

## Maryland Centralizes District and Circuit Court Self-Help While Expanding Phone and Mobile Support (News 2016)



After unifying its statewide self-help support services into a single call line and support center, the Maryland court system's new [Maryland Self-Help Center](#) expects to at least double the number of litigants it has previously helped while also expanding the type of cases it can support. The new Center supports litigants involved in either District Court or Circuit Courts and can direct referrals to the Family Law Self-Help Centers located in most Circuit Courts and the District Court's Self-Help Resource Centers. While the Center is based in an urban area it delivers extensive remote service, expanding access to legal help by offering people the support they need, when they need it, in a format they can understand.

“The District Court launched the model of phone and live chat services with our Self-Help Resource Center, and it has been very well received by the public and continues to grow,” said Judge John P. Morrissey, Chief Judge of the District Court of Maryland. “In 2014, the District Court Self-Help Center served more than 23,000 people by phone, live chat, and walk-in self-help services in the District Court locations in Glen Burnie and Upper Marlboro. And, in just the first nine months of this year, we have almost matched last year’s total with more than 21,000 people served.” The number of litigants served has doubled by offering people help in the way they want it.

Pamela Cardullo Ortiz, the Director of Maryland’s Access to Justice Department, added that Maryland “expects to double the number of litigants” it serves with the new centralized Self-Help Center. She also noted that a key benefit of centralized Self-Help line is that court users “don’t need to know what level court their case is at in order to get help.” She added that the public shouldn’t know if their case is specifically a District Court problem in order to get help and noted that having a unified line makes it much easier to market a generic self-help service to pro se litigants in Maryland.

Before centralizing its line, the Maryland Court system faced multiple barriers to offering self-represented litigants’ access to justice: only some District Courts housed a physical walk-in self-help space and beyond this support was available only at Family Law Self-Help Centers, limiting both the geographic accessibility of support and the types of civil case the Centers could help with.

The new centralized Self-Help Center provides limited scope legal advice through a contract with Maryland Legal Aid. The 11-attorney team work directly with individuals that contact the Center by phone or online chat. By centralizing legal self-help support staff, the Courts have created statewide access for SRLs to legal support while also enabling an hour expansion: SRLs can talk live with staff 8:30 a.m. to 8 p.m., Monday through Friday. The centralization also helps the court offer a more uniform support system and enables the Self-Help Center to assist with landlord-tenant matters, small and large claims, debt collection, return of property, peace and protective orders, family law matters such as divorce, custody, child support and guardianship, foreclosure, shielding and expungement of records.

The court system also recently launched [the Maryland Law Help app](#), an initiative that brings together all of the Maryland Judiciary's legal resources in one place. It also includes a button to chat or call the Self-Help Center directly for support. The Self-Help Center next plans to study which hours its call volume increases avoid phone bottlenecks and best serve litigants.

This unified legal hotline from Maryland, offering remote services via an urban-based Self-Help Center, will be featured in SRLN's soon to be released Remote Services Study. For more information on the court initiative contact Pamela Cardullo Ortiz at [pamela.ortiz@mdcourts.gov](mailto:pamela.ortiz@mdcourts.gov), and for information about Maryland Legal Aid's role contact Sarah Frush at [sfrush@mdlab.org](mailto:sfrush@mdlab.org).

Last updated on October 13, 2019.

**Year published:** 2016

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- News
- SRLN

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