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DEVELOPMENT OF PRO SE ORIENTATION PROGRAM

Large numbers of Americans are choosing to represent themselves even when they can afford an attorney. They choose to be “lawyerless” (pro se or pro per). Income-qualified pro se litigants can get pro bono or some form of legal assistance from an attorney and therefore are not a part of this study. Our research indicates that the average potential customer for an initial Pro Se Orientation Program in Prince George's County Circuit Court is female, age 31-40, has 1-3 years college or vocational training, is African American, enjoys an income between \$30,000 and \$40,000, can afford a lawyer, and indicates that if the Court offered an orientation clinic or class, she would attend. These statistics are based on a survey conducted over a two-month period in the Courthouse. Survey results were surprising to many key stakeholders in the Court and Bar Communities. Assumptions held before the survey was not founded on the actual demographics of the customers described above. The “I can do it myself” phenomena make current pro se litigant procedures inadequate for the numbers and types of customers choosing to self-represent.

The goal of the Prince George's County Pro Se Orientation Program is to handle the burgeoning demands of pro se litigants, increase public access to services and effectively provide quality customer service to all court users.

The methodology we used to achieve these goals included: researching, analyzing, interviewing, observing, questionnaires, surveys, documenting and recommending the best of the

best practices appropriate for this Court. Taking into consideration this court's culture and practices, we focused on the most "doable" program features first. The project team met with major stakeholders including the Prince George's County Bar, the Hispanic Bar and the Black Bar Associations; court clerk staff, administrators, judges, as well as volunteer and individual family practice attorneys.

Courts at all levels are seeking ways to deal with pro se litigation. A literature search of best practices indicates that most courts offer some form of self-help assistance but that fewer go to the next step by offering orientation clinics or classes. We focused on courts that already offer clinics or classes in addition to "self-help" assistance, their experiences and learning from their experiences (success and failures) as well as their effectiveness in developing and managing their programs.

Based on approval to proceed by the Prince George's Pro Se Orientation Committee, the Project Team will develop a structure for this court's orientation program.

It is *Recommended* that the Court undertake:

1. Designing and structuring the Pro Se Orientation program.
2. Designing, developing and testing an orientation program curriculum.
3. Developing videos, handouts, support material and feedback forms.
4. Constructing a pro se link to the Court's website.
5. Clarifying Advice versus Assistance and train court staff.
6. Developing a Pro Se Hotline.

Strong partnerships between the Court and the Bar will determine program success. Attorneys must be integral partners with a significant presence during each orientation session.

The report that follows is the result of the Court's efforts to proactively address the issue of the "lawyerless" party phenomenon and it describes the project methodology and recommendations made by the Project Team to the Committee overseeing the Pro Se Orientation Program development. Further, this paper guides the reader logically through our approach to the design, development, testing and implementation of the Prince George's Maryland Pro Se Orientation Project.

This [research paper](#) is available in its entirety in portable document format. To access, you must first obtain and install the Adobe Acrobat Reader.



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