization, to conduct outreach.  
• In Maricopa County, Arizona, the court can require self-represented litigants to attend an early resolution conference in which they meet virtually with a family law case manager who can help them prepare documents and reach a resolution outside the courtroom. |
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| Are judges able to spend their time on the cases that most require their expertise, such as those involving disputes of the law or facts in evidence? | • Early in each case, engage with the court users by scheduling a hearing, triaging cases to receive the right level of court involvement, or connecting the court users with legal aid or community organizations that can support them in navigating their legal issue.  
• Develop guidelines to triage cases and right-size case management based on complexity, needs, and other relevant variables. | • NCSC evaluated a Florida pilot program that included case management teams—made up of a judge, case manager, judicial assistant, and bailiff, each with an assigned role—and found that cases assigned under the pilot model were resolved more quickly than those without a management team and that attorneys and judges reported greater satisfaction with the processes.  
• The Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System has 10 guidelines for differentiated or right-size case management, including that management activities should begin early and continue through the life cycle of the case and that judges can use conferences and ensure that discovery is proportional to the case.  
• NCSC’s case management team guidance includes a checklist of questions that courts can use to assess existing resources, including technology and staff. |

How to measure it: Analyze court docket data on judicial workloads and timelines.  

Who’s involved: Judges, Leadership, Researchers, Self-help, Court users  

The work in action: Courts in Cook County, Illinois, collaborate with community organizations to divert evictions

In November 2021, Cook County, Illinois, launched the Cook County Legal Aid for Housing and Debt Early Resolution Program (ERP)—a partnership of the Chicago Bar Foundation, the Chicago Bar Association, the city of Chicago, Cook County, and a network of service providers and community organizations. The program, which the county started shortly after it began conducting virtual hearings, helps court users access legal and rental assistance, mediation, and community support resources to resolve eviction and consumer debt cases without traditional litigation. By assisting litigants in solving their issues, ERP also enables judges to focus on more complex cases.

“Equal access to justice requires commitment and can be advanced in many ways,” said Judge Barbara Flores, one of two judges presiding over the ERP courtroom in Chicago. “Programs like ERP help self-represented litigants more capably navigate through, and competently participate in, the judicial process.”

Nearly half of eviction and debt collection cases in Cook County are filed at just five courthouses in suburban communities outside Chicago. The ERP helps to ensure consistency in how cases are managed throughout the county, makes it easier for litigants in these areas to access legal services—which had previously been concentrated in downtown Chicago—and eliminates the problem of cases proceeding to judgment before the parties can connect with legal aid or apply for rental assistance. Defendants receive information about ERP in English, Spanish, and Polish at the time of service and can connect with program staff by calling a dedicated hotline or by connecting with case managers who are present during their initial virtual court hearings. Additionally, during those first hearings, judges can direct unrepresented litigants to one of 25 virtual breakout rooms to meet with representatives from legal aid, mediation, and rental assistance programs. Program resources are available to self-represented landlords and tenants, and individuals who participate receive a 28-day continuance to pursue a solution outside court before trial. The continuance provision also helps save court time, allowing judges to focus more on disputes of fact or law.

Since ERP’s launch, judges have referred about 34,000 cases for case management and program services. The program has enabled tens of thousands of litigants to access resources or reach resolutions without the need to travel to several physical offices seeking help. The Chicago Bar Foundation also partnered with Stout Risius Ross, an investment and evaluation firm, to evaluate the program and found that 76% of litigants who received legal services and settlement negotiations through ERP felt confident that they would achieve their goals, such as tenants receiving rental assistance or staying in their homes, or landlords recovering possession of their rental units.
Endnotes


