The decline in both the Michigan and national economies has led to an increasing number of individuals representing themselves in court. \(^1\) For many people, hiring an attorney is a luxury that they cannot afford. At the same time, legal aid programs have not had the resources to keep up with this increased demand. \(^2\) Individuals are now representing themselves in court for a wide variety of legal services, including divorce, child custody, child support, landlord/tenant, home foreclosure, protection from abuse, employment concerns, and business disputes. Due to the economic barriers that often prevent them from retaining an attorney, self-represented litigants (SRLs) are now turning to other entities to obtain legal assistance. \(^3\) One of these entities is the public library, which provides community-wide access to information and technology resources. \(^4\) This new customer base provides numerous challenges to public libraries because many are not equipped with the necessary legal materials and/or expertise to provide meaningful assistance to the SRL. \(^5\) Likewise, no matter how much information a

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\(^3\) Broderick & George, supra note 1.


\(^5\) Id.
library may be able to provide, it cannot provide legal advice and will never be a substitute for legal representation. This article will examine how the Adams-Pratt Oakland County Law Library (APLL) grappled with the challenges of serving SRLs and how the Library established unique programs and partnerships within the legal community to assist them in a whole new way.

II. BACKGROUND

In his remarks at the 2008 National Access to Justice Conference, then New Hampshire Chief Justice John T. Broderick, Jr. told the audience:

Equal justice under law is not achievable if poverty or limited resources effectively barricade the doors to our courthouses and do not allow a growing segment of our population a fair, understandable, affordable and impartial forum for resolution of their disputes. How would you feel if we had a system in this country where, if you went to an emergency room with severe abdominal pain, without insurance, you were told to use the illustrated textbooks on the bookshelves to diagnose your problem and the sterilized instruments in the trays to perform your own surgery? All of us would think that system immoral. Somehow, when mothers or fathers are told to fight for custody of their child or for their health care, their job, their apartment or their home without a lawyer, too many think it’s perfectly alright for them to perform their own surgery in our courthouses with burdens, rules and process they do not understand.6

This scenario described by Chief Justice Broderick so aptly describes the situation SRLs find themselves in when going to court. The lack of knowledge of the legal system causes confusion, frustration and anger for the SRL. It can also lengthen the time and increases the cost of court proceedings. It is not an ideal situation for either the SRL or the Court.

This situation has been compounded by the economic downturn in the American economy that has only increased the number of SRLs in the court system.7 A survey conducted by the Self-Represented Litigation Network in 2009 found that 50-60% of judges reported having an

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7. Id.
increase in cases with SRLs. They also reported that the SRLs did not exclusively come from the ranks of the poor. Many members of the middle class are also becoming SRLs as the fees charged by some attorneys are becoming increasingly out of their reach.

The SRL increases are manifesting themselves in all layers of the court system: federal, state, and local. One study of the federal court system found that in 37% of the cases there was a SRL. While state data is not uniformly collected, there have been some studies that indicate a substantial increase in SRL cases. New Hampshire reported having at least one SRL party in 85% of district court civil cases and 48% in superior court civil cases.

Economic difficulties are not the only reason behind the increase in the SRL population. Some SRLs want to represent themselves simply because they believe in their constitutional right to do so. Others believe their situations are relatively simple to resolve and do not require the expertise of an attorney.

While legal aid programs exist for the precise reason of being able to assist those who cannot afford an attorney, the resources of these programs are not enough to meet the demand. According to a study done by the Legal Services Corporation, the largest publicly funded legal aid provider in the United States, for every person served by the program, at least one person is turned down for service due to a lack of resources. Nationwide, it is estimated that nearly one million cases annually go unserved due to lack of funds.

When it comes to the local situation in Michigan, the SRL population largely mirrors nationwide trends. According to a 1999 State Bar survey, in 40% of civil cases, at least one party is a SRL. In Berrien County, up to 80% of the divorce cases have at least one SRL. In terms of demographics, the majority of Michigan SRLs are poor,
female, have a high school education, and are the petitioners in their case.\textsuperscript{17} There are 3.1 million low-income people in the state (approximately 1 in 3 citizens), compared to the only 150 legal aid lawyers in Michigan. Like the nation-wide statistics, roughly half of all individuals seeking legal assistance in Michigan are turned away due to a lack of resources.\textsuperscript{18}

SRLs know they need to obtain information about the court system and its procedures. One of the places they are turning to for this information is the public library. Scholar and President of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Vartan Gregorian, once made the following remarks regarding libraries:

\begin{quote}
Across America we are coming to realize the library’s unsurpassed importance as a civic institution. In our democratic society, the library stands for hope, for learning, for progress, for literacy, for self-improvement and civic engagement. The library is a symbol of opportunity, citizenship, equality, freedom of speech and freedom of thought, and hence, is a symbol for democracy itself. It is a critical component in the free exchange of information, which is at the heart of our democracy.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Gregorian so beautifully sums up why SRLs are turning to libraries for assistance. The SRL knows that he/she needs help with their problem and the library represents the one resource in the community that provides a welcome mat to them for locating information and solving problems. As Putney Vermont Public Library Director, Stephen Corolla states, “A good library works a lot like a harbor. It provides a place where people can dock themselves for a while, socialize with others, and feel some comfort and security.”\textsuperscript{20}

Most Americans are fortunate to have access to a public library located close to them. Libraries contain all kinds of information and provide it free to the community. Likewise, the public library is open longer than the courts. It has both evening and weekend hours, enabling the SRL to use it after they have completed work. Libraries are also staffed with individuals who are trained in locating information and

\begin{footnotes}
\footnoteref{17} Linda Rexer, Co-Chair, SOS Task Force and Executive Director, Michigan State Bar Foundation, Address at the State Bar of Michigan Pro Bono Workshop (May 23, 2012).
\footnoteref{18} Id.
\footnoteref{19} Wayne Senville, \textit{Libraries at the Heart of Our Communities}, 75 \textit{PLAN. COMM’R J.}, Summer 2009, at 15.
\footnoteref{20} Id. at 14.
\end{footnotes}
providing assistance to the public. Library service is no longer just about providing books. It now takes a holistic approach, looking at the information requirements of the community it serves, and providing many different forums as well as formats to promote learning and the exchange of information.

The public continues to view librarians in a positive light, seeing them as helpful people who can and will assist them. When they contact a librarian, the public knows they shouldn’t expect to be put on hold for endless amounts of time. They know they will not be speaking to someone in a foreign country reading from a script, as so many call assistance centers are structured. They will be speaking to a trained, courteous professional from their own community whose role is to assist them with their information queries. In today’s digital world, the public library is often the one place in the community that provides access to computers and the internet for free. Such tools can be used to research court information, prepare documents, and file them with the court. For an already economically challenged SRL, the public library can be an oasis.

Serving the SRL population does bring its own sets of challenges for libraries. Librarians cannot provide legal advice to a SRL. Unfortunately, there is not always a uniform understanding within the library community as to what constitutes legal advice. Some librarians will not answer any legal questions in fear that whatever they say might be interpreted by the SRL as legal advice. Librarians can and should be able to provide procedural information as well as instructions on how to research the law. There needs to be better coordination between the court systems and the library profession on how to serve SRLs. As Richard Zorza wrote in his article, *Public Libraries and Access to Justice*:

A public library’s staff needs to know: (1) where the information is; (2) how to access and share it; (3) that it is appropriate for them to assist in providing that information; and (4) how they can do so without inappropriately acting as lawyers who give legal advice.

[...] Librarians, just like self-help center staff and clerks, can provide information and help the patrons find information, but they cannot develop an attorney-client relationship with the patron, cannot create any expectation of confidentiality, and cannot provide advice. They must remain neutral. They can

point out court forms, and their functions, but they cannot tell litigants how to choose what legal strategy to follow. They can tell people how and where to file their cases, and where to find information about what factors the judge will take into account in making a decision, but they should not predict what a judge will do.\textsuperscript{22}

Another difficulty that librarians face is that many SRLs seek legal advice, which librarians cannot provide, creating customer service challenges. The SRL cannot always comprehend that librarians are not permitted to give legal advice. Even when they understand, they sometimes believe their question is not a request for legal advice, when it actually is indeed just that. The phrase, “I’m not asking you for advice, I need to know what to do,” is a common response uttered to the librarian by SRLs. When the librarian declines to answer, it can be frustrating for the SRL, as they may perceive that the librarian is simply refusing to help them. Nonetheless, there are limits to service in regards to legal questions and both parties have to respect them. Librarians can work with the SRL by providing referrals to legal aid programs and lawyer referral services, thus allowing the SRL to get the assistance they need. In this role, the librarian acts as a conduit to an attorney.

When looking for information to assist a SRL, it becomes readily apparent that there are many resources to consult. Most public libraries simply do not have the funds or staff expertise to develop a full-service legal collection. Their mission is to provide generalized reading materials to the community. While they do have some reference materials, they have them in a wide variety of subjects with a few representative titles; specialization is rare. Some public libraries may purchase a few core legal reference titles, but not all have the funds and/or staff to keep pace with the updates. When it comes to electronic resources, a subscription to Westlaw or LexisNexis, which can cost thousands of dollars per year, is simply beyond the economic means of most public libraries. Librarians and SRLs are reliant upon free resources available on the Internet. The amount and quality of these resources can vary widely by jurisdiction. For example, a study done by the Michigan State Bar Foundation located some 158 different websites for Michigan legal self-help information. Many sites were incomplete,\textsuperscript{22}

out of date, had broken links or were of poor quality. Such disparity can add to the difficulties of serving the SRL.

Given all of the factors discussed above, as a result of the increase in the SRL population and the challenges of providing service to them, libraries throughout the United States are creating partnerships with the legal community and local social service agencies to provide better and more relevant service to SRLs. A well-informed SRL makes the court system operate more efficiently and creates a less-frustrating and more successful court experience for them. The remaining part of this article will examine how the Adams-Pratt Oakland County Law Library (APLL) has used community partnerships to enhance its services to its SRLs and provide greater access to justice.

III. ANALYSIS

The Adams-Pratt Oakland County Law Library traces its roots all the way back to 1904. Housed in the Oakland County Circuit Courthouse, the APLL serves as the library for this court and has been open to the public for much of its history. In 1976, the APLL was formally dedicated and named after two distinguished Oakland County jurists, Clark J. Adams and Philip Pratt. The APLL serves many distinct user groups in southeast Michigan, including SRLs, the legal community, and the Oakland County Government.

The Library is the only public library in southeast Michigan that allows members of the public to have full access to its legal resources. The Library sees people from multiple counties, but its largest concentration of visitors comes from within Oakland County. Although the county is considered to be the wealthiest in Michigan, it does contain pockets of high concentrations of poverty. The county seat, Pontiac, has 32% of its residents living under the poverty line and is currently under the control of an Emergency Manager.

25. Id.
26. Id.
the city has experienced population loss and the erosion of its tax base. The recent recession hit Oakland County hard with many individuals losing their jobs, particularly those tied to the automotive sector. Property values in the country were hit hard: in Pontiac, values dropped more than 17%.\textsuperscript{29} Such economic pressures have created more SRLs in Oakland County in recent years. In 2012, the Court had 9,964 SRLs for 6,264 civil cases, averaging 1.6 SRLs per case.\textsuperscript{30}

The APLL had 38,700 visitors in 2012, with approximately 70% (27,000) of them being SRLs needing assistance with legal matters.\textsuperscript{31} In the last ten years, the percentage of members of the general public using the Law Library has risen from 50% to 70%. This reflects the economic downturn and the resulting increase in the SRL population.

The single largest area of the law that Oakland County SRLs need assistance with is family law, where the Library receives questions on divorce, child custody, child support, parenting time, personal protection requests and paternity on a daily basis. After family law, the greatest concentration of questions focus upon landlord/tenant and housing issues, debtor/creditor law and bankruptcy, employment issues, guardianship and estates, and criminal record expungements. In addition to providing a fully staffed information desk with library professionals trained to assist SRLs, the APLL also provides 13 public access computers. Four of these computers have \textit{Westlaw} subscriptions whose use is available to the public free of charge. The APLL also serves as the main distribution point for court forms and procedural information for the Sixth Circuit Court. Oakland County has pioneered the electronic filing of court cases in Michigan. The Library provides a computer station to the public solely dedicated to electronic case filing. The APLL collection contains approximately 35,000 volumes with Michigan law representing the single largest subject concentration. The APLL also maintains a “Legal Self-Help” collection of 300 volumes written on various legal topics in plain-English for the SRL audience. The APLL is fortunate to have many entities from the Circuit Court, the County Clerk, legal aid organizations, and municipal libraries, which provide regular

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[30.] Interview with Kevin Oeffner, Oakland County Circuit Court Administrator (January 9, 2013).
\item[31.] FY2012 Oakland County Library Annual Usage Statistical Report, Oakland County Library (December 18, 2012) (on file with the author).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
referrals to SRLs to come and use its facilities. SRLs in southeast Michigan are fortunate to have this resource available.

The one service that the APLL is neither equipped with nor permitted to provide is legal advice. As the SRL population began to experience dramatic growth in Oakland County in the last decade, the APLL began to examine how it could better connect SRLs with legal advice and assistance at the library, while at the same time not violating the legal advice statutory prohibitions in Michigan or over-extending the role of the librarian.

In 2006, the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law began to expand their geographic outreach of the Mobile Law Clinic program. The school purchased a mobile home vehicle outfitted with law students, law professors and volunteer attorneys and drove it to various different community centers to offer legal assistance. When the Clinic wished to establish a presence in Oakland County, it was advised to contact the APLL. The Library was intrigued by the possibility of having a legal aid clinic onsite so it invited the Mobile Law Office to offer a legal aid clinic twice a month to the public. The Mobile Law Office team provides consultation to the low-income SRLs on civil matters excluding family law. Landlord/tenant, immigration, employment, debtor/creditor, social security, and veteran’s law are among the areas practiced by the clinic. In addition to the consultation, clinic staff will provide assistance in completing court documents, reviewing court procedures, providing referrals to attorneys or other programs, and in some cases will provide direct representation for a SRL case.

Upon commencement of their operations both the Law Library and the Mobile Law Clinic noted that having the legal aid clinic onsite in the library provided numerous benefits to the SRL. Previously, such individuals had to visit the courthouse to file papers and attend hearings. By coming to the clinic and having an attorney consultation, they learn what issues they need more information for, what procedures they must follow, and/or what forms they must file with the court. The SRL could then visit the information desk at the library and be much more knowledgeable about their legal issue and how they needed to proceed. Library staff would know what resources to direct them to and provide the necessary instruction. Computers are also available to create court forms and other documents. SRLs now receive legal assistance and legal information all in one place. The Mobile Law Office clinic staff benefited from being in a law library when they conducted their consultations. If there was something in the law they needed to look up to assist a SRL, all of the materials needed were directly at their fingertips. Because of this, clinic staff was able to provide more thorough and detailed assistance to the SRL. Likewise, library staff
could refer a SRL to a program right at the library to get the legal assistance the SRL needed. Now, they could receive everything they needed in one location. This immensely reduced SRL levels of frustration and anxiety and created a much more positive service transaction between the librarian and the SRL. For all of these reasons and more, the Mobile Law Office’s partnership with the Law Library has been highly successful. The legal aid clinic is now in its sixth year of operation. Clinics are held twenty-four times a year and assist an average of 200 SRLs.\footnote{Data compiled from actual number of Clinic Visits and client sign-in sheets.}

While the Mobile Law Office clinic program was successful, it did not address family law matters and this remained the single largest legal request area from SRLs. Early in 2007, the Family Law Assistance Project (FLAP) was born. This project was a collaboration between Lakeshore Legal Aid and the Thomas M. Cooley Law School in Auburn Hills. News of the success of the Mobile Law Office legal aid clinic at APLL was being spread throughout the legal community and FLAP approached the APLL about establishing their legal aid clinics at the library. The APLL welcomed that opportunity and clinics were scheduled to run twice a month. The FLAP clinic provides assistance with family law issues such as divorce, custody, parenting time, child support, and minor guardianship. To be eligible, SRLs must be low-income and have a case in the Oakland County court system. Clinic services include consultations, program referrals, procedural information and instruction, assistance with court forms, and in eligible cases, representation in court. FLAP has now been at the APLL for the past five years, averaging 24 clinics a year and assisting nearly 1200 SRLs annually.\footnote{Id.}

As with the Mobile Law Office clinic program, both FLAP and APLL benefited from the partnership and were able to provide enhanced service to the SRL community. As librarian Maria Danna stated, “When the SRL visits the Law Library, they often do not know where to begin. The halls of justice can be very overwhelming and intimidating to the uninitiated. The Law Library can serve as a bridge to the SRL by providing them the procedural information they need and then referring them to reliable sources of legal assistance under one ceiling.”\footnote{Interview with Maria Danna, Library Supervisor, Oakland County Library, in Pontiac, MI (Jan. 10, 2013).} Ashley Lowe, Professor at Thomas M. Cooley Law School and FLAP Clinic Supervisor, states, “Having the FLAP clinics at the APLL is a natural connection. Our clients are in the courthouse and they often come
straight from court needing answers to legal questions. The library’s resources are invaluable to us while we are doing consultations and the librarians on staff are available to assist clinic staff when we are dealing with areas of the law, we just do not know. The clients then benefit from all of this collective knowledge.\(^{35}\)

The Circuit Court also benefits from having these clinics available to SRLs. When the SRL is knowledgeable about their case and court proceedings, it makes court proceedings run much more smoothly. According to a California study conducted by Greacen Associates, LLC:

> Courts that provide one-on-one support and information services to litigants are saving: at least one hearing per case, 5 to 15 minutes of hearing time for every hearing held in the cases, and 1 to 1.5 hours of court staff time related to providing assistance to self-represented litigants at the front counter and to reviewing and rejecting proposed judgments. The services required to produce these court savings range from a high of $.55 to a low of $.36 for every $1.00 saved. Adding the savings accruing to the litigants reduces the costs to a range of $.33 to $.26 for every $1.00 of savings.\(^{36}\)

Although the APLL is not operated under the auspices of the Sixth Circuit Court, it does maintain a close relationship with the Bench. The judges themselves have been very enthusiastic about the APLL’s legal aid clinic programs and often refer their SRLs to them. Circuit Court Judge Joan Young states that “If we didn’t have FLAP, we’d have many more people floundering around trying to get a divorce.” Her colleague Judge Elizabeth Pezetti echoes that opinion and offers that the clinics have had an enormous effect on our docket.\(^{37}\)

While the APLL was enormously grateful to both the Mobile Law Office and FLAP for holding their legal aid clinics at the library, it still struggled with one segment of the SRL population- those that earned too much money to be considered low income yet not enough to be able to retain an attorney. Common Ground, a social service organization in the county, which operates its own legal assistance program, approached the

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35. Interview with Ashley Lowe, Professor at Thomas M. Cooley Law School and FLAP Clinic Supervisor in Pontiac, MI (Jan. 9, 2013).

36. JOHN GREACEN, CENTER FOR FAMILY, CHILDREN, & THE COURTS THE BENEFITS AND COST OF PROGRAMS TO ASSIST SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS: RESULTS FROM LIMITED DATA GATHERING CONDUCTED BY SIX TRIAL COURTS IN CALIFORNIA’S SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY (2009).

APLL about holding legal aids clinics onsite at the library. The library welcomed the idea with open arms. Despite having two legal clinic programs, the Library still could not meet the demand from the SRL population for additional clinics and was still struggling to better assist that segment of the SRL population that was not considered to be truly poor. The Common Ground clinics nicely complemented the services of the other partners without overlapping. They were held every week instead of twice a month. They have no income restriction and thus are open to any SRL. Likewise, there is no geographic restriction, which is important because the APLL has SRL visitors from all over the region. The Common Ground clinics are one of the few that provide assistance with criminal expungements. This is another area of the law that has seen more requests from SRLs. As criminal convictions are often barriers to employment, more and more individuals are trying to have these removed from their records to gain employment. Most attempt to go through this process on their own and many of these SRLs find the process to be daunting. Unlike the other clinics, Common Ground does not provide legal representation. They work with the SRLs on providing consultations, referrals, assistance with court forms and procedures. Nonetheless, the clinics have been just as successful at the library as the Mobile Law and FLAP clinics. The Common Ground legal aid clinics have been in place at the library for two years, average 50 sessions a year, and assist over 1,200 individuals on an annual basis.

The APLL benefited from having yet another option to offer its SRL visitors. Common Ground benefited from having the services of the library available to them for their client meetings. John Kuzmich, Legal Services Manager for Common Ground, remarks that, at the library, "Everything is here. There is access to legal resource materials, computers, court forms, and private spaces for client consultations. We can’t get that anywhere else."

As a result of its partnerships with legal aid providers in the region, the APLL was invited to join the HELP (Help End Legal Programs) Taskforce. This was a taskforce comprised of the legal aid providers in Oakland County as a way to come together and to better coordinate the limited resources of all the organizations. The library’s invitation to join the taskforce was in recognition of its growing role as a major service provider to SRLs in the county. Joining the taskforce enabled the APLL to become familiar with, and build a relationship with, all of the county’s legal aid providers, not just those who used the library. These

relationships enabled library staff to provide more targeted referrals to its SRL visitors.

The APLL was also interested in developing workshop seminars on different legal topics of interest for SRLs. Many of these individuals contact the APLL when they are in the early stages of their issue and simply want to know more information before deciding to take any action. For some SRLs the idea of doing research on a computer or from a book is simply not appealing. Sometimes coming in and listening and speaking to a real live person is a much more attractive option. The APLL decided to launch a program of five topics of great interest to SRLs. It approached the Oakland County Bar Association, a great partner and supporter of the Law Library, to ask if it could provide a list of possible speakers for such a program series. The APLL then learned that the Public Services Committee of the Bar Association had developed a program entitled, The People’s Law College, which featured four classes on different legal topics geared towards members of the public. The Committee held the program the year before but had low attendance and was looking for ways to promote better awareness of the lecture series within the SRL community. Upon learning the needs of both organizations, collaboration was immediately born to re-launch The People’s Law College. The APLL worked with the Public Services Committee to compile a list of five program topics that would be of interest to SRLs and speakers were located. All of the programs would then be held at the APLL. Both the APLL and the Bar Association worked to publicize the programs. The first year’s lecture series featured the topics of Property Tax Foreclosure, Child Custody, Bankruptcy, and Elder Law and Medicaid. The workshops at the library garnered a huge turnout, with some evenings having a standing room only crowd. By combining forces, both the APLL and the Public Services Committee were able to achieve more success together than if it had offered this service alone. By having the programs at the APLL, it provided SRLs with a place to get additional information on their topic if they wanted to learn more after the series and served as another avenue for promoting the library’s legal aid clinics. The People’s Law College at the APLL was such a success that it was offered for three consecutive years.

At the same time that these efforts were taking place in Oakland County, steps were starting to be taken at the state level to address the problem of how to effectively assist the SRL. After all, this was not a problem that was by any means unique to Oakland County. In 2010, then Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Marilyn Kelly, in partnership with the Michigan State Bar Foundation, established the Solutions on
Self-Help (SOS) Task Force. The charge of the Task Force was to promote greater centralization, coordination, and quality of support for SRLs in Michigan. Over 90 people served on the SOS Task Force, representing many of the constituencies that interact with the SRL community, including judges, courts, lawyers, bar associations, legal aid organizations, self-help centers, libraries, and social service agencies.

The projects of the SOS Task Force included creating a statewide, authoritative, Michigan-based, legal self-help website for SRLs to assist them in handling their simple legal matters. The Michigan Legal Help website was launched in August 2012 and included the following features: instructions and video tutorials on how to use the website; toolkits for legal issues; articles and common questions on specific legal topics; automated online court forms to be completed through a user-friendly interview process; forms and step-by-step instructions on what to do after completing court forms; information for finding local Michigan lawyers and community service agencies. The website debuted with content for the subjects of family law, consumer law, expungements, protection orders, and landlord/tenant matters. These subjects tend to be areas that have the most SRLs in Michigan. Additional subjects will be added to the site in 2013.

The website is not meant to be a substitution for an attorney and it makes it very clear to the user in multiple locations on the site. Rather, its purpose is to provide current, comprehensive and authoritative information on Michigan law and court procedures written in plain English for the SRL user. For those representing in simple legal matters, the Michigan Legal Help website can be a wonderful tool to help guide them through the court process. For those SRLs with more complex issues, the website can provide basic introductory information and referrals to legal aid organizations and lawyers referral services located in their geographic area. The intention behind the web site is that those with simple legal matters will be able to succeed in conducting their legal issue to a satisfactory conclusion. Those with more complicated matters can be sent to a legal aid organization, which would have the resources and expertise to assist them. It creates almost a triage effect for the SRL. Empower the ones who can handle their own issues and dedicate limited legal aid resources to those whose situations really require the expertise of an attorney. Another benefit of the website is that it includes court-

specific procedures by geography and jurisdiction. Court procedures are not always uniform throughout the state and this site helps to communicate those local procedures.41

Along with the Michigan Legal Help website, the SOS Task Force also created four pilot local self-help centers to assist SRLs in using the website. The centers were staffed with individuals who could serve as “navigators” and provide instruction to the SRL on how to use the various website features. Likewise, these self-help centers also serve as a local community point of free computer access for SRLs for the purposes of working on their legal matters. The SOS Taskforce designated four pilot self-help centers in Oscoda, Allegan, Oakland and Wayne counties. In 2013, more self-help centers are expected to be established.

Additional SOS Task Force projects included developing a curricula for judicial and court staff on how to work with a SRL, recommending court rule changes to allow for the practice of unbundling of legal services, instructing Michigan courts to accept SCAO forms and the forms developed for the Michigan Legal Help website, and working to improve the uniformity and understandability of court forms.42 These initiatives, while not as publicly visible as the website, were directed at trying to make the court system more understandable and more user-friendly for the SRL.

The APLL was involved as a member of the SOS Task Force from the very beginning. The SOS Task Force recognized early on that involving Michigan libraries was going to be a key component of publicizing the Michigan Legal Help website and other initiatives, since they were well aware that SRLs were turning to libraries for assistance. The Task Force wished to reach out to the library community and equip them with better tools to serve the SRLs. As Linda Rexer, Co-Chair of the SOS Taskforce and Executive Director of the Michigan State Bar Foundation related:

SOS involved librarians from the beginning and going forward for three important reasons: (a) libraries are places where people go for information; thousands of persons seeking to represent themselves go to public and law libraries each year in our State for help; (b) librarians are skilled and very committed to helping persons in need find help to solve their problems; (c) librarians have similar needs to non-lawyer court staff or non-lawyer self-

42. See Kelly, supra note 15.
help center staff for training in how to provide information that does not cross the line into providing legal advice (which only lawyers can provide), so designing education for all those groups could build on core content rather than reinvent the wheel for each.\footnote{Interview with Linda Rexer, Co-Chair SOS Task Force and Executive Director for the Michigan State Bar Foundation (January 11, 2013).}

In fact, two of the four pilot self-help centers designated for the project were libraries. One of the final Task Force projects will be launching a special training program for librarians on the Michigan Legal Help website and working with SRLs.

When the SOS Task Force solicited proposals for self-help centers, the APLL was immediately interested given its extensive work with SRLs. The APLL, in conjunction with several of its partners from the HELP Task Force: Common Ground, Family Law Assistance Project, Legal Aid and Defender Association, Oakland County Bar Association; and the Oakland County Clerk’s Office applied to be a self-help center and was awarded the designation. The APLL officially opened as a Michigan Legal Help Center on October 10, 2012 and has been extensively using the Michigan Legal Help website with its SRL patrons. Its legal aid clinic partners are also using the site and it is assisting them in being able to direct program resources more effectively towards those SRLs with complex legal matters.

Although the Michigan Legal Help website has only been live for a short time, it is already having an impact for SRLs. As of December 2012, the website had 185,181 page views and 40,636 visitors.\footnote{Evaluation Report, Michigan Legal Help Website and Self-Help Center Pilot Project, Solutions on Self Help Task Force (December 19, 2012) (on file with the author).} Weekly visitor traffic has risen from 2,500 to 3,600 per week. Given these figures, it is projected that by 2013, the site will be used by 208,000 people. The visitors have come from all fifty states, demonstrating the site’s impact even outside of Michigan. In the state itself, visitors have come from all areas including Detroit, Saginaw, Battle Creek, Traverse City, Alpena, Marquette and Ironwood. As anticipated, SRLs are using most frequently the family law topics and forms section of the site. Over 72\% of the users responding to feedback surveys rated the site as Very Helpful or Moderately Helpful.\footnote{Id.} Some of the user comments include the following:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{Weekly visitor traffic has risen from 2,500 to 3,600 per week. Given these figures, it is projected that by 2013, the site will be used by 208,000 people.}
  \item \textbf{Visitors have come from all fifty states, demonstrating the site’s impact even outside of Michigan.}
  \item \textbf{In the state itself, visitors have come from all areas including Detroit, Saginaw, Battle Creek, Traverse City, Alpena, Marquette and Ironwood. As anticipated, SRLs are using most frequently the family law topics and forms section of the site.}
  \item \textbf{Over 72\% of the users responding to feedback surveys rated the site as Very Helpful or Moderately Helpful.}
\end{itemize}
I was so scared that I wouldn’t be able to do this all by myself. You and your site has made this painful process a little easier. Thank you so much!!

I’ve been trying to navigate all the forms on the different sites for months. It’s GREAT to have them all together with an easy portal to complete them. THANK YOU!!

My wife wants a divorce but I can’t afford a lawyer. I’ve been looking for every resource that I can find to help me get the process started and hopefully help me through it. I can’t explain what a relief it’s been to find a site with the information that I need for my specific locality and the depth of information in concert with lawhelppinteractive.org Thank you for creating and maintaining this site.46

The APLL has also been experiencing positive feedback from its SRL patrons, with many expressing delight that this information is now finally available to them online and they can access it from their homes as well as in the library.

Clearly the Michigan Legal Help website and the SOS Task Force initiatives have been a game changer for services to SRLs in Michigan. One can only hope that the momentum from these recent endeavors will continue to carry forward to make the justice system more accessible to Michigan SRLs.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is not easy to represent oneself in a legal matter. Without the proper training, the court forms and procedures can seem like a foreign language to a SRL. The courtroom itself can be a very intimidating environment, more so if the other party in the case has an attorney. Emotions can run very high for the SRLs, as their access to their child or their home could be at stake. Having to navigate a justice system without any assistance can be a harrowing experience.

The APLL has served SRLs for many years. As their numbers increased and their cases became more complex, it became clear that the library had to augment its services to be truly effective in serving the SRL visitor. Having a collection of books on legal subjects and court forms was no longer enough. Partnering with legal aid and community organizations created new clinic programs for providing legal assistance.

46. Id.
to the SRL. These programs benefitted all parties involved and led to even more partnerships for the library. More partnerships meant service options for the SRL. The designation of the APLL as a Michigan Legal Help Self-Help Center has expanded its outreach to the SRL community in southeast Michigan. The APLL’s efforts to enhance its services for SRLs can be used as a service model for many libraries throughout Michigan. It is hoped that by publicizing its efforts through legal publications and workshops in the library community, other libraries will adopt this model. The SRL is coming through the library’s door to obtain assistance for their legal problem. Libraries have an obligation to assist them as much as possible while respecting their role as an information provider and not a provider of legal advice. This article demonstrates what one library can do. If others follow, the SRL will find the justice system more accessible to them than ever before.