

RESOURCES FOR THE SELF-REPRESENTED IN THE MARYLAND COURTS



ACCESS TO JUSTICE
MARYLAND COURT LAW LIBRARY DIRECTORS
JUVENILE & FAMILY SERVICES
THURGOOD MARSHALL STATE LAW LIBRARY

FISCAL YEAR 2023

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Programs and Resources

The Maryland Judiciary depends for its efficacy on the public’s trust and confidence. By promoting and supporting meaningful access to justice, the Judiciary enhances that trust. The programs and resources described in this annual report reflect the commitment of the Maryland Judiciary to ensure that all Marylanders can benefit from the protections the law affords by meaningfully participating in the court process.

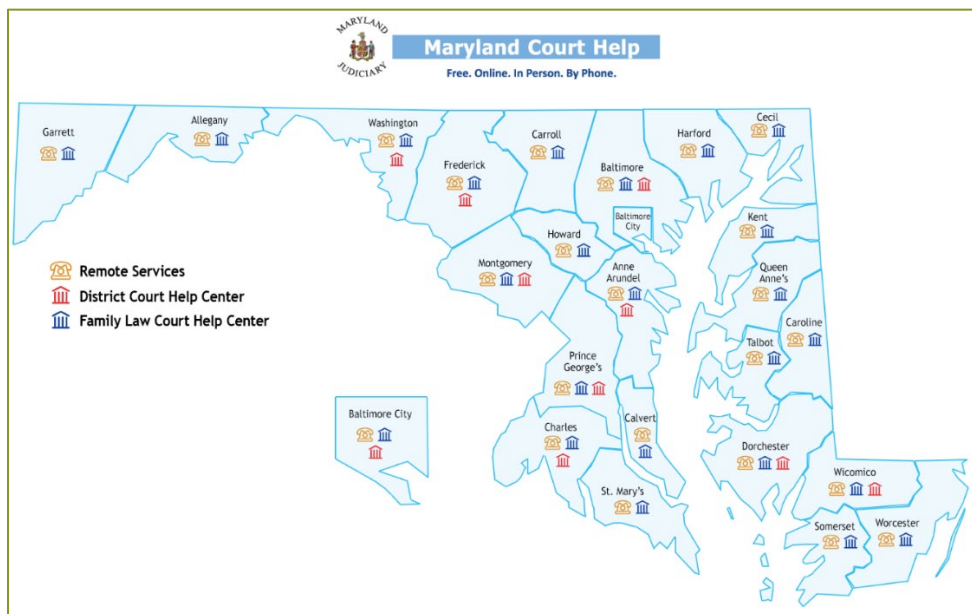
Courts must serve all regardless of income, education, or ability – regardless of whether they appear before the court represented by counsel or whether, unable to secure counsel, they appear on their own. Resources offered by the court and its partners enable individuals to obtain legal information and advice, allow them to prepare court documents with relative ease, assist them in preparing for their day in court, and provide them with information to better understand their legal problem and tools to navigate the court process.

A network of court-based help centers provides legal help to self-represented litigants in civil cases. These complement additional resources which together ensure Marylanders can find the legal information they need and get more support from attorneys, paralegals, and law librarians when they need it. This spectrum of resources include:

- **Maryland Court Help Centers**
 - 10 District Court locations including two “All Civil” Centers.
 - The Remote Services Center, which assists with all civil matters via phone and live chat.
 - Family Court Help Centers in all circuit courts.
 - Court Help Access & Information Centers.
- **Public Law Libraries**
 - The Thurgood Marshall State Law Library provides a staff of professional law librarians, key print resources, support for those conducting legal research, and online access to a broad range of legal resources.
 - Nine staffed law libraries in circuit court locations provide print and online resources and help from a law librarian.
- **Legal Information Resources**
 - Court Help web content on www.mdcourts.gov.
 - The People’s Law Library, Maryland’s legal content website at www.peoples-law.org.
 - The Maryland Court Help Video Library with over 120 titles.
 - The Maryland Court Help app.
 - Webinars offered live and on-demand.
 - CourtTV displays in all court locations.
- **Forms Tools**
 - Form Finders to help users identify the forms they need.
 - Guide & File, plain language online interviews to guide users in completing packets of court forms.

Maryland Court Help Centers

The Maryland courts provide legal advice and information to all Marylanders through a network of help centers. Eight regional centers assist walk-in visitors in District Court locations. Two additional centers – in Frederick and La Plata – serve co-located circuit and District Courts and assist with all civil case types. These centers are operated for the Judiciary by the Maryland Center for Legal Assistance, LLC (MCLA), a subsidiary of Maryland Legal Aid.



A Network of Maryland Court Help Center walk-in locations serves the entire state. Marylanders in every jurisdiction have access to the statewide call center (Remote Services) for help via phone and chat.

In addition, all circuit court locations provide a Family Court Help Center where visitors can get help with their divorce, custody, child support, or other family law case. Family Court Help Centers are managed by local circuit courts, each of which determines how best to provide the service. Some courts contract with local legal aid providers, while some engage staff directly to manage the service. The Family Court Help Centers are funded by grant funds provided to each circuit court by Juvenile & Family Services in the Administrative Office of the Courts.

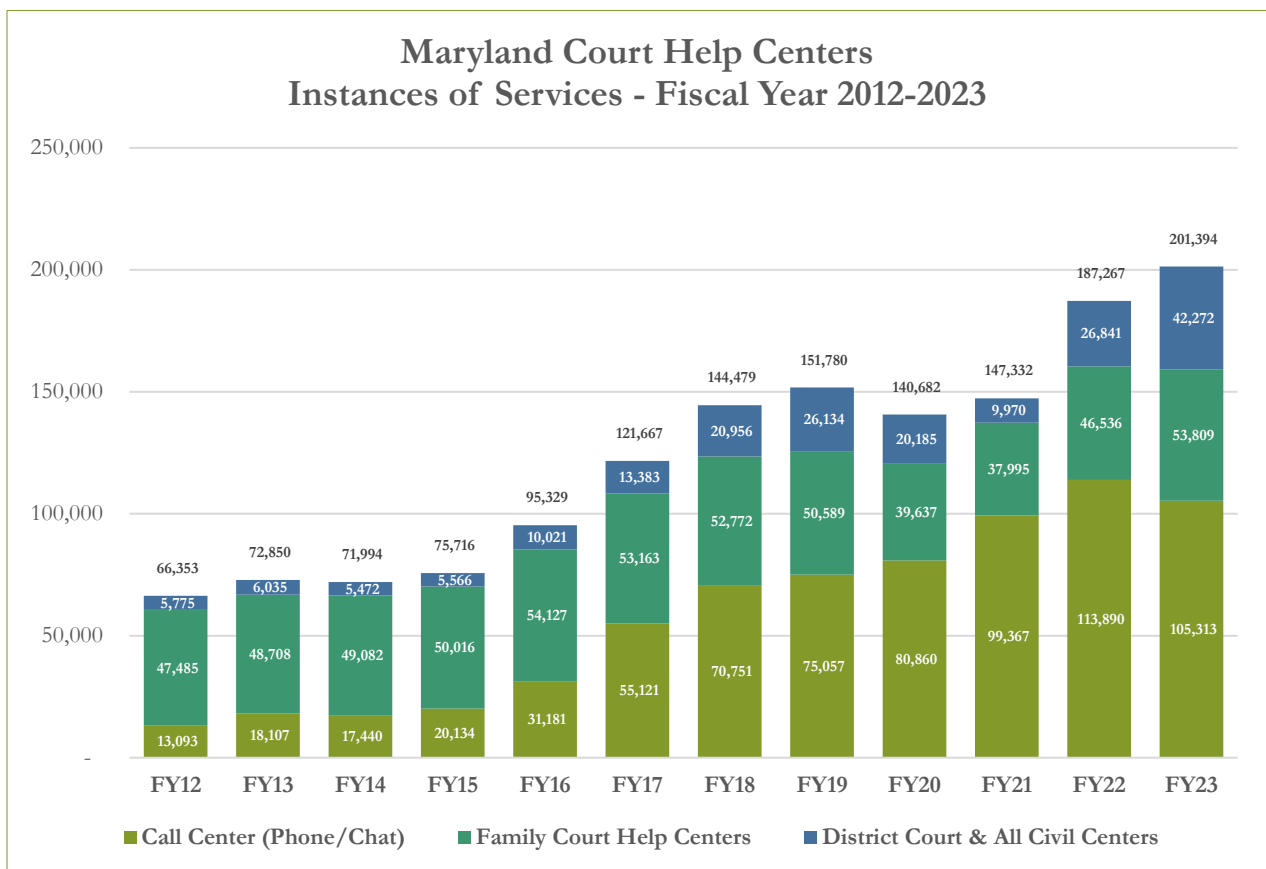
The walk-in centers are complemented by a statewide call center, also operated by MCLA. At the call center, attorneys answer phone calls and respond to live chats from 8:30 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Attorneys at the remote services center also assist court visitors from some locations via videoconference. Users can also use the Maryland Court Help app to connect directly with a lawyer at the center.



Call Center Attorneys are Available Weekdays from 8:30 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

In fiscal year 2023, these court-based help centers together provided over 200,000 instances of service.



District Court and All-Civil Walk-in Centers and Remote Services

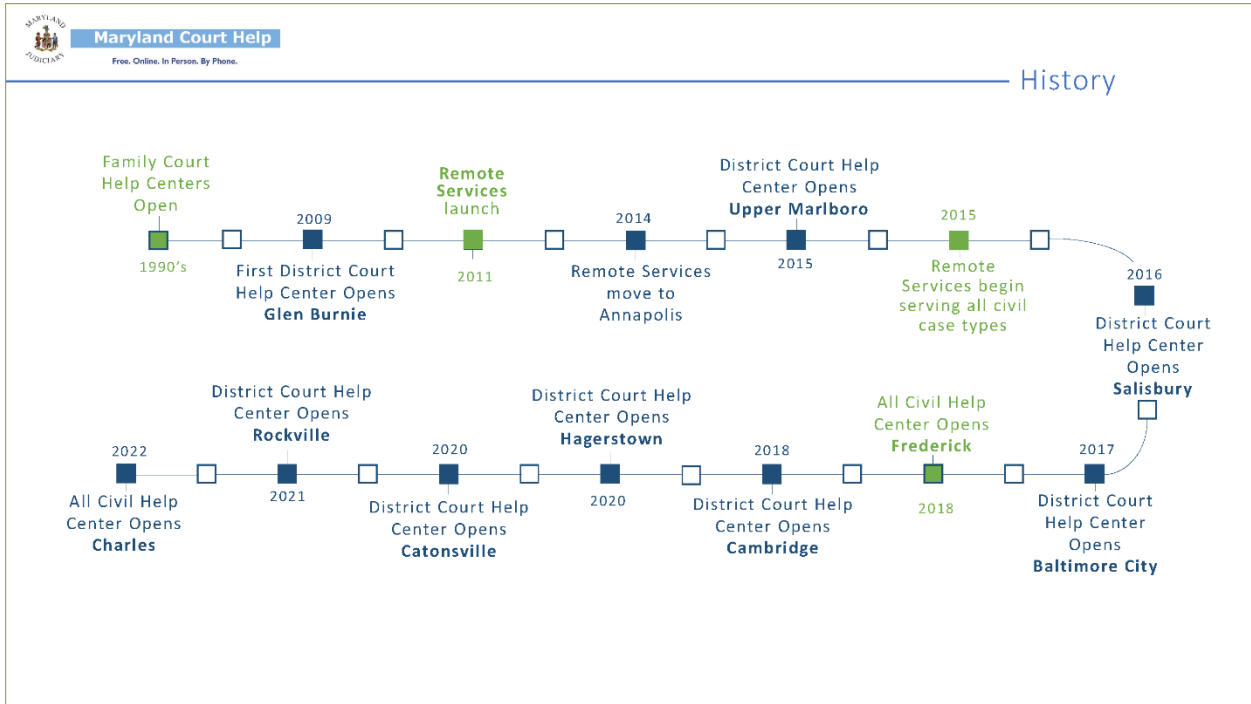
Building a Robust Statewide Network – One Step at a Time

Maryland is unique in being able to offer a comprehensive network of services that make it easy for residents anywhere in the state to get help navigating the courts. Establishing a strong statewide network requires



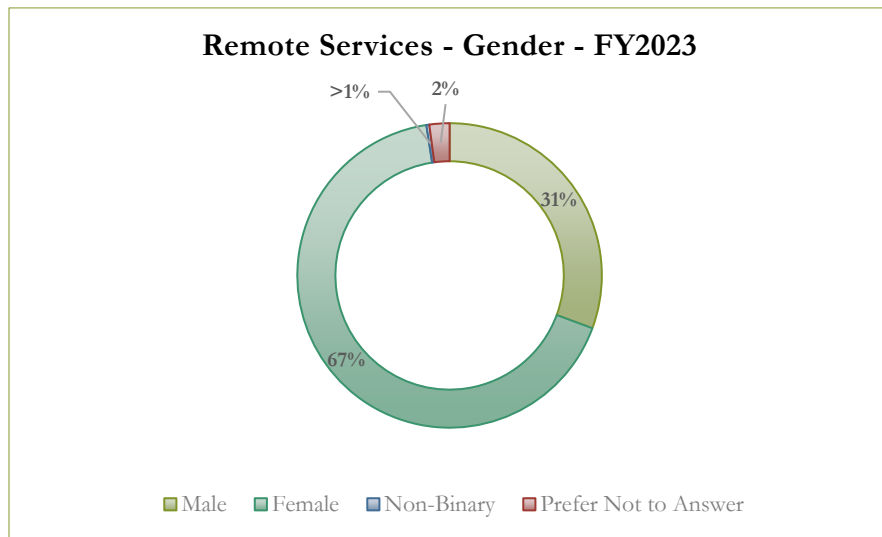
Speaking with an Attorney at the District Court Help Center in Salisbury, Maryland

leadership support and a long-standing commitment. The District Court of Maryland began the journey of expanding help center services to District Court clients in 2009, opening a single walk-in center in the District Court in Anne Arundel County (Glen Burnie). Since that time, additional walk-in center locations have opened to ensure regional access to these services across the state. A statewide call center, the Remote Services Center, opened in 2011 and now provides help in all civil case types via phone and live chat, ensuring that Marylanders in every jurisdiction can speak with an attorney about their civil legal needs.

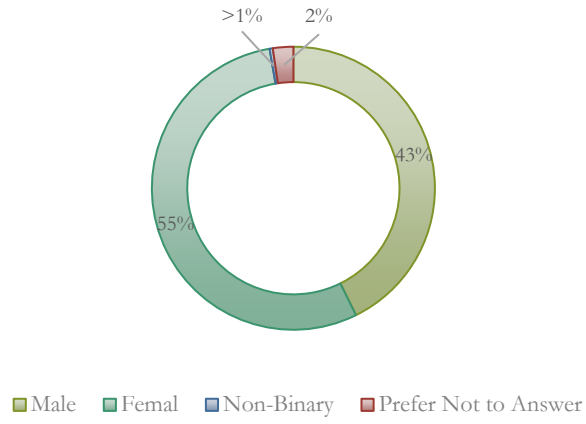


Who Uses the Court Help Centers?

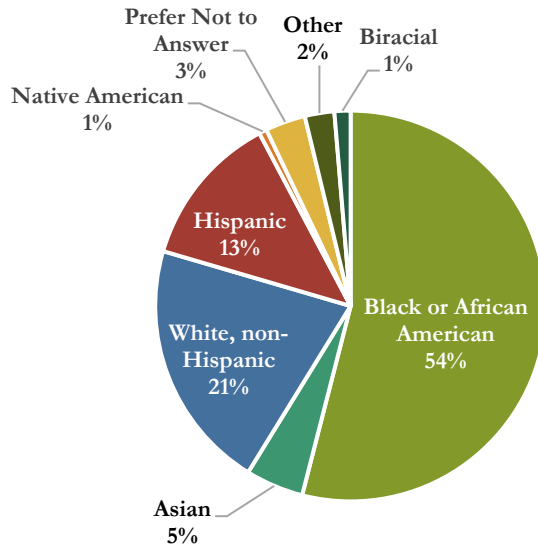
The Maryland Judiciary captures quarterly demographic data to fully understand who benefits from these programs. In both the District Court and all-civil walk-in centers and the call center, users are overwhelmingly female, and most likely to be persons of color. Approximately 8% of walk-in and call center users report they are veterans.

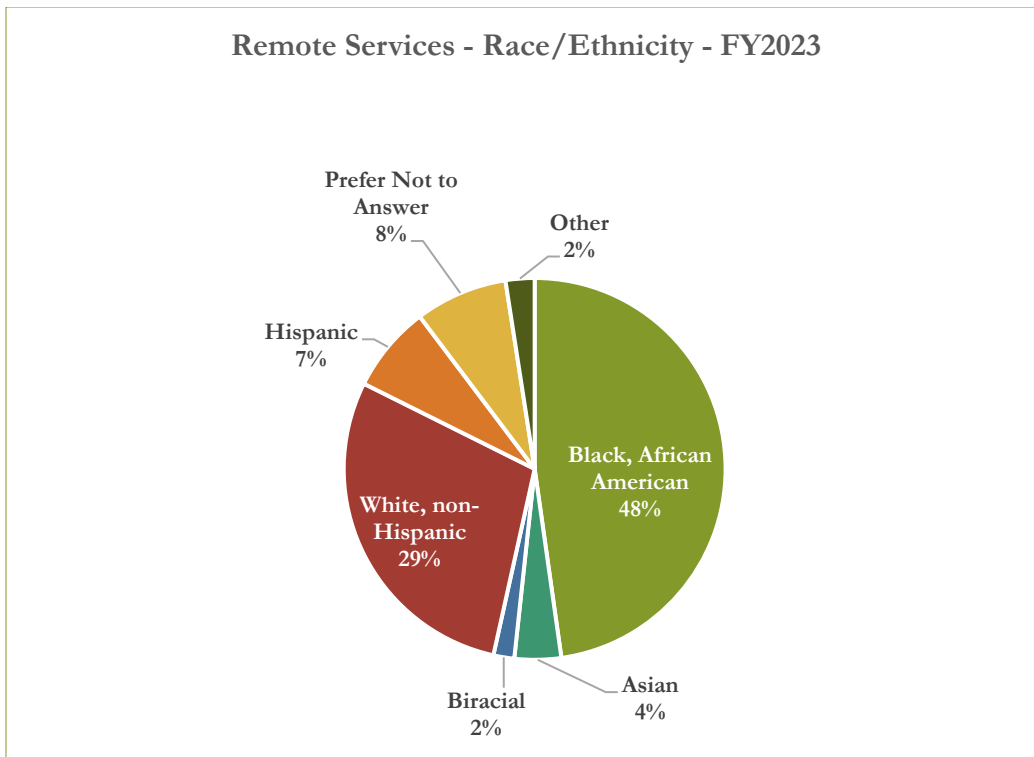


**District Court & All Civil Walk-in Centers -
Gender - FY2023**

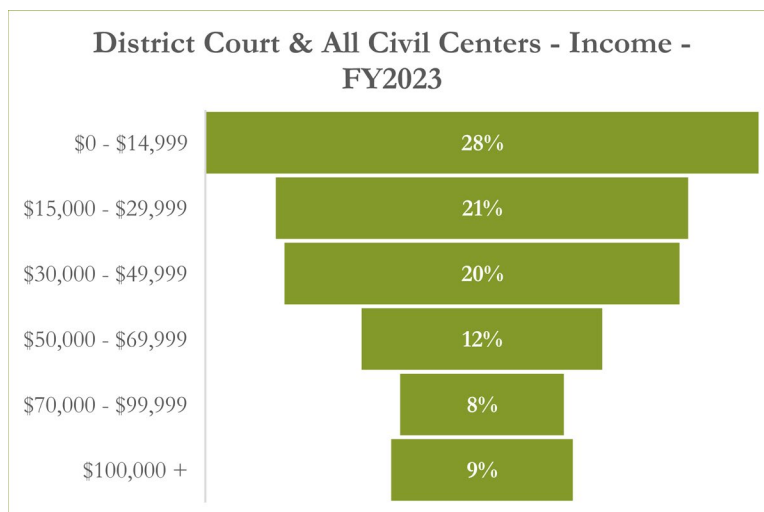


**District Court & All Civil Walk-In Centers -
Race/Ethnicity - FY2023**



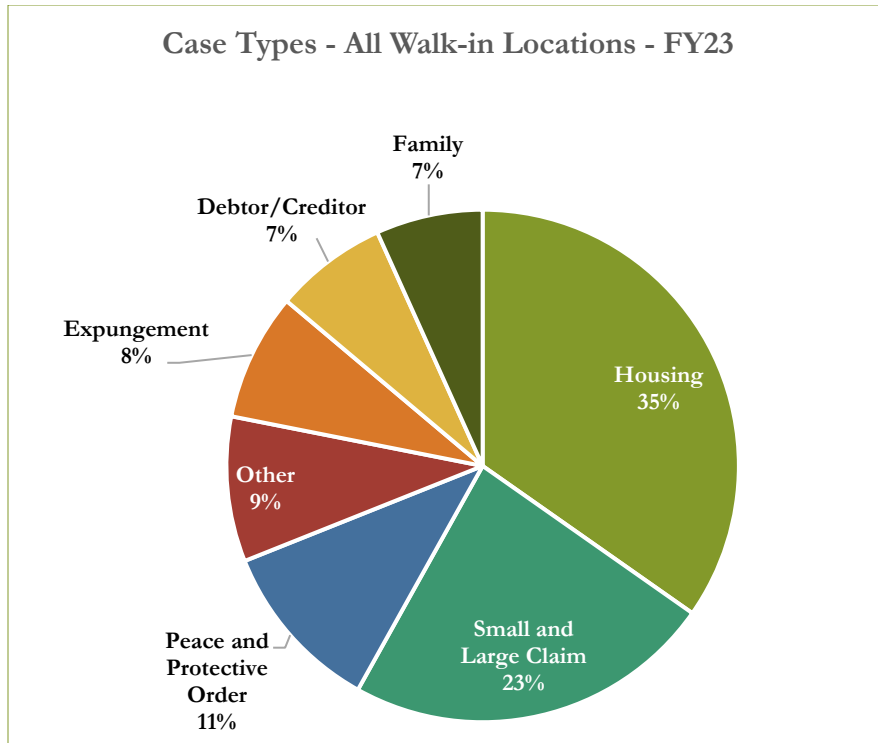


Nearly half (49%) of walk-in center visitors report a household income of under \$30,000.



What Kinds of Legal Problems Do the Centers Help With?

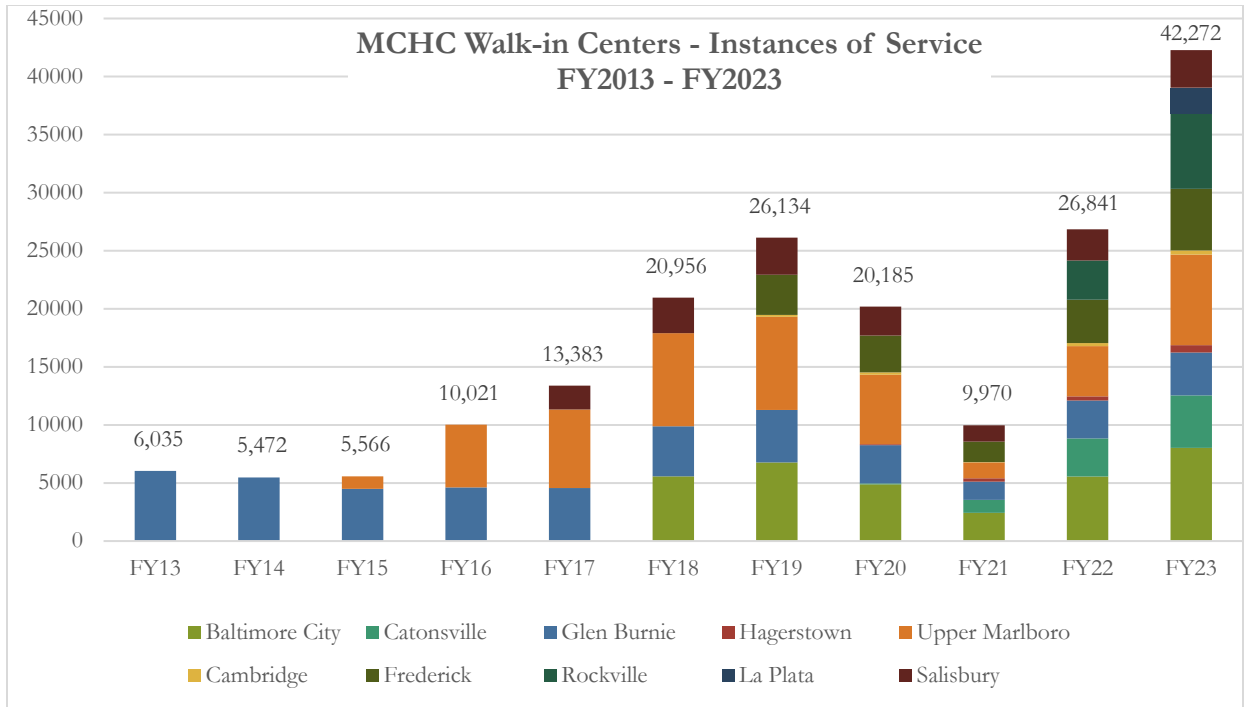
Marylanders can speak with lawyers about a broad range of civil case types. Eight walk-in centers offer help in District Court case types including small claims, housing, criminal expungement, peace and protective orders, and consumer debt matters. The two all-civil centers in La Plata and Frederick also offer help in family law matters and some non-family circuit court case types like foreclosure and mandamus. The makeup of caseloads vary by location depending on the types of dockets heard in that location, the other resources available in the courthouse, and the needs of the community.



Trends: Looking Forward

The COVID-19 pandemic affected traffic in the Maryland courts and the way individuals sought help. Walk-in services were suppressed to some extent in fiscal years 2020 through 2022, as people sought alternative ways of getting help, primarily online. Fiscal year 2023 saw a significant return to in-person services. The instances of service at District Court and all-civil walk-in locations increased significantly, up 57% from the year prior.

Based on past performance, the Maryland Judiciary anticipates continued growth in the use of the Maryland Court Help Centers at both the District Court and all-civil walk-in centers and through the call center.



Court Help Access & Information Centers: Increased Use of Videoconferencing

Since opening an unstaffed Court Help Access & Information Center (CHAI) at the Circuit Court for Washington County in early 2022, other courts have expressed an interest in standing up these types of resources for court visitors. Access to Justice has been working with the Circuit Court for Allegany County to launch a CHAI in that location. At CHAI centers, court visitors can use public access computers to find legal information, complete court forms with the help of Guide & File plain language interviews, or videoconference with attorneys at the statewide call center. Allegany County’s CHAI center is slated to be available to the public in fall 2023.

To support these types of standalone resource centers, Access to Justice has created a series of tabletop instructions and visual law posters. These help the court create a user-friendly space where visitors can find what they need with minimal assistance.

What happens in my divorce case?

- The person who files for divorce will need to indicate a ground for divorce. Grounds for divorce are the reasons you are allowed to file for divorce in Maryland. They are:
 - mutual consent.
 - irreconcilable differences.
 - 6-month separation.
- If you and your spouse agree to everything, you can get a divorce on the grounds of "mutual consent." In these cases, the divorce can be granted fairly quickly.
- The court may order or offer MEDIATION where you and the other side will meet with a neutral mediator who can help you reach an agreement.
- If the court needs more information to decide what's best in your case, you may be required to participate in a CUSTODY EVALUATION, SUBSTANCE ABUSE TEST or another type of assessment.
- You may have a PENDENTE LITE HEARING. This is a hearing to decide certain things early on so your family can be stable while awaiting the final trial.
- If necessary, the court will hold a TRIAL to make final decisions in your case.

Who decides my case?

You and Your Spouse
If you reach an agreement on marital property, child custody, child support, alimony or other decisions, you can ask the court to incorporate your full or partial agreement into the final judgment of divorce.

The Court
If you do not reach an agreement on all issues, the court will make those decisions. The final decision will be outlined in a judgment of divorce.

Custody issues? You'll need a parenting plan.

If your case involves kids, you and the other parent will need to submit a Parenting Plan.
Find out more:
mdcourts.gov/parentingplans

What happens after trial?

You and the other party must follow the final decision made by the court, which may include your agreement. If one of you does not comply, the other person can return to court for further action.

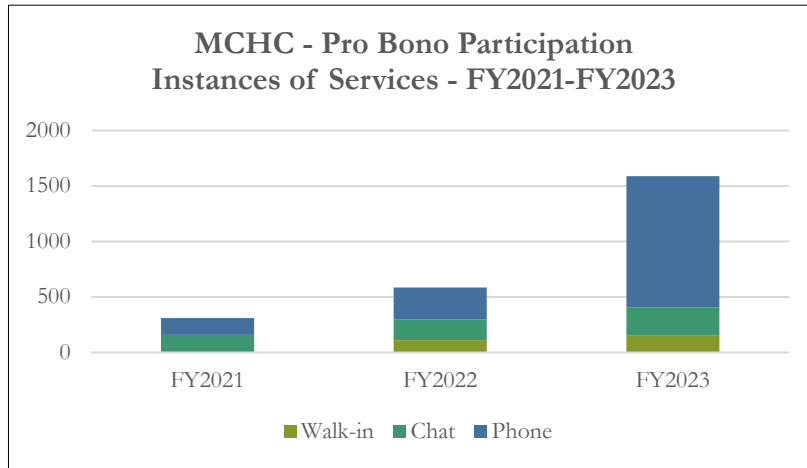
mdcourts.gov/divorce

A Series of Visual Law Posters Help Visitors Get Quick Access to Key Information

Engaging the Support of the Private Bar through Pro Bono Participation

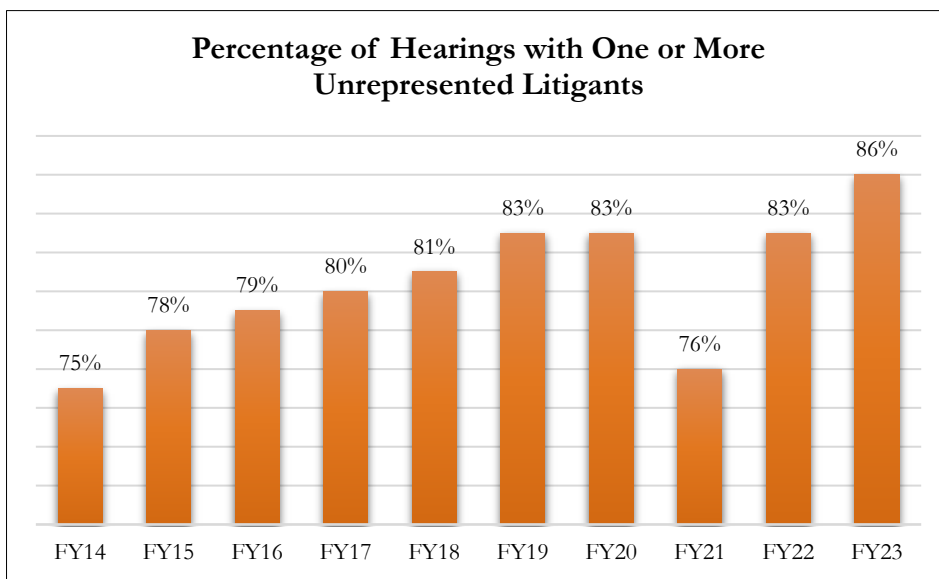
To amplify the reach of the help centers, the Maryland Judiciary requires its vendor, the Maryland Center for Legal Assistance (MCLA), to engage pro bono attorneys. MCLA employs a pro bono coordinator who recruits and supports members of the private bar who are willing to volunteer their time to serve in a walk-in location, or to pick up calls or chats. Attorneys who choose to support the call center can volunteer to take calls or chats from any location, including their home or office. In fiscal year 2023, the number of instances

of service provided by pro bono attorneys increased 172%, most notably in phone services. Attorneys provided 709 hours of service to the program during the fiscal year.



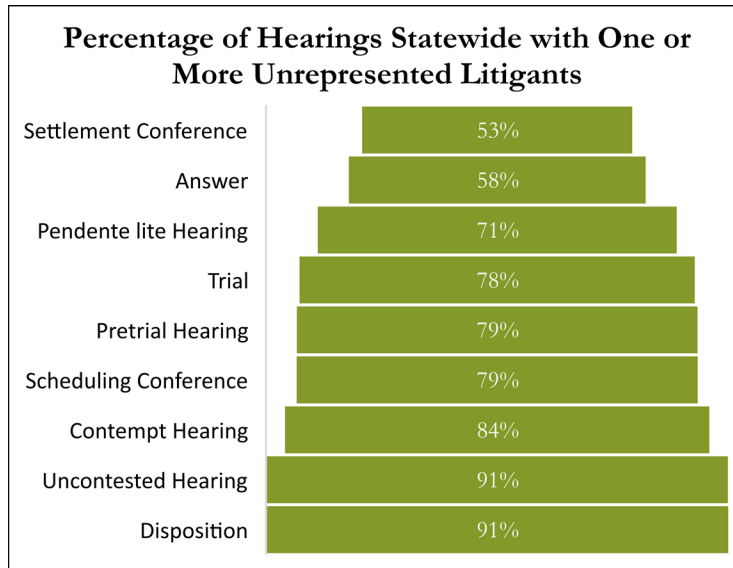
Family Court Help Centers

Every circuit court in Maryland provides services to litigants who do not have legal representation. Some larger jurisdictions have family court help centers where litigants meet with an attorney or paralegal for guidance on court forms and legal procedures. In other counties, courts contract with private attorneys or legal services providers to offer guidance to self-represented litigants.



The Department of Juvenile and Family Services receives quarterly data from each court detailing representation status of litigants in domestic cases. The number of domestic hearings reported in fiscal year

2023 increased by 10% and the number of individuals in domestic cases where one or more litigants were not represented by an attorney increased by 3%.



At the time the answer was filed, 58% of domestic cases had at least one unrepresented litigant, and at trial 78% of cases had one or more unrepresented litigants. Baltimore City has the highest percentage of litigants without representation. At answer, both parties had representation only 8.4% of the time. Both parties were unrepresented at answer 71% of the time. Other jurisdictions report higher representation rates. Talbot and Worcester counties consistently report both litigants being represented at answer more than 80% of the time.

Meeting the Need

The COVID-19 health emergency changed the way the centers do business. By maintaining some of the changes implemented during the COVID-19 health emergency, the courts have made the help centers more accessible. Centers continue to provide services in-person, remote, by phone, and through email/mail/pick-up. Email/mail/pick-up is when a litigant emails an inquiry and the center provides the forms needed electronically, by mail, or in a packet for the litigant to pick-up from the courthouse (potentially outside of the help center's hours).



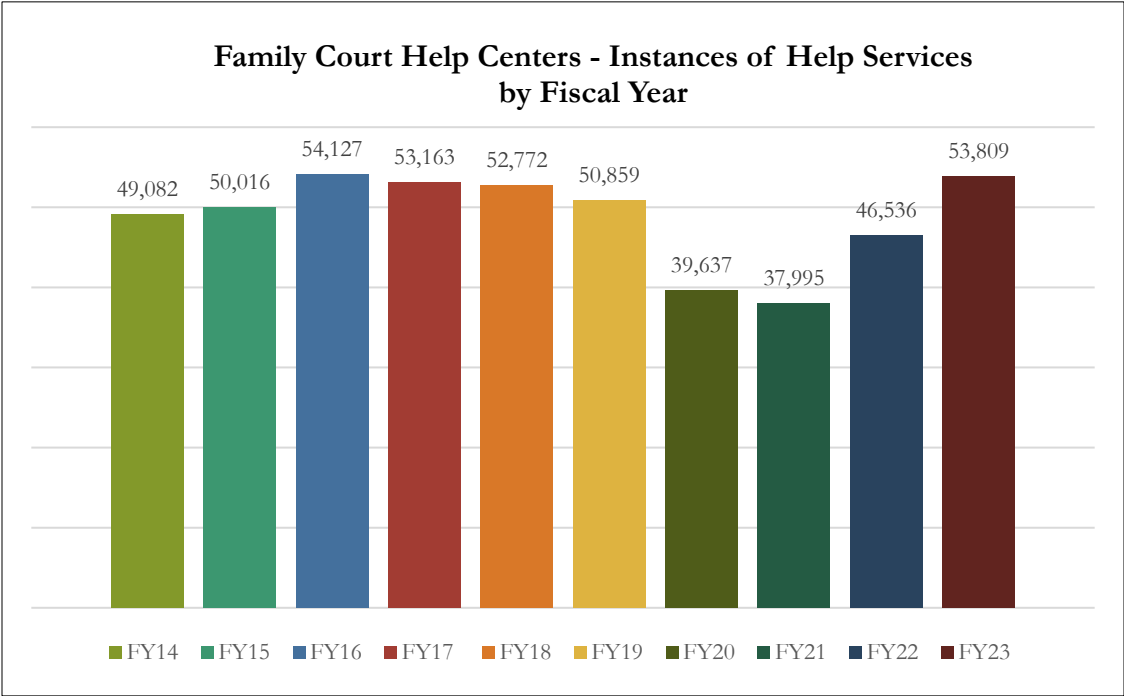
Staff at the Charles County Help Center Provide Remote Assistance

Accessibility has also improved the expansion of online resources. The Judiciary's [Children & Family Legal Help](#) page continues to be a frequently visited page on the Judiciary's site. More than 36,000 people visited the family help page and there have been nearly 70,000 individual page views this past year. These webpages contain brief videos that walk litigants through common family law issues with child custody, divorce, domestic violence, guardianship, and name changes. There are also fact sheets, links to the help centers, and other legal resources.

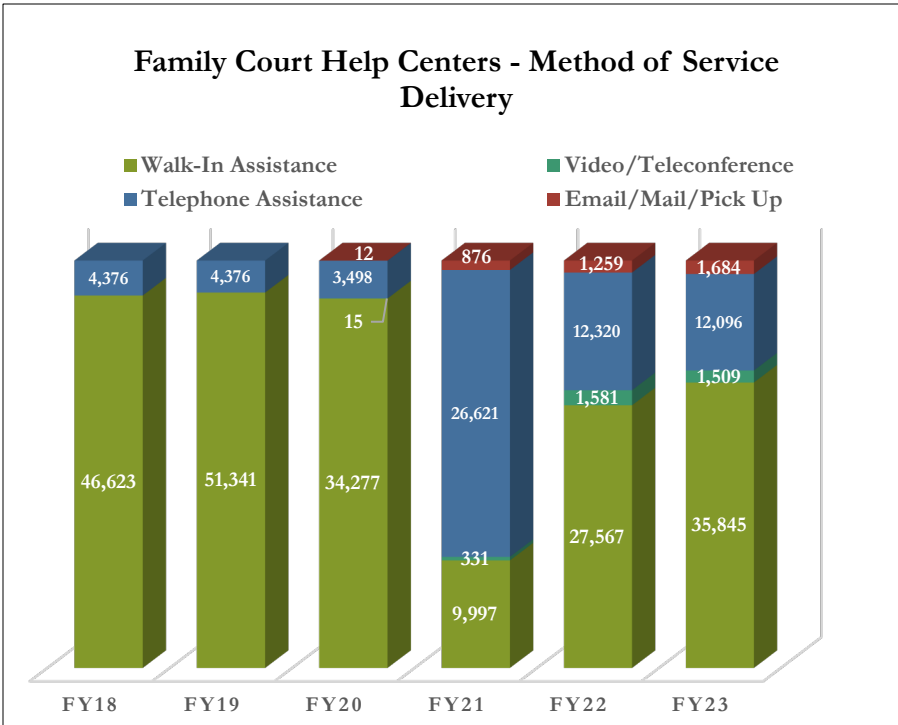
The centers provide a wide array of services to litigants. Fifty percent (50%) of the instances of service included forms assistance and 44% included legal advice. Help Center staff also provided mediation or trial preparation, reviewed parenting plans, and worked with litigants on organizing their cases through the Purple Notebook Project, a tool for litigants to organize their cases.

Who is Being Assisted?

In fiscal year 2023, Family Court Help Centers provided 53,809 instances of service, a 19.1% (7,273) increase from fiscal year 2022.



As the courts return to pre-pandemic levels of operations and case filings begin to increase, the need for help center services has also increased. Many of the litigants who access the centers are repeat customers. In their



intake survey, only 48% of individuals served reported that this was their first visit to the help center, while 8% reported visiting the center more than eight times for their current legal issue.

Most individuals that seek assistance at the Family Court Help Centers need fundamental help with court processes and forms. Thirty-four percent (34%) of visitors do not have an active case and have little to no knowledge about how to start their case with the court.

Demographics of Family Court Help Center Visitors – Fiscal Year 2023

Ethnic Background

American Indian (Native American) or Alaska Native	236	0.55%
Asian or Asian American	1,193	2.8%
Black or African American	18,755	43.7%
Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin	7,368	17.2%
Middle Eastern or North African	431	1.01%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	49	0.11%
White	11,471	26.8%
Two or more races and/or ethnicities	1,515	3.5%
Prefer not to answer	1,690	3.9%
Other	167	0.39%

167 litigants reported 15 other races including: Afro Carib American, Afro-Arab, Afro-Latina, Albanian, Brazilian, East Indian, Fatemeh, Haitian, Jamaican, Mexicana, North Africa-Morocco, Pakistani, Puerto Rican, Scotch Irish Italiano, and South Asian Indian.

Ethnic Background 2 or More Race Breakdown

American Indian (Native American) or Alaska Native	186	9.5%
Asian or Asian American	145	7.4%
Black or African American	604	30.9%
Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin	209	10.7%
Middle Eastern or North African	24	1.2%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	35	1.8%
White – Blanco	542	27.8%
Prefer not to answer	101	5.2%
Other (please specify)	97	4.97%

Gender

Male	15,951	37.6%
Female	25,918	61.0%
Non-binary	59	0.14%
Prefer not to say	475	1.12%

Prefer to self-describe	29	0.07%
No Response/Refused	30	0.07%

Age

18 – 29	6,195	16.2%
30 – 49	22,012	57.7%
50 – 64	7,151	18.7%
65 or Older	1,657	4.3%
No Response/Refused	1,148	3.0%

Household Income

\$0-\$14,999	10,315	25.6%
\$15,000 - \$29,999	7,476	18.5%
\$30,000 - \$49,999	7,948	19.7%
\$50,000 - \$69,999	4,378	10.9%
\$70,000 - \$99,999	2,798	6.9%
\$100,000 +	2,594	6.4%
No Response/Refused	4,825	12.0%

Military Service

Yes	2,456	6.9%
No	35,682	93.5%
No Response/Refused	25	0.1%

Education

Less than High School	2,614	6.3%
High School	15,167	36.4%
Technical School	1,695	4.1%
Some College	9,454	22.7%
Associates Degree	2,698	6.5%
Bachelor's Degree	5,108	12.3%
Advanced Degree	2,766	6.6%
No Response/Refused	2,181	5.2%

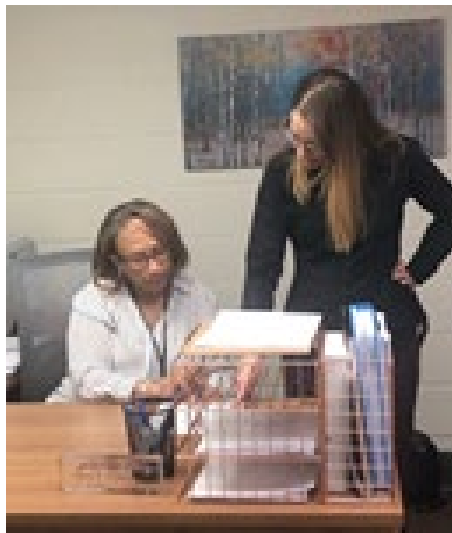
Major Language Spoken

English	35,369	83.4%
Spanish	5,166	12.2%
French	290	0.7%
Russian	34	0.1%
Korean	22	0.1%
Chinese	74	0.2%
Other	247	0.6%
No Response/Refused	1,230	2.9%

1,230 litigants reported 75 other languages.

Evaluating the Impact

In the year to come, Juvenile and Family Services will be completing the second phase of a help center evaluation study. Between October 2019 and January 2023, Juvenile and Family Services gathered satisfaction surveys from litigants who visited the Family Court Help Centers. The study involved surveys taken after litigants visited help centers and then a second survey that was completed after the litigants' court hearings. At the close of the first (collection) phase of the evaluation, we had responses from more than 4,500 litigants who have utilized our Family Court Help Centers across the state. Of those, 500 respondents completed a subsequent, post-hearing survey after their court hearing.



Gina Polley, Help Center Attorney, and Julee Snyder, Legal Resource Coordinator, review court

Preliminary results of the initial surveys show that 93% of survey respondents fully agreed that the staff treated them with respect and 89% fully agreed that the staff listened to what they had to say. In addition, 78% reported knowing what to do next, and 82% reported that all their concerns were addressed.

Litigant comments included the following:

“ . . . the lawyer helped ease my worries about filing for divorce. I feel confident to represent myself in court and was assisted with filing the proper forms to file for absolute divorce.” *Prince George’s County Help Center visitor*

“The lawyer 's information was clear; he answered all of my questions; gave me options if there were any; repeated the instructions if necessary and was not intimidating or dismissive in his approach.” *Baltimore City Help Center visitor*

“The advice was great, really took the time to help and point in the right direction.” *Charles County Help Center visitor*

“Highly recommended! I felt lost and hopeless before their assistance. They were truly a blessing.” *Frederick County Help Center visitor*

“Everyone was extremely helpful during a difficult and stressful time. Thank you for all that you do!!!” *Harford Help Center visitor*

Results from the post-hearing surveys show that 80% of respondents participated in their hearing without an attorney and 48% of those indicate that they could not afford or did not want to spend the money to hire an attorney. Most of these litigants, 86%, indicated that they had prepared their court documents properly (74%) or “somewhat” properly (12%), and 88% indicated that they were able to follow (78%) or “somewhat” able to follow (10%) the court’s procedural rules.

The second phase of this evaluation involves analysis of the data collected with the help of a data analyst intern. We are analyzing the survey outcomes to gain a better understanding of the most effective service delivery method, the issues that are bringing people to the help centers, and ways we can improve the family help centers so that litigants who rely on these services are prepared and effective in their self-representation. In addition to the data analysis, phase two will include in-person observations of court hearings involving self-represented litigants and interviews with self-represented litigants, judicial officers, and attorneys to gain first-person accounts of the impact of the centers.

Law Libraries

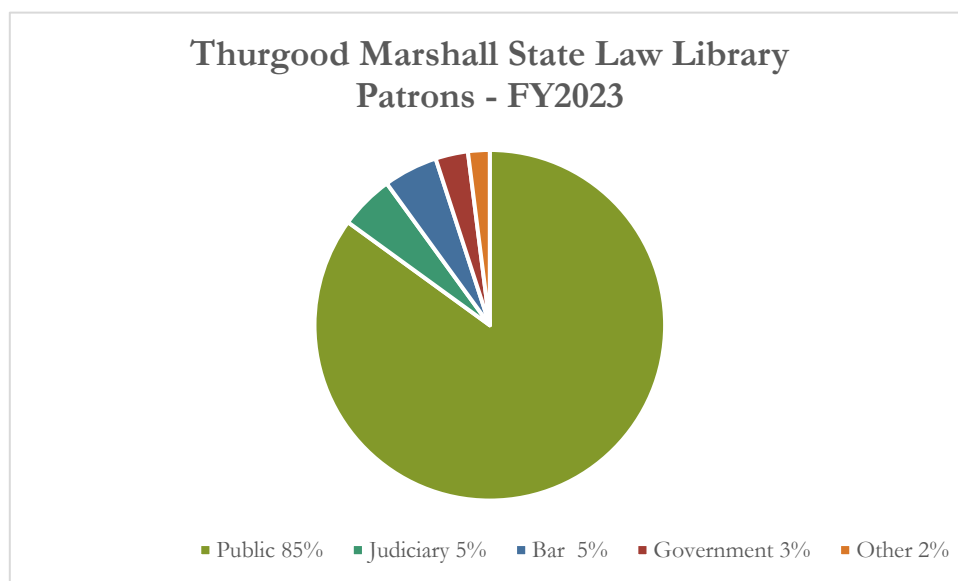
Thurgood Marshall State Law Library

The Thurgood Marshall State Law Library, a court-related agency of the Maryland Judiciary, serves the needs of Maryland's government and citizens by building and preserving collections of legal information resources; promoting access to these collections; and creating educational opportunities that enhance the understanding of legal information. The library provides in-person, telephone, mail, and email services. The library's collection includes significant coverage of Maryland historical materials as well as current law. The library serves the Judiciary, bar, and the general public, with the latter constituting the largest percentage of direct assistance.

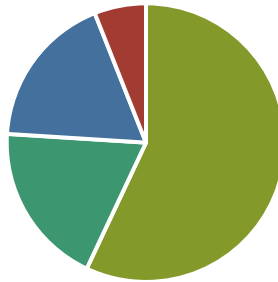
The library supports the needs of Maryland's self-represented through the provision of direct reference assistance as well as indirect services. These indirect services include management of the People's Law Library website; curation and management of information collections specifically chosen to best serve the needs of persons with no legal training; access to the Maryland Electronic Courts (MDEC) through a dedicated kiosk; and an educational series for public librarians who provide legal information.

Reference Activity

In fiscal year 2023, the public comprised more than 85% of library reference activity. More than half of requests from the public (57%) were for information about civil non-domestic topics, with another 18% for civil domestic topics. Thus, three quarters (75%) of reference work for public patrons involved requests related to civil law matters.



Thurgood Marshall State Law Library Reference Topics - FY2023



■ Civil Non-Domestic 57% ■ None/Other 19% ■ Civil Domestic 18% ■ Criminal 6%



Assisting at the Reference Desk

People's Law Library

Library staff manages the People's Law Library (PLL) website. The PLL provides information about civil law topics and serves as a link to a wide range of civil legal aid organizations. The PLL site also includes a portal through which the self-represented can contact the library for additional resources and reference assistance.

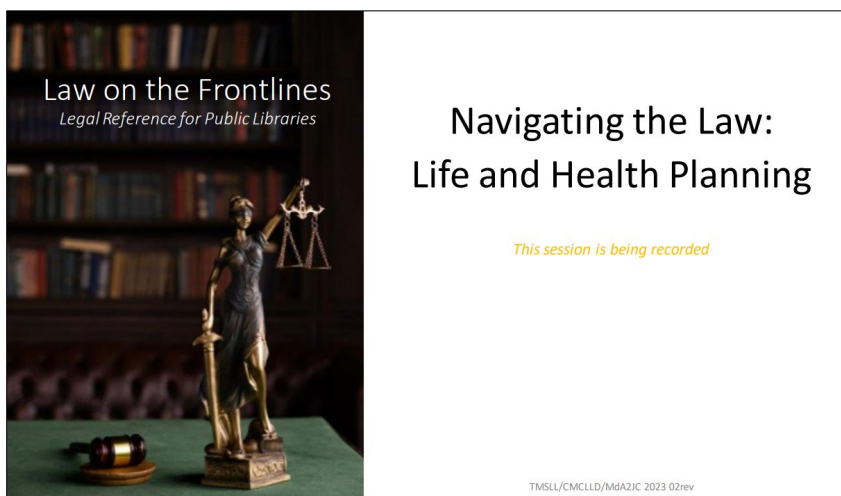
Self-Help Collections

The library's extensive collection includes titles and materials chosen specifically for their usefulness to the self-represented. A "self-help" collection is shelved conveniently near the public computers to help patrons pursuing their own legal matters. In fiscal year 2023, the library added titles aimed at assisting the self-represented on tenant rights, financial planning, legal research, legal rights in divorce, neighbor law, adult guardianships, and starting a nonprofit in Maryland.

Public Library Staff Training

The library is a founding partner in the statewide project, Law on the Frontlines: Legal Reference for Public Libraries. Public libraries, with multiple geographic locations and extended hours, are an excellent resource for self-represented litigants seeking legal information and assistance. As many public library staff do not have regular experience with legal information requests, the Frontlines project provides staff training in best practices and resources for managing of legal reference questions. In fiscal year 2023, the Frontlines project provided training to 124 public library staff from thirteen (13) of Maryland’s 24 public library systems. In addition to best practices and basic legal resources, topic sessions focused on resources to assist with questions about landlord-tenant law and life & health planning.

From a Frontlines attendee: “Your emphasis on of the importance of making a connection with patrons who have legal questions, makes sense. It requires a different set of skills, and will likely lead the librarian to a more precise understanding of what the patrons are looking for. Thank you for the reminder that many of them come to us with some pain or at least some discomfort in asking for help.”



2023 Frontlines Training

In May 2023, partners in the Frontlines project from the State Law Library, the Anne Arundel Circuit Court Law Library, the Anne Arundel County Public Library, and the Maryland Access to Justice Commission, delivered a program about public libraries and access to justice, with a focus on Frontlines, at the 2023 Maryland Partners for Justice Conference.



Panel presentation at the Maryland Partners for Justice Conference, May 2023; Joan Bellistri (Anne Arundel County Public Law Library), Catherine McGuire (Thurgood Marshall State Law Library), Sarah Mullen (Anne Arundel County Public Library), and Reena Shah (Maryland Access to Justice Commission).

In fiscal year 2024, the Frontlines project will continue to expand materials to support the reference activities of public library staff. The development of videos and tip sheets tailored to public library needs will reinforce the services available to self-represented litigants at the local library level.

Maryland Public Law Libraries

Maryland's network of court law libraries provides the public and bar with access to legal information, forms, educational programs, and the Maryland Electronic Courts (MDEC) case management system. There are no income or subject matter restrictions in court law libraries. Law librarians assist with researching civil and criminal legal questions and help fill in gaps where limited resources exist. As self-represented litigants continue to make up larger percentages of law library patrons, professional law librarians increasingly orient their resources, guides, programming, and services for assisting self-represented litigants (SRLs).

There are staffed law libraries in the following circuit court locations:

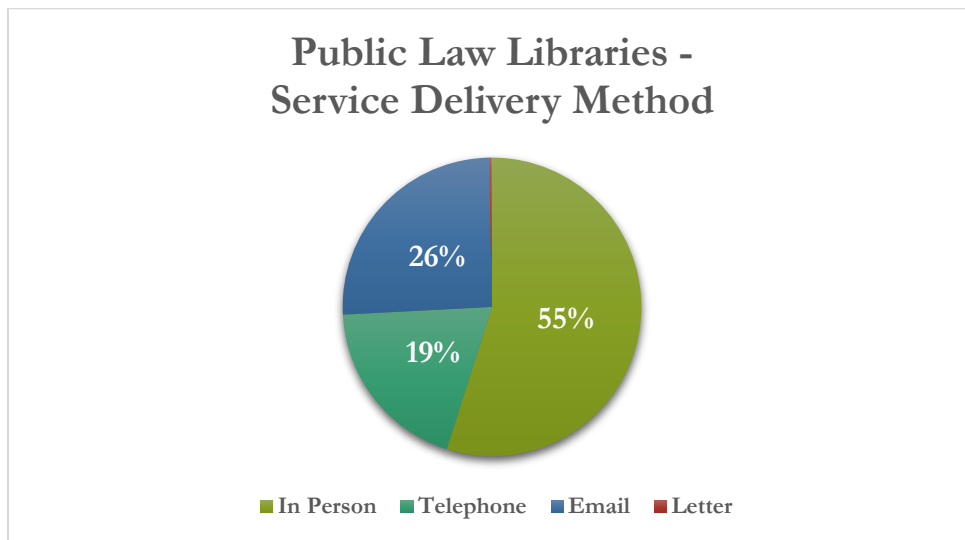
- Anne Arundel County
- Baltimore City
- Baltimore County
- Carroll County
- Charles County
- Howard County
- Montgomery County
- Prince George's County
- Washington County

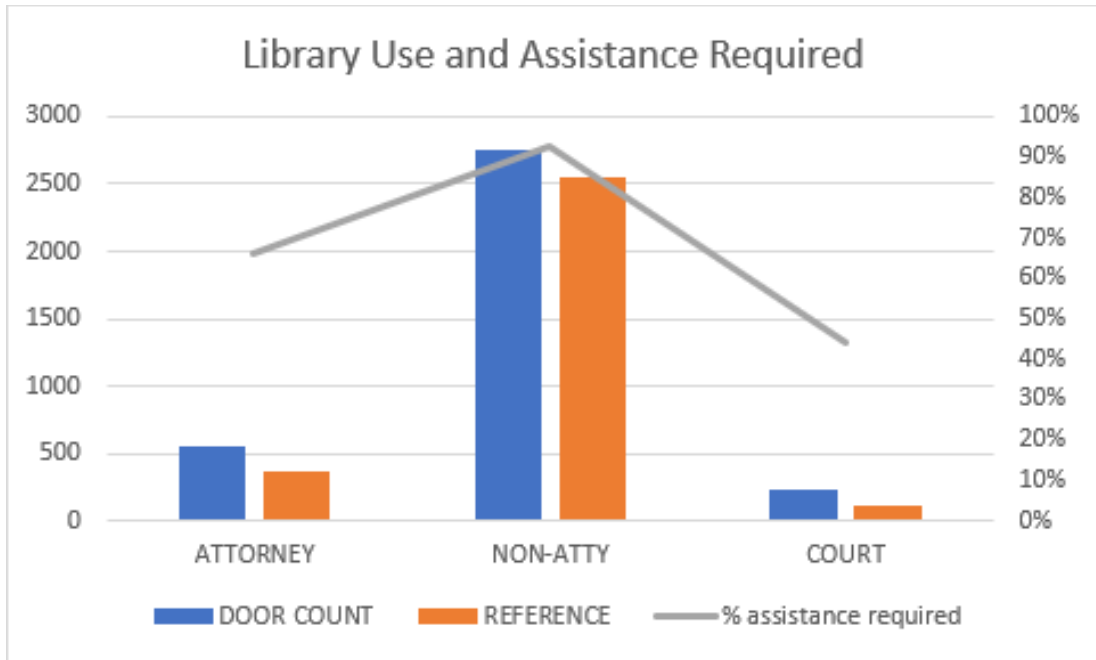
The Conference of Maryland Court Law Library Directors (CMCLLD) brings together directors of all Maryland staffed circuit court libraries and the Maryland Thurgood Marshall State Law Library to discuss advancing access to justice through education and the provision of legal information to the public. CMCLLD members meet regularly to exchange ideas on law library operations and programming.

In fiscal year 2023, Maryland court law libraries provided more than 27,668 instances of service. This number does not include statistics from Baltimore City, Baltimore County, or Washington County law libraries. This number also reflects a recent change in the way the Thurgood Marshall State Law Library reports their statistics.

Fiscal year 2023 was not without its challenges for several law libraries. The Thurgood Marshall State Law Library saw staff transitions and hired new staff. Montgomery County experienced a large flood in early 2023 that necessitated offering library services fully remotely for over a month while repairs were made. Lastly, Anne Arundel continued to experience displacement from their original law library space. Even in the face of these challenges, law libraries continued to provide high-quality reference services in-person when possible as well as by phone, email, and at times via Zoom.

Law library traffic was high in fiscal year 2023. Over half of those asking library staff for assistance visited law libraries in person. Of those visitors, non-attorneys constituted the vast majority of those who came through our doors and required assistance. In Anne Arundel County Public Law Library this past year, 90% of self-represented litigants came in person to the law library, and 80% of them required direct assistance from library staff. As one patron put it to the Law Library Director, “Legal research is hard. People just think it’s easier with databases. That’s why I come to you.”





(Library Use and Assistance Required numbers based on Anne Arundel County Public Law Library)

Legal Reference

Law library staff use their expertise to connect the Judiciary, attorneys, and the public with legal information. This information includes web-based informational resources, such as the People’s Law Library; legal database access; digital materials; and traditional print materials. Library staff guide patrons to the materials that work best for their legal research needs and level of comfort with legal materials.

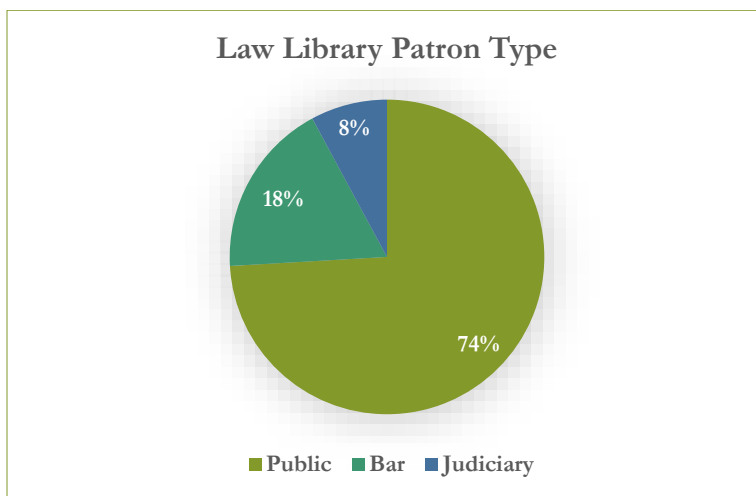


Law Library Staff in Prince George’s County Assisting a Patron

Law libraries provide equitable access to materials unavailable to the public and small/solo legal practitioners due to paywalls or subscription fees. These resources include databases like Westlaw, LexisNexis, HeinOnline, PACER, and SASI-CALC, as well as expensive legal treatises and sample form books, annotated laws, and more. This includes legal texts for non-lawyers, such as Nolo Press publications. These resources provide the public with valuable information on unique subject areas, including family law, business law, traffic, wills, trusts, and estates.

In fiscal year 2023, law librarians enhanced their legal resources in various ways. Carroll County increased the number of treatises available via their Westlaw database and Montgomery County upgraded its LexisNexis database. Furthermore, Prince George’s County increased its collection of legal resources for non-attorneys by adding to its online catalog links to electronic versions of Nolo publications that are provided by the Thurgood Marshall State Law Library.

No matter the legal question, law library staff expertly, non-judgmentally, and empathetically assist library users to locate and use these resources. Of those users, members of the public and self-represented litigants remained the largest patron base in fiscal year 2023, constituting 74% of service interactions.

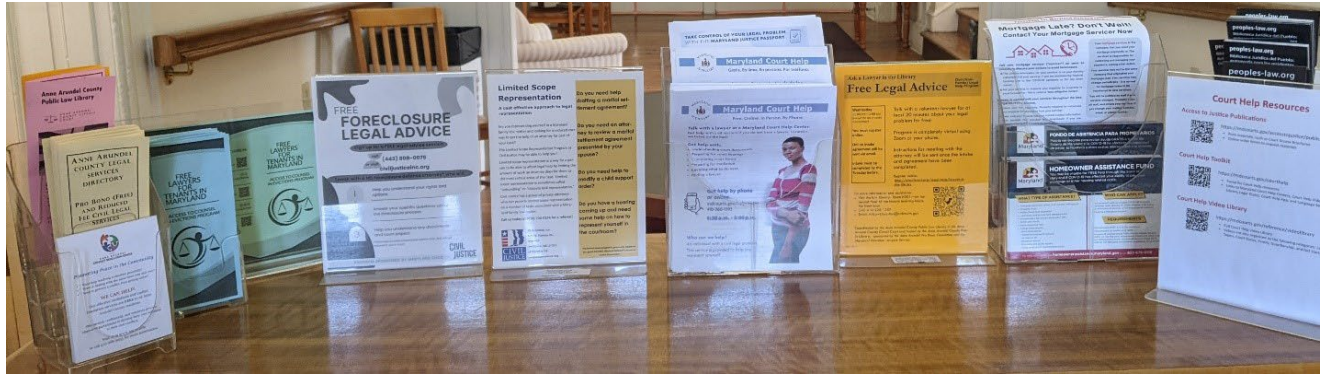


Legal Referrals

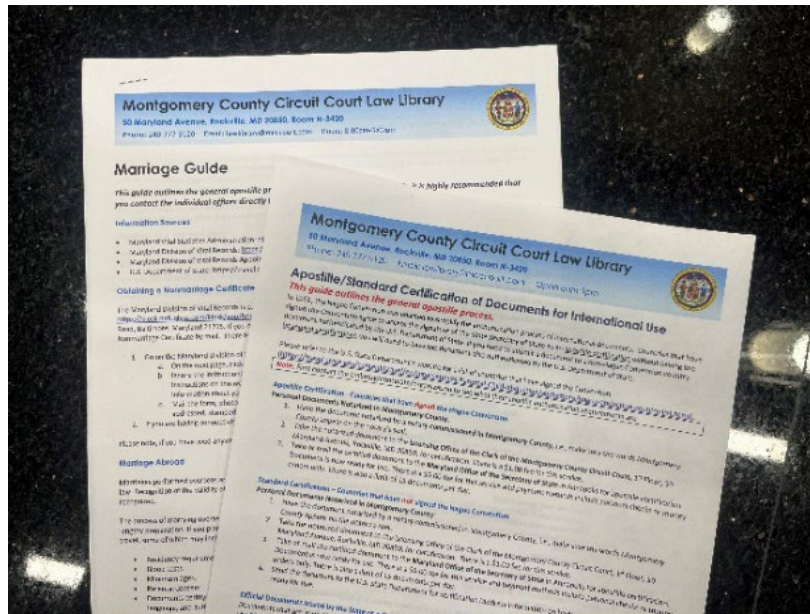
When litigants need legal advice, law library staff make informed referrals to court programs and services, including all Maryland Court Help Centers. When litigants need assistance that goes beyond legal advice, law library staff also make referrals to appropriate community services and government agencies. In fiscal year 2023, law library staff provided 1,910 legal referrals.

Guides and Educational Programs

Law Libraries craft guides on popular legal information topics geared toward the self-represented. In fiscal year 2023, Anne Arundel County Public Law Library added QR codes to brochures and flyers to allow online access to more information about law library programs and referrals. This year, Montgomery County Circuit Court Law Library updated guides on international marriage and the Apostille process for document authentication.



Legal Referral display at Anne Arundel Public Law Library



Updated Guides at Montgomery County Circuit Court Law Library

In addition to guides, law librarians connect with their communities and the public via educational presentations. In fiscal year 2023, law library staff in Montgomery County continued to present on legal resources to Montgomery College’s paralegal program. This past year, Carroll County presented during a walking tour of the court for librarians in the local public library system and plans to collaborate more with the public library system in the future to better assist the public.

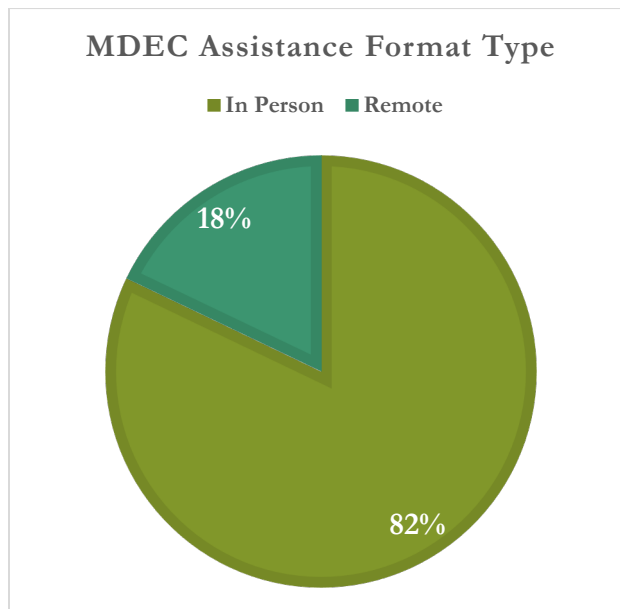
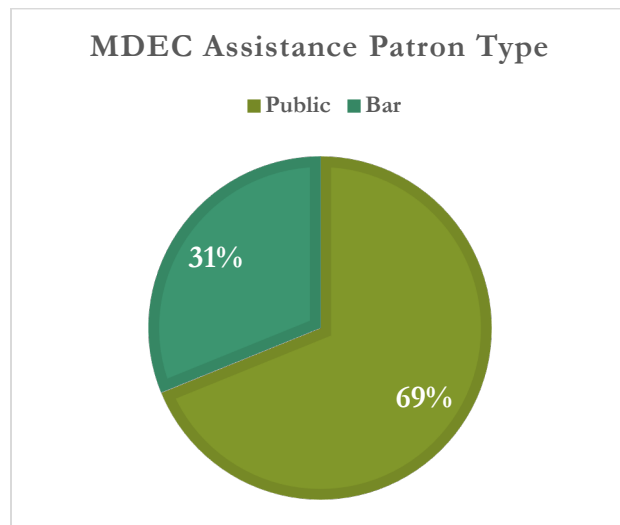
Technology Assistance

In addition to assisting with legal research, law libraries use technology to connect people to legal information and provide technical assistance to those who need it. Law library staff provide technical assistance in-person as well as remotely via phone, email, and Zoom. Technical assistance includes helping litigants navigate websites and legal databases, using child support calculators, uploading and downloading documents, scanning and printing documents, operating microfilm and microfiche readers, operating electronic

magnifiers and text-to-speech computer programs, and locating online resources. In fiscal year 2023, law library staff performed 4,732 instances of technology assistance.

As more counties adopt MDEC, law library staff have increasingly assisted the bar and public with performing electronic filings and accessing electronic case documents. All law libraries in counties that have implemented MDEC now contain computers with MDEC File and Serve and Public Kiosk portals. Law library staff are trained to assist attorneys and the public with basic MDEC needs. Fiscal year 2023 saw Prince George’s County joining the MDEC ranks, and their law library became the sole provider in their courthouse of public access to an MDEC Kiosk and File and Serve portal.

This year, law library staff have noted that more self-represented litigants than before have asked for assistance with registering to e-file. In fiscal year 2023, library staff assisted library patrons with 648 instances of MDEC-related assistance. Public patrons made up most of those instances at 69%.



In addition to MDEC assistance, law libraries innovated new ways to use technology to better serve their users in fiscal year 2023.

In Howard County, the law library acquired a new photocopier.

In Charles County, the Help Center & Legal Resource Coordinator worked with the Maryland Judiciary to obtain the technology needed to create a mediation room in the law library to accommodate remote, hybrid, and in-person mediations. They also acquired three computers for self-represented patrons to use to research their case, watch self-help videos, print court forms, and get general court information as well as thoroughly revised their library website.

This past year, Prince George's County Circuit Court Law Library joined Montgomery County Circuit Court Law Library in offering dedicated access to Zoom for self-represented litigants who do not have the equipment, space, or privacy needed to attend hearings at home virtually. These rooms are equipped with computers, headphones, and webcams. Law library staff assist self-represented litigants with technology and locating Zoom meeting credentials.

Partnering with Court Help Centers

Multiple law libraries host recurring self-help programs and/or collocate with court help centers or Lawyer in the Law Library programs in-person and/or virtually. These partnerships help make the access to justice conveyor belt easier for Marylanders to navigate. Law libraries provide attorneys with logistical support, space, legal research materials like codes and forms, and legal research expertise. In turn, embedded attorneys provide law libraries with quick and reliable referrals. This service is much appreciated by visitors; feedback law library staff received in fiscal year 2023 includes, "I am very grateful for the time [the self-help attorney] afforded me and love his matter of way of explaining things. It is clear this is a popular program and [I] sure hope the library is able to continue it."

In fiscal year 2023, Anne Arundel County's Lawyer in the Library Program discontinued operating remotely to reduce conflict with the new in-person Anne Arundel Community College (AACC) Paralegal Program Legal Clinic held on Wednesday and Thursday evenings. This new clinic was born out of a collaboration between the law library and the AACC Paralegal Program.

This past year, Carroll County Circuit Court Law Library provided virtual help to individuals needing legal advice. The library contains a Self-Help Computer Center with access to the People's Law Library and the Maryland Court Help Center via chat. In fiscal year 2023, the law library completed updates to the computer's interface, which now includes an option to view the interface in Spanish.

In Howard County, the law librarian manages the Circuit Court for Howard County's free legal assistance programs – the Civil Law Center and the Family Law Assistance Program. New this year, the law library can now host all the Family Law Assistance Program sessions in the law library's conference room. The law library also provides a videoconferencing kiosk that connects visitors with attorneys at the Maryland Court Help Center. Videoconferencing is available for all civil case types and helps fill in the gaps when in-person programs are not operating.

The law libraries located in Washington County and Charles County are the latest law libraries to collaborate with attorneys assisting the self-represented. In Charles County, the Legal Resource Center & Public Law Library opened a Maryland Court Help Center inside its walls in July 2022 to provide limited legal advice and

services to litigants in civil matters in the District and circuit courts. In addition, a full-time family law attorney was hired to provide the same for family matters. In its inaugural year, Charles County Circuit Court's Maryland Help Center and Family Law Self-Help Clinic assisted 4,068 self-represented litigants, many of whom also benefited from collocated library resources like sample form books, self-help computers, and the research expertise of the Help Center & Legal Resource Coordinator.



Entryway of Charles County Help Center

Future Initiatives

In fiscal year 2024, law libraries will continue to expand resources and expertise outside law library walls. The Anne Arundel County Public Law Library Director chairs the American Association of Law Libraries' Government Law Libraries Best Practices for Access to Justice Committee and is currently working with the Self-Represented Litigation Network to create a national survey of law library services to self-represented litigants than will update an existing 2019 survey.



2019 SRLN Report Webpage

In Charles County, the Help Center & Legal Resource Coordinator plans to attend local bar association meetings to discuss the needs of local attorneys like solo practitioners and pro bono service providers and how the library can best support them. Plans are in the works to create guides for self-represented litigants. Prince George's Law Library plans to continue its annual National Library Week Book Drive with the courthouse community. This past fiscal year's donation of over 350 books to the YMCA of Prince George's County was the largest annual book drive donation in 15 years.

Law libraries want to improve their technology offerings for the public in fiscal year 2024. Montgomery County Law Library will be adding an additional Zoom Room and Carroll County Circuit Court Law Library will add a stand-alone laptop and printer that will allow self-represented litigants to create, edit, and save legal documents onto their own personal flash drive devices.

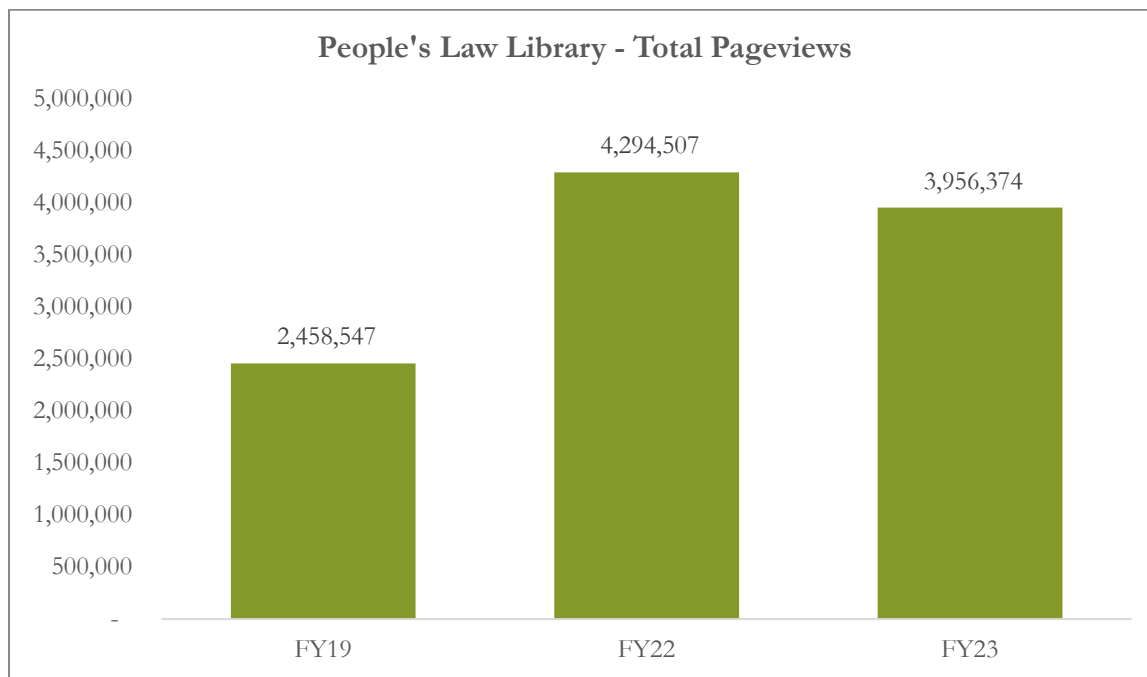
Most dramatically, two law libraries will be experiencing major changes in their space in fiscal year 2024. Anne Arundel County Public Law Library will be moving into a new, permanent home after three years of being housed in a temporary space and Prince George's County Circuit Court Law Library will be undergoing a large renovation.

Legal Information Resources

People's Law Library

The People's Law Library (PLL) is a legal information website operated by the Thurgood Marshall State Law Library. PLL provides plain language summaries of federal, state, and local laws affecting Marylanders and their families. Legal topics encompass housing, family law, domestic violence, consumer law, life and health planning, and more. PLL also links Marylanders to Judiciary services, such as the Library's Information Desk and Maryland Court Help Centers. To connect Marylanders with other legal services, PLL provides a statewide listing of legal service organizations and a schedule of legal clinics for individuals seeking legal counsel or support.

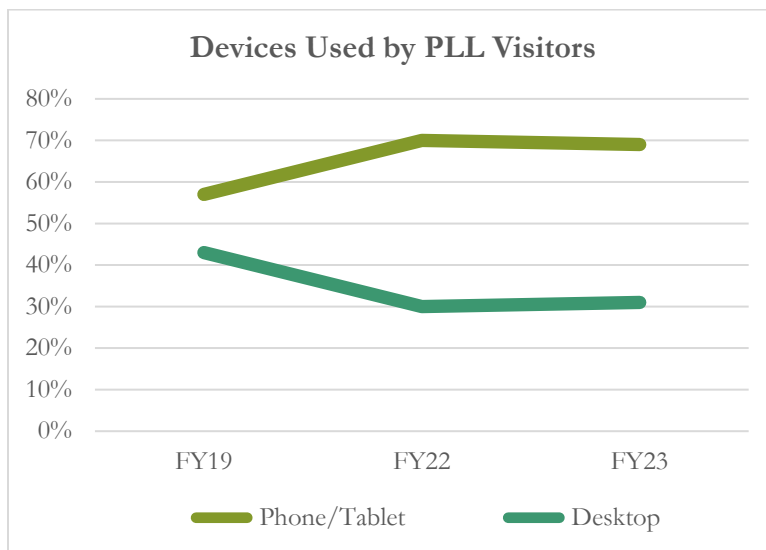
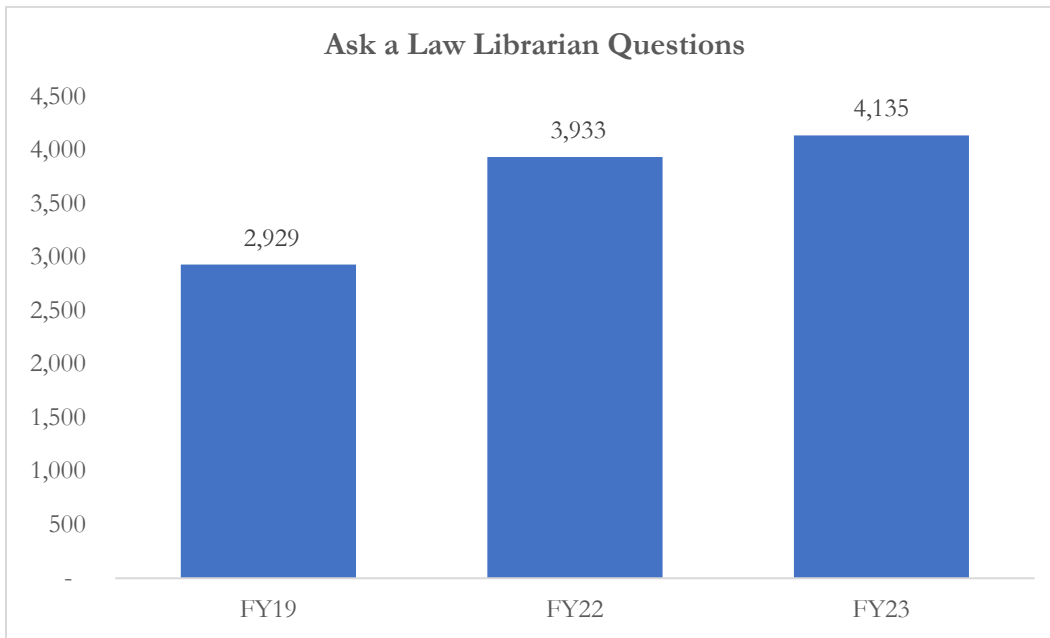
PLL's mission is to provide self-represented litigants in Maryland state courts information about the law, including summaries of the law, links to primary and secondary legal sources, and referrals for legal services.



To expand access to legal information, PLL published significant updates to nearly half of the site's 496 English language articles. Several article series were entirely re-written and republished, including articles on public housing and bankruptcy. The site's most popular new article, on recreational cannabis, was viewed nearly 100,000 times between December and July. PLL also added a new content area specifically designed to connect users with Maryland Court website resources such as court forms. Court Help Videos were embedded in over 100 articles to connect users to multi-media resources.

PLL includes significant amounts of non-English resources. The site provides information in Chinese, French, Korean, and Spanish. Nearly 90% of the site's legal information articles are available in Spanish. In fiscal year 2023, users recorded 332,577 views of non-English resources.

After reading general summaries of the law, individuals with a legal problem often need additional resources. PLL's Ask a Law Librarian feature allows users to contact the Thurgood Marshall State Law Library's Information Desk. Over 4,000 users utilized the help of a law librarian through this feature. After reviewing the information, many people need to follow up with legal advice. To that end, PLL's Legal Services Directory and Legal Clinic Calendar were accessed over 75,000 times during the fiscal year.

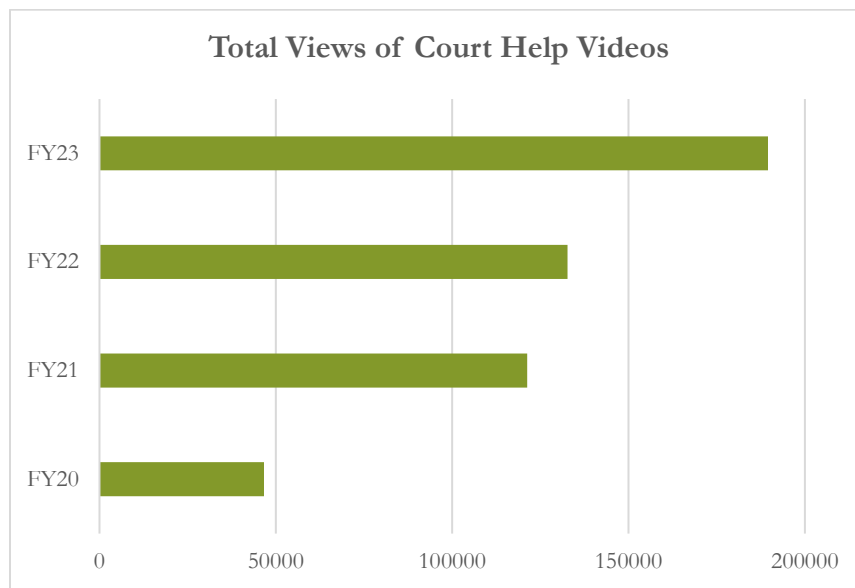


A major technology upgrade was also undertaken during fiscal year 2023. PLL, built on the Drupal content management system, moved to the most recent Drupal 10 release. This upgrade will position PLL to remain reliable and accessible into the future.

Court Help Video Library

The Maryland Judiciary’s Court Help Video Library offers an extensive informational resource with over 120 videos on topics ranging from expungement to guardianship as well as court basics, such as how to prepare for court. With the intent to prepare Marylanders for court and to represent themselves, most of the videos engage the audience using a live on-camera narrator and kinetic typography. The Court Help Videos are relatively brief, with a typical run time between two and ten minutes, and many videos are part of a topic-specific series with subjects broken up by video to be more digestible. Each video has an accompanying tip or fact sheet highlighting the most important takeaways from the video. Videos are closed captioned in English and Spanish or, in some cases, recorded in a language other than English. Access to Justice and Family and Juvenile Services produce the videos.

Videos in the library were viewed a total of 189,521 times throughout the fiscal year, a 43 percent increase from fiscal year 2022. Viewers spent a total of 9,912 hours watching Court Help Videos.



A total of 22 videos were added to the video library or revised. New videos include information on filing for a writ of mandamus, applying for a marriage license, mediation as an alternative to guardianship, and navigating discovery in circuit court, among other topics.

Of the 22 new videos, several are updated versions of previous videos covering the same topics. These include two videos on how to research the law, tips for preparing for court, and filing fee waivers.

The 22 new and revised videos are:

- How to Research the Law: Getting Started
- How to Research the Law: Diving In
- How to Apply for a Marriage License
- The Restricted Information Form
- Mandamus

- Discovery in the Circuit Court
- Administrative Appeals
- Accommodations
- Alternatives to Guardianship Part 9: Exploring the Options with a Mediator
- Alternatives to Guardianship Part 10: Preparing for Mediation
- Before Court: Getting Ready for Your Day in Court
- On Your Court Date: Tips for Your Day in Court
- Can't Afford Court Fees?
- Can't Afford Appellate Costs?
- Tips for Hiring a Lawyer
- What is the Law?
- Expungement Part 1: Is Your Conviction Eligible?
- Expungement Part 2: Other Eligible Dispositions
- Expungement Part 3: Is Your Probation Before Judgment Case Eligible?
- Expungement Part 5: When to File Your Petition
- Case Search
- How Do I Get a Copy of a Maryland Criminal Case?



Videos Feature a Live Narrator and Kinetic Typography





What's Next?

Several video projects are underway to deliver new and revised content to the Court Help Video Library in fiscal year 2024. These initiatives include videos on:

- E-filing for the self-represented.
- Remote proceedings.
- Victims' rights and roles.
- Name change.
- Cannabis and expungement.
- Judicial declaration of gender identity.

Webinars

The Judiciary offers free online classes on a variety of legal topics taught by Maryland Court Help Center attorneys. Live classes are offered regularly on *Child Custody*, *Filing for Divorce in Maryland*, and other topics. Some legal topics work better on demand, especially those case types that may come up quickly, such as landlord-tenant matters, when it may not be convenient to wait for a scheduled live event.

	<h3>Responding to a Complaint for Custody in Maryland</h3> <p>In this class, an attorney from the Maryland Court Help Center will walk you through filling out the Answer and Counter Complaint forms.</p>	Watch Now
	<h3>Upcoming Changes to Divorce in Maryland</h3> <p>An attorney from the Maryland Court Help Center will go over some big changes to Maryland divorce law that will be effective beginning October 1, 2023.</p>	Watch Now
	<h3>Responding to a Complaint for Divorce in Maryland</h3> <p>In this class, an attorney from the Maryland Court Help Center will walk you through filling out the Answer and Counter Complaint forms.</p>	Watch Now
	<h3>Filing for Expungement in Maryland</h3> <p>This class will guide you through filling out the form.</p>	Watch Now

Some of the On-Demand Webinars Available from the Maryland Court Help Centers

On demand titles include:

- Child Custody.
- Responding to a Complaint for Custody in Maryland.
- Responding to a Complaint for Divorce in Maryland.
- Filing for Expungement in Maryland.
- Rent Escrow.
- Facing Eviction for Failure to Pay Rent?
- Filing a Failure to Pay Rent Case?

- Collecting Your District Court Judgment.
- Filing Your Case in the District Court of Maryland.

In fiscal year 2023, 60 individuals participated in 11 live webinars offered by the Maryland Court Help Center. Hundreds more watched the pre-recorded webinars on demand available on the Judiciary website.

Legal Help Pages

Access to Justice and Juvenile & Family Services maintain Court Help web content on the Maryland Judiciary website, www.mdcourts.gov. This web content serves as a critical “front door” to the justice system for many litigants who begin exploring their legal problem online. The site is heavily used and must be maintained regularly to ensure it incorporates all statutory and court rule changes. The pages in highest demand are consistently the pages on court records and traffic, followed closed by topics on housing and family law. In August 2023 there were 153,978 users and 216,259 pageviews.

Maryland Guide & File – Easy-to-Use Forms Support

Guide & File is a series of interactive guided interviews to help litigants fill out court forms. This free program works by asking litigants questions and using their answers to fill out forms. The information they type into interviews will appear on the forms exactly as they enter it.

Guide & File includes helpful resources, detailed explanations, and explains the next steps in your process. When finished, forms can be saved, printed, and submitted at the courthouse or printed and e-filed. Users

Type of Claim

What type of claim are you trying to file? *

I want a person or business to pay the money they owe me. (Contract)

I want someone to return my property. (Replevin)

I want someone to return my property OR the value of the property. (Detinue)

I want someone to pay me for my loss or damage due to harm caused by a wrongful act. (Tort)

I want actual damages and litigation costs and expenses with interest from an insurer that did not act in good faith. (Bad Faith Insurance Claim)

If you are filing a civil complaint for a company that purchased the consumer debt that was charged off by the original creditor, you must complete the [Complaint - Assigned Consumer Debt \(DC-CV-106\)](#).

What is the amount you claim the defendant owes? *

Other amount you are claiming.

If you are not claiming other amounts, enter 0. Attorney and late fees will be entered later in the interview.

Are you attempting to collect a consumer debt? *

Yes No

Guide & File Allows Users to Answer Plain Language Questions to Generate Completed Forms Packets

completed 1,337 interviews in fiscal year 2023. Interviews most often included the divorce interview, the

request for a remote proceeding, District Court complaint form, the small claims interview, and the interview to assist users in completing the notice of restricted information.

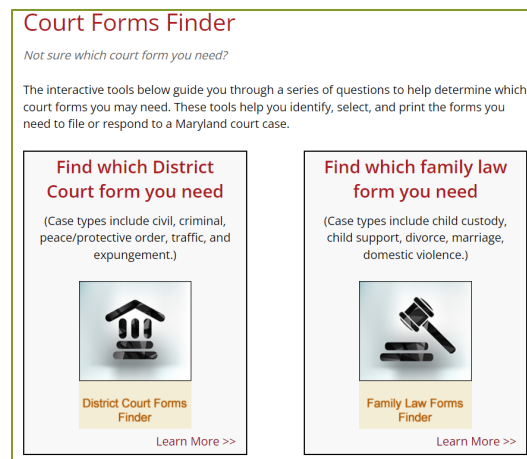
In fiscal year 2023, Access to Justice and District Court Administrative Services updated numerous interviews to comply with legislative changes, including the Request for Child Custody, Request for Child Support, Request for a Divorce, and the Small Claims Suite interviews.

Access to Justice and District Court Administrative Services also launched an Expungement interview, a Motion for Order Declaring Judgment Satisfied interview, and a Motion for Summons Renewal interview.

An interview for answering a domestic case is in the works. We are also currently testing the first of what will be several translated versions of the Request for an Interpreter interview. The Spanish language interview is in test and other languages are in development.

Form Finders

Two online decision-tree tools help Marylanders determine what forms they need to accomplish their legal objective.



Court Form Finders Help Individuals Identify the Forms They Need

District Court Form Finder

The District Court Form Finder guides individuals to the forms they need by asking a simple set of questions. In fiscal year 2023, the tool was used 14,389 times. Since its creation in 2009, the tool has been used over 189,000 times. The tool is regularly updated to reflect changes in the law and forms.

District Court Forms

2. Starting a New District Court Case

Tell us the type of case you want to start in District Court.

1. What do you want to do or what type of case do you want to start?

- I want to seek the return of property (not real estate) or compensation for its value and possible damages.
- I want to evict a tenant for non-payment of rent or other reasons.
- I want to require my landlord to make repairs or fix the property I am renting.
- I want to seek the return of property (not real estate) that belongs to me and possible damages.
- I want the court to take firearms away from someone who is at risk of harming themselves or others
- I need protection from someone.
- I want to evict someone who is not a tenant.
- I want to recover money someone owes to me.

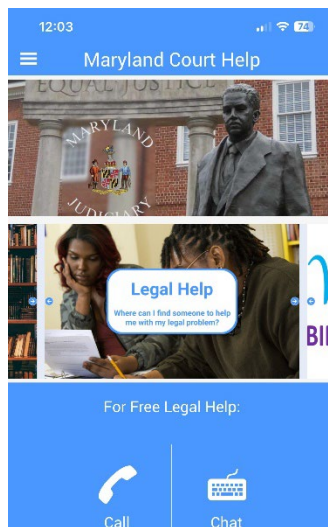
District Court Form Finder

Family Law Form Finder

A similar form finder tool guides individuals seeking forms for use in family law matters. In fiscal year 2023, the tool was used 15,651 times.

Maryland Court Help App

The Maryland Judiciary brings all these resources together in a simple app available for Apple and Android devices. *Maryland Court Help* is a free mobile app that connects Marylanders with legal information on their smartphones and tablets. The app combines tools and resources developed by the Maryland Judiciary and others to help Marylanders use the courts, find local resources, or explore legal help options. The app is maintained continually to ensure it is up-to-date and includes new resources as developed. Users can access the Judiciary’s Court Help web content, view videos, get directions to a court, or find out about a range of court-based services. Users can also click to call or chat directly with a lawyer at the Maryland Court Help Center. Version 3.0 of the app is currently in development. There were 533 new downloads in fiscal year 2023.



Find the App in the App Store or Google Play

Access to Justice Impact Dashboard

Finally, a new public dashboard provides information on the broad range of services available to Marylanders through the Maryland courts. The dashboard is updated monthly and provides a dynamic snapshot of services provided to the public – from legal information resources to language services and help center services. The new interactive version replaces a prior static dashboard. The dashboard is available at www.mdcourts.gov/accesstojustice.

