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Carl Vinson
Institute of Government

Civil Access to Justice

Benefits and Efficiencies of Two
Self-Help Centers in Georgia

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Executive Summary

Legal self-help centers provide legal information and procedural guidance to individuals who cannot afford or are otherwise unable to hire a lawyer and choose to pursue a civil case in court. This is referred to as being a self-represented litigant or a pro se litigant. Self-help centers assist people in navigating the legal system by providing access to legal forms, instructions on court procedures, and referrals to other resources, which can improve court efficiency and ensure litigants are better prepared. Self-help centers are one way courts work to serve individuals who cannot afford an attorney, making the legal system more accessible to those who would otherwise be unable to pursue their legal rights.

Legal representation is provided to litigants who cannot afford it in criminal cases, but the same services are not provided in civil and domestic cases. In Georgia, many rural areas have limited or no access to qualified lawyers to assist in family law cases. Additionally, in many rural areas, Georgians have limited access to legal assistance as pro se litigants. As a response to this need, Georgia has seen an increased interest in self-help centers, which do not provide legal aid but rather exist to help guide pro se litigants through the civil justice system.

The Judicial Council Standing Committee on Access to Justice partnered with the Carl Vinson Institute of Government to understand the economic impact of two self-help centers in Georgia: the Appalachian Judicial Circuit Family Law Information Center and the Southwest Georgia Legal Self-Help Center in the Dougherty Judicial Circuit. The purpose of this study was to understand the economic and social impact of both centers.

This study used a mixed-methods approach to estimate the impact of both self-help centers, capturing both quantitative and qualitative data to inform analysis. Researchers conducted the study in three phases:

1. 1) e-filing data collection,
2. 2) interviews with users of both self-help centers,
3. 3) an analysis period to estimate impact.

E-filing data captured participant information such as socioeconomic status, case process and outcomes, resolution measures, and court operational details. The research team conducted structured in-person and phone interviews to better understand participants' experiences using the self-help centers, as well as their experiences with the court system and outcomes of their case. To analyze economic or fiscal impact, researchers analyzed evidence of court efficiencies, cost avoidance, and the trade-offs of publicly funded legal assistance versus hiring an attorney and the impact this might have on litigant wages or earnings.

Researchers conducted analysis for cases that were assisted by the self-help centers and filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024. In total, the research team recorded 371 cases that were assisted by the centers and 434 overall clients. Most individuals, 80%, who were assisted by the self-help centers were plaintiffs in their case. The remaining 20% were defendants in their case. Of the people that were assisted, 96% remained pro se throughout the entire duration of their case. Litigants in our sample that used self-help center services are working (80%) but are also lower income. The median monthly income of those in self-help center assisted cases was \$3,144 per month. Approximately a third of all litigants had annual incomes at or below the federal poverty level for a family of three. Data on whether an individual was on public assistance varied among e-filing data and interviews, which did not allow researchers to determine public assistance usage rates among self-help center users. Researchers found that the self-help centers provided services to their target audience: self-represented litigants who likely would not be able to afford legal assistance otherwise.

According to the analyses for this study, key findings include increased court efficiency, increased trust in the court system, and savings regarding attorney fees:

- Pro se plaintiffs who used the self-help centers saw their cases take an average of 101.6 days to adjudicate. For pro se plaintiffs who did not use self-help services, cases took, on average, an additional 40.3 days to adjudicate. Additionally, roughly 95% of all litigants in self-help center assisted cases made no more than two appearances to court. Interviews with self-help center users revealed an increased trust in the court system, where nearly 70% of all interviewees reported their experience with the self-help center improved their trust in the judicial system.
- Common themes among those interviewed included multiple years attempting to file or resolve their case, confusion when navigating the civil legal process, and burnout from previous filing attempts. Together, researchers found that self-help centers not only serve as an assistance program, but also a mediator between the courts and individuals who are intimidated and lack an understanding of court processes.
- To estimate attorney fees saved by litigants, researchers estimated total attorney fees for cases reviewed in the study, which totaled \$860,000 on the low end to \$1.77 million on the higher end. By comparison, the combined FY2025 public investment in the two self-help centers was approximately \$245,000.
- Using this investment, the centers served individuals who would have otherwise hired private counsel, those who would have proceeded without assistance, and those who would not have pursued their case at all. The public value of self-help centers exceeded the alternative cost of private representation, which many pro se litigants would not have been able to afford. Researchers conclude that legal assistance does not crowd out

paid legal services but rather provides access to legal services for those who otherwise would not have had access.

In addition to the findings on court efficiency, increased trust, and benefits of self-help centers, this study also identified ways the courts can improve and standardize data collection to inform future research and evaluation efforts:

- Data system improvements include standardizing questions asked at self-help centers and at court, standardizing the method of data collection, and developing data infrastructure to connect self-help center users and their experiences with court case outcomes.
- Cohort tracking (i.e. collecting data from the same group of people across multiple points of time) would allow documentation of changes over time, accounts for changes in circumstances that could impact responses, and confirms whether a specific pattern remains accurate beyond a single point in time.
- Creating a digital filing system can enable self-help centers to standardize both the method and questions asked for participants. In addition, it will streamline access to data for analysis, allow for real-time case tracking, provide timestamps for the paperwork, reduce human error in data collection, and reduce the burden on the staff to collect data and information. It would allow for data system improvements, opportunities for cohort tracking, and other important aspects of data collection and analysis.

Introduction

Civil access to justice refers to people’s ability “to understand and assert their rights in a neutral process pursuant to the fair rule of law and enforce the result” when they encounter “life problems that touch the law.”¹ Legal representation is provided to individuals who cannot afford it in criminal cases, but the same services are not provided in civil or domestic cases. Self-help centers provide legal information and procedural guidance to individuals who cannot afford or are otherwise unable to hire an attorney. In this case, the litigant is referred to as a “self-represented” or “pro se” litigant. Self-help centers help individuals navigate the legal system by providing access to legal forms, instructions on court procedures, and referrals to other resources, which can improve court efficiency and ensure litigants are better prepared.

In Georgia, many rural areas have limited or no access to qualified lawyers to assist in family law cases. Further, although rates of divorce across the country have dropped from 10 per thousand women in 2012 to 7 per thousand in 2022, according to data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau, rates of divorce in Georgia have continued to rise to 8.7 per thousand in 2022, leading to increased family law cases.² As family law cases increase, self-representation in these cases has also increased substantially. However, due to the limited legal aid and multiple resource constraints in rural or less wealthy areas of Georgia, many legal needs are unable to be met. This has led to an increase in interest in self-help centers for many who cannot afford or get access to legal aid. These self-help centers provide necessary information and assistance for self-represented litigants to navigate the legal system in a quick and efficient manner. For this reason, it is important to understand the influence and impact of self-help centers in Georgia.

Two centers were included in this study: the Appalachian Judicial Circuit Family Law Information Center (FLIC) that serves Pickens, Gilmer, and Fannin county residents, and the Southwest Georgia Legal Self-Help Center in the Dougherty Judicial Circuit. Both self-help centers were developed to assist individuals in navigating the civil legal system, especially those who are representing themselves in court. No legal advice is offered, but rather the centers are used to help people with finding and filing appropriate paperwork and finding necessary tools, resources, and knowledge to represent themselves during the court process. The purpose of this study was to understand the economic and social impact of these self-help centers and the population they serve.

Multiple methods were employed in this study, including interviews, coded information from court papers, and survey questions. The results from this study are based on our analysis of 12 months of civil cases where at least one of the litigants utilized the services of a self-help center. Our findings are organized into three sections: self-help center user profile, benefits and efficiencies, and social impacts. In the self-help center user profile section, we summarize the type of cases filed, income profile of litigants, and awards granted. The benefits and efficiencies section details findings that could positively impact the courts as well as individuals and

families included in this study, which in turn improves the economic health of the state. Finally, the social impact addresses the long-term effects of divorce on family and social systems. We conclude the report with recommendations on ways to improve data collection that will benefit the courts when conducting future impact analysis research.

GEORGIA'S CIVIL LEGAL LANDSCAPE

Between 2022 and 2024, 984,474 total cases were filed in superior courts across Georgia. As shown in Table 1.1, of all cases filed in superior courts, 35% were domestic filings,^a and 17% were civil filings,^b with the remaining cases being criminal cases. Table 1.3 summarizes the percent of cases filed in superior courts that were self-represented, with just over half of the self-represented cases being non-criminal cases. As noted earlier, litigants in criminal cases have the right to legal representation. Self-help centers fill a need for legal assistance in non-criminal cases, where legal representation is not provided.

As shown in Table 1.4, domestic court cases were more than double that of civil cases, with the majority of domestic court cases addressing divorce or marital dissolution, 34–35%, as well as issues such as family violence, 18–20%, and custody modification, 4–5%. Civil filings included some landlord and property cases, 6%–8%, as well as a few landlord/tenant cases, .04–.07%, with contract cases consisting of much of the filings, 28–38% (Table 1.5).

Table 1.1. Superior Court Filings

Year	Total	Domestic	Civil	Criminal
2022	316,828	116,970 (37%)	51,355 (16%)	148,503 (47%)
2023	334,301	117,361 (35%)	57,315 (17%)	159,625 (48%)
2024	333,345	116,524 (35%)	62,230 (19%)	154,591 (46%)

Table 1.2. Superior Court Self-Represented Litigants

Year	Total Pro Se	Domestic	Civil	Criminal
2021	68,097	47,836 (70%)	12,774 (19%)	7,487 (11%)
2022	67,208	45,413 (68%)	12,969 (19%)	8,826 (13%)
2023	65,305	42,857 (66%)	13,337 (20%)	9,111 (14%)

Table 1.3. Share of Cases that are Self-Represented

Year	Total Pro Se	Domestic	Civil	Criminal
2022	21.2%	38.8%	25.3%	5.9%
2023	19.5%	36.5%	23.3%	5.7%

^a Legal matters between family, household, or intimate partners

^b Legal disputes between individuals, organizations, or corporations.

Table 1.4. Superior Court Domestic Filings

Year	Total	Divorce	Custody Modifying	Family Violence	Other Case Types
2022	116,970	41,575 (35%)	6,240 (5%)	21,927 (19%)	47,228 (41%)
2023	117,361	41,140 (35%)	5,084 (5%)	21,880 (18%)	48,987 (42%)
2024	116,524	39,497 (34%)	4,913 (4%)	23,047 (20%)	49,067 (42%)

Table 1.5. Superior Court Civil Filings

Year	Total	Landlord/Tenant	Property	Contract	Other Case Types
2022	51,355	322 (0.6%)	4,328 (8%)	14,205 (28%)	32,500 (63.4%)
2023	57,315	384 (0.7%)	4,113 (7%)	18,236 (32%)	34,582 (60.3%)
2024	62,230	262(0.4%)	4,145 (6%)	23,563 (38%)	34,260 (55.6%)

*Data for total self-represented litigants in Georgia were only available up to 2023 at the time of the writing of this report.

Source: Judicial Council of Georgia Administrative Office Courts³

As shown in Table 1.3, 36.5% of domestic filings and 25% of civil cases were filed by self-represented litigants. A person’s means impacts their ability to hire legal representation. In 2023, at least 14% of Georgia households were living under the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), with another 31% of households with income barely above the FPL.⁴ For Georgians at or below the FPL who have a domestic or civil legal case, many turn to self-help centers or services to help them navigate the process.

In addition, Georgians living in rural areas are less likely to have the resources necessary for navigating the legal system when compared to larger, more urban areas such as Atlanta. For example, counties near Atlanta have thousands of legal service lawyers, whereas over 30 counties in rural areas have 10 or fewer legal service lawyers available, with 2 counties not having any legal service lawyers.⁵ However, even if a family has access to a lawyer, they often cannot afford legal representation. The rates of households living in or near the poverty level are more prevalent in rural Georgia, with 100% of single mothers at or barely above the FPL in over a dozen counties.⁶ The purpose of legal aid organizations is to bridge the gap of missing resources – to increase resources for individuals with limited access to legal aid due to either income or geographic location.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In December of 2023, the Carl Vinson Institute of Government completed a report for the Judicial Council Standing Committee on Access to Justice that provided a landscape analysis on self-help centers across the United States. Upon completion of that project, the Committee requested an impact analysis to estimate the economic impact of two self-help centers in

Georgia: the Appalachian Judicial Circuit Family Law Information Center (FLIC) and the Southwest Georgia Legal Self-Help Center (SGLSC) in the Dougherty Judicial Circuit. This report builds on the December 2023 report and provides a deeper analysis of the users and impact of the two self-help centers.

The FLIC and SGLSC were selected for the study given their regional reach. The FLIC serves a three-county, largely rural area in north Georgia with a focus on family law cases, while the SGLSC operates in southwest Georgia as a regional resource addressing a broader range of civil legal issues. Both self-help centers support self-represented litigants who might otherwise face barriers to accessing justice, such as financial, geographic, or other resource constraints.

The study was conducted in partnership with staff from both self-help centers and their respective superior court clerk of courts. The project was carried out in three phases:

- 1) The development of a data collection tool and methodology;
- 2) Data collection by the research team including coding court filings and interviews;
- 3) Data analysis and report preparation.

Throughout the study, Institute of Government researchers met with self-help center and court staff and observed center and court processes to inform the development of the project.

Family Law Information Center

The Family Law Information Center (FLIC) is the self-help center for the Appalachian Judicial Circuit, serving Fannin, Gilmer, and Pickens counties. Established in July of 2008 with a state grant, FLIC was created to provide no-cost assistance to residents of the Appalachian Judicial Circuit who need help with family law matters but cannot afford an attorney or whose legal issue may not qualify for assistance from a legal aid center.⁷ All three counties served by the FLIC contribute office space, equipment, and a portion of staff salaries to support the center.

Fannin, Gilmer, and Pickens counties are rural counties in North Georgia. FLIC primarily serves self-represented litigants with incomes at or below 150% of the federal poverty level. The center consists of one full-time legal coordinator who provides legal information, not legal advice, on a variety of family law matters, such as divorce, child custody, child support, visitation, legitimation, name changes, and protective orders. Referrals into FLIC can come from a variety of sources such as accountability courts, court staff such as clerks and judges, and local attorneys. The FLIC coordinator also attends all accountability court reviews so that she can efficiently address referrals.

FLIC assists pro se litigants with accessing necessary paperwork to file, a service offered in-person and online via their website. Individuals typically schedule a one-hour appointment with the legal coordinator, during which an intake form is completed and individuals receive help navigating legal filings and court procedures. The Appalachian Judicial Circuit designates certain court dates each month as family law pro se days. On these days, the FLIC coordinator attends court and provides guidance to any self-represented litigants who may need on-the-spot support.

Southwest Georgia Legal Self-Help Center

The Southwest Georgia Legal Self-Help Center (SGLSC) opened in 2018 as part of a statewide initiative by the Georgia Justice for All Working Group to address unmet civil legal needs.⁸ The SGLSC is based in the Dougherty County Courthouse in Albany, Georgia and serves individuals seeking to represent themselves in civil legal matters, such as family law, landlord-tenant, probate, wills, name changes, and record restrictions. While the center receives requests for assistance from throughout Georgia, most users of the center are from the Dougherty and rural southwest Georgia areas. Additionally, most individuals who seek services from the SGLSC are low-income and face significant barriers to accessing legal assistance, such as transportation and physical distance from the self-help center.

Center staff include their director, who is also an attorney, one full-time legal navigator, one part-time legal navigator, two additional part-time employees who assist with calls, scheduling, and data collection, and an intern from Albany State University. Legal navigators help self-represented litigants navigate the legal system, but do not provide legal advice. The center's director supervises the provision of legal information provided by the center's legal navigators.

The SGLSC offers in-person assistance through walk-in or scheduled appointments, as well as virtual appointments. Services provided by the center include filing form packets available for purchase, assistance completing forms, and computer access for legal research. The center is open five days a week for walk-in assistance, scheduled appointments, or assistance via phone call.

Methodology

The Carl Vinson Institute of Government research team used a mixed-methods approach to estimate the impact of the FLIC and SGLSC. The study combined quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to capture measurable efficiencies, as well as user experiences within each judicial circuit.

The study was structured around three primary components:

4. E-filing data collection;
5. Interviews with self-help center users;
6. Impact analysis.

The research team conducted site visits to both the FLIC and SGLSC throughout the duration of the study. These visits included observation of center operations, court observations, meetings with center and court staff, and interviews with self-help center users.

Because the study involved the collection of human subject data, including interviews with self-help center users and the review of case filing information, the research team sought and obtained approval from the University of Georgia's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB approval process required the development of a comprehensive research protocol detailing the study's objectives, data collection methods, participant recruitment procedures, and privacy safeguards. All study activities were reviewed to ensure IRB compliance. The approved protocol included measures to protect the confidentiality of participants and the secure handling of court and e-filing data. Interview participants were provided with informed consent materials stating participation is voluntary and their access to self-help services would not be affected by their participation in the study.

E-FILING DATA COLLECTION

The research team worked alongside self-help center staff in the e-filing data collection process and pulled data from three main sources: 1) self-help center data, 2) PeachCourt, and 3) the Dougherty Court Case Management System.

Both the FLIC and SGLSC maintain internal databases with information on individuals they assist. Although the two centers collect somewhat different data elements, both recorded information that allowed the research team to match the individual with a court filing. From the self-help center databases, the research team identified individuals who filed a civil legal case in either the Appalachian Judicial Circuit or the Dougherty Judicial Circuit between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024.

The research team met and worked with the clerk of courts at both judicial circuits to obtain access to their e-filing data systems. While many court filings are publicly accessible in Georgia through PeachCourt, reviewing complete case filings typically requires paid access. With the support of both clerks' offices, the research team was granted secure access to an account on PeachCourt to review case filings for the Appalachian Judicial Circuit and an account to the Dougherty Court Case Management System to view filings for the Dougherty Judicial Circuit.

Data captured include participant information, socioeconomic status points, case process and outcomes, resolution measures, and court operational details. A list of all e-filing data points captured can be found in Appendix A.

SELF-HELP CENTER USER INTERVIEWS

Following the completion of e-filing data collection, the research team conducted structured interviews with users of the FLIC and SGLSC. Through these interviews, the research team aimed to better understand participants' experiences using the self-help centers, their experience with the court process, and outcomes of their case.

To identify potential interview participants, the research team compiled a list of all individuals included in the e-filing database whose civil case had been closed by April of 2025. In the Appalachian Judicial Circuit, the FLIC coordinator assisted with a "warm handoff" approach by first reaching out to eligible individuals to gauge interest in having any contact with the study researchers. The FLIC coordinator then shared names of individuals who were interested in participating for researchers to contact and share more information. Researchers contacted eligible participants directly for the Dougherty Judicial Circuit.

Interviews were conducted both in-person and by phone. For in-person interviews, the research team coordinated with both self-help centers to secure private meeting spaces at both judicial circuits. In the Appalachian Judicial Circuit, researchers were able to provide in-person interviews at all three county courthouses. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes, and participants were provided a \$25 gift card for their participation in the study, as approved by the IRB. The research team conducted a total of 34 interviews across both centers, with 33 interviews included in the final analysis.

The interview guide included questions to gather both quantitative and qualitative points. See Appendix B for the full interview guide used in the study. For quantitative questions, scantron sheets were used to capture data. Interviews were audio recorded to allow for transcription, and later, qualitative data analysis.

ECONOMIC IMPACT ANALYSIS

To analyze the economic impact or fiscal impact of self-help centers, researchers looked at evidence of court efficiencies, cost avoidance, the trade-offs of publicly funded legal assistance versus hiring an attorney and the impact on litigant wages or earnings. Increased efficiencies in processing cases result in lower court expenditures per case and may delay the need to add staff. The ability to pursue their case without the expense of an attorney means the ability to file their case more promptly, rather than waiting until financial resources are sufficient.

The data available for this study did not lend itself to traditional input-output economic modeling using tools like IMPLAN because the data were limited and there was no evidence of a multiplier. Input-output modeling is appropriate only when adding new financial resources to the economy, as when a new firm locates to the state. Financial resources are awarded in some divorce cases, but this is a transfer of funds from one party to another. For example, if a litigant received child support as part of the resolution of their case, the funds are transferred from one parent to the other. But, again, this does not add income to the economy. As part of this study, we also looked for any economic benefits related to changes in public assistance. As explained later in the report, the data collected on public assistance was inconsistent between court filing data and the interview data, preventing the research team from analyzing the effect of those benefits or generalizing to a larger number of cases.

LIMITATIONS

All case filings reviewed through PeachCourt and the Dougherty Case Management System were available only in PDF format, which did not allow for automated data extraction or scraping. As a result, the research team conducted a manual review and data entry process for all cases included in the study. While researchers were able to gather data for all cases that were assisted by either self-help center and filed within the study period, the manual nature of the review and e-filing data collection process limited the total number of cases that could be analyzed. Particularly, this limitation did not allow for the review of a control sample.

A second limitation of this study is that analysis is limited to only cases in which at least one party received assistance from one of the two self-help centers. The study does not include a control group of self-represented litigants who did not use self-help center services. Insights and findings included in this report reflect the experiences of self-help center users but do not provide a basis for comparison with other self-represented litigants or litigants represented by an attorney who did not use the self-help center.

Lastly, although 34 interviews were conducted, only 33 were included in the final analysis. While this sample size provides valuable qualitative insights, generalizability is limited. Additionally, some participants expressed hesitancy or discomfort when responding to questions related to personal finances or employment. Participation in any part of the interview was voluntary, and participants were allowed to skip any question they were uncomfortable with. As a result, financial and employment data from interviews may be incomplete or may be self-reported estimates rather than precise measures.

Self-Help Center User Profile

The FLIC in the Appalachian Judicial Circuit provides assistance to those in Fannin, Pickens, and Gilmer counties who plan to file a family law civil case in the circuit and who plan to

pursue their case as a self-represented litigant. The SGLSC in the Dougherty Judicial Circuit provides services to southwest Georgia, though most of their clientele tend to be residents of Dougherty County.

The following insights provide information on the profile of self-help center users in the two judicial circuits of interest for the study and help contextualize the socioeconomic standing of those using self-help centers. It is important to note that both self-help centers assist more clients than are listed in the following insights. This is because researchers focused on individuals who were assisted and eventually filed within a certain time period. These centers may have assisted other individuals who did not go on to file or did not file within the study’s period of interest. Additionally, the cases included in this study are largely divorce cases without indication of domestic violence. Legal aid organizations are often able to assist litigants in domestic violence cases, which might explain the reason domestic violence cases are not largely observed in this study.

For cases filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024, the research team recorded 371 civil law cases that were assisted by the FLIC and the SGLSC. The total number of clients served from these cases was 434, meaning that in certain cases, the self-help centers assisted both the plaintiff and the defendant. Roughly 80% of all clients assisted were plaintiffs in their civil case, and approximately 20% were defendants.

Table 2. Total Cases and Clients Assisted by FLIC and SGLSC

	FLIC			SGLSC	Total
	Fannin	Gilmer	Pickens	Dougherty	
Plaintiffs	65	65	96	115	341
Defendants	9	22	21	41	93
Total number of clients	74	87	117	156	434
Total number of cases	65	65	98	143	371

Note: Data include only cases that were assisted by the FLIC and SGLSC and were filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024.

Source: PeachCourt, Dougherty Court Case Management System

Of the 434 total clients who received assistance from the self-help centers, only a small number went on to retain an attorney at some point in their case. Table 3 demonstrates the breakdown of client plaintiffs and client defendants who retained an attorney and who remained pro se throughout their legal case. Of all self-help center clients, 96% remained pro se throughout their legal case. Only 18 out of 434 total self-help center clients retained an attorney, 12 of whom were plaintiffs and 6 of whom were defendants.

Table 3. Pro Se Status of Self-Help Center Users

Representation	Plaintiffs	Defendants	Total
Pro se	329	87	416
Retained attorney	12	6	18
Total	341	93	434

Note: Data include only cases that were assisted by the FLIC and SGLSC and were filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024.

Source: PeachCourt, Dougherty Court Case Management System

Monthly income was available for 201 individuals who were either the plaintiff or defendant in cases assisted by the self-help centers. The average monthly income was \$3,588.21. The median monthly income, which is less sensitive to outliers, was \$3,144.00, meaning half of the people with reported income earned less per month and half earned more than \$3,144.00 per month. The data mostly come from the domestic relations financial affidavits and child support worksheets and therefore include the imputed minimum wage income of \$1,261.50 per month for some parents.

Table 4. Statistics on Monthly Income of Individuals Involved in Self-Help Center Assisted Cases

Statistic	Value
Monthly incomes reported	201
Mean	3,588.21
Std. deviation	2,507.17
Percentiles	
5th	946.52
10th	1,203.85
25th	1,917.00
Median	3,144.00
75th	4,458.39
90th	6,142.30
95th	8,875.30

Note: Data include only cases that were assisted by the FLIC and SGLSC and were filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024.

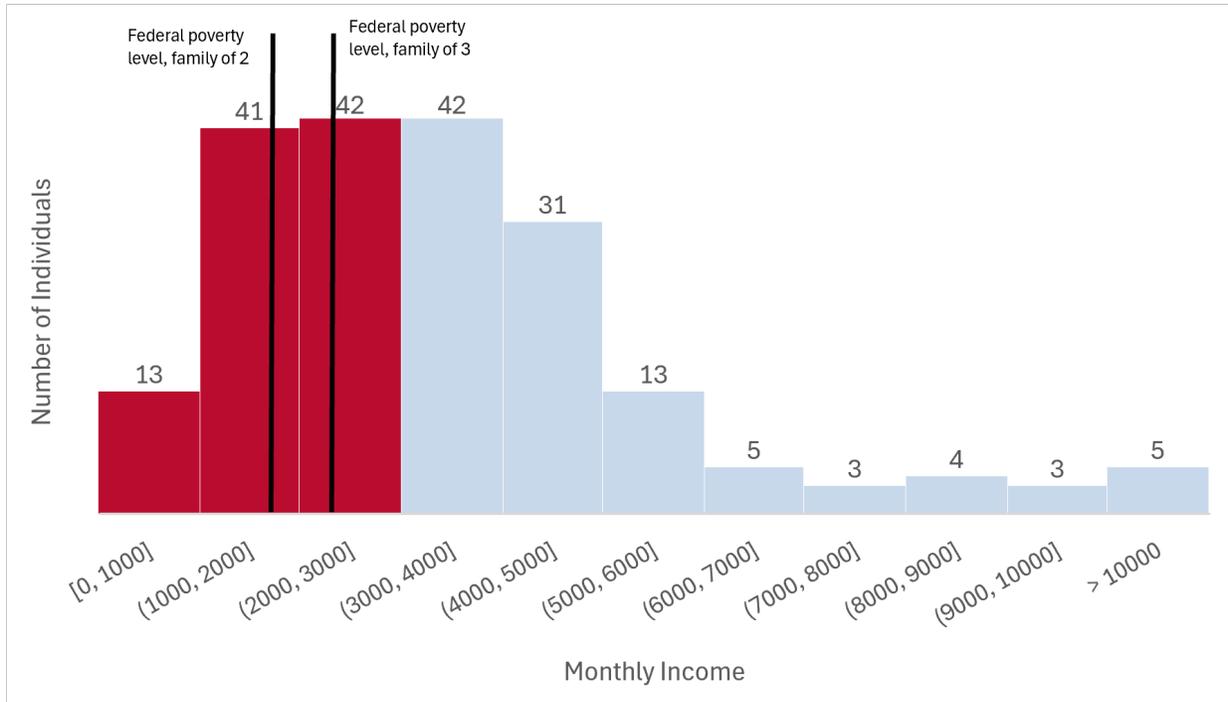
Source: PeachCourt, Dougherty Court Case Management System

Figure 1 shows the distribution of monthly income of individuals involved as either the plaintiff or defendant in self-help center assisted cases. Of the 201 litigants whose case filings included monthly income, 57.8% (n = 116) earned less than \$3,500 per month. The most common income

groups using the self-help centers were people making between \$2,000 and \$3,000 (n = 42) and between \$3,000 and \$4,000 per month (n = 42).

As a point of reference, the 2025 federal poverty level for a family of two is \$21,150 per year, or \$1,762.50 per month, and the federal poverty level for a family of three is \$26,650 per year, or \$2,220.83 per month.^{9,10} Approximately half of these litigants have annual incomes near or below the federal poverty level for a family of three.

Figure 1. Monthly Income of Individuals Involved in Self-Help Center Assisted Cases



Note: Data include only cases that were assisted by the FLIC and SGLSC and were filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024.

Source: PeachCourt, Dougherty Court Case Management System

Though most people using self-help center services earn lower incomes, most are working. E-filing data included work status for 285 case participants. These data indicate that more than 80% of case participants were working at the time their case was initiated (Table 5). The data further indicate that 77.3% of plaintiffs were working while 85.3% of defendants were working.

Table 5. Employment Status of All Litigants

Employment status	Count			Percentage		
	Plaintiffs	Defendants	Total	Plaintiffs	Defendants	Total
Working	136	93	229	77.3%	85.3%	80.4%
Not working	40	16	56	22.7%	14.7%	19.6%
Total	176	109	285	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note: Data include only cases that were assisted by the FLIC and SGLSC and were filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024.

Source: PeachCourt, Dougherty Court Case Management System

In looking at e-filing data collected on self-help center assisted cases, 22.1% or 82 of the 371 closed cases included a monthly monetary award, with 63 awarded to the self-help center client.

Table 6 provides summary statistics on 81 overall monthly award amounts, as well as 63 monthly awards that were provided directly to center clients. The most frequent award amount for all monthly awards is \$500, which is relatively close to the median monthly amount of \$450. For monthly awards provided to self-help center clients specifically, the mode and the median were the same, both at \$400 per month. The maximum monthly award for the cases in our sample was \$3,000 per month, which was awarded to a self-help center client.

Table 6. Monthly Award Amount Statistics

	All monthly awards	Monthly awards for SHC clients
Minimum	\$50.00	\$100.00
Median	\$450.00	\$400.00
Maximum	\$3,000.00	\$3,000.00
Mode	\$500.00	\$400.00
Average award amount	\$516.12	\$505.80
Total awards	81	63

Note: Data excludes a monthly award of \$100,000. Data include only cases that were assisted by the FLIC and SGLSC and were filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024.

Source: PeachCourt, Dougherty Court Case Management System

For one-time awards, 4.6% or 17 of the 371 closed cases included a one-time monetary award, with 11 awarded to the self-help center client. Table 7 provides summary statistics on the 16 overall one-time awards, as well as the 11 one-time awards for center clients. Excluding an outlier that totaled over \$1,000,000, the median one-time award was \$8,350 for all people who received an award. When looking at one-time awards for self-help center clients specifically, the

median one-time award was \$3,886, the minimum was \$100, and the maximum award was \$150,000.

Table 7. One-time Award Amount Statistics

	All one-time awards	One-time awards for SHC clients
Minimum	\$100.00	\$100.00
Median	\$8,350.00	\$3,886.00
Maximum	\$150,000.00	\$150,000.00
Mode	-	-
Average award amount	\$21,796.06	\$23,685.18
Total awards	16	11

Note: Data excludes a one-time award of \$1,012,247. Data include only cases that were assisted by the FLIC and SGLSC and were filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024.

Source: PeachCourt, Dougherty Court Case Management System

Insights into the profile of self-help center users indicate that most individuals who seek assistance from both centers tend to be plaintiffs, though both centers do assist a number of defendants, and in certain cases, both parties in a single case. Monthly income data shows that most individuals involved in a self-help center assisted case tend to be low income. Additionally, users of both centers overwhelmingly (96%) tend to remain self-represented throughout the duration of their case. This means that the self-help centers are serving a target audience – self-represented litigants who likely would not have the means to hire an attorney to pursue a civil case in court.

Findings

The duration of litigation can greatly impact court systems as well as litigants. When duration is limited and the court process moves more quickly, then both courts and litigants receive benefits. For example, the Benefits and Cost Program Analysis for the State of California found multiple areas of savings for the court when litigation time was reduced.¹¹ The study found that assistance for self-represented litigants during their initial court appearance reduced future court appearances. Further, when these future court appearances were reduced, they estimated that the cost of services was about \$.14 for every \$1.00 saved. In addition, during qualitative interviews for this project, multiple interviewees expressed the ways in which time was saved. One person stated,

“I tried and tried to get my divorce finalized... I could never get it to go through because they said something with the paperwork was messed up. But the first time [at the self-

help center], having [them] help me do the paperwork — it went through like that, quick.” Another participant stated, “If I hadn’t had them, it probably would have taken longer to get my divorce.”

When litigants have the appropriate paperwork filled out correctly and are prepared for their case, it reduces the length of hearings and reduces or eliminates the number of future hearings, which saves the court both time and money.¹²

Efficiency in divorce proceedings can bring multiple positive impacts to the State that may not be evident during or immediately after the divorce proceedings. As discussed previously, benefits such as reduced court congestion, increased efficiency, and improved trust in the court system can positively impact the State.

COURT EFFICIENCY

Pro se plaintiffs who used the self-help centers had their cases adjudicated more quickly than those who did not use the centers. The mean number of calendar days to adjudication for self-help center users was 101.6 compared to 142.0 for those not using the centers (Table 8). This difference is statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level as indicated by the t-score ($t = 2.2996$). The standard deviation suggests greater variance in the length of time to adjudication for plaintiffs not using the self-help centers while the 95% confidence interval is much smaller for users than for non-users. These statistics suggest that self-help center users have a much more uniform experience in the length of time spent pursuing their cases in addition to being more likely to gain full resolution from the court.

Litigants using self-help centers spend the equivalent of two months less time adjudicating their case. Though it is hard to quantify, this means more time at work, less mental stress waiting for a case to be concluded, and for litigants in domestic violence situations, two fewer months in abusive and threatening situations. Put simply, the litigant is able to move on with their life much sooner.

Adjudicating cases in 92 to 111 calendar days versus 142 days or as long as 181 days means that the court is carrying fewer cases at one time, case documents are completed appropriately, and a judge’s time is more efficiently and effectively used.

Table 8. Days to Adjudicate (Two-Sample T-Test)

SHC user status	Count	Mean	Std. Err.	95% CI
Plaintiff did not use SHC	30	142.0	19.4	[102.4; 181.5]
Plaintiff used SHC	332	101.6	5.0	[91.8; 111.4]
Total	362	105.0	4.9	[95.4; 114.5]
Difference		40.3	17.5	[5.8; 74.8]

Note: Data include only cases that were assisted by the FLIC and SGLSC, were filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024, and were adjudicated by May of 2025.

Note: $t = 2.2996$, $p < 0.050$; Degrees of freedom = 360

Source: PeachCourt, Dougherty Court Case Management System

As mentioned in the self-help center user profiles, most self-help center users tend to be employed, though most earn lower incomes. Employment rates for self-help users are at approximately 80%. Broken down, 77.3% of plaintiffs and 85.3% of defendants were employed.

It is worth noting that in Georgia, the labor force participation rate was 61.3% in December of 2024.¹³ This means that of people aged sixteen and older, 61.3% were working or looking for work.¹⁴ The number of litigants in our data sample who were working exceeds the overall state labor force participation rate.

Time in court means time away from work for approximately 80% of litigants. To understand the fiscal impact on a litigant missing a day of work to be in court, researchers used the median wage of litigants of \$3,144 per month. Multiplied by 12 months, this yields a median annual salary of \$37,728. To get to an hourly rate, the annual median wage was divided by 2,080 hours worked in a year. The hourly rate is \$18.14 per hour. For a litigant working full-time, taking off a full day of work for court leads to a loss of \$145.12 earnings in that day. The court-filing data and the interviews confirm that self-help centers reduce time lost at work as well as make the day in court a much more efficient use of court time because forms are completed correctly and litigants better understand the process.

Table 9. Employment Status of All Litigants

Employment status	Count			Percentage		
	Plaintiffs	Defendants	Total	Plaintiffs	Defendants	Total
Working	136	93	229	77.3%	85.3%	80.4%
Not working	40	16	56	22.7%	14.7%	19.6%
Total	176	109	285	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note: Data include only cases that were assisted by the FLIC and SGLSC and were filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024.

Source: PeachCourt, Dougherty Court Case Management System

Number of Appearances

Table 10 shows that 65.8% of plaintiffs and defendants in these cases made only one court appearance and almost 95% made no more than two appearances. The number of court appearances for plaintiffs and defendants did not differ significantly, holding very closely to the figures for case participants as a whole. The data also provide additional evidence that when litigants receive support from the self-help centers, their time in court is highly efficient with most cases being resolved with one court appearance.

In contrast to this efficiency, past reports regarding pro se litigants prior to the development of self-help centers state that up to 85% of cases need to be continued beyond the first court visit due to incorrect or incomplete paperwork.¹⁵ One clerk estimated that it could take between three to four separate court appearances to adjudicate a pro se case without assistance from the self-help center.¹⁶ Two judges that were previously interviewed estimated that courtroom time for pro se self-help litigants was reduced by up to 50% per case.¹⁷ According to these results, we can confidently assume that use of self-help centers greatly reduces court time for pro se litigants.

Table 10. Total Number of Court Appearances for All Litigants

Number of appearances	Count			Percentage		
	Plaintiffs	Defendants	Total	Plaintiffs	Defendants	Total
0	54	94	148	14.6%	26.9%	20.6%
1	264	209	473	71.4%	59.9%	65.8%
2	31	29	60	8.4%	8.3%	8.3%
3	11	11	22	3.0%	3.2%	3.1%
4	6	3	9	1.6%	0.9%	1.3%
5	4	3	7	1.1%	0.9%	1.0%
Total	370	349	719	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note: Data include only cases that were assisted by the FLIC and SGLSC, were filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024, and were adjudicated by May of 2025.

Source: PeachCourt, Dougherty Court Case Management System

INCREASED TRUST IN THE COURT SYSTEM

Litigants who used the self-help centers reported that their trust in the court system improved. Nearly 70% of survey respondents reported that their experience with the self-help center improved their trust in the judicial system (Table 11). Only one respondent indicated that the assistance they received reduced their trust in the system.

Table 11. Interview Responses on Trust in the Court System

Answer options	Count	Percent
Greatly improved trust	13	39.4%
Slightly improved trust	10	30.3%
No change	8	24.2%
Reduced trust	1	3.0%
Missing data	1	3.0%
Total	33	100.0%

Note: Data come from interviews with users of the FLIC and SGLSC whose cases were filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024, and whose case had been adjudicated by May of 2025.

Source: Civil Access to Justice Project Interviews

With overall public trust in the U.S. court system at an all-time low,¹⁸¹⁹ developing seeds of trust in the court system is essential for a democratic government as well as for the viability of government authority.²⁰²¹ Many of the individuals who participated in the interviews stated that they spent multiple years trying to get divorced or change their child custody or child support agreements. Additionally, interviewees expressed confusion when navigating the civil legal process or burnout from previous filing attempts. Many of the people who go to the self-help centers are unable to afford an attorney and have no other resources to assist in the court processes. However, having the self-help center as a resource not only saved litigants time and money, but also increased their trust in the court system. One participant stated,

“Before these services, I felt like because I didn't have an attorney, I was kind of on my own. And if you're on your own and you don't know how to do something—and all the legal stuff is intimidating—a lot of times people don't get their stuff settled and filed and done right because they don't have support for the process... I know by giving these [services]—or explaining to other people that I know who are in the same situation, “Hey, you’ve got a friend at the courthouse that can support you on how to do all this” —it makes a huge difference in being able to accurately do the things you need to do for your legal matters.”

Many participants expressed greater trust in the system because they were taught how the system works and how it could work for them. In addition, many participants saw the self-help centers as a beacon for change, providing direct attention and care from the court systems. For example, another participant stated,

“Having something like this means that somewhere, somebody along the line is looking for a solution to a problem... A lot of people have this idea that the court system—especially if they’ve only had negative experiences with it—that's their only outlook.

And I've had that in the past. I've had negative influences and I had this idea that it was a certain way... By somebody putting [self-help centers] in place, it means the court system is trying to fill a need, which makes me feel maybe that my negative views weren't entirely correct."

Self-help centers have been acting not only as an assistance program, but also as a mediator between the courts and litigants who are intimidated and lack an understanding of court processes. The centers have helped to increase public trust in the court system.

ATTORNEY FEES AVOIDED

Self-help centers provide services to a population of litigants who tend to be individuals with lower income. Analysis of cases at the two self-help centers found that 95% of cases were related to divorce.

Research has shown that the presence of a self-help center or some form of legal assistance increases the likelihood that people pursue their case. Zaber et al, (2025) studied the impact of access to legal services on divorce outcomes and found that, "access to legal services appears to increase divorce among low-income residents, including an additional 2.5 to 3.5 divorces per 1,000 eligible residents, with somewhat stronger effects found among eligible women relative to men."²² These researchers conclude that legal assistance does not crowd out paid legal services, but rather provides access to legal services to those who would not have otherwise had access. This study corroborates with these findings. In our interviews, researchers found that 21% of litigants would not have pursued their case had there been no self-help center in their area.

Table 12. Interview Responses to Lack of Self-Help Center Scenario

Response	Count	Percent
I would have continued to pursue it self-represented	14	42.4%
I would have hired an attorney	7	21.2%
I would not have pursued the court case at that time	7	21.2%
Other	5	15.2%
Total	33	100.0%

Note: Data come from interviews with users of the FLIC and SGLSC whose cases were filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024, and whose case had been adjudicated by May of 2025.

Source: Civil Access to Justice Project Interviews

The e-filing data for cases assisted by the FLIC and SGLSC contain information on 372 individual court cases of which 354 were divorce cases (Table 13). Nearly half of all cases in both judicial circuits (46.2%) were for simple divorce with no children or financial issues for consideration. Approximately 20% of cases involved divorce with children and financial considerations, and 30% of cases involved divorce with financial considerations. The remaining

4.8% of cases involved other issues, which were typically cases for nonpayment of child support, name changes, or alimony.

Table 13. Distribution of Case Type by Court

Case type	Count			Percentage		
	FLIC	SGLSC	Total	FLIC	SGLSC	Total
Simple divorce	104	68	172	45.6%	47.2%	46.2%
Divorce w/ children and fin. issues	48	24	72	21.1%	16.7%	19.4%
Divorce w/ fin. issues only	63	47	110	27.6%	32.6%	29.6%
Other type of case*	13	5	18	5.7%	3.5%	4.8%
Total	228	144	372	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

* This group is mostly adjustments to child support or a hearing for non-payment.

Note: Data include only cases that were assisted by the FLIC and SGLSC and were filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024.

Source: PeachCourt, Dougherty Court Case Management System

As part of the study’s interviews, self-help center litigants were asked “if the self-help center was unavailable to you, how would you have continued with your court case?” Fourteen of 33 respondents (42.4%) reported that they would have continued to pursue their case self-represented if the self-help center were unavailable to them. Twenty-one percent of respondents relayed they would have hired an attorney and 21% reported they would not have pursued their case at the time without the center.

The following analysis examines the trade-offs of using a dollar to hire an attorney or a dollar to fund self-help center activities. With the information that 21% of interview respondents would have hired an attorney if the self-help center were unavailable to them, researchers analyzed the use of a dollar for an attorney versus the use of a dollar for self-help center services. To estimate the cost of an attorney, published rates and ranges for divorce attorneys were analyzed.^c

The following table summarizes the data used to derive a conservative estimate of a low, medium, or moderately high cost of an attorney for a divorce case.

^c Rates and cost ranges for hiring a divorce attorney were pulled from advertisements on public websites.

Table 14. Cost Estimate for Divorce Attorneys

Sample law firm	Low	High	Mid
Law firm 1	\$200	\$600	\$400
Law firm 2	\$200	\$500	\$350
Law firm 3	\$200	\$800	\$500
Law firm 4	\$300	\$780	\$540
Average			\$447.50

Source: Carl Vinson Institute of Government; Sample of Georgia divorce lawyer websites

A 2019 survey by NOLO found that the average attorney hourly rate was \$270.²³ Additionally, many divorce attorney sites noted that an uncontested divorce may have a maximum cost of \$5,000. Researchers first applied the lower hourly rate of \$270 from 2019, the average of \$450 per hour, and a maximum cost of \$5,000 to the 354 divorce cases, assuming that at least one of the parties hired an attorney.

Table 15 shows three estimates for attorney fees. For our calculations, it was assumed that one hour in court requires three hours of preparation time. Analysis of the cases in the study found that 97.8% of all cases were resolved with three or less appearances. The hourly rate was first multiplied by three for preparation time, and then by three again to account for three court appearances. This serves as a proxy for both appearances and time in court to file documents.

Table 15. Hourly Cost Scenarios for Divorce Cases with an Attorney

Cost scenario:	Low cost (\$270/h)			Medium cost (\$450/h)		
	Attorney hours per court appearance					
Number of appearances	2h	3h	4h	2h	3h	4h
2	\$1,080	\$1,620	\$2,160	\$1,800	\$2,700	\$3,600
3	\$1,620	\$2,430	\$3,240	\$2,700	\$4,050	\$5,400
4	\$2,160	\$3,240	\$4,320	\$3,600	\$5,400	\$7,200
Flat fee			\$5,000			

Source: Carl Vinson Institute of Government

Using this approach, researchers estimate that the low cost to hire an attorney is \$2,430, the medium cost is \$4,050, and then the high end of the flat rate of \$5,000 is applied. For each type of divorce case, a cost per case was applied. Table 16 summarizes the cost estimates using the three attorney fee options. In total, if at least one of the litigants in the case had used an attorney instead of being a pro se litigant, approximately \$860,000 to \$1.77 million would have been spent by litigants in attorney fees or provided in pro-bono services for the 354 divorce cases in the study.

Table 16. Cost Structure Scenarios for Divorce Cases with an Attorney

	Case type			Total cost
	Simple divorce	Divorce w/ children and fin. issues	Divorce w/ fin. issues only	
Count	172	72	110	
Cost scenario per litigant				
Low cost for all cases	\$2,430	\$2,430	\$2,430	
Medium cost for complex cases	\$2,430	\$4,050	\$4,050	
Flat fee for all cases	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$5,000	
Total cost per scenario				
Low cost for all cases	\$417,960	\$174,960	\$267,300	\$860,220
Medium cost for complex cases	\$417,960	\$291,600	\$445,500	\$1,155,060
Flat fee for all cases	\$860,000	\$360,000	\$550,000	\$1,770,000

Source: Carl Vinson Institute of Government

In FY2025, the FLIC received \$50,000 in state funding, with an additional \$20,000 in other funds. The SGLSC currently does not receive state funding and instead receives the majority of its funding from grants. The SGLSC estimates it takes a minimum of \$175,000 to run the center each year. Self-help centers are a public good. To understand the value of the public good, we have used the hourly rate of an attorney to estimate what litigants would have spent otherwise. Assuming a total of \$245,000 in public investment in the two self-help centers, the alternative private expense to serve the same number of people would have been an estimated \$860,220.

For the FY2025 investment in these centers, they not only served the 21% who would have otherwise hired an attorney, but also the 42% who would have continued as a pro se litigant with no assistance and the other 21% of litigants who would have not pursued their case at all. This analysis shows that the public value of a self-help center exceeds the alternative cost because not only is the annual public contribution less than the alternative cost, but also 63% more people are served with the same investment.

Given the income bracket of the people served by self-help centers, many of the litigants would likely not be able to afford legal representation. This analysis shows that self-help centers provide a strong return on investment for the clientele they serve.

Public Assistance Programs

Our [December 2023 report](#) on the impact of self-help centers identified a number of studies that found that receipt of federally funded public assistance increased among litigants as a result of court case. The economic impact was based on additional federal funds coming to the state through SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, TANF or other public assistance programs. Researchers

attempted to collect data through the e-filing data and our interviews to confirm the findings of other studies.

Among the more than 700 case participants in the e-filing data, only 141, or less than 20%, had an indication of whether or not they were receiving some form of government assistance at the time which their case was being processed in court. Of those 141, only 34 individuals were receiving government assistance. This equals 24.1% of the 141 with any indication of public assistance, and approximately 4.7% of the more than 700 case participants in the overall dataset.

Table 17. Interview Responses for Public Assistance Recipient Status

Recipient status	Count	Percent
No	107	75.9%
Yes	34	24.1%
Total	141	100.0%

Note: Data come from interviews with users of the FLIC and SGLSC whose cases were filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024, and whose case had been adjudicated by May of 2025.

Source: Civil Access to Justice Project Interviews

Most of the 34 case participants who were receiving some type of government assistance at the time their case was heard received a benefit from social security. Table 18 shows the breakdown of government assistance type received, with 70.6% (n = 24) receiving social security. Three of these 24 individuals also received benefits from either Medicaid or Veterans Affairs.

Table 18. Public Assistance Type Received by Litigants

Type of government assistance	Count	Percent
Disability	5	14.7%
SNAP and Medicaid	2	5.9%
Medicaid	2	5.9%
PeachCare	1	2.9%
Social security	24	70.6%
Total	34	100.0%

Note: Data include only cases that were assisted by the FLIC and SGLSC, were filed between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024, and were adjudicated by May of 2025.

Source: PeachCourt, Dougherty Court Case Management System

Tracking and recording of government assistance programs is not consistently recorded in e-filings of cases. There is a marked difference between the e-filing data and interview responses regarding use of government assistance. While e-filing data show 24% of litigants are receiving public assistance, interviews conducted with self-help center users show that 51.5% were receiving public assistance at the time their court case began.

Given the conflicting and incomplete data on public assistance, researchers were not able to calculate any impact of litigants gaining or losing public assistance benefits in their case. The median monthly award in cases with a financial award was \$450 per month, adding 14.3% to the median income of \$3,144. However, 63.6% of those interviewed indicated they had not been able to reduce or end their participation in a public assistance program as a result of a financial award in their court case.

Social Impact Findings

The vast majority of court cases in this project are in regard to divorce and/or child support. Although marriage rates in Georgia did not significantly change between 2012 and 2022, the rates of divorce did significantly increase, whereas in most other states in the U.S., rates of divorce are declining.²⁴ Because the process of divorce can be financially and emotionally destabilizing for most families, it is important to examine the long-term impact that divorce can have on parents, children, and society and how the court process affects these factors.

LONGTERM IMPACTS TO THE FAMILY

Within the first year after divorce, multiple adverse effects occur regarding finances for women, emotional development in children, and familial stability. The first year after a divorce is a time of instability, as individuals attempt to navigate new family and financial structures. Although both men and women experience significant financial disruptions with divorce, women experience significantly larger financial disruptions compared to men.^{25,26} For example, mothers' household income experiences a 33% decline in the year after the divorce,²⁷ and mothers and children are more likely to utilize federally funded resources such as SNAP, WIC, and Medicaid.²⁸ During the qualitative interviews for this project, one parent expressed their hope after the divorce was finalized that they could “get some stability and I can spend more time with my children.” The financial burden of divorce can further exacerbate many of these financial struggles; the swiftness of divorce settlements and proceedings may reduce much of the financial burdens that parents hold during the divorce period. In addition, having a swift divorce allows families to settle into a new normalcy with new behaviors, patterns, and opportunities for familial stability to be reinstated. Many of these lifestyle changes can often lead to disturbance in children’s emotional development and familial stability.

The sudden loss in familial stability can have many negative effects on child emotional development. When compared to children who do not experience divorce, children of divorced parents were more likely to have increased depression and anxiety, and decreased well-being and self-esteem.²⁹ For many children, the structure of their day-to-day changes, with mothers being less present and fathers often being entirely absent.³⁰ However, when divorce proceedings are completed, children are able to adapt to their new lifestyle without the

insecurity that the divorce process can often bring. For example, researchers have found that during the actual process of divorce, children's grades in school tend to suffer, their interpersonal skills decrease, and they are more likely to experience anxiety and depression.³¹ Thus, a quick divorce is often the path to reducing many negative outcomes for children.

Although divorce can have negative outcomes for children, divorce can also have positive outcomes for children and adults. Divorce is often the result of unhappy marriages that include unhealthy communications styles. For example, couples who often fight without repairing their relationship can lead to increased depression and anxiety for their children.³² In addition, witnessing these behaviors can result in children mimicking those same destructive behaviors in their own interpersonal relationships.³³ Thus, when divorce is finalized, families can often become much more peaceful and emotionally healthy compared to before and during the divorce. For ideal child development, the healthiest option is to be raised by two parents who love each other and maintain healthy relationships and communication; the next best option for children is having divorced parents that communicate clearly and co-parent collaboratively with their child's best interest at heart.^{34,35} Thus, divorce can be the healthiest option for many families and utilization of self-help centers can speed this process of divorce substantially.³⁶

With regard to parents, divorce can often allow increased freedom and reduced stress. The process of divorce and experiences in the home prior to divorce can be stressful and complex. However, after the divorce is finalized, many individuals are able to thrive even more than they did during their marriage. One interviewee for this project expressed their struggle of being in an abusive marriage, stating that "as a mom with three kids trying to get away from an abusive husband, you know, there's not a lot of resources to get out of that kind of situation." She was able to leave that marriage and have a full divorce because of the assistance she received with the divorce paperwork and she is much happier for it. In addition, although women often experience a decrease in their financial stability immediately after divorce, one study examined changes in financial status for women over a period of 25 years. Including women who were never divorced, women who were divorced and remarried, and women who were divorced and never remarried, they found that women who divorced experienced long-lasting earnings increases in comparison to married women, particularly among those who did not remarry.³⁷ Divorce is not wholly bad and there can be many positive long-term effects of divorce that are not seen during or immediately after the process of divorce, however they do become more apparent when divorce proceedings are efficient.

Data Discussion and Recommendations

A. Data Systems Improvements

The process of data collection for this study was meticulous and time-intensive; there are multiple areas in which data collection could be improved for greater efficiency and effectiveness. Important information regarding participants is currently missing or unavailable with the current self-help center data collection process. Missing information includes participant experiences with the self-help center (i.e. purpose for attending self-help centers, most utilized tools and resources, etc.), participant information (i.e. income, education, if they are receiving government benefits, etc.), and participant outcomes (i.e. if the divorce was uncontested, final resolution, speed and efficiency of the court case, etc.). In addition to the overall lack of information, there is also inconsistency in reports across the various self-help centers and even the courts in Georgia. At this point, there is no data infrastructure to connect self-help users and their experiences with court case outcomes. Without a clear connection between self-help centers and case outcomes, it is nearly impossible to determine the extent to which self-help centers are effectively impacting court cases in efficiency and outcomes.

Developing standardized methods and questions for data collection enables researchers to perform more precise and accurate evaluations of self-help centers, which allows for improved allocation of resources. Utilizing the same methods, forms, and questions across data collection locations is the basis of any scientific method of research;³⁸ without standardized methods and questions, it is nearly impossible to analyze, understand, or interpret the impact that self-help centers have on the population and the state of Georgia or how resources can best be allocated to meet the needs of self-help centers. The current system of scanning hand-written documents into a PDF format, accomplishes the purpose of documentation, however it is ineffective for data collection and analysis. The PDF documents are often unstandardized, many spaces are left blank or undocumented, and it requires extensive time and attention to collect information into an analyzable format. It greatly limits opportunities for analysis through the lack of efficiency and standardization. Developing statewide consistency in the method of data collection and

Steps to improve data collection for future research and evaluation

- Standardize intake forms across all self-help centers
- Collect self-help intake information digitally and store in shared database
- Enter case number(s) in self-help database so evaluators can link self-help data with court case data
- Standardize case intake and resolution information
- Load select court case information into a database to support ongoing evaluation needs

questions for analysis would improve not only the information received regarding self-help centers and their participants, but would also enable information regarding areas of improvement, how and where to allocate funding, and greater details regarding the economic impact of self-help centers on the state of Georgia. Two main factors in creating a more efficient method for data collection would include the ability to track participants beyond their initial visit as well as a standardized digital filing system for all self-help centers.

B. Cohort Tracking

Cohort tracking means to collect data from the same group of people across multiple points of time. Some of the benefits of collecting multiple data points across time are that it allows documentation of changes over time, accounts for changes in circumstances that could impact responses, and confirms whether a specific pattern remains accurate beyond a single point in time.³⁹ In addition, for this specific study, researchers were unable to have a comparison group between people who used the self-help centers and those self-represented who did not use the self-help centers; tracking multiple time points would open opportunities for average comparisons across both users and non-users of self-help centers. For many couples, the process of divorce can have a negative impact on their mental, emotional, and physical health.⁴⁰ If data is only collected during one of the most vulnerable moments of their life without revisiting their experience, the results could be skewed and inaccurate in portraying their actual experience with the legal system. By tracking a cohort during and after the divorce process, the results of analysis will be less skewed, more reliable, and show a consistent pattern of results.

Some important metrics to consider collecting when utilizing multiple data points include: completion rates for court cases; how well participants complied with court and self-help center guidance; recurrence of legal issues; changes in income, job, or government benefits; changes in satisfaction with the self-help centers; changes in how they view or trust the court system, etc. In order to collect data at multiple time points, self-help centers would need to not only standardize what questions are asked, but when they are asked. There would need to be an agreement for when follow-up questions should be asked (i.e. 30 days after the first visit at the self-help center, 30 vs 90 days after a case is closed, etc.), as well as a method for reaching participants (i.e. email, phone calls, letters, etc.). In addition, centers would need to decide who will reach out to participants or if there is a way to automate emails or other methods for reaching participants, especially if they are no longer actively attending the self-help center. In addition, to these questions, many obstacles can be resolved when filing and tracking systems are digitized.

C. Digitized Filing Systems

Creating a digital filing system can enable self-help centers to standardize both the method and questions asked for participants. In addition, it will streamline access to data for analysis, allow

for real-time case tracking, provide timestamps for the paperwork, reduce human error in data collection, and reduce the burden on the staff to collect data and information. For rural areas, which often do not have the resources for data collection, the digitization of filing systems increases their access to important data and information regarding self-help centers and may enable them to receive more resources because the need and impact is better demonstrated. Self-help locations could have dedicated intake kiosks or assisted e-filing stations to facilitate digitizing and standardizing self-help and court case filing systems. Implementing these strategies can streamline digitizing court documents, data collection, and supports more data integration with court clerk and AOC systems.

Future Research Strategies

The findings from this study highlight the benefits of aligning data on self-help center use and court filing data. Due to limited capacity to manually code court filing information for this research project, only cases where self-help center litigants were involved were included. Future research would benefit from a standardized intake and exit form for users of all self-help centers. This would improve researchers' ability to clearly and reliably analyze and interpret findings as well as include more details regarding outcomes of these cases. In addition, pilot programs can be established to integrate the data collected at self-help centers with data collected at court. Finally, a future study will benefit from having a comparison group for evaluation. Future research should include a sample of self-help participants as well as a sample of self-represented litigants that did not use the self-help center. This would provide clear results regarding the impact of self-help centers for self-represented litigants.

Conclusion

This study focused on the impact of self-help centers on the State from a both broad and more narrow perspective, from court cases to family benefits. The data collected focused on family court cases, which largely consisted of divorce cases. Key findings from this study include increased court efficiency, the value of self-centers as a public good, and improvements in public trust with the judicial system.

Court efficiencies are realized in multiple ways; utilization of the self-help center reduced the number of court appearances, largely due to users receiving correct information, correct forms, and assistance in filling out forms. This enabled the court to correctly file paperwork the first time that users attend court appearances rather than sending them away to find and fill out the correct paperwork. Overall, assistance from the self-help centers improves the flow of court cases, creates increased efficiency in court docket management, reduces delays in those cases,

and reduces the administrative burden for courts. In cases where litigants used the self-help center, the time of adjudication was approximately two months shorter.

This increased efficiency has positive effects on families and children, reducing the stressful time and negative impacts of the divorce process on families.⁴¹ In addition, it saves parents from missing days of work for court for additional days of court appearances and in some cases avoid the cost of legal representation. Analysis estimates that the cost of legal representation for 21% of self-help cases in our study to be between \$180,000 and \$372,000, compared to the funding for the self-help center function of \$245,000 for 100% of self-help cases in the study.

The support of a self-help center also means people are more likely to file their case and seek resolution of a divorce or other domestic matter. Finally, the positive experience provided by the self-help centers works to strengthen the users' confidence and trust in the judicial system and court processes by guiding them through otherwise complex court system.

The findings from this study support previous findings regarding the positive impact of legal self-help centers on the court and users of these centers. Due to multiple methods used in data collection, the results from this study provide a unique perspective on the impact of self-help centers in Georgia by providing multiple perspectives and experiences of self-help users. In addition, this study has identified opportunities to strengthen future data collection to support ongoing evaluation and research needs. Standardizing intake forms and creating databases to store and report self-help and court case information are two ways identified to support future evaluation efforts. In conclusion, the contributions from this study serve as a guide and resource for how to best utilize self-help centers and their important contributions to the State and to society.

Appendix A. E-filing Data Collection Codes

ID	Starts with 1 = Gilmer, 2 = Pickens, 3 = Fannin, 4 = Dougherty
Case filing number	Plaintiffs and defendants share a case number
Name	Name from case filing initiation form
Phone number	Phone number available through petition and response forms
Email address	Email available through petition and response forms
Address	Address available through petition and response forms
Plaintiff	No = 0, Yes = 1
Used SHC	No = 0, Yes = 1
Pro se	No = 0, Yes = 1
Date attorney entered	Date from entry of appearance filings
Government financial support	No = 0, Yes = 1
Type of government assistance	Fill-in response for any type of government assistance (SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, etc.)
Working	No = 0, Yes = 1
Monthly income	Fill-in dollar response for litigant's monthly income; primarily available through child support worksheets
Interpreter needed	No = 0, Yes = 1
Court filed	Fill-in response: either Gilmer, Pickens, Fannin, or Dougherty
Divorce without kids	No = 0, Yes = 1
Divorce with kids	No = 0, Yes = 1
Legitimation	No = 0, Yes = 1

Visitation	No = 0, Yes = 1
Child custody	No = 0, Yes = 1
Child support	No = 0, Yes = 1
Alimony	No = 0, Yes = 1
Adoption	No = 0, Yes = 1
Other legal issue (write-in)	Name change = 1, Contempt = 2, Protective/restraining order = 3, Other = 4; Changed from a fill-in response to a coded, categorical response. Issues labeled as "Other" include: Civil Appeal, Landlord/Tenant, Complaint for Interpleader, Auto Negligence, and Will of Possession
Court mandated classes	No = 0, Yes = 1
Mediation required	No = 0, Yes = 1
Remedy sought by plaintiff	Fill-in response with detailed descriptions
Resolution	Fill-in response with detailed descriptions
Final resolution	This was created using the detailed responses in Resolution to develop a categorical variable for analyses. Received full resolution requested = 1, Partial resolution = 2, Did not receive resolution = 3, Dismissed = 4
Financial award	No = 0, Yes = 1
One-time financial award	Fill-in dollar response for award per month
Monthly financial award	Fill-in dollar response for total award
Award beneficiary	Plaintiff = 1, Defendant = 2, Both or third party = 3
Additional notes	Fill-in response detailing any other pertinent information to the case
Total number of court appearances	Summed from multiple reports of court visits (up to 5 visits reported)

Total number of filings with clerk	Summed from multiple reports of clerk filings (up to 6 filings reported)
Total number of e-filings	Summed from multiple reports of e-filings (up to 12 e-filings reported)
Total number of all filings/appearances	Summed from total reports of court visits, clerk filings, and e-filings
Date filed	Fill-in response including month, day, year
Date of disposition	Fill-in response including month, day, year
Length of time to adjudicate (days)	Calculated according to the date filed and the date of disposition
Case status	Closed = 0, Open = 1, Dismissed = 2

Appendix B. Civil Access to Justice Interview Guide

QUESTIONNAIRE – OVER THE PHONE OR IN-PERSON

All the questions that I am going to ask concern a case that you were a party to between November 1st, 2023, and October 31st, 2024, in [county] Superior Court. This should be the case that you discussed with [center staff]. There are a total of three sections to this interview and the first one focuses on your experience with the self-help center. The interview will take about 30 minutes. Are you ready to start?

Part I: Self-Help Center Activities

[Q1] First, can you tell me how you heard about the self-help center?

[Q2] What made you decide to use the center for your legal matter?

[Q3] For this particular court case, how many times did you visit the self-help center?

[Q4] To the best you can remember, how many times have you used the self-help center for other legal cases over the years, excluding the case we are talking about – the one that started between November 1, 2023 and October 31, 2024? [If FLIC] I know [staff name] helps with other types of courts, but we are only interested in assistance through the family law center.

[Q5] I am going to list a series of services that a self-help center may provide. Please agree or disagree if you received any of them from the center for the case we are focusing on.

- a. Explaining the legal process for your court case
- b. Giving you the forms that you needed to fill out to file your court case
- c. Helping while you completed the forms to file with the Clerk of Court
- d. Helping you while you were with a Clerk of Court staff member to start the court case
 - i. If yes, to “d” what did [center staff] do?
- e. On the day you went to court, helping while you completed any additional forms. For some people this could be a parenting plan or child support worksheet
- f. Referring you to a legal aid organization
- g. Referring you to other community assistance organizations such as a domestic violence shelter or food bank.
- h. Did [center staff] help you in any other way that I didn’t list? If so, please explain.

[Q6] Please discuss the different ways you received assistance from self-help center staff, such as only in-person or also over the phone or through email.

[Q7] How much of the information you received from the self-help center did you use for your court case, overall? Did you use:

- a. All of the information

- b. Most of the information
- c. A little of the information
- d. None of the information

[Q7a] Please explain why.

[Q8] Please rate how well the self-help center staff explained your court hearing process – what needed to be done and the sequence of events

- a. Extremely helpful
- b. Moderately helpful
- c. Slightly helpful
- d. Neutral – not helpful but not harmful
- e. The self-help center made my court experience more difficult
- f. The self-help center did not explain the court process to me
- g. None of the above describes my experience

If select “g” for Q8 go to Q8a. If not go to Q9

[Q8a] Why so?

[Q9] Please rate how well self-help center staff explained the specific process for filling out the necessary forms for your court case. Was it:

- a. Extremely helpful
- b. Moderately helpful
- c. Slightly helpful
- d. Neutral – not helpful but not harmful
- e. The self-help center made my court experience more difficult
- f. The self-help center did not explain to me how to fill out any forms
- g. None of the above describes my experience

If select “g” for Q9 go to Q9a. If not go to Q10

[Q9a] Why so?

[Q10] Are there any ways that the self-help center could improve?

[Q11] If the self-help center was unavailable to you, how would you have continued with your court case? Please choose the response that best fits your situation.

- a. I would have continued to pursue it self-represented – no changes
- b. I would have hired an attorney
- c. I would not have pursued the court case at that time
- d. Other. Please explain

Now let’s move to questions about the court process itself.

Part II: Court Process

[Q12] How many times did you have to physically go to the courthouse from the initial filing to the final disposition of your court case, such as to drop off paperwork and/or go before a judge? Don't count times when you went to the courthouse ONLY to get help from the help center.

[Q13] How did the help you received from the Assistance Center affect your trust in the court system?

- a. Greatly improved my trust in the court system
- b. Slightly improved my trust in the court system
- c. Neither improved nor reduced my trust in the court system
- d. Slightly reduced my trust in the court system
- e. Greatly reduced my trust in the court system

[13a] Would you please explain to me why you chose that answer?

Part III: Court Case Outcomes

We've reached the last part of our interview which is about the outcomes of your case. I will be asking you a few questions about your work situation and finances as these will help us understand the impact of your case.

[Q14] Did you receive any kind of financial award from your court case, such as child support or an asset like a vehicle?

- a. Yes
- b. No

If "yes" to Q14 continue to Q15. If "no" skip to Q18

[Q15] Would you mind stating what kind of financial award you received, such as a vehicle, savings, or child support?

[Q16] [If one-time award] Have you received your award in full? Yes or No

[If on-going award] Have you been regularly receiving your award? Yes or No

[Q17] How would you rate the importance of this award to your current financial wellbeing? Please choose the response that most closely fits your current situation.

- a. The award is extremely important
- b. The award is somewhat important
- c. The award is only a little important
- d. The award is not important – doesn't really make any difference financially.

[Q17a] Would you mind explaining why?

To help us better understand the impact of the award, I am going to ask a few questions about your finances.

[Q18] Were you employed when [you first filed the paperwork or received a summons] for your court case?

- a. Yes
- b. No

If “yes” continue to Q19. If “no” skip to Q20

[Q19] At the time you first went to court, about how much did you make per month or per week? Please give your gross income – income before taxes. [If unclear, confirm whether monthly or weekly]. Or, how much did you make hourly and about how many hours per week did you work?

[Q20] Did you or a child that lives with you receive any kind of public assistance at the time of your court case began? Some examples include PeachCare, SNAP, disability, and subsidized housing. You only need to answer yes or no.

- a. Yes
- b. No

If “no” to Q20, skip to Q23

[Q21] If you or a child living with you received a cash benefit like SNAP, TANF, or Social Security at the time of your court case, how much were you receiving a week or per month at the time of your court case? If you were not receiving a cash benefit, such as PeachCare or public housing, please say so. If you are unsure of the amount, that’s ok, but a rough estimate would be helpful.

[Q22] Have you been able to reduce or end your participation in a public assistance program because of the financial award from your court case?

- a. Yes
- b. No

If “yes” continue to Q22a If “no” skip to Q23

[Q22a] Would you please explain how this public assistance has been reduced or ended and what program(s) were changed?

[Q23] Please select the following response that most accurately describes your work situation today, as opposed to when you court case began.

- a. I work full-time – 30 hours or more a week, on average

- b. I work part-time – less than 30 hours a week, on average
- c. I am unemployed and receive disability
- d. I am unemployed but do not receive disability

[Q24] Please select the response that most accurately describes your current work situation.

- a. I work more because of the outcome of my court case
- b. I work less because of the outcome of my court case
- c. The court case did not affect how much I work
- d. Other. Please explain.

If answer “a” or “b” continue to Q24a. If “c” or “d” skip to Q25

[Q24a] How much do you earn per month or per week now? Again, please give your gross income – income before taxes. [If unclear, confirm whether monthly or weekly]. Or, how much did you make hourly and about how many hours per week did you work?

[Q25] How do you think the outcome of your case will affect you financially over the long term?

[Q26]. Last question. Would you like to share anything else about your experience with the self-help center?

End Notes

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