

Self-Help Toolkit | Georgia Legal Assistance

A Guide for Judges

May 2026



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(I) THE JUSTICE GAP as of 2025

In 2022, the Legal Services Corporation (LSC), which provides funds to Atlanta Legal Aid Society and Georgia Legal Services Program, released a report entitled *The Justice Gap: Measuring the Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans*. This report provides critical insight into the prevalence of access to justice challenges in 2025. The term “justice gap” refers to the difference between the civil legal needs of low-income Americans and the resources available to meet those needs. This study provides a fresh assessment of low-income Americans’ civil legal needs and the extent to which their legal needs are met. Additionally, its timing allows an examination of the justice gap in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had disproportionate effects on this population. The study leverages LSC’s “intake census” conducted among LSC-funded legal aid organizations as well as a nationally representative survey of more than 5,000 adults conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago using its AmeriSpeak® Panel. In cooperation with the non-partisan and objective research organization at the University of Chicago (NORC), LSC made the following findings in its report:

1. LSC-funded organizations are unable to provide any or enough legal help for an estimated 1.4 million eligible problems brought to their doors over the course of a year.
2. **1.9 million requests for help:** Low-income individuals’ approach LSC-funded organizations for help with an estimated 1.9 million civil legal problems in a year.
3. In 2021, 77% of the civil legal issues reported by low-income Americans were inadequately resolved or entirely unresolved.
4. **3 in 4 (74%)** low-income households experienced 1+ civil legal problems in the past year.
5. **2 in 5 (39%)** experienced 5+ problems and 1 in 5 (20%) experienced 10+ problems.
6. **Most common types of problems:** consumer issues, health care, housing, income maintenance.
7. **1 in 2 (55%)** low-income Americans who personally experienced a problem say these problems substantially impacted their lives – with the consequences affecting their finances, mental health, physical health and safety, and relationships.
8. In the southern region of the United States, which includes Georgia, **22.2 million people are below 125% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL)** and thus eligible for assistance from an LSC-funded organization; **75% of households had 1+ civil legal problems in the past year.**
9. Seniors, veterans, children under 18, people living in rural areas, people with high housing costs, and survivors of domestic violence make up the over approximately 50 million Americans who live at or below 125% of the Federal Poverty Level.
10. Low-income Americans seek professional help for only 20% of the civil legal problems they face, often because they are unaware of available resources and whether their problem is “legal” in nature.

Despite the struggle that individual states face in adequately addressing the unmet civil legal needs of low-income individuals, Georgia’s Appalachian and Eastern Judicial Circuits have demonstrated a concerted effort to help low-income residents in their community’s access help in family law cases. They have enjoyed considerable success. Other states, such as Alaska, have made strides to assist people with the use of a statewide self-help center and informal trial proceedings. Finally, in Georgia, alternative dispute resolution offices are also using creative ways to assist courts in resolving a wide variety of disputes.

(II) SUPREME COURT OF GEORGIA STUDY COMMITTEE ON LEGAL REGULATORY REFORM

In June 2025, the Supreme Court of Georgia published its Supreme Court Study Committee on Legal Regulatory Reform’s (the “Study Committee”) Report and Recommendations (the “Committee Report”) concerning access to justice issues. The Committee Report addresses the civil justice gap and measures of non-lawyer regulatory reform to increase civil access to justice, generally; in other states such as, Arizona, Alaska, Delaware, Minnesota, Utah, and Washington; and within Georgia, as well.

In August 2024, the Study Committee was charged with “examin[ing] existing regulation of the practice of law and determin[ing] the viability of modifications to current regulatory practices to allow certain qualified, credentialed, and supervised non-attorneys to provide limited legal services directly to low-income Georgians.” The Study Committee’s fact-gathering efforts included 40 stakeholder interviews with court staff, judges, legal aid attorneys, private attorneys, and others to ascertain their perspectives on these issues; a thorough comparative analysis of regulations and programs in other jurisdictions to better understand the national landscape of reforms, important issues for consideration, and any evaluative data on these existing programs; as well as quantitative data collection via two surveys concerning the potential for non-licensed attorneys to provide legal assistance in high need areas of law and court users’ perceptions of their needs as they navigate the judicial system.

Areas of law which were identified as having a high unmet need for legal services included creditor/fraud cases, domestic/family law matters, employment/wage disputes, landlord/tenant cases, probate cases, and public benefits. Ultimately, the Study Committee’s Report & Recommendations included the provision of recommendations which included the implementation of a phased pilot program permitting non-attorneys, identified as “Limited Licensed Legal Practitioners” (“LLLPs”), to perform specific, limited legal tasks in certain cases considered as high volume, relatively less complex, and generally involve significant numbers of self-represented individuals.

The Study Committee also engaged in fact-gathering to propose recommendations regarding how attorneys earn Continuing Legal Education (“CLE”) credits and eligibility for performing pro bono work, specifically from attorneys with an inactive Georgia law license and with proposed changes to the Extended Public Service program which is utilized by out-of-state attorneys.

(III) SRLN REPORT ON REMOTE SERVICE DELIVERY

- In 2016, the Self-Represented Litigation Network (SRLN) released a resource guide entitled Serving Self Represented Litigants Remotely.
- Eight state-level and county-level programs contributed to the guide.
- The resource guide concluded that remote services delivery is effective and efficient, cost-effective, potentially better than in-person services, and a powerful catalyst for developing provider networks to better serve the public.

- For rural jurisdictions, remote service delivery is a valuable method by which to assist self-represented litigants.
- According to the guide, remote service delivery, namely, providing substantive and procedural information, is a valuable method by which to assist self-represented litigants and should be an integral to judicial districts nationwide, particularly those located in rural settings.
- Link: <https://www.srln.org/node/997/report-resource-guide-serving-self-represented-litigants-remotely-srln-2016>

(IV) LANGUAGE ACCESS, DISABILITIES, AND OTHER ACCESSIBILITY CONSIDERATIONS

In March 2023, the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) issued a [Toolkit for Courts and Legal Services](#) which provides courts and self-help programs with best practices for developing self-help materials. Regarding access for persons who are limited English proficient (LEP) and persons with disabilities, including persons who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing (DHH), the NCSC toolkit emphasizes:

Language Access

- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires recipients of federal funding, like courts, to provide meaningful access to persons who are limited English proficient (LEP) and require interpretation, translation, or other language assistance services to fully participate in court proceedings or other court-managed programs.
- Self-help materials should be provided in the languages most used in the communities served by the court/self-help program.
- Courts and self-help programs may use census data, including [American Community Survey data](#), and court interpreter use data to determine what languages are most commonly used in the communities served.
- **Georgia Court-Specific LEP data/statistics**, compiled by the Judicial Council of Georgia/Administrative Office of the Courts, is **available** at [Data and Statistics – Office of Research and Data Analysis](#). Specifically, users may review LEP data for each class of Georgia court, broken down by case type in the *Case Characteristics* drop down menu.
 - Link Pathway: *Office of Research and Data Analysis Home>Data and Statistics>Case Characteristics*
- If materials are not available in multiple languages, then the courts/self-help programs should document in which languages the materials are available and who performed the translations.
- Additionally, when assessing materials, courts and self-help programs should document what languages the materials are available in and who performed the translation.
- **Reminder:** Don't forget to include date stamps on translated materials! If a resource is not available in multiple languages, consider whether providing translations would make it more accessible.

Disability

- Federal law, the Americans with Disabilities Act requires that all content, including web-based content, be accessible to users with disabilities.
- [Section 508](#) of the Rehabilitation Act also requires that federal agencies make electronic information and information technology accessible, and the General Services Administration has developed guidance that is helpful for all web designers. Likewise, the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#) (WCAG) developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) provide in-depth requirements to ensure that web content is accessible.
- NCSC's Toolkit provides a helpful checklist courts and self-help programs may use to help review materials for some common web and document accessibility needs.

Accessibility Checklist

Accessibility Checklist	
☐	The resource uses high contrast (e.g., black on white or similar). (This document has some guidance about checking contrast.)
☐	For a fillable form, fields are labeled.
☐	Alt text is included for any visuals.
☐	The resource limits the use of tables.
☐	The resource avoids color-coding or provides coded information in another format.
☐	For PDF, the text is searchable.
☐	For video, captioning is included.
☐	For websites, it is navigable by keyboard.
☐	The resource has information about how to request other accommodations or to report an accessibility problem. (For more information about making Word documents accessible, go here . For more information about making PDF documents accessible, go here .)

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Accommodation Information

- Courts/Programs are encouraged to include information about how a user can request accommodation or report accessibility issues. This can be a contact phone number and email address, an online form, or a link to a website with more information.

¹ [NCSC Toolkit for Courts and Legal Services](#)

(V) EXISTING SELF-HELP PROGRAMS IN GEORGIA

A. Atlanta Metropolitan Area

1. Gwinnett County: Self-Help Pamphlet Series
 - a. Chief Magistrate Judge Kristina Hammer Blum spearheaded creation of a color-coded pamphlet series outlining the [Magistrate Court's](#) main court processes.
 - b. Pamphlet series covers family violence, garnishments, abandoned motor vehicles, civil disputes, warrant applications, and landlord/tenant issues.
 - c. The pamphlets are written in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Korean.
 - d. Self-help kiosks at the Gwinnett Magistrate Court allow litigants to electronically generate the requisite forms for their court case; integrated electronic filing is anticipated in the future.
2. Fulton County Family Law Information Center (FLIC)
 - a. Provides legal forms, free 30-minute legal consultations, and a free monthly workshop to clients (consulting attorneys are affiliated with Atlanta Legal Aid Society, though possibly attorneys from other legal services organizations may also volunteer their time).
 - b. The consultations and workshop are not limited to Fulton County residents.
 - c. Allows for one private 30-minute consultation with an Atlanta Legal Aid Society attorney, at no charge.
 - d. In 2015 and 2016, FLIC averaged 1,293 free 30-minute consultations per year.
3. Fulton County Magistrate Court:
 - a. Reimagining court through websites, pamphlets, and videos.
 - i. The Magistrate Court of Fulton County does not have a formalized, stand-alone self-help center. As an alternative, the Chief Magistrate Judge instituted mechanisms for litigant self-help.
 - ii. Chief Magistrate Judge Cassandra Kirk emphasizes increasing accessibility of information on the court website (www.magistratefulton.org), informational pamphlets, videos, and court outreach efforts. In consultation with an expert from the National Center for State Courts, the Fulton County Magistrate Court transformed its website to increase usability and ease of navigation for court users. Each case type features a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section to further guide users.
 - b. Visual Information Center.
 - i. Chief Magistrate Judge Cassandra Kirk created a Visual Information Center on the court's website at: <https://www.magistratefulton.org/205/Magistrate-Court-Visual-Information-Cent>, to house informational videos. The Court-created videos discuss processes for garnishment, small claims, and landlord-tenant cases. These videos accompany the nine general Magistrate Court videos created by the Georgia Council of Magistrate Court Judges, which provide an overview of what the Magistrate Court does, types of cases it handles, and how to approach the Court.
 - c. Fulton County Magistrate Court collaborated with the **Law Incubator program and the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation** to create a Housing Court Assistance Center, which provides legal navigation services to tenants in landlord-tenant cases, including assistance in filing answers.

- i. The Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation trains volunteer pro bono attorneys in Georgia landlord-tenant law. The volunteers provide tenant representation in court in certain housing cases.
- d. The Court created easy to understand, step by step pamphlets for both sides of litigation in its high-volume cases of landlord-tenant, small claims and garnishment, as well as abandoned motor vehicles, abandoned minor child, and warrant application case types. The pamphlets are available on the website, on-site, and are distributed in community libraries and recreation centers. The links for the pamphlets are as follows:

Landlord

([Landlord Pamphlet](#)),

Tenant

([Tenant Pamphlet](#)),

Small Claims

([Small Claims Pamphlet](#)),

Garnishment General

([Garnishment General-Pamphlet](#)),

Garnishment Defendant

([Garnishment Defendant](#)),

Abandoned Motor Vehicles, Garage and Salvage Dealers

([Abandoned Motor Vehicles, Pamphlet](#) [Garages-and-Salvage-Dealers-Brochure](#)),

Abandoned Minor Child

([Abandoned Minor Child Pamphlet](#)),

Warrant Application

([Warrant Application Pamphlet](#))

- a. The Court emphasizes the importance of mediation in managing its calendars. Traditionally viewed as “The People’s Court,” Magistrate Court mediation allows all litigants an opportunity to direct an outcome that best fits them and their situations. Mediation services are provided on the Landlord-Tenant calendar through an ADR program that relies on student interns and on the warrant application and small claims calendars through the Justice Center of Atlanta. The Court also offers online alternative dispute resolutions on its small claims’ calendars through MODRIA.
 - b. Because most of the Court’s civil calendars require mandatory electronic filing, the Court website included the Magistrate Council’s Guide and File, a Forms Generator system which allows litigants to complete interview questions to build a final document ready to file in their case.
4. Fulton County State Court
- a. The Fulton County State Court Self-Help Center is dedicated to serving the public by providing informed access, information, and support services to persons having legal matters in the State Court of Fulton County. Established in 2009, the Self-Help Center serves as a vital resource for individuals navigating legal matters in the State and Magistrate Courts of Fulton County. Located on the ground floor of the Justice Center Building, the Center has earned recognition for its exceptional customer service and dedication to improving public access to justice. Thousands of visitors

rely on the Center for legal assistance, access to court forms, and general navigation of the justice system.

- a. The Center provides a range of services to self-represented litigants, including:
 - i. Intake, screening, document preparation, and legal processing
 - ii. Distribution of legal information and administrative support
 - iii. General information on court rules, procedures, and practices
 - iv. Access to E-File Portals
 - v. Guidance on court calendars and hearing scheduling
 - vi. Attorney consultation to aid in resolving litigation matters
 - vii. Case information, where permissible by law
- b. State Court of Fulton County Self-Help Center
185 Shirley Franklin Blvd., Suite TG300
Atlanta, GA 30303 Office: 404 613-4116

5. Cobb County

- a. Family Law Workshop
 - i. Joint effort between Cobb County Superior Court and Cobb County Bar Association. Assists self-represented litigants in Cobb County with divorce, contempt, paternity and legitimation, child support, and modification issues.
 - ii. [Held once a month](#) and led by attorneys from the Cobb County Bar Association's Family Law and Younger Lawyers Sections.
 - iii. Self-represented litigants can also pay \$150 for a three-hour consultation with an attorney and print or purchase forms from the Cobb County Law Library.
 - iv. Cobb County partially redirects the revenue earned from forms to sponsor individuals with a \$150 scholarship to offset the cost of the three-hour attorney consultation.
- b. Cobb Housing Stability Court Program
 - i. The Cobb County Board of Commissioners created a housing stability court in partnership with the Cetner for Family Resources (CFR) and Cobb County Magistrate Court. The innovative program aims to divert eligible families – the majority of whom are self-represented - from the courtroom where they face eviction, providing resources to improve their financial stability. The Court offers small monetary assistance and wrap-around services to work with landlords and tenants to avoid eviction.
 - ii. The Program is not open for general, direct applications. Eligible individuals must be referred by the CFR or other authorized entity.
 - iii. For more information, including determining tenant eligibility, individuals should contact CFR at 770-428-2601 or email info@theCFR.org

6. DeKalb County

- a. DeKalb County Family Law Information Center
 - i. Assists self-represented litigants seeking help with family law issues such as birth certificate correction, divorce, custody, legitimation, child support, contempt, regardless of income status.
 - ii. Provides legal forms, notary services, assists with navigation of the Child Support Calculator, attorney resource directory, and a virtual Family Law Workshop.

- iii. In collaboration with the Atlanta Legal Aid Society-DeKalb Branch Office, offers one-time, 30-minute consultation in-person, by telephone, and via Zoom.
 - iv. Attorney consultations are limited to DeKalb County residents or litigants with open family law cases in DeKalb County Superior Court.
 - v. Provides an attorney resources directory for litigants seeking or needing to retain counsel
 - vi. Forms are available to print or to complete online, or they may be purchased in the center for a nominal fee.
 - vii. To best assist pro se litigants, the Center often partners with other community agencies.
 - viii. The Center's website provides educational family law videos
 - ix. The Center uses Interpreters to assist with non-English speaking pro se litigants.
 - x. Call and text reminders are used to remind litigants of their attorney consultations.
- b. The DeKalb County Family Law Information Center is located inside the DeKalb County Courthouse, 556 North McDonough Street, Suite 160, Administrative Tower, Decatur, Georgia 30030. The center's operating hours are Monday – Friday, 9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. Attorney consultations are by appointment only. Telephone: 404-687-3990; Website: www.dekalbgasuperiorcourt.gov. email: flic@dekalbcountyga.gov

B. Non-Metropolitan Areas: Appalachian, Eastern, Macon, Augusta, Northeastern Judicial Circuits; Dougherty County Legal Self-Help Center and Existing Programs in Georgia

1. The Appalachian Judicial Circuit

- a. Located in northern Georgia and serves Fannin, Gilmer, and Pickens Counties.
- b. The circuit's [Family Law Information Center](#) (FLIC) was inaugurated in 2008.
 - i. Serves low-income residents seeking assistance with family law issues such as divorce, child custody, child support, legitimation, and contempt, among others. It does not provide legal advice but does provide legal information.
 - ii. Staffing: The Center is staffed by a single Center Coordinator, Hannah Towns, a non-attorney who has directed the Center since 2018. As a non-attorney, the coordinator is able to assist both sides in cases and does not provide legal advice or representation.
 - iii. The Center Coordinator is supported by a highly involved group of judges and court staff.
 - iv. Full contact information for the Center is available at [Contact | Appalachian Family Law](#).
- c. August 2010:
 - i. Richard Zorza, founder of the Self-Represented Litigation Network, evaluated FLIC and concluded that it effectively meets its goal of increasing access to courts for self-represented litigants.

- d. 2014:
 - i. The Center received the William B. Spann, Jr., award from the State Bar of Georgia Access to Justice Committee and the Bar's Pro Bono Project.
 - ii. FLIC services are promoted through various channels, including business cards, a detailed website (www.appflic.org), brochures, print media, DFCS offices², community centers, word of mouth, and referrals from local practicing attorneys.
- e. Two days each month:
 - i. Each county in the circuit hosts two pro se court days per month, for a total of six monthly pro se court days in the circuit;
 - ii. Pro se court allows the presiding judge to take a more engaged approach during proceedings;
 - iii. The judge will explain court procedure, conduct fact-finding, review relevant paperwork, and allow each party to be assisted by FLIC staff as the need arises during the case.

Note on judicial engagement: Critical to FLIC's success is engagement from the local judiciary. The judges recognize that family law issues can be complicated and stressful. The issues may take an emotional toll on the parties involved, especially if a party is unemployed or underemployed, suffering from substance abuse issues, responsible for young children or ailing parents, or anxious because of fear of an unfavorable outcome in court. The judges believe unrepresented litigants may be more willing to fully engage in the judicial process and less inclined to view court as a strictly adversarial setting if judges empathize and acknowledge the taxing effect that litigation can have on unrepresented parties.

2) The Eastern Judicial Circuit

- a) Located in southeastern Georgia, exclusively serves Chatham County.
 - i) Primary resource for self-represented litigants in the circuit is the Mediation Center of the Coastal Empire, a nonprofit organization that contracts with Chatham County Alternative Dispute Resolution Board.
- b) The Mediation Center manages numerous services for Chatham County, and these services are accessible to anyone in Georgia.
 - i) The Chatham County Office of Alternative Dispute Resolution refers litigants to the Mediation Center of Savannah, which provides free mediation services to litigants with cases in Magistrate, State, and Probate Courts, and provides discounted mediation services to litigants with cases in Superior Court. Attorneys from across Georgia can use the Mediation Center. Superior Court cases are currently mediated at \$350 per party. Over the past 40 years, the Mediation Center has helped thousands of parties reach agreements through court-connected mediation—saving significant time and public resources by reducing the number of cases proceeding to trial. A substantial portion of these mediations involve self-represented litigants, many of whom successfully resolve their disputes through the process. The Center continues to receive steady referrals from Superior, Magistrate, Juvenile, State, and Probate Courts, reflecting strong judicial confidence in mediation as an effective, efficient, and accessible pathway to resolution.
 - ii) The Mediation Center supported over 1900 mediation referrals in 2024.
- c) The Family Law Resource Center (FLRC): Operated through The Mediation Center of the Coastal Empire, provides education, guidance, and document assistance to self-represented individuals navigating family law matters in Georgia. The FLRC helps community members prepare the necessary paperwork for actions such as divorce (with or without

² [Georgia Department of Human Services Division of Family & Children Services](#)

minor children), modifications, legitimations, contempts, answers, and adult name changes. Clients begin by completing a brief screening form, after which staff review eligibility and provide next steps. Link to FLRC screening form (<https://mediationsavannah.com/screening-form/>). The Center offers both uncontested and contested divorce form packets created by an experienced Georgia family law attorney, including detailed instructions, definitions, videos, and optional form review sessions with FLRC staff. Fee waivers are available for those with mitigating circumstances.

- i) FLRC supports over 6000 community members a year with navigating the family law system and receives over 450 completed document packets per year.
- d) Classes offered by the Mediation Center include Transitional Parenting Seminar, Legitimation Class for Fathers (meets the requirements of Transitional Parenting Seminar), and Children First (a class for parents who meet a high-conflict threshold). All classes are delivered online via Zoom or as self-paced modules and are available to anyone in Georgia. Class information can be found here: <https://mediationsavannah.com/classes/>
 - i) Over 600 community members have attended the mediation center's parenting certificates per year.
- a) **Juvenile Court:** Mediation Center, in partnership with Chatham County Juvenile Court, provides Delinquency and Dependency mediation, Restorative Conferences, and Parent-Teen sessions. These services are designed to promote accountability, healing, and support within families and the broader community. Restorative Conferences foster dialogue and mutual understanding, engaging young people charged with low-level offenses in the process, encouraging accountability, and promoting healing within the community. This approach addresses behavior and helps restore relationships among all parties involved, addressing juvenile dependency to cultivate a nurturing environment for children, and implementing targeted strategies to mitigate truancy by re-engaging at-risk students and their families. The Mediation Center team provides training to Court personnel and consults with courts on establishing restorative justice conferences and practices.
 - i) Youth who participate in a restorative conference have a 9% recidivism rate one year after the conference.
 - ii) Training: the Mediation Center provides training and consultation to Courts to establish community mediation centers, restorative justice practices, and Georgia Office of Dispute Resolution approved training.
 - iii) The Mediation Center trained over 300 community members in restorative practices, de-escalation, and mediation in 2025.

3) The Macon Judicial Circuit

- a) Middle Georgia Justice (MGJ), a tax-exempt non-profit corporation, opened its office in Macon in June 2018 to serve Bibb, Peach, and Crawford Counties in the Macon Judicial Circuit as well as the other counties contiguous to Bibb, namely Monroe, Jones, Twiggs, and Houston.
- b) Individuals with incomes up to 300% of the federal poverty level are eligible for assistance which includes limited legal advice and direct representation.
- c) MGJ seeks to reduce the justice gap in middle Georgia by providing limited legal advice, limited self-help services, and direct representation services in the areas of family law, probate law, and criminal history relief.
- d) The self-help services require a \$25 fee which can be waived.
- e) MGJ is located at 501 Walnut Street, Second Floor, Bank of OZK building., Macon, Georgia 31202. The phone number is 478-238-0224. The website address is www.mgajustice.org. For additional information, email info@mgajustice.org.

4) Augusta Judicial Circuit

- a) The Augusta Judicial Circuit (AJC) Second Chance Desk is a FREE resource helping citizens of Burke and Richmond Counties restrict eligible criminal records and access opportunity.
- b) The AJC Second Chance Desk is a partnership between the Georgia Justice Project, the District Attorney's Office for the Augusta Judicial Circuit, and the Office of the Solicitor General of Richmond County. Our goal is to provide FREE advice and self-help assistance to individuals regarding their criminal history so they can restrict and seal eligible criminal records in cases stemming from arrests/cases in Burke and Richmond Counties.
- c) Pre-Registration is Required. Full details are available at [Second Chance Desk | Augusta, GA - Official Website](#).

5) Northeastern Judicial Circuit

- a) The Northeastern Judicial Circuit Family Law Information Center (FLIC) provides free assistance to individuals filing or living in Hall or Dawson Counties who plan to represent themselves in divorce, legitimation, and adult name change cases. FLIC also has resources and information for other family law matters. In 2024, FLIC provided 420 legal consultations and 1249 non-legal appointments.
- b) Services: Forms review and limited legal consultations by appointment.
- c) Forms are free online or available for purchase from the Clerk's office.
- d) Individuals must financially qualify for legal consultations (also subject to conflict check).
- e) Legal consultations are provided by lawyers through a partnership with the Hall County Law Library and the FLIC Director (attorney).
- f) Additional information:
 - i) Website/Forms: www.nejcga.gov/familylaw or Clerk of Courts (courthouse)
 - ii) Hours: 8 - 5, Monday through Friday (closed Friday 11:30 AM - 12:30 PM)
 - iii) Location: Hall County Courthouse, 3rd floor
 - iv) Dawson County Courthouse (call for hours)
 - v) Phone: 770 531-2463
 - vi) Email: nejcflic@nejcga.gov
 - vii) Appointments: Complete an Appointment Request Form and deliver it to FLIC by email or in person (included with all packets)

6) Dougherty County Law Library and Southwest Georgia Legal Self-Help Center

- a) A 501(c)(3) organization that opened its doors in June 2018 as the pilot project for the Southwest Georgia region. This region includes Dougherty, Terrell, Lee, Mitchell, Baker, Grady, Decatur, Thomas, Brooks, Seminole, Miller Early, Calhoun, Worth, Turner, Tift, Cook, Berrien, Lowndes, Lanier, Echols, Irwin, Colquitt, and Ben Hill counties. Serving all counties in the State of Georgia.
- b) The Dougherty County Georgia Legal Self-Help center seeks to reduce the justice gap for all citizens in Georgia by promoting and providing open and effective access to legal and related information and retrieving and maintaining legal information in a variety of formats.

- c) It provides these services by directing patrons to where they can find information on the issue in question and suggesting the best resources. It refers patrons to other agencies and institutions where they can obtain detailed and appropriate information.
- d) It maintains a list of attorney resources and has an attorney on staff to answer any legal questions and further direct the patrons to the correct resource. In addition, it has several attorneys who can reach out to advise and represent patrons at little or no cost.
- e) It partners with over 35 agencies so patrons can approach and resolve their issues in a holistic manner.
- f) It offers court forms that are specific to each judicial circuit, including all the forms necessary to their case as specified by the particular circuit.
- g) It helps patrons navigate through their forms and the legal system individually, online and by phone using technology (Zoom, Life-size, FB email).
- h) The Law Library and Southwest Georgia Legal Self-Help Center is located at 225 Pine Ave. Albany, Georgia, 31705 (RM.209). It is open to the public from 9:00 am-12 noon and from 1:00 pm-4:45 pm Monday-Friday. It navigates patrons through forms Monday-Thursday during normal business hours. Patrons may contact the Center's staff attorney and Legal Navigators during business hours at (229)302-3295. For additional information, please visit www.dougherty.ga.us.
- i) Note on judicial engagement: Once a person uses self-help via the Center, they often are not required to return to court.

(VI) SELECT PROGRAMS IN STATES OUTSIDE OF GEORGIA: NEW YORK, ALASKA, AND SOUTH DAKOTA

1. New York State: Best Practices

- a. Location
 - i. Ideally, Help Centers should be located in the courthouse because self-represented litigants typically first realize that they have questions when they are in court.
 - ii. Help Centers should be: easily visible and reachable located on the first floor of the building, near the building entrance adjacent to, near, or part of the Clerk's office where papers are filed close to the court's childcare center (if there is one) easily accessible to those with disabilities Alternatively, Help Centers may be located in a Bar Association office or a law library
- b. Practical Considerations
 - i. Uniformity makes everything easier for court personnel, unrepresented litigants, and attorneys.
 - ii. To achieve uniformity, a statewide Help Center administration or central office can help reduce redundancies between centers, promote uniformity in training, promote regular communication between centers, and otherwise support and connect centers.
- c. Stakeholder Partnerships
 - i. Help Centers typically work best when partnerships exist with community stakeholders.

- ii. Potential stakeholders include local and state Bar Associations, legal aid organizations, law schools, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, advocacy and community organizations, and private foundations.
- iii. Neutrality should be considered before a partnership is realized.

d. Logistics: Operating Hours

- i. Ideally, a Help Center will operate during the same days and hours as the court and additionally will operate both in the evening and in the early morning once per week.
- ii. Staffing difficulties may be met by hiring school interns or accepting volunteers.
- iii. Branding is an important consideration too. Names like “Office of the Self-Represented” or “Pro Se Office” may not be clear to self-represented litigants and could perpetuate confusion.

e) Legal Information versus Legal Advice

- i) Legal information is factual information about court procedures and rules, definitions of legal words, and information about legal help.
- ii) Legal advice is sometimes nonfactual about the application of law to the case and the best way to proceed.
- iii) Help Centers should freely provide legal information to self-represented litigants at no cost but are prohibited from providing legal advice.
- iv) The Help Center’s neutrality is a priority. However, neutrality may not always be equivalent to not providing legal advice; a substantial gray area exists. Fundamentally, the Help Center cannot provide beneficial treatment to one visitor at the exclusion of another and cannot argue for a person in court or suggest legal strategies. The Help Center’s foremost priority should be to inform visitors, clarifying questions concerning procedure and resources.

f) Rural Areas

- i) For rural areas, a Mobile Legal Help Center or a Virtual Help Center may be effective.
- ii) Mobile Centers: A Mobile Legal Help Center provides most of the services available in a traditional Help Center, but via a vehicle.
- iii) A mobile center accommodates litigants who are homebound, disabled or otherwise unhealthy, or who are unable to travel to a courthouse, by driving into communities to provide legal services instead of individuals needing to travel to a courthouse.
- iv) Virtual Centers: A Virtual Help Center provides services strictly over the internet and telephone.
- v) A virtual center may offer multi-lingual access to Help Center publications and instructions and is inexpensive relative to mobile centers.

g) Suggested Best Practices

- i) Help Centers should provide free internet access for basic legal research, including access to city records, government agencies and websites, and all court websites and resources.
- ii) Translate buttons should be added to internet pages, and a reasonable amount of printing should be free.

- iii) Computer terminals should also be provided when the court system has document assembly programs that produce court forms.
 - iv) Remote tools can be utilized to promote remote services – tools like desktop sharing, FaceTime or Skype, email or telephone assistance, or web chatting can effectively connect self-represented litigants in rural areas to legal information.
 - v) At a minimum, each Help Center should offer (1) free one-on-one consultations or workshops with attorneys, (2) attorney referrals, and (3) free written materials, including forms.
 - vi) Ideally, written materials should help shorten consultation times, assuming they are direct and concise.
 - vii) Further, written materials should be available in foreign languages that are prevalent in the jurisdiction.
 - viii) Interpreting services should always be available without charge to self-represented litigants visiting Help Centers, and ideally an interpreter in the language most requested should be on Help Center staff.
 - ix) Where staffing an interpreter is impossible, however, robust translation services should be provided by the Help Center.
- a. Triage
- i. The triage role consists of quickly and correctly determining what a litigant is trying to do, e.g., whether the litigant should be in the Help Center in the first place, if they need mere information as opposed to a private attorney consultation, if they need a form, or if they need a referral.
 - ii. Bilingual triage staff members are particularly effective in ensuring the Help Center runs smoothly.
- i. Statewide Staffing and Support
- iii. In New York, pro se administration is handled through a statewide office with centralized, top-down authority, with some latitude given to regional offices.
 - iv. The Statewide Pro Se Coordination Office oversees, supports, and connects individual Help Centers.
 - v. The Coordination Office is also tasked with overseeing technology linking all Help Centers in the state together via a statewide shared site and intake statistical program.
 - vi. The Office can facilitate remote services programs and is responsible for posting
 - vii. information and resources on the courts' website(s) and on social media.
 - viii. The Help Center Central Administration Managing Attorney should be licensed to practice in the jurisdiction and in good standing with the State Bar.
 - ix. The Managing Attorney should have expertise in the areas of law in which the Help Centers provide assistance and must be an excellent communicator who is personable and has a profound understanding of the challenges faced by unrepresented litigants in court.
 - x. Basic duties include conducting Help Center promotion, reporting Help Center statistics, facilitating expansion of Help Centers, overseeing Help Center unification, developing uniform intake procedure, and training Help Center Supervisors.
- j. Promotion
- i. Every Help Center should have a clear and visible presence.
 - ii. Multi-lingual promotional materials should be placed strategically around the courthouse, and clerks may hand out materials to litigants when they come in to answer a summons.

- iii. Public events like information fairs and Law Day celebrations and local organizations like law schools and government agencies can effectively promote Help Centers through community outreach.
- iv. Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are great resources for publicizing Help Centers, particularly when noteworthy events occur.

2) Alaska – The Alaska Family Law Self Help Center (FLSHC)

- a) Fully Mobile Help Center:
 - i) Primary resource for Alaska residents seeking information and educational materials regarding issues of family law.
 - ii) Due to the vast geographic area that Alaska occupies, the self-help center exclusively assists self-represented litigants via a toll-free helpline that is staffed 42 hours per week.
 - iii) Calls are fielded one at a time; therefore, FLSHC staff do not face interruptions from multiple litigants competing to ask for information.
 - iv) The helpline is staffed by four non-attorney facilitators, who can answer procedural questions from litigants in English, Spanish, and Tagalog, and uses interpreters for other non-English languages such as Russian, Korean, Samoan, Hmong, and Yup'ik.
 - v) Staff facilitators are incredibly careful about not advising customers and instead provide an abundance of education and information about their options regarding procedures and forms to accomplish their goals.
 - vi) Non-attorney facilitators are supervised by an attorney to ensure they are not giving out legal advice and are trained by attorneys at the outset of their tenure.
- b) Civil Rule 16.2:
 - i) Alaska Supreme Court adopted Civil Rule 16.2 in 2015, which provides for informal trials in domestic relations disputes.
 - ii) If both parties consent to an informal trial, the formal rules of evidence are suspended, parties are not allowed to cross-examine each other, and in most cases, the only witnesses will be the parties.
 - iii) The judge asks all the questions of the witnesses and solicits topics or questions from the parties about which to inquire.
 - iv) Parties can introduce all evidence they think is important, and the judge determines the appropriate weight to afford the evidence.
 - v) No objections are permitted.
 - vi) Informal trials allow judges to relax or suspend certain rules in the interest of achieving a swifter resolution.
 - vii) Additional information regarding Alaska's efforts is discussed further, *infra*, at p. 22.

3) South Dakota

- a) South Dakota Free Legal Answers
 - i) It is a virtual legal advice clinic where qualifying users may post civil legal questions at no cost to be answered by pro bono attorneys licensed in South Dakota.
 - ii) Civil matters addressed include, but are not limited to, custody, divorce, family law, eviction, housing, homelessness, consumer rights, financial, work/employment/unemployment, health and disability, civil rights, income maintenance, juvenile, and education law.
- b) Legal Form Help Line

- i) Provides assistance by answering questions or helping self-represented litigants with the completion of the South Dakota Uniform Judicial System's forms.
 - ii) Service cannot provide legal advice; merely answers form-related questions.
- c) The Justice Bus
 - i) South Dakota's mobile legal aid office and technology hotspot which permits legal aid attorneys to travel to and provide legal services at no cost to clients.
 - ii) Assists South Dakotans to access free legal services.
 - o Provides technology to address legal needs in rural and underserved areas.
 - o Solves legal challenges to improve financial security, health, and safety.
 - o Partners with community organizations state-wide.
- d) SD Law Help
 - i) Website created by three nonprofit legal aid organizations (East River Legal Services, Dakota Plains Legal Services, and Access to Justice) to serve the South Dakota and local Tribal Nations' legal assistance needs in civil matters.
 - ii) Lastly, South Dakota is one of several states that has also prioritized efforts to minimize the access to justice gap through codifying pro-bono/access to justice efforts into state law. See, [South Dakota Codified Laws, § 16-2-56, Grants to entities that deliver services to persons meeting income guidelines.](#)

For full list of court rules please see, ***Appendix C - SELF-HELP RELATED COURT RULES BY STATE, infra.***

VII. THE ROLE THAT ADR AND JUDGES CAN PLAY IN CLOSING THE JUSTICE GAP

Tracy Johnson, current Executive Director of the Georgia Office of Dispute Resolution and previous director of the ADR program in Georgia's Sixth Judicial Administrative District, which serves several rural counties, says that ADR is a powerful tool for increasing meaningful access to justice for litigants.

Ms. Johnson says that while over 20 years ago attorneys were highly skeptical of mediation as a method of legal recourse, many attorneys now earn fees from mediating cases between pro se litigants and have realized that earning fees and closing the justice gap can be complementary endeavors. Relative to litigation, ADR is informal, which can potentially promote more efficient outcomes. Mediation gives litigants the opportunity to actually be heard. Even if litigants do not arrive at an immediate solution during mediation, many litigants feel as though their experience in mediation was more satisfying relative to pursuing a remedy in court.

Judge Jerry Wood, formerly the Chief Magistrate Judge in Floyd County, Georgia, and former Program Director of the Fulton County Alternative Dispute Resolution Office, said the main challenge when working with self-represented litigants during his tenure as judge was to educate the parties on court procedure without providing legal advice, so that litigants felt comfortable making informed decisions about their case. The Fulton County ADR office has used mediation to assist self-represented litigants in a wider variety of cases than family law matters. Nevertheless, mediation as a means of closing the justice gap is not without its challenges. A common question regarding access to justice in the context of mediation by way of a hypothetical: suppose a dispute arises between a landlord and a tenant. The landlord has allegedly violated a statute. A different statute provides for treble damages, in this case to

the tenant. The parties achieve a settlement using mediation, but the tenant is never aware of the treble damages statute. Does the mediator bear responsibility for informing the tenant of the treble damages statute?³ A question appropriate for deeper discussion is whether justice is really delivered when a party foregoes a claim simply due to being unaware of the right to assert it. Alternatively, isn't it the role of the attorney as an advocate to counsel clients with respect to the claims and defenses available to them in law? There is hardly an easy answer, but whatever the scenario, where self-represented litigants have ready access to clear, free information about courts, it appears the justice gap begins to narrow.

A. Fulton County: Family Law Information Center

The Fulton County Family Law Information Center (FLIC) was founded in the late 1990s under the leadership of then Fulton County Superior Court Chief Judge Thelma Wyatt Cummings Moore.

Today, FLIC provides legal forms, free 30-minute legal consultations, and a free monthly workshop to clients from around the state of Georgia. Georgia superior court judges who believe that a self-represented litigant might benefit from further legal advice can encourage the litigant to inquire with FLIC regarding his or her eligibility for a free 30-minute consultation. Through a joint partnership between FLIC and Atlanta Legal Aid Society, FLIC consultations provide self-represented litigants with access to an attorney for 30 minutes to discuss domestic issues such as divorce, legitimation, child support, and visitation. One FLIC client, an entrepreneur recognized by Atlanta Business Chronicle's 40 under 40 who recently fell on hard times, emphasized how comforting it was simply to speak to an experienced attorney in person. Kesia Green, another FLIC client, scheduled an appointment seeking advice on how to file for divorce. Green admitted that before attending the consultation she had "no idea what to do," but that consulting with an attorney was very helpful and provided her with a clearer sense of direction.

B. Magistrate Court of Fulton County

In 2014, the Georgia State Legislature established the independent form of the current Magistrate Court of Fulton County, allowing its Chief Magistrate Judge to reshape the way the court interacts with its litigants and court users. The Magistrate Court of Fulton County is without a formalized, stand-alone self-help program. Instead, the Chief Magistrate Judge created and instituted mechanisms for litigant self-help. During her first term, Chief Magistrate Judge Cassandra Kirk and the Magistrate Court were awarded a grant from the National Center for State Courts for a High-Volume Court Simplified Project.

The project allowed the Court to interact with stakeholders through surveys and town halls to develop ways for all court users, particularly self-represented litigants, to access relevant and easy to understand information about the court and its processes. Chief Judge Kirk increased accessibility of information to the litigants through the court website (www.magistratefulton.org), informational pamphlets, videos and court outreach efforts.

Website revisions included a "Find My Case" option where litigants track their case online, as well as the Virtual Information Center, which shares specific process information about garnishment, small

³ Mediators are prohibited from giving legal advice when serving in the capacity of a mediator, even if the individual is also a licensed attorney. Additionally, to serve as a mediator in a court-connected program in Georgia, an individual must be a registered neutral with the Georgia Office of Dispute Resolution (ODR). To learn more about how to become a registered neutral, visit [Georgia Office of Dispute Resolution – Georgia Commission on Dispute Resolution](http://www.georgiaodr.org).

claims, and landlord-tenant cases, FAQ's for each case type, and plain language pamphlets for both parties in Landlord-Tenant, Small Claims, Garnishment, Abandoned Motor Vehicles, Abandoned Minor Child, Warrant Application Hearings, and Bond Hearings.

The Court integrated features offered through the Council of Magistrate Court Judges into its website to ensure the best experience for court users. Namely, the Magistrate Council's Guide and File, a Forms Generator system which allows litigants to complete interview questions to build a final document ready to file in their case, as well as the Council's nine general Magistrate Court videos. Magistrate Court mediation allows litigants to direct an outcome that best fits them and their situations. Mediation services are provided on the Landlord-Tenant calendar through an ADR program that utilizes student interns and on the warrant application and small claims calendars through the Justice Center of Atlanta. The Court also offers online alternative dispute resolution on its small claims calendars through MODRIA.

Chief Judge Kirk implemented and installed Maggie, the Magistrate Court Chatbot, on every page of the www.magistratefulton.org website in January of 2020 to assist community members in navigating the varied court processes. Maggie utilized simple keywords to direct users to appropriate information. When Maggie does not have the answer, she creates a ticket which is answered by one of the Magistrate Court's administrative staff.

Chief Judge Kirk created the Magistrate Messenger, a quarterly newsletter to highlight the Magistrate Court's mission to Inform, Engage, and Empower Our Community. This newsletter is another way that the Magistrate Court will continue to inform community members of the events and self-help programs available.

C. Gwinnett County: Self-Help Pamphlet Series

In Gwinnett County, Chief Magistrate Judge Kristina Hammer Blum spearheaded the creation of a color-coded pamphlet series outlining the Magistrate Court's main court processes. They include family violence, garnishments, abandoned motor vehicles, civil disputes, warrant applications, and landlord tenant issues. The pamphlets are written in plain English and are largely devoid of technical legal terms. In addition to their availability in English, the pamphlets are printed in Spanish, Vietnamese, and Korean and are reflective of Gwinnett's status as one of the most diverse counties in the southeastern United States. At their simplest, the pamphlets are intended to help litigants decide whether a particular court process is right for them. "Ultimately," Blum said, "we want anyone who walks in [our court] to feel like they have the access to justice they deserve."

Additionally, Chief Judge Blum encourages litigants to reconsider how they create and file pleadings. The first step in that direction has been the installation of self-help kiosks at the Gwinnett Magistrate Court. The kiosks allow litigants to electronically generate the requisite forms for their court case. The kiosks, which offer clear and direct instructions for generating forms, are complemented by thirteen videos on the Gwinnett County Courts website, which include topics like "Should I Be Represented By a Lawyer," "Filing a Claim in Magistrate Court," and "Family Violence."

D. Cobb County: Family Law Workshop

The Family Law Workshop assists self-represented litigants in Cobb County with divorce, contempt, paternity and legitimation, and modification issues. The workshop, held once a month, is led by attorneys from the Cobb County Bar Association's Family Law and Younger Lawyers Sections. At the end of each workshop, attendees are invited to complete a satisfaction survey. Notably, 80% of respondents said they found the workshop to be helpful, and approximately 75% of respondents said they would recommend the workshop to a friend. In addition to the workshop, self-represented litigants

can pay \$150 for a three-hour consultation with an attorney and print or purchase forms from the Cobb County Law Library. Cobb County partially redirects the revenue earned from forms to sponsor individuals with a \$150 scholarship to offset the cost of the three-hour attorney consultation.

- “Access to justice is a key component of a court system, and the more information a pro se litigant has, the better outcome for everyone: that person, their family, and the court system.”- *Cobb County Superior Court Judge Mary Staley Clark (Ret.)*

F. DeKalb County: Family Law Information Center

The DeKalb Family Law Information Center (FLIC) was a collaborative effort of members from the DeKalb Superior Court Bench, Calendar and Law Clerks of the judges, Superior Court Administration, and the Atlanta Legal Aid Society, DeKalb County Branch. The committee saw the importance of preserving the court's time and helping pro se litigants as a twofold project of importance. Judge Seeliger (Retired) and Attorney Deborah Johnson (Deceased) of Atlanta Legal Aid Society were the spearheads of the project, which led to a series of meetings and events that resulted in the official opening of the DeKalb County Family Law Information Center in May of 2001.

As laws and circumstances changed, the Center adapted its services to meet the needs of self-represented litigants. When Georgia's child support laws changed in 2007, the Center created dedicated computer access and paralegal assistance to assist litigants in completing the Child Support Calculator. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Center continued to provide services remotely, including attorney consultations and assistance with the Child Support Calculator. In 2022, the DeKalb County Family Law Information Center was awarded “Court Program of the Year” by the Georgia Council of Court Administrators in recognition of its Remote Attorney Consultations Program implemented during the pandemic.

The DeKalb Superior Court Judges frequently refer litigants to the Center and other organizations, such as DeKalb Pro Bono and DeKalb County Legal Aid, for assistance with family law matters.

The Center continues to provide legal forms, notary services, attorney consultations, virtual family law workshops, assistance with navigating the Child Support Calculator, and referrals to community resources. The DeKalb County Family Law Information Center is committed to access to justice and continually seeks innovative ways to educate and empower litigants.

E. Alaska's Remote Delivery Services and Informal Trial Procedure

The Alaska Model: A Fully Mobile Help Center, FLSHC, effectively answers questions from across the state using telephonic services. Executive Director, Ms. Stacey Marz, believes that helping people over the phone is generally less taxing for staff and often provides faster service relative to centers that provide similar services in person. The helpline is staffed by four non-attorney facilitators, who can answer procedural questions from litigants in English, Spanish, and Tagalog, with the use of interpreters for other non-English languages such as Russian, Korean, Samoan, Hmong, and Yupik. With proper training and attorney oversight, Stacey Marz considers non-attorneys to be excellent candidates for staffing help centers. The most important attributes are the abilities to provide excellent customer service and understanding the distinction between providing legal information, which is permitted, and legal advice, which is prohibited. The staff facilitators are incredibly careful about not advising customers and instead provide an abundance of education and information about options regarding procedures and forms to accomplish their goals.

The Alaska Bar Association provides a list of pro bono resources available around the state at [Pro Bono Legal Service Providers \(Assistance\) – Alaska Bar Association](#). Alaska also provides additional self-help resources through [AlaskaLawHelp.org](#) and the Self-Help section on [Home Page - Alaska Court System](#).

Civil Rule 16.2

In 2015, the Alaska Supreme Court adopted Civil Rule 16.2, which provides for informal trials in domestic relations disputes. According to the rule, effective April 15, 2015, an informal trial is an alternative trial procedure. If both parties consent to an informal trial, the formal rules of evidence are suspended, parties are not allowed to cross-examine each other, and in most cases the only witnesses are the parties. The judge questions all the witnesses and solicits topics or questions from the parties about inquiries to be made. Parties may introduce all evidence they think is important, and the judge determines the appropriate weight to afford the evidence. Finally, no objections are permitted. Further details about Alaska's informal trial process are available in this [resource document from the Alaska Bar Association](#).

Provided that self-represented litigants, especially those who do not speak English fluently, are unfamiliar with rules of civil procedure and evidence, informal trials allow judges to relax or suspend certain rules in the interest of achieving a swifter resolution. The rule required the Administrative Director to report on the efficacy of informal trials and make recommendations, with the first evaluation completed in 2018. The [Alaska Court System Annual Report for FY18](#) reported that informal trials, or sessions, were integrated into the Alaska Court system's Early Resolution Program (ERP), which continues to help parties in divorce and custody hearings avoid long, expensive trials that can be particularly harmful to children. Parties in cases admitted to the program negotiate their disputes in informal sessions, aided by volunteer attorneys, court mediators, or settlement judges. Court staff, court mediators, and volunteer attorneys staff the program, and most cases reach resolution after one session. Teleconferencing and video technology have extended the reach and effectiveness of ERP. Parties may appear by phone or video — necessary given the geography of the state as well as the transience of many residents.

Note: In April 2017, Alaska (along with Hawaii) announced a new pilot site for increased development of its legal services in partnership with Microsoft and Pro Net. See: <http://www.lsc.gov/media-center/press-releases/2017/legal-services-corporation-announces-pilot-states-innovative>. See also, *supra*, SRLN Report on Remote Services Delivery. See also, APPENDIX C, SELF-HELP RELATED COURT RULES BY STATE, *infra*.

APPENDIX A – LAW LIBRARIES IN GEORGIA ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC

1. Alcovy Judicial Circuit (Newton and Walton Counties)

Newton County

- Address: Judge Horace J. Johnson, Jr. Judicial Center, 1132 Usher Street, Room 119 Covington, Georgia 30014 (2nd Floor)
- Phone: [706-469-3362](tel:706-469-3362)
- Hours: Monday – Friday, 8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.
- Website: [Alcovy Judicial Circuit Law Library](#)

Walton County

- Address: Walton County Government Building, 303 S Hammond Dr, Monroe, GA 30655 (2nd Floor)
- Phone: [706-469-3362](tel:706-469-3362)
- Hours: Monday – Friday, 8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.
- Website: [Alcovy Judicial Circuit Law Library](#)

2. Augusta-Richmond County Law Library

- Address: 823 Telfair Street, Augusta, Georgia 30901 (2nd Floor)
- Phone: [706-469-3362](tel:706-469-3362)
- Hours: Monday – Thursday
9:00 a.m. – 8:00 p.m.
Friday
9:00 a.m. – 5:30 p.m.
Saturday
10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
Sunday
2:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.
- Website: [Augusta Law Library](#)

3. Cobb County Law Library

- Address: 70 Haynes St., Fourth Floor, Suite 4300, Marietta, GA 30090
- Phone: (770) 528-1884
- Email: lawlibrary@cobbcounty.gov
- Hours: 8:00 am – 5:00 pm
- Website: [Cobb County Law Library](#)

4. DeKalb County Law Library

- Address: 556 North McDonough Street, Suite 400, Decatur, GA 30030
- Phone: 404-371-2441
- Email: lawlibrary@dekalbcountyga.gov
- Hours: Monday – Friday, 9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
- Website: <https://dekalbgasuperiorcourt.gov/law-library/>

5. Dougherty County Law Library & Southwest Georgia Legal Self-Help Center

- Address: 225 Pine Avenue, Room 209, Albany, GA 31701
 - Phone: (229) 302-3295
 - Hours: Monday–Friday, 9:00 AM – 12:00 PM and 1:00 PM – 4:45 PM
 - Website: [Dougherty County Law Library](#)
-

6. Eastern Judicial Circuit of Georgia (Chatham County)

- Address: 133 Montgomery Street, Savannah, GA 31401 (Room 503)
 - Phone: [\(912\) 652-7336](tel:9126527336)
 - Hours: Monday–Friday, 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM
 - Website: [Eastern Judicial Circuit Law Library](#)
-

7. Fulton County Law Library

- Address: 185 Central Avenue, Atlanta, GA 30303
- Phone: [404-612-2789](tel:4046122789) (Fulton County Justice Resource Center)
- E-Mail: sca.jrc@fultoncountyga.gov
- Website: [Fulton County Law Library](#)

See also, [Legal Research](#) | <https://jrc.fultoncourt.org/>

See also, [Home](#) | <https://jrc.fultoncourt.org/>

8. Georgia State University Law Library

- Address: 140 Decatur Street, Atlanta, GA 30302
 - Phone: Not listed
 - Hours: *Georgia State University has changed building access hours on the Atlanta campus for individuals without a valid GSU PantherCard. Public hours for the Law Library remain Monday – Friday 8:30 AM – 5:00 PM. Individuals with special access, such as a GA bar card, may use the Law Library Monday-Friday 7:30 AM – 8:00 PM and Saturday 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM. Hours are subject to change.*
 - Website: [Georgia State University College of Law Library](#)
-

9. Homer M. Stark Law Library (Gwinnett County)

- Address: 75 Langley Drive, Lawrenceville, GA 30046
- Phone: (770) 822-8575
- E-mail: StarkLawLibrary@gwinnettcounty.com
- Hours: Monday–Friday, 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM; Closed weekends
- Website: [Homer M. Stark Law Library](#)

10. Mercer University Furman Smith Law Library (Macon-Bibb County)

- Address: 1021 Georgia Avenue, Macon, GA 31207
 - Phone: (478) 301-2612
 - Email: Reference Desk - reference@law.mercer.edu
 - Hours: The Law Library is not currently open to the public but members of the public may call or email the Reference Desk for assistance.
 - Website: [Mercer Law Library](#)
-

11. Muscogee County Law Library

- Address: Government Center, 100 10th Street, 8th Floor Tower, Columbus, GA 31901
 - Phone: (706) 225-4010
 - Hours: Monday–Friday, 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM
 - Website: [Muscogee County Law Library](#)
-

12. Northeastern Judicial Circuit Law Library

Dawson County

- Address: Dawson County Courthouse, 25 Justice Way, Suite 1304 / 1st Floor, Dawsonville, GA 30534

- Phone: (770) 532-1895
- Hours: Monday–Friday, 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM
- Website: [Law Library - Northeastern Judicial Circuit](#)

Hall County

- Address: Hall County Courthouse, 225 Green St SE, 3rd Floor, Gainesville, GA 30501
 - Phone: (706) 344-3513
 - Hours: Monday–Friday, 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM
 - Website: [Law Library - Northeastern Judicial Circuit](#)
-

13. University of Georgia Alexander Campbell King Law Library

- Address: University of Georgia School of Law, Athens, GA 30602
 - Phone: (706) 542-5191
 - Hours: The Law Library is open to the public daily Monday - Friday from 9:00 am to 5:45 pm. Please refer to the [Law Library Hours of Operation](#) for the normal hours of the Circulation and Reference Desks and the exceptions to those hours.
 - Website: [UGA Law Library](#)
-

APPENDIX B – SELF HELP CENTERS & RESOURCES OFFERED BY STATE

STATE	SELF HELP OFFERED
Alabama	AlabamaLegalHelp.org LegalServicesAlabama.org Alabama State Bar – Justice4AL
Alaska	Family Law Self-Help Center (FLSHC) Alaska Court System offers classes, legal clinic, programs & resources AlaskaLawHelp.org AlaskaTribes.org Alaska Free Legal Answers
Arizona	Arizona Court System Self-Service Center Law Library Resource Center The Arizona Legal Center
Arkansas	Legal Aid of Arkansas Center for Arkansas Legal Services
California	California Court System Self-Help Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles' Self-Help Legal Access Centers
Colorado	Colorado Court System Self-Help Colorado Law Help – Directory of Self-Help Centers
Connecticut	Connecticut Judicial System Self-Help CTLawHelp.org
Delaware	Delaware Judicial System Self-Help Center
Florida	DIY Florida Florida Free Legal Answers Florida Judicial System Self-Help Site University of Florida Levin College of Law – Lawton Chiles Legal Information Center

Georgia	Fulton County Family Law Information Center (FLIC) Fulton County Probate Information Center (PIC) DeKalb County Family Law Information Center Cobb County Family Law Workshop Gwinnett County Self-Help Pamphlet Series State Court of Fulton County Self-Help Center Working law libraries statewide, including the Appalachian Family Law Information Center
Hawai'i	Hawai'i Judicial System's Self-Help Centers & Access to Justice Rooms
Idaho	Idaho Legal Aid Idaho Judicial System's Self- Help
Illinois	Illinois Legal Aid Online Self-Help Toolkit Chicago-Kent College of Law Self-Help Resource Center (Student Run) Illinois Judicial System Self-Help Resources
Indiana	Indiana Judicial System Self-Service Legal Center Indiana Bar Foundation Legal Help Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic Indiana Free Legal Answers Elkhart County Access to Justice Center University of Notre Dame Law School Legal Clinic
Iowa	Iowa People's Law Library Iowa Legal Aid Iowa Judicial System Self-Help Iowa Free Legal Answers Drake University Law School Legal Clinic University of Iowa Legal Clinic
Kansas	Kansas Judicial System Self-Help Kansas Legal Services
Kentucky	Kentucky Judicial System Self-Help Kentucky Justice Jefferson County Public Law Library University of Louisville Louis D. Brandeis School of Law Library Kentucky Legal Aid
Louisiana	Louisiana State Bar Association Self-Help Services Louisiana Free Legal Answers The Pro Bono Project Self Help Resource Center Louisiana Civil Justice Center Law Library of Louisiana
Maine	Maine Judicial System Pine Tree Legal Assistance
Maryland	Maryland Court Help Centers Maryland Legal Aid Clinics Montgomery County Family Law Self-Help Center

	Maryland People’s Law Library Thurgood Marshall State Law Library Baltimore County Access to Justice Resource Center
Massachusetts	Massachusetts Judicial System Massachusetts Trial Court Law Libraries Massachusetts Legal Help
Michigan	Michigan Legal Help Michigan Self Help Center Alliance
Minnesota	Minnesota Judicial System Self Help Centers Law Help MN The Legal Kiosk – A Reach Justice Minnesota initiative and a project of the Minnesota Legal Services Coalition
Mississippi	Mississippi Free Legal Answers Mississippi Access to Justice Commission Justice Court Access Program
Missouri	Legal Advice Clinic Missouri Free Legal Answers University of Missouri-Kansas City Legal Aid of Western Missouri
Montana	Montana Supreme Court Self-Help Law Program
Nebraska	Nebraska Online Legal Self-Help Center Legal Aid of Nebraska
Nevada	Civil Law Self-Help Center
New Hampshire	New Hampshire Judicial System 603 Legal Aid New Hampshire Legal Assistance (NHLA) Senior Citizens Law Project
New Jersey	New Jersey Judicial System Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ)
New Mexico	New Mexico Judicial System Bernalillo County Metropolitan Self-Help Center
New York	New York Judicial System New York Judicial System – Family Court Central New York Legal Helpline
North Carolina	North Carolina Judicial System SelfServe Center North Carolina Free Legal Answers Legal Aid of North Carolina
North Dakota	North Dakota Legal Self Help Center
Ohio	Self Help Center University of Akron School of Law Clinics

	<u>Case Western Reserve University Law Clinic</u> <u>Legal Aid of Southeast and Central Ohio (LASCO)</u>
Oklahoma	<u>Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma (LASO)</u> <u>Oklahoma Free Legal Answers</u>
Oregon	<u>Oregon Judicial System Self Help Center</u> <u>Oregon Law Help</u> <u>Legal Aid Services of Oregon</u> <u>Oregon Law Center</u>
Pennsylvania	<u>PA LawHelp</u> <u>PA Legal Aid Network (PLAN)</u> <u>Pennsylvania Free Legal Answers</u>
Rhode Island	<u>Rhode Island Judiciary</u>
South Carolina	<u>South Carolina Judicial System</u>
South Dakota	<u>The Justice Bus</u> <u>South Dakota Free Legal Answers</u>
Tennessee	<u>Tennessee Judicial System Self Help Center</u> <u>Legal Aid Society – Community Classroom</u> <u>Tennessee Free Legal Answers</u>
Texas	<u>Texas Judicial System Self-Help</u> <u>Lone Star Legal Aid</u>
Utah	<u>Utah Courts Self Help</u>
Vermont	<u>Vermont Judiciary Self Help</u> <u>Legal Services Vermont</u>
Virginia	<u>Virginia Judicial System Court Self Help</u> <u>Virginia Legal Aid/Virginia Poverty Law Center</u>
Washington	<u>Washington Courts Self Help</u> <u>Washington Law Help</u> <u>Northwest Justice Project</u>
West Virginia	<u>Legal Aid of West Virginia</u> <u>West Virginia Free Legal Answers</u> <u>Tuesday Legal Connect</u>
Wisconsin	<u>Wisconsin Judicial System Self-Help Law Center</u> <u>Wisconsin State Law Library</u> <u>Wisconsin Free Legal Answers</u>

Wyoming

[Wyoming Judicial System Self-Help](#)

[Teton County Access to Justice Center](#)

[University of Wyoming College of Law Legal Clinics](#)

[Wyoming Free Legal Answers](#)

[Wyoming Children's Law Center](#)

APPENDIX C – SELF HELP RELATED COURT RULES BY STATE

STATE	RULE
Alabama	*****
Alaska	Alaska Rules of Civil Procedure, Rule 16.2 Informal Trials in Domestic Relations Cases
Arizona	Arizona Code of Judicial Administration (ACJA) §7-208, Legal Document Preparer Arizona Code of Judicial Administration (ACJA) §7-209, Alternative Business Structures Arizona Code of Judicial Administration (ACJA) §7-210, Legal Paraprofessional Arizona Code of Judicial Administration (ACJA) §7-211, Community-Based Justice Work Service Delivery Models
Arkansas	Arkansas Rules of Professional Conduct, Rule 6.5. Nonprofit and Court-Annexed Limited Legal Services Programs Arkansas Rules of Civil Procedure Rule 87, Limited Scope Representation
California	California Rules of Court, Rule 10.960, Court Self-Help Centers
Colorado	Colorado Rules of Civil Procedure, Rule 121 § 1-1(5), Local Rules – Statewide Practice Standards – Notice of Limited Representation Entry of Appearance
Connecticut	*****
Delaware	Rules of the Supreme Court of the State of Delaware Rule 55, Limited Permission to Practice in Certain Public Programs Rules of the Supreme Court of the State of Delaware Rule 57, Representation of Residential Tenant by Qualified Tenant Advocate in the Justice of the Peace Court
Florida	Florida Family Law Rules of Procedure, Rule 12.750, Family Self-Help Programs
Georgia	*****
Hawai'i	Hawai'i Rules of Civil Procedure, Rule 11.1, Limited Appearance and Withdrawal
Idaho	Idaho Court Administrative Rule 53: Court Assistance Services
Illinois	Illinois Supreme Court Policy on Assistance to Court Users by Circuit Clerks, Court Staff, Law Librarians, and Court Volunteers ("Safe Harbor Policy") Illinois Supreme Court Rule 10-100, Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice
Indiana	Order Amending the Administrative Rules, Rules of Professional Conduct, and Rules of Trial Procedure (eff. Apr. 3, 2024), Rule 4(A)(10), Coalition for Court Access Indiana Rules of Professional Conduct, Rule 6.6, The Coalition for Court Access
Iowa	*****

Kansas	Kansas Rules & Order, Rule 115A, Limited Representation Kansas Rules & Order, Rule 1402, Providing Assistance to the Public Kansas Rules & Order, Rule 1404, Pro Bono or Low-Cost Direct Legal Services Provided by Retired, Inactive, or Single-Employer Attorneys
Kentucky	*****
Louisiana	Louisiana Supreme Court Rules, Rule XX. Limited Participation Of Law Students In Trial Work Louisiana Rules of Professional Conduct, Rule 6.5. Nonprofit and Court-Annexed Limited Legal Services Programs
Maine	Maine Rules of Civil Procedure, Rule 89, Withdrawal of Attorneys; Visiting Lawyers; Temporary Practice with Legal Services Organizations Maine Rules of Civil Procedure, Rule 90, Legal Assistance by Law Students
Maryland	MD Code, Courts and Judicial Proceedings § 13-501, Thurgood Marshall State Law Library part of Judiciary Department
Massachusetts	Judicial Guidelines for Civil Cases with Self-Represented Litigants, 2. General Practices S.J.C. Rule 3:09, Code of Judicial Conduct, Canon 2, Rule 2.5(B) (2016)
Michigan	Administrative Order No. 2021-1, Creation of the Justice for All Commission
Minnesota	General Rules of Practice for the District Courts Rule 110, Self-Help Programs
Mississippi	En Banc Order, In Re: Establishing the Mississippi Access to Justice Commission (2006)
Missouri	*****
Montana	Court Self-Help Law Program is a free service offered by the Montana Supreme Court to provide legal forms and information to pro se litigants with civil, non-criminal legal problems.
Nebraska	Supreme Court Rules § 1-901, General Use (of State Library) Neb. Ct. R. of Prof. Cond. § 3-506.5. Nonprofit and court-annexed limited legal services programs
Nevada	Nevada Supreme Court Rules, Rule 15, Commission on Access to Justice
New Hampshire	Supreme Court Rules, Rule 41. Petition to Approve Corporation Providing Legal Services to the Poor
New Jersey	New Jersey Rules of Court, Rule 1:21-1-Who May Practice; Appearance in Court Directive #09-21 Judiciary Staff Authority to Assist Court Users in Completing and Submitting Judiciary Forms
New Mexico	*****

New York	<u>New York Court Rules § 520.16, Pro Bono requirement for bar admission</u> <u>New York Court Rules § 520.17, Pro Bono Scholars Program</u>
North Carolina	*****
North Dakota	<u>North Dakota Rules of Court, Rule 11.8 Limited Professional Guardian Practice</u>
Ohio	<u>Ohio Rules of Civil Procedure, Rule 3(B), Limited appearance by attorney.</u>
Oklahoma	*****
Oregon	*****
Pennsylvania	*****
Rhode Island	*****
South Carolina	<u>South Carolina Court Rules, Rule 407 – 6.1, Voluntary Pro Bono Publico Service</u> <u>South Carolina Court Rules, Rule 407 – 6.5, Nonprofit and Court Annexed Limited Legal Services Programs</u> <u>South Carolina Court Rules, Rule 414, Limited Certificate of Admission for Clinical Law Program Teachers</u> <u>South Carolina Court Rules, Rule 415, Limited Certificate of Admission for the Retired and Inactive Attorney Pro Bono Participation Program</u> <u>South Carolina Court Rules, Rule 608, Appointment of Lawyers for Indigents (Pertains to civil and criminal matters).</u>
South Dakota	<u>South Dakota Codified Laws, § 16-2-56, Grants to entities that deliver services to persons meeting income guidelines</u>
Tennessee	<u>Supreme Court of Tennessee Rules, Rule 50A(1.01), Special Initiative to Improve Access to Justice – Legal Services by Pro Bono Emeritus Attorneys</u>
Texas	*****
Utah	<u>Utah Code of Judicial Administration §14-801, Definitions</u>
Vermont	*****
Virginia	<u>Order Establishing the Virginia Access to Justice Commission (2013)</u>
Washington	*****
West Virginia	<u>West Virginia Judiciary Rules, Rule 10.0 - Rule relative to legal assistance by law students to persons unable to pay for legal services</u>
Wisconsin	<u>Wisconsin Supreme Court Rules Chapter 14, Access to Justice Commission</u> <u>Wisconsin Supreme Court Rules Chapter 50, Practical Training of Law Students</u> <u>Wisconsin Supreme Court Rules Chapter 82, State Law Library</u>
Wyoming	<u>Wyoming Supreme Court Order Adopting the Rules and Regulations of the Wyoming Center for Legal Aid (2011)</u> <u>Wyoming Supreme Court Order Adopting the Rules and Regulations for Equal Justice Wyoming (eff. 10.6.2025)</u>

APPENDIX D – HOUSING DEFENSE AS THE NEW *GIDEON*

Sabbeth, Kathryn Anne, Housing Defense as the New Gideon (February 20, 2017). 41 Harvard J. L. & Gender 55 (2018), Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2931102> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2931102>

Summary:

New York City has become the first jurisdiction in the United States to create a right to appointed counsel for poor people facing eviction. This article draws on NYC's housing defense statute to highlight three ways in which the creation of a civil right to counsel has the potential to build on and expand beyond the *Gideon v. Wainwright* model. The right to appointment of criminal defense counsel, as recognized in *Gideon*, was part of the U.S. Supreme Court's indirect response to the Civil Rights Movement. In contrast, the NYC Legislature openly promotes substantive outcomes, explicitly targeting eviction and its secondary effects. Additionally, the Legislature's focus on housing recognizes concerns that disproportionately impact Black women; this echoes the racial equality goal underlying *Gideon* and promotes gender equality. Finally, while the criminal defense model defends individuals against only state power, NYC's right to housing defense counsel includes tenants of private landlords and thereby checks private power. All three of these features are worth attention from legislatures considering expansion of the right to civil counsel. The article also identifies one important way in which the new model of appointment of housing counsel is like the criminal model for appointment: NYC's legislation addresses appointment of defense lawyers, as opposed to lawyers for plaintiffs, potential plaintiffs, or people engaged in non-litigation matters. This article argues that the focus on defense lawyering limits the impact of appointment of counsel. Defense lawyering suffers from systemic limitations that influence litigation strategy and the potential to collaborate with social movements. With respect to the substantive goal of housing preservation, problems like discrimination, harassment, and dangerous conditions also pose significant threats and could be more robustly addressed through affirmative suits. In spite of recognizing the limits of defense lawyering, this article concludes that the availability of counterclaims in civil litigation makes civil defense more flexible than criminal defense. As a result, civil defense might be able to do more than criminal defense to challenge the status quo and advance substantive improvements for poor litigants.

I. HOUSING DEFENSE AS THE NEW *GIDEON*

A. Housing as Essential to Society

- Housing is a vital human need, necessary for individuals to reach their full potential in life, and security in the home has been identified as essential to dignity and personhood.
- Access to housing shapes educational and employment opportunities.
- The harms of housing displacement are exacerbated when housing loss results in homelessness.
 - The consequences include psychological trauma, physical injuries, infection, illness, and death.
 - Homeless persons also face challenges in building and maintaining social and professional networks.
 - Homelessness creates significant psychological damage, particularly for children.

- Eviction and homelessness contribute to a criminalization loop, as evicted tenants may be prosecuted for trespassing if they remain on the premises, and homeless people who sit or sleep on streets may face criminal charges for loitering.
- A major obstacle to obtaining new housing after losing one's case in court is the civil judgment issued against the defendant, which has three important consequences:
 - After an eviction, the judgment of possession against the tenant marks he or she as an undesirable applicant for future housing rentals; public and private exclusions from national "blacklists" restrict the supply of housing available to persons who have lost their homes.
 - Civil judgments damage defendants' credit.
 - Damaged credit further restricts the supply of housing.
 - Landlords use credit scores to evaluate applicants for rental housing.
 - Mortgage lenders depend on credit scores to evaluate applicants for loans.
 - Damaged credit scores can harm one's ability to generate the income necessary to pay rent in the future.
 - Damaged credit impacts both immediate employment opportunities and educational opportunities that could improve employment prospects.
 - Employers increasingly use credit scores to screen out current and prospective employees.
 - Education, one of the best avenues for boosting credentials and earnings, typically requires loans, which themselves require credit.
 - Eviction judgments create additional, indirect obstacles to obtaining and maintaining new housing.

B. Development of the Right to Housing Defense Counsel

- The rationale for protecting liberty and other vital interests through appointment of counsel is procedural and substantive [constitutes a matter of fairness and produces results that accurately comport with the applicable law].
- In the development of the right to appointment of criminal defense counsel, courts have emphasized procedural goals even when substantive outcomes provided the true motivation.
 - The Justices who decided *Gideon v. Wainwright* and the cases leading up to it were motivated by a desire for substantive justice: they sought to protect African American men from abusive states operating under Jim Crow.
- Yet they pursued this substantive aim indirectly and relied on the language and logic of procedure.
- Although Mr. Gideon was white, Gideon was in many ways a race case.
- The Gideon decision reflected the Court's "concern over a criminal justice system where white judges and prosecutors processed poor, unrepresented blacks and Hispanics," a system known for "the selective prosecution of crime" and "treating black suspects and defendants much worse than white ones."
 - In the past decade, the push for a right to counsel in civil cases has regained steam.
 - State and local jurisdictions have begun new access-to-justice initiatives to expand the availability of representation.
 - 2003: The National Coalition for a Civil Right to Counsel was born, strengthening coordination and advocacy efforts.
 - 2006: The American Bar Association adopted a resolution advocating the appointment of counsel in civil matters where "basic human needs" are at stake.

- The ABA Resolution identified five such needs, in the following order: shelter; sustenance; safety; access to healthcare; and child custody and parental rights.
 - No jurisdiction guarantees counsel for all basic needs, though many have made progress on parental rights and have begun to expand to other areas.
 - Recently, housing has been receiving increased attention.
 - A number of localities have developed experimental pilot projects to provide counsel in targeted areas for limited periods and to evaluate the results.
- California
 - 2009: Legislation passed establishing the most ambitious pilot program yet, funding appointment of counsel in ten different projects across the state.
 - Six of the ten projects focused on housing, while the remaining four were divided between custody, domestic violence, and probate guardianship services.
 - 2016: Because of the proven success in the above programs California committed to funding the program on a recurring basis.
- District of Columbia
 - 2015: Funded a pilot project to provide attorneys for tenants facing eviction from subsidized housing and the following year introduced the “Expanding Access to Justice Act Of 2016” to expand the program.
- Massachusetts
 - 2009: Established the Housing Assistance and Representation Pilot Project, a group of two pilot studies, which measured the effect of providing representation to tenants facing eviction.
 - January 2017: Building on the results of the above studies, Martin J. “Marty” Walsh, the Mayor of Boston, worked with Massachusetts legislators to file a bill to guarantee such tenants a right to counsel.
- Pennsylvania [Philadelphia]
 - March 2017: The Philadelphia City Council held a hearing regarding the possibility of appointing counsel to tenants.
- New York
 - In 2017, New York City became the first government in the United States to guarantee a right to counsel for people at risk of losing their homes.
 - Now pending bill [Assembly Bill A162](#) seeks to provide additional protections for all defendants in eviction, foreclosure, or ejectment proceedings whose incomes fall at /or below 125% of the federal poverty line.
- Georgia
 - HB 404 (*The Safe at Home Act*)
 - This new law, effective July 1, 2025, provides three additional tenant protections.
 - Landlords are required to keep the property “fit for human habitation”. This means the landlord must keep the property free from all safety and health hazards and make repairs in a timely manner.
 - The security deposit may not exceed the equivalent amount of two months’ rent.
 - Landlords must give written notice of eviction of at least three days (*including for non-payment of rent*). Prior to HB404, the landlord could file for eviction immediately for non-payment of rent. **IMPORTANT:** The three-day written

notice must comply with the notice requirements set forth in O.C.G.A. § 44-7-50 (d).

- Georgia Eviction Policy: A Comparative Analysis of Southern States (*Alex Macdonald, Ciarra Malone, Myah Palmer, Freya Sargent, Georgia State University Andrew Young School of Policy Studies (May 2024)*)⁴
 - GSU used the American Bar Association's *10 Guidelines for Residential Eviction Laws and the Evictions Proceedings Report by the National Council of State Legislators* to build a scorecard for evaluating states' adoption of residential eviction laws and practices that these sources claim reduce harm to tenants and landlords.
 - **States Evaluated:** Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.
 - The scorecard includes four macro categories: (1) Pre-eviction Protections, (2) Eviction Filing & Process, (3) Access to Counsel, and (4) Post-judgment. These categories have one or more criteria within them, as shown below in Figure 1: (1) Tenant pre-eviction protections & notices, (2) eviction filing, (3) fair hearing process, (4) pre-litigation diversion & mediation programs, (5) right to redemption, (6) access to preparation resources, (7) access to counsel & legal aid services, (8) the appeal process, and (9) privacy and post-eviction protections.

Figure 1. Scoring Categories and Criteria for Evaluating State Eviction Laws & Policy

Pre-Eviction Protections		Eviction Filing & Process			Access to Counsel		Post-Judgement	
Tenant Protections	Eviction Filing	Fair Hearing Process	Pre-Hearing Programs	Right to Redemption	Access to Preparation Resources	Free Access to Legal Services	Appeal Process	Post-Eviction Protections
✓ Grace periods for rent payment	✓ Number of days tenants can answer the eviction orders	✓ Hearings are guaranteed	✓ State-provided eviction mediation program	✓ Tenants can redeem tenancy through full payment of rent owed at any time before a judgment	✓ Online information and resources	✓ Right to counsel	✓ Right to appeal	✓ Options for record sealing
✓ Caps on late fees		✓ Tenants have the right to be heard			✓ Tenant-landlord hotline	✓ Legal aid at the local level	✓ Fees/bonds required to exercise the right to appeal	
✓ Notice requirements for eviction filing		✓ Tenants have the right to discovery	✓ State-funded rental assistance program		✓ Summons requirement to include tenant resources	✓ Statewide legal aid services	✓ Fee/bond waivers available	
✓ Notice requirements for rent increases							✓ Number of days tenants can file an appeal	
● 0-1 practice	● 1-10 days	● 0-1 practice	● No programs	● No option	● 0-1 resource	● No access	● Only right to appeal	● No option
● 2-3 practices	● 11-30 days	● 2 practices	● 1 program	● Before answer	● 2 resources	● Local services	● Appeal time of 10-30 days	● Option before hearing
● 4 practices	● >30 days	● 3 practices	● 2 programs	● Before hearing	● 3 resources	● Statewide services	● Appeal time >30 days or fee/ bond waiver	● Option post-judgement

- Each state received a grade of low, medium, or high on each of the nine criteria on the following basis:
 - **Category/Criteria 1: tenant protections and pre-eviction notices:** GSU considered whether states offer grace periods for rent payment, caps on late fees, notice requirements for eviction filing, and notice requirements for rent increases. States that meet one or none of these factors score low, states that meet two to three of these factors score medium, and states that meet all four factors score high.

⁴ [Georgia-Eviction-Policy-Report.pdf](#)

- **Category/Criteria 2: eviction filing process:** includes four criteria. The first criterion, eviction filing, is the time states provide to tenants to answer the eviction orders. States with no explicit time provided for tenants to answer eviction orders score low, states that provide tenants with one to ten days score medium, and states that provide tenants with 11 to 30 days score high. The second criterion, fair hearing process, considers whether hearings are guaranteed, whether tenants have the right to be heard, and whether tenants have the right to discovery. States that meet one or none of these factors score low, states that meet two of these factors score medium, and states that meet all three factors score high. For the third criterion, pre-litigation diversion and mediation programs, we evaluated the availability of eviction mediation programs and rental assistance programs at the state level. States that provided neither score low, states that provided one score medium, and states that provided both scored high. The final criterion in this category, right to redemption, considers whether tenants can redeem tenancy through full payment of rent owed at any time before a judgment. States with no such opportunity score low, states with the opportunity for redemption at any point before the tenant is required to respond to the summons score medium, and states with the opportunity for redemption any time before the decision score high.
- **Category/Criteria 3: Access to Legal Counsel:** includes two criteria. GSU evaluated access to preparation resources, based on whether states offer online information and eight resources, a tenant-landlord hotline, or require that the summons include tenant resources. States that meet one or none of these factors score low, states that meet two of these factors score medium, and states that meet all three factors score high. For the second criterion, access to counsel & legal aid services, GSU considered whether states have a right to counsel, statewide legal aid services available, or funding provided for legal aid at the local level. States with no access to counsel or legal aid score low, states with state funding for legal aid at the local level score medium, and states with statewide access to counsel score high.
- **Category/Criteria 4: Opportunities for tenants to appeal an eviction decision or seal eviction filings post-judgment** For the appeal process, GSU identified whether the right to appeal is available, whether tenants must pay fees or bonds to exercise the right to appeal, whether fee or bond waivers are available, and how much time is provided to tenants to file an appeal. States that only guarantee the right to appeal score low, states that guarantee the right to appeal within ten or more days score medium, and states that guarantee the right to appeal within 30 days or more and made fee or bond waivers available to tenants score high. The final criterion, post-eviction protections, is based on the availability of record-sealing measures. States with no statute governing eviction records score low, states with record sealing during the hearing process score medium, and states with post-judgment record sealing score high.⁵

⁵ The study concluded there are no clear pathways in Georgia for tenants to seal or expunge an eviction from

- After reviewing eviction filing data, legislative and literature reviews, and conducting stakeholder interviews, Georgia scored as follows:

Georgia

Pre-Eviction Protections	Eviction Filing & Process				Access to Counsel		Post-Judgement	
Tenant Protections	Eviction Filing	Fair Hearing Process	Pre-Hearing Programs	Right to Redemption	Access to Preparation Resources	Free Access to Legal Services	Appeal Process	Post-Eviction Protections
Medium	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Low	Low

- Georgia is "middling," similar to Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas. Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, and Tennessee consistently had low adherence to best practices. Overall, no states scored highly in this category.
- Within the eviction filings and process category, Georgia scored at the low end of most of its peers, similar to Alabama, but slightly above Louisiana. While no state scored highly across all criteria in this category, several states meet at least one recommended best practice. For instance, Mississippi adhered to the best practice for right to redemption. Furthermore, Texas and North Carolina met two recommended practices under this category. Texas adhered to the recommended timeframe provided to tenants to answer eviction orders, while North Carolina met the best practices for a fair hearing process. Both scored highly on the right to redemption criterion. States performed best in the eviction filings and process category relative to the other categories, yet overall, they still scored medium or low on most criteria.
- Georgia scored low on both criteria within the access to counsel or legal aid category, similar to the majority of states, including Alabama, South Carolina, and Texas. Only Florida and Tennessee received medium scores in this category. No state scored highly in this category.
- Finally, within the post-judgment category, Georgia scored low on both criteria. In this regard, Georgia was similar to most of its peers, including Florida, Louisiana, and Texas. Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas received medium scores for the appeal process, but all states scored low on privacy and post-eviction protections. In fact, privacy and post-eviction protections were the only criterion for which no state received at least a medium score.

C. Rationale For Housing Defense Counsel

- In one of the earliest Supreme Court cases considering the right to appointed counsel [*Powell v. Alabama*, 287 U.S. 45, 68-69 (1932)], the Court explained that “[t]he right to be heard would be, in many cases, of little avail if it did not comprehend the right to be heard by counsel.”
 - Pro se parties lack the knowledge of law and strategy necessary to present a case or negotiate its resolution.
 - Commentators in favor of appointment of housing defense counsel have borrowed a partial analogy from the criminal defense context and emphasized the absurdity of a judicial system in which people with little understanding of the process are dragged into court, where they confront lawyers arguing against them, and then, in relatively quick fashion, lose any right to their homes.
- Multiple studies have shown a routine, systemic mismatch of pro se parties against lawyers.
 - 90% of landlords in eviction proceedings are represented.
 - 90% of tenants in eviction proceedings are unrepresented.
 - The absence of counsel for one party and presence of counsel for the other raises basic concerns about due process, fairness, equality, accuracy of outcomes, and legitimacy.
- Landlords have been represented disproportionately for many years, allowing them to influence the culture of the Housing Courts to favor their clients’ positions.
 - Landlords and their lawyers enjoy numerous advantages as “repeat players” in the Housing Court system.
 - Advantages for repeat players include specialized expertise, bargaining credibility, informal relationships with institutional representatives, the ability to play for rules instead of individual results, and savings from economies of scale [according to Marc Galanter’s research].
- Judges regularly misapply rules of procedure and standards of proof, allowing landlords to evade their evidentiary burdens and even “trying the landlord’s case”.
 - When tenants try to offer testimony, judges often silence and interrupt them.
 - The majority of tenants in Housing Court are poor women of color, while the majority of landlords and their lawyers are middle or upper- class white men, and the majority of judges are white and middle or upper-class.
 - Evidence suggests that judges, like all of us, suffer from implicit bias, which can predispose even well-meaning people against women and people of color.
 - Judges are also more likely to be property owners or landlords than to be tenants, increasing the potential for bias.

II. THE NEW *GIDEON* IMPROVES UPON THE OLD

- NYC Legislature’s approach to the right to housing defense counsel reflects lessons learned from decades of criminal defense practice.

The emphasis of the “new Gideon” builds on the old criminal defense model in three notable ways:

- Supporters of the right to housing defense counsel move beyond the language of procedural fairness and explicitly emphasize the goal of positive substantive outcomes.
- While incarceration is a problem that disproportionately affects black men, and Gideon served to protect black men in the criminal justice system, eviction is a phenomenon that disproportionately impacts black women.
 - The new right to housing defense counsel seeks to protect them in the civil justice system.
- While the criminal defense model emphasizes the need to counteract the power of the state, the appointment of housing defense counsel acknowledges and contends with the power of private actors.

A. Substantive Outcomes

- The NYC legislation prevents displacement from homes, decreases homelessness, and preserves affordable housing.
- Discussion around Intro 214 A, was very different from how the right to criminal defense counsel has been conceptualized.
- The right to criminal defense counsel developed from due process doctrine. It is therefore tethered to the jurisprudence and traditions of constitutional rights.
- The right to housing counsel, in contrast, has been presented as legislation.
 - It benefits from a clean slate, limited only by the creativity and capital of local representatives.
 - In contrast to the viewpoint neutrality expected of courts and embodied in process rights, legislation can support a program for social welfare based on a conception of the public good.
- The evidence on the effectiveness of alternatives to full legal representation – like for example “unbundled” services, self-help centers, and hotlines that offer limited advice or assistance with discrete tasks – is scant.
 - Existing data suggests that limited legal assistance might make the processes feel fairer to litigants but still produce no difference in substantive outcomes.
 - Some evidence has even indicated that limited services can be detrimental to the outcome if the person wielding the legal tools lacks the strategic knowledge to employ them properly.
 - Even commentators who favor non-lawyer alternatives in other contexts generally acknowledge that housing litigation is an area where full representation is needed.

1. Beyond Legal Outcomes: Secondary Effects

- Intro 214A took aim not only at case outcomes, but also at non-legal, secondary effects of such proceedings.
- City Council Member Mark Levine summarized the Intro 214 A's legislative intent in September 2016:
 - "It cost around 2,500 dollars to provide a tenant a lawyer, but if that same tenant were to have no lawyer and would be evicted, and as happens in so many cases when families are evicted were to wind up homeless, it would cost the City tens of thousands of dollars in shelter costs, in extra services in schools, in extra emergency room visits, and increased applications for unemployment benefits, and increased mental health services and more. And since over half of evictions [are] in rent regulated units, and we know those units often go market rate after they're vacated, when we invest in lawyers to prevent evictions, we save thousands of affordable apartments, which otherwise the city would have to spend millions of dollars to replace"

B. Equality For Gideon's Sister

- The NYC Legislature aims to create substantive change in an area of particular importance to African American women.
- Housing court defendants and evicted persons are disproportionately women of color.
- Harvard sociologist Matthew Desmond in his new book Evicted:
 - Milwaukee, Wisconsin:
 - Women of color are overrepresented among evicted tenants.
 - Eviction is extremely widespread for Black and Latina women and plays a major role in creating and maintaining poverty for them and their families.
 - In poor Black and Latino communities, "eviction is to women what incarceration is to men."
 - Desmond's quantitative sample:
 - The average annual number of women evicted from Black neighborhoods was more than double that of men from the same neighborhoods and almost triple that of women from white neighborhoods.
 - The eviction rate was 5.55 percent of women and 2.94 percent of men in Black neighborhoods, 2.51 percent of women and
 - 1.16 percent of men in Latino neighborhoods, and 2.05 percent of women and 1.14 percent of men in White neighborhoods.

1. Explaining The Gender Disparity

- Caring for the home and its occupants remains disproportionately woman's work.
- Women are more likely than men to live with their children.
- Women with children are even more likely than women without to face eviction.
- Children as a contributing factor to eviction:
 - Children can make noise or damage property, which a landlord may claim to be a nuisance.
 - Children also attract negative attention through no fault of their own.
 - Police engage disproportionately with Black and Latino children, and the neighborhood disruptions caused by police activity can lead to their mothers' eviction.

- Substandard housing conditions pose particular dangers for children, increasing liability for landlords and conflict for tenants.
- Women are more likely than men to report substandard conditions to relevant agencies and such reports often result in retaliatory eviction.
- Greater Monthly Expenses
 - Women are more likely than men to serve as the primary caretaker for their children, and so women's monthly expenses tend to be higher.
 - Single women generally maintain primary responsibility for food, clothing, medical care, school supplies, and other needs of their children which compete with rent for a share of the budget.
- Budget Shortfalls Hit Harder
 - Women enjoy fewer opportunities than men to compensate for budget fluctuations and shortfalls.
 - When emergencies occur, poor tenants sometimes work overtime, rely on social contacts, or make additional money in underground economies, but these options are more readily available to men than women.
 - With respect to overtime work, childcare responsibilities often leave women without extra time to perform it, and paying a third party for childcare would likely cost more than mothers could earn with the additional hours.
 - Among poor people like those in Desmond's study, employed women are also more likely than employed men to occupy part-time positions that do not include overtime opportunities.
- Sexual Harassment
 - Although it has received less attention than sexual harassment in the workplace, sexual harassment in rental housing is remarkably common, further compounding the gender disparity in eviction.
 - Landlords' sexual harassment of their tenants includes conduct ranging from abusive or threatening remarks to rape.
 - Property owners and managers use keys to gain unauthorized access to apartments and corner tenants in hallways and laundry rooms.
- Gendered Tenant Eligibility
 - As a technical matter, women are more likely than men to qualify as tenants when they apply for housing.
 - They are more likely to work in the formal economy or to receive public assistance.
 - Because women can more often document their income sources and otherwise demonstrate eligibility, landlords are more likely to approve them for leases.

Because of their formal eligibility for housing, women become overrepresented as named tenants on leases and, should there be an eviction later on, overrepresented as defendants in eviction proceedings.

C. Rule Of Law: Balancing Power of Private Actors

- Appointment of counsel serves to counteract power imbalances that might otherwise interfere with the fair application of the rule of law.
- The criminal trial serves to provide a check on state power, but without representation for the defendant, he or she is in no position to benefit from the trial process.
- As the Court explained in Gideon, “in our adversary system of criminal justice, any person hauled into court, who is too poor to hire a lawyer, cannot be assured a fair trial unless counsel is provided for him.”
 - Tenants “hailed into court” are generally in no position to make use of their legal defenses without a lawyer to articulate them.

III. THE LIMITS OF HOUSING DEFENSE COUNSEL

- Intro to 214 A appoints lawyers for named defendants at risk of losing their homes through judicial proceedings.
 - It does not cover administrative proceedings, such as those governing termination of housing subsidies.
 - It does not address the legal needs of persons whose problems with their homes are not yet, or never become, expressed in court pleadings.
 - This is significant because “informal evictions,” involving no court action, make up at least half of forced tenant moves.
 - Example: When landlords take steps toward filing an eviction proceeding, such as serving a tenant with a Notice to Quit, tenants often abandon the property before the landlord files a complaint with the court.
 - Such informal evictions are more difficult to track, but offering tenants advice, counsel, and transactional assistance could potentially make a difference.

A. Proceedings Included and Problems Addressed [By Intro 214 A]

- The legislation provides counsel to defendants in eviction, ejectment, and foreclosure proceedings – all of which involve potential imminent displacement of occupants - and would require the state to match dollar for dollar the amount counties appropriate for their plans.
- Eviction:
 - Also called summary proceedings because of their shortened timeline compared to most civil litigation, concern a landlord’s right to recover possession of real property from a tenant
- Ejectment:
 - An action to recover possession of real property from a party outside of the statutory landlord-tenant relationship; it is the appropriate course of action for property disputes between, for example, family members

- Foreclosure:
 - Involves disputes regarding ownership of homes purchased with credit, specifically allegations that a debtor failed to pay a mortgage and therefore forfeited rights to a property.
- The volume of eviction proceedings vastly outweighs that of the other two categories combined.
- Eviction matters are handled by a special subdivision of the New York City Court System, the Housing Court.
- The most common eviction matter is the non-payment action in which the landlord alleges the tenant has not paid rent due, and the landlord seeks possession of the property and monetary damages for unpaid rent.
- The second type of eviction proceeding is a “holdover.”
 - In a holdover, the landlord alleges the tenant is “holding over” and occupying the property after the tenant’s right to occupy it has terminated. In these cases, the landlord seeks to recover possession of the unit regardless of whether any money is owed.
- Foreclosures and ejectments are generally initiated in New York Supreme Court, the lowest division of the New York State Court System.

B. Procedural Position

- The defensive position brings inherent limits.
- The defensive posture is necessarily reactive, rather than proactive, which can put the defendant at a disadvantage.
 - The defendant does not choose whether to use litigation or a different method to solve the underlying social problem.
 - The plaintiff selects the time for commencement of the litigation and generally controls the speed of the litigation.
 - The timing or speed may be difficult for the defendant.
- Because the plaintiff selects the forum when filing the lawsuit, defense attorneys do not enjoy the benefit of choosing the court.
 - Forum selection can decide the rules of evidence and procedure that will cover the proceedings.
 - Such rules can support or undermine due process and be outcome- determinative.
- Defensive litigation tends to address issues individually, not collectively.
 - A tenant-defendant challenges the landlord on a case-by-case basis, whereas tenants as plaintiffs can bring their claims together.
 - The collective approach may be more effective for the plaintiffs and the justice system overall.

***Note:** While the passage of Intro 214-A in August 2017 mandated universal access to legal representation for low-income tenants, there is additional, related legislation pending currently in 2025. [Assembly Bill A162](#) would add additional tenant protections and require counties and/or cities to establish a plan for providing legal counsel to persons who are defendants or respondents in eviction, ejectment and foreclosure proceedings and who are financially unable to obtain counsel; defines eligible person as one whose gross individual income is not in excess of one hundred twenty-five percent of the federal income official poverty line; requires the state to match dollar for dollar the amount counties appropriate for their plans.*



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