



The need to expand legal resources for SRLs in rural areas

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Several recent [Institute for Court Management's \(ICM\) Fellows](#) papers address rural justice and expanding resources for self-represented litigants (SRLs) in Maryland. This problem is not unique to Maryland. Insights can inform others nationwide.

[Washington County, Maryland Court-Help Centers: A Journey to Rural Destinations?](#) focused on the impact of expanding resources from self-help centers (SHC) to rural locations, allowing SRLs access to information to assist them with court processes.

Over a one-year period, four independent surveys were conducted in Washington County. Surveys were sent to the circuit and district courts, the Washington County Free Library (WCFL), and the Washington County Bar Association. The data collected indicated that 74% of participants would use SHC-style resources if they were located closer to their homes. The need for SRL resources for family cases, including custody and divorce, was mentioned in 55% of the responses.

As part of the [Strategic Plan for the Maryland Judiciary](#), the advancement of justice and the operation of efficient and accessible court systems tie directly to making SRL services and resources more readily available. Expanding SRL resources to locations such as regional branches of the WCFL or in municipalities such as the town hall would help rural residents improve their access.

As NCSC's [2023 national survey of court-based self-help centers](#) found, expanding SHC resources in rural areas improves access to justice. Increased access to information and advice at self-help centers assist users in being more prepared in court and educates the public about the functions of the legal system.

[Locations, Logistics, and Language: Rural SRLs in Wicomico County, Maryland](#) approached a similar facet of resource allocation for SRLs, taking a more tailored approach to services for family cases. SRLs appearing for divorce cases were surveyed on their awareness of and satisfaction with family law help services. The study also involved a survey of judges,

magistrates, attorneys, and court staff involved in family cases, allowing them to share their thoughts on family law help services.

Survey results revealed that many SRLs were unfamiliar with family law help services. Those who were aware of their existence voiced their satisfaction. However, the lack of availability of these services and print materials in languages other than English, such as Spanish and Haitian Creole, is a barrier to fully accessible services for SRLs.

The SRLs interviewed expressed their preference for in-person interactions, while court professionals suggested additional remote services. The study suggests that expanding court services should involve partnerships between the court and local agencies to allow for increased remote help services while hosting staff familiar with the programs to answer any questions for those seeking assistance.

Does your court need help expanding resources for rural SRLs? Visit [SRL Resources](#), contact knowledge@ncsc.org or call 800-616-6164. Follow the National Center for State Courts on [Facebook](#), [X](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Vimeo](#). For more Trending Topics posts, visit ncsc.org/trendingtopics and subscribe to the [LinkedIn newsletter](#).