



## **MICHIGAN POVERTY LAW PROGRAM**

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## **Solutions on Self-Help Task Force Announces Upcoming Public Launch of Michigan Legal Help Website; SCAO-Approved Divorce Forms to be Included**

On behalf of the statewide Solutions on Self-Help Task Force, we are pleased to announce the upcoming public launch of the Michigan Legal Help website. Michigan Legal Help.org is an interactive website built to enable self-represented litigants to handle relatively simple civil legal matters on their own.

The public launch will include new SCAO-approved divorce forms. Pro se litigants will soon be able to use the website to complete all the forms that they need to initiate a divorce on their own. This includes SCAO-approved Complaints for Divorce and Judgments of Divorce. Many courts may have created jurisdiction-specific complaint and judgment forms; these may still be used but, as you know, SCAO requires all courts to accept SCAO-approved forms as well.

At this point, these SCAO-approved divorce complaint and judgment forms can only be used in conjunction with the interview on the website because the interview serves as both a screening mechanism and a way to complete the forms. The Department of Community Health has allowed us to produce the Record of Divorce form as part of the interview, so court staff should accept these forms as well (even though they are printed on plain paper).

When users come to the Michigan Legal Help website looking for information about divorce, they should begin by reviewing articles and common questions about family law and divorce. Then, if they want to do the interview and complete the forms, they will see a checklist of all the documents and information they should collect before they begin the interview – names, birthdates, employer information, insurance information, and etcetera. They are told how the interview works and how long they can expect it to take. The interview itself is a series of choices that the user must make and questions that the user must answer.

The first several are screening questions. These serve to make sure that users who go on to complete the interview are eligible to file for divorce in Michigan and have a case that is appropriate for self-representation. For several scenarios, there is a hybrid option – users with certain fact patterns (those who want spousal support or who have pensions to divide, for example) can use the interview to begin a divorce, but are advised to consult with an attorney in order to complete the divorce process. Neither the interview nor the website will assist them in filing a motion for spousal support, for example, but this request is preserved in the user's complaint. Some users with certain scenarios (users whose spouses have been found incompetent and users who own their own businesses, for example) are screened out and are not allowed to finish the interview, but we tried to make the interview as inclusive as possible.

The choices that the user makes during the interview direct the route the interview takes, and the answers that the user enters populate all the standard forms needed for a divorce. SCAO staff and many family law attorneys, including several from SCAO's forms review committee, worked together to create these forms and the interview.

When the user is finished with the interview, he or she has completed PDF files of all the standard documents needed for a divorce. Some jurisdictions require additional local forms; they are not part of the interview, but users will be directed to those forms as part of the procedural instructions on the website. The documents that can be produced in an interview include: complaint; summons; UCCJEA affidavit; verified statement; record of divorce; default request, affidavit, entry; notice of hearing; several check-box proofs of mailing; a judgment with several possible addenda; uniform child support order (blank except for the caption), and judgment information form.

The Michigan Poverty Law Program's (MPLP) content development staff is hard at work talking to court clerks and friend of the court staff in every jurisdiction about each county's procedures for pro se divorce filers. They will then draft simple, step-by-step procedural instructions for website users. This is a very large undertaking – but it is valuable because we will be able to give users jurisdiction-specific directions for completing their own divorces. A set of generic instructions (with a warning to check with the court for more information) will be in place temporarily for some counties until each set of jurisdiction-specific instructions is ready.

The public launch of the site is planned for the week of July 23<sup>rd</sup>. The website has been in a “soft launch” period since May and much valuable feedback has been received from the private bar, court staff, friend of the court staff, other key stakeholders, and the public. Please take a few moments to explore the website at [www.michiganlegalhelp.org](http://www.michiganlegalhelp.org).

When you start to see pro se litigants in your courts and offices who are using the new forms, please let MPLP know how they are doing. Questions and feedback can be directed to Angela Tripp ([trippa@lsscm.org](mailto:trippa@lsscm.org)) or sent via one of the two feedback links on the website – “Tell Us What You Think” or “Contact Us.”