

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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McHENRY COUNTY CIRCUIT COURT OPENS LEGAL SELF-HELP CENTER

(Woodstock, IL) Chief Judge, Michael J. Sullivan, announced the opening of a new Legal Self-Help Center today for individuals who represent themselves in court without an attorney. The new center is located in the Law Library on the third floor of the McHenry County Courthouse.

“While there is no substitute for the assistance of a skilled attorney in the courtroom, many people are coming into the courtroom attempting to represent themselves without an attorney. The legal self-help centers will assist these self-represented litigants by providing current information on Illinois law which will allow them to present their case more effectively in court,” said Judge Sullivan. “Many of these self-represented litigants cannot afford to hire an attorney. Our local legal aid provider, Prairie State Legal Services, and its staff and volunteer lawyers do not have the resources to help every person who needs a lawyer in court,” he said.

Individuals using the self-help center will be able to search for legal information on a broad range of civil legal problems. Legal forms are also available on the website along with short videos on how to go to court. The underlying website is maintained and regularly updated by Illinois Legal Aid Online, an Illinois nonprofit organization with offices in Chicago.

“We hope that by providing access to self-represented litigants, we will reduce the frustration of people who must come to court without an attorney,” said Judge Maureen P. McIntyre, Presiding Judge of the Civil Division. “The legal process is often complex and difficult to understand for non-lawyers. Individuals who come to the self-help center will find that the legal information is presented in a clear and straight forward manner,” said Judge McIntyre.

The new public access computer for the legal self-help center will be located in the Law Library, Room B-340, in the McHenry County Government Center, 2200 North Seminary Avenue, Woodstock, Illinois. In addition to accessing the center through the courthouse location, anyone with a computer and internet access can find the McHenry County Self-Help Center online at: <http://mchenry.illinoislegalaid.org>. For those who need assistance in using the website, a “navigator” will be available Monday through Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. at the courthouse location to help people locate the information which they are seeking. The legal self-help center will be open to the public from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. each business day. Some public librarians in McHenry County have also been trained to assist library patrons in using the self-help center. Court documents will still need to be filed at the courthouse in Woodstock.

The McHenry County Self-Help Center website features an introductory welcoming video from Chief Judge Sullivan. In addition to the location and hours of operation, the front page features a list of six

commonly requested legal topics and a search bar to locate additional information from the self-help center.

“The legal information and pleadings contained on the site are geared to assist lower income people with less complex legal problems,” said Lisa Colpoys, Executive Director of Illinois Legal Aid Online. “We realize that legal aid organizations such as Prairie State Legal Services do not have enough staff attorneys to handle all of the legal problems of lower income people in a large county like McHenry County, even with an active pro bono program. The role of the self-help center is to assist those people who cannot find an attorney to help them,” she said.

“This is a very exciting time for the courts in Illinois,” said Joseph A. Dailing, Executive Director of the Illinois Coalition for Equal Justice. “Illinois judges are demonstrating in a very concrete way that they want to ensure that lower income individuals with legal problems have meaningful access to the court system. The self-help centers are one way to increase access. The Coalition is proud to be a part of this process,” said Dailing.

The self-help center was developed as a result of a broad-based collaboration of people and organizations in McHenry County including the Circuit Court, the Circuit Clerk’s Office, the McHenry County Board, McHenry County Bar Association, Prairie State Legal Services, Illinois Legal Aid Online and the Illinois Coalition for Equal Justice.

The first two years of operation of the center will be funded by a start up grant from the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation which receives its funding from the Illinois General Assembly. “I am hopeful that the McHenry County Board will be able to assist with funding for the self-help center after the initial funding is exhausted,” said Judge Sullivan. “I think this will be an important and cost-effective service to our citizens who must go to court without the help of an attorney,” he concluded.

Last year eight legal self-help centers were opened in various counties in Illinois. These new generation self-help centers provide expanded access to legal information, legal forms and videos through the internet. The McHenry County Self-Help Center is the fifth new self-help center opened in 2008. An additional four centers are planned to be opened later this year.

For additional information, please contact:

Office of the Chief Judge
Hon. Michael J. Sullivan
(815) 334-4885