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Superior Court, County of Alameda Self Help Center: Results of an Operations and Customer Service Survey

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**Superior Court, County of Alameda Self Help Center:
Results of an Operations and Customer Service Survey**

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For EMPA 396

Graduate Research Project in Public Management

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

According to the Judicial Council of California, 450,000 people who cannot afford an attorney are forced to represent themselves in a court of law on important issues in their life, including: domestic violence, divorce, child support, or eviction (Judicial Council, 2015). Through the creation of Self Help Centers, when people face critical life changing issues affecting their basic needs and security, Self Help Centers can assist them, enhancing equal access to justice.

The barriers mentioned in the literature identify social and economic reasons as the primary cause for the formation of self-help centers. An estimated number of 450,000 people in California require services of self-help centers annually. Among them 90% belong to an earning bracket of \$2000 month or less. (SJI, 2007)

Providing effective customer service to the public is a goal of many governmental agencies and of the Alameda County Superior Court Self-Help Center in particular. Providing these services to the public can be a daunting task for the Superior Court given the complexity of the legal system and the large number of unrepresented litigants. Unrepresented litigants, entitled to their day in court, habitually file their cases with incomplete paperwork, have inadequate proof of service, and are generally ill prepared for their court hearing. Scholarly literature highlighted that the provision of legal procedural assistance at Self Help Centers to unrepresented litigants can prepare them to conduct their business with the judicial system.

WHO ARE SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS?

The Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution provides that all persons charged with a crime have the right to an attorney for his/her legal defense. If a person cannot afford an attorney, a government paid attorney will be appointed to represent him/her in a criminal case.

The Sixth Amendment does not apply to civil proceedings; these proceedings are frequently broken down into three groups:

- Civil: a “typical” lawsuit, a legal proceeding to protect ones rights or property;
- Family Law: divorce, custody, paternity, domestic violence, restraining orders, etc.
- Probate Law: estates, guardianships and conservatorships.

Due to the high cost of legal representation, civil proceeding(s) litigants sometimes have no other option but to represent themselves in their case. It is quite possible that many of the civilians who have good claims might have to give up their right and keep their problem unsettled just because they don’t have resources to gain legal assistance for their case to be presented before court (Zorza, 2015). In this scenario, they are left with an option to attempt representing themselves in court (Judicial Council, 2013). That is why they are known as self-represented litigants.

PROBLEMS FACED BY SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS:

Self-represented litigants face many barriers in their court proceeding. One of the major problems is the legal language used in courts. Many times the judges, attorneys and court staff use legal terminology which is difficult to understand. In addition, many of the terms are in Latin, a language that is no longer spoken. For example self- represented litigants themselves might not understand the legal term that refers to their status: “in propria persona”, abbreviated as “pro per” or “pro se”. A pro per litigant refers to a person who appears on his/her behalf (a self-represented litigant). An individual with no acquaintance with legal terminology will likely experience difficulty in presenting his case from the very start.

Family Law Proceedings are extremely complex, with over 179 statutory forms to select from to initiate and complete such a proceeding. Research has shown that court litigants find the technical language of the court forms confusing (Zorza, 2015). Proof of Service is also required for every Civil Proceeding. Proof of Service is documentation served (delivered) to the other party (parties) in the proceeding legally notifying them they are party to a legal action. Each proof of service must comply with specific criteria of form, content and delivery in order to make the service

“valid” and admissible into the court. Self-represented court litigants are frustrated at the difficulty to initiate a proceeding because of the myriad of forms to select from, and confused by the methods of serving notice to all parties in the action.

RAMIFICATIONS TO THE SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS AND THE COURT:

Most self-represented litigants have little idea about factors or information (or the way it is presented) which is helpful to a Judicial Officer when making a decision on their case (Zorza, 2015). In the County of Alameda, the average existing caseload for a Judicial Officer is 350 - 380 active cases at any given time (Byer, 2011). Failure to present proper documents to the court is likely to add to delays in processing cases. For example, a family law child support filing requires complete financial records to be lodged with the court before appearing in front of the court. Self-represented litigants (unaware of this requirement) will likely experience a delay in their proceeding, resulting in the possible loss of some child support, coupled with the litigant’s frustration interacting with the judicial system.

Case backlog is a common problem throughout the United States (Cooper, 2014). Case backlog in civil proceedings are attributable to: 1) judicial vacancies; 2) political gridlock over judicial selection; and 3) priority given criminal cases. Criminal proceedings are prioritized because of the sixth amendment of the Constitution guaranteeing the right to a “swift and speedy trial”. The right to a speedy trial is not constitutionally given to civil proceedings, therefore they are not prioritized.

When a self-represented litigant (who unbeknownst to the court at the time of scheduling) appears in court and it is discovered the litigant has insufficient information or improper service, the case is delayed. This exacerbates the court backlog in civil proceedings, and wastes judicial resources spent identifying the problem and communicating it to the litigant.

Self-represented litigants can experience loss of home or experience dangerous habitability issues in eviction proceedings (commonly referred to as unlawful detainer or “UD” cases). UD proceedings are extremely abbreviated, usually adjudicated within 30 days. Self-represented litigants (tenants) are only given (approximately) 14 days to dispute a landlord’s claims (who are usually represented by legal counsel).

The 2010 U.S. Census reports that 34% of the people in the County of Alameda speak a language other than English in the home. The problems for self-represented litigants can increase for litigants who are not native English speaking because they might face the dual role of attorney as well as interpreter (SJI, 2007).

WHAT IS THE SIZE OF THE PROBLEM?

Statistics maintained by the Superior Court of California, County of Alameda documents 13,869 self-represented litigants during 2013. As a percentage: for Family Law Proceedings the total number of self-represented litigants is 45% of all litigants in that case type. It is important to note the pronounced decrease in court cases filed between 2009–2013, yet a constant (if not growing) increase in percentage of self-represented litigants.

Table of pro per parties cases

<i>Number of Pro Per Parties at Disposition</i>			<i>Number of Cases Disposed</i>		<i>Pro Per Parties for Each Disposition</i>	
Year	Civil Limited	Family Law	Civil Limited	Family Law	Civil Limited	Family Law
2009	5,597	9,761	22,729	11,877	12%	41%
2010	5,704	9,431	23,987	10,813	12%	44%
2011	5,666	9,820	22,668	11,177	12%	44%
2012	6,065	9,098	21,659	9,998	14%	45%
2013	5,229	8,640	14,777	9,499	18%	45%

CAN COURT STAFF ASSIST THE SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS?

It is important at this time to review the steps a litigant goes through in order to get a civil case resolved (“disposed”). The plaintiff of a case (also known as the petitioner) fills out the first document and files it with the court. The defendant (respondent) files his/her response, and the case commences. Numerous documents are filed, and summarily brought into the courtroom in front of a judge/commissioner.

Each state has its rules and procedures for filing these documents (commonly referred to as “papers”). These documents must be filed completely, with verifiable information, prior to the court hearing. Failure to file accurate papers will likely result in one of two events: 1) the papers will be denied by the clerk of the court; or 2) the papers will be denied by the judicial officer, resulting in a “continuance” or a rescheduling of the hearing. In some extreme instances, incorrect papers can result in the dismissal of the action. Even if the papers were admitted to the proceeding, and the judicial officer allowed their content in the proceeding, incorrect or incomplete information could also result in a judgment against the party who erred on preparing the documents.

The question is begged: why can’t court staff assist people in getting their papers filled out completely? This is a very important question because court support-staff have considerable knowledge about the way in which their court functions. However, court management and judicial officers are adamant about the absolute neutrality of the judicial branch of government. A clerk of the court assisting one party in filling out papers without absolute equal support to the other party in the action tips the sensitive balance of justice and breaks down the fabric of the judicial system. A court clerk who provides advice to a party on ‘what to do’ crosses the line from neutrality and impartiality to partiality, and perhaps can even be perceived as the unauthorized practice of law, punishable by one year in jail and a \$ 1,000 fine.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH:

Since 1999, courts in the United States have experimented with providing procedural information to the mounting self-represented litigant problem. This includes the creation of self-help centers to provide unbiased procedural information to both plaintiff and defendants in civil proceedings. Procedural information offered to both sides of the legal matter does not constitute legal advice or representation, and thus the court protects the neutrality that is the cornerstone of the judicial branch of government.

This research explored the attitudes and perceptions of self-represented litigants, who were assisted at the Self-Help Center during October, 2015. The study's objective was to gather data on various factors, including data on the communication, the information and the resources available at the Self-Help Center. These three (3) factors were used as the working hypotheses to form the structure of the research project. Evidence was sought to support that the allocation of resources to self-help centers provides sufficient assistance to people as they are conducting their business with the judicial system.

The primary purpose of this research was to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of self-represented litigants who have received services at the court's Self Help Center. California has a ten year history of providing these services; and the state's Judicial Council has published seminal work documenting the importance of supporting SRLs with their procedural needs. The literature on Self Help Centers was examined to better understand the issues facing SRLs, and this was used to develop a framework to analyze data collected from these people.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES:

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this research was to investigate the perceptions of Self-Represented Litigants after the provision of services in the Alameda County Self-Help Center.

The primary research question for this study was: Does the operation of a Self-Help Center assist

Alameda County residents in preparing them for their case with the Superior Court? In order to research this question, it was necessary to assess what barriers to justice (if any) that Self-Represented Litigants experience at the court.

The State of California Judicial Council addressed this question in its comprehensive *State Wide Action Plan for Serving Self Represented Litigants* (Judicial Council, 2003). The Judicial Council identified three (3) barriers to justice faced by self-represented litigants. These barriers were used in the formulation of hypotheses to assess whether the provision of services at the Self-Help Center was supportive of Self-Represented Litigants. Survey questions were developed, and these questions were used a framework to collect data on the attitudes and perceptions of Self-Represented Litigants. Furthermore, the National Center for State Courts published “The State of State Courts: A 2014 NCSC Public Opinion Survey” (2015) that reported customer service is a recommended goal for state courts, and this was used to formulate the fourth and final hypothesis for this research study.

Barrier to Justice # 1: Alameda County Residents utilizing the Self Help Center cannot afford legal representation:

Hypothesis One:

The operation of a Self-Help Center will assist self-represented litigants who cannot afford an attorney. It was estimated that the majority of the Self-Represented Litigants using the Self Help Center in Alameda County would endorse the option, “I can’t afford an attorney” in response to the question, “Why did you choose to get help at the Self-Help Center?”

Barrier to Justice # 2: The absence of trained court staff to explain to SRLs the court paperwork they need to complete in order to file a court case.

Hypothesis Two:

The operation of a Self-Help Center will increase the Self-Represented Litigant's knowledge of the legal process. It was estimated that at least 75 percent of the Self-Represented Litigants using the Self Help Center in Alameda County will endorse the option, "More" and "Much More" in response to the item, "Rate the extent to which you now understand the legal process" and "Rate the extent to which you now feel better prepared to proceed with your legal issue."

Barrier to Justice # 3: The barrier relating to a litigants inability to file one's papers without procedural knowledge of which form to choose, the information that must be disclosed, and generally how to complete the form.

Hypothesis Three:

The operation of the Self-Help Center will provide assistance with Self-Represented Litigants need to complete complex paperwork, as required to initiate a legal proceeding. It was estimated at Least 75 percent of Alameda County Self Help Center instances of service will endorse, "Assistance with forms" in the "Type of Service Provided" on the 2015-16 Instance of Assistance Form.

The first three (3) hypotheses tested whether the provision of procedural information to Alameda County residents would assist Self-Represented Litigants in preparing their legal paperwork for submission to the court. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the attitudes and perceptions of Self-Represented Litigants, a fourth and final hypothesis was developed. Based upon the National Center for State Courts "The State of State Courts: A 2014 NCSC Public Opinion Survey" (2015): state courts that provide effective customer service increases the public's trust and confidence in the judicial branch of government (National Center for State Courts, 2015). In order to test SRL perception of trust and confidence the fourth hypothesis developed was:

Hypothesis Four:

At least 80 percent of the Self-Represented Litigants using the Self Help Center in Alameda County would endorse, “Excellent” or “Good” in response to the request, “Please rate the services received today.”

The main goal for this research was to assess whether Self-Help Centers perform services beneficial to the public. This research measured Self-Represented Litigants attitudes and perceptions who receive services at the Alameda County Self-help Center. Ultimately, this research will increase the literature regarding the importance of operating a Self-Help Center.

RESEARCH SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS:

There are many aspects to the law from the inception of the case to its final judgment. This research was limited to the discreet observations of SRL litigants in the preparation of his/her initial paperwork to be filed with the court. This research was essentially limited to a SRL up to the point where the SRL enters into the courtroom for his/her case to be heard.

This research was designed to assess whether resources allocated to assisting SRLs in completing their paperwork accurately can reduce procedural waste and avoid litigant frustration. This work does not attempt to research how this provision of services conserves the resources of the court; however, this would be a logical and excellent secondary study. There are several cost saving protocols or models for service delivery that the SHCs can employ (including technology, videos, workshops, and publications); however, this research was limited to the completion of the SRLs paperwork for the initial filing with the court.

Ultimately, a good test of a nation’s justice system is the sense of trust its citizenry has with the judicial branch of government. That question would lend itself to a longitudinal research study, where court litigants are measured for their perceived sense of fairness in the judgments rendered by the court. The SRLs perception of trust and fairness of judgments rendered in a legal proceeding is also outside the scope of this research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, different scholarly research articles regarding self-represented litigants (hereinafter referred to as “SRL”) and self-help centers were investigated and reported upon. The themes of the literature included the exploration of the central problems associated with SRL’s bringing their case to court, and the effect on the judicial processing of their cases. The literature also explored countervailing attitudes and perceptions surrounding SRL’s in the judicial system. Also explored was the formation of pilot self-help centers in California and their establishment throughout the state. Existing services at self-help centers were documented. The final theme tied the effectiveness of service delivery which supports the allocation of resources to self-help centers.

JUDICIAL PROCESSING IN CASES INVOLVING SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS:

According to (SJI, 2007), most of the family law judges now have cases in which one of the parties is an SRL. Judicial Officers find it as a grave responsibility and a large task adjudicating matters where one or both parties are a SRL (ibid, 2007). The Judicial Officer’s paramount concern is on making case decisions based upon the law and the merits of what is presented by each side. Yet, there are legal drawbacks when a SRL presents his/her case because of their limited knowledge of the law. Judicial Officers are generally of the opinion that SRLs frequently present petitions/ responses with conflicting or missing information; and when coupled with limited understanding of how to represent themselves in a court of law, that justice is difficult to achieve (ibid, 2007). Case processing for judges (once governed by procedure, precedence, wisdom, and fairness) becomes a “problem solving court” where the judge has to craft creative solutions while remaining impartial, rendering decisions based upon the law (ibid, 2007).

**ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS SURROUNDING THE PROVISION OF SERVICES
TO SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS:**

Statistics maintained by the California Judicial Council demonstrate an overwhelming number of SRLs in family law proceedings, and it is universally agreed upon that litigants not represented by legal counsel are not prepared to conduct their case (SJI, 2007). Judicial Officers have found that SRL behavior in the courtroom is difficult to manage, and frequently remind SRLs to “play by the rules” to avoid having their case dismissed (Blaney, 2014). Judicial Officers report that SRL communication that is threatening in any way (either subtle or overt) is referred to the court bailiff for the offenders' immediate removal from the courtroom (ibid. 2014). A judicial survey conducted in Canada illustrates the SRL problem as a nuisance and that court dockets are “clogged” due to the lengthy hearings needed to accommodate SRLs (Boyd, 2015). Further evidence is offered by (Richardson, 2012) that SRL’s are perceived as a burden upon the justice system and society, and they are to be treated as a standardized group of problematic people, and should even be banned from the courtroom.

These opinions do not appear to be based upon court evidence, as other research described SRL’s as a group of lawful “clients” who are to be treated fairly and with respect (Spain, 1996). Jacobs and Johnson present the case that SRLs have the legal right to represent themselves, and the courts and judges are responsible to promote justice for all people on an equal basis, regardless of legal representation (Jacobs, 2013). Furthermore, judges are ethically required to ensure that legal counsel not use their specialized knowledge as a “tactic” to gain advantages over a self-represented party - to ensure justice to all parties in a case (ibid, 2013).

Despite conflicting viewpoints, all of the literature investigated in this study agreed upon the lawful status of SRL’s to bring a case to court. This research unanimously shows the SRL’s lack critical information needed to file a case, SRL’s wrongly identify things or make serious

omissions on paperwork filed with the court, and they require more time in processing their cases (SJI, 2007; Spain, 1996, Yegge, 1994).

ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND THE CREATION OF PILOT SELF HELP CENTERS

One report (Blackwell, May 2010) mentions that courts realize less delays and greater accuracy of papers if the court addresses the goals of the SRL's. One way to achieve this was the formation of self-help centers. Self-help centers (hereinafter referred to as SHC) were created by the California Judicial Council as a public policy issue, with the sole purpose of providing procedural information to all parties in a court action. Emphasis was given to never provide legal information that might be construed as legal advice or legal representation. SHC's were designed to provide instruction on local court rules, pertaining only to the accurate completion of forms and the perfection of service. Developing educational pamphlets to educate the SRL's on civil cases (one for the plaintiff, one for the defendant) also ensured an unbiased approach (Blackwell, 2010). Assisting SRL compliance with court forms basically serves to make the litigant "hearing ready" for his/her appointment with the judge (ibid, 2010).

In California, five pilot self-help centers were established in 2003 to provide services to people. The pilot SHCs were funded by the Judicial Council and evaluated in order to measure the effectiveness of staff providing services for the purpose of determining if future funds should be allocated to this public policy agenda. The pilot study sought to identify the challenges a SRL faced and how they might be addressed, while maintaining the complete neutrality required of the judicial branch. Lack of instruction on completing forms was identified as the primary difficulty faced by SRLs, as well as common misconceptions on what forms were needed to initiate a case. During the three year pilot study, the SHCs worked with limited resources, yet service delivery was determined to be effectively and efficiently coordinated, (California Judicial Council, 2015).

Based upon this three year study, the Judicial Council in 2007 authorized funds for all 58 counties in California and provided guidelines for services to offer at these SHCs. Regional models were explored for smaller, rural counties. One operating requirement of any SHC was that all work needed to be supervised by a licensed attorney. This flexibility allowed the employment of paralegals, and the use of volunteers from local law schools.

The barriers mentioned in the literature identify social and economic reasons as the cause for the formation of self-help centers. An estimated number of 450,000 people in California acquire services of self-help centers annually. Among them 90% belong to earning bracket less than \$2,000 a month. (SJI, 2007)

WHAT ARE SELF HELP CENTERS?

The Judicial Council created (as public policy) access to justice through the creation of self-help centers. For this purpose, a state wide action plan was implemented by Judicial Council Advisory Committee to ensure fair access to the courts, and the main programs in this plan was formation of SHCs (Judicial Council, 2015). Pursuant to the rules established with the funding, the SHC must be “court based” (near or inside the court location) in order to facilitate the filing of documents. Staff must have an attorney(s) overseeing the work, with the goal of providing services relating to the completion of forms and the provision of information on the process of justice. The Judicial Council authorized \$ 9.8 million in 2013 for the 58 counties in California to operate the SHCs (Judicial Council, 2015). Staff is trained in order to identify and explain what the court requires for the completion of forms, along with mandates for providing supporting documentation for judicial processing. (McNeal, 1999) discusses the voluminous documentation requirements for a Family Law proceeding, often perceived as daunting for a SRL.

FUNCTIONS OF SELF HELP CENTERS:

According to the Judicial Council (JCC, 2015), the self-help centers are meant to perform the following functions:

- Provide all necessary information for preparing paperwork for a litigant in family law or civil proceeding;
- Provide general legal information relating to family and civil law case processing;
- Educate litigants on court procedures and computer systems;
- Keeping the litigants informed about procedures of administrative tribunals;
- The lawyers and paralegals assisting the litigants are employed by the court or contracted by the court;
- All staff are trained to explain that they are not responsible for the confidentiality of information, and that an attorney client relationship does not exist;
- SHC must be available to provide services to both parties of the case; and
- Services are provided free of cost. (JCC, 2015).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE AT COURT SHCs:

Well planned public policy begins with a thorough needs assessment, and such an assessment was performed upon the creation of the SHC pilot program (Judicial Council, 2003). The needs assessment focused on the financial resources needed, and scarcity was recognized as a barrier in 42% of the action plans (per county) for a statewide funding initiative (Judicial Council, 2003). The funding issue was exacerbated for smaller counties in the state, without the population base that merited funding any portion of an attorney. Medium and large sized counties were assessed with significant levels of required training needed for staff, and this cost was considered financially exorbitant (Judicial Council, 2003).

Once fully developed, court SHCs help remove barriers to justice for the public when staffed with knowledgeable attorneys and paralegal employees (or court contractors). The staff and attorneys both can be considered a resource for the public at SHCs. Other things which can be considered as a resource include the facilities (space) inside courts for the SHCs, and the high-level of security normally found throughout courthouses. In addition, the California Legislature passed Government Code Section 70600, authorizing funding for children's waiting rooms to be located in high population areas. A children's waiting room is a convenience, the child(ren) wait in a safe atmosphere while the parent(s) handles the seemingly difficult process of initiating a divorce, obtain a restraining order, etc. Another resource in serving the SRLs is the availability of courthouse information desks immediately observable upon entering a courthouse. Trained volunteers (frequently bi-lingual) staffing information desks assist SRLs in navigating throughout each courthouse (Mindlin, 2009).

The language barrier pointed out in (Mindlin, 2009) was also identified by the Judicial Council. Given the scarcity of resources available coupled with the prevalence of limited English speaking people, the action plans suggested Spanish speaking staff were preferred in 64% of the counties statewide (Judicial Council, 2003) . A language plan for SHCs in large counties was mentioned as a vital requirement 86% of the time. (Judicial Council, 2003) identified resources such as computers and copiers should also be accessible to staff in SHCs.

SUPPORT FOR THE ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES DEDICATED TO SELF-HELP CENTERS:

The report (Judicial Council, 2003) specifically recommends resources should be allocated to self-help centers. Provision of support services should "have a high priority" for judicial officers and executives who manage the trial courts. The research indicated that those assigned to assisting

SRLs should possess sufficient “passion” to assist disenfranchised litigants who are having difficulties navigating the courts.

This above literature review clearly explained the demand of assisting “high needs” SRLs. The research also pointed out that SRLs are a time consuming facet of the judiciary throughout the entire life-span of each SRL’s case (Spain, 1996). To overcome these drawbacks trial courts are encouraged to address the following: 1) a central location, with access to public transit; 2) access to SHC counsel for legal guidance on completing paperwork; 3) staff who are trained in providing supportive services to the disenfranchised; 4) information that is disseminated assists SRLS in filing their legal paperwork with the court; and lastly 5) provide a high level of customer service (Judicial Council, 2003). The five (5) afore-referenced are the areas of focus for the working hypothesis in this research. It is important to know the perceptions and behaviors among the self-representing litigants, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of functions being performed by the self-help centers. This effectiveness can also be determined by examining the five factors, enumerated: 1) location; 2) access to guidance; 3) trained staff; 4) information that assists filing legal paperwork; and 5) a high level of customer service.

One highly original study was performed by John Graecen in 2009. This study titled “*The Benefits and Costs of Programs to Assist Self-Represented Litigants*” attempts to justify the reserouces allocated to Self Help Centers through a (net) financial cost benefit in the following areas:

- 1) Self Help Centers assist judicial processing, saving at least five (5) minutes to as much as fifteen (15) minutes per litigant in case processing before a judicial officer;
- 2) Self Help Centers save one to one and a half hours of court clerk staff time, by expediting initial paper processing, and eliminating the processing of judicial officer review and denial documents;

3) Jurisdiction problems (the time it takes to answer and assign the proper venue for an action)

expedites court clerk processing between 5% to 19% per litigant.

Overall it was summarized by Graecen that in court processing time, the equivalent of two full time clerks is saved because of the existence of Self-Help Program (Graecen, 2009). .

EFFECTIVENESS OF SERVICE PROVISION TO SRLs:

The literature frequently mentions that the provision of these services is not a predictor of case outcomes, nor is any Self Help Center services interpret the law (Hough, 2003). Self Help Center services do not indicate how judicial officers will respond to a SRL appearing in his/her courtroom (McNeal, 1999). Whether the performance of Self-Help Centers is satisfactory to the SRL or not, this can be measured with a customer satisfaction survey testing the five hypotheses identified.

The completion of legal forms, if smooth and correct, would likely lend itself to high satisfaction rating of SRLs.

SUMMARY OF SERVICE PROVISION TO SRLs:

Multiple studies of SRLs have been conducted, and based upon the review of the literature, there are conflicting viewpoints about the amount and type of services a SRL should receive from the court. The literature clearly demonstrates the legal right an individual has to represent themselves in court (Spain, 1996 and Judicial Council, 2003). However because of limited procedural knowledge identified by the California Judicial Council (Judicial Council, 2015) SRLs are unable to initiate their case or conduct their business with the judiciary.

A review of the literature on SRLs identified that procedural information offered to these individuals can assist them in initiating their court case, while still maintaining the strict code of neutrality mandated of the judicial branch of government (Judicial Council, 2015). The literature surrounding service delivery at Self Help Centers was reviewed, and the recommended SHC services (Judicial Council, 2015) were used to build a conceptual framework for measuring the

four (4) hypotheses of this research study. The hypotheses were developed to explore the attitudes and perceptions of Self Represented Litigants at the Alameda County Self Help Center.

CHAPTER 3 - RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN:

This chapter describes the methodology used to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of Self Represented Litigants measured by a survey administered after the provision of services at the County of Alameda Self Help Center. A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was implemented to test the hypotheses regarding consumer response to services provided by the County of Alameda Superior Court Self Help Center. A cross-sectional survey design was selected because it supports the analysis of multiple variables at a single point in time and is ideally suited to quantify respondent's attitudes and perceptions. This design was observational in nature and did not require manipulation of the study environment.

Survey data were utilized to test the hypotheses that the provision of service would: 1) enable SRLs to obtain critically needed services that otherwise would not have available to them; 2) increase the SRLs knowledge of their case (in specific), and legal proceedings (in general); and 3) provide SRLs the procedural information enabling them to initiate their case with the court. Overall satisfaction with the services provided is interpreted to indicate trust and confidence with the County of Alameda Self Help Center. Between October 1, 2015 through October 31, 2015 surveys were administered to all SLRs, totaling an estimated 3,293 surveys. Eight (8) dates were chosen randomly selected between October 1, 2015 and October 31, 2015 for analysis. Quantitative survey results were analyzed to test the hypotheses.

POPULATION AND SAMPLING PROCEDURE:

The population of inference was defined as all self-represented litigants utilizing the services of the Self Help Center between October 1, 2015 and October 31, 2015; estimated at 3,293 adults.

The Self Help Center operates from 8:00am to 12:00pm Monday through Friday. Self-represented litigants were served on 22 days during this period. A random sample of eight (8) days was selected for this research study. Each adult receiving services on these five days was asked to participate in the research.

RESEARCH TECHNIQUE:

According to Blackstone (2012) surveys are an effective method of collecting information from a large population of respondents and a valid means of measuring attitudes and perceptions. The unit of analysis in this research is the individual. Responses to survey questions were used to test the four working hypotheses developed from the conceptual framework for this research.

The first survey item was designed to elicit the reason each person chose to come to the SHC. Responses to this question which included four closed-ended options and a fifth option for “Other” were used to test the first hypothesis. The next three survey questions utilized a Likert-type response scale with three options (Much More, Somewhat More, or No Change) to measure increase in knowledge and understanding of the SRL’s case (in specific) and knowledge of the legal process (in general).

The final question was used to assess satisfaction with the procedural guidance provided to each individual. Satisfaction was measured using a Likert-type scale, including the options Excellent, Good, Average, or Poor.

FRAMEWORK FOR THIS RESEARCH:

The literature review established the need for the services provided by Self Help Centers. Four hypotheses were developed, and survey questions were designed to operationalize SRL’s attitudes and perceptions. The hypotheses and survey questions are indicated in Table 2:

Table 3.1: Framework of This Research	
HYPOTHEISIS	QUESTION
Hypothesis 1: <i>The operation of a Self-Help Center will assist self-represented litigants who cannot afford an attorney.</i>	Why did you choose to come to the Self Help Center today?
Hypothesis 2: <i>The operation of a Self-Help Center will increase the Self-Represented Litigant's knowledge of the legal process.</i>	<i>Rate the extent to which you now understand the legal process.</i>
	<i>Rate the extent to which you now feel better prepared to proceed with your legal issue.</i>
Hypothesis 3: <i>The Self-Help Center will provide the assistance needed by Self-Represented Litigants to complete complex paperwork, as required to initiate a legal proceeding.</i>	<i>Assistance with forms" in the "Type of Service Provided" on the 2015-16 Instance of Assistance Form</i>
Hypothesis 4: State courts that provide excellent customer service increases the public's trust and confidence in the judicial branch of government	<i>"Please rate the services received today."</i>

INSTRUMENTATION:

Data were collected utilizing two instruments (a brief questionnaires and an "instance of assistance" summary completed by volunteers at the Self Help Center). No information was requested on either instrument that would enable anyone to identify a survey respondent. Each self-represented litigant's survey responses were essentially anonymous.

To ensure that literacy was not a barrier to study participation, the questionnaires were orally administered by 14 volunteer interns (pre-law students from U.C. Berkeley and Cal State East Bay). The Alameda County Superior Court Self-Help Center 2015 Litigant Feedback Questionnaire included six fixed-response items and required between two and four minutes to complete with an average timed administration of three minutes and 35 seconds. The instance of assistance form is routinely completed by Self Help Center staff or volunteers. It includes six fixed-response and two open-ended items. Completion of this brief form was not timed. All instruments are included in Appendix A.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTATION SELECTION:

Institutional permission to conduct this research was provided by Chad Finke, (at that time) General Counsel for the Superior Court, and Malea Chavez, the Program Manager of the Alameda County Self Help Center when this research project was conceived in 2014. The initial surveys designed for this research in 2014 were aligned with the barriers to justice as identified by the Judicial Council in its seminal work from 2003 *Statewide Action Plan for Serving Self-Represented Litigants*. Prior to this research study, management at the Superior Court identified a survey instrument that was selected and employed at the Self Help Center on August 21, 2015 (copies of each survey form are provided at Appendix A). The 2014 questions were compared to the actual August 21, 2015 survey, and both item sets will support hypothesis testing, as shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Comparison of Conceptual Interview Questions (2014) and Interview Questions Adopted by the Self Help Center (2015)	
2014 Q1: With my income level I could not afford legal representation	2015 Q1: Why did you choose to get help at the Self Help Center today? Response 3) I can't afford an attorney
2014 Q2: The SHC staff helped me to better understand my legal situation	2015 Q2: I now understand the legal process
2014 Q3: N/A	2015 Q3: I now feel more confident representing myself
2014 Q4: I am satisfied with the assistance I received at the SHC	2015 Q4: Please rate the services received today at the SHC

Institutional management provided the researcher a choice to use the 2015 survey or to administer the original survey as conceived in 2014. In order to assess this, it was necessary to compare and contrast the process and magnitude between the two choices.

The 2014 plan for administering the survey conceived the researcher spending two hours daily for a week administering as many surveys as possible, including self-administered surveys to litigants in SHC. Institutional management emphasized that IF the 2014 survey was to be administered, then this would be in addition to the current survey used since August 21, 2015. The possibility of

“survey fatigue” for respondents, the strongly likelihood of litigants declining to participate in two surveys, and the possibility of bias that would be present for those who decided/and did not decide to answer the second survey.

The 2015 survey plan was chosen for the following reasons:

- 1) Conceivably, 100% of the SHC litigants would be offered the opportunity to be surveyed, this obviously increases the sample size used for evaluating the hypotheses;
- 2) The surveys were to be administered by fourteen volunteers in the SHC;
- 3) The fourteen volunteers have been trained on identifying basic information for the public in the SHC, and trained on the survey instrument;
- 4) The survey was to be an orally administered survey, with the volunteer reading the questions and the responses to each;
- 5) Individual surveys orally administered increases personal attention to the subject, and reduces possible distractions, misunderstandings, or incorrect coding of responses;
- 6) The terminology of the questions and responses in the 2015 survey were comparable (if not greater) in clarity, than originally conceived in 2014 for the research.
- 7) An adequate (if not ample) amount of volunteers were present during the normal business hours of the SHC.
- 8) The volunteers and staff bring multi-lingual skills to the SHC, which were employed in conducting surveys in a language spoken by each individual receiving service at the SHC (discussed in greater detail below); and finally
- 9) The 2014 survey would have been narrower a narrower sample size.

CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH SURVEY:

JusticeCorps Volunteers were interviewed and selected to supplement the staff of the Self Help Center, and were under the supervision of court employed attorneys at all times. The Alameda County JusticeCorps volunteers are pre-law students from the University of California, Berkeley and Cal State East Bay. The JusticeCorps volunteer duties include the identification of legal forms that SRLs needed to complete for their legal matter. They also administer an intake form required by the Judicial Council (in Appendix B); and the post service survey (as adopted in August, 2015 in Appendix A). JusticeCorps volunteers were trained in conducting the Judicial Council intake, and trained to ask the SRLs to participate in a brief survey. The script to obtain informed consent included the following language:

“Feedback provided by persons visiting the Self Help Center is very important to help us improve our services. Will you please answer some questions for this purpose? This is a voluntary survey. The questions do not include any identifying information and your responses will remain anonymous. May I ask you these questions now? It will take less than five minutes to complete the survey.”

Hard copies of the completed questionnaires and instance of assistance form were collected and manually entered into an Excel spreadsheet created for this purpose by the researcher. Data in the Excel spreadsheet were utilized to prepare graphical and tabular distributions of the responses. In addition, the completed Excel spreadsheet was imported into a statistical analytic software package (IBM SPSS Statistics). A variety of descriptive and inferential statistical procedures including frequencies and correlations were computed to test the research hypotheses.

CONTROLLING FOR BIAS AND EXTERNAL VALIDITY:

The deciding factor in support of selecting and testing using the August 21, 2015 survey were the resources made available to the researcher. Volunteers dedicated to collecting the data from the entire population utilizing the SHC on randomly selected days enabled greater control over possible bias. Asking all SRLs during the full span of hours of SHC operation on randomly selected days to complete the survey provided a broad spectrum of respondents including all ages, ethnicities, etc. and that make up was representative of the population of the County of Alameda. However, the greatest control for bias was the random selection of seven days for data collection. Random selection is considered a powerful method for controlling bias (Blackstone, 2012). Moreover, random selection supports the argument that the findings were externally valid, and generalizable to all users of the SHC.

CONFIDENCE LEVEL AND RELIABILITY:

The desired level of confidence for research is established by the researcher (Blackstone, 2012). In this study, the researcher followed guidance provided by *the Encyclopedia of Public Administration and Public Policy* indicating that “a confidence interval of plus or minus 5%” is ideal for public policy relevant research.” This means that it was important to select a large enough sample to support a 5% confidence interval. By including over 400 SRLs in the study sample, we can be 95% sure that any survey result will fall within an interval of 5% above or below the population parameter (the result that would be obtained if every SRL completed a survey).

Confidence intervals also serve to quantify sampling error in a research project. The larger the confidence interval, the greater the estimated sampling error. To better ensure reliability, a large (randomly selected) sample of over 400 was specified to narrow the confidence interval. Using a larger sample yields more precise estimates of population parameters, and resulted in a smaller confidence interval.

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH:

For this research project, the attitudes and perceptions of the public were examined as services were provided in the Alameda County Self Help Center. The scope of the research is expansive considering the population and sample size; however the study is limited to the County of Alameda. Furthermore, being a cross-sectional research design, it is essentially a “snap shot in time. Service provision may vary over long periods of time, becoming generally better or worse. Furthermore, the outcome of the service provision (the impact) is not measured, as that would require a longitudinal study of each litigant to determine the success for their ability to file their papers to initiate a legal proceeding.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Analyses of survey data collected to assess the attitudes and perceptions of self-represented litigants utilizing the Alameda County Self Help Center are presented in this chapter. Descriptive statistics depict the distributions of: 1) the days randomly selected into the survey sample; 2) the services provided by case type; and 3) the length of service provision (measured in minutes). This basic information may be used by court management to support resource allocation decisions. The results of analyses conducted to test hypotheses follow, including the level of support found for each hypothesis. Cross-tabulation tables and comparisons of means are presented to test hypotheses and investigate other issues bearing upon increased knowledge and overall satisfaction with service provision.

DISTRIBUTIONS OF: 1) SURVEYS COMPLETED ON DAYS RANDOMLY SELECTED INTO THE SAMPLE, 2) THE CASE TYPE AND 3) THE LENGTH OF SERVICE PROVISION.

The sample timeframe consisted of all days during the month of October during which the Self Help Center was open, and eight days were randomly selected to obtain the survey sample.

Random sampling is a valid method that is utilized to obtain data that can be generalized to a larger population. The distribution of completed surveys on each day randomly selected into the sample is presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Random Sample – Count Per Day of Service					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative
Valid	10/01/2015	59	13.2	13.2	13.2
	10/06/2015	94	21.0	21.0	34.2
	10/07/2015	30	6.7	6.7	40.8
	10/16/2015	65	14.5	14.5	55.4
	10/19/2015	43	9.6	9.6	65.0
	10/21/2015	37	8.3	8.3	73.2
	10/27/2015	60	13.4	13.4	86.6
	10/29/2015	60	13.4	13.4	100.0
	Total	448	100.0	100.0	

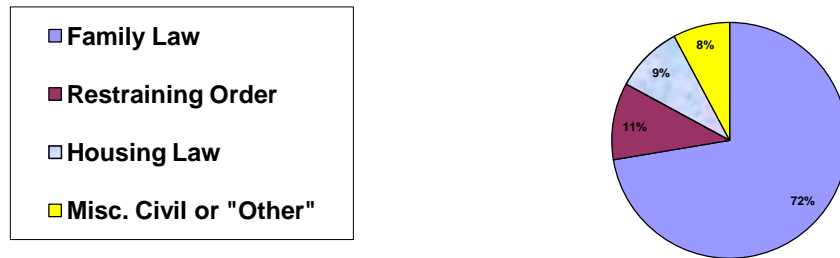
Table 4.1 indicates a wide dispersion of the number of self-represented litigants assisted on a given day, with a range from 30 (6.7 percent of the total number of persons interviewed) on what is apparently a “slow” day, to 94 (21.0 percent of the total sample) on what appears to be a busy day at the Alameda County SHC.

The distribution of legal issues or “case types” that brought the SRL to the SHC for assistance is presented in Table 4.2:

Table 4.2: Case Type Assistance					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1 Family law	288	64.3	72.4	72.4
	2 Restraining orders	42	9.4	10.6	82.9
	3 Housing law	37	8.3	9.3	92.2
	4 Civil law	30	6.7	7.5	99.7
	5 Other	1	.2	.3	100.0
	Total	398	88.8	100.0	
Missing	System	50	11.2		
Total		448	100.0		

The entry above the “Total” row in Table 4.2 shows that Case Type was not reported by 50 (11.2 percent) of the SRLs. The Case Type proportions among SRLs with valid data on this measure are depicted in the “Valid Percent” column, which omits the missing data from the valid percent computation. This column shows that more than seven in every ten respondents ($n = 288$, 72.4 percent) visited the Self Help Center for legal issues related to Family Law. Among the remaining litigants who received individual service, 42 (10.6 percent) visited the Self Help Center to obtain assistance on matters related to restraining orders, 37 (9.3 percent) required assistance with housing law, and 30 (7.5 percent) with matters categorized as civil law. The sole “Other” visited the center to obtain assistance in an undocumented category. This distribution is illustrated by Graph # 1.

Graph # 1: Case Type



The Case Type distribution may be used as an indicator of resources needed at the Self Help Center. For example, employee training can be predicted by this distribution. The required quantity of information pamphlets can also be predicted, with Family Law clearly the predominant area of need (at 72% of service delivery).

Table 4.3 presents the distribution of “Service Length” as measured in minutes of contact with Self Help Center staff. Among the 419 litigants receiving individual service for whom Service Length was recorded, 78 (18.6 percent) required 5 – 14 minutes of service, 159 (37.9 percent) needed 15-29 minutes; just less than one third of the SRLs ($n=135$, 32.2 percent) needed 30- 59 minutes; and 47 (11.2 percent) required more than 60 minutes or more.

Table 4.3 Service Length

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1 5 to 14 minutes	78	17.4	18.6	18.6
	2 15-29 minutes	159	35.5	37.9	56.6
	3 30-59 minutes	135	30.1	32.2	88.8
	4 60-89 minutes	44	9.8	10.5	99.3
	5 More than 90 minutes	3	.7	.7	100.0
	Total	419	93.5	100.0	
Missing	System	29	6.5		
Total		448	100.0		

This distribution is illustrated by Graph # 2:

Graph # 2: Service utilization (in minutes)



This data (in combination with the distribution by Case Type presented in Table 4.1) may be used to predict optimum staffing levels required to avoid lengthy lines and wait-times for SRLs.

HYPOTHESIS ONE:

As presented in Table 4.4, the first hypotheses concerned the reasons that Self-Represented Litigants came to the Self Help Center for assistance, predicting (based upon a review of the literature) that the inability to afford an attorney was the primary factor.

Table 4.4: Research Framework – Hypothesis # 1	
HYPOTHEISIS	SURVEY QUESTION
Hypothesis: <i>The operation of a Self-Help Center will assist self-represented litigants who cannot afford an attorney.</i>	Why did you choose to come to the Self Help Center today?

As indicated by Table 4.5, the survey results support the first hypothesis. Respondents were free to select multiple answers to the hypothesis question specified in Table 4.4. The majority of Self-Represented Litigants ($n= 196$, 50.13 percent) reported that their inability to afford legal representation was the reason for seeking services at the Alameda County Self Help Center. Other reasons for choosing to come to the Self Help Center were selected by less than half of the respondents.

Table 4.5 Statistics Reporting Survey Response					
	Referred by friend or family member	Referred by court staff or judge	Cannot afford an attorney	Prefer to do my own legal work	Total
N Valid Responses	83	84	196	28	391
Valid Percentage	21.23%	21.5%	50.13%	7.12%	100.0%
Missing Responses					57
Total					448

HYPOTHESIS TWO:

The second hypothesis, that SRLs would gain increased knowledge of the legal process by visiting the Self Help Center was reported by responses to the survey questions depicted in Table 4.7 and 4.8. Table 4.6 presents the hypothesis and the two survey questions utilized to test it.

Table 4.6: Research Framework – Hypothesis # 2	
HYPOTHESIS	QUESTIONS
<i>Hypothesis: The operation of a Self-Help Center will increase the Self-Represented Litigant's knowledge of the legal process.</i>	<i>Rate the extent to which you now feel better prepared to proceed with your legal issue.</i>
	<i>Rate the extent to which you now understand the legal process.</i>

The second hypothesis predicts that SRLs would report increased knowledge *after* the provision of services at the SHC. The first survey question measured the perception that SRLs felt better prepared to proceed with their legal issue.

Table 4.7: Statistics Reporting Survey Responses when asked “ I feel better prepared to proceed with my legal issue”					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid N	0 No Change	12	2.6	4.1	4.1
	1 Somewhat More	98	21.8	33.9	38.0
	2 Much More	179	40.0	61.9	100.0
	Total	289		100.0	
Missing Response		159	35.4		
Total		448	100.0		

As shown by Table 4.7, the largest proportion of survey respondents ($n= 179$, 61.9 percent) report feeling “much more” prepared to proceed with their legal issue and about one third (33.9 percent)

reported feeling “somewhat more” prepared. Just twelve of 289 (4.1 percent) SRLs answering this question indicated “No change” in their preparedness to proceed with their legal issue. This result constitutes strong support for hypothesis # 2.

Table 4.8: Statistics Reporting Survey Responses when asked “ I now understand the legal process”					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid N	0 No Change	9	2.0	3.1	3.1
	1 Somewhat More	70	15.6	24.4	27.5
	2 Much More	208	46.4	72.5	100.0
	Total	287	64.1	100.0	
Missing Response		161	35.9		
Total		448	100.0		

Responses to the statement, “I now understand the legal process” depicted in Table 4.8 show that nearly three quarters ($n= 208$, 72.5 percent) understand the legal system “much more” than they did prior to their visit to the SHC. Nearly one quarter ($n= 70$, 24.4 percent) indicate understanding the legal process “somewhat more.” Just three of every 100 ($n= 9$, 3.1 percent) report “no change” in their understanding of the legal process. These results as reported in Table 4.8 provide strong support for hypothesis # 2.

HYPOTHESIS THREE:

The literature review established the fact that the process of initiating a legal case or responding to an existing case was complex, and hypothesis # 3 predicted that this complexity would be reflected by the number of required forms and the difficulty in preparing them. Table 4.9 indicates that the third hypothesis verifies the SHC’s primary mission: to provide procedural assistance in form preparation.

Table 4.9: Research Framework – Hypothesis Three

HYPOTHESIS	QUESTION
<i>Hypothesis: The Self-Help Center will provide the assistance needed by Self-Represented Litigants to complete complex paperwork, as required to initiate a legal proceeding.</i>	<i>Assistance with forms” in the “Type of Service Provided” on the 2015-16 Instance of Assistance Form</i>

As reported in the results presented in Table 4.10, the survey responses offer strong support for the third working hypothesis, that form preparation is the predominant assistance needed as reported by SRLs. Four hundred four of 411 SRLs (98.3 percent) endorsed “Assistance with forms” as a service received during their visit to the Self Help Center.

Table 4.10: Assistance provided at the Self Help Center

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid N Assistance with forms	404	90.2%	98.3%
Post Hearing Follow up	1	0.2%	0.2%
Appointment	2	0.4%	0.5%
Guardianship	1	0.2%	0.2%
Modification	1	0.2%	0.2%
Police order form	1	0.2%	0.2%
Small claims	1	0.2%	0.2%
	411	91.7%	100.0%
Missing Response	37	8.3%	
Total	448	100.0%	

Table 4.11 Cross Tab Table – Association between Number of Forms and Service Length								
			Service Length					Total
			5 to 14 minutes	15-29 minutes	30-59 minutes	60-89 minutes	90 minutes +	
Number of Forms	One or two forms	Count	42	73	27	6	0	148
		% within ServiceLength	66.7%	50.3%	21.1%	15.8%	0.0%	39.3%
		% of Total	11.1%	19.4%	7.2%	1.6%	0.0%	39.3%
	Three or four forms	Count	12	45	49	19	2	127
		% within ServiceLength	19.0%	31.0%	38.3%	50.0%	66.7%	33.7%
		% of Total	3.2%	11.9%	13.0%	5.0%	.5%	33.7%
	Five or more Forms	Count	9	27	52	13	1	102
		% within ServiceLength	14.3%	18.6%	40.6%	34.2%	33.3%	27.1%
		% of Total	2.4%	7.2%	13.8%	3.4%	.3%	27.1%
Total	Count	63	145	128	38	3	377	
	% within ServiceLength	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	16.7%	38.5%	34.0%	10.1%	.8%	100.0%	

Table 4.11 reports a predictable conclusion: that length of service increases with the number of forms needed by the SRL to proceed with their case. This cross-tabulation table serves to verify the internal consistency of the data based upon the time it takes to complete the forms. Table 4.11 shows that the largest proportions of SRLs requiring assistance with one or two forms are associated with service lengths of “5 to 14 minutes” ($n= 42$, 66.7 percent of all SRLs in this service length category) and “15 to 29 minutes” ($n= 72$, 50.3 percent of all SRLs in this service length category). As the number of forms increases to three or four, the largest proportions of SRLs show service lengths of “60 to 89 minutes” ($n= 19$, 50.0 percent) and two of the three SRLs (66.7 percent) requiring 90 minutes or more of service.

Table 4.12 Cross Tab Table: Number of Forms Correlated to Case Type								
			Case Type					Total
			Family law	Restraining Orders	Housing law	Civil law	Other	
NumForms	One or two forms	Count	97	4	28	6	0	135
		% within casetype case type	37.6%	9.5%	82.4%	21.4%	0.0%	37.2%
		% of Total	26.7%	1.1%	7.7%	1.7%	0.0%	37.2%
	Three or four forms	Count	101	13	5	7	1	127
		% within casetype case type	39.1%	31.0%	14.7%	25.0%	100.0%	35.0%
		% of Total	27.8%	3.6%	1.4%	1.9%	.3%	35.0%
	Five or more Forms	Count	60	25	1	15	0	101
		% within casetype case type	23.3%	59.5%	2.9%	53.6%	0.0%	27.8%
		% of Total	16.5%	6.9%	.3%	4.1%	0.0%	27.8%
Total	Count	258	42	34	28	1	363	
	% within casetype case type	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	71.1%	11.6%	9.4%	7.7%	.3%	100.0%	

Table 4.12 points out an interesting and statistically significant relationship. The percentage of cases in Family Law needs 1 – 2 Forms 37.6 percent of the time, 3 – 4 Forms 39.1 percent of the time, and 5 or more forms 23.3 percent of the time. In contrast, SRLs seeking assistance with restraining orders require 5 or more forms 59.5 percent of the time and those requiring help with Civil Law cases require 5 or more forms 53.6 percent of time. Restraining Orders and Civil Law matters require a greater number of forms, which require greater time. In contrast, 82.4 percent of the SRLs seeking assistance with issues related to Housing Law require assistance with just one or two forms.

HYPOTHESIS FOUR:

The fourth hypothesis addresses the degree of satisfaction SRLs report regarding the services they received at the Alameda County SHC.

Table 4.13: Research Framework – Hypothesis Four

HYPOTHESIS	QUESTION
Hypothesis: State courts that provide excellent customer service increase the public's trust and confidence in the judicial branch of government	<i>"Please rate the services received today."</i>

Table 4.14 Please rate the services received today

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid N			
1 Poor	0	.0	.0
2 Average	2	.6	.9
3 Good	23	7.3	10.7
4 Excellent	189	59.8	88.3
Total	214	67.7	100.0
Missing Response	102	32.3	
Total	316	100.0	

Table 4.14 indicates very high satisfaction with services received. One hundred eighty-nine of 214 SRLs answering this question (88.3 percent) endorsed "excellent" and none rated the services received as "poor." However, further research is necessary to establish a positive correlation between service satisfaction and trust in the judicial branch of government.

FURTHER RESEARCH FINDINGS AND SUB-QUESTIONS

The research findings support the four hypotheses. A number of factors and sub-questions can be reviewed to provide greater clarity to the needs of SRLs.

Table 4.2 (above) presented the distribution of areas of need for legal assistance by the case types. The following table (4.15) portrays whether the outcomes of service provision differ by case type. Table 4.15 compares the mean responses whether SRL knowledge increased after the provision of services. SRL reported gains in understanding of the legal process, preparation to proceed with the SRL's legal issue and satisfaction with the services provided were compared by Case Type.

Table 4.15 Comparison of Mean Responses to Selected Survey Items by Case Type

Case Type		Hypothesis # 2 Now I understand the legal process better.	Hypothesis # 2 I feel better prepared to proceed with my legal issue	Hypothesis # 4 Please rate the services received today
Family law	Mean	1.60	1.69	3.86
	N	186	186	187
Restraining orders	Mean	1.40	1.63	3.88
	N	35	32	34
Housing law	Mean	1.40	1.75	3.85
	N	20	20	20
Civil law	Mean	1.75	1.70	3.81
	N	20	20	21
Total	Mean	1.57	1.69	3.86
	N	261	258	262
Scale		0 is "No Change" 1 is "More", 2 is "Much More"	0 is "No Change" 1 is "More", 2 is "Much More"	1.0 is "Poor"; 2.0 is "Average" 3.0 is "Good" 4.0 is "Excellent"

Table 4.15 shows that understanding of the legal process (measured on a scale from 0 to 2 as described in the last row of the table) was greatest ($M= 1.75$) among SRLs seeking assistance with issues related to Civil Law, and lowest ($M= 1.40$) among those seeking services related to restraining orders and housing law. These findings are important and may suggest needed improvements in services provided to address the latter case types.

With regard to the second survey question associated with hypothesis # 2, mean responses to the statement, "I feel better prepared to proceed with my legal issue" are higher than for understanding of the legal process in every case type except civil law. Again, the lowest mean ($M= 1.63$) is reported among SRLs who sought services related to restraining orders. On this measure, the highest average on the scale from 0 to 2 ($M= 1.75$) is reported among individuals seeking assistance with issues related to housing law. Means for each case type are very similar, and the differences between them are negligible.

Differences between the mean ratings of services provided in each case type are also negligible, ranging between 3.81 and 3.88 on a four point scale where 1= Poor and 4= Excellent. The differences in this table may be instructive to court managers, however, to plan staff training. For example, SRL's being evicted appear to have greater levels of difficulty understanding the process as do those seeking help with restraining orders.

The researcher also sought to determine whether service outcomes for Limited English Proficient (LEP) Self-Represented Litigants differed from the outcomes reported by SRLs with a better command of the English language. Table 4.17 shows that mean responses to each of the three survey items are higher among LEP SRLs. Limited English Proficient users of court services report higher levels of understanding ($M= 1.67$) than English Proficient SRLs ($M= 1.51$). This is a substantial difference on a three-point scale.

Table 4.16 A Comparison of Mean Attitudes and Perceptions between Limited English Proficient (LEP) and English Proficient Self-Represented Litigants				
LEP Assistance Condition		Hypothesis # 2 Now I understand the legal process better.	Hypothesis # 2 I know what to do next	Hypothesis # 4 Please rate the services received today
No Language Assistance	Mean	1.51	1.59	3.80
	N	140	138	141
Language Assistance Provided	Mean	1.67	1.76	3.92
	N	64	63	63
Total	Mean	1.56	1.64	3.86
	N	204	201	
Scale		0 is "No Change" 1 is "More", 2 is "Much More"	0 is "No Change" 1 is "More", 2 is "Much More"	1.0 is "Poor"; 2.0 is "Average" 3.0 is "Good" 4.0 is "Excellent"

Responses to the statement, "I know what to do next" when SRLs receive services in their native language are significantly higher ($M= 1.76$) than among the English speaking SRLs ($M= 1.59$).

Finally, although the relationship is not statistically significant, the overall rating of "services

received today” is also higher among LEP litigants ($M= 3.92$) than among English proficient SRLs ($M= 3.80$).

Table 4.17: Comparison of Mean Service Outcomes by Language Groups						
		Now I understand	Feel more confident	Feel better prepared	Know what to do next	Rate Service
English	Mean	1.55	1.50	1.67	1.62	3.83
	N	221	216	219	217	224
Mandarin	Mean	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	4.00
	N	6	6	6	6	6
Other	Mean	1.50	1.50	1.70	1.67	3.90
	N	10	10	10	9	10
Spanish	Mean	1.65	1.65	1.75	1.71	3.92
	N	52	52	52	52	51
Total	Mean	1.58	1.54	1.69	1.65	3.86
	N	289	284	287	284	291
		0 is “No Change” 1 is “More”, 2 is “Much More”	0 is “No Change” 1 is “More”, 2 is “Much More”	0 is “No Change” 1 is “More”, 2 is “Much More”	0 is “No Change” 1 is “More”, 2 is “Much More”	1.0 is “Poor” 2.0 is “Average” 3.0 is “Good” 4.0 is “Excellent”

A comparison by language spoken was compiled to report relationships between specific language groups and service outcomes including understanding, confidence, preparation, knowing what to do next and an overall service rating. English-speakers ($M= 1.55$) and the few SRLs speaking languages under “Other” ($M= 1.50$) report the lowest mean ratings of increased understanding of the legal process. Similarly, English speakers and those speaking “Other” languages provided lower mean ratings ($M= 1.50$ in each group) of confidence representing themselves, whereas Mandarin ($M= 2.00$) and Spanish-speakers ($M= 1.65$). It seems predictable that receiving legal assistance in one’s own language is a valued experience.

SUMMARY:

The purpose of this research was to gather data to assess the attitudes and perceptions of Self-Represented Litigants regarding the services they received at the Alameda County Self Help Center. The first hypothesis was designed to assess the reason the litigants sought assistance from

the SHC. The second hypothesis tested whether the litigant increased their level of knowledge with their case (in specific) and with the judicial process (in general). The third hypothesis addressed that the root cause for which they needed assistance was the identification and completion of legal forms to initiate their case with the court. The fourth hypothesis tested the overall satisfaction level of the litigants after the provision of services.

The findings in the research support the four hypotheses, which provide evidence that the litigants received services that increased their knowledge and ability to function and commence their case with the court. Overwhelmingly, the respondents were satisfied with the services they received at the Alameda County Self Help Center. The research provided insight on reported findings, and areas of further research are to be recommended in the final chapter.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter offers observations and recommendations on the Self Help Center research project. The purpose of this research was to explore the attitudes and perceptions of Self Represented Litigants after receiving services in the Alameda County Self Help Center. Literature on the critical need for assisting self-represented was examined, and the history of Self Help Centers in California was explored. The literature enabled the researcher to develop four working hypotheses. The four hypotheses were measured using two survey instruments that measured the attitudes and perceptions of the self-represented litigants after they received services in the Alameda County Self Help Center. Conclusions were formulated that highlight notable research findings.

CONCLUSIONS:

Conclusions Regarding the Research Hypotheses:

The results of this research assessed the attitudes and perceptions of Self-Represented Litigants regarding the services they received at the Alameda County Self Help Center. Table 5.1 below summarizes the findings of the working hypotheses:

Table 5.1: Framework of This Research – Hypotheses and Levels of Support	
HYPOTHESIS	Level of Support
Hypothesis # 1: <i>The operation of a Self-Help Center will assist self-represented litigants who cannot afford an attorney.</i>	Support
Hypothesis # 2: <i>The operation of a Self-Help Center will increase the Self-Represented Litigant's knowledge of the legal process.</i>	Strong Support
Hypothesis # 3: <i>The Self-Help Center will provide the assistance needed by Self-Represented Litigants to complete complex paperwork, as required to initiate a legal proceeding.</i>	Strong Support
Hypothesis # 4: <i>State courts that provide excellent customer service increase the public's trust and confidence in the judicial branch of government</i>	Strong Support

Hypothesis # 1: *The operation of a Self-Help Center will assist self-represented litigants who cannot afford an attorney.* A search of the current literature assessed the critical need for litigants who could not afford an attorney. The first hypothesis was created to assess the need for legal assistance and test it with results from surveys. The majority of litigants (50.3%) supported the need for legal services because they could not afford an attorney.

Hypothesis # 2: *The operation of a Self-Help Center will increase the Self-Represented Litigant's knowledge of the legal process.* The consensus of the literature indicates the SRL's limited understanding of the legal system, and two survey questions sought to gather data after the provision of services rendered in the SHC. Both survey questions provided reliable data that strongly supported working hypothesis number two.

Hypothesis # 3: *The Self-Help Center will provide the assistance needed by Self-Represented Litigants to complete complex paperwork, as required to initiate a legal proceeding.* A review of the literature identified the complexity of the forms required to initiate a legal proceeding to

people without a legal education. The data strongly supported the allocation of resources to support litigants with procedural information on legal forms.

Hypothesis # 4: *State courts that provide excellent customer service increase the public's trust and confidence in the judicial branch of government.* The data provided strong support for the fourth hypothesis, and this justifies court support for materials and assistance to litigants.

Conclusions Regarding the Statistically Significant Findings:

Statistically Significant Finding # 1

The needs of self-represented clearly include services in languages other than English. The literature reported significant numbers of people in the County of Alameda that speak languages other than English in the home. The research study produced statistically significant findings for services to this population. Services rendered in a language other than English produced a high confidence of information, satisfaction, and assistance that is generalizable to the entire population. The data evidently exposes the critical need for clear information and assistance to address a relevant problem for limited English speaking litigants.

Statistically Significant Finding # 2

A correlation between “Better Prepared with your Legal Issue” and “Level of Satisfaction” with services received at the Self Help Center produced statistically significant findings between the two. Considering these findings clearly demonstrates that services prepare litigants for their court proceeding (with a high level of satisfaction) supports the allocation of resources to litigants in need of information and procedural knowledge to conduct their business with the Superior Court.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation # 1 – Extend data collection an additional six months.

In November, 2015 the presiding judge elect for 2016/2017 identified the Self Help Center as an area that required strategic planning to best address the needs of Self-Represented Litigants.

Superior Court senior management received the preliminary findings of this research on December 4, 2015. The researcher has requested an additional six (6) months of survey data collection to support data driven decision making. The court's management analyst (the researcher for this study) will analyze all metrics collected, including the correlation between income, service provided, number of forms, time utilized, case type and level of satisfaction. In order to implement this, resources need to be allocated to assist with the data entry and verification. Finding will be presented to senior court management, and areas of emphasis will be articulated to the presiding judge. The period of performance for this enhanced research study will be August 21, 2015 – May 21, 2016.

Recommendation # 2 – (Extended) data collection to support the analysis of limited English proficient litigants .

The statistical significance of the limited English speaking population (based upon data in this research) will also be explored in the afore-mentioned augmented SHC study (period of performance August 21, 2015 – May 21, 2016). The court's management analyst will analyze all metrics collected, including the correlation between income, service provided, number of forms, time utilized, case type and level of satisfaction on a per language basis. This augmented study will include an analysis of resources that are currently available at the court, with recommendations to support service delivery in a language that the litigant is conversant.

Statistics that quantify the language need, per instance of service, will likely support a decision to dedicate a court paid interpreters to support SRLs. It is anticipated that recommendations from this augmented research would support bi-lingual skills as a job requirement for the SHC. Further, survey measured service length for each litigant (in minutes) and this information could be correlated to each day of the week. This can be investigated for optimal staffing considerations of interpreters to improve the SHC operations and maintain interpreters for their other assignments.

AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY:

It is further recommended that a longitudinal study be completed beginning from point of service at the SHC up to the point legal documents are successfully filed with the clerk of the court. A longitudinal study with the inclusion of the impact on each judicial proceeding itself would likely inform legislative decision making surrounding the allocation of services to the greater population statewide. Additionally, focused interviews with judicial officers on litigants who received SHC services would add more depth to future research.

Finally, this research provides additional understanding of how SHC services can positively impact the court and the community it serves. This research serves to measure the impact on SRL's and what is needed in order to assist them with their statutory right to fully participate in the judicial system. This research can be useful for developing and improving a SHC as it operates to bring critically needed services to the public.

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY FORMS

2015-16 Instance of Assistance Form

Member:	Date:
Total time spent: Brief Service <input type="checkbox"/> 5 to 14 minutes Substantial Service* <input type="checkbox"/> 15-29 minutes <input type="checkbox"/> 30-59 minutes <input type="checkbox"/> 60-89 minutes <input type="checkbox"/> More than 90 minutes: _____ <i>*Conduct survey on back</i>	LEP assistance: <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes Language spoken: <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese <input type="checkbox"/> Korean <input type="checkbox"/> Mandarin <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____
Nature of Service: <input type="checkbox"/> Triage <input type="checkbox"/> One-on-one assistance <input type="checkbox"/> Workshop assistance <input type="checkbox"/> Court room assistance <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	Type of Service (check all that apply): <input type="checkbox"/> Case consultation <input type="checkbox"/> Assistance with forms <input type="checkbox"/> Information and referral <input type="checkbox"/> Post-hearing follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____
Type of Case: <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Civil law <input type="checkbox"/> Family law <input type="checkbox"/> Housing law </div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> Restraining orders <input type="checkbox"/> Small claims <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ </div> </div>	
Total number of forms:	Form Accuracy Rating:
Supervisor signature:	

2015-16 Litigant Feedback Form

1. Why did you choose to get help at the Self Help Center today?

(Check all that apply)

- ☐ My friend or family member recommended the Self-Help Center
- ☐ Court staff or the judge recommended the Self-Help Center

- ☐ I can't afford an attorney
- ☐ I prefer to do my own legal work
- ☐ Other (explain):

2. Rate the extent to which you...	Much More	Somewhat More	No Change
a. Now understand the legal process.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Feel more confident representing yourself.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Feel better prepared to proceed with your legal issue.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Know what to do next.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. Comments/suggestions:

4. Please rate the services received today from the JusticeCorps volunteer (circle one):

Excellent

Good

Average

Poor

Appendix B: Intake Form

Alameda County Superior Court Self-Help Center

Scope of Services Provided

By completing this survey I acknowledge that:

- ☐ The Center is here to help me help myself.
- ☐ The Center will be giving me legal information.
- ☐ The Center will **NOT** be giving me legal advice.
- ☐ The Center is available to help both parties in my case.
- ☐ The Center is not representing me and this is **NOT** a private meeting.

1. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
☐ Female

2. Where do you live?

- ☐ This County
☐ Another County in California
☐ Another State
☐ Another Country

3. What is your race or ethnic group? Check all that apply.

- ☐ American Indian/Alaska Native Asian
☐ Asian
☐ Black/African American
☐ Hispanic/Latino
☐ Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander
☐ White
☐ Other: _____

4. Have you ever had an attorney?

- ☐ No ☐ Yes

If YES, we need to see a Court Order removing them from your case.

5. What is your main source of income?

- ☐ None—No income
☐ Employment
☐ Unemployment Benefits
☐ Public Assistance, CalWORKS, TANF
☐ Retirement, Social Security, Pension
☐ Disability (Non-Retirement)
☐ Other: Self-Employment
☐ Other: _____

6. Your Monthly Income (before taxes)

- ☐ None
☐ \$1000 or less
☐ \$1001 to \$2000
☐ \$2001 to \$3000
☐ \$3001 to \$4000
☐ \$4001 to \$5000
☐ More than \$5000

7. What language do you like using most?

- ☐ English ☐ Korean
☐ Spanish ☐ Mandarin
☐ Armenian ☐ Russian
☐ Cambodian ☐ Vietnamese
☐ Cantonese ☐ Other: _____
☐ Hmong

8. How many times have you been to a Family Law Facilitator or Self-Help Center in California?

- ☐ This is my first visit.
☐ 1 Other Visit
☐ 2 Other Visits
☐ 3 Other Visits
☐ 4 Or More Other Visits

10. Who told you about us?

- ☐ Brochures/Pamphlets
☐ Clerk's Office/Other Court Staff
☐ DV Advocate/Battered Women's Shelter
☐ Family Court Services
☐ Friend/Family
☐ Housing Service
☐ Judge/Commissioner
☐ Lawyer Referral Service/Private Attorney
☐ Legal Aid/Legal Services
☐ Local Child Support Agency
☐ Mediation Service
☐ Other Community-based Organization
☐ Other Facilitator
☐ Self
☐ Small Claims Advisor
☐ Website/Internet
☐ Other: _____

11. What are you here for?

- ☐ Family Law
☐ Eviction—Landlord
☐ Eviction—Tenant
☐ Guardianship of

Minor's Name: _____

Date of Birth: _____

- ☐ Name Change
☐ Minor ☐ Adult

- ☐ Other Probate
☐ Small Claims
☐ Other: _____

9. How many times have you been here about this case?

- ☐ This is my first visit.
☐ 1 Other Visit
☐ 2 Other Visits
☐ 3 Other Visits
☐ 4 Or More Other Visits

12. What is your zip?

13. Why did you choose to get help at the Self-Help Center?

- ☐ I can't afford an attorney ☐ My friend recommended the SHC ☐ Court Staff/Judge recommended the SHC
☐ I prefer to do my own legal work ☐ All of the above ☐ Other: _____