

For those facing time in court, a way to prepare

Nonprofit group helps Charleston library acquire legal self-help center

By DAVE FOPAY, Staff Writer

CHARLESTON — Someone without a lawyer can now use a step-by-step guide to find out what they need before they go to court.

A new online legal “self-help” center will actually ask questions of the user to pin down the situation and make sure someone qualifies for a certain kind of relief or has the needed forms. A demonstration was provided Wednesday at the Charleston Carnegie Public Library, the new home for the program.

The Illinois Coalition for Equal Justice, a nonprofit group, provided the library with a grant to buy a computer and equipment for the self-help center, now the 28th in the state and which was touted Wednesday as a way for those facing time in court, mostly over civil matters, to prepare themselves.

“We’re trying to ensure equal access to justice,” said Gary Jacobs, presiding judge in Coles County, who worked with the coalition to bring the program to the library.

Jacobs noted that defendants in criminal cases have the legal right to an appointed attorney if they can’t afford to hire one. For those in similar situations but involved in civil cases such as divorces, orders of protection or landlord-tenant disputes, there are some lawyers who work free of charge, he said.

“The problem is, it’s not enough,” Jacobs said. “We do not have enough lawyers to go around.”

The self-help center is located on the library’s second floor near the reference section, and the library has brochures with information on the program and staff that can answer questions.

The Web site for the program is <http://coles.illinoislegalaid.org>. The site’s home page includes a video introduction from Circuit Judge Tracy Resch, chief judge of the judicial circuit that includes Coles County. There’s also a list of frequently asked questions and links to other information along with the library’s address, phone number of hours of operation.

Jacobs said the self-help center “is not a substitute” for an attorney but is an “avenue of information.” People representing themselves can use the program to print forms they need to be prepared in court and “that’s the spirit of the program,” he said.

Library Director Sheryl Snider said she’s “thrilled” to have the self-help center at the library.

“It’s something we deal with on a monthly basis, people asking for forms we can’t give them,” she said. She added that people without computer knowledge can learn to use the program “with very little help” and documents can be printed and retrieved privately.

Joe Dailing, executive director of the Illinois Coalition for Equal Justice, credited Jacobs for contacting him and starting the work to bring the self-help center to Coles County. He said courts didn’t used to be as open to people representing themselves as they are now, making the service more vital.

“Courts in this county are now dealing with the public in a different way,” Dailing said.

Jacobs also recognized the local committee that worked on the project: Circuit Clerk Vicki Kirkpatrick; Public Defender Lonnie Lutz; Clare McCulla of the Charleston office of the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation; Jim Walters, director of HOPE of East Central Illinois; Assistant State’s Attorney Tracy Nemitz; and Snyder.