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Legal self-help centers more popular in tough economy

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The program will expand to a third center in the northern part of Pinellas County.

PINELLAS COUNTY (Bay News 9) -- More people are avoiding expensive attorney

fees by using Pinellas County's legal self-help centers.

The option to represent themselves in court is becoming more popular in the tough economic climate. People who need legal guidance can go to the center and pay a dollar a minute for consultations with divorces, adoptions, landlord-tenant issues and small claims.

The self-help centers are a collaborative effort between the clerk's office, the Community Law Program and the Clearwater Bar Association. There are no income eligibility requirements for the service.

Heather Worthington is one of those who is taking advantage of the service.

"Because the small claims case I'm involved in, I'm representing myself, and there are certain procedural things and things I had questions about that would take me months to try and research and figure out the right way of doing something," she said.

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Worthington recently met with attorney Shelly Beach at the Clearwater center, where Beach prepared her to represent herself in small claims court.

"If I had the money, absolutely I would have hired an attorney because it's a complicated case even though it's small claims," she said. "It's not something I really wanted to handle, but I'm okay doing it myself. I just really needed a little bit of extra help."

Manager Charles Minnis said the centers give people more options when it comes to handling their legal issues.

"There's no question about people are looking for alternative ways to help themselves and we try to provide that service," he said. "Of

course there's no substitute for having your own attorney. We offer limited legal guidance."

The program is currently located in Clearwater and St. Petersburg, but it has been so successful that the county plans to open another branch in the northern part of the county. Service at that branch will start April 6.

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