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### Clerk adds legal self-help center

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The Pinellas County Clerk of the Court's legal Self Help Centers have assisted more than 5,600 citizens in just over two years by providing citizens who represent themselves in court access to affordable attorney services.

Beginning April 6, the clerk's office will add a satellite office in the North County Branch, 29582 U.S. 19 N., Clearwater, on Tuesdays from 1 p.m. until 4:30 p.m.

"The locations in Clearwater and St. Petersburg have become increasingly busy," said Clerk of the Court Ken Burke. "A current employee will operate the North County Branch satellite center during that half day each week. So, we will be able to reach a broader area of Pinellas by shifting our available resources and not creating any new expenses."

The SHC attorneys' fees are not paid at the expense of the taxpayers and do not come out of the clerk's budget. The \$1-per-minute fees (see guidelines below) are used to compensate the attorneys, Burke said.

The self-help centers are the product of a collaborative effort by the clerk's office, Sixth Judicial Circuit, Community Law Program and Clearwater Bar Association, created to assist self-represented or pro se litigants with civil court forms. In the areas of family law, landlord-tenant, and small claims related matters, the clerk may provide ministerial assistance.

"The benefits of the SHC flow both ways, Burke said. "To the self-represented people in need of these services the centers offer an affordable solution. For the courts bogged down by incorrect pro se filings, the services provided by the SHC help both the clerk's office and the courts save time and money by reducing the number of times pro se matters get re-filed due to errors. "

Family law issues such as divorces, name changes and adoptions, make up 70 percent of the type of case in which people are seeking help with completing and filing legal forms, according to Burke.

"These types of cases are some of the most emotional, Burke said. "For people who may already be dealing with a lot emotionally, and then are dealing with the confusion of going it alone through the court system, the centers have been a blessing."

The SHC have received heartfelt recognition from many of the people who otherwise would have not had access to the court system. Examples from the thousands of positive comment cards received include:

- "During this difficult time of divorce, the staff was wonderful and supporting. I was blessed by their caring attitude and support. They have a difficult position, but helped me get through this difficult time."



From left aClerk of the Court Ken Burke, the Sixth Judicial Circuit's Court Administrator Gay Inskip and former Chief Judge Robert Morris discuss the benefits of Pinellas County's legal self-help centers.

- "I didn't know about this self help before. This is great. Thanks!"
- "I was better informed upon leaving than I was when I arrived. Everyone was professional. Continue on the path that you are traveling."

### **Guidelines**

Attorney appointments may be scheduled for a minimum of 15 minutes to a maximum of one hour in 15-minute increments for \$1 per minute. There are no income eligibility requirements. No refunds or rescheduling permitted. Attorneys cannot represent customers in court.

More information is available at [www.mypinellasclerk.org](http://www.mypinellasclerk.org) or 727-464-5150 (Clearwater) or 727-582-7941 (St. Petersburg).

### **Heller praises centers**

While visiting the employees of the clerk's office during an in-service day at St. Petersburg College on Feb. 15, Florida Rep. Bill Heller, D-St. Petersburg, spoke about how often his office referred citizens to take advantage of the small claims, landlord/tenant and family law legal services offered at the Clerk's Self Help Centers.

"When you think about \$15 for fifteen minutes and the kind of attorneys that practice and help (self-help center clients), you can't beat that anywhere," Heller said.

Calling the program a "tremendous project," Heller said his office has received letters of thanks from the people referred by his office to the self-help centers in Clearwater and St. Petersburg.

"When you think that (the clerk's office) did it and (they) did it without state support, that's even more wonderful," Heller said, emphasizing the fact that no funding from taxpayers or the state was used to establish the legal help centers.

### **About the legal self-help centers**

- Since the two self-help centers opened on Monday, Oct. 8, 2007, more than 6,000 citizens who represent themselves in court, also known as pro se' litigants, have used the affordable attorney services.
- The self-help centers are a collaborative effort of the clerk's office, the Sixth Judicial Circuit, the Community Law Program and the Clearwater Bar Association.
- Citizens can schedule an appointment to consult with an attorney for a minimum of 15 minutes to a maximum of one hour in 15-minute increments, at a rate of \$1 per minute.
- No income eligibility requirements to use the centers.
- In January 2008, working with the Hispanic Outreach Center, the Clerk's Office added the free services of a Spanish interpreter at the Clearwater Center on Fridays from 8:30 a.m. until 12:30 p.m.
- Self-help centers' brochures are available in English and Spanish.

- Specialized software to assist in filling out eviction, divorce and small claims forms is available in the centers or online at [www.mypinellasclerk.org](http://www.mypinellasclerk.org), for a fee plus the form-packet fees.
- Citizens may purchase civil court action filing form packets.
- Documents can be notarized and copies made for a fee.
- Open Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.
- Two locations: Clearwater Law Library, 324 S. Ft. Harrison Ave., Clearwater 727-464-5150; and St. Petersburg Judicial Building, 545 First Ave. N., St. Petersburg 727-582-7941.
- A third location will be open on Tuesdays from 1 p.m. until 4:30 p.m., beginning on April 5.
- Fees must be paid when an attorney appointment time is scheduled. Online scheduling and payment is available at [www.mypinellasclerk.org](http://www.mypinellasclerk.org). Payments may be cash, credit card, check or money order. Refunds will not be issued for missed appointments.
- In May 2008, Burke was honored by the Community Law Program with the CPL Outreach Award for "Providing Self Help Centers to serve Pro Se Litigants in Pinellas County," for his role in the establishment of the legal Self Help Centers.

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