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Court Savings and Efficiency Gains from Georgia Self-Help Centers

Peter Bluestone
Carly Blaier
Alex Hathaway

Executive Summary

The Southwest Georgia Legal Self-Help Center (LSHC) actively works to help lower-income Georgians access justice and legal information through a variety of services that benefit roughly 500 patrons per month, 92 percent of whom are lower-income Georgians. In addition, groups that have struggled to gain access to the legal system—particularly Black individuals, women and those with special needs—make up sizable shares of the patrons served by the center. For instance, in 2022 Black patrons accounted for 40 percent and women 60 percent of the average monthly clients served.

Most of these patrons are from Dougherty County, but residents of other counties also utilize the center's services. The use of the LSHC by other county residents suggest there is demand throughout the state for such services, particularly in rural parts of Georgia. Based on 2021 Census data, it is estimated that almost 7 percent of Dougherty County residents utilize services from the center. About 3 million Georgians live in areas of the state outside of large metropolitan places—many in rural parts of the state. This group of Georgians would likely benefit from an expansion of self-help centers like the LSHC. If a similar share of these 3 million Georgians had access to self-help centers like the one in Dougherty County, roughly 200,000 Georgians would be helped.

Using conservative estimates of court time saved, the return on investment for Dougherty County courts range from \$1.80 to \$2.40 per dollar spent on the LSHC. These benefits accrued annually to the Dougherty County court system more than offset the \$200,000 cost of the program.

Estimates for the benefits received by patrons, as measured by the value of legal services and value of the long-term legal benefits confirmed (called the social return on investment), suggest the total ROI for the LSHC is even greater. Using conservative estimation methods, these benefits are likely to be roughly \$11 per dollar spent for direct legal fees and \$15 per dollar spent based on long-term benefits.

These long-term benefits have been found to increase income and well-being of recipients who are generally lower-income individuals (Teufel, Gosset, & Hayman, 2016). The expansion of self-help centers into other rural parts of the state may help residents needing legal assistance. Additionally, helping to resolve their legal issues may boost their incomes.

As each center would likely serve residents from many surrounding counties, the benefits accrued would spillover to these other counties. Economic theory posits that in the presence of public good spillovers, funding for the service creating the spillovers should come from a jurisdiction large enough to capture all the benefits. In Georgia, the state government would seem to be in the best position to provide this funding to ensure maximum benefit.

Project Overview

The Southwest Georgia Legal Self-Help Center (LSHC) began as a pilot project within the Law Library of the Dougherty County Courthouse in June 2018.¹ The self-help center was established to provide access to justice and legal information for all people, with the goal of mending the justice gap—a disparity in the legal needs of individuals and families with lower incomes and their ability to access or acquire those needs. The impact of these services can be substantial to low-income southerners, the majority of which (92 percent) reported that they received either no legal help or not enough legal help for their civil legal problems in 2022 (Legal Services Corporation, 2022b). The creation of the LSHC has its roots in previous legal efforts in other states.

Prior research has shown a variety of benefits from increasing access to justice, but this report specifically examines economic benefits to the court due to efficiency gains from the operations of the self-help center in Albany, Georgia. In addition, the economic benefits to the program participants are also estimated. These types of benefits are often referred to as social returns on investment.

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These long-term benefits have been found to increase income and well-being of recipients who are generally lower-income individuals (Teufel et al., 2016). The expansion of self-help centers to other rural parts of the state may help residents needing legal assistance and helping to resolve their legal issues may boost their incomes. The findings of this study suggest that because benefits spillover across county lines, funding for expanding these services should be provided by a level of government best able to internalize these spillovers, which in Georgia would be the state.

The LSHC assists primarily with civil matters, including family law, divorces and small probate issues. While located in Dougherty County, the center provides services to citizens living in many other parts of the state. This study will also illustrate how the center improves access to justice for Georgians by documenting in greater detail the services provided as well as demographic information on patrons

¹The data for the S.W. Georgia Legal Self-Help Center was provided by Nancy Long, a court navigator for the center, and was originally collected as a survey of center patrons between June 2018 and June 2022. Much of the operational knowledge was gathered through interviews of other full-time navigators.

served since the center's inception. Finally, recommendations will be made to assist the center and its supporting organizations to further improve access to justice in Georgia.²

The Southwest Georgia Legal Self-Help Center

The Southwest Georgia Legal Self-Help Center has successfully provided legal access to Georgians, assisting nearly 20,000 patrons from many counties in Georgia since opening 2018 (Long, 2022). This center is part of a broader trend across the country of self-help centers becoming an integral part of court systems to improve access to justice (ABA, 2014; Lane, 2004).

Self-help centers have assisted court systems since 1995, when the Phoenix Self-Service Center of Maricopa County, Arizona established a court-based, self-help legal center to assist self-represented litigants with access to legal information and resources (ABA, 2014; Lane, 2004). Self-help centers are typically located within courthouses and operated by court navigators or volunteers, who may help with understanding documents and forms or navigating web-based information. Other less commonly provided services include in-person or online workshops, online or video tutorials, and referrals to pro bono attorneys. Attorneys may also provide unbundled services (ABA, 2014).

A 2014 American Bar Association (ABA) census surveyed nearly one half of the approximately 500 self-help centers across the nation (222 self-help centers in 28 jurisdictions across the United States), offering insights into how self-help centers assist litigants in the judicial process. A key finding suggests that self-help centers help most of self-represented litigants; only a small subset of patrons are turned away because of overly complicated legal issues, limited income or because the center had too many patrons for its staff to accommodate. Nearly 80 percent of self-help center staff surveyed responded that less than 25 percent of patrons needed full legal representation, with half of those reporting that none of their patrons required full legal representation.

However, limited-scope representation can play an important role in helping clients of self-help centers (the LSHC refers to these as unbundled services). The ABA census showed 86 percent of self-help center staff indicated that limited-scope representation would benefit some of their customers, including limited court appearances for a single hearing (62 percent), drafting documents such as pleadings and demand letters (61 percent), and limited court appearances for a single issue (58 percent) (ABA, 2014). The operation of the LSHC follows the guidelines established by these earlier centers. We next discuss the services and operations provided by the LSHC.

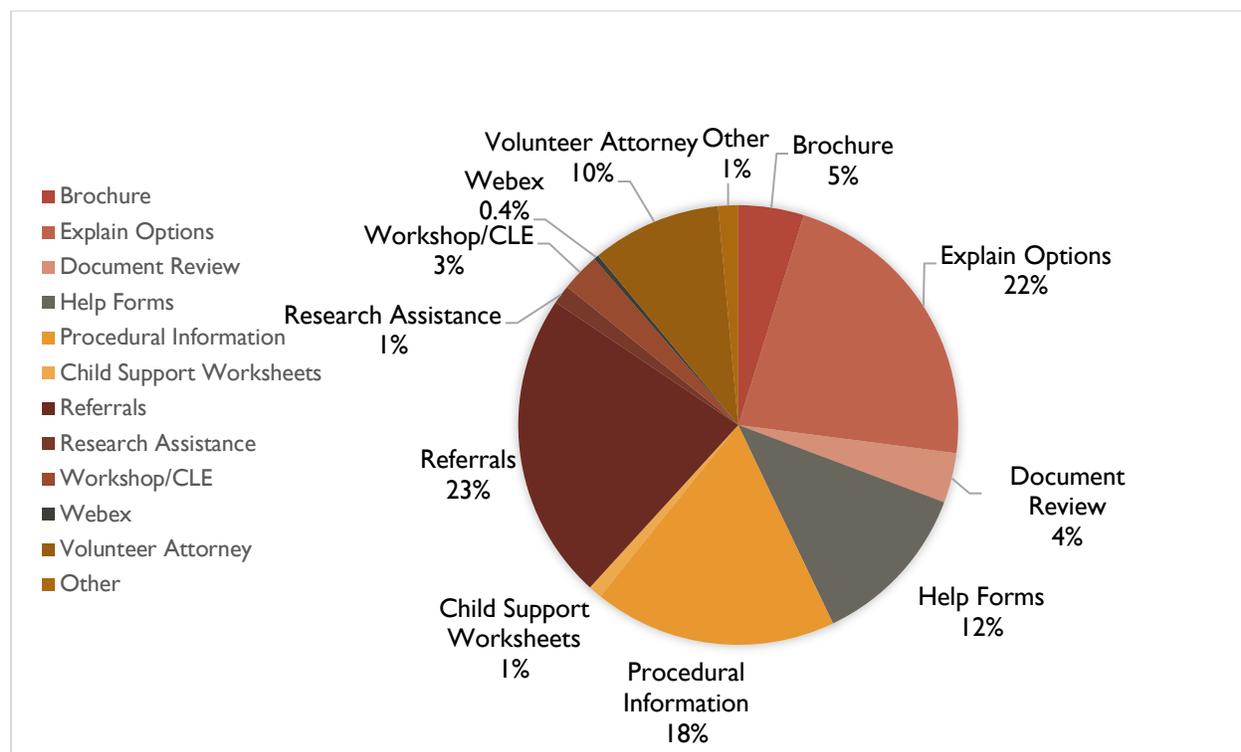
² The Center for State and Local Finance (CSLF) at Georgia State University was contacted by the Judicial Council of Georgia /Administrative Office of the Courts for the purposes of conducting this study.

Services and Operations of the Self-Help Center

Since opening in June 2018, LSHC has offered aid for court-referred litigants, judicial assistance, victim assistance, online assistance and, as of 2022, referrals to faith leaders. In addition, LSHC staff state that it is has become part of Dougherty County court procedures for staff and personnel to redirect litigants to the self-help center. In Dougherty County, the LSHC operates seven hours per day, five days per week.

During its hours of operation, the LSHC is operated by one attorney and two navigators. The attorney and two full-time navigators work every day. The services of the LSHC include informational brochures, explanation of options, document review, help with forms, procedural information, child support worksheets, referrals, research assistance, workshops, WebEx and assistance from a volunteer attorney. Patrons may receive more than one service per visit, depending on their legal needs. Figure 1 shows the distribution of total services provided from 2018-2022.

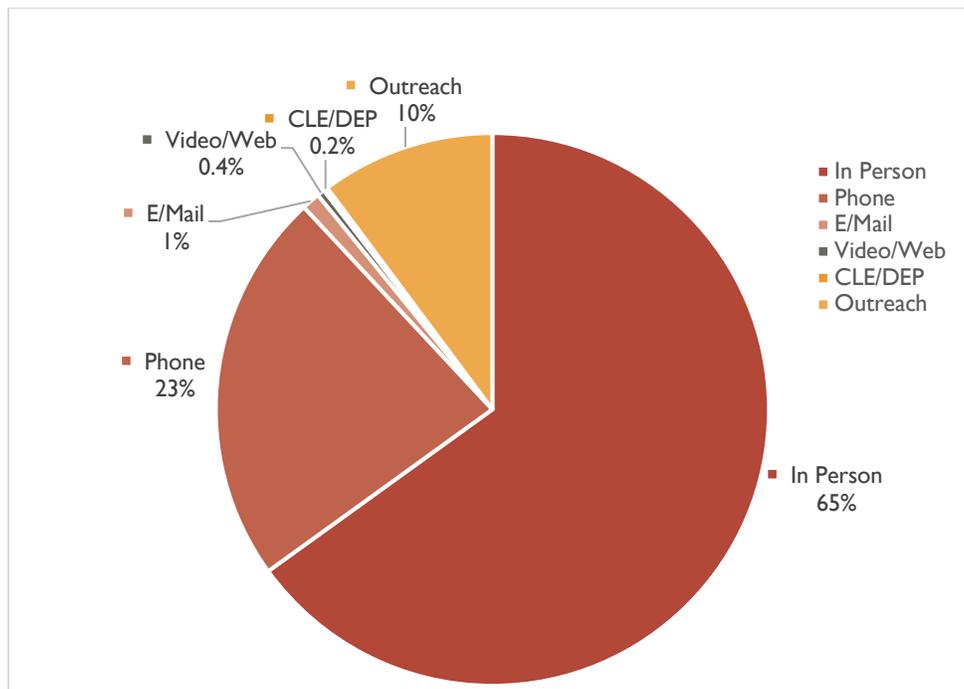
Figure 1. Distribution of Services Provided, 2018–22



Source: Data provided by the Law Library and LSHC; from June 2018 to June 2022, 65,162 services were provided. Note that WebEx and child support worksheet services were not recorded until 2021.

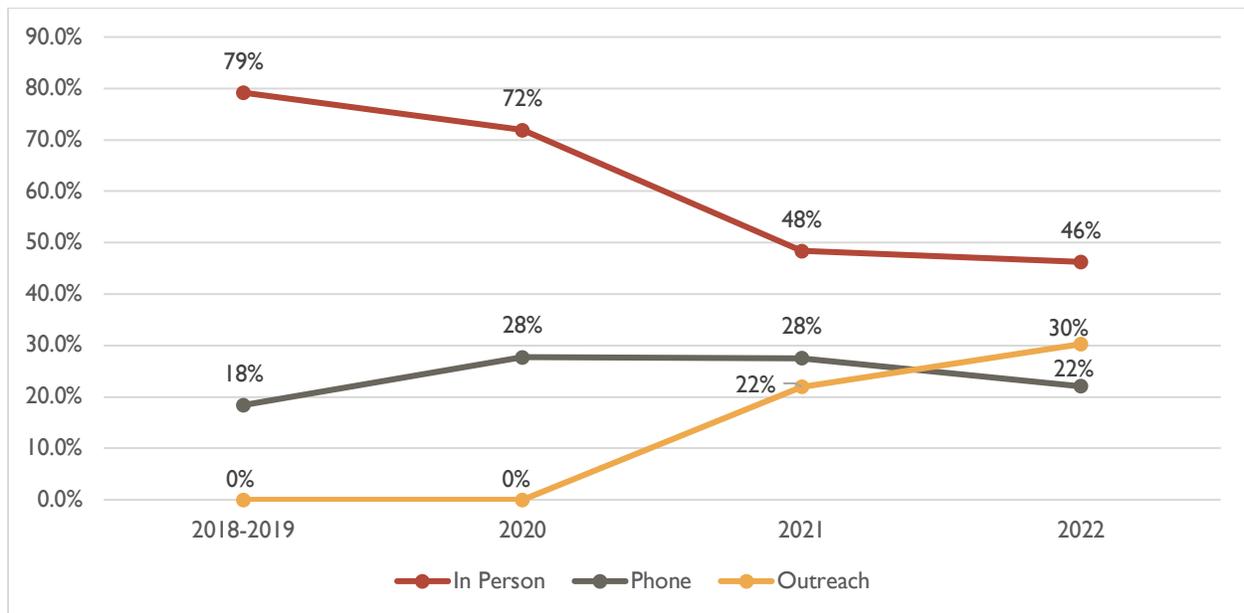
As Figure 1 shows, from 2018-2022 four services accounted for nearly 75 percent of those provided by the LSHC: outward referrals (23 percent), explanation of a patron's options (22 percent), procedural information (18 percent) and help with forms (12 percent). Of the remaining 25 percent, the most common service was volunteer attorneys (10 percent). The remaining services are narrow, such as child support worksheets or workshops/continuing legal education.

Figure 2. Mode of Assistance, 2018–22



Source: Data provided by the Law Library and LSHC; from June 2018 to June 2022, 37,694 services were provided.

Figure 2 details the modes of assistance from June 2018 to June 2022. During the center’s regular hours of operation, The clerk handles the center’s online and telephone correspondence and help direct clients that visit the center in person. The court navigators assist patrons in person or attend to their duties over the phone or via other digital means. Video/Web and email are individually designated but could be combined to ‘online assistance.’ CLE/DEP is assistance through workshops. Outreach represents community initiatives to raise awareness of the services of the LSHC. Figure 2 demonstrates that most patrons (65 percent) are assisted at the center in person and via telephone (23 percent). Outreach accounted for 10 percent of patron assistance, while online assistance and workshops (CLE/DEP) make up the small remainder.

Figure 3. Modes of Assistance, 2018–22

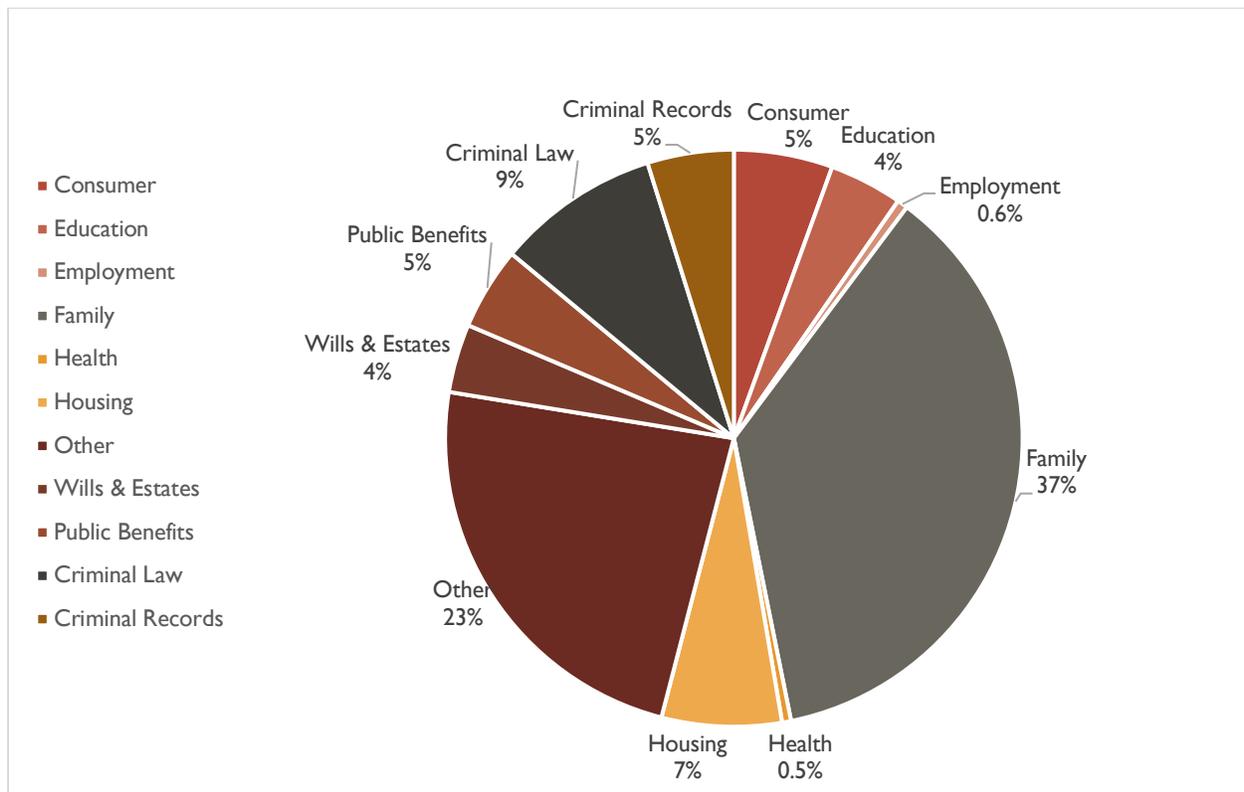
Source: Data provided by the Law Library and LSHC; from June 2018 to June 2022, 37,694 services were provided.

Figure 3 details the top three most common modes of assistance from 2018 to 2022—in-person visits, telephone appointments and assistance through outreach programs—and how they have changed over the years. The results illustrate that traditional in-person assistance accounted for more than three quarters of all assistance in 2018–19 but saw a sharp decrease to 48 percent by 2021. This shift is likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to increase remote assistance. Additional evidence of this shift can be seen in the increased use of phone assistance.

In an interview with the Georgia Courts Journal, the center’s staff explained that telephone assistance was particularly important during the pandemic. Center staff rerouted LSHC calls to their personal cell phones as they worked from home (Long & Williams, 2020). In addition, patrons were routed to other community partners and pilot programs set up during the pandemic. Lastly, outreach, which was unused in 2018–2020 due to high demand and limited staff, grew immensely to 22 percent in 2021 and 30 percent in the first half of 2022, as another avenue of assistance during and after the pandemic. Eventually during the pandemic, navigators were meeting with patrons outdoors on the courthouse steps to help them with forms and other issues (Long, 2023).

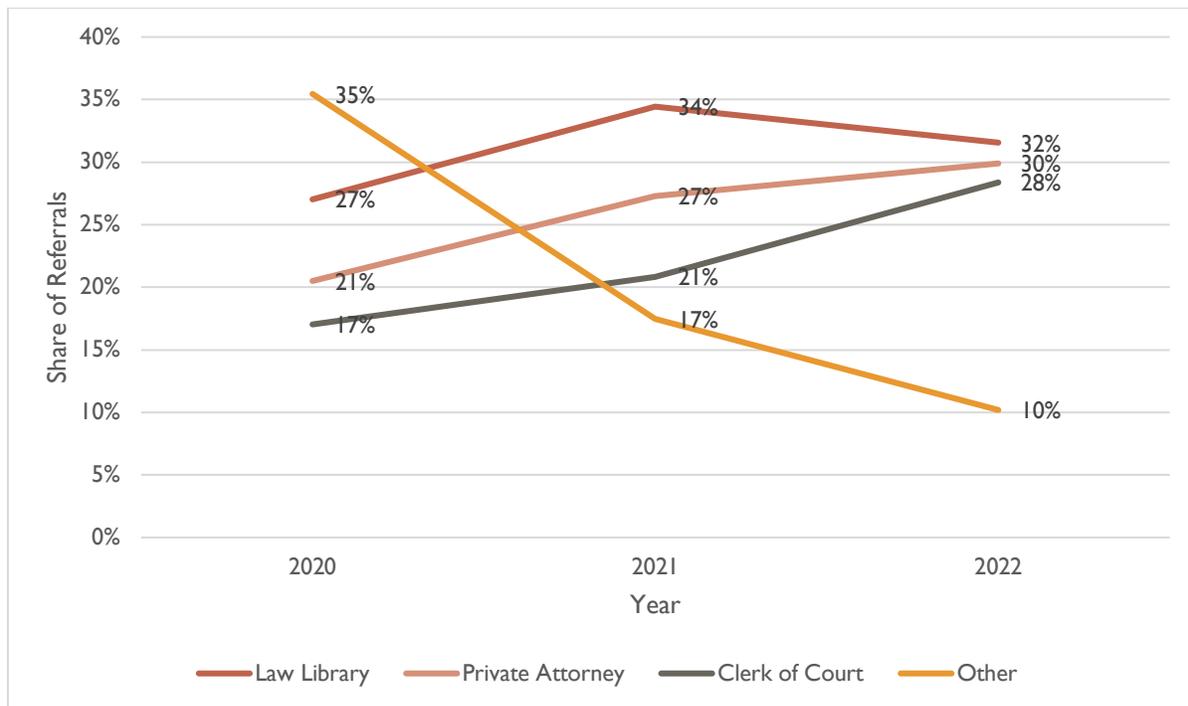
Overall, Figure 2 illustrates a downward trend in the use of in-person assistance during to the pandemic, as services shifted to phone and outreach. Post-pandemic, outreach has remained a significant mode of assistance, while in-person assistance has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. The pandemic exacerbated problems patrons had using the bus to get to the court house and limited other community transportation options. (Long & Williams, 2020). Beyond the limitations of the pandemic, the availability of alternatives to in-person assistance is helpful to patrons who may not have access to transportation or have questions that can be answered quickly over the phone or by other electronic means.

Figure 4. Types of Legal Cases Assisted, 2018–22



Source: Data provided by the Law Library and LSHC; from June 2018 to June 2022, there were a total of 25,117 responses.

Figure 4 displays the legal sub-field types of cases the LSHC assisted from June 2018 to June 2022. The figure shows that patrons of the center most often sought assistance with cases involving family law (37 percent), including child custody, child support, divorce, legitimation, guardianship, and other family or domestic issues. The next most common category is recorded as ‘other’ (24 percent), which includes immigration, international law, mental health, military law, municipal, non-domestic stalking, power of attorney, tax law, torts/personal injury and other less common types. The three remaining types with more than 5 percent of the total include criminal law (9 percent), housing law (7 percent) and consumer law (6 percent). Note that patrons may require multiple services or have questions regarding more than one area of law. Employment and health cases are rarely seen.

Figure 5. Types of Outward Referrals, 2020–22

Source: Data provided by the Law Library and LSHC; between January 2020 to June 2022, there were 40,838 recorded outward referrals, indicating that patrons are referred to more than one source.

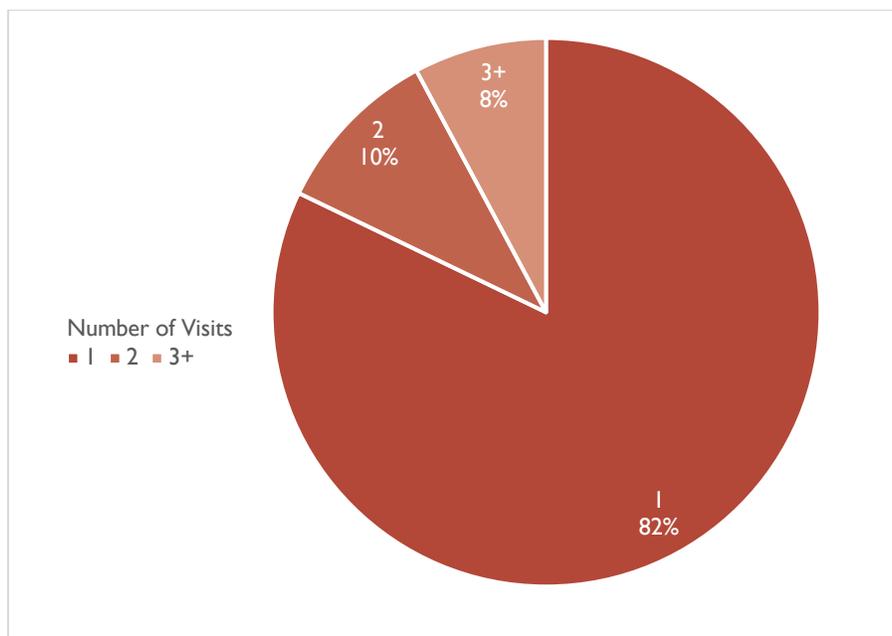
After receiving resources and information from the LSHC, litigants may be referred elsewhere (see Figure 1, in which 23 percent of services are outward referrals). Types of outward referrals by the LSHC are categorized in Figure 5 over the years 2020-2022.³ Most common are referrals to the law library, private attorneys, or the clerk of court.⁴ It should be noted that the law library is within the LSHC, therefore this may constitute as an ‘inward referral.’ This type of referral is often made for those patrons or their attorneys who have another party to the legal issue that is out of state and thus need proper forms for that state. ‘Other’ referrals are primarily to other agencies, a majority of which are nonprofit organizations.

Figure 5 shows that in 2020, most outward referrals were to other agencies, but by 2022 other agencies was the smallest share of referrals. As was discussed earlier, COVID forced changes in viable referral options, with community partners and special programs filling the gaps. In 2021 and 2022, the greatest share of outward referrals was to the internal law library. The second largest portion went to private attorneys, which has increased from 2020 to 2022. The LSHC works closely with attorneys and over time this relationship has grown. In addition, attorneys are allowed to offer unbundled services to the clients of the LSHC, which has proven to be very helpful (Long, 2023). The share of the clerk of court referrals also increased, indicating patrons increased need for such services as court records and status updates.

³ Data was not available for years prior to 2020.

⁴ The clerk of court allows litigants to request official records from the courts as well as status updates.

Figure 6. Number of Patron Visits, 2018–22



Source: Data provided by the Law Library and LSHC; the total number of recorded visits between June 2018 to 2022 was 30,667.

Figure 6 illustrates the number of visits per patron, which clearly shows the prevalence of single-visit patrons. From 2018–22, 82 percent of patrons required only one visit to the LSHC. For returning patrons, 10 percent had just two visits; the remaining 8 percent visited three or more times, likely for guidance or follow-up regarding more complex legal questions. Figure 6 shows that the LSHC can address most patrons’ needs in one visit, and these findings are supported by previous studies from other self-help centers in the 2014 Self-Help Center census by the ABA.

In summary, the center provides many useful services that are typically unavailable to litigants of lower incomes. Many services include tasks completed without the assistance of an attorney. But some issues require legal counsel and are addressed by the LSHC’s volunteer attorney. The data also suggests that the self-help center is evolving in response to external conditions, such as COVID-19, to better assist litigants. Our findings support the work of the ABA census in demonstrating self-help centers’ roles in making the courts more accessible to lower-income litigants. Self-help centers can aid court systems in addressing general legal questions and paperwork or forms, which delays court time when unaddressed or filled out incorrectly.

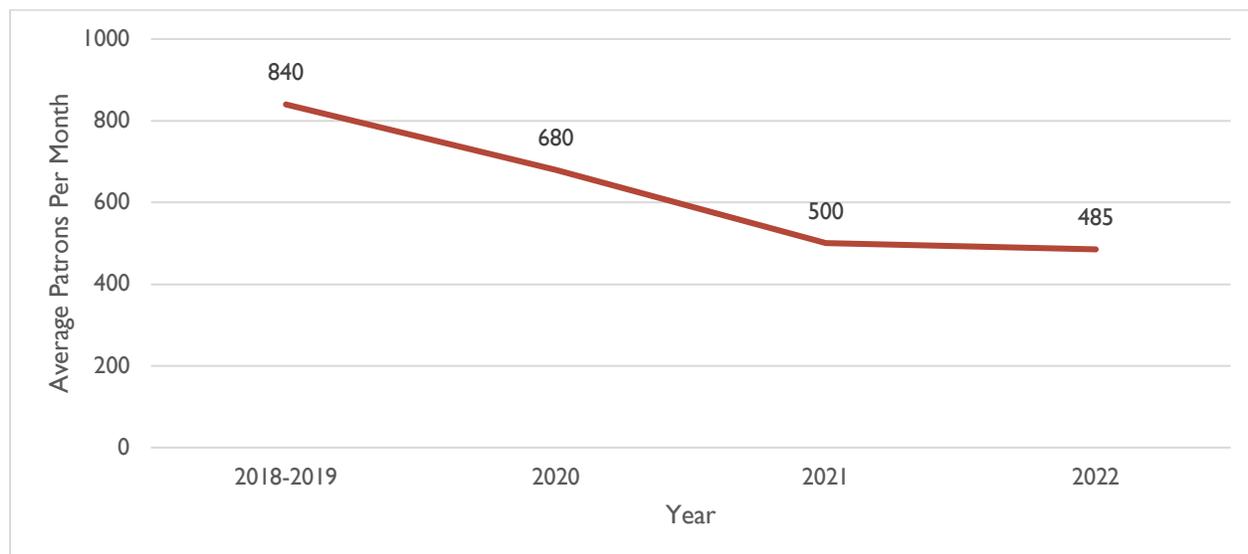
The trends observed within the LSHC support findings of the 2014 ABA Self-Help Center census. First, the LSHC offers a variety of services to meet litigants’ needs, but most common are outward referrals (23 percent), explanation of a patron’s options (22 percent), procedural information (18 percent), and help with forms (12 percent). Note outward referrals are to other social service agencies to help with issues that have arisen for the patron due to the events that necessitated the legal action. Second, in person assistance is the primary mode of assistance. Third, the most assisted cases assisted by the LSHC are within family law (37 percent). Of the referrals, only 20 to 30 percent of those referrals (Figure 5) are to

private attorneys, but this number has increased over time, which may indicate an increase in patrons' legal issue complexity as well as the availability of unbundled services. Lastly, most patrons (82 percent) visit the LSHC once. We next examine the types of patrons that received these services and how the LSHC helps to close the justice gap.

Patrons of the Self-Help Center

In this section, we examine the self-help center data to illustrate who used the LSHC from 2018–22.⁵ The 2018–19 data spans 18 months, while 2022 spans 5 months—therefore, the per-month averages are shown to control for these period disparities. As previously noted, patron assistance sharply declined in 2020, likely from the COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted the availability of in-person assistance. Workarounds for the pandemic took place by phone and over the internet, which may have presented a hurdle to litigants without or with limited access to this technology.

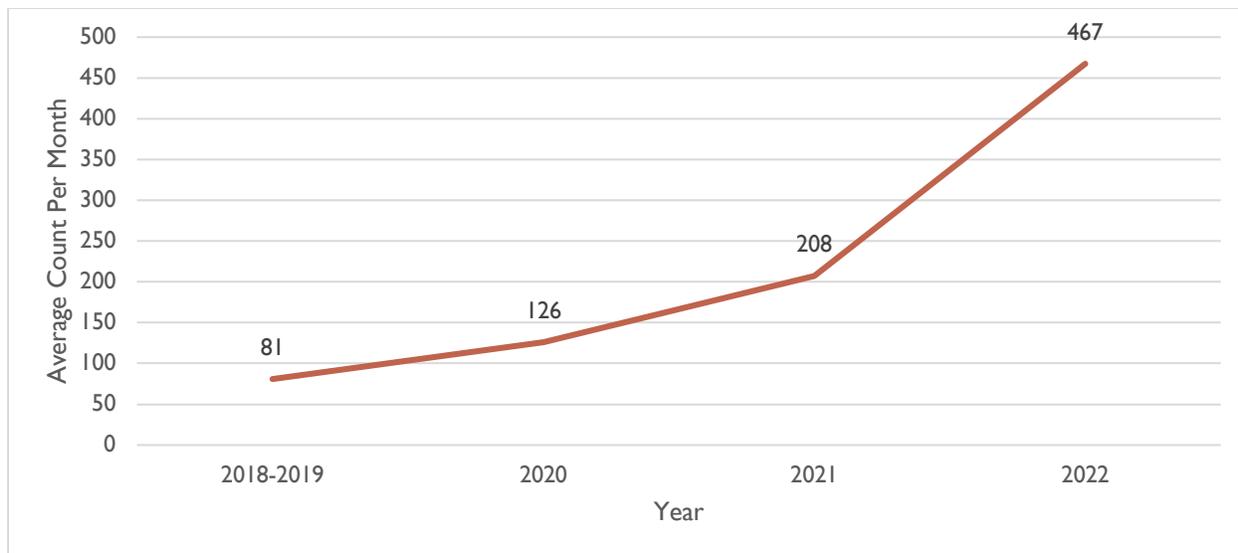
Figure 7. Average Non-Attorney U.S. Citizen Patrons (per month average)



Source: Data provided by the Law Library and the LSHC; total patrons assessed were 31,811 between June 2018 to June 2022.

Figure 7 illustrates the monthly average number of non-attorney patrons receiving assistance at the LSHC. The vast majority of LSHC patrons are U.S. citizens, with several hundred assisted every month, while fewer than seven non-U.S. citizen patrons were seen each month, on average. Over the time period, patrons have decreased. Part of the decline is likely due to the pent-up demand for such services in the years prior to the LSHC's creation. LSHC has worked through those cases from 2018-2020 and the roughly 500 or so patrons per month in 2021 and 2022 may represent the amount of current need (Long, 2023).

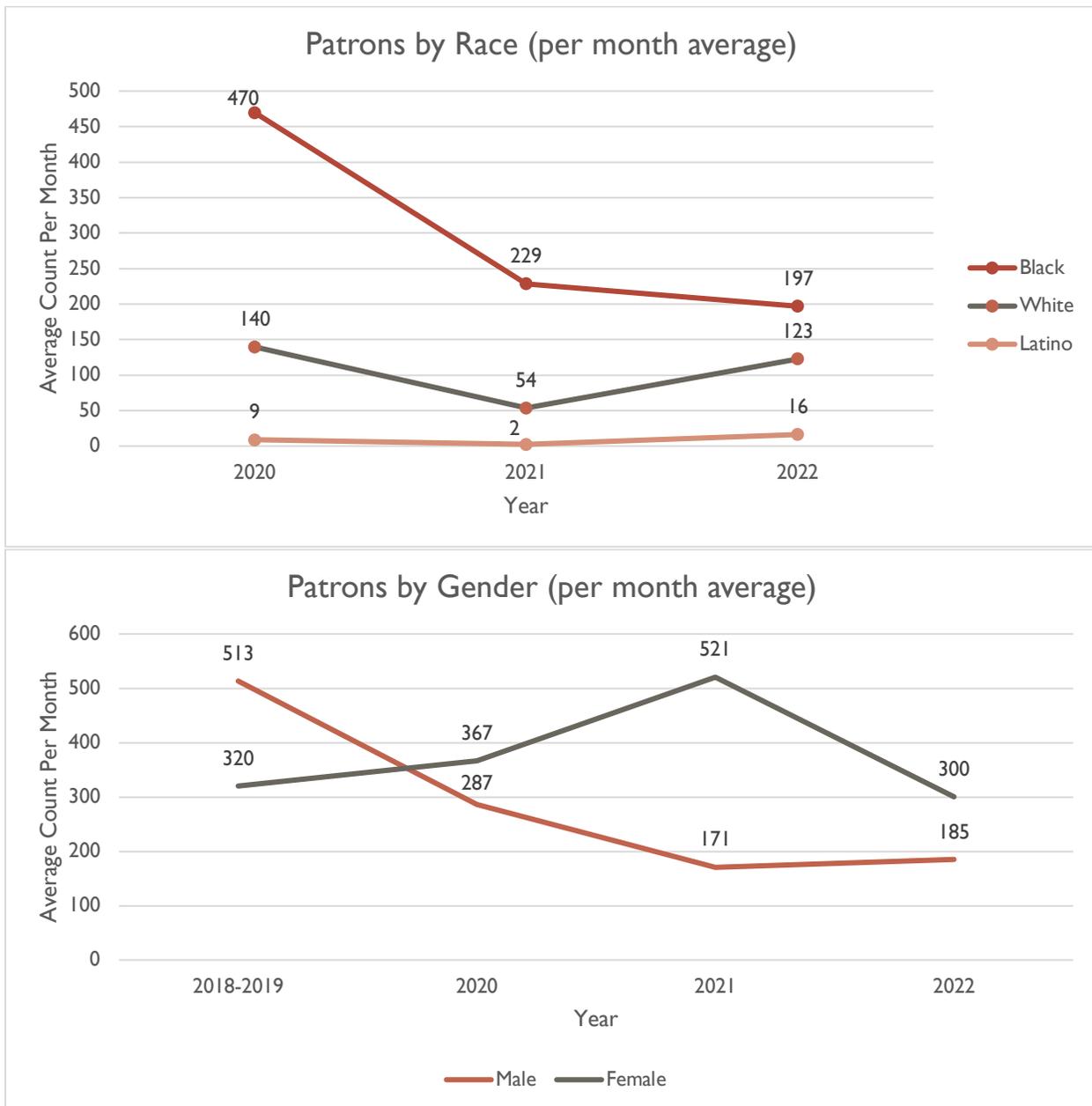
⁵ While much of the data has been consistently recorded, some criteria have been altered or added over time. Observations between 2020 to 2022 can be sorted by year, whereas the data source from 2018 to 2019 is aggregated over 18 months, from July 2018 through December 2019.

Figure 8. Attorney Patrons (per month average)

Source: Data provided by the Law Library and LSHC; there were 29,913 patron responses between June 2018 to 2022.

While the use of the centers has declined for non-attorney patrons, attorney usage has increased over the years examined. Figure 8 displays the monthly average of attorney patrons. For the years 2018 to 2022, the average number of attorney patrons per month increased, and by 2022, there were 467 attorney patrons each month, on average. As was discussed earlier, LSHC and attorneys have a symbiotic relationship in which each helps the other and information has spread over the years to more attorneys in the region. Again, the ability to provide unbundled services has also led attorneys to LSHC.

Figures 9 and 10. Average Non-Attorney Patrons by Race and Gender



Source: Data provided by the Law Library and the LHSC

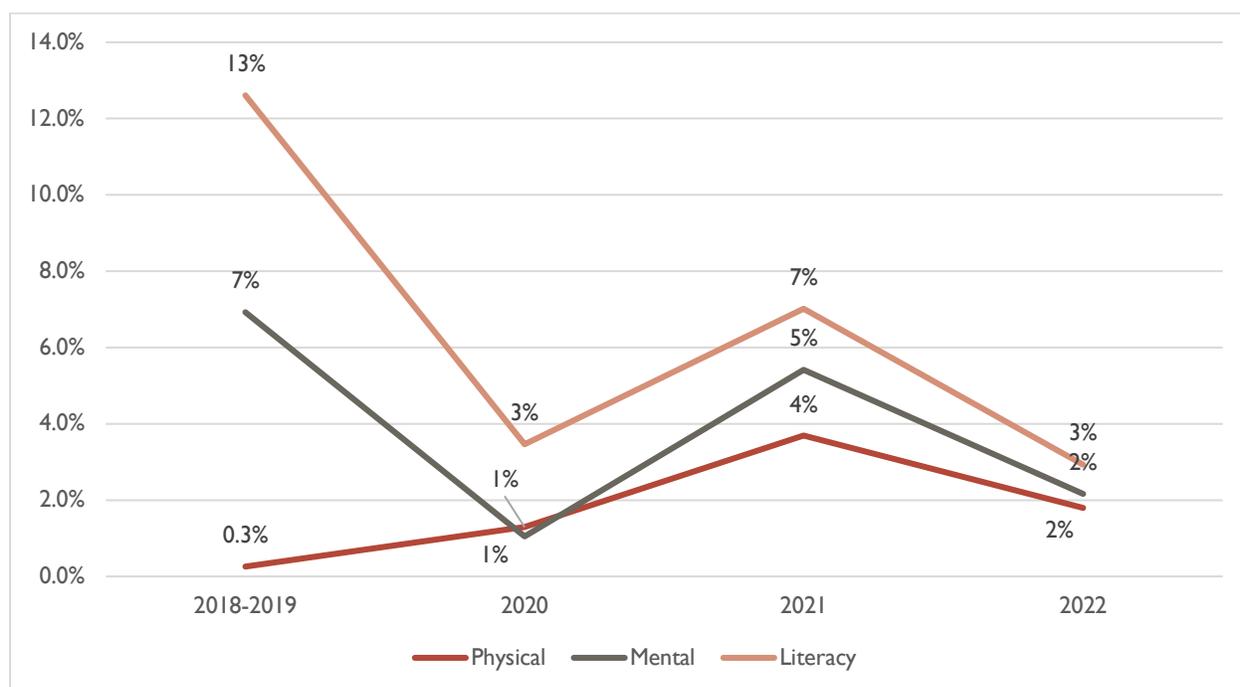
Figures 9 and 10 contain monthly average patron visits per year, showing the patron's race and gender.⁶ Race was not recorded in the period 2018–19, so Figure 8 only contains responses for the years 2020–22. Figure 9 shows that the majority of LSHC patrons in all years are Black. By 2022, most patrons surveyed were Black (58 percent), but this share decreased from 2020 to 2022. Figure 10 highlights patron gender

⁶ Unlike Figure 10, Figure 9 does not include 2018–19. For Figure 8, labels for 'Other' races have been omitted due to low values and visibility; there were 1,245 patrons whose race was recorded between 2020 to 2022. For Figure 9, 'Other' gender has also been omitted due to zero values; there were 2,832 patrons whose gender was recorded between 2018 to 2022.

and conveys that males were seen more frequently in 2018–19, but since 2020 females comprise the majority of monthly patron visits. These trends, which indicate relevant usage for Black and female patrons, suggest that the LSHC offers judicial representation for traditionally underserved communities or demographics. It is an open question as to why the number of Black patrons as well as male patrons declines so dramatically from the early years of the program.

Individuals with special needs are particularly vulnerable to the justice gap. For instance, the 2022 Justice Gap Measurement Survey showed that 82 percent of low-income households with special needs nationally experienced at least one civil legal problem in the past year, and 48 percent experienced at least five problems (LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION, 2022a). Figure 11 shows the proportion of average monthly number of patrons with special needs, designated by the type of special need.

Figure 11. Percentage of Non-Attorney Patrons with Special Needs (per month average)



Source: Data provided by the Law Library and the LSHC. Between 2018 to 2022, there were 30,564 patron respondents.

Figure 11 indicates that, generally, literacy issues account for most patrons with special needs, followed by mental special needs, and physical special needs. There is one exception, in 2020, when mental special needs were less prevalent than physical special needs. Since this is only the case for 2020, it is possible that the underrepresentation of those with mental special needs might be a result of court closure due to the pandemic, suggesting a need for in-person assistance.

Figure 11 in particular shows that the proportion of literacy and mental special needs decreased from 2018–19 to 2020 during the pandemic, with both increasing again in 2021. The proportion of patrons with physical special needs increases steadily from 2018 through 2021 before decreasing somewhat in

2022. None of the percentages have returned to 2018–19 levels. Patrons with special needs also have struggled to access the LSHC due to diminished bus service and the decline of other community provided transportation options (Long, 2023).

Table 1. Patrons from Top-10 Counties (excluding Dougherty County)

COUNTY	TOTAL
Lee	364
Worth	146
Fulton	115
Terrell	114
Mitchell	88
Sumter	74
Houston	58
Tift	48
Lowndes	30
Bibb	29

Table 1 shows the top-10 counties besides Dougherty County that had residents who utilized the center since January 2020. Residents of 93 different counties throughout Georgia have used the service. Although roughly 90 percent of all patrons are from Dougherty County, Table 1 shows that for the other listed counties alone over 1,000 clients have been served. Thus, LSHC provides significant benefits that spillover across county lines. In such a case of public-service spillovers, economic theory suggests that funding should come from the jurisdiction large enough to contain all the spillover effects. In this case, that would be the state of Georgia.

The data and figures in this section illustrate how the LSHC helps to close the justice gap for traditionally underserved individuals. Some of the leading demographic groups served are Black and female patrons, and the number of female patrons has increased over time. The share of Black patrons has decreased since 2020 but is still significant. More research is needed to better understand this finding. Additionally, the LSHC provides accommodations to individuals with special needs. Those with literacy issues account for the majority of these patrons, a group that struggles mightily in the legal arena.

Valuation of Self-Help Centers

Self-help centers have immediate and long-term economic impacts for the court system and its litigants. Many studies of self-help centers only include the benefits to litigants and do not examine the benefits of the self-help center on the court system. Only a limited number of studies include court time savings valuations. We review a relatively recent study that illustrates one of the methodologies we will use to estimate the savings to Dougherty County from the LSHC.

COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS: EXAMPLES FROM OTHER JURISDICTIONS

The San Joaquin Valley court system was the subject of a study that utilized a cost-benefit approach to assess the programs for self-represented litigants in six of its courts (Greacen, 2011). The programs assessed include workshops, one-on-one and information services and self-help services to resolve cases

at the first court hearing from data gathered in 2009. The cost-benefit analysis for each of the individual programs is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Cost-Benefit Findings of the San Joaquin Valley Courts Programs*

TYPE OF SERVICE	ESTIMATED BENEFIT PER \$1 SPENT	ESTIMATED BENEFIT PER \$1 SPENT CLIENT	TOTAL BENEFITS
Workshops ^a	\$4.35	\$3.34	\$7.69
One-on-one and informational services	\$2.30	\$1.14	\$3.44
Self-help services	\$2.22	\$4.92	\$7.14

*Source: Greacen 2011, San Joaquin Valley Court and author's calculations

^a The estimated benefits per dollar spent for workshops were calculated with values for reduced continuances and reduced time for a counter clerk to provide one-on-one assistance to a litigant.

Table 2 presents Greacen's revised cost-benefit analysis that shows the estimated benefits per dollar spent rather than per dollar saved. The first column illustrates the direct benefits measured as the value of the legal services. The second column contains the estimated benefits to the client, in terms of time savings, and the third column is the total benefits. Overall, Table 2 shows:

- The estimated benefits of the workshops are \$4.35 for every dollar spent. Considering the savings of the litigant from eliminated future hearings, these estimated benefits increase by \$3.34 for every dollar spent.
- The estimated benefits of one-on-one and informational services average \$2.30 for every dollar spent. Adding the litigants' savings from these services increases the benefits by \$1.14 on average per dollar spent.
- The estimated benefits of the self-help services are roughly \$2.22 for every dollar spent. When the savings of litigants' eliminated hearings are included, the estimated benefit of the services increases by \$4.92 for every dollar spent.

The Greacen report delves further into the value of court time saved through the cost of continuances, which are defined as additional time before or during a trial, typically granted by a judge, but in this instance may refer to further hearings. In this report, continuance costs are calculated using the one-quarter hour rate of a judge, courtroom clerk, bailiff, filing clerk and data entry clerk, including benefits and overhead. This produces an estimated cost of \$74.21 per continuance in 2008 in San Joaquin County (Greacen, 2011).

Other time savings are explored as well. The Greacen report observed that regarding one-on-one and informational services, courts saved:

- At least one hearing per case
- 5 to 15 minutes of hearing time for every hearing held in the case
- 1 to 1.5 hours of court staff time assisting litigants at the front counter and reviewing and rejecting proposed judgments

Lastly, court data in Greacen's report showed that when self-help staff met with a litigant beforehand, it reduced at least one further court hearing in the case. Self-help centers estimated that staff effort was

one hour per case. Using these estimates above, it was found that with one reduced future hearing from the one hour of self-help assistance, the court would save \$2.20 for every dollar spent. Additional savings to litigants increased these savings to \$6.90 for every dollar spent.

SOCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Another method of analysis is the social return on investment (SROI), which is more commonly used in legal-aid valuation as it quantifies the benefits to litigants. SROI differs from traditional ROI in that it considers long-term impacts as well as the direct value of savings; the direct and long-term savings are then compared to an initial investment.

Social return on investment (SROI) methodology is a common choice to illustrate benefits beyond direct impacts. This SROI analysis helps stakeholder groups because they can observe the benefits of the legal process to the broader population, as SROI can show the economic impacts on individuals and their communities. SROI evaluates both individual programs' net contribution to the community and the program's benefit relative to other program costs. The social return on investment calculated can be compared and ranked among other programs' net contributions to the community; in turn, one benefit of SROI is that different programs with different goals and outcomes can be compared based on a common metric of analysis (Yates & Marra, 2017).

The calculations of the following legal aid SROI analyses total the direct value and the long-term impacts of the services and compare these values to an initial investment (Community Services Analysis, 2014, 2018). The direct value is equivalent to the cost to replace the service with no legal aid, plus legal settlements and court awards. Long-term impact values include, but are not limited to:

- Multiple year income from Social Security and/or Disability benefits, that were previously wrongly denied, terminated, or reduced
- Long-term savings on children's medical and other support costs resulting from child support payments that were previously not obtained
- Unemployment compensation benefits, that were previously wrongly denied
- Significant savings on costs for emergency housing and family assistance resulting from enforcement of landlord/tenant law
- Cost savings and benefits resulting from other legal aid services available to qualified low-income individuals and families (Community Services Analysis, 2014)

SROI methodology compares the immediate and long-term benefits to the initial total funding for operations by taking a ratio of the total benefits over the initial investments. This produces a cost-benefit ratio that, in legal aid SROI studies, is typically adjusted to a base dollar investment to produce dollar of direct and long-term benefits. Table 3 below is a summary of legal aid SROI studies' ROI estimates shown as the savings per dollar spent on legal aid from recent years (Moore & Phyper, 2019). Some states such as Alabama, Florida, Louisiana have multiple studies; these values may vary due to SROI methodology adjustments over time (for a complete list of these studies and additional states, see the Appendix).

Table 3. Selected State Social Return on Investment (SROI) Findings

STATE	YEAR	ROI
Alabama	2015	15.54
Delaware	2013–15	7.23
Florida	2016	7.19
Georgia	2011	8
Indiana	2017	6.7
Louisiana	2016	8.73
North Carolina	2012	10
Tennessee	2013	11.21

Source: Data from Community Services Analysis (2014), Teufel, J., Gosset, K., & Hayman, R. (2016), Community Services Analysis (2018), Moore, L., & Phyper, M. (2019). All states and studies can be viewed in the Appendix.

The ROI in Table 3 contains valuations from 2011 to 2017. Legal benefits in the given fiscal year range from \$7.19 to \$15.54 per dollar invested nationally, and the average of these observations is \$9.33 per dollar invested. Note that the data and assumptions used to calculate SROI vary from state to state, and there is variation based on the types of cases documented, as some types of cases produce more monetary benefits than others. We next apply the methodologies discussed above to the LSHC.

Georgia Estimates of Court ROI and SROI

In this section, we estimate the two types of returns on investment for Georgia, discussed earlier. The first are benefits that accrue to the court system. The second are returns to individuals in terms of legal benefits and future contingent benefits, based on the successful outcome of the legal proceeding—commonly referred to as SROI.

To estimate the benefits to the Dougherty County court system, we rely on data on the average salaries of court personnel provided by the Georgia court administrator’s office. The social-returns estimates rely on data from other studies, as it is beyond the scope of this study to generate original data for Georgia. However, we would expect Georgia to have similar benefits as states such as Alabama and Indiana, which do have detailed studies, as well as those states listed in Table 3.

The first part of the SROI estimate quantifies the market value of legal services, based on legal aid fees or other needs-based services received by the individual. The second part examines the long-term benefits to clients. We examined three broad types of cases the LSHC assisted with—family law, housing law and consumer law—for which we have estimates of Georgia case numbers.

BENEFITS TO DOUGHERTY COUNTY COURT SYSTEM

Table 4 shows the average annual salaries of the various personnel necessary to run the Dougherty County courts. Using the annual average salary, a per-hour cost is estimated assuming court is in session 2,000 hours per year.⁷

Table 4. Dougherty County Average Annual Salaries

JOB	ANNUAL SALARY	COST PER HOUR
Judge	\$200,000	\$100
Court clerk	\$40,000	\$20
Bailiff	\$47,000	\$24
Law clerk	\$42,000	\$21
Court reporter	\$55,000	\$28
Judge's admin assist.	\$55,000	\$28
Judicial assist.	\$42,000	\$21
Total	\$481,000	\$241

To estimate the return on investment, several additional assumptions are necessary. First, it is assumed that the LSHC work would save the court 15 minutes per case, as documented in the San Joaquin Valley study (Greacen, 2011).⁸ Data from the center shows that about 500 clients on average are served per month and the center's budget is \$200,000 per year. Based on the above, the return on investment is \$1.80 saved per dollar spent. Note that if the court was in session for fewer hours per year, the value of the benefits per dollar spent increases. For instance, if the court was only in session on average six hours per day, the return on investment would be \$2.40 per dollar spent.

Social Returns on Investment

In this section, we estimate hypothetical social returns on investment for several selected types of cases. We focus on family law, consumer law, and housing law, because we have estimates for the share of these cases in Georgia. Also, there are many of these types of cases documented in studies of Alabama and Indiana (Community Services Analysis, 2014, 2018). Table 5 shows the average direct and long-term benefits for Alabama and Indiana, as well as the number of cases in each legal segment. To be conservative in our estimates, we use the average direct benefit for Indiana (\$702) and the average long-term benefit for Alabama (\$1,025).

⁷ This estimate assumes that the court is open 50 weeks per year with court in session five days per week, eight hours per day.

⁸ This estimate is an average value; thus, in some instances more time is saved while in other's less time is saved. Because this is an average value, it is applied to all cases for this estimate. Also, our estimate of court labor cost of \$84 per quarter hour is similar to that of the San Joaquin Valley study of \$74 per quarter hour.

Table 5. Average Direct and Long-term Benefits for Alabama and Indiana Clients

	Avg. Benefits per Client		Total Clients
	Direct	Long-Term	
Family Law			
Alabama	\$1,188	\$916	8,829
Indiana	\$676	\$7,955	6,573
Consumer Law			
Alabama	\$2,530	\$1,476	4,653
Indiana	\$959	\$1,051	1,840
Housing Law			
Alabama	\$1,332	\$681	5,229
Indiana	\$469	\$3,265	2,211
Avg: Low State	\$702	\$1,025	

Source: Community Services Analysis 2014, Community Services Analysis 2018 and author's calculations

Using the recent data from the center that 500 clients are helped per month, it is estimated that the three types of cases represent roughly 50 percent of the total, about 3,000 per year.⁹ To estimate the social returns on investment, we assume the budget for the center would be \$200,000 annually. For the direct costs, the social returns for every dollar invested in the legal navigator program, \$11 are returned. The long-term estimate of the social return on investment is \$15, meaning for every dollar spent, \$15 in long-term benefits flows to the clients.

These estimates are quite conservative, using the lowest values from Alabama and Indiana studies. A third study from Delaware (Teufel et al., 2016) suggests that the long-term benefits to clients are even greater than the studies from either Alabama or Indiana. The Delaware study is notable as it explains in detail how the long-term benefits are estimated, including data sources and assumptions used.

Conclusion

The LSHC actively works to help lower-income Georgians access justice and legal information through a variety of services that benefit roughly 500 patrons per month, 92 percent of whom are lower-income Georgians. In addition, groups that have struggled to gain access to the legal system—particularly Black individuals, women and those with special needs—make up sizable shares of the patrons served by the center. For instance, in 2022, Black patrons accounted for 40 percent and women 60 percent of the average monthly clients served.

Most of these patrons are from Dougherty County, but residents of other counties also utilize the center's services. The use of the LSHC by other county residents suggest there is demand throughout the state for such services, particularly in rural parts of Georgia. To examine the potential amount of demand in other

⁹ Recall the shares of Georgia cases shown earlier: 37 percent family law, 7 percent housing law, and 6 percent consumer law.

parts of Georgia, we estimated the share of the Dougherty County population that utilizes the centers services. Using the U.S. Census population of Dougherty County from 2021 of 84,844 and the average annual patrons served of 6,000 (with 92 percent from Dougherty County), the evidence suggests that almost 7 percent of county residents utilize services from the center.

About 3 million Georgians live in areas of the state outside of large metropolitan places—many in rural parts of the state.¹⁰ This group of Georgians would likely benefit from an expansion of self-help centers like LSHC in Dougherty County. If a similar share of these 3 million Georgians had access to self-help centers like the one in Dougherty County, roughly 200,000 Georgians would be helped.

The benefits accrued to the Dougherty County court system more than offset the \$200,000 cost of the program. Recall, the return on investment for Dougherty County courts range from \$1.80 to \$2.40 per dollar spent. The social return on investment suggests that there are likely additional benefits that accrue to the clients. Using conservative estimation methods, these benefits are likely to be roughly \$11 per dollar spent for direct legal fees and \$15 per dollar spent based on long-term benefits.

These long-term benefits have been found to increase income and well-being of recipients who are generally lower-income individuals (Teufel et al., 2016). The expansion of self-help centers and other rural parts of the state may help residence needing legal assistance and helping to resolve their legal issues may boost their income.

As each center would likely serve residents from many surrounding counties, the benefits accrued would also spillover to these other counties. Economic theory posits that in the presence of public good spillovers, funding for the service creating the spillovers should come from a jurisdiction large enough to capture all the benefits. In Georgia, the state government would seem to be in the best position to provide this funding to ensure maximum benefit.

Collecting data on the clients that use the self-help centers is critical to continue to evaluate their effectiveness. The study primarily relies on data collected in other states to estimate the economic benefits that likely accrue to Dougherty County and the clients of the LSHC. It would be helpful if data were collected on how the centers benefit clients and help them efficiently move through the legal process. The goal of this data collection would be to get estimates from Georgia on the benefits to the courts in terms of time saved or other procedural efficiencies.

In addition, estimates of the value of the legal services provided by the center would be useful in calculating direct benefits. Finally, some data on the outcomes of the legal proceedings for these clients would also be beneficial, such as if clients received additional spousal support in a divorce proceeding or were granted government benefits based on the services provided by the center. These data and outcomes would allow for better estimates of long-term benefits in Georgia for the clients.

¹⁰ This estimate subtracts the populations of the six large metro areas of Atlanta, Savannah, Augusta, Columbus, Macon and Athens from the total state population.

The Judicial Council of Georgia/Administrative Office of the Courts could utilize this data to update the analysis in this report. In addition, the effectiveness of these programs at providing access to justice for vulnerable populations could also be monitored.

An additional step the Judicial Council of Georgia/Administrative Office of the Courts might take to help improve access to justice is to continue in its efforts to standardize forms across county court systems in Georgia. Standardized forms would facilitate helping residents of counties without a self-help center through various remote access, such as the phone or other digital means. With standardized forms, court navigators would not need county-specific knowledge or forms. The experience of the LSHC illustrates that increased use of phone and other digital access to assistance is a viable way to help provide needed legal assistance and improve access to justice. In summary, the LSHC helps to close the justice gap and provide meaningful access to the legal system in an economically efficient way.

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Appendix

Table 1A. State Social Return on Investment (SROI) Findings

STATE	YEAR	ROI
Alabama	2014	8.84
Alabama	2015	15.54
Alaska	2012	5
Arizona	2011	6.39
Colorado	2012	6.35
Delaware	2013–15	7.23
Florida	2008	4.78
Florida	2016	7.19
Georgia	2011	8
Illinois	2010	1.8
Indiana	2017	6.7
Iowa	2011	6.71
Iowa	2017	4.3
Louisiana	2009–10	1.55–2.40
Louisiana	2016	8.73
Massachusetts	2013	2–5
Missouri	2008	1.84
Montana	2013	3.15
Nebraska	2007	3.97
New Mexico	2014	4.98
New Mexico	2015	3.56
North Carolina	2012	10
Oklahoma	2010	1.54
Oregon	2018	3.43
Pennsylvania	2011	11
Tennessee	2013	11.21
Texas	2007	7.42
Utah	2012	9.23
Virginia	2008–09	2.62
Virginia	2009–10	5.27

Source: Data from Community Services Analysis (2014), Teufel, J., Gosset, K., & Hayman, R. (2016), Community Services Analysis (2018), Moore, L., & Phyper, M. (2019)

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