

Evaluation: Michigan Legal Help Evaluation Report (MLHP 2015)



Executive Summary

The Michigan Legal Help Program (MLHP) consists of two components: an interactive statewide website and affiliated Self-Help Centers that provide legal information assistance to individuals representing themselves in simple civil legal matters in Michigan. The Michigan Legal Help website (MLH) has many tools for visitors, including articles, common questions, and detailed step-by-step instructions. MLH provides links to lawyer referral services, self-help centers, legal aid programs, and other community resources. Another central tool on the MLH website is the collection of interactive online “interviews” that use litigants’ answers to simple questions to populate State Court-approved forms necessary to process a legal matter from start to finish. The website launched in September 2012, and the first four Self-Help Centers opened that fall. An additional 3 local MLHP Self-Help

Centers opened thereafter. In 2014, the Michigan Legal Help Program received a Technology Initiative Grant (TIG) from the Legal Services Corporation to support an evaluation of the website's efficacy in assisting self-represented litigants to resolve a legal matter — in this case, divorce.

This report shares the findings of that evaluation, which analyzed quantitative and qualitative data to answer the driving question: How successful are Michigan Legal Help website users in completing the divorce process? Success was primarily defined as reaching a judgment within a reasonable time frame. The experience of Michigan Legal Help website users was compared to that of other self-represented litigants and attorney-represented litigants. The evaluation also produced important data about divorce and self-represented litigants in Michigan that can be used to improve the experiences of litigants and courts. In addition, the data set can be extrapolated with confidence to provide an understanding of the divorce process across all Michigan counties.

The evaluators discovered these key findings:

1. 74% of litigants using the MLH website obtain a judgment of divorce, a rate virtually equal to that of other self-represented litigants and attorney-represented litigants.
2. In Michigan in 2013, 48% of divorce cases were filed by self-represented plaintiffs and 68% of cases had one or more self-represented litigants. 42% of divorce cases had no attorney involvement at all.
3. Self-represented litigants conclude the divorce process in less time than attorney-represented litigants, with MLH litigants concluding slightly more quickly than other self-represented litigants. This finding is true even when controlling for other factors, such as complexity.

These findings suggest that the MLH website is achieving its desired result of supporting self-represented litigants in successfully resolving civil legal matters. The findings also support the need for MLH's resources, given the very large number of self-represented litigants involved in divorce cases.

Other highlights include:

- There was virtually no change in the proportion of plaintiffs represented by attorneys from 2012 (one year prior to the launch of the MLH website) to 2013, when MLH was launched. This finding suggests that the majority of MLH website users come from the group of plaintiffs who would be self-represented regardless of the existence of the MLH website.
- Only 3% of plaintiffs and 1% of defendants change representation status while a divorce case is in progress.
- The slight majority (56%) of Michigan divorces do not involve minor children.
- Fee waivers are granted in 22% of divorce cases; the majority of these were cases with self-represented plaintiffs.
- Nearly three-quarters (73%) of all divorce cases in Michigan reach judgment. Of these, 75% of cases result in a consent judgment, where the parties agree; data were then weighted so that findings could be extrapolated to describe the whole state, the remaining 25% result in a default judgment, which is entered by a plaintiff in the absence of any participation by the defendant.
- 24% of all Michigan divorce cases are dismissed. Of these, the largest proportion (40%) was dismissed by the court for lack of service. A similar proportion (39%) was voluntarily dismissed by the parties, while the courts dismissed the remaining 21% for lack of progress.
- As assessed by a number of factors, most divorce cases (79%) in Michigan can be described as “not complex at all.” Only 3% of divorce cases could be described as “very complex,” while the remaining 18% are “somewhat complex.” While the fraction of attorney represented cases grew as complexity increased,
- there were some instances of self-represented litigants completing “somewhat complex” and “very complex” divorces.

This evaluation also sought to gather information about which parts of the legal process are most challenging to self-represented litigants and whether the use of the MLH website has resulted in a positive impact on court interactions with self-represented litigants. Interviews with court and self-help center staff were conducted with the goal of uncovering potential opportunities for improving the MLH website to better serve the needs of both self-represented litigants and the courts. Several of the recommendations derived from the interviews and the data analysis are in the process of being implemented already, such as the creation of a judgment-only divorce interview. Others have greatly aided in the future planning of

the direction of the Michigan Legal Help Program, such as automatically including fee waiver forms with other documents produced for litigants who are receiving public assistance, and making it easier for litigants to notify the court when they decide to dismiss a divorce.

One important conclusion appears to be that the self-represented individuals pursuing divorces in Michigan using the Michigan Legal Help website fare at least as well as attorney-represented litigants and litigants using other self-represented materials in obtaining judgments in a timely fashion. This supports the findings reported by Jeanne Charn in her Yale Law Journal article reflecting on other studies of the success of self-represented litigants. Charn suggests that advocates of the self-represented celebrate this lack of significant difference between self-represented and attorney represented litigants – that with access to appropriate self-help resources, self-represented litigants can successfully complete straightforward legal matters.

Recommended Citation: Kerry Sheldon, *Evaluation Report: Michigan Legal Help website*, LSC (Jan. 2015).

The full report is available at: [http://www.mplp.org/Taskforces/technology/michigan-legal-help-evaluatio....](http://www.mplp.org/Taskforces/technology/michigan-legal-help-evaluatio...)

Last updated on September 24, 2020.

State: Kelsea Jeon

Year published: 2015

Document Author:

- Bridgeport Consulting LLC
- Michigan Legal Help

Topics

[Evaluation Forms](#)

States

[Kelsea Jeon](#)

Regions

[United States](#)

Files

[michigan-legal-help-evaluation-report-1-15.pdf](#)

Print

Table of Contents

PDF downloaded from <https://atjlibrary.org/node/450/evaluation-michigan-legal-help-evaluation-report-mlhp-2015>