

Understanding and Improving the Experience of Pro Se Litigants in the Trial Court of Massachusetts

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¹ Demetrios is an independent user experience researcher. Although this research was approved and facilitated by Probate and Family Court Chief Justice Casey and Court Administrator Dicenso, the information and recommendations here are the work of Demetrios alone and do not reflect the views of the Trial Court. Similarly, although Demetrios worked with Bentley graduate students on parts of this research, this paper does not reflect the views of Bentley University.

Executive Summary

What can the Trial Court do to improve the experience of pro se litigants? To answer this question, I interviewed litigants, court staff, and attorneys, observed in courthouses, analyzed court forms and materials, studied websites, and reviewed relevant literature. This work took place between September, 2023 and February, 2025. I made over a dozen trips to courthouses and interviewed well over 100 litigants and dozens of court staff and attorneys.

I concentrate on changes the Trial Court can make that will have a substantial positive impact and yet are relatively easy to implement. Although the focus here is on the Probate and Family Court (PFC), many of the recommendations apply to multiple court departments, systems that are used by all court departments, and many of the large courthouses that contain multiple departments. I focus on the user experience of litigants and attorneys, but primarily self-represented litigants (SRLs). This is just one perspective, one way of examining the court system, and there are many others, also valid, and complementary to this one.

I am neither an attorney with experience practicing in the Trial Court nor a court employee, and there are many limitations to this report, which are discussed in detail below. In particular, many recommendations that might seem reasonable may not be, given my ignorance of internal systems, processes, and resource constraints.

Top Findings

- One of the easiest and quickest ways the Trial Court can improve the experience of self-represented litigants is to improve information about existing services and the availability of free legal help – both the quality of the information and its discoverability. A redesigned Information Sheet is one way to achieve this (see Figure 3).
- There are many ways the court can provide additional and more complete information to litigants: developing flow charts and step-by-step guides for legal procedures, including more links from Mass.gov to Masslegalhelp.org, producing and distributing single-page handouts as well as detailed brochures for each type of court case, and developing videos on guardianship, divorce, child support and custody, and so on. Providing this additional information will help litigants understand legal procedures, avoid mistakes, and thus reduce demands on court staff.
- Many court forms are difficult to understand and fill out; this is a well understood problem, and there are now multiple ongoing efforts to improve forms. A simple short-term solution is to create more instruction documents to help litigants

correctly fill out the existing forms. They should be handed out along with forms in Probate and Family Court (PFC) offices. In addition, templates should be provided for documents that litigants need to submit that do not have a court-provided form.

- Law Libraries are an important but underutilized resource and should be advertised better. They excel at providing detailed responses to questions they receive via text or email, and provide a quiet, comfortable space where litigants can sit and fill out forms and other paperwork.
- The Trial Court should focus more on Lawyer for the Day programs and work harder to recruit more pro bono lawyers. It is very beneficial to SRLs when Court Service Center staff coordinate with Lawyer for the Day programs. The differences between the Lawyer for the Day and the Court Service Center need to be communicated clearly to clerks, and the advantages of combining the two services emphasized.
- Some courthouses have terrible signage and it can be challenging to find a desired location. This problem is easily fixed with better signage; the Franklin County Justice Center in Greenfield and the Ireland courthouse in Springfield provide examples of excellent signage. Other recommendations include more comfortable seating, small standing tables, vending machines, and better advertising about the availability of free computers. The Greeter program should be rolled out in other large courthouses.
- Probate and Family Court offices vary widely in both their physical layout and procedures. I point out areas where things work well and other areas where there are problems. There should be more sharing of best practices across PFCs.
- Satellite offices and Specialty Courts seem to have a positive impact on litigants' experiences and should be continued and, where possible, new ones added.
- Waiting is inevitable, but many PFCs could do a much better job in both scheduling and in informing litigants about expected wait times.
- In addition, the court can try to educate people while they wait via videos and posters explaining divorce, custody, guardianship, and so on.
- Most litigants don't understand how the court system works. It would help to provide information to litigants about how probation, the register's office, and the judicial side of the PFC all work together. This information could be conveyed in one or more of the following: on posters, handouts, inserts with summons, videos, or on Mass.gov.
- There have been improvements in the communication between the court and litigants, but more is needed. Summons, citations, and motions that are currently sent to litigants often provide more information than in the past, but there is still vast room for improvement. It should be clear what a document from the court means, what will happen next, and what options are available.

- eFiling and Masscourts are both very valuable to litigants but have serious design and usability problems. The Trial Court should focus on improving both. This will require working with the vendors; if that proves problematic, improved instructions should be developed and online training or tutorials considered.
- Mass.gov is the primary source for legal information for SRLs. It has improved significantly in recent years but there is still room for dramatic improvements, and the Trial Court should focus on improving its design, usability, and information content.

The following sections expand on these top findings. More details, supporting photos, and references to the literature can be found in the main body of this report. A new report by a group of lawyers at Stanford makes many similar recommendations, although it focuses on the Los Angeles Superior Court's Eviction Docket (Engstrom et al., 2025).

Improve Information About Court Services and Free Legal Help

One of the easiest and quickest ways the Trial Court can improve SRLs' experience is to improve information about existing services and the availability of free legal help.

An Information Sheet

The Worcester PFC developed an Information Sheet during 2023. It contained excellent and important information for litigants, but I redesigned and expanded it to include additional information on the Court Service Centers, The Law Libraries, Mass.gov, and the Virtual Registry. I also added information on the Massachusetts Legal Resource Finder, Masslegalhelp.org, and provided URLs for information about finding a lawyer and for an online book on family law.

Recommendations

- Offer a redesigned Information Sheet like the one shown in Figure 3 to everyone who comes to the counter in the PFC office; it is particularly important for people during their first visit and those who don't live in the area. In addition, create a poster out of the information on the redesigned information sheet and place it on a stand where people can see it while waiting in line.
- Share the Information Sheet with other court departments. With only minor modifications the information on it can be used to create Information Sheets for the Housing Court, District Court, the Boston Municipal Court, the Juvenile Court, and the Superior Court.

Court Service Centers (CSCs) and Law Libraries

Both of these organizations are incredibly useful to SRLs.

Recommendations

- Increase the staff for both organizations. I realize that CSCs have recently hired additional staff, so this is probably unlikely. My initial recommendation was to train more volunteers, but I learned from CSC staff that their physical spaces generally do not allow for additional volunteer staff (note that the CSCs often share space with Law Libraries; they already have about 85 interns and volunteers each semester). Since most CSCs can't accommodate additional volunteers, one recommendation is to recruit volunteers who will work for more than a semester.
- Increase coordination between the CSCs and Law Libraries, and advertise better the Law Libraries' ability to provide detailed email responses to legal questions.

The Virtual Registry

The Virtual Registry is also incredibly useful to litigants who know about it, as it can save trips to a court and answer questions quickly.

Recommendations

- Advertise the Virtual Registry better; e.g., by encouraging clerks, judges, and probation officers to mention it.
- Investigate the advantages of creating a centralized state-wide Virtual Registry.
- When people call individual PFC offices, direct the calls to the Virtual Registry to improve response times and efficiency.
- Open the Virtual Registry one or two evenings a week and on Saturday morning.
- Create or expand similar services for the other court departments; e.g., the Virtual Front Counter in the Housing Court and the Virtual Clerk's Office for some divisions of the Boston Municipal Court (BMC).

Lawyer for the Day Programs

When there are sufficient lawyers in attendance, these programs can be very helpful to a large number of people.

Recommendation

- The Trial Court should focus more on Lawyer for the Day (LFD) programs and work harder with outside organizations to recruit more lawyers. It is very beneficial to SRLs when CSC staff coordinate with Lawyer for the Day programs, and the PFC and other court departments need to understand the distinction between the two organizations and work harder to recruit lawyers. The

differences between the LFD and CSC need to be communicated clearly to clerks, and the advantages of combining the two services emphasized.

- In courthouses where there are Lawyer for the Day programs, they should be advertised better. For example, create a poster that can be placed immediately past security on days when the Lawyer for the Day program is active.
- Try to maintain a regular weekly schedule so information can be included on Mass.gov and other sources. One problem is that the scheduling of attorneys varies county by county; it is sometimes very effective (e.g., in Hampden county, where the Bar Association handles it), while in other counties it is very ineffective.

See the full report for details, explanations, and additional recommendations.

Help People Understand Court Procedures and Legal Processes

Representing yourself in a civil case is incredibly complicated for a litigant untrained in the law, and there is a tremendous amount to learn. Educating litigants to help them understand court procedures and legal processes will not only help litigants, but make the court much more efficient, as a tremendous amount of time is wasted when litigants are not prepared, don't have the required documents, or make mistakes in what they submit to the court.

Recommendations

- Develop a "virtual courthouse tour." The tour would orient court users about where to go and what happens at each stage of a legal process, providing basic information about the Registry, the Probation Department, the CSC, on-site pro bono programs, and courtrooms. The tour should be available online and at CSCs.
- Include links from Mass.gov to Masslegalhelp.org when that site provides additional or complementary information.
- Develop and display flow charts for each type of legal procedure, as well as posters that display the sequence of steps. (Note: Accessibility is important, and there is a section on it in the full report below.)
- Produce and distribute single-page handouts as well as detailed brochures for each type of court case. Include flow charts and typical timelines, as well as a section with FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions).
- Develop videos on guardianship, divorce, child custody, and other common processes and make them available on Mass.gov as well as, perhaps, in courthouses.

See the full report for details, explanations, and additional recommendations.

Improve Court Forms

Many court forms are difficult to understand and fill out. This is a well understood problem, and Trial Court leaders and staff understand well that court forms are a problem. There are now multiple ongoing efforts to improve forms, especially the most commonly used forms, but this takes a lot of time and resources. I propose a relatively simple temporary solution of creating better instructions for existing forms.

Recommendations

- Create more instruction documents to accompany forms.
- When instruction documents exist, have clerks hand them out along with the form.
- In some cases, detailed instructions exist on Masslegalhelp.org but not on Mass.gov. When this is the case, link from Mass.gov to Masslegalhelp.org

Usability Studies and Expert Reviews

Ongoing efforts to redesign forms should include expert reviews and usability studies. It is easy to identify problems with forms. During 2021 and 2022, a group of user experience (UX) experts and I evaluated a number of court forms. At that time, I also wrote a document with details on how to perform a usability evaluation of court forms ([A Guide for Field Testing Court Forms & Self-Help Material](#)). The expert reviews and usability evaluations we performed can be found here: [Trial Court Reports on Improving User Experience](#).

Recommendations

- Perform usability evaluations on both existing and redesigned forms.
- This type of evaluation is relatively simple to perform. For that reason, it makes for ideal class projects if the court works with colleges and universities in Massachusetts.

See the full report for details, explanations, and additional recommendations.

Courthouses

Wayfinding involves orienting yourself when you arrive at a location and then navigating to your destination. With only two exceptions, in every large courthouse I've visited better signage would have facilitated wayfinding. There is currently a digital signage project that may help, but I have not seen the early implementations. People often spend many hours in courthouses, so it is also important to examine the physical environment.

Recommendations

- After entering a multi-court complex there should be a directory immediately past security that lists the name of the courthouse and the court departments in it.
- With respect to signage, the Trial Court should study what was done at the Franklin County Justice Center in Greenfield and the Ireland Courthouse in Springfield and try to replicate their improvements at other courthouses.
- Continue the Greeter program and roll it out at all the large courthouses in the state.
- When there is a cafe in a courthouse, it should be included in directories and signage. Consider installing vending machines in larger courthouses when there is no cafe or it is closed for extended periods.
- To make filling out forms easier, add small standing tables to courthouses where there is room in lobbies and outside offices and courtrooms.
- For new courthouses or renovations, make sure that there are comfortable places to sit. If they have to be hard surfaces to make cleaning easy, at least make sure they have backs.
- Advertise the availability of free computers and make clear what they can be used for. Limit the use of free computers by non-litigants (often people paid to do criminal background checks), perhaps by establishing a time limit.

See the full report for details, explanations, and additional recommendations.

Office Procedures in the Probate and Family Court Offices

There is significant variation among PFC offices, and effective techniques used in each office should be shared with the other offices. From what we observed and heard from those we interviewed, the information and directions from clerks was generally accurate and helpful. However, a simple mistake can result in a lot of wasted time and great stress for litigants. For this reason, I recommend a continual training program for clerks.

Recommendations

- Create online training programs for clerks. These can be used to help train new hires and also as part of a continuous training program.
- For PFC offices that don't currently "triage" long lines, consider starting this practice. In addition, periodically send a clerk outside the office and announce, where groups of people can hear, "Does anyone have any questions? Does everyone know where to go?"
- Consider recruiting volunteers to provide assistance to litigants (as is done in the CSCs).

- Make sure that PFC offices are clearly identified and make it clear where people should go when they enter a PFC office. The signage and physical layout of PFC offices should be examined from the perspective of a first-time litigant.
- Improve the design of the daily list to allow both the primary and secondary parties to find their names quickly. In addition, make the location for each case clear. Alternatively, dispense with publicly displaying the daily list altogether and have everyone check in at the counter.
- Put two posters on tripods so they can be read while waiting in line: one poster with a large version of the Information Sheet, and another stating that you may not have to pay court fees if you qualify for a fee waiver.
- Whenever anyone asks for a form or procedure that requires a payment, ask the person something like this: “Would you like to see if you qualify for a fee waiver?” If they say yes, show them a sheet with the income requirements and then hand them an Affidavit of Indigency if they still want to proceed.

See the full report for details, explanations, and additional recommendations.

Improve the User Experience While Waiting

Waiting is inevitable, and it’s impossible to assign a specific time for each hearing or legal procedure because sometimes people don’t show up, come unprepared, or request a delay, and because sometimes things take longer than planned. It does seem possible, however, to improve the current situation in the Trial Court.

Recommendations

- End block scheduling as much as possible and try to move to staggered hearing times. (This is, in fact, already mandated by PFC Standing Order 2-23; see Appendix 3.)
- Probation should share the information they have about wait times more clearly and make clear dependencies; e.g., people often don’t realize that they will not be seen unless the other party shows up.
- Most litigants don’t understand how the court system works. It would help to provide information to litigants about how probation, the register’s office, and the judicial side of the PFC all work together. This information could be conveyed in one or more of the following: on posters, handouts, inserts with summons, videos, or on Mass.gov.
- Educate people while they wait by developing informative videos and having them playing on video monitors outside the PFC office. Also, if possible, use free wall space for informative posters about all the case types handled by the PFC.
- Improve upon the current system in some PFC offices of yelling out a name, often in a large space with over 100 people. Provide a monitor or board with

names and the order they will be seen, or text people when it is their turn, or use one of the many commercial check-in and queuing systems.

See the full report for details, explanations, and additional recommendations.

Improve Communication Between the Courts and Litigants

The Trial Court communicates with litigants in multiple ways. Communication with litigants before a court date provides an excellent avenue for providing helpful information. As one person told us, the Trial Court should inform litigants: “Your hearing is coming up. Here’s what you need to do.” The current practice of including instructions on how to serve the defendant when a summons is sent out is an excellent idea, and a good example of the main type of recommendation here. It is critical to design the layout of summonses and notices carefully and make sure they contain not just the required information, but also information that will help the recipient understand the situation and what he or she needs to do next. Another issue is that there are frequent complaints about the difficulty of contacting the court, especially when a person knows they will be late or unable to attend a hearing.

Recommendations

- Consider including more information on summonses and notices about what the litigant should do next, what is expected, and what will happen at the next court date.
- The court should provide more information when motions are sent out (see the section in the main paper for details and an example of a confusing motion).
- Investigate the possibility of including additional personalized information to reminder text messages, including the type of hearing, where to report, and what the litigant is required to do or to bring.
- There should be a single number that litigants can call or text to inform the court that they will be late or will be unable to attend. Ideally, this will be part of some type of automated system that will send a text message back to the sender. Although this may not prevent a default, it can improve court efficiency by saving time waiting or trying to locate litigants.
- Improve the design and layout of summonses and notices.

See the full report for details, explanations, and additional recommendations.

Improve Usability and User Experience Throughout the Court System

All complex systems and large organizations have multiple usability problems, and there needs to be a continuous ongoing effort to identify and improve usability and user experience.

Recommendations

- Ideally, the Trial Court should have a User Experience (UX) team that evaluates the usability of all aspects of interacting with the trial court, participates in the design of new forms, products, and services, and collects information from litigants about their experiences.
- Because eFiling can be tremendously valuable to litigants but is currently very difficult to use, improving the usability of eFiling should be a priority.
- Similarly, Masscourts is critically important to SRLs and a similar effort should be made to improve Masscourts.
- Continue to make small improvements as problems are identified on Mass.gov, on forms, on wayfinding, on digital displays in courthouses, on notices and summons sent to litigants, and other areas.
- Create separate qualitative surveys for litigants, attorneys, and court staff requesting information about problems and suggestions for improvements. Run these surveys continuously.

See the full report for details, explanations, and additional recommendations.

Generalizability and Limitations

Although focused on the Probate and Family Court (PFC), most recommendations here apply to all court departments.

In an ideal study, a user experience (UX) researcher would follow a number of litigants for months or even years as they interacted with the court system via a series of summons, hearings, pre-trial conferences, case management meetings, and trials. What I present here, on the other hand, is primarily a snapshot of individuals' experiences at one moment in time. People often mention the experiences they had during previous interactions with the court system, but it's hard to evaluate these experiences given that they happened months or even years in the past. However, when people say they had trouble filling out a certain form, and I can look at that form myself, or when they say the seats are uncomfortable, they're hungry and there's nowhere to eat, or they show me a confusing summons, then this is either their immediate experience or else I can check this information myself and be confident I have something interesting and valid to report. In other cases, I'm reporting peoples' experiences and it doesn't matter whether what they report is an accurate description of a previous event; what is important in these cases is how a person experienced the event.

Disclaimer

I am an outsider with no legal training. I do not know about many existing projects or the complexities of implementing changes within the Trial Court. Although I visited six PFCs throughout the state, there are many I did not visit. This report is written from the perspective of litigants who interact with the court system, especially self-represented litigants (SRLs). It looks at the court through their eyes, and is very limited in the sense that it does not touch on many aspects of court procedures and operations. I'm not aware of the inner workings of the court, including initiatives such as the Pathways Case Management Process, the effort to move to an all digital case flow system, or the legal processes involved in most types of cases. I also don't consider language access and resources for those with limited English proficiency (LEP) or alternative dispute resolution and non-adversarial approaches. Another limitation is that I only interviewed English-speaking litigants. I write a lot about Mass.gov, but not about Masscourts.org, which is also critically important to SRLs.

None of This is New

Practically everything I report here has been mentioned in previous reports and articles, both by the Trial Court (in its strategic plans and annual reports²), by other organizations (the National Center for State Courts, NCSC, the Access to Justice Commission, The Pew Charitable Trusts, etc.), and in academic articles. Despite all the recent advances, this report points out that many known problems still exist and are frustrating and hindering access to justice. By focusing on the experiences of litigants, often illustrated in their own words, I hope to make some problems “come alive.” By focusing on recommendations that the Trial Court can implement relatively quickly and easily, I also hope to make this report more relevant and useful.

Share Best Practices Among the Probate and Family Courts

A litigant's experience after walking into a courthouse with a PFC and interacting with the staff differs in multiple ways across the state. This starts immediately past security, where in some courts there are well-designed directories immediately visible, while for others there is nothing to facilitate wayfinding. It is clear that many PFCs have developed innovations in their procedures, in the information they provide, and even in their physical spaces, and many of these innovations have a positive impact on the user experiences of all those who enter. In this report, I provide many examples of both positive and negative aspects of PFCs. For example, the register in Worcester developed an information sheet with a lot of very useful information, while in Boston the procedure of “triaging the line” when it is long is very effective. Waiting is a problem, and especially not understanding how long you will be waiting, and in Springfield they have an electronic display with wait times listed for each individual who has checked in.

² For example, see <https://www.mass.gov/doc/fy-2023-annual-report-for-the-court-system/download>

Springfield is also one of the few offices with ample table space for sitting and filling out forms. In Northampton they have developed informative pamphlets, some with information that can't be found on Mass.gov or anywhere else. My recommendation here is to increase communication among the PFC Registers, sharing information about what they are doing to improve the ease with which litigants interact with the court. There is no separate section about this in the report, but examples can be found throughout.

User Experience IS Improving

It is important to point out that many initiatives over the last several years have resulted in dramatic improvements to litigants' experiences with the court system. The staff at Court Service Centers has been increased and there is now a Virtual Court Service Center available via Zoom. There is also a Virtual Registry in the Probate and Family Court, and other courts have similar virtual services. You can now bring your cellphone into courthouses and there is public Wi-Fi. A Greeter program was rolled out last year at large courthouses and some signage has been improved. One court employee told me that summonses were very confusing to many people in the past because self-represented litigants (SRLs) had no idea of what to do next. Now, along with the summons, the Probate and Family Court sends out a two-page list of instructions and information about how to serve the summons on the defendant. This is exactly the type of improvement I focus on here – providing essential information to people who need help, and providing this information when they need it, in this case at the time they receive a summons. There is now more information available about court procedures, as well as new videos with detailed instructions. Mass.gov now has more information than it had just a few years ago, and the court web services team is now larger. Other sites, particularly Masslegalhelp.org, provide simple, well-written, and practical information about interacting with the legal system. There have been a lot of improvements, but more can be done, as reported here.

Vignettes

I present 13 vignettes. Each is the story of a real individual litigant I spoke with and illustrates one or more of the major themes of this report. They are presented as a way for the reader to see the court from a litigant's point of view and continues previous work on trying to develop a court ethnography.

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Introduction

It's difficult for self-represented litigants (SRLs) to deal with the legal system without assistance. It's difficult to understand legal processes, determine what documents are required, and learn how long it takes to complete different procedures (e.g., divorce or guardianship). It can be extremely difficult to fill out court forms, discover what type of information and help is available, and understand one's options. There is universal acknowledgement that SRLs need help during their interactions with the legal system. One man we talked with described the beginning of his journey as an SRL as "trial by fire."

Not only do SRLs need help, but their numbers are increasing, and numerous studies point to the large percentage of litigants who are forced to deal with the legal system alone, without representation. For example:

A 2018 Pew survey revealed that almost half of U.S. households had experienced at least one civil legal issue in the preceding 12 months, not including traffic tickets. However, most civil litigants receive little or no legal assistance. A 2018 study found that across income levels, roughly 67% of people with civil issues did not have help from an attorney. Further, a 2021 analysis that broke litigants down by income showed that 92% of low income Americans involved in a civil case lacked adequate professional legal help despite being eligible for legal aid, and millions more who make too much money to qualify for legal aid but not enough to afford an attorney also went unrepresented. (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2023, "How to Make Civil Courts More Open, Effective, and Equitable")³

In 2015, the Conference of Chief Justices, in their Resolution 5, "set the aspirational goal of establishing 100 percent access to effective assistance for essential civil legal needs through a continuum of meaningful and appropriate services...."⁴ Providing services and useful functionality alone is not sufficient, however, as SRLs must know they're available and be able to access them. More importantly, they must be able to

³ Footnotes and references within quotes have been omitted. The reference list at the end of this paper includes URLs to facilitate downloading the full text version of articles and reports.

⁴https://ccj.ncsc.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/23510/01312018-expanding-meaningful-access-to-justice-for-all.pdf

use these services. eFiling is a good example. Although it is loved and widely used by attorneys, it is almost never used by SRLs, primarily for two reasons: first, most SRLs don't know that they can eFile, and second, even if they do know, it is incredibly difficult to eFile for the first time without help (e.g., I failed when I tried to eFile). Looking at the resolution from a user-experience (UX) perspective, the focus should be on improved and expanded self-help services, new or modified court rules and processes, and the effective use of technology.

SRLs need assistance in all court departments, but as former Chief Justice Ralph Gantz wrote in his Annual State of the Judiciary address in 2017, this is especially true in the Probate and Family Court:

In no other court do we have so many self-represented parties being asked to litigate disputes as complex, as emotional, as enduring, and as life-changing, as in the Probate and Family Court. The challenge of proceeding without the benefit of counsel is illustrated by the routine questions a clerk will ask a spouse seeking a divorce: "Where are the Rule 401 Financial Statements? Do you have a signed written Separation Agreement? Have you prepared a written parenting plan and used the child support guidelines to determine child support? Have you taken the mandatory parenting course?"⁵

An attorney described the Probate and Family Court succinctly in an interview with one of the graduate students working with me: "High volume, high intensity, high emotion." Although there have been many improvements over the last several years, it is still incredibly difficult for most SRLs to interact with the Trial Court without assistance. This project is another effort to reduce that difficulty.

Methodology

I collected information via interviews, observations, analyzing court forms and materials, studying websites, and reviewing the relevant literature. This work took place between September, 2023 and February, 2025. I made over a dozen trips to courthouses (including six locations of the Probate and Family Court), and interviewed well over 100 English-speaking litigants. From September until December, 2024, I worked with three Bentley graduate students on this project (see Figure 1 below, in which two of the three graduate students and I are with our posters and table outside the Worcester PFC office). The students interviewed 37 litigants, 10 court staff, 6 community organizers,

⁵<https://www.mass.gov/doc/2017-state-of-the-judiciary-address-by-sjc-chief-justice-ralph-d-gantz-oct-26-2017/download>

and 2 legal aid representatives and they visited the Worcester Court 13 times.⁶ I participated in many of these interviews, and reviewed the students' notes for the ones I didn't observe. General and specific goals, the project background, and more details on the methodology can be found in Appendix 1.



⁶ If two students visited the same day, that counted as two visits. When I use the pronoun “we” in this paper I am referring to these graduate students and me.

Figure 1. The author with two of the three graduate students, Fabiana Da Silva and Jacqueline Murli, at our table with two posters just outside the PFC office in Worcester.

Primary acronyms:

- CSC: Court Service Center
- LFD: Lawyer for the Day
- NCSC: National Center for State Courts
- PFC: Probate and Family Court
- SRL: Self-represented litigant
- UX: User experience

Also note: In most places, “clerks” refers to staff in the register’s office, and in particular the staff that litigants interact with at the PFC counter or on the Virtual Registry. Sometimes, however, I use “clerks” to refer to court staff in other departments.

Organization

Recommendations for improvement are included in the following eight sections:

1. Improve information about free legal help and court services
2. Help people understand court proceedings and legal processes
3. Improve court forms
4. Courthouses: Improve wayfinding and the physical environment
5. Improve office procedures in the Probate and Family Court offices
6. Improve the user experience while waiting
7. Improve communication between the court and litigants
8. Improve usability and user experience throughout the court system

There is also a section on the factors that influenced how litigants rated their satisfaction with the PFC, plus a section that includes 13 vignettes from individual litigants.

Improve Information About Free Legal Help and Court Services

One of the easiest and quickest ways the Trial Court can improve user experience is to improve information about existing services and the availability of free legal help. The eight Court Service Centers (CSCs), the Virtual Registry, and the 15 Law Libraries all provide great services and information. While the CSCs are generally well known, the Virtual Registry and Law Libraries are not as well known as they should be. In addition, information about free legal aid and Lawyer for the Day programs should be more widely disseminated.

A Redesigned Information Sheet

The Existing Information Sheet: The Worcester PFC developed an information sheet that is available in the office and can be seen in Figure 2. It is excellent, but can be further improved as described here. The current information sheet lists the Court Service Center, Mass.gov, the Law Library, and the Virtual Registry, which are all excellent sources of information and assistance. It also lists Community Legal Aid, the largest legal aid organization in Western MA, as well as the Lawyer Referral Service, which is a full-fee program.

**STEPHANIE K. FATTMAN
REGISTER OF PROBATE**

CONNECT WITH US

Phone: 508-831-2200
Email: wpfc@jud.state.ma.us



WELCOME TO THE WORCESTER PROBATE AND FAMILY COURT

Please note, we are not able to give legal advice. For help filling out forms or determining which documents you need, please access one of the following resources:

Court Service Center

<https://www.zoom.com/j/1615261140>

or scan the QR code



*In person ONLY available on
Tuesdays and Thursdays*

Mass.gov

Visit Mass.gov and search for
the probate and family court
page for:

- forms
- instructions on how to fill out forms
- filing fees
- general court information

Lawyer Referral Service

508-752-1311 or 1-800-622-9700
www.worcestercountybar.org

*The lawyer referral service allows
anyone to find the right lawyer
for your own legal issue.*

*Reduced fees are available upon
your request*

This is not a walk in service

Community Legal Aid

508-752-3718 or 1-800-649-3718

[www.masslegalservices.org/
findlegalaid](http://www.masslegalservices.org/findlegalaid)

*provides low income and
elderly litigants **free** civil
legal aid*

Worcester Law library

508-831-2525

worcesterlawlibrary@jud.state.ma.us
online chat with a law librarian here:

[https://www.mass.gov/service-
details/chat-or-text-with-a-law-
librarian](https://www.mass.gov/service-details/chat-or-text-with-a-law-librarian)

or text them here:
866-885-6277

Virtual registry

Monday – Friday 8:30am-4pm

Access our court online



Figure 2. The original Information Sheet developed by the Worcester PFC office

The Redesigned Information Sheet: The redesigned sheet is shown in Figure 3.⁷ More information is included about the Court Service Center, the Law Library, and the Virtual Registry: the physical location, services offered, hours, and multiple methods for contact. Masslegalhelp.org was added; it provides excellent information for SRLs and is a good complement to Mass.gov. The MA Legal Resource Finder replaced Community Legal Aid. I talked with two attorneys from Community Legal Aid who agreed that it was an improvement to replace it with the MA Legal Resource Finder, and even the Community Legal Aid website directs people to the MA Legal Resource Finder. The reason is that the MA Legal Resource Finder asks visitors a series of questions and based on their answers directs them to an appropriate agency – in many cases Community Legal Aid if people meet their requirements.

Masslegalhelp.org Pageviews

Although traffic to Masslegalhelp.org is much less than to Mass.gov, it is still significant. It also has less total content, but the content it has is clear, concise, and easy for a non-lawyer to understand. There are almost 1,000 different web pages and 15 articles and “how-tos” for the Probate and Family Court. There are 18,388 pageviews per month overall, with 3,315 pageviews for the PFC.⁸

eFiling: Attorneys find eFiling incredibly useful, and it would also be incredibly useful to SRLs if it were easier to use. I chose not to include information about eFiling on the redesigned Information Sheet because I thought it would be more likely to frustrate litigants rather than help them.

QR Codes: The QR codes remain in the redesigned Information Sheet. Although I do not have information on the number of litigants who use QR codes, many people I talked with told me that they use them frequently. Not unexpectedly, younger people are more likely to use QR codes than older people. This is confirmed by survey data. One study found that “... most QR code users were between the ages of 18 and 46, with the largest proportion being between the ages of 33 and 46. The largest group of non-QR code users was aged between 62 and 75.”⁹

⁷ Thanks to Fabiana Da Silva for visual design and Carolin Hetzner, Lisa Delgado and others for valuable feedback.

⁸ Thanks to Rochelle Hahn, Director of the MA Legal Aid Websites Project, for these numbers (on October 29, 2024).

⁹ <https://www.scantrust.com/do-consumers-use-qr-codes-in-america-17/>



Welcome to the Worcester Probate and Family Court

225 Main Street, Room 2001, Worcester, MA 01608

Contact us for information and forms about family matters and wills.

Monday – Friday: 8:30 am – 4:30 pm

Phone: (508) 831-2200

Email: wpfc@jud.state.ma.us

Please note: Trial Court employees cannot give legal advice



Stephanie K. Fattman
Register of Probate

Helpful Resources

Court Service Center

(First floor Worcester Courthouse)

Free information and one-on-one help with certain family matters, guardianship, housing, etc.

In-person Assistance

(In-person intake hours will close when capacity is reached)

Monday – Thursday: 8:30 am – 1 pm and 2 – 4:30 pm

Friday: 8:30 am – 1 pm

Virtual Court Service Center

Monday – Friday: 9 am – 2 pm

Options for connecting:

- Join on Zoom: www.zoomgov.com/j/1615261140
- Call (646) 828-7666
Enter meeting ID 1615261140 then press # #
- Scan the QR Code



Massachusetts Legal Resource Finder

Answer a few questions to get contact information for free and low-cost legal help from legal aid offices, government agencies and court programs:

www.masslrf.org

Mass.gov

Forms, instructions, filing fees, court information:

www.mass.gov/orgs/probate-and-family-court

MassLegalHelp

Free, practical information about your legal rights in Massachusetts. Information about all types of non-criminal legal issues:

www.masslegalhelp.org

If you need a lawyer

To find both free and paid legal help:

www.mass.gov/info-details/finding-a-lawyer

Worcester Law Library

(In-person across the street at 184 Main Street)

Free help finding information, books, and public computers.

Monday – Friday: 9 am – 12 pm, 1 – 4 pm

- Call (508) 831-2525
- Email worcestlawlibrary@jud.state.ma.us
- More Information: www.mass.gov/ask-a-law-librarian

Worcester Probate and Family Virtual Registry

Monday – Friday: 8:30 am – 1 pm, 2 – 4 pm

Get all the assistance available in the office by:

- Calling (646) 828-7666, enter meeting ID 1614383173 then press # # or
- Join on Zoom: www.zoomgov.com/j/1614383173 or
- Scan the QR Code



Online book on family law: www.masslegalservices.org/content/family-lawadvocacy-low-moderate-income-litigants

Figure 3. The Redesigned Information Sheet¹⁰

¹⁰ I've been told that Trial Court branding requires a date at the bottom, which is an excellent idea, and a date should be added to the Information Sheet.

Recommendations

- Offer the redesigned Information Sheet to everyone who comes to the counter in the PFC office. It is particularly important for people during their first visit and those who don't live in the area. In addition, create a poster out of the information on the redesigned information sheet and place it on a stand where people can see it while waiting in line. Consider creating a Spanish version. The Information Sheet could be two sided, with one side in English and the other in Spanish. Alternatively, create separate English, Spanish, and Portuguese versions.¹¹
- Consider including the information sheet with summons and other communication that is sent to people who live out of state. The Virtual Registry, Virtual Court Service Center, and Law Library are particularly relevant and important resources for these people, as these organizations may allow people to get their questions answered and to complete some of their court business without traveling to a courthouse.
- Share the Information Sheet with other court departments. With only minor modifications the information on it can be used to create Information Sheets for the Housing Court, District Court, the Boston Municipal Court, the Juvenile Court, and the Superior Court. It seems less likely to be useful in the Land Court. Note that virtual sources of help are now available in multiple departments: e.g., the Virtual Front Counter in the Housing Court and the Virtual Clerk's Office for some divisions of the Boston Municipal Court (BMC).

Court Service Centers (CSCs)

The CSCs are a wonderful resource and help many people. With recently added staff the eight physical locations are now open in-person five days a week and the Virtual CSC is also open every weekday. Being open in-person every day is very important, and before this change one young man told me that he would like someone to help him fill out paperwork on "all days of the week, not just Tuesday and Thursday." This was a frequent comment before the CSCs opened up full-time in person after the COVID shutdowns.

Despite the additional staff, the CSCs can't meet the need, and stop helping people mid-morning in some locations when they have reached the limit of people they can assist. They then open up again after lunch. Over the last six years, I have observed that the CSCs have become much more widely known. Counter staff in the PFC and other offices are now more likely to recommend that people get help at a CSC than in the past, there is information online and in brochures available in courthouses, and

¹¹ Spanish accounts for 64% of language requests, Portuguese 20%, while no other language approaches even 5% (from the 2023 Annual Report of the State of the Massachusetts Court System).

during court sessions I have heard several judges suggest to litigants that they try to get help at a CSC. There are still some people, however, who don't know about the CSCs. Recently (February, 2025) I talked with a man while he was waiting to get some forms at a PFC. He had a strong accent and I assume he was a non-native English speaker. He told me that he had a friend who was a police Lieutenant, and she was "really smart" and helped him fill out forms. He had never heard of the CSC, even though he must have passed it on the way to the elevators on the first floor of the Springfield courthouse.

Given that staff levels were recently increased, it is unlikely that the CSC will be able to hire additional staff. My initial recommendation was to increase non-paid volunteer staff. CSCs have trained high school students, college students, law students, and other volunteers to assist people in filling out forms and other tasks (under the supervision of a staff member). Training takes time and resources, and the training becomes more cost effective the longer the volunteer continues to work. Since students typically only work for a semester, I recommend trying to recruit retired people and others who may be willing to make a longer commitment. A secondary recommendation is to explore ways that current AI tools may be able to augment staff productivity.

Recommendation

- Increase CSC staff. I realize that CSCs have recently hired additional staff, so this is probably unlikely. My initial recommendation was to train more volunteers, but I heard from CSC staff that their physical spaces generally do not allow for additional volunteer staff (note that the CSCs often share space with Law Libraries; they already have about 85 interns and volunteers each semester). Since most CSCs can't accommodate additional volunteers, one recommendation is to recruit volunteers who will work for more than a semester.
- Continue the recent efforts to send CSC staff out into the community, where they can provide in-person assistance without requiring litigants to travel to courthouses. My understanding is that there already are, or soon will be, CSC staff visiting domestic violence shelters, prisons, local libraries, public schools, and various community centers.
- Consider having the Virtual Court Service Center open at least one night during the week.
- Consult with the AI experts at the Legal Innovation Lab at Suffolk University about augmenting staff productivity by creating a chatbot configured as a form-filling coach. The output could be reviewed by CSC staff.

Law Libraries

In my opinion, the Law Libraries are an underused resource – not that staff have free time or are sitting around waiting for people to help – but that with additional staff they could help a great many more people, and the assistance they provide is not replicated elsewhere in the court system or among legal aid or other organizations. I have observed law librarians helping individuals with their particular legal situation, and I have received excellent email responses to questions I sent to Law Librarians. Far fewer people are aware of the assistance they can receive at a Law Library compared to the CSC. I talked with one man in his 30s who was involved in a child custody case. He told me that he had spent the entire previous day in the law library preparing for his court case today, but he was the exception.

The CSCs will actually sit down with you and help you fill out forms. The Law Librarians don't have time for this, and this is not in their charter, but they will answer questions and point you to appropriate reference material and appropriate forms. In some cases, they may also review what you have done. One person we spoke with told us that he often takes several of the same forms and makes drafts of them, generally running one of his drafts by the law librarian to make sure he filled it out correctly.

Trial Court executives may need to change the way they think about the law libraries if they currently think of them merely as a library with a repository of legal information. Yes, they look like conventional libraries, but they are also a place where SRLs and attorneys can get help not only in finding legal information but in understanding what it means. In conjunction with the CSCs, they are a place where litigants can get assistance to learn about their particular legal situation.

Recommendations

I have multiple recommendations related to the Law Libraries, but many depend on the first, which involves increasing staffing.

- Increase staffing so the Law Libraries can handle both more walk-ins and the requests for information that arrive via email or text.
- Coordinate assistance between the CSCs and the Law Libraries. For example, in facilities where there are both, send people to the Law Libraries when the CSCs are closed because they have reached their limit. This is now being done in Worcester by the Greeters; instead of just telling people that the CSC is closed, they now add that the Law Library across the street is open and can provide a subset of the help provided by the CSC. In some locations, especially where the CSC and Law Libraries are co-located, this already happens, but coordination in other locations could be improved.

- The Law Libraries ability to provide detailed email and text responses to questions should be highlighted. The Law Libraries, in my experience, excel at providing detailed responses to questions they receive via text and email; their answers often include links to the relevant pages on Mass.gov, Masslegalhelp.org, and other sources. Getting information from Law Libraries is already emphasized by CSC staff, but could probably be emphasized more by the Greeters and by clerks in the PFC offices, as well as on Mass.gov.
- Consider how new AI tools may be able to increase staff productivity, or be used directly by litigants.

The Virtual Registry

The Virtual Registry, which was started during the COVID pandemic, provides many of the services available at the counter in the PFC office via Zoom. It is thus amazingly useful to many SRLs because it can save them time and money by allowing them to get their questions answered from home without having to travel to an office. I talked with people who told me that the number of times they needed to visit the courthouse was reduced because they had used the Virtual Registry. One woman told me that she “loved” the Virtual Registry because it saved her time. However, many people I talked with were unaware of the Virtual Registry. Here’s a perfect use case for how the Virtual Registry could have helped: One woman I talked with has three children and received several forms in the mail and didn’t know why they were different. She traveled to the court to ask why they were different but could have received an answer by visiting the Virtual Registry instead. This woman knew about the CSC and had heard of the Virtual Registry but didn’t know what it was for. The Virtual Registry, like the Law Libraries, is far less well known than the CSCs.

Provide both the URL and Phone Number

Litigants and attorneys can connect to the Virtual Registry via URLs and QR codes listed on Mass.gov and various printed information. This can be done via a computer or a smartphone, but for those less technically sophisticated it’s also possible to connect to the Virtual Registry via a regular phone call. Most Virtual Registries, however, only provide this information on Mass.gov:

The Virtual Registry uses Zoom to operate by video conference. Customers can connect and conduct business directly with registry personnel through the internet by clicking on the following link:
[Virtual Registry Zoom Link](#)

A few PFCs also provide the phone number. For example, the Franklin PFC Virtual Registry page on Mass.gov has both the information above as well as the following:

You can also call in to the Virtual Registry by phone (without using video) using the following information:
Call in number: 1-646-828-7666
Meeting ID: 1606480378

Providing this additional information will help some people.

Call Volume to the Virtual Registry

Since inception (during COVID), there have been 550,000 calls to the Virtual Registry from across the state, with 50,000 just for the Worcester PFC office. The daily average is 632 across all the PFCs, with 58 for the Worcester PFC. The daily average depends on several factors, but primarily the number of people served by a PFC; the individual PFCs average from approximately 10 per day to over 100 per day.¹²

Recommendations

- The Virtual Registry needs to be advertised better. Each PFC office could have a large poster listing what the Virtual Registry does, its hours, and how to contact it.
- Creating a centralized state-wide Virtual Registry rather than having each PFC office run their own should increase efficiency and allow the Virtual Registry to handle more calls. I realize that there are some differences among PFC offices that may make it difficult to answer all questions, but my guess is that these differences are relatively minor and can be dealt with by directing the questions to a clerk in a particular office. My assumption is that each PFC would allocate staff to run a central Virtual Registry, but that questions could arrive from anywhere in the state. This (and the next recommendation) will require some additional training, as the clerks working at the Virtual Registry will need to have information on hand about every PFC office. (I realize that several PFC Registers argue against this idea, and I suggest an analysis of calls to the Virtual Registry to determine the percentage that require detailed local knowledge.)
- Include information on how to contact Virtual Registries by phone (without using video). (I've reported this issue and I think that changes are being made.)
- Send calls that people make to the individual PFC offices to the Virtual Registry. The individual offices are not set up as call centers and I've heard from several people that calls to a PFC office often go unanswered.
- Track and monitor the number of calls to the Virtual Registry from SRLs versus attorneys. If there are so many calls from attorneys that wait times for SRLs increase, give SRLs priority. Anecdotally, I've heard about some attorneys who use the Virtual Registry extensively.

¹² Thanks to Keith Nalbandian and Marisol Henrique for these numbers (in October, 2024).

- Open the Virtual Registry on one or two evenings a week and on Saturday mornings. Since some PFC staff already take calls from home, there would be no requirement to keep court buildings open. Some staff members might even prefer working one or two evenings a week and then being able to take time off during the week in compensation. (I realize this may be difficult given union contracts.)

Lawyer for the Day

The Lawyer for the Day (LFD) programs can be incredibly valuable. It is not mentioned on the Information Sheet because the program in Worcester for the PFC is being discontinued. Even when it was operating, it was not worth advertising it more widely because there was typically only one lawyer involved on one morning a week and thus only about four or five people could be helped. As one person told us, “When is the lawyer of the day? They’re here once a week for 3 hours. How many people are they really helping?” At other courthouses, and departments, there are often multiple lawyers. In these cases, not only should the program be advertised better, but when attorneys are in the courthouse this information should be conveyed to litigants not just by the clerks but via a poster put up past security or in the PFC office.

I realize that LFD programs are not run by the Trial Court. In the Greater Boston area they are run primarily by the Volunteer Lawyers Project, while in western Massachusetts they are run by Community Legal Aid or local bar associations. My suggestion is that this service is so valuable that the Trial Court should work with these and other outside organizations (e.g., law schools) to encourage sufficient staffing, and assign court personnel to do things like put up posters and manage the non-legal aspects of the program (e.g., checking people in).

The staffing problem is sometimes “simple demographics.” In Hampshire County, one PFC staff member wrote to me with the following information:

LFD is run by the Hampshire County Bar Association. We have sessions on the third Wednesday of the month in Northampton and the first Thursday in our Belchertown satellite session at the Eastern Hampshire District Court. These can be popular sessions but we have trouble recruiting volunteers from the bar association. The problem is simple demographics: most of our stalwart volunteers are aging out and there are few, if any, younger attorneys filling the slots. This is the same with our free conciliation sessions that are also run by the bar association. We have thought of reaching out to our local law school, Western New England University but there are not many graduating law students that are practicing family law.

There is a new webpage on Mass.gov about the Lawyer for the Day program, and the information it provides is excellent (<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/volunteer-lawyers-at-your-court>). In addition, there is a page to Search for a Lawyer for the Day program, which is an excellent feature (<https://www.mass.gov/resource/search-for-a-lawyer-for-the-day-program>). This is much needed and part of what I am recommending. However, the main problem with the program is a lack of lawyers. Looking through the list of PFCs on the search page, many have no programs at all, or programs with very limited hours.

Observations at the Brooke Courthouse¹³: There was an attorney from a firm specializing in probate matters working pro bono as a Lawyer for the Day in a small office next to the PFC counter. It was unclear to me how a person could request her help, but when I asked a clerk at the counter, she pointed out to me a signup sheet on a counter outside the attorney's door (which I had not noticed). This was not visible to people in line. According to Mass.gov, some Attorney for the Day programs provide legal advice and help people fill out forms, but that was not the way this attorney operated. She answered questions, explained terms and procedures, and went to get the forms people needed.

From my conversations with litigants in this office, it was clear that many would have liked to talk with this attorney, but there was no way for people waiting in line to know that there was an attorney available they could talk with at no cost.

The CSCs work extensively with the Lawyer for the Day (LFD) program, and a CSC employee wrote to me and explained the relationship like this:

It cannot be stressed enough how important the LFD program is to the administration of Access to Justice (A2J) for SRLs. While CSCs can give court users all of their options, they are barred from giving legal advice or trial strategy and therefore unable to give them their "best" option. Sometimes, the "best option" for the SRL is to not file anything at all but telling them this is legal advice. This is why obtaining advice is so crucial prior to filing. The LFD program is volunteer dependent and as such, not always available. However, when they are available, CSCs and LFD programs can work successfully in tandem. For instance, there is a lawyer who routinely volunteers as LFD in Norfolk and assists with forms once a week. He always has a VERY long line. As there is no physical CSC in Norfolk County, the Norfolk Registry has created a partnership with the CSCs where multiple times a month, the Southeast Circuit CSC joins the attorney. CSC staff sign in/greet SRLs, and determine whether the SRL would

¹³ This was in October, 2023.

like to wait for legal advice or would only like legal information and forms assistance. Sometimes when SRLs seek both advice and forms help, the LFD will give advice and CSCs will help with forms so that he does not get tied up with the forms portion. This improves efficiency and more court users are served with shorter wait times.

In locations where both a brick-and-mortar CSC and a LFD are available on-site, the CSC will often refer court users to the LFD for legal advice. SRLs typically receive 15 minutes of consultation with the LFD, which limits the LFD's ability to assist with more complex or lengthy forms. If the case type is one that the CSCs handle, the SRL may choose to return to the CSC for further assistance with forms after receiving legal advice. This highlights the importance of having both LFDs and CSCs in the same courthouses, as each provides distinct functions to support Access to Justice. Since LFD services are often irregular and vary by county, CSCs frequently direct individuals to legal aid or law school clinics for advice. In some locations, CSCs have established partnerships with organizations and law schools that offer legal clinics within the CSC space, providing legal assistance to those who qualify for legal aid.

Some court staff think of the CSC and LFD as similar; after all, they both assist SRLs. But as the quote above makes clear, getting legal advice is often critically important, and not available from CSCs, so there should be more of an effort to recruit lawyers for the LFD program. This is often difficult and is the reason the LFD program in Worcester was cancelled late last year.

At the Edward W. Brooke courthouse in Boston there are multiple Lawyer for the Day programs, and the Greeters there have a list of where and when each meets. This should be replicated as the Greeter program continues to be rolled out in other large courthouses.

Recommendation

- The Trial Court should focus more on the LFD programs and work harder with outside organizations to recruit more lawyers. It is very beneficial to SRLs when CSC staff coordinate with Lawyer for the Day programs, and the PFC and other court departments need to understand the distinction between the two organizations and work harder to recruit lawyers. The differences between the LFD and CSC need to be communicated clearly to clerks, and the advantages of combining the two services emphasized.
- Another advantage of recruiting enough lawyers is that it will then be possible to maintain a weekly schedule. Information about the Lawyer for the Day program

can then be included on Mass.gov and other sources. Currently, the following often appears on Mass.gov in a section on Lawyer for the Day: “Please call ahead to see if there is an Attorney that day.” One problem is that the scheduling of attorneys varies county by county; it is sometimes very effective (e.g., in Hampden county, where the Bar Association handles it), while in other counties it is very ineffective.

- In courthouses where there are Lawyer for the Day programs they should be advertised better. For example, I have seen multiple lawyers working in the hallways of the Brooke courthouse helping dozens of people (I think this was for the housing court), but it is typically not easy to find out when they will be at the courthouse and where they will be located. I recommend creating a poster that could be placed immediately past security on days when the Lawyer for the Day program is active. For example, the text on such a poster might include something like the following:

Probate and Family Court Lawyer for the Day

(Free legal assistance; no income requirements)

Time: Today, 9 – 12 (and every Tuesday morning)

Location: Hallway on the third floor

- Continue and expand the current CSC programs in which CSC staff partner with volunteer lawyers. If litigants want advice, they are directed to the lawyer, while if they want help with forms, CSC staff help them. After litigants speak to a lawyer, CSC staff take over to complete paperwork; this is an extremely efficient way to make use of volunteer lawyers' limited time.

Legal Aid and Community Organizations

There are multiple legal aid organizations around the state that provide free assistance to low income and older litigants (with varying other requirements). There are also literally dozens of other community organizations that provide help in many other areas, including housing, domestic violence, mental health, parenting support, and so on. Despite their advertising, a fair number of people I talked with did not know about the free legal help available. On the other hand, with respect to community organizations, in a sense there is too much information. I've seen sheets of paper listing a dozen or more community organizations in multiple courthouses, and I've seen many bulletin boards with literally 20 or 30 individual postings for various types of assistance. The number of organizations can be overwhelming. On bulletin boards, there is often such a jumble of paper in various formats and sizes, and often with font sizes so tiny that the text is almost illegible, that it is difficult to look through the information on these boards.

Card Sorting: Card sorting is a technique that can be used to learn how people organize information, and could help in learning how best to organize the multitude of community organizations.¹⁴ In a card sort with physical cards (it can also be done online), the name (and perhaps a brief description) of each community organization would be written on a small card. Participants in the study would then sort the cards into piles, putting similar cards in the same pile (each individual decides what is similar). Each pile could then become a category, given a name, and the organizations associated with it listed in it. For example, here is one potential categorization that might emerge:

- Legal Services, Referrals, and Information
- Parent/Caregiver Support
- Housing: Information, Counseling, and Support
- Domestic Violence
- Suicide & Emotional Crisis Support
- Mental Health & Substance Abuse
- Runaway and Homeless Youth Support
- Social Security Information

Recommendation

- For each courthouse, or perhaps county, prepare a list of both legal aid organizations and community organizations and then organize it into categories and design a handout or poster that is easy to read or scan. For example, “Where to get help in Worcester County: Legal Services, Referrals, and Information; Parent/Caregiver Support; and so on.

Public Libraries

There is now a Public Library Initiative in which the Trial Court works with public libraries to set up a room with a computer where people can participate in Zoom hearings and get information about their cases.

We help by offering access to virtual court services via the comfort and convenience of your local library. Our goal is to remove many of the barriers that people face in getting to our courts in person, or reaching us virtually, such as: transportation; childcare; stable internet access and/or computer access; and limited training or experience in using technology platforms such as Zoom.¹⁵

This is a great idea, but to be effective requires a lot of time and resources from both the Trial Court and any participating libraries. There must be a room in the library that

¹⁴ For example, see

<https://www.optimalworkshop.com/101guides/card-sorting-101/introduction-to-card-sorting>

¹⁵ <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/about-the-public-library-initiative>

can be set up for this purpose, another computer to buy and maintain, and most important, the training of library staff about court services and procedures, and the distribution of information to the libraries. This is great, but for libraries that are not part of the program, there are other low-cost options. For example, a wall mounting with brochures and information about the different departments of the Trial Court is one idea.

Legal Kiosks

The Center for Social Justice in the Western New England (WNE) Law School in Springfield developed and deployed free Legal Kiosk throughout Springfield (<https://www.legalkiosks.com/western-new-england>). From their “One-Pager” description:

Legal Kiosks are computer stations located across the greater Springfield area. They provide greater access to the justice system to individuals without access to wifi or technology. At a Legal Kiosk, community members can find free civil legal service providers nearby, access legal resources, print documents and, in some cases, attend online meetings and remote court hearings in privacy.

I recommend consulting with the Center for Social Justice at WNE to learn about their experiences with the kiosks, examine usage statistics, and learn about the level of support and maintenance required to lead to adoption and enough usage to justify the expense and resources required to set them up. Is it better to install legal kiosks in libraries, social service agencies, within courthouses, or other locations? And perhaps most important, are the majority of SRLs able to use these kiosks without assistance?

Recommendations

- All public libraries should have a poster or display with information about the Trial Court, which is much easier than becoming part of the Library Initiative. For example, a simple stand or wall mounting could have one information sheet for each court department. See Figure 8 for what a wall mounting might look like, although it would most likely be much smaller.
- A basic half-day training session could be developed for librarians that includes a handbook with basic information about each court department, contact information, information about legal aid and free services, and so on.
- Compare the WNE Legal Kiosk project with the Public Library Initiative. Is one more cost effective and useful to SRLs than the other? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

Providing Information about Assistance During Virtual Events

Information about getting assistance can be presented to litigants while they attend virtual proceedings, Virtual Registries, the Virtual Court Service Center, and other virtual services. The A2J report on *Creating a More Equitable System* makes two excellent recommendations in this area:

- “All staff operating virtual court services should be regularly trained on, and reminded of, their vital role in providing information about available resources, including LFD [Lawyer for the Day] programs and CSCs [Court Service Centers].”
- “A specially designed Zoom background for all court employees providing a simple statement such as ‘Ask me about free resources,’ repeated in several languages, would invite SRLs to ask for help” (Creating a More Equitable System: Lessons Learned During the COVID-19 Pandemic, 2022)

Help People Understand Court Proceedings and Legal Processes

Representing yourself in a civil case is incredibly complicated for a litigant untrained in the law, and there is a tremendous amount to learn.¹⁶ Very few SRLs understand the litigation process, including discovery, motion practice, and all the aspects of a trial. Consider all the areas in which a litigant needs to become knowledgeable: starting a case; service of process; responding to a lawsuit; requesting and preparing for a hearing; courtroom etiquette and procedure; introducing evidence; enforcing/asking to change a court order; mediation/alternative dispute resolution/diversion programs; appeals; and perhaps requesting an interpreter, an accommodation, or a filing fee waiver. In addition, most people have many practical questions, such as the following:

- How does my legal procedure work?
- How long does it typically take?
- How much does it cost in court fees?
- What forms do I need to fill out?
- What do I need to file next? (after the case has started)
- How many times will I need to return to court?
- What do I do in the courtroom?
- How can I get help?

Creating appropriate material for litigants is not easy. Consider the questions a court needs to answer about the material it provides: “Do existing materials provide enough

¹⁶ Attorneys have many information-related concerns as well, but they are very different from those of SRLs. See Karis and Huitema (2023) for a discussion of information that would help attorneys. “The main information-related concern we heard from attorneys was the challenges they face in understanding changes to court operating procedures and how legal proceedings differ from one courthouse (or even courtroom) to the next.”

information? Are the materials accurate? Do the materials use basic plain language principles” (Spulak et al., 2023, “Best Practice for Creating Legal Self-Help Materials”)?

Although there may be tremendous variability in all aspects of a legal procedure, such as the length of time and the number of court visits required, providing a typical range and listing some of the factors that influence these numbers can be very helpful.

As a side note, we came across many people who started out with a lawyer but were unable to continue due to the cost (which is not surprising, given that the average hourly rate for a family lawyer in Massachusetts is from \$250 to over \$300 per hour). If these people had understood the time and number of court visits required before they started the process, they might have realized from the beginning that they would not be able to afford a lawyer. One option for some of these people is limited assistance representation, which the CSCs often recommend.

Orient the court user before entering the courthouse

The title of this section is from a title in the Massachusetts Justice for all Strategic Action Plan (2017), which includes the following:

Many court users arrive at the courthouse unprepared and confused. To reduce their stress levels and also to reduce the burden on frontline court personnel, steps should be taken to orient users early on, for example by:

- Providing a "virtual courthouse tour." The tour would orient court users about where to go and what happens at each stage of the process, providing basic information about the Registry, the Probation Department, the CSC, on-site pro bono programs, and courtrooms. The tour should be available online and at CSCs. (Massachusetts Justice for all Strategic Action Plan, 2017)

In a discussion about a video from Multnomah County in Oregon (<https://youtu.be/GcYBMsn8Q7s>), PFC Chief Casey suggested a video tour beginning with security, then proceeding through registry, probation, and a courtroom. A second video might include an overview of normal court processes and where to get more information. That would be an excellent idea, and an improvement over the Multnomah video. In that video, a lot of the information was about how staff will treat you with respect and listen carefully to you. “Procedural justice for all,” “treat you with respect,” and “treat you with dignity and respect” was repeated over and over. It’s important to get this message across, but it does not have to be mentioned by everyone in the video. By repeating this information there was less time for practical information, such as the hours of operation, what can be done remotely, interpreters, information for people with

disabilities, and on and on. There is so much potentially useful information that could be included that the question becomes, what's most important to include?

Colorado Virtual Courthouse Tour

Colorado has a virtual courthouse tour that is worth studying. It contains a lot of useful information, but suffers from poor design and usability (in my opinion; a simple usability study could quickly determine if this is true).

“Funded by a 2020 LSC-TIG grant, this collaboration among the NuLawLab, Colorado Legal Services, and HELM Studio created an interactive, web-based, detailed simulation on how to navigate and interact within a courthouse, courtroom and with court personnel. Launched January 2022. Explore the tool at <https://coloradovirtualcourthouse.org/>.

It is interesting that I am unable to locate this tour on the Colorado judicial website (<https://www.coloradojudicial.gov/>).

Recommendation

- Create and distribute an introductory court video.¹⁷ It could be available on Mass.gov, on monitors in courthouses, and in the CSCs and Law Libraries (especially where people are waiting outside the PFC offices and in the CSCs). It could also be available via QR codes included on summons and notices sent out by the court.

Online Information

There is a tremendous amount of useful information on Mass.gov in a series of pages on Court Basics (<https://www.mass.gov/topics/court-basics>), but this information is not easy to find and the organization makes it difficult to find and master the basics. An online book, recommended to me by a law librarian, is much easier to use, and I consider it a goldmine of information, although it is probably most useful for well-educated native English speakers (*Family Law Advocacy for Low and Moderate Income Litigants*).¹⁸ There are over 700 pages of information in its 20 chapters.

In some cases, Masslegalhelp.org provides more information than Mass.gov, and often in an easier-to-read and clearer style. For example, consider the page on

¹⁷ Everything should be tested before a general release. It's relatively easy to test new videos. For example, before producing a video one can test the script, either by reading it to people or giving it to them to read, and then asking them questions to make sure they understood it (e.g., the vocabulary used, what each office did). One can also ask about the content and what else should be in the video. In addition to the script, one can test the storyboard showing the scenes that would be depicted in the video, either by rough drawings or photos. Later in the process, a more finished video could also be tested.

¹⁸ <https://www.masslegalservices.org/content/family-law-advocacy-low-moderate-income-litigants>

Masslegalhelp.org on *How to Answer a Complaint in Probate and Family Court*.¹⁹ There are 12 expandable sections on this page with over a thousand words of explanation and instructions.

Many of the existing verbal descriptions on Mass.gov and Masslegalhelp.org are very good, but what is typically lacking is a description of the “big picture.” How long do various court proceedings typically take, and what factors can result in delays? What are the sequence of events and what should an SRL do to prepare for each? How many times will I have to return to court? There should be more use of flow charts, process maps, and step-by-step guides.

In many cases that we heard about, people who had filled out some forms didn’t realize that they were missing other required documents. In general, it is rare to find clear step-by-step directions leading you through various complex processes such as guardianship. An example of a brochure with detailed step-by-step instructions is presented in the next section.

Provide Information in Multiple Formats on Multiple Platforms

In addition to expanding the textual information on Mass.gov, it would be very helpful to provide procedural information using flowcharts and process maps.²⁰ I have seen flow charts used for training in the Court Service Centers, but I have never seen these online or outside the CSCs. The PFC has also developed a number of flow charts, but they are not currently available to the public. Other state courts use flow charts more frequently, and the MA Trial Court should also develop flowcharts and then display them widely. For example, in the larger courthouses, where there is often unused wall space, procedural information could be included on posters attached to these walls. It could also be made available on Mass.gov and Masslegalhelp.org.

Brochures for each type of case would also be helpful. The Harvard A2J Lab, in partnership with the Boston Court Service Center and the Volunteer Lawyers Project of the Boston Bar Association, conducted a Guardianship Service of Process study in 2017 to evaluate “whether self-help materials can make a difference for court users navigating the complex web of court procedures to initiate a guardianship case.”²¹ I have not seen a report with the results, but I have a copy of the booklet they produced

¹⁹<https://www.masslegalhelp.org/children-families-divorce/probate-and-family-court/how-answer-complaint-probate-and-family-court>

²⁰ From Google Search Labs AI Overview: “While both flowcharts and process maps are visual representations of a process, a flowchart provides a simplified overview of the key steps in a workflow, while a process map offers a more detailed breakdown, including inputs, outputs, decision points, and potential bottlenecks, essentially providing a deeper analysis of the process with more granular information.”

²¹ <https://a2jlab.org/current-projects/smaller-studies/guardianship-service-of-process/>

(which is 5 ½ by 8 ½ inches). The booklet is 25 pages long and is focused on service of process. It is meant to be used after you have already filed a Petition for Guardianship and received a response from the court. Figure 4 below should give you a feel for what the pages are like. There are also simple flow charts. For example, there is one to “Let people know” (Do you know this person’s name?; Do you know where they live?) and another on “How to serve using a Sheriff” (So you know where this person lives, but they won’t sign consent forms?; Does this person live in Massachusetts?).

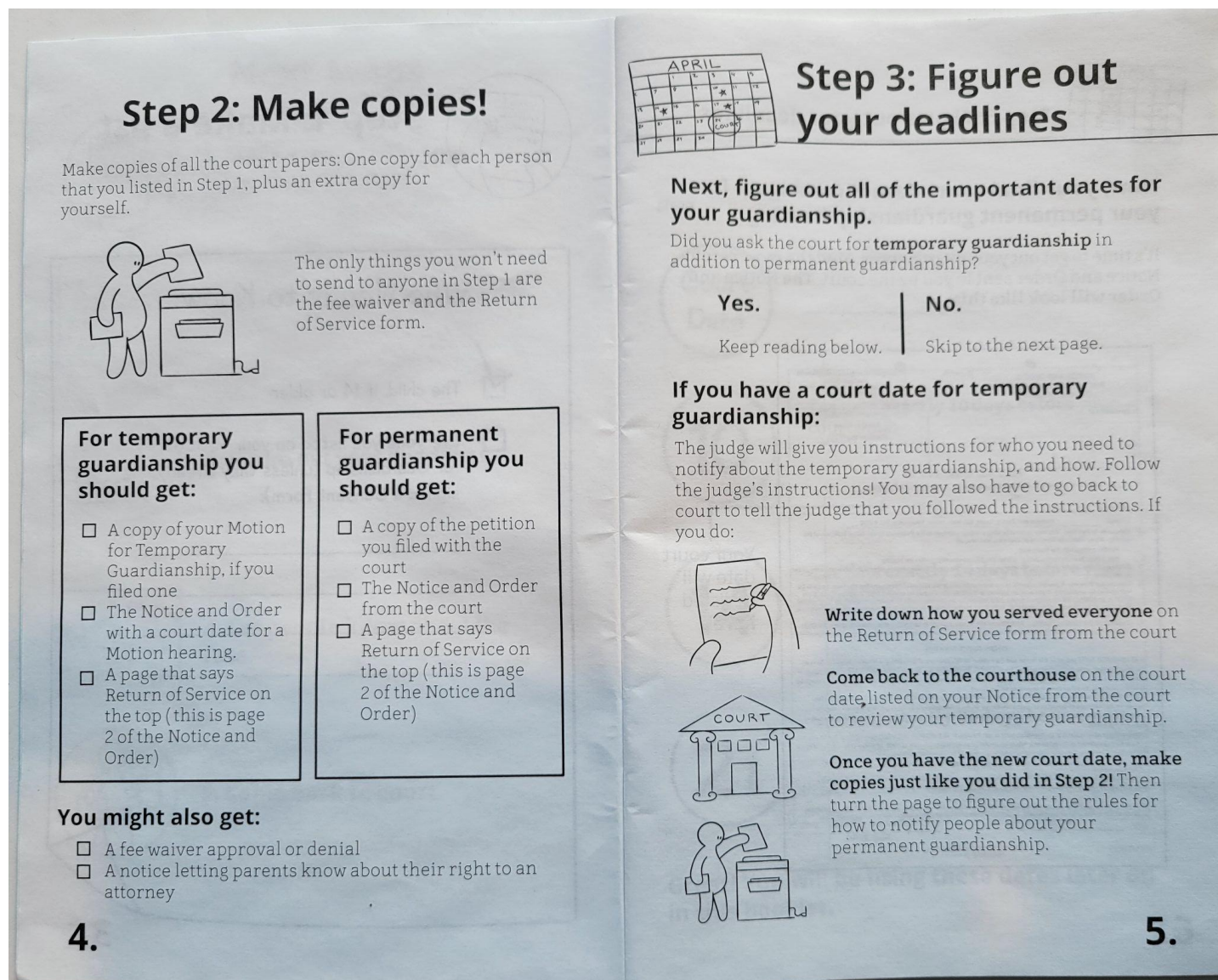


Figure 4. Sample pages from a brochure, The Next Steps in Your Guardianship Case

Note that this brochure is 25 pages long and covers only service of process! It is obviously designed to present the information as simply and clearly as possible, and I'm

sure the intended audience includes those with little formal education and perhaps also non-native English speakers (although booklets in Spanish were also produced). Ideally, there should be information developed and presented for people at differing levels of reading proficiency and ability to comprehend complex information. I can imagine another brochure about guardianship that covers the entire process in approximately the same length, but in a more textually dense and less “cartoony” style.

Unfortunately, the experiment on guardianship also provides an example of problems that arise from lack of uniformity. It would take additional work to put this information online, because the guardianship process varies from county to county throughout the state. Because there is an expectation that processes will eventually be unified, no one is willing to spend all the extra effort to customize instructions for each county.

An Example from the Medical Field

I had a minor eye surgery at Massachusetts Eye and Ear Hospital in Boston. Before the operation they sent me a 16-page booklet (5 ½ by 8 ½ inches). It had six sections, each with multiple subsections and many with checklists and information for special conditions (e.g., diabetes, respiratory issues, implanted electronic devices).

1. Pre-Surgical Preparation
2. Day of Surgery
3. Pain Management after Surgery
4. Directions & Parking
5. Services and Other Information
6. Important Numbers

I had many questions, and this booklet answered them all. This is an example of what the Trial Court could produce for common legal procedures.²²

Provide Comprehensive Online Information

Here is an example of comprehensive information and online tools to help people understand the difference between a caregiver, temporary agent, and a guardian (produced by Community Legal Aid and Masslegalhelp.org). There is detailed information on guardianship and caregiving on Masslegalhelp.org, a chart to understand the different types of caregivers, and then interactive guided interviews to help you select the appropriate type of arrangement. A guided interview then assists you in filling out the appropriate forms.

- Information, in multiple articles:
<https://www.masslegalhelp.org/children-families-divorce/guardians-other-caregivers>

²² This example comes from Karis (2020).

- Interactive chart and care-type finder: The chart is on the bottom of this page. There is also a link for *Visit the Care Type Finder*:
<https://www.masslegalhelp.org/children-families-divorce/guardians-other-caregivers/caregivers-or-guardianship-choosing-best>
- Guided interview to complete forms: Click on *Start Guardian Form* on the page in the bullet above for a guided interview to fill out the form for Petition for Guardianship of a Minor.

There should be similar comprehensive information and online assistance for other complex legal processes. Note, however, that guided interviews are not a substitute for redesigned and easy-to-use court forms (see the paragraph on Guided Interviews in the section on Court Forms).

What is the Purpose of this Court Date?

In many situations we heard described by litigants, they are frustrated because when they arrive at court they want to tell their story, and it is often hard for SRLs to grasp that there is a specific purpose for each court date. We also heard that judges often become frustrated having to deal with litigants who don't understand what should be happening and just want to tell their story and have everything resolved. This, we think, is the reason why we heard from one legal aid lawyer that the number one complaint in court is, "I didn't get to speak."

What Happens Next?

Litigants are often confused about what will happen next in their case and what they should do. A judge we interviewed told us that after a summons is issued and given to the plaintiff, he or she then needs to serve it on the defendant, but people often don't realize this. A lawyer we talked to while she was waiting to enter a courtroom told us a similar story (see Vignette 9). This lawyer represented a woman who was getting a divorce. The husband, who didn't have a lawyer, had already filed. After looking up the case the lawyer couldn't figure out why there was such a long delay and called the husband, who told her that he had no idea that he had to serve her. This lawyer ended up coaching the husband throughout the divorce because it saved her client money. Had the husband known more about the legal processes involved, he would have taken the required action and there would not have been a delay.

On the 2023 Access and Fairness Survey,²³ when people report knowing what to do next in their case in the PFC, 86.5% report having a satisfactory experience at court,

²³<https://www.mass.gov/doc/massachusetts-trial-court-report-on-the-2023-access-and-fairness-survey/download>

while for those who do not know what to do next, only 35.7% report having a satisfactory experience.

What Happens, and What Do I Do in the Courtroom?

When you go into a restaurant, or doctor's office, or store, you typically know what will happen, what to do, how to behave, and what the employees who work there can do for you, thanks to your long-term familiarity with these institutions. The situation is very different for people who walk into a courthouse for the first time.²⁴

In an interview conducted for our previous report, an attorney described to me the challenges that litigants face. He mentioned not only confusion about the system and unfamiliarity with the process, but even confusion about the basics:

Where to stand, how to present yourself, when my name is called do I raise my hand, do I stay here?

In civil sessions people get frustrated because they show up at court for what turns out to be a 2-minute case management conference to set the date for a future hearing. "What the hell did I come in here for?" they may say. Very frustrating for SRLs when they're expecting their day in court.

– Attorney in District Court

One PFC Register, after reading an earlier version of this report, wrote the following:

My takeaway is thinking about how we can communicate better what is going to happen during the course of a hearing. Oftentimes SRLs feel like a court hearing is an opportunity to re-litigate the entire case when in fact the hearing is intended for a more specific issue. In their mind, they see the value in bringing up older issues because it supports their perspective on the new issue. But they get frustrated that the court can't correct the old issue during the current hearing.

I recommend that videos be created, and these should include shots from inside courtrooms to help litigants visualize the situation they will be encountering. Of course, as some attorneys pointed out to us, there are a lot of diversity, equity, and inclusion concerns to be kept in mind when creating videos about how to behave in court. One attorney, after reviewing an earlier version of our 2023 report, wrote to us with a positive story about the use of videos in the courtroom.

²⁴ Parts of this section are from Karis & Huitema (2023).

Many years ago, a retired Probate and Family Court judge...routinely had a video playing at the start of each morning session that would present an overview of the court process in a family law matter featuring him, a probation officer, and an attorney. It educated the litigants as well as set the tone for his courtroom. Having such videos available on the Trial Court's website would be very helpful and informative.

Use Wall Space for Informative Posters

On the second floor of the Worcester courthouse there are four walls between courtrooms with nothing on them, which provides a great potential space for informational posters. There are four benches. The benches are about 8 feet long and the spaces in between the benches are about 2 feet so each wall is a total of about 38 feet long, not counting the dark wood areas on either side of this space (the dark wood next to the courtroom entrances. All of this wall space can be seen in Figure 5 below). Most building signs need to be ADA compliant, but these are typically signs that provide directions or information about interior spaces, identify rooms and spaces, and so on. I don't think informative posters need to be ADA compliant, but they should still be designed so they can be read by litigants with low vision and are appropriate for the space where they will be placed. For example, litigants should be able to read the posters in Worcester from seven or eight feet away, as people may be sitting on the benches in front of the posters. But even in Worcester, posters could be placed in between the benches, where people could stand closer to them.



Figure 5. Empty wall space in the Worcester Courthouse

Recommendations

- Include links from Mass.gov to Masslegalhelp.org when that site provides additional or complementary information.
- Develop and display flow charts for each type of legal procedure, as well as posters that display the sequence of steps.
- Produce and distribute single-page handouts as well as detailed brochures for each type of court case. Include flow charts and typical timelines, as well as a section with FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions).
- Develop videos on guardianship, divorce, child custody, and other processes and make them available on Mass.gov as well, perhaps, in courthouses.
- For each court case (e.g., divorce, guardianship) provide information on the purpose of each court event, what will happen, what is required, what happens next, and a typical timeline.

The Future: A Self-Service Portal

The ultimate way to help SRLs is via a self-service portal. This section is taken from the Karis and Huitema report in 2023, *The Massachusetts Trial Court in 2023 and Beyond: Improving Online Capabilities and Increasing Access to Justice* (Karis & Huitema, 2023).

A personal self-service portal would be amazing, and should be on any future plan for online enhancements. Given the resources required to create one, however, we do not recommend it as a near-term priority. A self-service portal would provide customized information for an individual given his or her particular legal situation and the current place in the process. As described in an Appleseed report:

Self-service portals present a dashboard or home screen to inform court users about their cases and provide them with options to complete or review court processes online. In order to provide a complete orientation for court users, effective self-service portals give users case status, updates, and next steps, as well as options for future actions. For example, a user should be able to check their upcoming court dates and see what action items he or she can complete prior to the next step in the case. To access this information, users can either create profiles which they can return to or log in using secure information provided by the court. (Turning on the Lights, 2019, p. 31)

A user should also be able to sign up for email or text notifications, should be told when forms need to be filled out or information provided, and the portal should provide not only links to relevant information, but also suggestions on what information to review and when to review it. Graphics should also be provided summarizing the complete process and include typical time ranges for each step in the process. Creating such a customized self-service portal is technically feasible, but will be exceedingly difficult and time consuming. In the future, if a decision is made to proceed, we suggest starting with one type of case, such as divorce or guardianship.

The Free Law Project (<https://free.law/>) is now working on a self-service litigant portal very similar to the one described above, although no information is currently publicly available. The Free Law Project describes itself as, “the leading 501(c)(3) nonprofit using technology, data, and advocacy to make the legal ecosystem more equitable and competitive.”

The use of large language models (LLMs) and other AI tools will eventually transform the law for both attorneys and SRLs, and self-service portals in the future will probably rely on one or more AI tools. A sample of current AI tools is presented in Appendix 5.

Satisfaction Ratings

During the fall semester of 2024, the Bentley graduate students asked the litigants they interviewed to rate their experience with the PFC on a five-point scale (Very Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Neutral, Satisfied, Very Satisfied). Although the sample size was very small,²⁵ the results were interesting and made sense. It would be worthwhile to replicate this study with a larger and more diverse sample.

Higher Satisfaction Ratings

Here are the results from the students' final presentation:

Those who reported higher satisfaction ratings with the court systems were influenced by positive interactions with employees and awareness and use of resources.

- Nine of 13 mentioned positive interactions with **court employees** during their interviews
 - Four interviewees alluded to their friendliness
 - Five interviewees spoke of their helpfulness through the process
- Ten of 13 mentioned positive interactions with **court resources** during their interviews.
 - The Court Service Center was the most commonly mentioned resource by SRLs
 - Three SRLs complimented the law library, with one stating that the law librarians are “wonderful” because they directed him to resources that helped him “understand [his] case” and “present [it] effectively”

Lower Satisfaction Ratings

Those who reported lower satisfaction with the court described difficulty navigating the court system at various touch points, including

- Confusion with court proceedings
 - Some SRLs expressed confusion with prolonged cases or misunderstood that hearings have assigned topics
- Preparing for court
 - Many SRLs were uncertain of how to make a strong case; some said that they were not aware of any resources, while others “wished” they were lawyers
- Difficulty completing paperwork

²⁵ The students interviewed 37 litigants, but not all rated their satisfaction. Thirteen reported high satisfaction.

- Many described filling out forms as “horrible” and “confusing,” with some noting that they have had to redo entire forms because they made a mistake
- A few reported using Google for help²⁶

The emphasis in this report on increasing litigants knowledge of existing resources should lead to improvements in litigants experiences and satisfaction. The emphasis on helping people to understand court proceedings and legal processes should lead to fewer low ratings of satisfaction.

The students also found that a perception of poor communication causes frustration and delays in proceedings. There were at least 15 mentions or observations of miscommunication causing frustration or delays, including

- Mentions of conflicting or incomplete information
 - “The judge told me I needed certain paperwork, but when I asked the PFC desk for it I was told the judge doesn’t want that.”
 - “I have a court date, but for what? Where to report to first?”
- An inability to connect to give or receive information
 - “I feel like I have to chase people around to get information.”²⁷

Improve Court Forms

Many court forms lack directions, use legal terminology that is unfamiliar to people outside the court system, and are confusingly organized. This makes them difficult to understand and fill out. Improving forms is one of the most impactful near-term improvements the Trial Court can do to help SRLs. This is a well understood problem, and there is a lot of information and guidelines on how to improve forms (e.g., there are multiple books and articles, and the NCSC provides guidelines, tutorials, and reports). Trial Court leaders and staff understand very well that forms are a problem, and there are now multiple ongoing efforts to improve forms, especially the most commonly used forms.

Provide Instructions

Improving forms is a difficult effort and will take a lot of time and resources given variations across departments and even within some departments, as well as the need for multiple reviews and approvals. Here is a relatively easy and short-term solution: provide detailed instructions for existing forms. Consider the best example of

²⁶ The students’ presentation can be found here: [Improving the Courthouse Experience for Self-Represented Litigants](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1EIQkecxqZAqjo-R_F7IVSwbvVnimbNTXKljUA2hjH8/edit?usp=s_haring), December 17, 2024 (URL: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1EIQkecxqZAqjo-R_F7IVSwbvVnimbNTXKljUA2hjH8/edit?usp=s_haring)

²⁷ Ibid.

instructions I can find on Mass.gov, the instructions for the form for both informal and formal probates whether or not there is a will. The form is Surviving Spouse, Children, Heirs at Law (MPC 162). It is three pages long (not particularly long for court forms), but intestacy succession is complex. There is a separate document with 13 pages of instructions; the first page is presented in Figure 6 below. This is wonderful, but unfortunately very rare. There are line-by-line instructions, and a table explaining intestate succession (e.g., If the decedent is survived by “Parents, and NO Spouse and NO Children” then the intestate estate passes to: “Surviving Parent(s) ONLY”; this is one of eight conditions). There is even a chart to help you figure out degrees of kinship.

Instructions for Form (MPC 162) - Surviving Spouse, Children, Heirs at Law

About This Form

Form Use. This form must be used to identify a Decedent’s surviving spouse, children and heirs at law. Heirs at law are persons entitled to receive the Decedent’s property under the [intestacy succession laws if there is no will](#). For dates of death on or after March 31, 2012, the Massachusetts Uniform Probate Code, G. L. c. 190B, § 2-101, et seq., should be consulted. For deaths prior to that date, see generally, Chapter 190.

Filing Fee. There is no fee to file this form.

Filing with the Court. This form must be filed with the petition to which it relates. **Failure to submit this form with the petition to which it relates will result in a delay in processing your case.**

Top of the Form

SURVIVING SPOUSE, CHILDREN, HEIRS AT LAW G. L. c. 190B, § 3-301		Docket No. B Commonwealth of Massachusetts The Trial Court Probate and Family Court	
☒ Original Form A ☐ Amended Form		Estate of: D Donna First Name Middle Name Decedent Last Name Middlesex Division	
Date of Death: April 1, 2016 C		Instructions	

A Original or Amended Form

Put an “X” next to “Original Form” if this is the first time you are filing this form; put an “X” next to “Amended Form” if you have previously filed this form with the court and are now changing the information.

Thereafter, a party may amend after an appearance has been filed only by leave of court or by written consent of all parties. See generally, Rules 3 and 7 of the Supplemental Rules of the Probate and Family Court and Rule 15 of the Mass.R.Civ.P.



*There are specific rules that govern when a pleading can be amended. In an informal proceeding, an Informal Petition (MPC 150), Surviving Spouse, Children, Heirs at Law (MPC 162) or Devises (MPC 163) form may **only** be amended by a party **prior to allowance**. In a formal proceeding, a Formal Petition (MPC 160), Surviving Spouse, Children, Heirs at Law (MPC 162) or Devises (MPC 163) form may be amended by a party as **a matter of***

B Docket Number

If known, fill in the docket number assigned by the court or leave blank if not yet assigned.

C Decedent’s Name and Date of Death

Enter the name of the deceased and date of death.

Figure 6. The first of 13 pages of instructions for Form MPC 162.

Instruction documents don’t have to be as elaborate as these instructions for Surviving Spouse, Children, Heirs at Law. For many forms, a subject matter expert and a

documentation expert should be able to create instructions for a form in a matter of hours, although it will take extra time to review and approve any new instruction document. The process of creating instruction documents will become easier over time, as many forms contain similar fields or elements. For example, the first question many people ask is whether I am the plaintiff or defendant. Once definitions for these and other common terms are written and explanations prepared for the meaning of common fields, they can be reused on many different forms.

Some PFC offices collect most of the forms needed for a single legal procedure and staple them into a single packet consisting of multiple forms. I picked up packets for Guardianship of a Minor and for a 1A divorce at a PFC office. The divorce packet included multiple forms: Joint Petition for Divorce, Report of Absolute Divorce or Annulment, Affidavit of Irretrievable Breakdown, Affidavit Disclosing Care or Custody Proceeding, Separation Agreement, and the Short Form Financial Statement. This is great, and very helpful, as is the cover sheet that lists all the documents that must be submitted. However, there were no instructions, which would be very helpful to SRLs. Even a single sheet of instructions with the most important information currently available on Masslegalhelp.org or Mass.gov could save many headaches.²⁸ The sheet should also include links and QR codes to the relevant pages on these two sites. I have found similar situations in multiple PFC offices.

Rare but Wonderful

Some packets of information contain not only information about how to file, but also forms filled in with instructions, which I am calling annotated forms. For example, I picked up one packet about filing a Complaint for Modification. It included not only an initial page of instructions, but then two versions of the form: one blank version that a litigant could fill in, and a second annotated one with instructions typed into most fields. For example, “(put your full name here)” and then for #2: “(put the date of the order you wish to change)” and then “(put what was ordered on that date that you wish to change) BE SPECIFIC! (for example: (The defendant was ordered to have parenting time every other weekend.)” There were additional instructions for #3, about the circumstances that have changed, and #4 about the changes you would like the judge to order. These types of instructions are very helpful, but unfortunately quite rare.

Annotating common forms will be very helpful, and the annotated forms could be available on Mass.gov as a PDF, or turned into a poster and attached to walls in courthouses. This was done with the short form of the Financial Statement, which can be seen in a photo in Appendix 2.

²⁸ That is, the information available on <https://www.masslegalhelp.org/children-families-divorce/divorce-separation/how-file-no-fault-1a-joint-petition-on-divorce> or <https://www.mass.gov/guides/get-a-no-fault-1a-divorce>

Until recently there were only one or two official court answer forms; one is Answer to Complaint for Divorce. Mass.gov provides lots of detail about what to do when there is no form:

If there is no form for your action, you can write it yourself. You'll need to have the complaint with you when you write the answer, because a lot of the information you need will be in the complaint. The answer must include: ... [and then lots of detail is provided in almost 500 words of text]²⁹

Mass.gov provides a lot of details on what you must include, but can I just type it up? Does it need to be in a format similar to the Answer to Complaint for Divorce? Providing templates will help tremendously. I was pleased to receive an announcement from the PFC that “New and revised Probate and Family Court parentage forms can be found here:...” and are effective for use on January 1, 2025. The new forms include several new answer forms, including Answer to Complaint to Establish Parentage and Answer to Complaint to Establish De Facto Parentage. Fewer templates will be needed as more answers to complaints are made available. This is progress.

Masslegalhelp.org currently provides detailed instructions on how to fill out some forms – instructions that are not available on Mass.gov. For example, Masslegalhelp.org provides detailed instructions on how to fill out the Child Support Guidelines Worksheet, line by line and box by box. There are eight numbered sections on the form, and eight corresponding sections on the web page; the top of the page is presented in Figure 7 below. Each section expands and there are over 4,000 words of instruction on this single page.

²⁹ <https://www.mass.gov/how-to/respond-to-a-case-filed-against-you-in-probate-and-family-court>

How to fill out the Child Support Guidelines Worksheet

Listen to this Page



By Massachusetts Law Reform Institute
Reviewed January 2024

Judges use the Child Support Guidelines Worksheet to figure out how much child support to order.

To fill out the Worksheet you need to have income and expense information for both parents. Use the other parent's Financial Statement if you have it. If you do not know the other parent's information, put in what you think it is.

On the Worksheet, the parent who receives the child support is called the "Recipient," and the parent who pays the child support is called the "Payor."

You can get the Child Support Guidelines Worksheet from [the Court website](#). Save the form to your computer first and then open.

If you use a computer to fill out the Worksheet, the Worksheet does all the math for you. You can use our instructions to:

- Fill out the Worksheet by hand, and
- Understand how the Worksheet applies the Child Support Guidelines to your situation.

Follow these steps

[Expand All](#)

1 Section 1: Age, Number, and Parenting of Children



2 Section 2: Income



3 Section 3: Gross Support Amounts



Figure 7. The first part of a Masslegalhelp.org instructional webpage.³⁰ Clicking on the "+" expands the section.

Legal Terminology³¹

The unfamiliarity of legal terminology to most SRLs is best dealt with by including plain-language explanations whenever such terminology can't be avoided, but it makes sense to also have a glossary of legal terms on Mass.gov. The Law Library has already created such a glossary;³² it is excellent, but we see two issues with it: First, it does not appear to be linked to from other pages about legal procedures, making it unlikely that SRLs will know about it. Second, it is comprehensive, and thus very long, with the result

³⁰<https://www.masslegalhelp.org/children-families-divorce/child-support/how-fill-out-child-support-guidelines-worksheet>

³¹ This section is from Karis & Huitema (2023).

³² <https://www.mass.gov/handbook/glossary-of-court-terms>

that most of the terms are not ones that SRLs are likely to encounter. We suggest adding a list of the two dozen or so most common unfamiliar terms at the top of the glossary. (Update: A reviewer of this report pointed out that there is now an ongoing project to update the court glossary and to create a shorter and more usable version.)

The National Center for State Courts developed an Interactive Plain Language Glossary that contains 68 examples of “Use This, Not That!”³³ The first three items give you an idea of how valuable this can be for most SRLs:

<u>Use This</u>	<u>Not That</u>
Reduce	Abate, Abatement
Amount claimed	Ad Damnum
Person who signed	Affiant

For more information about plain language, and why I advise against the use of readability formulas to calculate reading grade level, see my 2021 paper, [A Guide for Field Testing Court Forms & Self-Help Material](#).

Guided Interviews

The Legal Innovation & Technology Lab (LIT Lab) at Suffolk University Law School has created a number of guided interviews using the Docassemble software tool (see <https://courtformsonline.org/> and <https://suffolklitlab.org/>); these are also sometimes called Guide and File forms. Rather than being confronted by an intimidating court form, an SRL goes through a multi-step process of answering questions while getting information along the way. At the end of the process, the system assembles the information and fills out the appropriate court form, which the SRL can then print out and submit to the court. In some cases, the form is automatically eFiled. The Trial Court is currently working with the LIT Lab, and several new Guide and File forms should be available later this year.

Although this is a technological achievement, and will assist many people, it is only one part of self-help tools and methods that need to include information and assistance in multiple ways. Guided interviews are most useful in only a small number of complex and frequently used forms, or for forms that need to be filed in an emergency, such as 209A restraining orders.³⁴ They are not a substitute for improved court forms and new improved instruction documents that should accompany forms. Not everyone will want or need to use a guided interview to complete court forms, and for some people it will be

³³<https://www.ncsc.org/consulting-and-research/areas-of-expertise/access-to-justice/plain-language/glossary>

³⁴ 209A Guided Interviews are available from the LIT Lab. Masslegalhelp.org links to this guided interview, but it is not available at Mass.gov.

quicker and more efficient to fill out court forms directly rather than go through a guided interview (see Karis & Huitema, 2023, for more discussion about guided interviews).

General Information Litigants Should Know Before Filling Out Forms

The Hampshire County PFC in Northampton developed a number of packets that provide helpful information about several types of procedures. These are available on a wall in the waiting room outside of the office as shown in Figure 8. For example, the pamphlet on Grounds for Divorce starts out by explaining what this phrase means and then has a page on 1A and 1B divorces. There are also two pamphlets with a Sample Separation Agreement for Families, one for families with children and one for families without children, and there is a pamphlet on How to Fill Out Your Financial Statement. Some of these pamphlets have information that is available on Mass.gov, while others have content that was created just for the Hampshire Probate & Family Court and isn't available elsewhere. There are other pamphlets on Getting Help from a Lawyer, Alternative Dispute Resolution, Court Procedures, Suggested Reading for Parents & Children, Laws about Parenting, and Child Support.

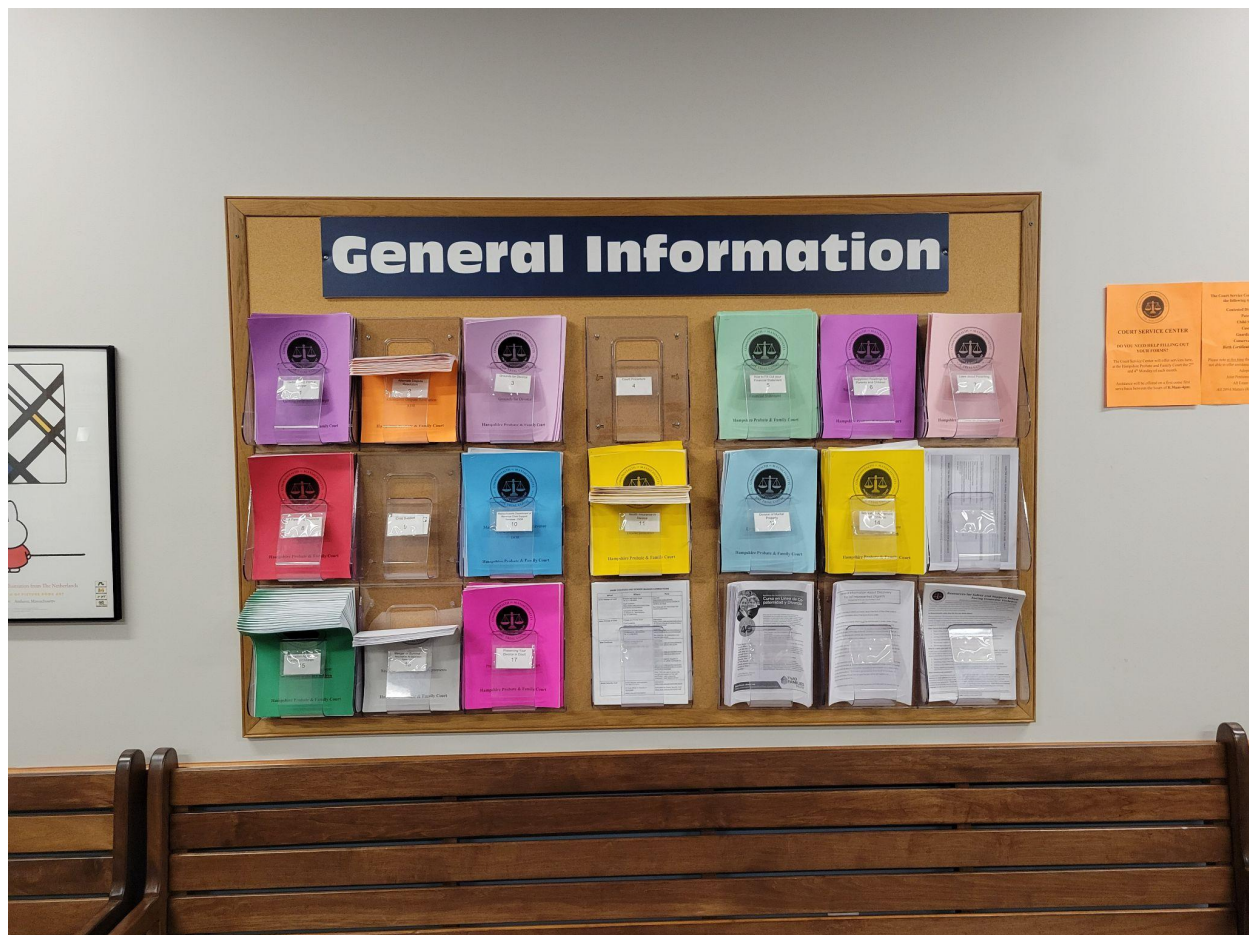


Figure 8. Pamphlets with general information about common family procedures at the Hampshire PFC in Northampton.

Video Help

Providing videos on how to fill out court forms is another way to assist litigants. The short-form financial statement is one of the most-used forms in Massachusetts because it is required in many types of cases in multiple court departments, including child support, alimony, the division of property, and other legal proceedings that have a financial component. In a project completed in 2024, the Court Service Center created a detailed video on how to fill out the short-form financial statement. They did an excellent job, which you can see here:

<https://www.mass.gov/how-to-series-short-form-financial-statement>

The Effects of Anxiety

Anxiety can impair performance on a variety of different types of tasks. Here's an example of the negative impacts of anxiety that I observed. In November, 2024, a man in his 40s was filling out the financial statement at the corner of "our" table (see Figure 1 above). He asked me about whether pay was daily or weekly, then he noticed something on the form that indicated it was weekly. He was getting a divorce and was clearly nervous – which of course makes it more difficult to understand and fill out forms. I talked with him later and he said that he just learned that his wife couldn't come. "I just lost a day's pay," he said. Also, he had started filling out the shorter and simpler financial statement but then realized he had to start over because he needed the longer form for those with higher income. He was anxious, he was rushing, and he was making multiple mistakes.

Forms in Spanish and Other Languages

Although many court forms have now been translated into other languages to help non-English speakers understand them, there appear to be significant gaps in coverage. Some non-English speakers may also have problems in finding forms in their language because on Mass.gov the page that mentions a form does not always list all its translations. On many pages where there are links to a court form, the link takes you to the English version and there is no information that a translation exists. In addition to Spanish, some court forms are now available in Arabic, Cape Verdean Creole, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Khmer, Portuguese, Russian, and Vietnamese.

I talked with a woman from CPCS (Committee for Public Counsel Services) who was sitting at a table and filling out a form for a Spanish-speaking woman. I asked her for suggestions and she immediately replied, "Paperwork is not in Spanish!" In California there are multiple versions of many forms, each with two languages. On some, English is on one side of a page, and another language on the other side (i.e., both languages are on the same side of the paper). The other languages include Spanish, Chinese,

Vietnamese, and Korean. Most forms in other languages in California, however, include only the other language. I realize the effort involved in translating forms and their instructions (and the extra work for clerks receiving these forms), but for the most commonly used forms it is probably worth the effort. The Short Form Financial Statement was one of the first forms translated (into both Spanish and Portuguese). I have heard from CSC staff that this is “super super helpful.” This form has the English immediately after or below the Spanish or Portuguese, which is an excellent way to do this (e.g., “Nombre y apellido (Your Name) _ “).

Recommendations

- Continue translating the most commonly used forms.
- Conduct an audit to make sure that links to translations appear on every Mass.gov page where the form is mentioned.

Short-form Financial Statement

There are now good instructions in multiple places and formats for filling out the short-form financial statement. However, to my knowledge, there is no easy way to update and resubmit this form, and this would help many people. In most family proceedings, a new financial statement must be submitted before every court appearance (I've even seen a paper attached to a clerk's desk in a courtroom with this information: “Must complete updated financial statement prior to the hearing”). This, of course, makes sense, as an individual's financial situation can change at any point. Some PFCs allow parties to re-sign and date a financial statement within 60 days of the originally filing date given that nothing has changed. After 60 days a new financial statement is required, and rather than filling out a new form from scratch, there should be some way to quickly update the previous form.

Recommendations

- Where this is not already the case, allow parties to re-sign and date a financial statement within 60 days of the original filing given that nothing has changed.
- Develop procedures to make it easier to update and submit a financial statements after circumstances have changed.

Affidavits

In many places, both online and on court forms, there is an instruction to “fill out an affidavit stating...”. Even if you know what an affidavit is, how do you write one? There is a blank affidavit form on Mass.gov, but it is difficult to find. Links to it should be included when affidavits are mentioned. In addition, on instructions that mention an affidavit, some additional text should be added, such as, “You can obtain a blank affidavit from the court or on Mass.gov.”

Recommendations³⁵

- Create more instruction documents to accompany forms.
- When instruction documents exist, have clerks hand them out along with the form.
- In some cases, detailed instructions exist on Masslegalhelp.org but not on Mass.gov. When this is the case, link from Mass.gov to Masslegalhelp.org
- Provide templates when there are no forms, such how to write an answer to a complaint
- When “affidavits” are mentioned, explain what one is and how to write one. Also mention that blank affidavit forms are available.

Conduct Expert Reviews and Studies on Form Usability

During 2021 and 2022, a group of UX experts and I evaluated a number of court forms. At that time, I also wrote a document with details on how to perform a usability evaluation of court forms ([A Guide for Field Testing Court Forms & Self-Help Material](#)). The expert reviews and usability evaluations we performed can be found here: [Trial Court Reports on Improving User Experience](#).

A Guide for Field Testing Court Forms & Self-Help Material

In the Guide for Field Testing, I describe a number of usability techniques that can be used to test forms and documents, whether on paper or online, but focus on the most basic technique. From that guide:

I propose that researchers conduct evaluation sessions either in person sitting next to the participant or observing them over ZoomThe essence of the procedure is simple: create a scenario that requires filling in a form, give a study participant the form, and watch as they attempt to fill it out. Have the participant think out loud while filling in the form. In addition, probe about confusions while the form is filled out, and then interview the participant afterwards. I propose following an iterative process: revise an existing form, test it, identify problems, revise the form, test again, and repeat this process until no new major problems occur.³⁶

Questions and Comments from Litigants

- One SRL called court forms “horrible.” She told us that the directions from the clerk were rushed and she couldn’t remember everything. After making a mistake

³⁵ For more information, see Spulak et al. (2023), Best Practice for Creating Legal Self-Help Materials: A Toolkit for Courts and Legal Service Agencies. National Center for State Courts.

³⁶<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QgOIJ3iF4mPLaDeRSF-e3crQ7-gOjRtCBjyG9S0XqvM/edit?usp=sharing>

and filling out something incorrectly, or if she had a question, she had to re-enter the line and wait again.

- One man asked, “What do you put down for the address of a partner or ex-partner when they have a restraining order out on you and you don’t know where they are living?”
- Another man made a common request: easier forms and more help. There is lots of terminology that is not explained, and “Plaintiff” is one example he mentioned. “What does that mean?” I’ve talked with several people in the past who were confused about whether they were a plaintiff or defendant.

Comments from Court Staff and Lawyers

- One manager told us that the court should, “Dumb down the language”; i.e., don’t use technical language or “legalese.”
- A legal aid lawyer told me that forms should be written in a way people can answer. The terminology is difficult, he said.

Recommendations

- Perform usability evaluations on both existing and redesigned forms.
- Set up a program involving expert reviews and usability evaluations. This is an ideal project to undertake in collaboration with local colleges and universities that have courses on usability, human factors, or user-interface design.

Courthouses: Improve Wayfinding and the Physical Environment

In this section, the focus is on wayfinding and the physical environment in courthouses, especially the larger multi-court complexes. There is currently a digital signage project that may help, but I have not seen the early implementations. Digital signage can be used in many ways, including wayfinding, but the simplest solution is the most effective – good old-fashioned physical signage.

Improve Wayfinding

Wayfinding involves orienting yourself when you arrive at a location and then navigating to your destination.

“In a courthouse building, effective wayfinding techniques help court users by quickly informing them of their surroundings in a new and often intimidating or stressful space, and facilitating their ability to locate and access court services and functions” (Wayfinding in California Courts, 2017).

The focus here is on directories and signage, although the report on Wayfinding in California Courts makes the point that the actual architectural design of a building can facilitate or detract from wayfinding (e.g., with respect to sightlines). In a building such as a large courthouse, there should be a map or directory near the entrance where you can orient yourself and plan how to navigate to your destination. As you proceed to your destination, there should be signs directing you, and when you reach your destination it should be labeled so you know you have arrived.

In many large courthouses in Massachusetts, all of the elements of wayfinding are missing or have problems. Consider the Edward E. Brooke courthouse in Boston. After passing through security there are no maps or directories immediately visible unless you look to the right and there are no people obstructing your view (see Figure 9 below). Straight ahead are stairs, where people who are not taking the elevator are focusing their attention. There is another directory on a wall, but it's even more difficult to notice and contains several mistakes. There is a digital display with maps for each floor by the elevators, but it is invisible unless you go to the elevators rather than walking up the stairs (and there are some serious usability problems with these displays; you can see the back of this display in Figure 9). There are some signs with directions as you exit elevators on higher floors, but they contain mistakes and the arrows sometimes point in the wrong direction. Worst of all, some destinations, such as the main office of the Probate and Family Court, are not labeled appropriately. Figure 10, for example, shows the identifying signs next to the door of the PFC office in the Brooke courthouse. The sign you can read, in this photo and in the courthouse, reads
REGISTRY OF PROBATE DOCKET LIBRARY

If you want to get divorced or change a custody arrangement, you don't need to go to a "Docket Library." The sign you can't read easily in this photo – or in the courthouse, reads

WELCOME TO THE SUFFOLK REGISTRY OF THE PROBATE AND FAMILY COURT.³⁷

³⁷ I'm not sure if this is still the situation, but this was how this door was labelled for years.



Figure 9. The lobby of the Edward W. Brooke courthouse in Boston, looking to the right toward the elevators. Many people look and walk straight ahead, toward the stairs.

Two stories illustrate part of the problem, identifying your destination. While walking around the third floor of the Brooke courthouse, I observed a woman walking around in the opposite direction. When we had both made more than one loop I asked her if she needed directions. She said she was looking for the PFC office – which she had already passed twice. I walked her to the office. A court employee at the Brooke courthouse told me about another similar situation. A man had left his wallet in her office; it contained a recent paycheck and IDs. The clerk called him and told him that they had it and he could come in and pick it up. The man returned, walked around for 30 minutes, could not find the office, and then left. The clerk eventually mailed him the wallet. Photos of two PFC offices are below in Figures 10 and 11. The signage for the office at the Brooke Courthouse in Boston is terrible, while that at the Franklin County Justice Center in Greenfield is excellent.



Figure 10. The entrance to the PFC Office in Boston at the Brooke Courthouse

The departments at the Franklin County Justice Center in Greenfield came together and planned how to improve their signage to facilitate wayfinding. They did an excellent job, and you can see photos in a brief report I wrote in 2022 ([The Franklin County Justice Center: Signage & Wayfinding](#)). Figure 13, below, is from that report and shows the directories for each floor that you see immediately after passing through security. The situation is similar at the Roderick L. Ireland courthouse in Springfield, which has excellent signage throughout the building; wherever you are in the building, look up or in any direction and you see color-coded directories or signs identifying a location. (You can see a photo in Appendix 2 of the directory immediately past security.) In contrast, the Lowell Justice Center is in a beautiful new building but there are multiple problems with signage and wayfinding (see my report from 2021, [The Lowell Justice Center: Wayfinding and Physical Spaces](#)). After you pass security in that courthouse, you see no maps or directories, and nothing about where offices or courtrooms are located. What you see are only digital displays (one about COVID-19, the other about the eReminder system) and some paper posters.

There is one outstanding feature of the Lowell Justice Center that it is worth pointing out, however: The stairwells are on the outside of the building and are filled with natural light from large windows; from the stairwells, there are stunning views of Lowell and the surrounding areas. These are the most beautiful stairwells I have ever seen, and unlike many stairwells, which feel oppressive, claustrophobic, and often even dangerous, these are an architectural marvel that lift your spirit.³⁸ In contrast, you can't use the stairs in the Ireland courthouse in Springfield to go from floor to floor; you are forced to take the elevator. The stairs can only be used to exit the building.



Figure 11. The entrance to the PFC Office in Greenfield at the Franklin County Justice Center.

Staff across departments at the Franklin County Justice Center improved wayfinding on their own at fairly limited (I assume) cost. The other extreme is what happened in Fulton County, GA, where the court system hired a design firm (Selbert Perkins) and spent many millions of dollars on the project.

³⁸ My Bentley graduate students worked on wayfinding in 2021. Their report and presentation are here: [Improving the Wayfinding User Experience in Massachusetts Courts](#) and here, [Improving the Wayfinding User Experience: Presentation](#)

We designed and installed a new, simple, easy and highly intuitive naming and color-coding system to assist visitors in finding their way without incurring undue stress. There are interactive digital touch screen kiosks and monitors throughout the facility, making it easy to find where you need to be and how to get there. Contextual signage was utilized, eliminating unnecessary information from all signs, making comprehension of the information much faster and easier. The County even extended the new wayfinding system to their juror notifications, integrating the new naming and color-coding information into the summons.³⁹

From the photos on the website of the design firm, it appears they did an amazing job. I encourage the reader to look at the photos on this webpage to get an idea of what is possible: <https://selbertperkins.com/wayfinding-a-courthouse-fulton-county-ga/>

Identify Courthouses Better

Although all courthouses have some type of identification on them, it is often not near the entrance and often not as salient as it should be. It is not infrequent for people to arrive at the wrong courthouse. In early research at the Brooke courthouse, we talked with people as they entered the building and noted that several people were at the wrong courthouse. This situation is probably worse at the Brooke than most other courthouses because there are multiple nearby courts, including the Suffolk County Superior Court, the John Adams Courthouse, The Boston Immigration Court, and others.

The Hampshire County PFC is an example of a clearly marked building, as can be seen in Figure 12 below.

³⁹ <https://selbertperkins.com/wayfinding-a-courthouse-fulton-county-ga/>



Figure 12. The entrance to the Hampshire County PFC courthouse



Figure 13. The color-coded directories immediately past security at the Franklin County Justice Center in Greenfield.

Make it Clear When Courtrooms are Closed

It's often not clear when you can enter a courtroom. In the PFC, some sessions, or a part of a session, are sometimes closed to the public and other litigants when sensitive cases are being heard, typically when children are involved. When arriving at a courtroom it is often not clear if the session is closed, open, or whether the doors are locked because the court is not in session. Sometimes there are groups of people milling about immediately outside a courtroom and it is unclear whether they have been told to leave the courtroom for a closed session or whether they are early for their session and just talking.

Greeters

There are now "greeters" at both the Brooke courthouse in Boston and the Worcester courthouse. The initial pilot program at the Brooke Courthouse was expanded to include Worcester. In Worcester there is an information desk immediately past security staffed by a bilingual person (usually). The greeters answer questions, but their primary duty is to give directions. The greeters in Worcester now have the daily list for PFC, Housing, District, and Superior courts, and can look up a person's name and direct them to a courtroom if that is where they need to go.

Court officers at security have traditionally given directions, but during busy times there is often not enough time to do this. Other states have information booths and people similar to greeters, and it is something that I have recommended for several years. From talking with greeters and questioning litigants about their experience with greeters, my opinion is that the Greeter initiative has had a significant positive impact on overall user experience. Not only do the Greeters direct people, but they tell people about the Court Service Center and Law Library, and also have information about social service agencies. Going to court is stressful, and the benefits of a positive interaction with a friendly greeter should not be underestimated.

Although the Greeters help people primarily by giving directions and looking up names in the daily lists, they do get a variety of questions. I was visiting with the Greeters when I heard what I assume is one of the most interesting and unusual questions. A mother and her daughter approached the Greeter station and asked where they should go to dissolve a nonprofit. It took a little investigation, but we sent them to the Superior Court. I followed them and the clerk there confirmed that they were in the correct place.

Recommendations

- There should be a prominent sign near the entrance of all courthouses identifying it by name.

- After entering a multi-court complex there should be a directory immediately past security that again lists the name of the courthouse and also lists the court departments in it
- The Trial Court should study what was done at the Franklin County Justice Center in Greenfield and the Ireland Courthouse in Springfield and try to replicate that at other courthouses. Someone (perhaps in facilities) should become familiar with the literature on wayfinding. For example, see *Wayfinding in California Courts* (2017), which includes an extensive Site Visit Observation Checklist.
- When a court session is closed, have the court officer put a sign on a stand immediately outside the doors to the courtroom: “Session Closed. Please do not enter.” (See Vignette #11 below.) It may also be worthwhile to have some type of sign or display indicating that the court is in session or that it is not (and the doors are locked).
- Add indoor maps of each courthouse on Mass.gov and also show information about the existence and availability of Zoom rooms.
- Continue the Greeter program and roll it out at all the large courthouses in the state.

Improve the Physical Environment

People often spend many hours within courthouses, so it is important to examine the physical environment.

Cafe and Vending Machines

In large courthouses there should be a cafe, or at least vending machines. Most large courthouses do have small cafes or places to buy food, but they are not always well marked. For example, in Worcester the cafe is in the basement, and the only signs about it are by the elevators (and many people use the stairs). Very few people we talked with were aware that there was a cafe in the basement. In Worcester, the cafe was closed for many months during 2024, but there was no indication anywhere that this was the case (I don’t know its current status).

Several people we talked with mentioned that they would be there for hours and it would be nice to have some vending machines, and people also said they would have liked to know that there was a cafe in the basement. In one case, I was talking with a man in Worcester when his wife walked by, curious about what we were talking about. When I explained that I was collecting suggestions for how to make it easier to deal with the Trial Court, she yelled out, “A cafe, vending machines.”

Recommendations

- When there is a cafe in a courthouse, it should be included in directories and signage. Visitors to courthouses should know whether or not there is a cafe or

vending machines. When the cafe in Worcester opens, include better signage about it.

- Consider installing vending machines in larger courthouses when there is no cafe or it is closed for extended periods.

Standing Tables

Litigants often need to fill out forms while in courthouses, but there are few places to do this comfortably. It is common to see people filling out forms on their laps. Whenever I've seen a table set up there are people sitting at it, typically with their things spread out and often filling out forms.

Bar-type standing tables, often called high-top tables, take up little room and offer a convenient place for a single person to stand and write. They can be bolted to the floor and are easy to clean. In a presentation my graduate students gave to the court in 2019, they recommended "Providing tables/desks, pens, papers, seats by placing them strategically in the courthouse. It would enable the litigants to complete their task more efficiently and reduce their cognitive load that could be caused due to the lack of these resources"

(<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1yHvyP3vkWwD8wpUw4GCNMyRW7Q2EF-1Fh72l2qToHdl/edit?usp=sharing>).

Some PFC offices do have many tables where litigants can fill out forms or just sit and wait to be called. A good example can be seen in the photo in Appendix 2 from the Springfield PFC office. The experience of waiting is much improved in this office compared to several other PFC offices.

Recommendation

- Add small standing tables to courthouses where there are not currently tables and where there is room in lobbies and outside offices and courtrooms. For example, outside the Worcester PFC office on both the right and left side there is room for two or three standing tables.

Places to Sit

After telling me that they would be in the courthouse for hours, I would often ask people what improvements the court could make. People often mentioned wanting more comfortable places to sit. In Worcester, one of the women commented that she would rather not sit on a fabric chair given all the people in the court who would be sitting on it, and another woman noted that the stone benches are uncomfortable but are probably easy to clean. The benches are placed a little away from the wall, so you can't really sit comfortably and lean back against the wall. The women suggested that the benches be flush with the wall so you could lean on it, or should have backs.

Some PFCs do have comfortable chairs, and most Law Libraries have comfortable places to sit and lots of underutilized space. The Law Library in the Ireland Courthouse in Springfield, for example, has both comfortable seating at tables and about a dozen carrels next to windows; these are quiet, peaceful places to sit and fill out forms, read about the law (there are also free computers to use), or plan for one's next court appearance.

Recommendation

- For new courthouses or renovations, make sure that there are comfortable places to sit. If they have to be hard surfaces to make cleaning easy, at least make sure they have backs.
- If there is a way to alert litigants when they will be called, or when there is a specified time for a meeting or court event, then litigants can be told about the option of waiting in the Law Library.

Free Computers for Litigants

Many courthouses have computers people can use to look up their cases, do research, and sometimes even to participate in remote hearings. Where computers do exist, they are typically not well advertised, and are sometimes monopolized by people hired by private companies to do criminal background checks (because some court computers provide expanded access to Masscourts compared to that available outside the courthouse).

Court Service Centers typically have computers litigants can use, but in some CSCs they discourage people from coming to the centers just to use the computers, as they can be a distraction when the centers are busy. In addition, the process of checking in and possibly waiting probably discourages people from coming to the CSCs just to use the computers. Perhaps more importantly, most people don't realize that CSCs provide "Computers with access to online resources that are available on a first-come, first served basis." This comes from Mass.gov (<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/learn-about-court-service-centers>), but access to computers is not mentioned in the CSC brochure, and I'm sure that more litigants have seen the brochure than the online information.

At a District Court room on the first floor in the Worcester courthouse there are computers anyone can use, but I'm sure basically no one entering the courthouse realizes that these computers exist and can be used by anyone. When I looked into this room and talked with those using the computers, I discovered that most were doing background checks. In some local District Courts (i.e., those not in large multi-court complexes) there is a public computer within the main office, and here also I observed

people with a long list of names doing background checks for private companies, often spending hours there. In one case, a clerk told me that the woman doing the background checks would stop and let a litigant use the computer when someone was waiting, and would even help the person complete their search (which benefited both of them, because the sooner the litigant finished, the sooner she could get back to work).

I spent time in one PFC office that had two public computers that were located in a very convenient place in the middle of the office. This is great, but is also a demonstration of how very simple user-interface changes can improve user experience. There were no instructions posted, only a sign with the following: “Probate & Family Court Research. 2 Hour Limit.” One of the computers didn’t work (it turned out it just needed to be plugged in), while on the other I couldn’t figure out what to do for some time, as the home screen didn’t have any options or directions. I was finally able to open a browser and access Masscourts, Mass.gov, and Masslegalhelp.org. In this case, a sheet of paper with some simple directions would have helped tremendously.

Law Libraries also have computers anyone can use, and it would be interesting to learn how computer usage in the law libraries compares with usage in other areas.

Recommendations

- Advertise the availability of free computers and make clear what they can be used for. If possible, increase the number of computers available.
- Provide simple, basic instructions, and a home screen with options for MassCourts.org, Mass.gov, and Masslegalhelp.org
- Limit the use of free computers by non-litigants, perhaps by establishing a time limit.

Parking

Many smaller courthouses have an adjacent parking lot that is free. Larger courthouses, and especially those in larger cities, often do not have any public parking. On Mass.gov, for Worcester, there is this: “There are paid parking lots and garages and metered street parking near the courthouse.” Thousands of low-income people need to come to the Worcester courthouse, and if they park in one of the lots immediately next to the courthouse (which have huge signs), the cost is \$20, whether for 20 minutes or six hours. Nearby garages are much cheaper; e.g., the Pearl-Elm Municipal Garage is only \$4.00 for the first hour and then \$1.00 for each additional hour.

Recommendation

- Court offices and staff constantly inform people that they can provide information but not legal advice. The situation here is similar in that the court should provide

better information but not advice or guidance. Don't recommend where to park, but give people the facts: "Parking immediately next to the courthouse costs \$20, even for short periods, while nearby municipal garages cost \$4.00 for the first hour and \$1.00 for additional hours."

Court Officers

I observed several interactions between court officers and litigants, and all were positive. One woman we talked with told us that she has been to the court so often that people know her by name. "I live here," she said. Court officers, she continued, keep an eye out for her. "They're my friends." In another case, from several years ago, I interviewed a woman who was in court trying to get child support from an abusive ex-partner. When he stormed out of the courtroom, the court officer advised her to wait a few minutes before exiting and then offered to walk her to her car. At both the Boston and Worcester courthouses, before the Greeter program started, I observed court officers at security going out of their way to provide a friendly greeting and detailed directions.

Improve Office Procedures in the Probate and Family Court Office

Triaging the Line

When a line gets long, it is a good idea to do what is often referred to as "triaging the line." I observed this done very effectively at the PFC office at the Brooke courthouse. When the line got very long, one of the assistant registers or clerks came and walked down the line, asking people something to the effect, "Do you have any questions before you get to the counter?" Here is what I observed on one occasion when I followed the assistant register as he made his way down the line:

- Sometimes people are in the wrong place. A Haitian man, for example, had been told on a previous visit that when he returned he should go to the Court Service Center. Instead, he had returned to the PFC office. Another man was trying to help a friend with an immigration matter and probably needed to go to the Boston Immigration Court (which is only a few blocks away from the Brooke Courthouse).
- Sometimes people are in the right place, but there is more they need to do before talking with a clerk. One person had filled out one form, but was holding another form that also needed to be filled out. The person stepped out of line to fill out that form.
- Some people should be in line but are not. I talked with two people who were waiting by some tables across from the counter for a particular clerk to return from lunch. They had spoken on the phone, or had been helped by this clerk days before, and assumed that only this person could help them (because, for example, they thought the litigant's papers were on his desk).

Interactions Between Office Staff & Litigants

In general, litigants' comments and ratings of PFC clerks were very positive. One person said that the staff was very friendly, great, and helpful. Most litigants we talked with said they experienced the clerks as professional, courteous, and helpful. This is supported by results from the 2023 Access and Fairness Survey, where over 80% of respondents from the PFC rated their overall experience at court satisfactory and that they were treated with the same courtesy and respect as others.⁴⁰ The importance of being treated with courtesy and respect is dramatic in the survey results for the PFC: almost 90% report having a satisfactory experience when they say they are treated with courtesy and respect, while only about 20% have a satisfactory experience when they are not treated with courtesy and respect.

Given the complexities of court forms and procedures, it was not surprising to hear that many people would have liked more help. Several SRLs mentioned that clerks were “rushed, they don’t explain anything to you,” and “they assume you know what to do and how to do it.” However, most people understood the situation: “I get it, it must be hard to help so many people in a day.” Another person's biggest wish was for slower directions and more clarity in navigating what to do from the beginning. People wanted help in understanding procedures and the order of events; e.g., knowing when to go to mediation before the courtroom. Once in a while we heard a very negative comment. A divorced woman in her 40s was at the court to get paperwork so her son could get an IEP at the school he attended near his father. She was frustrated due to clerical and filing errors in the register’s office and described the staff as largely incompetent bureaucrats. Some people have no complaints and no suggestions. I recently talked with a man in his 40s who was in court dealing with a child custody issue. He said he had been back to the court multiple times over eight years dealing with issues related to his children and child support. He said everything works fine. He gets a summons, he comes in and deals with it.

Continuous Training for PFC Clerks

Although the information and directions from clerks was generally accurate and helpful, a simple mistake can result in a lot of wasted time and great stress. Here is one example. A couple was trying to get an emergency hearing to get custody of their daughter. They were told they needed the daughter’s birth certificate and were sent to the Worcester town hall five blocks away. They doubted this was accurate because the daughter was not born in Worcester (she was born in another city in MA). The father and his mother walked to the town hall while the wife remained and filled out forms.

⁴⁰<https://www.mass.gov/doc/massachusetts-trial-court-report-on-the-2023-access-and-fairness-survey/download>

They returned in an agitated state because the town hall did not have the birth certificate. I was there when they returned. The man's mother was quite agitated because they had spoken with several clerks in the office and each time had received different information. It turned out (I think) that they didn't need the birth certificate at all.

Some attorneys claim that the form you are told to file is dependent on the particular clerk you see at the counter. The problem with a lack of uniformity also arises here, as the form a litigant is given in the county where they live is sometimes not accepted in the county where they are filing.

It may be worthwhile developing a regular training program for clerks. For example, an online training program for clerks with one 15 to 20 minute module required every month. These could consist of scenarios with multiple choice questions and would not be graded; each clerk would need to continue with the module until they passed a certain percentage of the questions. Wrong answers would result in explanatory text. The modules could go over the details of legal procedures (e.g., guardianship, name changes), and ask questions about the forms needed, the sequence of steps, and answers to common questions.

These type of training programs are common in industry and I have taken several, including ones on sexual harassment in the workplace, the threat from hacking and stealing of private or company confidential material, and so on. They often involve videos with actors followed by questions, and if done well are not only informative but actually pleasant to take. There are many private companies with software tools for constructing such training, or the companies themselves can create training to a client's specifications.

Nonlawyer Navigators⁴¹

Many of the volunteers working in Massachusetts Court Service Centers meet the definition of nonlawyer navigators in a study by McClymont (2019): they do not have formal legal training, are not court employees, are physically located within a court, and provide direct assistance to SRLs. They do not have an attorney-client relationship with those they help, and they receive training within a formal court program. The results of the study were very positive:

Programs demonstrate that well-trained and appropriately supervised navigators can perform a wide array of tasks. For example, they help SRLs find their way around the court; give practical information and referrals to other sources of assistance; or complete their court paperwork. Navigators also accompany SRLs

⁴¹ Parts of this section come from Karis & Huitema (2023).

to court to provide emotional back-up, help answer the judge's factual questions, or resolve a matter with opposing counsel" (McClymont, 2019, p. 6).

Among the 23 programs studied, there were no complaints about the unauthorized practice of law. "Across all the programs studied, navigators generally perform eight distinct kinds of tasks:

1. "Helping people physically navigate the courthouse
2. Referring SRLs to other sources of assistance
3. Providing legal and procedural information
4. Sharing options with SRLs
5. Assisting SRLs with forms or other documents
6. Translation and other language assistance
7. Accompanying SRLs through different activities in court
8. Offering feedback to courts and service providers based on navigator experiences working with SRLs" (p. 19)

Navigators may even reduce the time in court, improving efficiency. Many court personnel running these programs "commented on the utility of navigators being available to 'listen to peoples' stories.' Said one, they 'listen to people and are more patient,' while another offered that the SRLs want 'to have their say and be heard. They need to talk and tell their story and the judge doesn't need to hear all the details.' She added that if the SRL has been able to talk to a navigator first, 'it shaves 20 minutes off what the judge will require'" (McClymont, 2019).

Setting up a nonlawyer navigator program has aspects of both the Greeter program and the volunteer program in the CSCs. If the Trial Court, or the PFC, set one up, it could be very helpful to some SRLs. I envision such a service similar to what other states have done that allow these navigators to help people physically navigate the courthouse and actually accompany SRLs to court proceedings. The navigators would provide moral support rather than legal advice; in the courtroom, the navigator would remain in the visitor section when the litigant they were accompanying was called forward.

Perhaps a clerk, probation officer, or case manager could offer the services of a navigator to a litigant who, in their opinion, needed a lot of help or reassurance.

Recommendations

- For PFC offices that don't currently triage long lines, consider starting this practice.
- Periodically send a clerk outside the office and announce, where groups of people can hear, "Does anyone have any questions?" Does everyone know

where to go?” This may be even more important than triaging the line, because if people in line are in the wrong place or need to take some additional actions, they will discover this as soon as they talk with a clerk. When people milling about outside the office are in the wrong place or need to complete additional tasks, no one will help them until they finally seek assistance, and this sometimes can take a long time. Consider the example of a man we talked with who was waiting to be called by probation. He didn’t realize that his wife needed to be there as well. He only learned this when he finally returned to probation to check on his status. He then left the courthouse, because he knew that his wife would not be coming.

- Create online training programs for clerks. These can be used to help train new hires, and also as part of a continuous training program.
- Consider developing a nonlawyer navigator program as discussed above.
- An alternative to a navigator program could be a program in which a volunteer focuses on litigants in and nearby a PFC office and offers a subset of traditional navigator programs. The PFC could recruit volunteers to provide directions and very basic assistance to litigants. The Court Service Centers train high school students, college students, law students, and people from the community to help people fill out forms in the CSCs. The PFC could set up a similar program: the volunteers would need to know much of what the Greeters know (e.g., the layout of the building and where all the departments are located, the hours of the CSCs), how to read the Daily List, and basic services and procedures of both the Register and Probation side of the office (e.g., when a litigant should go directly to a courtroom and when to check in at probation). Volunteers could ask people waiting if they needed directions or help and if the volunteer couldn’t answer a question they could return to the office and ask a clerk or assistant register. Training volunteers can take time, however, and it might make sense to create a training team of clerks and retired volunteer attorneys.

Signage and the Physical Layout of the PFC Office

The signage and physical layout of PFC offices should be examined from the perspective of a first-time litigant. The following are initial questions to consider: is it clear where to go upon entering? (I talked with one woman who spent 15 minutes waiting in line at probation, only to be told that she needed to wait in the other line at the Register side of the office.) Are there signs and do they provide the necessary information? Are there areas for waiting and filling out forms? Are there any children-friendly areas? Are there posters or bulletin boards with relevant information?

Consider the physical layout of the PFC office at the Brooke courthouse, which is unusual and very strange. After entering, there is a window (for getting records, I think)

and a long narrow passage before you get to the counter area. There are three doors, but one is locked, one is for exit only, and one is for both entering and exiting. It would help to have better signage upon entering. What is especially nice is having two tables with chairs across from the counter. People use this area to wait or to fill out forms. During most of the time I was there, multiple people were using this area. There is a small child's table with legos underneath, which is an excellent idea for people with small children.

In some offices there are two areas with clerks, one for probation and one for everything else (information, records, forms). In the PFC in the Lowell Justice Center there are large prominent signs, but they are confusing, because both have the word “probation” on them. So many people who are at the court for family matters ended up on the Probation side of the office that the clerks put up several sheets of paper making clear the distinction between “Probation” and “Probate” (see Figure 14 below). When the original signage is designed well, there should be no need for ad hoc signage like this.



Figure 14. Distinguishing between probation and probate in the Lowell PFC office⁴²

Recommendations

- Make it clear where people should go when they enter a PFC office.
- I suggest a small project to examine the entire public area of PFC offices from the litigant's perspective, including the entrance and exit, all signs and information on the walls, counters and tables, and so on.
- Make sure that from the outside it is clear that this is a PFC office (see Wayfinding above, and Figures 10 and 11).
- The wall space outside of offices is a potentially useful space for informational posters about divorce, child custody, guardianship, name changes, and so on (as described in a section below).

Court Forms

In most PFCs, litigants have to ask for forms at the counter or else print them out from Mass.gov. In Hampshire County at the Northampton PFC, however, common forms are available outside the office. This is shown in Figure 15. This system is used by litigants and doesn't seem to be abused, so it is something other PFCs might want to consider. This may be more likely to work well if accompanied by another self-serve area with information about the main types of legal procedures (see Figure 8).

⁴² This is from October 7, 2021, so the situation may be different now.



Figure 15. The most commonly used forms are available in the waiting area of the Hampshire PFC in Northampton. Note the poster that is partially visible to the left; it explains the Pathways process and is excellent. It is a good example of the type of poster I recommended above.

The Daily List

The Daily List is important, as many litigants must examine it when they arrive to find the courtroom for their case (see Figure 16 below). The following applies to the Daily List as I observed its use at the Worcester PFC. There are three problems: 1., it can sometimes be difficult to find your name; 2., it can be difficult to determine where to go; and 3., it can be stressful for some people when there are crowds of people around the Daily List trying to read it.

The first problem arises because the list is alphabetized according to the last name of the primary party, which is in the left column. If you are the secondary party, and are looking for your own name, it could be anywhere in the list. Another issue is that a location often applies to multiple entries, and it is typically written at the top of a sheet and applies to everything below it (and since several sheets may be taped together, the

location may be listed far above an entry). The problem is that this is not obvious, and if you don't look at the top of the sheet you will not realize where you should go. The third issue is that since the font is small and many people need to find their names on the list, there is often a crowd around the bulletin board where the list is posted. One person described the daily list as overwhelming – not the structure of the list, but the crowd that forms around it. This person felt stressed with everyone looking over his shoulder at the board at the same time. Contrast this with the situation at airports, where many people need to simultaneously check arrival and departure monitors. The monitors are typically either placed high up so people can view them without obstructing the view of others, or else are so large that many people can view them at once.

We asked one man to try to find his name on the list but he failed, because he was only scanning down the list of names on the left side of the paper, and he was the secondary party. In another case I volunteered to help a man find his name on the list. He failed to find it (he was the secondary party) but I finally succeeded.

An alternative is to do away with publicly displaying the daily list altogether. This appears to be the case at the Springfield PFC. Although I was told that the daily list is sometimes available on a bulletin board, none was available on the day I visited, and I was told that they prefer to have everyone check in. This makes sense, because individuals get more personal attention, they don't have to figure out how to decipher the posted daily list, can be directed to the appropriate location, and last minute changes may not be included in a posted paper list. However, this may work better in Springfield because they also have a digital queuing system that displays wait times for different activities (this is described in more detail in the section on Waiting below).



Recommendation

- Improve the design of the Daily List to allow both the primary and secondary parties to find their names quickly.
- As part of a redesign, make the location for each case clear; e.g., if the location on the top of a sheet applies to everything beneath it, draw an arrow down the page.
- Alternatively, dispense with publicly displaying the daily list altogether and have everyone check in at the counter, or using an online system.

Satellite Offices

Several PFC offices have satellite locations in nearby cities. Setting up satellite offices, especially in areas where there is poor public transportation, is an excellent idea. These small offices are less intimidating than large courthouses, are easier for many people to get to, and can often provide more personalized service, where clerks actually get to know litigants who need to come in frequently.

These factors can improve a litigant's experience, and this is confirmed by several results from the Access and Fairness Surveys. These surveys don't consider satellite offices, but they look at the differences between high-volume and lower-volume courts. Satellite offices are like super low-volume courts, and according to the latest survey, "...users of high-volume courts consistently rated the courts lower on access and fairness than users of lower-volume courts."⁴³ In addition, "Users of lower-volume courts were more likely to report that the judicial officer listened to them before making a decision about their case than users of high-volume courts (83.8% of users in lower-volume courts, 76.5% of users in high-volume courts)."⁴⁴

Specialty Courts

There are multiple specialty courts in Massachusetts, including drug courts, mental health courts, veterans treatment courts, and housing courts. Although my experience here is very limited, these non-adversarial approaches seem very effective. There are a few other specialty courts, like the Family Resolutions Specialty Court in Hampshire County. Although these approaches may require more upfront costs, if they reduce recidivism and facilitate family agreements, they will undoubtedly save money in the long term. From Mass.gov:

The Family Resolutions Specialty Court (FRSC) is a unique problem-solving family court. It is a voluntary program that gives divorcing and separating parents

⁴³<https://www.mass.gov/doc/massachusetts-trial-court-report-on-the-2023-access-and-fairness-survey/download>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

the chance to resolve their differences with less conflict and with a focus on each family member. FRSC is located at the Hampshire Probate and Family Court and is open to Hampshire, Franklin, Berkshire, and Hampden parents.

Every family in FRSC receives help from a team. There is a mental health professional for the family, a mediator for the parents, usually a lawyer for the children, and a team coordinator, all at no cost to the parents. The parents are active in all decision-making whether they have attorneys or not. There are no trials or motion sessions. Instead, the case moves forward through a series of team meetings and court conferences where all members of the team work together to help the parents resolve their differences.⁴⁵

PocketTalk, a Translation Device

The Trial Court bought Pockettalk devices as part of a pilot program and I examined one for a few minutes in a Probate and Family Court Office (<https://www.pockettalk.com/device>). With a PocketTalk device, two people can communicate by speaking and then reading the text translation of what the other person says: after party 1, speaking language A, talks, the text appears in language B for party 2 to read. Then when party 2 speaks in language B, the text appears in language A for party 1 to read. I think the clerks will use these devices at the counter when a person doesn't speak English or Spanish. If these devices are as accurate as advertised, and the clerks are adequately trained in their use, they have great potential in helping out with language difficulties. My understanding is that the pilot program was successful in demonstrating the value of these devices in certain places around the court for limited purposes.

Even better would be interpretation devices, and early models are now also available (they are sometimes referred to as real-time earbud translators). In a two party conversation between people speaking different languages, each person speaks in their own language and then hears what the other person is saying in their own language as well. The problem with using these in the Trial Court is that in current systems both parties must use earbuds, and there are health and sanitary concerns with having multiple people use the same set of earbuds (e.g., bacteria may be transferred from one user to the next). It may also be difficult to explain the procedure to a person who only speaks another language. This technology is advancing rapidly, however, and within the next few years I predict there will be devices that can be used safely and easily in public spaces.

⁴⁵ <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/family-resolutions-specialty-court>

The distinction between these two types of devices may not be clear. Using PocketTalk, you speak your language and then read the response from the other person (also in your language). With an interpretation device there is no reading: I speak in my language and hear your response in my language, even though you spoke the response in your language.

Google translate now has a conversation mode that is an interpretation tool: I speak English and the software speaks in Spanish while displaying Spanish text. My respondent then speaks in Spanish and I hear the response in English while seeing the text. There are probably now other free interpretation applications that run on smartphones, and they should be compared to PocketTalk and other translation and interpretation devices before making major purchases.

Suggestions from Litigants

Here are a few suggestions we heard from SRLs.

- One woman recommended having a paperwork line. That is, a line for people who just need forms, so it will move quickly and they don't have to wait in the regular line. Currently, sometimes clerks need to spend significant time with an individual, looking up their case online, checking with other people, getting copies of documents, and so on. There is a separate line for attorneys, this woman said, so why not one for people who just need forms? This woman had been to court many times and had developed a lot of knowledge about the courts. She realized that just having a set of different forms in public for people to select themselves might not work.
- My Comment: A paperwork line seems like a good idea but may not be practical, as some people who think they just need a form may actually also need information or have some questions answered. Also, at many PFC offices, lines are only long for a short period each day. The Northampton PFC, however, has common forms available in the waiting area and this has worked out well.
- Here is an example of a very specific suggestion – the type that a user experience team could investigate. A couple recommended that the PFC evaluate the requirements for guardianship for an incapacitated person to reduce the possibility that when a disabled child reaches 18 a guardianship will not yet be in place. This suggestion came from a well educated and technically sophisticated couple who had worked hard to get a guardianship in place for their son before he turned 18 but had failed given the time requirements. (For example, you can only start the process within a certain period before the child turns 18, and the various external evaluations can be difficult to obtain, and are only valid for a specific period of time.) See Vignette 4 for more details.

Always Offer the Information Sheet and the Affidavit of Indigency

As described above, the services and information on the redesigned Information Sheet can be incredibly useful, so it should be distributed more widely. In addition, many people are not aware that if they have a low income they don't need to pay court fees or costs. The Affidavit of Indigency doesn't list the required income level, just text that the poverty levels for households should be posted in the courthouse. You automatically qualify if you receive public assistance, and if you don't receive public assistance, you can still qualify if "Your income, after taxes, does not exceed 125% of the current Federal Poverty Line. See Poverty Threshold Guidelines for a chart of income by family size. [or] You cannot pay the court fees or costs without depriving yourself or those who are dependent on you of the necessities of life, including food, shelter and clothing" (<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/eligibility-requirements-for-indigency-waiver-of-fees>).

It will be easier for SRLs to see actual dollar amounts rather than be told to find out what 125% of the current Federal Poverty Line is. This can be done simply. For example, provide the following information on a sheet of paper or a poster:

If your income after taxes is less than the amount in the table below, you do not have to pay court fees or costs.

<u>Family Size</u>	<u>Income after Taxes</u>
1	\$18,825
2	\$25,550
3	\$32,275
4	\$39,000
5	\$45,725

In addition, when filing fees are mentioned on instructions, there should also be information that fees will be waived when a litigant submits an Affidavit of Indigency and it is approved. For example, one instruction sheet for a Complaint for Modification starts like this: "To file a Complaint for Modification

1. Pay a filing fee: \$55.00 (Cash, Personal Checks...
2. Complaint for Modification
3. Etc.

Nowhere on the page of instructions is the Affidavit of Indigency mentioned.

Recommendations

- Whenever anyone asks for a form or procedure that requires a payment, ask the person something like this: “Would you like to see if you qualify for a fee waiver?” If they say yes, explain that if they receive public assistance they qualify automatically. Otherwise, show them a sheet with the income requirements and then hand them an Affidavit of Indigency if they still want to proceed.
- Mention the Affidavit of Indigency on instructional material when fees are mentioned.
- Put two posters on tripods so they can be read while waiting in line: one poster with a large version of the Information Sheet, and another stating that you may not have to pay court fees if you qualify for a fee waiver.

Improve the User Experience While Waiting

Waiting is inevitable, and it's impossible to assign a specific time for each hearing or legal procedure, because sometimes people don't show up, come unprepared, or request a delay, and because sometimes things take longer than planned. It does seem possible, however, to improve the current situation in some parts of the Trial Court. I realize that for courtroom events there are efforts underway to end block scheduling and assign a more accurate time for litigants, and this is already happening in some court departments and some locations (and is, in fact, already mandated by PFC Standing Order 2-23; see Appendix 3). In this section, I am concerned primarily with the waiting that occurs at the PFC office itself. In some PFCs, before the office opens at 8:30, probation has already received the case files for that day, which are assigned among multiple probation officers (POs). Everyone is scheduled for 8:30, and people are seen in the order that they check in. After checking in, there is intake paperwork to fill out (e.g., updating the financial statement if necessary, filling out an appearance form), and then people wait to be seen by the PO. In most cases, both parties have to be present and have turned in their completed paperwork before being seen (when restraining orders are in effect or if one of the parties feels unsafe the two parties may be seen separately). After litigants meet with a PO, their paperwork is sent to the judicial side for scheduling. There's then another wait until the parties are seen by a judge. Most people have little knowledge of the relationships and sequence of events described in this paragraph, and their experience would be improved if they did.

It seems that staggered scheduling would reduce litigants' wait time. At some PFCs, everyone is told to report to probation at 8:30, and for some court sessions everyone is scheduled at the same time. Consider what I observed on October 15, 2024 in Worcester. The Daily List showed that most events during the morning were in a Guardianship block in a Magistrate Session in Courtroom 9. There were over 40 parties

listed, all with a start time of 9:00 am. Do they all have to be scheduled for 9:00 am? And, as I describe below, information that the court has is often not shared with litigants.

First, consider what people say about the experience of waiting:

- “Everyone has the same appointment and sometimes they don’t see you until 3 pm. You stay here all day, no food, just waiting.”
- A woman who had missed work many times said her appointment was at 9:30 and she had to clear a whole day for this.
- A couple involved in a custody issue said their appointment was always at 8:45. Based on past experience they don’t expect to be seen until 11 or 12.
- Another litigant typically spends 3 to 4 hours waiting at the courthouse any time she has to be there. She spends this time either on her phone or walking around.
- A woman told us that she never knows how long she’ll have to wait; it could be 1 hour or 4 to 5 hours. She spends this time just sitting on her phone.
- A young man described the scheduling system as confusing and hard to decode.
- A woman was at the court for a custody modification. She checked in with probation, filled out some paperwork, turned it in, and then waited. She told me that she was given no indication of how much time she might have to wait, and when I asked her she didn’t know if she had to wait for the other party to show up.
- The average wait, another litigant told us, was 2 to 4 hours.

There appears to be less block scheduling, and thus less waiting, at the Springfield PFC office, but I can’t confirm this.

The NCSC has a recent report, *Leveraging Check-In, Queuing, and Wayfinding Technology to Provide Better Access to Court Services* (Combest-Friedman & Zarnow, 2024). They write, in their introduction,

Check-in, queuing, and wayfinding technologies are transforming the way people navigate courthouses and access court services. Courts may enhance the administration of justice and improve user experience by automating check-in processes, digitizing wayfinding, signage, and queue management systems, and providing supplemental methods for court users to access information. Leveraging these technologies can increase the efficiency and productivity of court procedures, improve public confidence, create a more user-friendly and accessible environment, and offer visitors a better experience. (Combest-Friedman & Zarnow, 2024)

In Multnomah County, Oregon, where they use an electronic check-in system, people can wait in a seated area for their number to be called.

At the Hampden PFC in Springfield they use a system from Mobile-Q that lists wait times on a digital display immediately outside the office. The display toggles between two states: one (shown in Figure 17 below), shows people waiting for Domestic procedures, the Vault (the name for their records archive), and Probate. It then cycles to three other queues: Initiating/Processing, Completing Paperwork, and Court Service Center (which is on the first floor of the building). The display shows how many people are in the queue, lists their names, and presents the wait time in minutes (I erased the names from the photo below). This is a useful application of technology, although I don't know how accurate the times are or to what extent litigants rely on the information in the display.

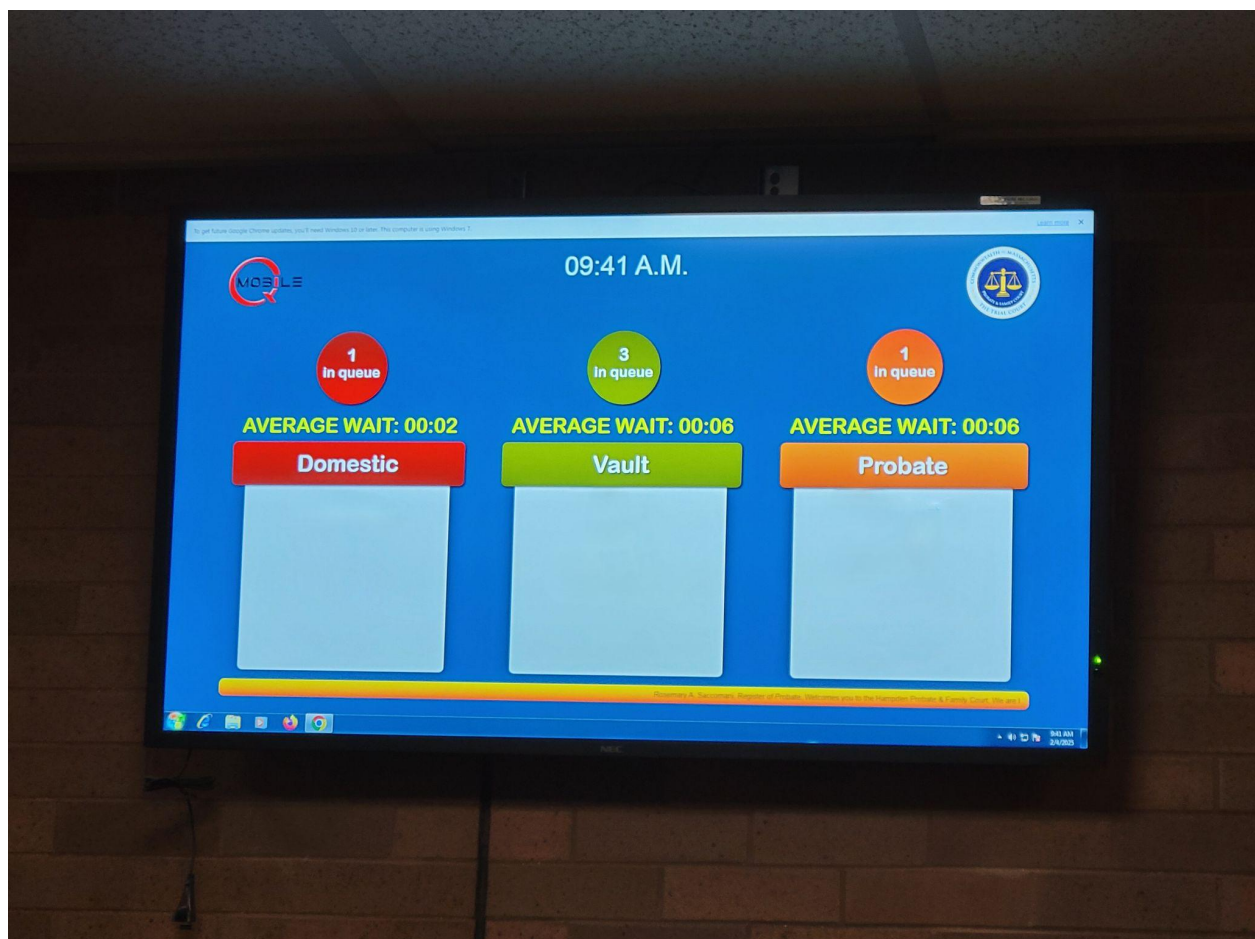


Figure 17. The digital display at the Hampden PFC office in Springfield. Each of the three queues had names listed, which I erased to protect each litigant's privacy.

Judges and lawyers understand many of the waiting and scheduling problems, and there was a Bench-Bar meeting earlier this year that discussed possible solutions. There were 131 participants including judges, court personnel and lawyers.⁴⁶ One question they discussed was how to make scheduling easier. Although the focus was on solutions that would help lawyers, judges, and increase court efficiency, it's clear these suggestions would also help SRLs. Here is a summary of two frequently mentioned suggestions:

Notifications re: Order of Cases to be Called: Post the list of cases in the order they will likely be called or have alerts/announcements when a case is "on deck" (in the next two or three to be called). This is similar to how restaurants post names or buzz when a table is almost ready or the MBTA displays the whereabouts/approximate timing of the upcoming trains. This way, lawyers can do other work in the hallways and conference rooms while waiting, instead of sitting in the courtroom or on zoom for many hours and being afraid to run to the restroom and miss the calling of the case.

Change the Motion Scheduling Process so it is Available for Self-Scheduling: Implement an online or app-based system to choose motion dates like Open Table uses to make restaurant reservations. Click on the county and then the judge's name, select the approximate amount of time needed for the hearing (with limits for non-evidentiary hearings), and see the next available motion dates and times. Select a hearing date and time, and receive a pop-up notice if the other lawyer is already scheduled elsewhere at that time. Select an available date and send an alert/notice to opposing counsel -- just like Open Table sends a restaurant reservation invite to friends/family.

Probation Should Provide the Information They Have

Even if it is not possible to predict wait times, it is possible to explain the situation and any contingencies. My understanding from talking with probation staff is that this is typically done, but I have learned from talking with people that many do not understand the contingencies. For example, most people I've talked with typically do not understand how long they will have to wait or what needs to happen before they can be seen. There have been times when the litigant I'm talking with did not know whether his or her spouse or ex-spouse needed to arrive before they could be seen. In most cases, both

⁴⁶ The Bench-Bar meeting was sponsored by the Massachusetts Family and Probate American Inn of Court.

parties must be present and have filled out their paperwork before they can see a PO, but not everyone knows this.

Recommendations

- On notices that people receive to appear at probation, and when they check in, make clear the following: first, POs will see litigants only after both parties have checked in and filled out their paperwork; second, people will be seen in the order that they check in; and third, where there is no system available for checking one's place in the queue (digital or even a whiteboard), tell people that they can check back at the counter to find out approximately when they will be seen (this will allow them to leave for a short period to visit the restroom or get something to eat).
- Most litigants don't understand how the court system works. It would help to provide information to litigants about how probation, the register's office, and the judicial side of the PFC all work together. This information could be conveyed in one or more of the following: on posters, handouts, inserts with summons, videos, or on Mass.gov.
- PFCs should share more information with each other about how they do their scheduling and how they communicate wait times to litigants.

Educate Litigants While They Wait

Although some people fill out forms, work on their case, or talk with their lawyer, most people just pass the time while they wait by spending time on their phones or chatting with people who have accompanied them. This is a great opportunity to educate people about the court system. There is room outside the PFC office in Worcester for two video monitors, one in each corner. These could loop through a series of short videos on how to behave in court, the typical sequences of court cases, basic legal terminology, and the steps you need to take to file for a divorce, guardianship, or custody, where to get legal information and assistance, and so on. There might be, for example, ten six minute modules that start over every hour. Next to the monitor there could be a list of the modules and when they start playing. One of the two monitors could be in English and one in Spanish. These videos could also be made available on Mass.gov, and they could also be available at Court Service Centers, where the staff could set up a video in a semi-private viewing area for SRLs, or have them playing in the waiting area.

The NCSC developed videos that can be downloaded from their website.⁴⁷ Several of these could be used in Massachusetts courts without modification, including these very short videos (just over a minute each):

- Legal Language 101

⁴⁷ <https://www.ncsc.org/consulting-and-research/areas-of-expertise/access-to-justice/a2j-videos>

- Filing Motions
- What to do After Being Served
- Understanding Common Procedural Terms
- Legal Advice vs. Legal Information

They are all very informative and well done.

Recommendations

- Develop informative videos and have them playing on video monitors outside the PFC office. Also make them available on Mass.gov.
- As described below, use free wall space for informative posters about all the case types handled by the PFC.

Calling Litigants: Current Practices and Technical Solutions

In Worcester there are often 100 people or more waiting outside the PFC office on a busy morning. Some are waiting for probation, some for clerks to finish some task (e.g., get a certified judgment), while others are waiting to enter a courtroom. Periodically a person from probation will step outside of the office and yell out a name. “Ortez? Ortez?” Someone will typically then walk over and they will return to the office, but in some cases there will be no answer, the person will call out again, and then return to the office alone. People often feel that they can’t leave the area because they might miss their name being called. In fact, more than one person has told me that they did not want to leave the area (e.g., to go to the bathroom) because they were afraid that they might miss being called. One litigant also noted something that we observed as well: the acoustics are not good and it is thus often difficult to clearly hear the name being called.

I’m not sure of the solution, but there must be a better way to call people and for people to keep track of when they will be called. For example,

- Provide a monitor or board with names so you can see where in the list you are, or your status (e.g., Keller – Jones; waiting for Jones to appear). See the section above on Improving the User Experience While Waiting for other ideas and information.
- Text people when it is their turn.
- If names continue to be called out, consider some type of loud speaker/amplification system.
- There are many commercial check-in and queuing systems available, and some vendors have experience working with court systems.⁴⁸ Many of these systems

⁴⁸ For example, see <https://www.getqflow.com/>, <https://www.moviik.com/tiik15>, <https://waitwhile.com/solutions/queue-management-system/>, <https://www.qminder.com/>, <https://awebstar.com.sg/queue-management-system.html>, and

require a person to sign in via their smartphone or at a kiosk, but even if a clerk checks a person in there should be advantages for the litigant, as there are typically options for notification when it is your turn and the ability to check your status in terms of expected wait time.

The Future

Consider what can happen when checking-in technology is integrated with court systems and available throughout the courthouse:

When a court user utilizes a digital platform to check-in, their time of arrival and supporting information is recorded and can be accessed digitally throughout the courthouse. Integrating this technology across the court administration's, attorney's, and judge's devices can help move court users through the courthouse quickly and seamlessly, as all parties can be privy to the same information. For example, when a court user checks in for their hearing, the technology can allow for each party to receive the data without the need for staff interaction. Attorneys and judges can view notifications to see who has checked in and any supporting information, such as if the court user has representation or requires any accommodation. Courts can customize check-in technology to route court users to their appropriate destinations. Once the check-in process is complete, the technology can provide automated case and courtroom information to help court users navigate the courthouse.⁴⁹

Improve Communication Between the Court and Litigants

The Trial Court communicates with litigants via regular mail, text messages, and email. Communication with litigants before a court date provides an excellent channel for providing helpful information in addition to notices and reminders. I was told by one court employee that summons used to be confusing, as there was no information about what to do next. Now, he told us, there is an instruction sheet sent along with the summons. When we asked one legal aid lawyer what the Trial Court could do to improve the SRL user experience, one of the top things he mentioned was to make it easier when someone shows up at court. People often show up unprepared, he told us. They don't have the required documents. The Trial Court should give people more information; "Your hearing is coming up. Here's what you need to do."

For example, in a complaint for divorce 1B, the plaintiff files the complaint with the Register's Office. The court then sends the plaintiff a summons in the mail, which must

<https://www.skiplino.com/queue-management-system/>. There is also a list of vendors who build customized technology in the NCSC report referenced in the next footnote.

⁴⁹https://www.ncsc.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/104202/Leveraging-Check-In-Queuing-and-Wayfinding-Technology-to-Provide-Better-Access-to-Court-Services.pdf

be served on the defendant. Some plaintiffs don't realize this. I talked with a lawyer who once represented a woman who was getting a divorce. The husband, who did not have a lawyer, had filed the complaint. When there was a long delay, the lawyer for the wife discovered that the husband had not served his wife. When the lawyer told the husband he had to serve his wife, he admitted that he had no idea this is what he was supposed to do next.

This is another area where the PFC has made significant improvements. As I was told, the PFC now sends two pages of instructions on service of process. This now satisfies most of the following recommendations from the Massachusetts Justice for all Strategic Action Plan, which was written in 2017. The following passage is from a section of the plan titled, "Educate and assist litigants with providing notice." The Probate and Family Court should:

- Provide an information and instruction insert about proper service whenever a summons is mailed to a plaintiff. Reportedly, this is already done in some courts, but not all. The insert should use simple language and simple formatting. Items in bold might include:
 - A warning that a case cannot be heard until service is completed
 - Information about what to do if the cost of professional service cannot be afforded
 - A Babel notice⁵⁰

Communication via Mail

The court sends out a variety of summons, notices, judgments, and orders, and litigants are also served complaints and motions by the other party or their lawyer.

Addresses May Not be Up-to-date

We talked with one woman from a community organization at a resource fair at the Worcester courthouse. She reported that individuals often miss important mail, including warrants and citations, because the court doesn't have an accurate address for them. This woman worked for an organization that helps women who have been abused or forced into prostitution, and these women often don't have a permanent address. This organization encourages women to use their shelter address for mail, but she admitted that this often doesn't work.

⁵⁰ <https://mass2j.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Massachusetts-JFA-Strategic-Action-Plan.pdf>. Note that these recommendations are from 2017, and some may have already been followed.

The Information and Layout of Summons and Notices

It is critical to design the layout of summons and notices carefully, and make sure they contain not just the required information, but also information that will help the recipient understand the situation and what he or she needs to do next.

Concerning layout, consider the Notice of First Tier Court Event from the Housing Court in Figure 18 below. I talked with a man outside the PFC office in Worcester who looked confused. He showed me the notice in the figure, I saw that in the top box was written “Central Housing Court” in Worcester, so I walked him to the Housing Court on the other side of the second floor. The clerk there pointed out to him that he was in the wrong place, because although the “Court Name & Address” indicated Worcester, right below this was written, “Parties must appear at: Marlborough Session” in Marlborough. Looking quickly at the notice, I also hadn’t noticed this. The clerk was both friendly and helpful, and said she would call ahead to tell the court in Marlborough that the man would be late. This is clearly a good example of the importance of layout; ideally, the name and location of the court where you should appear should be at the top of the form. For an excellent example of a redesigned notice from another domain, see Appendix 4.

This may be one of those situations in which the problem is clear but implementation is very difficult. My understanding is that docket numbers have no indication of whether an event will occur in the main office or a satellite office, and thus using information from Masscourts it isn’t possible to format notices differently if they will be occurring in a satellite office. This is not just a problem with the Housing Court, but also for the Probate and Family Court, which also has satellite offices. I don’t know what the solution to this problem is, but there must be a way to improve the layout of these notices.

There is good evidence from a large-scale field study in New York City that redesigning the summons form results in reduced failure to appear rates. The changes made were straightforward: move the court date and time from the bottom of the form to the top, clearly indicate the court location, and highlight the consequences of missing the court date (i.e., an arrest warrant, which was mentioned only on the back of the original form). These simple changes reduced failures to appear by 13% (Fishbane, Ouss, & Shah, 2020).

Engstrom et al. (2025) provide another example of a poorly designed notice, this one a “Notice of Unlawful Detainer (Eviction)” (see their Figure 22). Almost a third of eviction cases in Los Angeles Superior Court end in default judgment, and the authors argue persuasively that a better designed notice would reduce default rates. There are several

problems with the current form, but the most important is that although people see that there's a hearing date, they fail to notice that the most important date is the answer deadline, and that they have only "five calendar days after the summons and legal papers are served to file a written response with the court...". The authors present a mockup of a redesigned form later in their paper that emphasizes the need to act quickly: "Respond quickly to avoid losing automatically" is printed in red and bolded, with the first two words underlined (see their Figure 47). Compared to the other recommendations that Engstrom et al. (2025) make, implementing this one is trivial.

Quan Trọng! Dich!

**Massachusetts Trial Court
Housing Court Department**

COURT NAME & ADDRESS
Central Housing Court
225 Main Street
Worcester, MA 01608

Parties must appear at:
Marlborough Session
45 Williams Street
Marlborough, MA 01752

Figure 18. A Notice of First Tier Court Event with unclear location information

A Confusing Motion

When a person receives a legal notice, it should be clear what the notice is about, what it means, what will happen next, whether the person needs to respond, and if so, what are their options. This is especially true in the case when a person receives an unexpected notice. Consider the following example, presented in more detail in Vignette #13. My friend Nancy (I've changed names here) called me because she was confused about a document she had just received in the mail. It was a Motion of "Waiver of

Guardian ad Litem for Minor.” Nancy had no idea what “Guardian ad Litem” meant and there was no explanation on the notice she received. A more serious problem for Nancy was deciding whether she had to take any action and what that action might be. There was no indication anywhere on the form she received about what would happen next and what options she had. There was a “Notice of Hearing” section at the bottom of the first page, but it was blank, and in a section below that was written, “The within motion is hereby ALLOWED, DENIED.” Neither option was selected, and it appeared as if these sections were for the court to complete.

The point here is to highlight how difficult this fairly simple situation was for Nancy. Her ex-partner had a lawyer, and he was the one who sent her the motion. She did not have a lawyer, and had no idea what the motion meant and whether she could oppose it, and in fact whether she needed to respond at all. Since the motion came from the lawyer, and not the court, it isn’t clear to me what the court should have done differently, but perhaps requiring more explanatory information on motions would help. This is the one recommendation here.

Recommendation

- The court could provide more information on the forms used for Motions. There is a form for Motions (CJD 400), and it would help to include a sentence on the motion with information such as, “If you disagree with this motion, you can file an opposition. To file an opposition to this motion use form XXX [if such a form exists] or go to mass.gov/xxx for more information.” (This assumes that filing an opposition is an option for all motions.) I realize that this may be simplifying the situation as there may be different procedures for different types of motions. However, I’m sure some type of useful information could be provided on the form.

Text Reminders

A text messaging system has been in operation for several years in the Trial Court, and it is available to litigants for all courts except the Juvenile and Land Court. Here is a description.

This new text messaging system originally was designed to reduce the number of warrants issued for “failure to appear” and reduce unnecessary pretrial detention The system sends text reminders to participants four days and 12-hour prior to a scheduled court event Roughly 35 percent of defendants nationwide fail to appear for court dates which can lead to further court involvement or jail time, according to Deputy Commissioner Pamerson Ifill who oversees the Massachusetts Probation Service’s Pretrial Probation Services Division. In the Bay State, 12.6 percent of

defendants fail to show up On any given day, there are some 19,000 criminal defendants under pretrial supervision in the Commonwealth. The Massachusetts Probation Service in collaboration with the Trial Court's Judicial Information Services Department (JISD) was tasked with developing this text notification system as part of the 2018 Criminal Justice Reform passed by the state legislature. Probation also coordinated with the court's Translation Services⁵¹ to provide texts in the most common languages spoken by court users: Cape Verdean Creole, Chinese, French, Haitian Creole, Portuguese, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Russian. Probationers, who opt to receive the eReminder text reminders, may receive text messages four days before and 12 hours before their upcoming court date.⁵²

One SRL we talked with appreciated the text reminders, but wished that they had more information. There's a court date coming up, but what is it for (a hearing, mediation, etc.) he asked? And when I arrive at the courthouse, where should I report first? It is always worth investigating what other states are doing. Michigan, for example, includes information about forms to submit when it sends reminders about deadlines.

Recommendation

- Investigate the possibility of adding additional personalized information to the text messages, including the type of hearing, where to report, and what the litigant is required to do or to bring. I realize that this may be difficult to implement.
- Similarly, consider including more information on summons and notices about what the litigant should do next, what is expected, and what will happen at the next court date.

Difficulty in Contacting the Court

What should you do when you will be late for a court session? We heard from several people about the difficulty of reaching someone at the court. One person told us that they knew that morning they would be late to court. They called ahead but were "bounced around." They left a voicemail, but didn't know if anyone received it. Others also complained that they were worried because although they had left a message they weren't sure whether it had been received and the appropriate people notified. Another person also mentioned that it is hard to reach someone to tell them that you can't make it. It would certainly be advantageous for both the court and other litigants involved in a case to know ahead of time that one of the parties will either be late or can't make it at all.

⁵¹ Now called the Office of Language Access

⁵²<https://www.mass.gov/news/new-text-messaging-reminder-system-for-court-users-is-now-available-across-the-commonwealth>

Recommendations

- There should be a single number that litigants can call or text to inform the court that they will be late or will be unable to attend. Ideally, this will be part of some type of automated system that will send a text message back to the sender. Although this may not prevent a default, it can improve court efficiency by saving time waiting or trying to locate litigants.

When and Where Do You Need to Check In?

For many litigants, it isn't clear whether you need to check in before proceeding to a courtroom. I think the following situation is fairly common: I talked with a man standing in front of the Daily List in Worcester. He showed me his summons, which stated that he had to appear in Courtroom 12 at 9 am. He wasn't sure whether he needed to check in first. I didn't know the answer either, and suggested that he ask at the Probation side of the office as there was currently no line. He did this and discovered that he did not need to check in.

Notify People When Court Proceedings are Rescheduled

I talked with a woman who worked for CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children), so I assume that her experience is primarily with the Juvenile Court. She told me that the court should do a better job of notifying people when things are rescheduled. She pointed out surgery as a medical analogy: if your surgery is rescheduled, you and everyone else involved is notified. Why can't the court do a better job here?

Another Example

One man we talked with said he goes to the Worcester court every two weeks to check on the process of getting a court appointed lawyer. He wishes the court would tell him when and if he'll be able to actually get one. This might be a situation in which the Virtual Registry could help, and save the man a trip to the courthouse.

Improve Usability and User Experience Throughout the Court System

As John Huitema and I wrote in our 2023 report, "The Trial Court would benefit greatly by staffing a dedicated UX group to support all Trial Court development plans. By applying user-centered design principles, iterative design with usability testing, and developing UX metrics, the court can make dramatic improvements to all aspects of its operation. This should include both external- and internal-facing systems" (Karis & Huitema, 2023).

Designers and writers become so familiar with their general domain and the organization they work for that it is impossible for them to see their designs and content through the eyes of a typical user. For this reason, usability testing is essential, and ideally an iterative process is used in which there are multiple cycles of testing, revision, and then more testing. Usability testing can be done relatively quickly, either online via a variety of online products,⁵³ or in person, and there is evidence that testing using low fidelity (even paper-based) prototypes can uncover the same problems as testing with fully functional systems.

Usability is typically defined as having three parts: being able to use a product or service, efficiency (being able to accomplish goals quickly), and satisfaction. Large organizations have a variety of products, services, websites and internal processes, and there are always multiple usability issues and problems. The Trial Court is no exception. The Trial Court, however, is at a disadvantage in not having any usability or user experience researchers on staff. There are usability issues with the courts internal and external websites, with some of the digital displays used in courthouses, and with wayfinding, filling out court forms, finding information on Mass.gov, understanding legal procedures, and other areas.

Assess Usability

Usability is typically assessed via usability testing, which can be carried out remotely or in person. Consider testing the usability of a court form. Create a scenario involving the procedure (“Imagine that you want to become the guardian of your nephew...; imagine that you are getting divorced”) and then give the person the required form, ask them to fill it out, watch what they do, and ask them questions afterwards. The evaluation could also be more complex: Imagine you want to become the guardian of your nephew. Go online and find out what you need to do and then start the process. Tell me what you’re thinking as you go about this so I can follow what you’re doing.” For more information about usability testing, see my report, [A Guide for Field Testing Court Forms & Self-Help Material](#).

Use of Technology, and Lack of Technology

Many SRLs have limited technical ability, do not own computers, and although they may have mobile phones, they often have limited available minutes. Websites definitely need to be usable by litigants using their mobile phones (“Responsive design” refers to web development that results in a website that can be used on multiple different platforms).

⁵³ Once tasks are established, data can be collected very rapidly, often within a day, using sites that maintain their own panel of testers. See, for example, <https://www.usertesting.com/>, one of many such services.

Some other states are ahead of Massachusetts in their use of technology. Consider the new 17-story courthouse in Multnomah County, Oregon, where they “developed an innovative plan for the use of technology including contracting with specialized audio visual consultants and incorporating new software applications for interacting with customers and displaying information.” The plan addressed many of the areas in this paper, including helping litigants understand complex legal processes, wayfinding, check-in, waiting, queues, and so on.

...the central public service area in our new facility features self-help kiosks and terminals (with interfaces available in multiple languages and for those that are sight-impaired), 18 public service windows, an electronic check-in system, and a seated waiting area. Courthouse customers requiring the least amount of personal assistance can conduct business transactions quickly and limit their need to wait in line for a court clerk. Another example is the Crane Room on the 2nd floor which is dedicated to the highest volume functions for the court including traffic and parking citations, small claims, and landlord/tenant matters. In the Crane Room, you’ll find a seated waiting area, terminals with orientation videos to explain procedural options, consultation areas offering privacy for parties attempting to resolve cases, and monitors directing parties to the four Crane Room courtrooms as their cases are called.⁵⁴

It is especially interesting to note that some services have been combined across different court departments. “Our new Customer Service area has 18 service windows where Court Clerks will assist customers with financial transactions in all case types, filing of documents, setting up payment plans, and so on.”⁵⁵

Many courts in other states now have public information kiosks. Again, in Multnomah County:

Public Information Kiosks – Located throughout the building, each group of kiosks offers access to self-service features relevant to their location in the Central Courthouse. For example, outside the high-volume courtrooms, kiosks offer selfservice check-in for litigants to let staff know they have arrived for their hearing. In the Customer Service area, a full suite of applications is available, from looking up court records, to making online payments, to filling out online forms. Several kiosk groups, particularly those that permit access to online court records, allow patrons to submit a print job to be paid for and picked up from

⁵⁴<https://www.courts.oregon.gov/courts/multnomah/resources/Documents/Public-Partners%20Newsletter.pdf>

⁵⁵ Ibid.

either the Records Department on the 3rd floor or the Customer Service area on the 2nd.⁵⁶

Online Capabilities

Karis and Huitema (2023) listed “existing online features and capabilities of the Trial Court that our research found to be highly beneficial for SRLs and others, and therefore worth expanding and improving upon. Existing capabilities that should be improved and expanded are:

- eFiling
- Filing by Email
- eReminder
- eSignatures
- ePayment
- eService
- Virtual Court Service Center and Other Remote One-on-One Services
- eDelivery for Attorneys and SRLs
- Guide and File
- For the Record (FTR)
- MassCourts

See the Karis and Huitema (2023) report for details on each of these systems or services, plus a list of problems and recommendations.

Online dispute resolution is an important service that could help many SRLs, and I was glad to hear recently that the Trial Court will be piloting an online dispute resolution service later this year; it will be primarily asynchronous but there will also be synchronous capabilities involving Zoom calls.

Mass.gov

Although Mass.gov has improved dramatically over the years, and now has a tremendous amount of content, the “information architecture” (the organization, navigation, and search aspects of the website) still needs improvement, and many people we’ve talked with complain about its organization and navigation. One CPCS attorney we talked with said, “Go to Mass.gov and lose your mind.” She also said that “Mass.gov is not intuitive.” On the other hand, I have observed great improvements over the last five years in both content and usability, and there is an excellent web team, which has expanded from two people several years ago to five now. Unfortunately, since the Trial Court shares Mass.gov with other parts of state government, it doesn’t

⁵⁶ Ibid.

have full control and must work within the constraints of Drupal, the content management system for Mass.gov.

Our general description of website design from 2023 is still relevant:

Perhaps the most important aspect of almost any website is that it should be designed well and organized such that it is easy to find what you are looking for. The overall organization, or information architecture, needs to be logical and fit with the “mental model” of the users. There should also be an effective search function. And, when a user finds information, it should be presented clearly and written in plain language. The most common recommendation we heard from SRLs was to “Make things easier,” which applied to legal proceedings, court forms, and the design and usability of Mass.gov. (Karis & Huitema, 2023)

Many parts of Mass.gov are written very clearly in plain language, but some parts are not. The following is not unusual: On a page titled, “Instructions: Complaint for custody-support-parenting time”

(<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/instructions-complaint-for-custody-support-parenting-time>), there is a section on Service of Complaint. This section consists of the following:

Service of complaint on defendant is to be made in accordance with [Massachusetts Rules of Domestic Relations Procedure Rule 4](#).

The highlighted words in the section above is a link to the Rules of Domestic Relations Procedure, which is 69 pages long. Rule 4 is several pages of dense text that very, very few non-lawyers will read. Making this even more intimidating, the link above goes to the full 69 page set of rules and not just to Rule 4. Many who follow this link will think, as I did, that I needed to look through the complete set of rules, as I did not initially notice the “Rule 4” at the end. Ideally, the link should go to a plain language description of Rule 4, with a link to the complete set of rules for those who might be interested (e.g., lawyers who come to this page).

Continuing on the same page, what are the filing fees for this complaint? In a section on Filing fees, there is this: “View the [Probate and Family Court filing fees](#) page for applicable filing fees.” Rather than just telling you what the filing fees are (\$100), the link sends you to the general PFC filing fees page, where you must realize that this complaint goes under “Domestic relations and paternity fees.” Clicking this link leads to a part of the fees page with about 20 types of pleadings in this category. You need to find Complaint for Custody-Support-Parenting Time in this list, where the fee is listed as \$100. There may be a \$15 surcharge, but surcharge is not defined on this part of the

page. You can find it at the top of this (very long) page, but I was confused by the explanation:

If you're entering a complaint, petition or other civil action that has an initial filing fee and a separate docket number, you must also pay the Register a \$15 surcharge . You don't need to pay a surcharge for adding a suffix.

It is easier to list fees in only one place, as it will then be easier to update, but it would be much easier for litigants if fees were listed throughout the site next to each procedure. This is an example of a general user-interface rule: to create a good user experience it is better for an organization to do extra work in presenting information rather than forcing the customer or user to do the extra work.

Links to Official Legal Rules

The first thing you see on the Mass.gov page, "Instructions: Motion court form"⁵⁷ is this: "See Rules 5 and 6 of both the [Mass.R.Civ.P](#) and the [Mass.R.Dom.Rel.P.](#)" This refers to the Massachusetts Rules of Civil Procedure and the Massachusetts Rules of Domestic Relations Procedure. It's great to include these links, but the content of these official rules are totally unintelligible to non lawyers. Mass.gov is used by both lawyers and SRLs – when information is clearly for only lawyers, why not make this clear? For example, "Lawyers may want to review rules 5 and 6 in the Massachusetts Rules of Civil Procedure and the Massachusetts Rules of Domestic Relations Procedure."

Mass.gov: Pageviews and Content

In the table below, the dramatic increase in pageviews for both the Trial Court sections of Mass.gov and the Probate and Family Court are clear.

Year	Court System Views	Probate & Family Court Views
2022	8,062,353	2,048,166
2023	18,810,049	4,940,888
2024*	21,220,453	7,809,822

*January 1, 2024 – October 10, 2024

On Mass.gov there are now almost 7,000 court system pages, with almost 1,000 of those for the Probate and Family Court.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/instructions-motion-court-form>

⁵⁸ Thanks to Michelle Ciccarelli and Kevin Buckley for these numbers.

Accessibility

Accessibility is very important, as it allows people with visual, auditory, cognitive, and physical limitations to use public facilities and services. Each court department has an ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) coordinator, and the Trial Court web services team is well aware of website accessibility practices and rules. The new federal rules require that web content (for large public entities) should be accessible by April, 2026.

On April 24, 2024, the Federal Register published the Department of Justice's (Department) final rule updating its regulations for Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The final rule has specific requirements about how to ensure that web content and mobile applications (apps) are accessible to people with disabilities.⁵⁹

Requirement: The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) Version 2.1, Level AA is the technical standard for state and local governments' web content and mobile apps.⁶⁰

I do not discuss accessibility in this report, but I assume that when brochures, flowcharts, and other materials are posted online they should be accessible; there should be an HTML version, and when these materials are developed accessibility should be one of the goals.

Masscourts.org: The Attorney Portal or eAccess Portal

The Massachusetts Trial Court Electronic Case Access application is also known as eAccess. Litigants can look up case information and pay some court fees online using Masscourts.org, which uses a case management system from CourtView (it was previously only available to attorneys, which explains the name Attorney Portal). The litigants I interviewed never mentioned using Masscourts, so there is no discussion of it here. Nevertheless, it is a critical part of proceeding without a lawyer, as it allows you to track the progress and status of your case by viewing case information, including court dates, documents filed, party information, and the disposition. From previous experience, my opinion is that the interface design and usability is horrendous (see Karis & Huitema, 2023, for a detailed discussion of Masscourts). A simple usability evaluation in which a researcher observes a litigant attempting to use the system to check on their case would immediately reveal a wide range of problems. The issue for the Trial Court is a common one: what to do about a system supplied by a vendor that has multiple problems? It's incredibly difficult to move to another system, and the court may have limited leverage to force the vendor to make improvements.

⁵⁹ <https://www.ada.gov/resources/2024-03-08-web-rule/>

⁶⁰ <https://www.ada.gov/resources/2024-03-08-web-rule/#highlights-of-the-requirements-in-the-rule>

What the Trial Court seems to have done – which is the best short-term solution – is to provide extensive directions on Mass.gov on how to use this portal. Note that the extent of the instructions provided is a good indication of the poor state of the Masscourts interface. If it were a well-designed system, extensive instructions would not be needed, as the interface would be designed to be much easier to understand and use, and any help or assistance required would be built into the system.

eFiling

eFiling is an example of a service that could be incredibly useful but does not live up to its potential because it is very difficult to use. I've talked to many attorneys during past projects who love eFiling, use it all the time, but told me that the first time they used it they needed help from a fellow lawyer. In my first attempt to use it I failed miserably. One individual left this feedback message on the Mass.gov page on "eFiling in the Probate and Family Court" (on 8/8/2024): "I need to move files into the SAME "envelope" as rejected filings. Nothing that I can "click on" appears to do that. "Copy envelope" makes an envelope with a new number. The Clerk is asking for a (replacement) envelope with the same number -- how do I do that???" In fact, when I tried to eFile, I was stumped when I encountered the term "envelope"; what is an "envelope" with respect to eFiling? (I know this now but I didn't know it then.)

This is an excellent example of how AI-generated answers by search engines are incredibly useful. Asking a question in Google search on the meaning of the word envelope in eFiling in Massachusetts results in a clear answer:

In the context of eFiling in Massachusetts, an "envelope" refers to a single electronic submission containing one or more documents to be filed in a specific case. It's the unit of filing within the eFiling system, and can include multiple documents like motions, briefs, and exhibits.

Here's a more detailed explanation:

- **What it is:** An envelope is essentially a container for your eFiled documents.
- **Contents:** It can hold multiple documents, allowing you to submit related filings together.
- **Filing:** When you submit an envelope, it initiates a filing with the court.
- **Fees:** For new cases, there's a \$22 eFile fee associated with the envelope.
- **Size:** The total size of all documents within an envelope has a limit, often 35 MB.

- **Impounded Documents:** Impounded documents (documents not open to public view) can be included within an envelope, along with public documents.

According to this [Google Search Labs | AI Overview](#), one of the references is to an 85-page PDF document, “MASSACHUSETTS APPEALS COURT GUIDE TO ELECTRONIC FILING PROCEDURE.” Although written for attorneys and their law firms, it has a lot of very detailed information and instructions. Some of the links for the other information from the AI Overview point to the Superior Court, and some information may be different for the Appeals and Superior Court versus the Trial Court.

I don’t have recent statistics, but a few years ago about 95% of eFilings were from attorneys. The few that came from SRLs almost all came from small claims. At that time, only small claims had a Guide and File option, which may explain why that is where most SRL eFilings originated.

I agree with a recent Pew report on simplifying court processes to support user engagement that suggests changing rules so that nonlawyers can e-file for free (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2023, “How to Simplify Court Processes to Support User Engagement: Steps for making civil courts more effective”). As an NCSC report on eFiling states, “All litigants, especially those who are low-income and unrepresented would benefit from the ability to file legal papers remotely at any time, day, or night” (Self-represented efilings, 2022). The NCSC report goes on to point out that it’s difficult for one system to meet everyone’s needs:

...the professional bar’s efilings needs are usually functionally different from the self-represented. This is why some states offer more than one efilings solution. “An interface designed for self-represented litigants will prove to be completely unsatisfactory for high-volume users and vice versa, given the unique context and needs of these very different users.” (Self-represented efilings, 2022)

The NCSC study was an initial foray into this area, and presented some of its limitations, writing that it did not study a variety of important topics, including “Whether state trial-level efilings systems accommodate limited scope representation situations, embrace plain language, offer real-time and human tech support, or are designed with the smartphone user in mind...” (Self-represented efilings, 2022).

Smartphone Apps for Parents

There are a variety of smartphone apps that parents can use for coordinating custody and childcare issues. Some are free, for some there is a charge, and some are

recommended by the PFC. This is another excellent use of technology. Our Family Wizard is often used, but they charge a fee, while AppClose is free. Both parties often agree to use one of these communication apps, and in some cases when only one party wants to use it the court may order the other party to use it as well, especially if there has been a failure to communicate respectfully and effectively.

Law School “Labs”

I recommend monitoring and keeping abreast of work by the various law school “labs” around the country. The Legal Innovation & Technology Lab at Suffolk University Law School has been creating guided interviews (described above) and examining the application of AI to the law. The Stanford Legal Design Lab is active in a number of areas (<https://law.stanford.edu/legal-design-lab/>), and the director, Margaret Hagan, has published a number of articles on topics related to user experience. The Access to Justice Lab at Harvard Law School has done a number of interesting studies in the past, although it doesn’t seem to be very active at the moment. At Northeastern University Law School there is the NuLawLab (<https://www.nulawlab.org/>).

Other Services and “Small Things”

Every service should be examined for both usability and functionality. Here’s an example of a usability problem that would be easy to identify in a usability evaluation. I tried to use For The Record (FTR; in September, 2024) to order the audio of a court event. I looked at the Daily List, chose a case, then went to FTR to look for it. After entering the case number from the daily list and proceeding (I wasn’t sure what the case title should be since there is nothing on the Daily List called Title) there was a very long pull-down to select the court and courtroom but the list stopped before Worcester (which I was looking for). There was text at the bottom, “Showing 10 courthouses. You can search to display further results.” However, there was no search function and I didn’t know how to search to display more courthouses. The next step would have asked for date and time (from, to), so this is a fairly long process...but I was stuck.

In any large organization, especially one that interacts with the public in multiple ways, there are always a large number of usability and user experience problems that should be addressed. Here is another example: When I’ve called the Virtual Court Service Center the video of the staff member helping me is on and I can see the person I’m talking with. In the CSC, in fact, it is a policy to always have the camera on. When I called the Virtual Registry the clerk’s camera was turned on during some calls but turned off on others. You can still be helped using audio alone, but the experience is much richer, and more personal, when you can see the person you’re talking with. When I pointed this out, I was told that clerks would be told to have their cameras on.

Reducing Anxiety

Improving user experience will reduce anxiety, and anxiety is a major problem for many litigants. Going to court is almost always stressful, and is often extremely stressful. Consider, for example, some of these questions: Will I be homeless after today's proceedings? Will I be able to see my son? Will I be in jail? Although we can never eliminate this stress, the courts can help in a variety of ways. Improvements in each of the areas in this report should reduce anxiety. For example, entering courts that have greeters are less stressful. Improved wayfinding throughout the courthouse can also help, as can improvements in the physical spaces by providing comfortable places to sit, or write, and where possible, providing places for small children to play. Better forms, and better information about complex procedures will help even more. Negative interactions with court personnel in offices and the courtrooms can lead to enormous stress, and past initiatives such as the Signature Counter Experience Program seemed to be very effective.⁶¹

Continuous Improvement

It is easy to collect feedback about problems within the Trial Court and suggestions for improvements. Although many have very positive experiences, almost everyone has ideas for improvements or complaints about their own experiences. It should be easy to set up procedures for collecting, analyzing, and acting on this feedback. It could be collected from litigants, attorneys (private and those working for legal aid organizations), court staff, and social service organizations. One woman I spoke with at a Resource Fair in Worcester suggested that the court send out a survey periodically in which people could report their experiences and recommendations. Although such a survey should include some standard rating questions that can be tracked over time, the most value will be from open-ended questions such as, "From your experiences with the Trial Court, what are the most important improvements the court should make?" And, "What problems have you had interacting with the Trial Court, and what does the Trial Court do well?" These would be open-ended questions with a free-text response field and so would take more time to analyze and summarize. The amount of useful and diagnostic user experience information from such questions is typically far superior to that obtained by a standard questionnaire with multiple choice answers.

Surveys

The Trial Court deploys an Access and Fairness Survey, but it is conducted only once every six to eight years.⁶² The last, in 2023, involved a major effort, with employees

⁶¹ Most of this paragraph is from Karis (2020).

⁶² The next Access and Fairness Survey is scheduled for 2026, three years after the 2023 survey, so I assume the new Office of Access to Justice and Court User Experience plans to run these surveys at shorter intervals.

collecting survey responses in-person at 25 court locations around the state.⁶³ The results were positive: eight or nine out of ten court users agreed with statements that they were treated with courtesy and respect, were satisfied with their overall court experience, and felt safe in courthouses. The survey provided a large amount of very useful information, and the results were broken down by court department. However, even with 1,399 respondents this was not enough to break down the results further by “role” (party on a case, attorney, friend), the purpose for visiting the court, and the individual PFC office.

Given the differences among PFCs, it’s not really meaningful to look at results for questions like, “I easily found the courtroom or office I needed.” In Northampton (Hampshire County), the building includes only the PFC, and when you walk into the building the main office is right there, while in the large multi-court complex in Boston, as mentioned elsewhere in this report, it is a real challenge to find the PFC office.

A total of 673 respondents (48%) were in court to participate in a hearing or trial, but no results were broken out for these respondents by court department, role, or the reason for visiting the court. Results for many questions aren’t really that interesting when they are combined across the reasons people check for being in court on the day of the survey. If you are in court to file papers or forms, versus participating in a hearing or trial, you may give very different answers to whether you completed business in a reasonable time and whether your overall experience at court was satisfactory. And, of course, the answers given by attorneys may be very different from those of SRLs.

Although informative and useful, the large Access and Fairness Survey provides little diagnostic information that can be used to improve the user experience. Much more useful would be regular qualitative surveys that use open-ended questions in which litigants can describe their problems and complaints and also present their suggestions. For example, questions might include: “Please describe any problems you have had in your dealings with the court system. Be as specific as possible” and “If you have any suggestions for improvements within the court system, please let us know. This survey is anonymous and we cannot respond to your suggestions or any problems you report, but court staff will review every response as part of our process of continuous improvement.”

Even a single response can alert court staff tracking user experience that there may be a problem worth investigating or fixing. For example, consider again the example from the section above on eFiling: last year (on August 8, 2024), one person clicked on the

⁶³<https://www.mass.gov/doc/massachusetts-trial-court-report-on-the-2023-access-and-fairness-survey/download>

“Feedback” link on the side of a Mass.gov page on “eFiling in the Probate and Family Court” and wrote this:

I need to move files into the SAME "envelope" as rejected filings. Nothing that I can "click on" appears to do that. "Copy envelope" makes an envelope with a new number. The Clerk is asking for a (replacement) envelope with the same number -- how do I do that???

This is just one person, but if a staff member familiar with eFiling looks at the interface and decides it is likely to be a problem that others will also experience, then the interface or page-level instructions need to be improved. In my experience in reviewing daily feedback emails on a major commercial website, most are uninteresting or general complaints that can't be addressed. However, one can read through these responses quickly, and every day or two I would find one that reported a problem I was unaware of, offered an interesting suggestion that was worth investigating, or even reported a problem that turned out to be a software bug.

Recommendations

- Ideally, the Trial Court should have a User Experience (UX) team that evaluates the usability of all aspects of interacting with the trial court, participates in the design of new forms, products, and services, and collects information from litigants about their experiences.
- Because eFiling can be tremendously valuable to litigants but is currently very difficult to use, improving the usability of eFiling should be a priority. The Trial Court should work with Tyler Technologies to help them improve the interface. Until it is much easier to use, each department should provide better written or video instructions, or perhaps even hold periodic Zoom training sessions on how to eFile. One example comes from the Housing Court, as they created instructional videos on eFiling (<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/step-by-step-video-guide-on-efiling-in-the-housing-court>).
- Similarly, conduct, or commission, a simple usability study focused on Masscourts and then pressure the vendor to make improvements. Alternatively, investigate switching to another vendor.
- There should be a usability and design project to improve Mass.gov.
- Label links to official legal rules in a way that identifies them as relevant primarily to lawyers. (“Lawyers may want to review rules x and y ...”)
- Continue to make small improvements. For example, here is a small improvement that was made recently: on the feedback forms available on Mass.gov, many people leave questions indicating that they want a response,

even though the feedback form indicates that “You will not get a response.” Recently these feedback forms were improved by adding the text, “If you need assistance, please [contact the Probate and Family Court](#)” with the underlined text linked to a page for the Probate and Family Court that includes contact information.

- As part of a process of continuous monitoring and improvement, create separate qualitative surveys for litigants, attorneys, and court staff requesting information about problems and suggestions for improvements. Surveys could be distributed monthly to relatively small numbers of respondents. The goal would be to collect information on problems and suggestions in order to provide information on what the court should focus on to improve user experience – rather than on tracking changes over time in a statistically rigorous way (which can also be done, but with a separate survey).
- One simple way to recruit survey respondents is to include a link to an anonymous qualitative survey in all communications that the court sends to litigants and lawyers. The fact that this would result in a non-probability sample is not an issue here, because one important goal is to identify usability and other problems that can be verified by a user experience team.
- Someone at the Trial Court should be assigned to review all NCSC, Pew, and other reports that present best practices and guidelines and distribute them to the appropriate departments and individuals.

Miscellaneous Issues

Extended Court Hours

One of the primary complaints from litigants is the time and expense of coming to court; people need to take time off from work, and those with children need to arrange child care. As one group of people we talked to told us, today was the fourth day of work that they had to take off to fill out paperwork. According to the 2023 Access and Fairness Survey,

Court users were asked to report what types of accommodations they made to come to court. Overall, 51.6% of court users, including 63.1% of non-attorneys, reported making at least one accommodation to come to court. The most frequent accommodation reported among non-attorneys was taking time off work or school (41.2% of non-attorney court users).⁶⁴

Some states keep their courts open one evening a week and on Saturday mornings to make it easier for litigants, and Massachusetts experimented with evening hours in the

⁶⁴<https://www.mass.gov/doc/massachusetts-trial-court-report-on-the-2023-access-and-fairness-survey/download>

past. Keeping courts open outside of normal business hours is a major undertaking, but other states have done this, and it is worth considering again.

A much easier solution is to extend the hours of the virtual registry and the virtual offices of other departments. Some people who staff these operations already work from home, so there would be no need to keep physical courthouses open. I assume some staff would enjoy having the flexibility to work in the evening, and on Saturday mornings, in exchange for taking time off during regular hours. (I realize that this may necessitate renegotiating union contracts.)

The NCSC studied alternative court hours and listed 14 states where there are alternative court hours, primarily during weekday evenings and on Saturdays (Wirkus & Zarnow, 2023). The Manhattan night court, for example, handles 70 to 90 cases each night between 5 pm and 1 am and, “The operation of this alternative service model has become essential for the city to keep up with its case flow.” The report focused on the benefits to both the courts and litigants. As mentioned in this report, the benefits to litigants are very clear, especially because in most cases litigants will no longer need to miss work or arrange child care. From the report:

Criminal court alternative hours have been used almost exclusively for “preliminary court proceedings—like arraignments, where people who have been arrested hear their charges in court and can submit their plea.” This allows courts to process matters that can clog the system during the day in a more timely manner. It also reduces the number of people in jail waiting for arraignment.

Respondents to the NCSC State of the State Courts poll expressed widespread concern about court accessibility and reported various obstacles to appearing. They reported that the following factors were obstacles: the distance to travel to the courthouse (49%); getting time off work or school to go to the courthouse (41%); transportation issues (30%); a physical handicap or disability making it difficult (23%); and finding childcare for the time they needed to be at the courthouse (22%).

Arrested individuals who cannot bond out must wait in jail to be arraigned, where they formally hear the charges against them and enter a plea. By providing arraignments and other preliminary hearings during extended hours, courts give people the opportunity to be released sooner and are less likely to run afoul of due process requirements.

All five of the five courts surveyed about establishing these programs said that it was not difficult to staff their programs (Wirkus & Zarnow, 2023).

Recommendation

- Extend the hours of the virtual registry and the virtual offices of other departments. Consider keeping some courthouses open one evening a week and on Saturday mornings.

Video Hearings and Depositions

During COVID, remote depositions were permitted. This Supreme Judicial Court (SJC) rule was later rescinded, but recently reinstated when the Supreme Judicial Court amended the Massachusetts Rule of Civil Procedure 30(b)(4), which became effective on February 1, 2025. It allows remote video-conferencing depositions. From the notice by the SJC:

(4) By Remote Means. A remote deposition may be taken using a video-conferencing platform or by telephone.

- (A) Video-Conferencing Deposition. Subject to the following provisions, by notice of the party seeking to take the deposition, a deposition may be taken in a civil case remotely by video-conferencing platform (video-conferencing deposition) in a manner that allows for the deponent, all other persons entitled to attend, and all other necessary persons (e.g., the officer/court reporter) to participate without attending the deposition in person....⁶⁵

The court has collected a lot of information about using videoconferencing for court events, including a survey that the SJC and Trial Court conducted in November and December, 2021 on the *Future of Virtual Technology in the Courts*. From the Executive Summary:

Participants supported the use of videoconferencing for short/time-sensitive, administrative court events, particularly where there is little need for evidence or witness testimony. Participants supported the use of videoconferencing for many proceedings, including scheduling conferences, status/discovery conferences, and initial case management conferences.⁶⁶

⁶⁵<https://www.mass.gov/doc/amendments-to-rule-30-b-4-of-the-massachusetts-rules-of-civil-procedure-effective-february-1-2025/download>

⁶⁶<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/report-of-massachusetts-attorney-survey-on-the-future-of-virtual-technology-in-the-courts>

Results from my previous research are in accord with the results from this survey. Everyone we talked to agreed with this use of videoconferencing, and many were dramatic in their enthusiasm (Karis & Huitema, 2023).

Recommendation

- Continue to study and extend the number and type of court events that can be held remotely. In most civil cases, from the perspective of an SRL, the more options for participating remotely the better.
- Provide more remote help via the Virtual Registry, Virtual Court Service Center, Zoom-based hearings, and so on

Support for Men

Several men complained to me and the graduate students that the court always takes the word and position of the woman involved in a case. This seemed to be especially true in child custody and support cases. Whether or not this is a valid complaint, the court should recognize that some men feel this way. One man told us that Massachusetts does not have any father's groups but has plenty of mother's groups. He said that he "respects" women for birthing babies, but that after the child is born, the father needs to be involved and supported. Within the court system he feels that it is not fair that his ex can lie and not provide proof, but that he is expected to give evidence for what he claims. He also feels that DCF (Department of Children & Families) is biased toward giving support to women.

Of course, many litigants are ignorant of both court and community resources. There are, in fact, many resources for fathers, including the City of Boston's Father Friendly Initiative, Fathers' Uplift, and the Fatherhood Project, which has a brochure that lists literally hundreds of organizations across the state by county as well as national organizations that focus on improving the "health and well-being of children and families by empowering fathers to be knowledgeable, active, and emotionally engaged with their children."⁶⁷

Here's the experience of another man: he is a single dad in his late 20s who is at court for the 3rd or 4th time regarding a custody "battle." Although he was initially at court asking for 50/50 custody, he has now started fighting for full custody and feels unfairly treated. He believes the court is set up against him as a single father because he's a man, even though by his account the mother is absent. He feels the court does a very bad job at working with parents, especially dads, and feels he is unfairly treated and judged because he and the woman were never married. The mother is absent, and it is

⁶⁷ <https://www.thefatherhoodproject.org/media/resourceguide-fatherhood-5-1-18-1.pdf>, <https://www.boston.gov/government/cabinets/boston-public-health-commission/childrens-and-newborn-health/father-friendly>, <https://www.fathersuplift.org/>

her mother, the child's grandmother, who is in court today (it's possible, of course, that the grandmother is the child's legal guardian, but I don't know any of the case details). He doesn't understand why that's allowed to happen because he's taking the mother to court and not the grandmother. He wants full custody and wishes to be rewarded for being the one who's showing up and trying.

People can have all types of perceptions of bias and persecution, and it's obviously impossible to evaluate the validity of such claims based on only a description from one party of the case. It is also the case that it is men who threaten and abuse women far more often than the reverse, and it is men who refuse to pay child support, and on and on, so there are good reasons why taking the word of a woman is often the right thing to do.

In my experience, the Trial Court strives to do what is best for the child. And although subconscious bias is always possible, it's also true that people's misperceptions of what the law is, prior to entering a courtroom, may play a part in their perception of bias once in the courtroom. One CSC staff member I spoke to reported that people often think they know what the law is based on what their friends, family, or even the Internet have told them. Then they come to court either without filing anything or they file an incorrect/incomplete pleading and the judge rules in a way that feels like a personal attack. The reality could be that the judge may be limited in their ruling based on their faulty pleading.

For instance, an unmarried parent who gives birth has sole custody of the child. A common misconception is that the act of signing a birth certificate will give parents shared custody. Under the law this is not true without a court order or unless the parents subsequently marry. Additionally, as a general rule, a judge is only able to discuss the requests made on a pleading. If a judge refuses to talk about something that is not on the pleading, the SRL may take this a personal attack.

I have no recommendations with respect to support for men as fathers, but felt it was important to convey what we heard from several men.

Vignettes

Telling the stories of some of the people I've talked with can be an effective way to convey their experiences and the problems they encountered. They also often offered suggestions for improvements; although many of these suggestions may not be practical, it is interesting to hear them. Here is a sample of the many stories that I heard.

Vignette 1: A Woman who Drove from Upstate NY

Situation: On October 6, 2023 I interviewed a 38 year old woman from far upstate, NY, at the Probate and Family Court office in Worcester. She was trying to modify a custody agreement to get custody of her two sons who currently live in Massachusetts. She thought that there was neglect and abuse by the father. She started this process six years ago.

She drives from upstate NY, which takes her four and half hours each way and costs \$100 (each way) for gas, food, and tolls. She came to court just to turn in paperwork and paid \$20 to park next to the courthouse. I told her parking at the Elm Street garage is only \$4 for the first hour, which she did not know, and was pleased to learn.

Background: She is disabled and not currently working. She has completed an Affidavit of Indigency, which was approved. She speaks English at home. She was with her oldest child, a daughter who is a high school senior. She normally drives her daughter to school, so was forced to take her out of school and bring her along. The daughter was attentive during the conversation and spoke up a few times, at one point saying that she just wanted her brothers to be safe. This woman said her experience today was “great.”

Importance of Information: She had never seen the current Information Sheet and said the Virtual Registry would have helped her. She also did not know about the Court Service Center or free legal aid. In addition, she did not know that you can eFile. She has a smartphone and has access to a computer at her in-laws’ house. Assistant Register Delgado brought in a printout about eFiling for her, and by her reaction I think she will try to eFile in the future. I asked the daughter to help her mom if there were computer problems.

Vignette 2: Registering a Divorce Obtained Overseas

On October 24, 2023, I interviewed a 37 year-old woman at the Brooke courthouse. She was living with family in Quincy, works in “Freelance Public Policy,” has not filled out an Affidavit of Indigency (she is not eligible) and speaks English at home. She indicated “Graduate/Professional School” for education on the information sheet we collected. She was in court because she needed to get her divorce registered.

Her story was very interesting. She was married in Cambridge to a man from Saudi Arabia. She obtained a Department of State form confirming her marriage so she would be eligible for better housing (as a married woman) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where she was going to work. She got divorced in the UAE but had trouble because her

husband had moved back to Saudi Arabia and would not cooperate. Her boss in the UAE was a Sheikh, and he helped obtain the support of her husband and his family.

She finally completed everything while in the UAE and had her papers stamped at the US Embassy there. She was told at the PFC counter that she needed to go to the Norfolk office of the Probate and Family Court (it serves Quincy, where she now lives). She could have learned this via a quick call to the Virtual Registry, and saved a trip to downtown Boston.

Vignette 3: Difficulty Finding the Court Service Center at the Brooke Courthouse

On October 24, 2023, I interviewed people in the PFC office at the Brooke courthouse accompanied by a law student intern (I will call her N. here). When we were leaving, I asked N. to try to find the Court Service Center in the building and I followed her, noting where she went. She started out knowing only that it was downstairs (from the third floor where we started). Here is what happened:

1. N. walked down the stairs to the second floor and looked around. She noticed the directory near the Information Desk (which is unattended except when legal aid organizations use it), but the Court Service Center was not listed on it. “It’s like a maze!” she exclaimed.
2. N. then walked down to the first floor and looked at the two directories on the wall there. Neither included the Court Service Center.
3. She asked a man walking by (who looked as if he might be an attorney) but he didn’t know. He did suggest asking the court officers at the security checkpoint near the main entrance (which was only about twenty meters away).
4. N. did this and a woman officer, who was very friendly, gave fairly detailed directions. The directions were to go up the stairs, make a left, go toward the exit, and look for a hallway on the right. The Court Service Center, she said, was down that hallway.
5. These were accurate directions, but after going up the stairs and turning left N. saw an exit sign and headed for it, going toward the elevators, which is the wrong direction (the officer was referring to the building exit on the second floor, while N. saw an exit sign leading down to the main entrance).
6. N. returned and walked in the correct direction, toward the employee entrance, and saw the Juvenile Probation Office, initially thinking that it was the Court Service Center, but then noticing a sign on the door indicating that the Court Service Center was across the open space and down a hallway. (I learned that many people had made this mistake, which was why clerks in that office had put a sign on the door.)
7. However, in front of the Juvenile Probation Office there are a series of seven foot high displays about slavery in Massachusetts and various trials (which, as an

aside, are quite fascinating). These displays blocked sight lines and so it wasn't possible to see the hallway across the open area where the Court Service Center is located.

8. N. headed to the employee entrance, where there was another court officer, and would have asked her and found the Court Service Center, given we were just a few feet away, so at that point I told her where it was. Success at last!

In the past, there used to be a poster on a stand at the beginning of the hallway with "Court Service Center" and an arrow pointing down the hallway. This was very useful and I don't know why it disappeared, but I've heard that signs on tripods – or the tripods themselves – often disappear, taken for use by other departments.



Figure 19. New signs make it much easier to locate the Boston Court Service Center

Note that none of the four wall directories she came upon listed the Court Service Center. Later, I checked the digital display near the elevator on the first floor (there is

one on each floor) and it listed the Court Service Center. However, in a previous report on the problems with these digital displays, I noted that on only the first floor are you able to get a map of every floor (see [Digital Displays at the Brooke Courthouse](#), November 17, 2019). The digital displays on the other floors only provide a map of the floor they are on. This means that you would not be able to find the Court Service Center if you looked at the digital displays on floor three through six. Even on the first floor digital display, the font size for “Court Service Center” is so small, with poor resolution, that it is difficult to read.

Update: In late 2024, new signs were installed that make it easier to find the Court Service Center. They can be seen in Figure 19 above, and are an excellent improvement.⁶⁸

Vignette 4: The Difficulty of Becoming the Guardian of Your Own Child Before He Turns 18

On October 6, 2023, I interviewed a woman and her husband at the Worcester PFC office. They were in court trying to get guardianship of their adult son. The woman did most of the talking. She is 43 years old, lives in Rutland, and is working as a social worker. She speaks English at home. Their son has cognitive and physical disabilities. They have been taking care of him and want to continue caring for him. He turned 18 yesterday. They started the process six months ago and filed the paperwork two weeks ago. Their complaint is that they have received “no direction” from the court. They are now very stressed because they can no longer make decisions for their son or have access to his medical records, and will not be able to fully take care of him until the guardianship process is complete.

Becoming a guardian of an incapacitated person is very complex, with multiple forms required, plus a medical certificate (valid for 30 days) and a clinical team report (valid for 180 days; see <https://www.mass.gov/how-to/file-for-guardianship-of-an-incapacitated-person>). The problem is the timing. They told me that you can’t file until the child is near 18, but then there may not be time to finish the process before the child turns 18. The required evaluations are good for only a limited time, and given when you’re allowed to start the process (I’m not sure exactly when that is), it may be difficult to have the guardianship in place when the child turns 18. This is the problem for this couple.

For parents with children with disabilities this can be a “challenging and very long process.” This couple is highly educated and motivated and they have done research on the process. They have a computer at home and seem to be tech savvy. Even though

⁶⁸ Thanks to Susan Lawlor for sharing this photo with me.

the woman is a social worker and works for elder services she still “struggled with the process.” They were told they can’t go before a judge today and have a court date for October 24 (I think the reason they can’t see a judge today is that there is not a current emergency that they need to deal with). They are trying to get temporary guardianship until the process is completed.

Medical evaluation. Their son has MassHealth and Blue Cross Blue Shield, and the medical evaluation would have been covered if done at Children’s Hospital. Children’s Hospital told them they could do the evaluation, but the next appointment was in two years. For this reason, they had to pay for their own private evaluation, which was very expensive.

The two clerks they interacted with today were “amazing.” However, in the past this wasn’t the case, when a clerk gave them forms and quickly told them to fill this out, do this, sign here, without giving a thorough explanation. I’ve observed this happening myself, but given the flow of people into the office it just doesn’t seem possible to always spend enough time to explain detailed processes thoroughly.

Consequences: Since their son just turned 18 they can’t make decisions for him, they can’t order his medicine, and they lost access to the Boston Children’s portal that has information about his medical condition, appointments, and so on (Boston Children’s Hospital cut off access to the portal as soon as he turned 18). Recently, their son’s feeding tube came out at school, he tried to put it back in himself, there was an investigation at his school, but the investigation stopped when he turned 18. Recently he has had two surgeries. The woman was very worried that if something happens to her son before the guardianship process is completed she will not be able to help him.

Recommendations

More help in understanding the process: This woman wanted more help in understanding the process. To paraphrase her: I file this, then this, then there is this notice, then the other children are served (I didn’t know children in the family would be served). She also wanted more information about how to fill out the paperwork and what everything means.

Working with schools: The court system should work more closely with schools on cases like this, the mother told me. Last year I interviewed a woman who was seeking help at a Court Service Center who made this same point.

Update: The CSCs now interact with schools in some communities, including Lowell, Lawrence, and Brockton, and this outreach work is now expanding given that the CSC

has what they call Circuit staff. These staff members go out into the community, working with individuals and also giving presentations on Guardianship and other processes.

A video: She said it would have been good to have a video with a case worker talking about guardianship and then having more detailed information.

Update: On Masslegalhelp.org there is now an hour-long video on Guardianship of Incapacitated Persons, so the situation is definitely improving.⁶⁹

Vignette 5: The Difficulty in Getting Help for Simple Probate Matters

An older woman stopped by our table and asked where she should go. Her sister died recently and she was looking for probate. I told her where to go and asked if I could stand with her in line and talk with her. She agreed, and I talked to her and stood next to her as she talked with a clerk about her situation. Her sister died in June and had no children or husband and the sister was taking care of things. The only thing left of the estate was a check for \$510 made out to the deceased. The woman wanted to be able to cash that check. She had the death certificate and birth certificates proving that she was the sister. She was under the mistaken impression that she could complete this all today and then have the ability to cash the check. At the counter, the woman explained her situation and the clerk asked if the estate was worth less than \$25,000. The answer was “Yes” and the clerk gave her Voluntary Administration Statement Form (MPC 170), which is correct based on Mass.gov information. However, the clerk did not give her the instructions, which are available on Mass.gov:

<https://www.mass.gov/doc/instructions-for-voluntary-administration-with-or-without-a-will-mpc-961/download>. The instructions are very good. When the clerk told the woman that there was a fee of \$115, the woman made a face and stiffened. She was not expecting this and for her this was obviously a lot of money. I asked if there was a waiver and the clerk handed her an Affidavit of Indigency. (I recently found out that costs in probate/voluntary administrations are not generally waived.)

I thought, mistakenly, that Court Service Centers do not help people with probate matters, and knew this was also the case for most legal aid organizations. I had examined Court Service Center brochures many times, and had read the descriptions online about the types of cases they can, and cannot, help with. This material always includes a statement that CSCs may help with “Voluntary Administrations” but I had no idea that this referred to an estate with less than \$25,000 in assets and no real estate. After looking at Form MPC 170, and the Affidavit of Indigency, the woman gave up.

⁶⁹<https://www.masslegalhelp.org/children-families-divorce/guardians-other-caregivers/guardianship-incapacitated-persons>

Parking: She said there was no parking. She couldn't afford the nearby \$20 lots and when I mentioned the much cheaper nearby municipal lots she said she didn't know about those. She parked on the street where there was a sign about paying by an app. She had no idea what this meant or how to do it and just left her car without paying. If they check regularly she probably received a ticket.

Vignette 6: A Man Searching through the Daily List

A man was standing in front of the Daily List outside the Worcester PFC looking for where he should be. I asked if I could help and he told me his name and we both looked. Finally, I found his name. I think it was a Guardian of an Adult hearing and it was called a Magistrate Session. But there was no location listed! Where should I go, he asked. I couldn't figure it out either, but someone came by and pointed out that "Courtroom 1" was written at the top of several sheets that were attached and referred to everything below it. Neither of us had seen that. Even just drawing a line straight down from the "Courtroom 1" would have helped us.

Vignette 7: Compassionate Behavior by a Court Officer

On October 15, 2024 I sat in a courtroom during a Guardianship Block. An older woman's phone kept making sounds. She tried to shut it off, but even that process made various beeping sounds. The judge told her to turn off her phone, and I noticed some others in the courtroom turning off their phones. A few minutes later it went off again. The first time a court officer approached her. He was very friendly and tried to help her. The second time her attorney (I think) came over and took the phone and left the courtroom. The court officer came over to tell the woman not to worry about it, it was fine. He was exceedingly nice. It was an older woman and she appeared to be getting frustrated and upset that she couldn't silence the phone and it kept making noise. The attorney came back in a few minutes later and gave the woman back her phone. This is a good example of compassionate behavior by a court officer.

Vignette 8: A Confusing Notice Leads to Arrival at the Wrong Courthouse

On November 26, 2024, I saw a man in his 40s outside the Worcester PFC looking confused so I approached him. He showed me a form, which was for a housing matter, so I walked him over to the other side of the second floor and went with him to the counter. He showed me what he had received, a Notice of First-Tier Court Event. On the top right there were three sections. Verbatim (and you can see this in Figure 18):

1. Massachusetts Trial Court Housing Court Department (part of the heading)
2. Court Name & Address: Central Housing Court, 225 Main Street, Worcester, MA01608
3. Parties must appear at Marlborough Session, 45 Williams Street, Marlborough, MA 01752

I did what this man had done and looked at the Court Name and Address, which is Worcester, where he was, and it was only when we talked with the clerk in the Housing Court that she pointed out that he was at the wrong court. She said she would call the Marlborough Court (a satellite office) and tell them he would be late. It was a 20 minute drive. I asked and he responded that he had a car. He also had a lawyer who he called; the man asked me to speak to his lawyer, as he was a Spanish speaker and his English wasn't very good. I spoke with the lawyer, who was already at the court, and he said everything would be fine. The clerk at the Housing counter was pleasant and helpful. The man's lawyer should have told the man where to appear.

Vignette 9: Getting Help from the Law Library When the CSC is Closed

On October 15, 2024 I walked across the street to visit the Law Library (this was in Worcester). I sat in the chair in front of the counter and listened as a man talked to the head librarian about his case. He was getting evicted, his landlord had cut off and then started his electricity, and was treating the building as a boarding house even though she didn't have that permission (according to him). That is, he was in a three bedroom apartment and she was renting out the other rooms without his consent or agreement. One of the people she let in was smoking crack, he claimed, and stole his tools and was using his space in the kitchen. He wanted punitive damages of \$20,000 from the landlord and was planning on filing several other complaints and trying to stop an eviction. He needed two copies of something, and the librarian made copies for him. He was planning on sending one to the court and one to his landlord, and also needed to send a registered letter. He had no money and asked the librarian for an envelope, which she gave him.

The Worcester Law Library allows people to make up to 20 copies at no charge. This man was talkative, clearly down and out, but also intelligent, and was willing to file various forms himself. He had gone to the CSC, seen it was closed, and so came across to the Law Library. He was aware of the Law Library and the CSC and had been to the court before. The Law Library is closed from 12 to 1 and the man and I were there until 12, when we both left.

Vignette 10: No Phone, No Computer, and Thus No Way to Call the CSC

On October 1, 2024, I noticed an older woman (perhaps in her late 70s) with a cane just standing outside the CSC. The door was locked and she was just standing there. I talked with her and she told me that she was there for a custody matter. She had been to court many times before. She said she just needed to talk with someone for a few minutes. I mentioned the Virtual Registry and that she could call it from her phone. She said she didn't have a phone. I asked if she had a phone at home and she said no. She

continued to just stand there. Someone came out, and before the door could close and lock, she entered. I'm not sure what happened next.

Vignette 11: Simple Help Can be Comforting

On October 8, 2024, I was outside the Worcester PFC office when a woman asked me where courtroom 1 was. It was actually visible from where we were standing. I walked her over. She didn't know if she could go in, as several people were standing around. I asked one of them and he said no. I told her that as soon as everyone else went in she could also go in. She thanked me profusely. This is a good example of how simple help and directions can be very comforting. Perhaps this was her first time at the court, and it might have been a guardianship case, as several were listed on the daily list. Just having someone help her for a few minutes was very comforting to her.

Vignette 12: A Lawyer Helps the Opposing Party

On October 8, 2024 I talked with a lawyer and her client outside a courtroom in Worcester. They were waiting for the courtroom to open. The lawyer did divorce law and several types of family law all across the state. She was very loquacious and friendly and extremely knowledgeable. We talked about many issues. She described how procedures vary across the state at different PFCs. In Worcester you just have to turn in a pretrial memorandum on the day of the hearing, but in some other PFCs you need to turn them in three days before the hearing. Sometimes you need to do things in a different order at different PFCs. She sometimes is a GAL, guardian ad litem.

She talked about not only the differences among PFC courts, but also the differences among judges. Judge X1, for example, is much more strict than Judge X2 (I prefer not to use their actual names in this report). She told several stories about how different judges handle things differently, and have different styles.

It is very difficult when the other party doesn't have a lawyer. She once represented a woman who was getting a divorce and the husband had already filed, so she was just going to amend his filing to save her client money. The husband didn't have a lawyer and hadn't served the wife. The lawyer looked up the case and didn't know why there was a very long delay, so she called up the husband and he told her that he had no idea that he had to serve his wife. He was very appreciative, and going forward she told him what he needed to do at several points during the process (because it would save her client time and money) and even accepted the documents, had the wife sign, and this saved the husband money because he didn't have to pay the constable to serve her. (I realize that I may have misunderstood some of what the lawyer was telling me, because as the counsel of record the husband should have been serving her and not the wife,

and rather than amending his complaint, she would most likely be filing a counter claim, which would also save her client money.)

Vignette 13: A Confusing Motion

My friend Nancy (I've changed names here) called me because she was confused about a document she had just received in the mail. It was a Motion of "Waiver of Guardian ad Litem for Minor." Nancy had no idea what "Guardian ad Litem" meant and there was no explanation on the notice she received. A more serious problem for Nancy was deciding whether she had to take any action and what that action might be. There was no indication anywhere on the form she received about what would happen next and what options she had. There was a "Notice of Hearing" section at the bottom of the first page, but it was blank, and in a section below that was written, "The within motion is hereby ALLOWED, DENIED." Neither option was selected, and it appeared as if these sections were for the court to complete.

Background: Nancy realized that the motion was related to money her son was going to inherit. Denise, the mother of her ex-partner Frank, died earlier that year. Frank is the father of Nancy's teenage son John. According to the will, John will inherit \$10,000 from his grandmother Denise (Frank's mother). Nancy is not on good terms with Frank, as he has failed to pay child support on multiple occasions, at one point quitting his job and leaving the state in order to avoid paying. Previous court interactions were stressful for Nancy, but she was treated well by court staff and the outcomes were positive for her; i.e., Frank was forced to pay child support. Nancy is on disability and has no money to hire a lawyer.

Outcome: Nancy didn't trust her ex-partner and was afraid he was trying to cheat her son out of his inheritance. When she found out that a Guardian ad Litem would look out for the interests of her son, she thought that this was a good idea, and so she did not want to waive the appointment. I realized that the Virtual Registry might be able to give her the information she needed, and the clerk at the Virtual Registry said that Nancy would receive something in the mail with information about her options and how to accept or argue against the motion. This turned out to be incorrect. Nancy received nothing in the mail, and when I checked on Masscourts.org I found out that the motion had been allowed. When Nancy received the Motion she should have filed an opposition to the Motion for Waiver of Guardian ad Litem for Minor, but of course she didn't know this. If possible, the court should provide more information on the forms used for Motions. Update: John received his \$10,000 inheritance, so there was a positive outcome.

Author Biography

Demetrios Karis received a B.A. in Psychology from Swarthmore College and a Ph.D. in experimental psychology from Cornell University. After spending five years doing research at the University of Illinois in a cognitive psychophysiology lab, he moved to industry, first at Grumman Aerospace, and then at GTE Labs and Verizon Labs. At GTE and Verizon, Demetrios worked on user interface design and the evaluation of consumer products and services, as well as conducting applied research. After Verizon, he started teaching at Bentley University in the Human Factors and Information Design Department, while also working as a contractor at Google, Fidelity, and other companies. In 2019 he started working with his graduate students at Bentley on research projects with the Trial Court, and continued with a group of volunteer user experience researchers (the Independent Court UX Team). Demetrios has multiple patents and several dozen publications.

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Appendix 1: Goals and Methodology

General and Specific Goals

The general goal of this project is to understand the experiences of SRLs as they interact with the legal system and then provide recommendations to improve that experience. For example, how can we help SRLs understand legal procedures, find appropriate assistance, fill out forms, and literally find their way in large courthouses? One specific goal is to redesign the information sheet used in the Worcester Probate and Family Court. The information on such a redesigned information sheet could also be included on a poster that could be displayed in courthouses. Another specific goal is to examine the physical spaces in the Worcester courthouse, gather feedback about the spaces from people we interview in the courthouse, and then make recommendations for improvements.

Project Background and Previous Reports

Over the last six years, I have worked with Bentley graduate students, as well as volunteer UX Researchers, on a variety of projects focused on making it easier for SRLs to interact with the legal system. A sample of reports can be found here: [Trial Court Reports on Improving User Experience](#).

Interviews

I conducted four types of interviews: relatively long and detailed interviews via Zoom, semi-structured interviews with SRLs in rooms within the Probate and Family Court, short interviews with people waiting outside the PFC office, and “walking interviews.” In most cases this involved convenience sampling. The approach in this project is similar to that advocated by Charmaz (2024) in her book on grounded theory. For example, topics and concerns in early interviews were explored in later interviews.

Zoom-based Interviews: These were primarily with court staff (including PFC clerks and judges) and attorneys. They typically lasted from 30 to 60 minutes.

Semi-structured Interviews: I recruited litigants as they waited in line in the PFC office or were waiting within the office. The litigant(s) and I went to a private room within the office where we sat around a small table and could talk undisturbed. These interviews lasted from five minutes to over 20 minutes. People sometimes left early after they received a text indicating they needed to meet court staff or others in their party. Some people were in no hurry to leave and were happy to talk with someone about their situation; in some cases they were clearing “venting.” I often talked with couples or a parent with their child.

Brief Interviews Outside the PFC Office: On many mornings there can be over 100 people waiting in the area outside the PFC office in Worcester. The graduate students and I would approach people and ask if they had a few minutes to talk with us about their experiences. If they agreed, we would talk while standing (i.e., we did not move to a separate room). Over half the people we approached agreed to talk with us. When the person couldn't communicate with us in English we thanked them and moved on. We sometimes talked with groups of two or three people who were there together. This was advantageous because it was often similar to a min-focus group, with one person agreeing and then building upon what someone else had said. I also talked briefly to people in the Law Library in Worcester (across the street from the main courthouse), outside the Court Service Center, and in other areas within both the Brooke courthouse in Boston and the Worcester multi-court complex. In Figure 1 (in the main body of this report), you can see two of the graduate students and me at our table outside of the PFC office in Worcester. Some people who saw our posters came over to our table to give us feedback.

Walking Interviews: When I talked with someone who didn't know where to go and what to do, I would offer to walk them to their destination and then remain to see what happened; destinations included the Housing Court, the Court Service Center, the Superior Court, and the PFC. While walking I would talk with the person about their experiences with the court.

Observations

I spent time in multiple courthouses observing interactions among litigants and court staff, among litigants and the people they had arrived with, and among court personnel. I also spent time observing the physical environment in the courthouses.

In Worcester I spent time behind the counter in the PFC standing next to the clerks as they interacted with litigants, answered their questions, and provided the forms or documents that they needed. I was often able to talk with the litigants while they were waiting at the counter for the clerks to retrieve some document or perform some other task.

Consent Form, Interview Guides, and Demographic Questionnaire

The Interview Guide, Consent Form, and a Demographic Questionnaire can be found below. I took notes by hand and did not record any of the interviews with litigants. I felt some people might be uncomfortable being recorded, and had I wanted to record the interviews I would have needed to spend time explaining why I wanted to record, confidentiality, and obtaining informed consent (the consent form was used for only the longer interviews, and not those where we approached people outside of a PFC office).

Some Zoom interviews with court staff and legal aid lawyers were recorded (when permission was given).

Consent Form

Probate and Family Court Interviews

My name is Demetrios Karis. I'm a researcher working on a study for the Trial Court. I do not work for the court and I am not an attorney.

Goal

We want to make it easier for people without lawyers to deal with the court system.

We want to learn about your experiences with the court system and what the courts can do to make your experience better. This will only take five to ten minutes.

Please Note

- Talking with me is voluntary and will have nothing to do with your court case.
- I only want to know your first name.
- I am not recording our conversation.
- I will keep the notes I take confidential.
- I will summarize my findings for the court, but will not identify any individual.
- You can decide to stop this interview at any time for any reason.

Do you understand and agree to talk with me?

Do you have any questions?

Demetrios Karis, Ph.D.
demetrios.karis@gmail.com

Interview Guide: Questions

1. Can you tell me why you came to the court today?
 - a. Is this your first time visiting the court?
2. What was your experience like today? Did you accomplish what you wanted to accomplish?
3. What were your expectations before coming to court today? What did you think would happen, and were you confident you could complete your tasks?
4. Was it clear to you what you had to do and what the court would do?
5. Are you clear about what's going to happen next with your case (situation) and how long it will take?
6. Before you came to court today [or before you came for the first time], would it have been useful for you to have seen a short video on what to expect when first appearing in court?
 - a. What information is most important to provide? For example, courtroom layout and procedures, how to act in court, how to find your way around one of the large courthouses, the time frame of various legal procedures (e.g., divorce, guardianship), and so on.
 - b. Would a video about your particular situation have been useful? For example, one about guardianship, or child support, or divorce?
7. Are you familiar with QR codes? [Show examples.]
 - a. Do you use them? How often?

8. If prior information would have been useful to you, what's the best way of finding this information? [What are people's preferences for finding information about the court, and how would they rate and rank the following?] Finding information from:
- a. A clerk, via phone
 - b. A knowledgeable friend
 - c. Mass.gov or another websites
 - d. The Virtual Registry
 - e. Video (not interactive with a person, like the Virtual Registry, but rather online or at the courthouse playing on a monitor)
 - f. A pamphlet or paper handout
 - g. A poster
 - h. A QR code that leads to a video or website.
 - i. From your perspective, what information should be available when entering a courthouse?
 - j. How important are maps, and would indoor directions via Google maps or another app help?
 - k. Is it important to have information outside of each courtroom about what is happening inside, who is allowed in, and who the presiding judge is?

Getting Information and Assistance

[Show the information sheet that is given to people at the counter in the Worcester Probate and Family Court or the new design.]

This sheet has information about how to get help with filling out forms and obtaining legal advice, and has information about the following six organizations. (Instructions will be modified when a redesigned information sheet is used.)

1. Court Service Center: Did you know that there's a Court Service Center in this building where people can get help with their case, including help with filling out forms?
2. Mass.gov: Have you ever used Mass.gov to get information about the Probate and Family Court or to find the court forms that you need? If so, was the information useful?
3. Lawyer Referral Service: Have you ever used a Lawyer Referral Service, such as the one listed here for the worcestercountybar.org? Did you try to find a lawyer?
4. Community Legal Aid: Have you ever received help from any legal aid organization, such as Community Legal Aid? What was your experience?
5. Worcester Law Library: Have you ever visited or received help from one of the Law Libraries in the state? The Worcester Law Library is right across the street from this building.
6. Virtual Registry: Did you know that the Probate and Family Court has a virtual registry, where you can get help without leaving your home by having a video or audio call with a clerk? Have you ever used it?

This sheet is often given to people who ask for help at the counter. How do you think this could be improved? What other information should be here?

Information about You

We are not asking for your name, but it would help our research to know something about you.

You do not have to provide any of this information. Just include what you are comfortable sharing.

City where you live: _____

Age: _____

Are you currently working? Yes No

If you are working, what is your job? _____

Did you fill out an Affidavit of Indigency so you do not have to pay court fees and costs? Yes No

What language do you speak at home?: _____

Education?: High School College Graduate/Professional School
Other

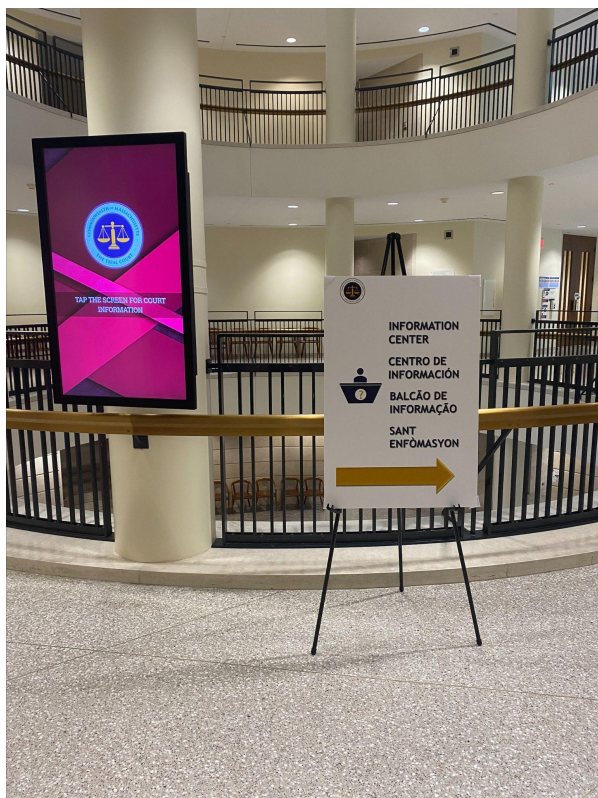
How do you describe your gender?

Male: _____ Female: _____ Non-binary/third gender: _____

Prefer not to say: _____

Prefer to self-describe: _____

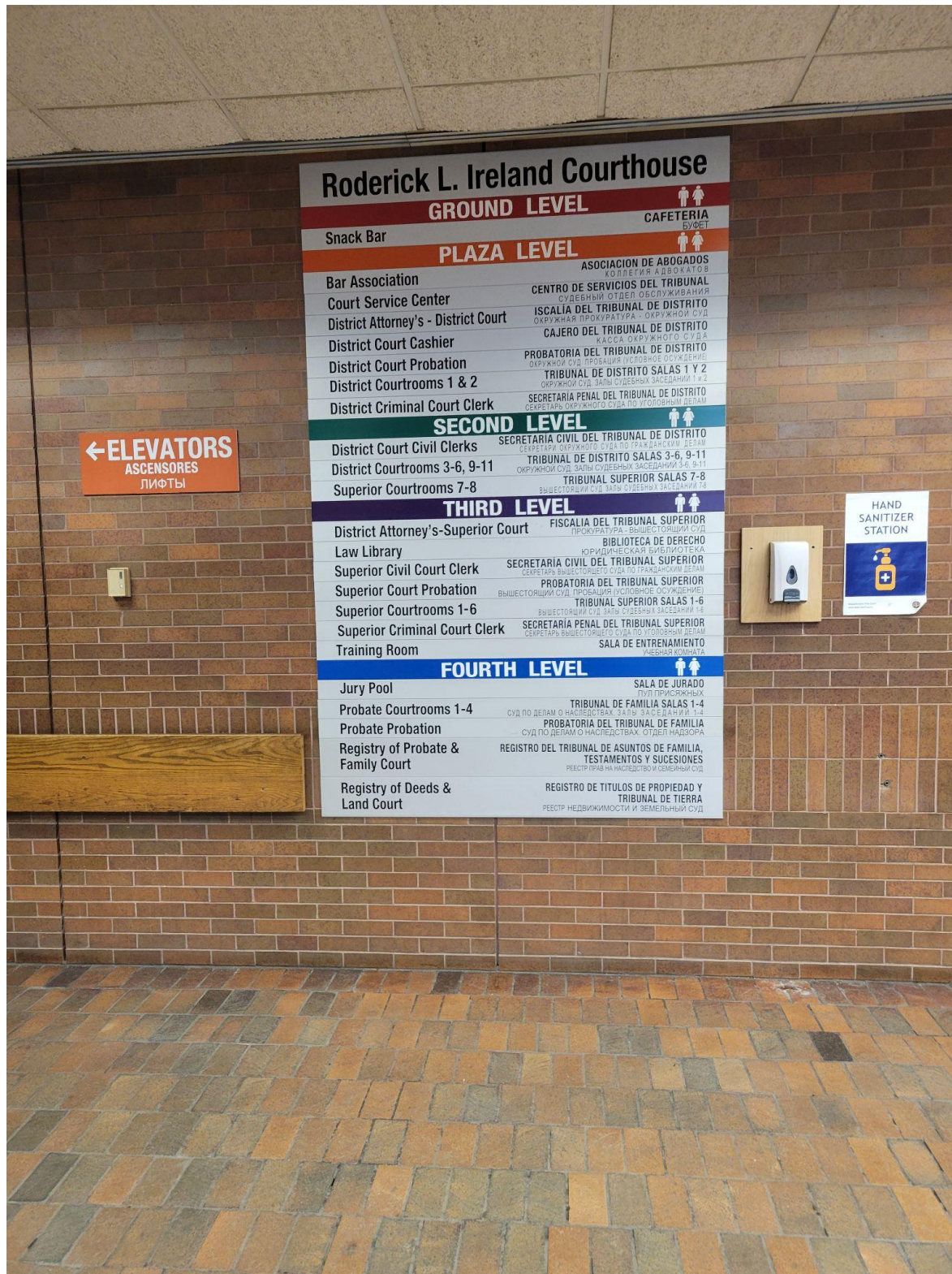
Appendix 2: Additional Photos



You can see two improvements to signage above. The photo on the left was taken in the Brooke courthouse in Boston, while the one on the right is from the Worcester courthouse, visible after you exit the elevators on the second floor. Thanks to Susan Lawlor for these photos and for carrying out these improvements to wayfinding.



This is inside the Springfield PFC office. In addition to the tables in the photos, there are smaller tables along a long counter, and additional tables outside in the hall.



Here is the directory that you see at the Ireland Courthouse in Springfield immediately past security.

Appendix 3: Judicial Guidelines for Civil Cases with Self-Represented Litigants & PFC Standing Order 2-23

The SJC just released new guidelines for judges in civil cases with SRLs, which can be downloaded from this page:

<https://www.mass.gov/guide/judicial-guidelines-for-civil-cases-with-self-represented-litigants> (February 12, 2025). I have not focused on understanding the experience of SRLs while in a courtroom in front of a judge, but it is clear that these guidelines, which supersede those released in 2006, continue the Trial Court's efforts to try to support SRLs. They refer to the updated Massachusetts Code of Judicial Conduct (2016), which also instructs judges how to act with respect to SRLs. The general ethical framework is that, "Judges do not compromise their impartiality by making reasonable accommodations to ensure that self-represented litigants have their matters fairly heard. As set forth in the Massachusetts Code of Judicial Conduct and its comments, judges may exercise their discretion to make reasonable accommodations for self-represented litigants and, in some instances, may be required by law to do so." In essence, the new guidelines make clear that it is okay for judges to explain to SRLs what is happening, what they need to do, answer their questions, and help them in various ways. The new guidelines accept the fact that the majority of litigants in civil cases do not have a lawyer, and that they are generally ignorant of the law and how court proceedings work. The new judicial guidelines, referring to Comment 1A to Rule 2.6 of the Code,

lists examples of accommodations that judges may properly make to ensure that self-represented litigants have the opportunity to be fairly heard. It provides that "a judge may:

- (1) construe pleadings liberally;
- (2) provide brief information about the proceeding and evidentiary and foundational requirements;
- (3) ask neutral questions to elicit or clarify information;
- (4) modify the manner or order of taking evidence or hearing argument;
- (5) attempt to make legal concepts understandable;
- (6) explain the basis for a ruling; and
- (7) make referrals as appropriate to any resources available to assist the litigants."

Judges can provide SRLs with information, and point them toward resources that will help them become familiar with the law and legal proceedings.

Judges and court staff do not compromise their neutrality by providing self-represented litigants with information about the law and the legal process. On the other hand, judges and court staff may not provide self-represented litigants with legal advice, e.g., guidance about which course of action they should take to further their interests.

Judges should be familiar with court resources that provide information and support to self-represented litigants and should make referrals to those resources as appropriate.⁷⁰

And, from the commentary:

Judges and court staff may properly provide legal information as needed to self-represented litigants, including information about how the court system works, what they need to file, how to complete forms, and where they can find further assistance. Judges and court staff should be knowledgeable about resources that are available to help litigants who lack counsel – including Court Service Centers, Trial Court law libraries, court webpages, Lawyer for the Day programs, lawyer referral services, and legal aid programs – and should refer those litigants to these resources as appropriate.⁷¹

With respect to the litigation process:

Adapting the Litigation Process for Self-Represented Litigants. Judges must afford self-represented litigants due process and provide them with the opportunity to meaningfully present their claims and defenses. In order to fulfill this obligation, judges may, generally should, and sometimes must, adapt the litigation process to provide reasonable accommodations to the self-represented.

Appropriate accommodations include, but are not limited to: construing pleadings liberally, explaining legal concepts, providing information about procedural and evidentiary requirements, making referrals to available resources, and asking questions to elicit or clarify facts necessary for decision.⁷²

Although I spent only limited time observing courtroom proceedings, I did observe proceedings before multiple judges in several courtrooms, primarily in the PFC. I was

⁷⁰ 1.6:

<https://www.mass.gov/doc/judicial-guidelines-for-civil-cases-with-self-represented-litigants/download>

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 5.1

pleased to observe that in most cases the judges seemed to be following the guidelines on how to interact with SRLs.

Recommendation

- Send volunteer retired judges into courtrooms at random to evaluate how well judges are following the judicial guidelines for dealing with SRLs. The retired judges would then provide feedback to the judges they observed, as well as producing an anonymized report with examples of both positive and negative interactions with SRLs. The report could be used for training new judges. The feedback to judges would remain confidential, and would not be reported to the First Justice of the court or to the Chief Justice of the PFC.

PFC Standing Order 2-23

According to PFC Standing Order 2-23,⁷³ a number of different types of proceedings should be held virtually, and all case types should use staggered scheduling:

E. Staggered scheduling

To better serve the court users, all Divisions shall continue staggered scheduling for all case types, whether in person, virtual, or a hybrid hearing. The scheduling of all matters shall be staggered (e.g., 9:00 a.m., 11:00 a.m., 2:00 p.m., etc.) to accommodate the maximum number of cases that may be heard and to attempt to minimize the wait time for court users while also ensuring the efficient and effective use of judicial and staff time. Separate sessions for remote hearings and in-person hearings are strongly encouraged. All scheduling templates shall be subject to review and approval by the Chief Justice.

⁷³ Probate and Family Court Standing Order 2-23: Presumptive in-person hearings, virtual hearings, and staggered scheduling,
<https://www.mass.gov/probate-and-family-court-rules/probate-and-family-court-standing-order-2-23-presumptive-in-person-hearings-virtual-hearings-and-staggered-scheduling#e-staggered-scheduling>

Appendix 4: Simplifying Notices

Although not from a judicial domain, and not even from the U.S., consider the redesign of a speeding notice by the Simplification Centre in the United Kingdom. The first screenshot below is the original, followed by the redesigned notice. The redesign makes clear what happened, the purpose of this letter, and what you should do now. From their description of the redesign:

Clear headings sit in their own space on the left, so you can read down them for the main story. Thick rules divide off the sections, so you read in short chunks. And the language is simplified to reflect what it means to people, not how the regulations are worded....The new form is uncluttered and uses white space to direct the eye across the three choices to the signature area. We've used plain English where possible, and have tried to calm the design to encourage careful reading.⁷⁴

⁷⁴https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/5c06fb475dbf1265069aba1e/5c2bc9233c78e5f0f793525a_SimpleAction5-SpeedingNotice.pdf



Speeding notice



This is an important notice. Do not ignore it or pass it on to anyone else, even if you were not the driver. We must get your reply by 28 October 2016

Mr Andrew Sample
12 Acacia Avenue
Manton
MN3 6XY

Notice date: **23 September 2016**
Document reference: **12345678**
Fixed Penalty Num. **1234123412341234**

Your car was recorded doing 37 in a 30 zone

Date of photo **15 September 2016**
Time **08.05**
Vehicle **AB51HTY**
Place **Station Road, Manton**
Speed limit **30 mph**
Recorded speed **37 mph**
Evidence **Speed camera**



You need to tell us who was driving

This is so we can issue the fixed penalty to the right person. Send us the Driver or Keeper Form by 28 October 2016.

If you were the driver, tick box A on the form

If you were the driver, you will be offered the chance to accept the offence without being prosecuted in court, and either

- receive a fine and points on your license (usually £100 and 3 points).
- **or** you may be able to avoid a fine and points if you go on a driver education course (please see the notes on the next page to see if you are eligible).

If you want to contest the alleged offence you must still send in the form, and you will have a chance to refer your case to a Magistrates' Court later.

If you were not the driver, tick box B or C on the form

If you were not the driver, you must give us details of the person who was driving the car at the time of the offence.

If you did not own the car at the time, you must tell us the name of the person or company who you bought it from or sold it to.

You must still fill in the form yourself. Do not pass it on to anyone else.

Contacting us

Keep this page for your records, and send the form to:

Fixed Penalty Support Unit,
City of Manton Police,
PO Box 123,
Manton MN1 2UX

Helpline 01234 567890

Legal notes

This is a Notice of Intended Prosecution issued in accordance with Section 1 of the Road Traffic Offenders Act 1988. It is also a Statutory Request for the name and address of the driver under Section 172 of the Road Traffic Act 1988.

The alleged speeding offence is contrary to Section S81(1) RTRA 84 Sch 2 RTOA 88. If you knowingly provide false information, you will be committing an offence under Section 5 of the Perjury Act.

Data Protection Act 1998: information you supply may be held on a computer.

Appendix 5: AI Tools and the Law

There are now many AI-powered software tools to help both attorneys and self-represented litigants. Here is a sample, with descriptive text copied verbatim from the websites. Some are free, some have a monthly fee. In my opinion, attorneys are currently much more likely to use these tools than SRLs, but I'm sure that will change in the near future.

<https://contend.legal/>

Get instant and affordable answers to your legal questions.

Contend Legal is an AI-powered legal assistant that helps people get legal help quickly and affordably. We offer an online chat service that gets customers legal help in real time.

Whether you need information on a contract, assistance with a legal dispute, or answers to general legal questions, our platform is designed to provide you with the guidance you need.

- Information tailored to your specific situation
- No waiting: Instant responses, available 24/7
- Accurate and reliable

<https://www.openprobono.com/>

OpenProBono will always be free for public use.

Finding the right legal resources and information can be time-consuming and complex. Our AI agents make legal research easy.

An AI agent is a chat bot, like ChatGPT, but with access to the web. Our AI agents are connected to trusted legal websites and databases, and come in an intuitive conversational interface. Pick the agent suited for the area of law you're interested in, ask a question, and the agent will gather pertinent information and give a formal report.

<https://courtroom5.com/>

We support your lawsuit from start to finish, for as long as your case is in court. Whether you are suing or being sued, let Courtroom5 clear your path to legal victory. Start your Personal Practice of Law today!

If your opponent has an attorney and you don't, you're outmatched. The lawyer representing your opponent has a graduate education in the law, years of practice on the types of claims in your case, and relationships with local judges and court staff. Courtroom5 is designed to help people without lawyers overcome these advantages so you get a fair hearing in court.

Courtroom5 has served people handling foreclosures, wrongful termination, debt collection, high-conflict divorce, child custody, probate, and many other legal issues that

rely on rules of civil procedure. **Criminal cases, traffic tickets, small claims, and evictions** are not well suited to Courtroom5.
\$15 to \$249 per month

<https://upsolve.org/>

Upsolve is a nonprofit that helps you get out of debt with education and free debt relief tools, like our bankruptcy filing tool. Think TurboTax for bankruptcy. Get free education, customer support, and community. Featured in Forbes 4x and funded by institutions like Harvard University so we'll never ask you for a credit card.

<https://justicetext.com/>

Video evidence is a powerful vehicle for justice
Thousands of hours of police interactions are captured on video every single day. We promote greater accountability in our legal system by helping attorneys analyze this voluminous data efficiently.

<https://descrybe.ai/>

Descrybe.ai is a powerful, intuitive platform for searching and understanding U.S. case law. Whether you're conducting legal research, studying precedent, or looking for clear legal summaries, our solution puts advanced AI at your fingertips.

<https://lawdroid.com/copilot/>

An AI legal assistant that is a force multiplier, helping you to get more done without the extra overhead, and be there to support you whenever you need it.

- Research Legal Cases: Quickly find relevant cases using our case law research feature to help you.
- Draft Emails and Letters: Clearly convey what you want to convey professionally in seconds.
- Upload Documents: Thoroughly analyze, summarize and extract relevant information.

\$15 to \$99 per month per user

The following is from Google's AI Mode, which mentions several other AI tools:

Representing yourself in state court can be a challenging process, but Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools are emerging that can assist self-represented litigants (pro se litigants) in navigating the legal system.

Types of AI Tools for Self-Represented Litigants in State Courts:

Several AI tools can help self-represented litigants by simplifying legal processes and providing valuable information:

- Chatbots: Some state courts offer chatbots to answer questions and provide resources. Examples include Alaska's AVA for probate cases and Florida's SANDI for general questions.
- Document Preparation Tools: Tools like AI.Law, DoNotPay, LegalZoom, Rocket Lawyer, and Pro Se Dad AI can assist with drafting documents and understanding legal concepts tailored to state laws.
- Legal Research Tools: Tools like Casetext CARA A.I. and Descrybe.ai can help find case law and summarize legal information. ChatGPT can also explain legal concepts and assist with document organization.
- Other Tools: Beagle+ analyzes legal agreements, Hello Divorce helps with the divorce process, JustAnswer connects users with legal experts, and JustFix assists tenants with housing issues.

Important Considerations:

- AI tools are not a substitute for legal advice. Always verify information and consult an attorney for complex issues.
- AI outputs may contain errors.
- Be cautious about data privacy when using AI tools.
- Some tools are free, while others require payment.

AI tools can provide self-represented litigants with resources and information to help them navigate the legal process