

Rock Island County Circuit Court to Provide Assistance to Unrepresented Litigants

Written by Joseph Dailing
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(Rock Island, IL.) Fourteenth Circuit Chief Judge Jeffrey W. O'Connor along with Circuit Clerk Lisa Bierman announced the opening of a new internet-based legal self-help center for lower income individuals who cannot find an attorney to represent them in civil matters in court. The new center will be located in the Circuit Clerk's Office, General Division on the Third Floor of the Rock Island County Courthouse. The center will be available during regular business hours. Individuals who have computers connected to the internet can access the materials on the Rock Island County Legal Self-Help Center at <http://rockisland.illinoislegalaid.org>. The center is available online twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week.

"With high unemployment, we are seeing a steady increase in the number of individuals who are forced to come to court without an attorney because they do not have the money to hire one," said Chief Judge O'Connor. "We know that people are better off in court with a skilled attorney," he said. "The reality is, however, that many people cannot pay an attorney to handle their case nor can they find a legal aid attorney to help them. Prairie State Legal Services is overwhelmed with requests for representation," Judge O'Connor said. "While the legal self-help center is not an adequate substitute for an attorney, it does provide valuable legal information that individuals can use to present their case to the judge more effectively," he said. "We hope that unrepresented people
will use this new resource to make their court experience less threatening and more comprehensible," he said.

"While the Circuit Clerk's Office

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works closely with the judges and the court system, we are not lawyers and cannot give legal advice. People often come first to the Circuit Clerk's Office looking for help with their legal problems when they cannot find a lawyer. We are pleased to have a place to refer these people to get the legal information that they need at no cost to them," said Circuit Clerk Lisa Bierman. "We are providing a public access computer in the General Division of the Circuit Clerk's Office for people to use who do not have a computer at home. The legal self-help center can also be accessed from any computer with internet access including public access computers at our local public libraries," she said.

"Coming to court without an attorney can be both intimidating and frustrating. All too often people have only a vague idea about how the court system works and what facts need to be presented to the judge," said Joseph A. Dailing, Executive Director of the Illinois Coalition for Equal Justice. "The legal information on the website, which is written by Illinois attorneys, will give people information about their legal problem as well as legal pleadings to file in court," he said. "Wherever possible we encourage people to find an attorney to help them. The Circuit Clerk's Office will begin handing out a sheet listing information about sources of legal representation," he said. "But in spite of these efforts, some people won't be able to find an attorney and will need to represent themselves in court. The legal self-help center can make that process less mysterious and less frustrating," he concluded.

"We provide representation and advice to as many low income people as we can but our staff is limited and we cannot help everyone who needs representation, even with the volunteer lawyer program," said Gretchen Farwell, Managing Attorney of the Rock Island Office of Prairie State Legal Services. "For those who we cannot help, the Rock Island County Legal Self-Help Center will provide useful information if people take the time to prepare for their court hearing," she said.

The internet-based legal self-help center provides legal information and court pleadings on a broad array of simpler civil legal problems. The website also has videos explaining the court system and how to go to court. The front page of the website features a short welcoming video by Fourteenth Circuit Chief Judge Jeffrey W. O'Connor. It also displays the hours of operation of the center and the location of the center in the courthouse. The homepage features a list of six of the most common legal problems. A search bar at the bottom allows users to search for other legal information.

The legal self-help center was developed by a broad-based collaboration of people and organizations in Rock Island County including the judiciary, the Trial Court Administrator, the Circuit Clerk's Office, Family Resources Domestic Violence Services Program and Prairie State Legal Services. The Illinois Coalition for Equal Justice and Stacie Colston, Outreach Coordinator for Illinois Legal Aid Online, provided technical support and assistance to the planning committee. Illinois Legal Aid Online, an Illinois nonprofit organization, operates and maintains the underlying website for the legal self-help center.

The Rock Island County Legal Self-Help Center is the forty-ninth such center to open in Illinois since 2007. A grant from the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation through Prairie State Legal Services provided the start up funding for the new legal self-help center. The Illinois Equal Justice Foundation receives its funding through an appropriation from the Illinois General Assembly.

For further information, contact Victoria A. Bluedorn, Trial Court Administrator at 309.558.3289.

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