

## **SRLN COVID-19 Best Practice Tip: Produce Plain Language and Accessible Court Administrative Orders (News 2020)**



As COVID-19 continues to impact court operations, courts must produce easy to understand and accessible translations of court administrative orders in order to ensure court processes remain inclusive of all court users. SRLs, the predominant user group in the civil courts, can not easily navigate procedural requirements through legalese heavy orders alone. Court policies should be translated into plain language (at a maximum of a fifth-grade reading level) and relevant non-English languages. If video is used, it should be captioned to be accessible to the hearing impaired.

“There is no access to the courts if the public cannot understand the rules of the road during this health emergency,” notes Katherine Alteneder of the Self-Represented Litigation Network, adding “plain language information was once treated as a best practice for consideration, but the pandemic makes it a necessity.” The courts have an increased responsibility to provide plain language guidance because in many jurisdictions emergency orders that have considerable impact have been entered in matters such as domestic relations, housing, and debt collection. When the court issues emergency administrative orders that impact the substantive rights of the public (and render much of the information on the website inaccurate), the courts are obligated to communicate in a comprehensible way with those impacted.

Self-Help and access to justice staff must prioritize providing clear and accessible guidance to the public, updating relevant court websites, existing form packages, and self-help materials. All materials should be easy to find through courts’ homepages in addition to any active social media accounts. If possible, [step-by-step videos](#) or tutorials walking SRLs through changed processes should also be produced to reflect courts’ commitment to accessibility. The effort to make COVID-19 administrative orders accessible will ensure users correctly file and relieve court staff of an increase in SRL requests for assistance. In addition, courts should identify and link to relevant and helpful information from legal aid partners about common COVID-19 related legal issues that are not heard within the state courts, such as information about unemployment insurance or public benefits.

When seeking a template or ideas on where to start, courts can look to Maryland, New York, California, Minnesota, and Alaska courts. In Maryland, [this page](#) compiled by the Courts is featured front and center on its homepage and walks court users through COVID-19’s impact on a breadth of case types. It includes links out to self-help pages, phone numbers, and commonly asked questions on COVID related issues like utility continuity and evictions. The page also features [a video guide](#) reviewing the tools and resources available to the Maryland public during COVID-19.

The [New York Courts’ landing page](#) is its COVID-19 resource page, making it easy to find for all court users. The easy-to-navigate content features a video from Chief Judge DiFiore updating New Yorkers on COVID’s impact on the state’s courts along with a highlighted public support hotline. Legal Assistance and Law Library help are

clearly linked as is e-filing. The page also includes a brief, plain language [memo](#) explaining key aspects of the New York Courts' COVID-19 administrative orders.

In California, the Court's Self-Help page features [an easy to access, plain language overview of court administrative orders](#). It specifically highlights the procedural changes to Restraining Orders, Tribal Law, Housing, and various Family Law cases. Related programs and resources for each case type are noted. While the landing page is in English, the site includes links to the same review in Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese.

Minnesota Courts also offer [clear, plain language information](#) on COVID-19 related court orders. This includes a link out to an accessible overview of [remote hearings](#) and self-help resources. In addition, Minnesota Courts link throughout their pages to a regularly [updated COVID-19 information](#) page translated into Spanish, Hmong, and Somali. All COVID orders are easily organized and an array of support resources are listed and linked at the bottom of the page.

One of the many significant challenges of this crisis is that information changes quickly and frequently, but that does not relieve the court of its obligation of providing comprehensible notice to the public. Courts are well-advised to adopt the best practice of issuing plain language explanations and [FAQs](#) (as offered in Alaska) in tandem with formal administrative orders. Self-Help Center staff can serve as a valuable resource in helping to translate Administrative Orders.

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