

Nonlawyer Navigators in State Courts: Part II — An Update

New Energy, Urgency and Possibilities

by
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About The Justice Lab

The Justice Lab is devoted to designing and evaluating innovative approaches, including approaches based in technology, to help people understand how the law applies to them and how they are empowered to solve their legal problems.

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Both this 2023 update report and the original 2019 report can be found at:
<https://www.law.georgetown.edu/tech-institute/initiatives/georgetown-justice-lab/court-navigators>.

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Robby has also been serving as co-chair for the Self Represented Litigation Network (SRLN) Navigator Working Group, initially with me and now with our colleague as his co-chair, Stacey Weiler. Robby and Stacey have offered their wise counsel and unique experiences through the development and implementation of the working group.

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Many program creators and supporters shared their observations, knowledge, and time. You can see their names, not only with their quotes and short case stories in this report’s text, but also noted in the contact list in Appendix B. They have busy professional lives and I am once again in awe of their commitment and hard work, day in and out in our courts. They are the best to render guidance to those interested in creating their own court navigator programs.

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I. INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND AND KEY FINDINGS

A. Background

An important approach to help solve the access to civil justice crisis is the use of “nonlawyer navigators” who come from communities outside the state courts to assist self-represented litigants (SRLs) with their civil legal problems. Based on a national survey of nonlawyer navigator programs in the state courts conducted in 2018–19, we identified and then analyzed 23 such programs in 15 states and the District of Columbia. Using extensive outreach and interviews with more than 60 informants who created, and/or who oversee or manage nonlawyer navigator programs and court settings, our report, issued in June 2019, describes program features while offering practical considerations for creating and implementing such programs.

[Nonlawyer Navigator Study](#)

This 2023 update report serves as a companion piece and supplement to the June 2019 report (hereinafter “2019 report”). It provides information about the status of and major developments in programs documented earlier, and it identifies and discusses new programs since then. Finally, it offers a “cheat sheet” of quick suggestions for those wishing to create court-affiliated navigator programs based on the experience, lessons learned, and overall guidance from leaders identified in both the 2019 and 2023 research efforts. Throughout this report, we offer observations and insights of program leaders who have initiated or run these programs.

This update report does not repeat the findings of the 2019 report, but it makes frequent reference to them. The 2019 report is broader in scope and offers a review of the crisis in access to justice for SRLs in the state courts along with full descriptions of the design features of these programs and how they operate. Therefore, especially for those wishing to create new programs, it may be useful to review the two reports together.

Accordingly, for ease of reference, this update tracks the outline of the 2019 report. We highlight the design elements of programs described — with chapters on program objectives, navigator roles, and program implementation — and discuss any notable new developments in design element patterns since the 2019 report. (We have also reprinted its executive summary in Appendix A.)

As a reminder, the navigator programs defined in this research use nonlawyers who are not court staff, who operate physically within a court, for the most part, and who provide direct “person-to-person” assistance to SRLs. They are defined as individuals who do not have formal legal credentials and who assist SRLs with civil legal problems. They do not act or operate under any attorney-client relationship, but they are part of a formal program and institutional auspices that provide specialized training.

B. Key Findings

Following this overview, we describe various meaningful approaches that leaders who have created and run these programs have used to solve problems and to find new champions, navigators, and funding. Their observations bring texture as well as wise counsel in how to help launch programs and to make them successful. Here are the main takeaways from our extensive reporting and discussions:

1. New Programs have emerged. During 2023, we uncovered and analyzed 16 new programs in nine new states, many in their early stages as this report is published. In fact, as many as 10 programs have been started since January, 2022, once most courts had reopened after the depths of the pandemic. (It is noteworthy that we learned of at least five more programs in three additional states that are not reported here, but that are “well in the works” and are anticipated to be launched in 2024.)

2. Previously identified programs not only continued despite COVID, but many have expanded their services. Despite frequent pandemic-related court closures, leaders of court-based programs ably rose to the challenge of keeping them going. Indeed, all 23 programs analyzed in the 2019 report have not only continued but, in various cases, have expanded or amplified their services. Given the increased post-pandemic demand to serve a growing number of SRLs in state courts, the navigator programs have become even more critical.

3. Programs are now in place in half of the states and the District of Columbia. In just four years, these court-affiliated navigator programs have shown resiliency, flexibility, and innovation. New programs have continued to emerge throughout the country even in the face of the pandemic and its aftermath. There is dynamism and momentum underway, with existing programs now in half of the states and the District of Columbia.

4. State access to justice commissions and judicial leaders are prominent program champions. Among the newly identified and soon-to-emerge programs, at least six have been promoted, developed and/or in some cases are run by state access to justice commissions (hereinafter “ATJ commissions”), which are proving to be instrumental in moving these programs forward. Often, the ATJ commissions have worked closely with senior judges who, frequently, either sit on the commissions or on the state supreme courts. These are leaders who bring stature and energy that push programs to realization. In addition, the administrative offices of the courts have been key players in the evolution of navigator programs.

5. More statewide efforts are in the offing. In an important and related finding, a number of judicial, ATJ commission and/or court administrative champions intend to develop statewide efforts that utilize court navigators as described in this update. Including those that already exist, we count as many as 10 statewide efforts that will be in place or in progress by the end of 2024.

6. Programs in 2023 show similar structural patterns to 2019. Like the programs found in the 2019 report, the 16 newly identified programs in 2023 show important variations in their design. While there are common elements, as discussed below, there is no single type, but there are broad structural patterns. In half of the programs, the court is in the lead management/supervisory role — sometimes in partnership with other entities — and they operate in self-help centers or similar locations in the court. Frequently, the navigators in these programs are volunteers or AmeriCorps members, who are trained to undertake a variety of tasks for SRLs often in multiple types of cases. By and large, the other half of the programs are overseen by nonprofit organizations, also sometimes in partnership with other entities. Navigators in these programs may be paid staff or volunteers who, typically, are based at a designated table or desk, in an assigned room, or in or near relevant court rooms.

7. COVID accelerated and elevated the use of technology. Innovation through new technology use to provide better SRL access is apparent. Most of the 23 programs identified in 2019 had previously provided only in-person services to help SRLs. Our new findings reveal that as many

as 16 of these programs have now incorporated “hybrid” services — both in-person and remote — into their operations. The programs vary in their embrace of technology to increase access — from using only email or telephone assistance, to text messaging, staffing of information hotlines, helping to complete court forms via Zoom, and enabling more engagement with SRLs through video chats. The programs identified in 2023 tend to be in-person only, due mostly to their burgeoning status. However, once programs are more established, many leaders are planning to incorporate remote access technology and provide SRLs with hybrid services.

8. There is more abundant use of some types of navigators. In 2023, we found more prevalent use of certain types of navigators, particularly paralegals. Several programs also plan to add community members and seniors to their navigator volunteer pool. Still, AmeriCorps members, along with undergraduate and law students, play a dominant role in many of these programs in addition to some that rely on nonprofit staff.

9. Program leaders are finding new ways to secure funding. Program leaders continue to seek new types of financial support and are increasingly using public funding to implement programs. For example, several efforts wisely secured federal resources that support joint programs between navigator law students and lawyers or court staff on eviction prevention work. But getting resources from the Corporation for National and Community Service (“CNCS”), often referred to as AmeriCorps, is becoming a more popular approach among programs. They have sought new and different means to gain AmeriCorps funding, including through state service commission planning grants, engaging the court as a host or service site, and making use of VISTA members, another opportunity in the CNCS universe.

Navigators, an important element of how courts are diversifying the way in which they serve self-represented litigants, are able to provide robust customer services that augment the more traditional role of self-help attorneys who liaise with judges and can oversee forms, case management improvements, and simplification efforts. Building service capacity in terms of personnel availability and sophistication is creating more resilient courts and delivering better outcomes.

Katherine Alteneder, Civil Justice Reform Expert

II. GOALS, PARAMETERS, AND METHODOLOGY

The goals of the earlier research were to describe the landscape of programs underway that use nonlawyers in the state courts to expand and extend resources available to SRLs in their civil legal matters, to discuss the characteristics of these programs and to offer practical considerations to those who wish to design their own.

The definition of the types of nonlawyer navigator programs we studied in 2019 remains the same for this update: We include **only** programs that use nonlawyers who are not court staff, are physically situated in or operated out of a court, and that provide direct “person to person” assistance to SRLs. Although nomenclature varies across the programs, for purposes of this research and report, we chose the term “navigator,” which resonated with many of the informants and experts with whom we spoke. We define navigators as individuals who:

- are without formal legal credentials and training (i.e., a law degree), but who are trained specially to assist SRLs with basic civil legal problems, one party or side of a case at a time.

- do not act or operate under an attorney/client relationship, with no “traditional professional liability” accruing to the navigators, the entities under which they operate, nor to their supervisors, even if the supervisors happen to have law degrees; and
- are part of a formal program and institutional auspices, and not acting in their individual capacity.¹

While this report focuses on navigators defined above, it is important to note that, over the last four years, there have been a number of new developments in the courts to provide help to SRLs. On a positive note, the pandemic created new opportunities to secure federal, state and local funding to aid SRLs, especially in the area of eviction, for example, through the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP).² Some private foundation funding became available, most notably, a grant from the Wells Fargo Foundation to the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) to build eviction diversion programs using facilitators to assist SRLs in the courts.³

Further, although our research did not review new self-help centers (SHCs) run by court staff per se but rather navigator programs that augment them, we discovered the emergence of more and varied court SHCs.⁴ No doubt more activity of this kind has been encouraged by the [2021 resolution](#) from the Conference of Chief Justices of the State Courts (CCJ) and Conference of State Court Administrators (COSCA) urging the development of self-help centers and navigator programs in the courts.

Despite these positive new developments, the need for court navigator programs persists more than ever in the pandemic aftermath.

Recruitment and retention of court staff has become an increasingly serious issue for state and local courts, especially coming out of the pandemic. Court navigator programs are often essential to providing necessary legal information, litigant support, and wayfinding for court users. For those court systems that have court navigator programs, their continued success is critical, and we see an increasing number of courts that identify court navigator programs as a necessary component to their plans for delivery of legal information and self-help.

Danielle Hirsch, Access to Justice Director, National Center for State Courts

Methodology. As in the initial 2019 study, we have drawn on informant interviews and documentation that is publicly available or has been provided by the programs. The “new” programs discussed here were identified over an eight-month period between January and August 2023. To collect information about and discover “new” programs (those up and running no later than October 2023), we conducted extensive outreach by email and telephone across the 50 states and the District of Columbia, including with judges, court staff, nonprofit leaders, legal aid lawyers, access to justice commission staff, and others who we believe would have the most knowledge about court-related programs in their states. Many interlocutors had already been identified in the 2019 research.⁵

During this time, we also engaged with leaders of programs that had already been identified to follow up on their status since the 2019 report. To derive information about the relevant

programs themselves, we used an interview protocol with 45 individuals who create, oversee or manage these programs.

As noted, we used the 2019 report's set of features or characteristics of the programs about which we sought to gain information, and then we analyzed them. It was not our goal, then or now, to conduct evaluations of any individual programs. Moreover, while the intention of our 2023 survey has been expansive, we know it cannot be comprehensive. (See Appendix B for a combined listing of both the programs identified in 2019 and in 2023 and their relevant contact information.)

Below, we track the design features laid out in the 2019 report for ease of reference for any reader interested in understanding the contents of all the design features. Rather than create a separate concluding section on impact, as we did in the 2019 report, we interweave perspectives on program impact through the voices of the very leaders who created them and/or are deeply involved in their implementation. All quotations of program leaders and other experts presented in this report are highlighted in blue.

III. PROGRAM OBJECTIVES AND NAVIGATOR ROLES

A. Program Objectives

The newly identified navigator programs embody the same three principal objectives we described in the 2019 report: 1) enhancing court effectiveness; 2) facilitating “access to justice” for SRLs; and 3) providing a positive and rich experience for navigators. The civil legal problems experienced by SRLs could have a significant impact on their families, homes, livelihoods, and health. The objectives of the 2023 programs fall in all or several of these categories.

For example, several leaders commented on the role the navigators play in “filling the gaps” due to court staff shortages; “bringing new resources” in terms of increasing capacity to serve SRLs; and “building public trust in the courts.” Others remarked on the feedback from SRLs who feel positive about the process, and who have been able to feel “listened to and heard.” And navigators, especially students and AmeriCorps members, had their eyes opened to the SRL crisis in the courts and found new career paths in the process, as discussed further below.

B. Navigator Roles

In sum, the roles performed by navigators remain much the same in new programs as in the programs described in 2019. Yet, there is greater use of remote services in implementing navigator tasks in the 2019 programs due to court closures and other operational disruptions caused by the pandemic.

1. Legal Advice vs. Legal Information

The emphasis by program leaders on seeking to clearly maintain the distinction of legal information versus legal advice continues, as reflected in program training and related materials. Some states now deploy “safe harbor” policies which provide guidance for court staff and volunteers helping SRLs to draw the distinction between legal advice and legal information.⁶ Importantly, as in the first study, program leaders report no official complaints about the

deployment of nonlawyer navigator programs, certainly helped by the fact that leaders continue to stress the difference in these concepts in their training of navigators.

2. Nomenclature

The commonly used terms in the 2019 report were: navigator, AmeriCorps member, volunteer or intern, advocate, and housing counselor. Those terms are the same or similar to what we found in our 2023 update, with a number now using the term “court navigators” which may describe those that augment permanent court staff as defined in this study or individuals who are often employed permanently by the court such as self-help center staff.

3. Case Types

Case types remain the same, with a larger percentage than before focused on eviction matters because of the pandemic. In the 2019 report most program navigators were used predominantly to assist with matters of family law, as well as housing, domestic violence, civil protection orders, and debt collection or small claims matters.

In this recent 2023 round of research, we found three new programs where navigators were specifically targeted to help SRLs avoid eviction. These efforts were driven largely by new federal funding available through ERAP and ARPA, which was distributed to states or cities and for which courts or nonprofits applied to set up programs. Several of these programs are designed as partnerships between nonprofits that use both lawyers and nonlawyers to perform services for SRLs.

One such program in Ohio secured funds for the court to implement an eviction prevention program. Support from various stakeholders was helpful in implementing their Eviction Prevention Coordinator Program:

Our program would not have been created without the support from advocates for both landlords and tenants. The vocal support from both groups helped to give the program legitimacy in the eyes of Court users and reduced friction that can be caused by adding new services to an already crowded Eviction Court landscape. Navigators working for this program are trained to provide equal services to both landlords and tenants and actively seek out resources to provide to both groups. By not advocating for one side, our navigators are able to best help all parties in a way that is effective and equitable.

Robert Southers, Managing Attorney of the Franklin County Municipal Self Help Center
and Dispute Resolution Department

4. Tasks

Tasks performed by navigators continue along the same lines. These tasks were identified and elaborated in the 2019 report (pp.19–20) and are summarized by category here:

CATEGORIES OF NAVIGATOR TASKS
Navigational direction/information
Referrals
Legal and procedural information
Options guidance
Assistance with legal forms or documents
Language assistance
Court Accompaniment⁷
Feedback to courts and service providers

Remote Services. What emerged in our research was the enhanced delivery of these tasks and related services through use of more technology tools and remote or virtual services in the 2019 programs which were in operation during the depths of COVID-related disruptions. As Danielle Hirsch observes:

Navigators are a critical piece of the access to justice ecosystem in state and local courts. During the pandemic, court navigator programs adapted to meet the evolving needs of court users and courts as they expanded use of technology and remote/virtual services. In many instances, court navigators were essential to the changing court processes in ensuring that all court users (including those who were less familiar with technology) were able to participate.

Most of the 23 programs identified in 2019 had previously provided only in-person services to help SRLs. Our recent findings reveal that as many as 16 of these programs have now incorporated “hybrid” services — both in person and remote — into their operations, mostly triggered by COVID. The programs vary in how they embrace technology — from use of only email or telephone assistance to text messaging, staffing of information hotlines, using Zoom to help complete court forms, and enabling more engagement with SRLs through video chats.

Not surprisingly, when court navigator programs had to decide whether to remain open or closed due to COVID, they generally followed the actions of the courts where they are housed. Still, several continued to provide assistance even when courts were in shutdown mode, often by swiftly adding minimal remote services, such as phones or email, or requiring limited staff or appointments only. The programs with multiple sites in a state mostly followed their in-court partners. But many of the programs, like Massachusetts Trial Court Service Centers, initiated remote services and then continued to provide hybrid services even after the worst consequences of COVID.

The Massachusetts Trial Court Service Centers (“CSCs”) have gone through multiple operational transitions since their inception in 2014. Once a full time in-person operation pre-pandemic, CSCs transitioned to fully remote operations at the height of the pandemic. CSCs have now moved to a hybrid operation of two days in-person and three days remote services using Zoom video conferencing.

The current hybrid operation enables CSC staff and navigator interns (including high school, college, and law students, among others) to duplicate services that were previously provided to SRLs in person in courthouses throughout Massachusetts. In Zoom breakout rooms, navigators, supervised by staff, assist SRLs with their court forms, answer questions, make referrals and provide language access services as needed. CSCs also provide remote services telephonically if SRLs have technological limitations. Providing hybrid services allows the CSCs to serve more court users, including those who have court matters in Massachusetts but reside outside of Massachusetts, and those who do not have access to a brick-and-mortar CSC in their geographic region but who need CSC services. Hybrid operations are the best way to reach the greatest number of SRLs.

Sheriece M. Perry, Director, Court Services and Law Libraries Department,
Massachusetts Trial Court

Like Sheriece Perry, several other leaders who started using remote services during COVID address the merits of providing hybrid services. For example:

If navigator programs can provide quality remote services—such as online workshops, technology-assisted forms completion, and LiveChat—in addition to robust in-person assistance, they will truly be increasing access to justice. Working in a hybrid environment simply allows them to serve more people, more thoroughly. Non-lawyer navigators can be trained in all these services, especially with appropriate supervision.

Nicole Claro-Quinn, Statewide Director, California Justice
Corps

Looking at the entire program landscape, there is no single model for delivering services. Two programs that had moved to remote services during the worst of COVID reverted to in-person. On the other hand, program leaders of the Philadelphia Mortgage Foreclosure Diversion program, which uses nonlawyer housing counselors to assist SRLs, moved to Zoom during the pandemic and now, since courts have reopened, only use Zoom for their housing counseling work. They last reported that they may return to regular in-person mode. Still other programs, which used hotline, email, or phone, along with in-person, before the shutdowns, now use their remote services, such as hotlines, even more extensively.

During the COVID-19 pandemic when many courthouses closed to the public, our Illinois JusticeCorps program shifted to providing remote services through telephone, text messaging and online chat. The program has also shifted to provide services that meet the needs of the moment. For example, many court patrons receive assistance with e-filing, or attending remote court hearings.

Stacey Jonas Weiler, Director of Grants and Access to Justice Programs, Illinois Bar
Foundation

It is worth noting that, of the programs newly identified in 2023, only four of 16, albeit in an early-stage mode, incorporate remote or have moved to hybrid services. Yet, many leaders indicate their desire to eventually introduce remote services into their operations as well.

Michigan Legal Help, a unique and innovative statewide program, uses staff that includes nonlawyers to help SRLs navigate the courts online. Its leader explains:

The Michigan Legal Help (MLH) website was launched in 2012 to provide centralized self-help resources to people handling their own civil legal problems. The effort to create MLH was started in 2010 as the result of a Michigan Supreme Court task force. In addition to the legal information resources on its website, MLH supports communities in setting up Legal Self-Help Centers, where people can go to access the internet, computers, and nonlawyer Navigators who can provide one-on-one assistance (short of legal advice). MLH staff also provide one-on-one chat assistance (non-legal advice as well) to people via LiveHelp.

MLH has a staff of twelve people, only five of whom are attorneys. Both lawyers and nonlawyer staff participate in providing individual assistance to MLH visitors through chats and after-hours emails.

The Remote Self-Help Center Navigators are part of a new pilot project where nonlawyer staff at MLH provide one-on-one assistance to visitors at unstaffed or understaffed Self-Help Centers via Zoom. Many Self-Help Centers either lack the resources for full-time staff or have limited traffic which can't justify dedicated staffing. Using Zoom to connect MLH staff to Self-Help Center visitors across the state is an efficient and effective way to use centralized Navigator resources to provide much-needed help to self-represented litigants.

Angela Tripp, Director, Michigan Legal Help

The use of remote services has an extra advantage in states with more rural areas. As noted in our 2019 report, various potential program leaders have voiced concerns about the difficulty of trying to organize and manage navigator programs in more rural states. Yet, several programs underway have found that remote services enable greater access for individuals within a state. For example, the AmeriCorps-funded program, Justice for Montanans, has made extensive use of remote services (along with in-person) during its entire life span.

Stacey Weiler, who oversees the Illinois JusticeCorps program, offers yet another method to better serve the rural parts of any state:

In an effort to reach some of the most rural and underserved communities in Illinois, we are piloting a new model where two AmeriCorps Fellows will serve large multi-county judicial circuits. The navigators will have a home-base courthouse where they will provide services one to two times per week, and travel to some of the more rural county courthouses on a rotating schedule so that they have a regular monthly or bi-monthly presence in the community.

To close, leaders emphasize that whether in-person, by remote, or hybrid mode, it is critical to have SRLs aided directly with one-on-one assistance. As the leader of Michigan Legal Help, Angela Tripp, puts it:

I love technology and I have spent more than a decade focusing my career on harnessing tech tools to provide as much assistance as possible to as large a group of people as we can. However, I have learned our website is not enough. Some people need individual assistance from another person (in person/remote) to fully understand their legal issues and figure out how to move forward. Maybe it's because they aren't comfortable with a website; maybe it's because they have language or literacy challenges; maybe it's because they are so

overwhelmed by the crisis at hand that they can't concentrate enough to read, comprehend, follow directions; maybe it's another reason. For these people, individual assistance — including the important act of listening to and hearing someone's story — is a critical piece of ensuring access to justice. That is why Self-Help Center Navigators, Live Help agents, and others are so critical to our work.

Katherine Alteneader concludes: “Courts are embracing a tiered approach to services with navigators to better accommodate the needs of the public and are increasingly providing both in-person and remote one-on-one assistance.”

5. Training and supervision

Training methodologies and supervision approaches remain much the same, just as training and supervision remain critical elements of the design of all the programs. As in 2019, program managers believe that a necessary level of training and supervision is basically a function of the tasks the navigators perform and their level of experience. Besides initial pre-site training, program leaders emphasized the importance of on-the-job training, including shadowing or observing the work of others or court proceedings. Almost all the new programs have dedicated supervision on site where navigators work, whether done by experienced nonprofit staff, court staff, or lawyers. Of course, supervision is also enhanced by using guided interview questionnaires or DIY forms that some states or jurisdictions have developed.

Concerns arose during COVID about how best to supervise navigators online. Sheriece Perry, the leader of the veteran program in Massachusetts using navigator interns, notes that a good quality control system is key to supervision and training. Her program does comprehensive training early on where expectations are set. Among other components to that system, one staff person in a service center is usually designated each day to supervise the interns' work product and to answer questions. She adds that: “When Court Service Center intern navigators are on Zoom, they are all set up as co-hosts so they can bounce in and out of breakout rooms and easily be able to communicate with the supervisor on SRL questions that come up or any issues.”

Again, guidance from Katherine Alteneader:

One of the greatest benefits of navigator programs is the opportunity to develop an arc of sophistication through training and supervision, which in turn builds better services for the public. Court navigators can mature from simple tasks such as wayfinding or providing handouts to more sophisticated tasks such as helping with forms, court accompaniment, and warm referrals.

IV. PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION: ORIGINS, NAVIGATOR STAFFING, AND FUNDING/STRUCTURAL SUPPORT

Findings about this next set of new navigator program features are similar to what we discovered in the 2019 programs, with some notable developments elaborated below.

A. Program Origins

As in 2019, few programs secured, let alone required, formal authorization for the navigator's role — such as a judicial order, state statute, or specific regulation — before program operations

could begin. Whether orders or directives are issued at all is largely determined by the particular court culture or context.

The 2019 report noted that the impetus for many programs came from the actions of multiple champions and supporters, such as the judiciary, official bodies like state access to justice commissions, nonprofit and legal aid lawyer leaders, bar foundations, and creative court staff. The report also noted the importance of partnerships in spawning new programs. These same trends hold true with the newly identified programs.

Any program needs a partnership of sorts with the respective court in which it is housed or affiliated. But several of the new programs have explicit partnerships with nonprofits or between nonprofits and university or law school leaders who comment on the value of these collaborations.

The level of engagement by the respective state access to justice commissions, mostly in conjunction with senior judges, is well worth notice. As many as six ATJ commissions have either developed or advocated for new and soon-to-emerge programs, and, in some cases, are now managing them. Judges have often collaborated with these efforts and court administrative offices have also played key leadership roles.

A notable example is the Kentucky Access to Justice Commission, which has been a leader in creating self-help centers in the state that use court-based navigators.

We are a project-driven state access to justice commission. We decided to lead an effort to learn about navigators and create self-help centers around the state. We secured an AmeriCorps planning grant from Serve Kentucky, our AmeriCorps state service commission. Using those funds, we hired a consultant, Sylvia Lovely, to prepare a report with information and recommendations for us. We are now running a legal help center at the courthouse in Fayette County using, among others, nonlawyers — law students, paralegals and staff. We have also encouraged development of centers in Bowling Green (which has one now up and running) and are helping develop others in the state in Covington and Louisville. We have seen the importance of partnerships with a variety of court actors, our Administrative Office of the Court, bar members and others to help make this happen.

Glenda Harrison, Executive Director, Kentucky Access to Justice Commission

In Wyoming, the combination of judicial leadership and direction from the Wyoming Judicial Branch (the Judicial Branch) and the creative and methodical work of the Wyoming Access to Justice Commission (the Commission), has resulted in the anticipated launch of a new Court Navigator Program in early 2024. This effective collaboration sprang from the Judicial Branch's 2023-24 Strategic Plan, which identified "access to justice" and "establishment of a court navigator program for the judicial branch" as part of its top priority. Thereafter, a committee of the Commission drafted a recommendation for a navigator program that was then approved by the Wyoming Judicial Council.

In the words of The Honorable Kate M. Fox, Chief Justice of the Wyoming Supreme Court and Chairperson of the Wyoming Judicial Council: "Wyoming's Court Navigator program will start with a model program in our Seventh Judicial District in Casper, located near the center of the

state. The Judicial Branch designed the Casper model program with scalability in mind — with an eye towards adding navigators across Wyoming in the future.”

And the importance of judicial leadership and broad stakeholder engagement to the process was clear:

The Judicial Branch’s navigator priority was a huge step forward. The Commission’s committee working on the navigator recommendation was made up of 24 members representing various stakeholder groups, including judges and court clerks from various courts, court administration, the state bar, social service entities, legal service organizations, and our law school’s library. Involving all these stakeholders was critical to designing the right recommendation for Wyoming.

Walter Eggers, Chair, Court Navigator Committee, Wyoming Access to Justice Commission

Other examples of state access to justice commissions playing significant roles are Virginia, which with judicial leadership helped spawn the Fairfax Courthouse Self Help Resource Center (now managed by the Fairfax Bar Association), and North Carolina, which was instrumental in starting the Wake County Legal Support Center in North Carolina (now run by the Commission as a pilot and potentially expected to serve as a model for other counties in the state).

B. Navigator Staffing

The 2019 report described types of individuals performing as navigators — paid or salaried staff of nonprofits; AmeriCorps members; or volunteers such as undergraduate or graduate students, law students, retirees or adults from the community who may be changing careers or simply wish to help, paralegals, and paralegal and community college students. We heard leaders speaking about the increased desire to deploy more community members and seniors, a welcome possibility now given the reopening of courts to the public post-COVID.

Although the use of paralegals was present and noted in three of the programs in the 2019 report, we have seen more frequent deployment of them in the newly identified crop of programs. For example, the Wake County Legal Support Center uses a paralegal to coordinate operations, while Kentucky’s Warren County Legal Center will deploy paralegal students who work as navigators to earn internship credit. Kentucky has made guided-interview questionnaires available, which facilitates the process with SRLs. Mecklenburg Self Serve Center in North Carolina utilizes the help of paralegal students for their externships, and the Wake County Legal Support Center has begun to invite paralegal students to participate as well.

In addition to paralegal students, programs use law and undergraduate students to serve in a volunteer capacity as navigators. Many leaders continue to appreciate the use of these individuals as navigators.

Since the Help Center was launched in 2017, non-lawyer navigators have been a critical piece of our model to provide the most robust pro se assistance possible to people facing evictions, debt collections, landlord/tenant and civil matters in small claims court. Law student navigators help litigants understand their options, the court process and how to complete legal forms. Undergrad navigators provide answers to common procedural questions and wayfinding help. Navigators not only provide important legal information to

our visitors, but they also help us make the best use of our attorneys, who provide limited legal advice in complicated and urgent matters. Using well trained nonlawyer navigators to field common questions and triage more complex matters enhances all our services and allows us to provide the highest level of service for pro se litigants' varied needs.

Robert J. Wall, Director, Hamilton County Municipal Help Center (former); Senior Court Management Consultant, National Center for State courts

Typically, these law, undergraduate or paralegal students either secure course or pro bono credit hours and may receive a small stipend. Program leaders comment both on the benefit they bring to SRLs and on the opportunity to introduce law students to new career paths whether in the court, legal aid, or the public interest law sector. Several leaders mentioned that navigator alums have already applied for or secured jobs in the courts. As one leader notes: Law students serving as navigators now get exposed to “an under-observed career path — working in the courts.”

Another program leader offers that, using law students as navigators “teaches the students and helps them get interested in and exposes them to a different field of law that they haven’t understood before because most focus is on criminal justice.” A director of a program that uses law students engaged in eviction prevention work says that they had “no idea of the huge volume of SRLs in the courts and what a crisis it is” before they served as navigators. And the leader of a program using paralegal students notes that they “need to be involved in the access to justice solution” and “many paralegal students eventually go to law school.”

The New Hampshire Circuit Court reported plans to use an interesting approach by deploying volunteers who possess specialized skills or experience in finance, such as bankers, accountants or financial planners. They help SRLs on probate matters, including proceedings related to estates or guardianship. And at the Mecklenburg Self Serve Center in North Carolina, a state agency employee, supported with funds from the federal Title IV-D of the Social Security Act, is in place to assist individuals with child support matters.

Recruitment and retention concerns. As in many sectors across the country, it is not surprising that recruitment and retention of navigators can be more difficult in this post-COVID period.

As pointed out in the 2019 report, issues can arise when using volunteers, with one downside being more frequent turnover. Similarly, several programs report that it has been harder to recruit some volunteers as they can now find compensation through other job opportunities.

In the longstanding AmeriCorps-funded programs, there were, generally, fewer members serving during the depths of COVID, but now the numbers are building back up. One leader, for example, noted it was “mostly an urban/rural problem.” Several leaders commented that it is easier to recruit when deploying full-timers than those who serve only quarter-time, while another leader of an AmeriCorps program says you need a full-time recruiter. Again, Stacey Weiler:

The Illinois JusticeCorps program has found that offering a competitive living allowance (recently increased to \$25,000 a year, up from \$20,000 a year for full-time AmeriCorps members) and providing opportunities to observe court, network with members of the judiciary and legal profession, and interesting and well-rounded training are crucial to a fruitful member experience and help retain participants for the entire year-long term of service.

It is also advantageous if there is a stipend for student navigators, as a court in Hennepin County Minnesota offers law students, and the Court Navigator Project based in Baltimore offers undergraduate and graduate students. The Hamilton County Self Help Center leader also notes that any potential difficulty in law student recruitment has been mitigated because of the strong relationship the Center has had with its partner law school's externship placement director.

C. Program Funding and Structural Support

In the 2019 report, we highlighted funding issues, and said, "Availability of resources is a critical issue and unfortunately in a number of the programs funding is relatively patchwork and ad hoc." Still, we learned about various sources of revenue, namely federal, state and/or city, private, and court funding. Many of the recently identified programs are only just beginning but, in several cases, they have found funding opportunities that merit mention here.

1. Federal funds

ERAP and ARPA. This federal funding supports three programs for eviction prevention work. Of course, there is concern that this support will end, which would make it difficult to maintain programs despite a continuing need. Yet, programs are already seeking new sources of funding. Program leader Robert Southers explains:

The Franklin County Municipal Court's Eviction Prevention Coordinator program received initial support from the City of Columbus for a one-year pilot. This funding came from the City's American Rescue Plan (ARPA) disbursement. After securing the first year of funding, stakeholders continued to meet to discuss further funding. The program will now be funded for a second year thanks to funding from ARPA provided by Franklin County. Key stakeholders continue to meet to prove the efficacy of this project and discuss permanent funding at the end of the two-year pilot.

AmeriCorps. We highlighted the use of AmeriCorps members as navigators in five veteran programs in the 2019 report. These are programs that secure resources under the federal Corporation for National and Community Services (CNCS).⁸ During 2023, we learned of some new efforts to secure federal money through AmeriCorps, with several programs having success. Opportunity abounds and program leaders with direct experience in this area are happy to share their advice and perspectives with others.

Each one of these program leaders points to the importance of building a relationship with their respective state service commission. The commissions can offer advice and guidance to help with the application process and operating an AmeriCorps program. All these leaders further comment on the care and focus needed to work their way through this funding mechanism and its requirements but once obtained, the AmeriCorps funds are abundant and critically important in sustaining programs.

Here are the observations of two leaders extolling the merits of AmeriCorps funding. Stacey Weiler says:

AmeriCorps funding has proved to be a reliable funding source and Illinois JusticeCorps has been able to scale and leverage additional support from the Commission on Access to Justice in order to make larger requests of AmeriCorps in each 3-year funding cycle. While recruiting new navigators on a yearly basis comes with its challenges, the additional benefit

of participating in a National Service Program and the subsequent education award has proven ample incentive for many program participants who are often recent graduates considering law school and the legal profession.

And, Angela Lovitt, Director of AmeriCorps of Project Kaulike in Hawaii, agrees: “Even though AmeriCorps has numerous requirements, the amount of effort needed is worth it because of the experience and skill that is gained by utilizing these members along with their length of stay, especially if they’re full-time.”

Planning grants. Meanwhile, we learned of five jurisdictions (and there are likely more) with current or potential new programs that, in recent years, have sought AmeriCorps planning grants from their respective state service commissions. These grants can help determine the viability of developing a navigator program and/or whether to expand programming that is already in place. Two of these programs have gone on to apply for or secure a grant to run a full operational program.

One leader observed that it is helpful to get a planning grant because, at the very least, one “can learn how AmeriCorps works and get immersed in that world.” She also said that it was helpful to have an expert consultant on AmeriCorps guide her through the planning grant process.

A veteran navigator program leader, Mary Ferwerda, offered advice upon obtaining a planning grant from her state service commission in Wisconsin that, for the first time, enabled her program to secure AmeriCorps resources through a large operational grant and, as a result, expand program services.

The Milwaukee Justice Center Family Forms Clinic, which utilizes undergraduate and law students as navigators year-round to assist SRLs in completing forms for family court, has been operating since 2009. The MJC is expanding services in a new way by utilizing a year-long AmeriCorps planning grant to develop a program where members create and staff a courthouse information desk and accompany SRLs through the multi-step filing process in this county. The planning grant gave us time and financial support to consider program needs and to write a successful AmeriCorps program grant. This newly received grant, which runs from September 2023–August 2024, enables us to welcome a total of 2 full-time (1700 hours in service term) and 26 minimum-time (300 hours in service term) AmeriCorps members over the course of a 12-month service term. This new AmeriCorps program allows the MJC to offer extended support to SRLs after they leave our clinic services and to the public entering the Courthouse complex.

Not having experience in implementing an AmeriCorps grant, we followed the advice of our state service commission to hire an AmeriCorps program consultant with some of our planning grant funds. The consultant has been integral to our successful program development and grant application. If you may be considering an AmeriCorps grant — and you should — we highly recommend utilizing planning grant funds to hire a consultant. The State Commission should have a resource book to assist in identifying a good person for your program. The consultant's experience and knowledge navigating the complexities of the federal grant management truly is priceless and, for us, made overwhelming components more achievable.

Mary L. Ferwerda, Executive Director, Milwaukee Justice Center

Court as a host site. Another approach comes from the State of Kansas, where, under a new program, the court can serve as host site and a different, existing AmeriCorps operational entity can provide the AmeriCorps members.

At the Kansas Judicial Branch, one of our primary goals is to expand access to justice by creating programs that help litigants, especially unrepresented people, navigate the court system. We've sought to include AmeriCorps members as part of a budding court navigator program that we hope to develop in the coming months and years.

We reached out to our CNCS state service commission (the Kansas Volunteer Commission) and determined that the most efficient approach to secure AmeriCorps members at this early stage in our effort would be to establish a pilot project through which two district courts will serve as "host sites" under existing AmeriCorps operational subgrantees. For our pilot project the operational subgrantees are the Wichita State University Community Engagement Institute and the United Way of Kaw Valley. A host site pays a relatively small fee to the operational subgrantee, and that subgrantee manages certain administrative elements of the grant, enabling the court to focus on project development.

Each of the two AmeriCorps members engaged through this pilot project will serve in our district courts for one year, helping litigants navigate the courts and building resources in our self-help centers under the supervision of court employees. We believe this is a great way to begin building our court navigator program across the state.

Sarah Hoskinson, Director of Access to Justice, Kansas Judicial Branch

Another jurisdiction received a planning grant and decided not to go forward with an operating grant, but it was exploring how to become a service or host site. The leader there, Suzan Chau, Supervising Attorney of the Elder Justices and Civil Resource Center at the First Judicial District of Pennsylvania Court of Common Pleas, suggests this as another option for a court that does not want to take on an operating grant. The court can contact the state service commission that awards the AmeriCorps grants and ask for recommendations of grantees who would want to be part of its programs.

A similar solicitation process can also work with an operational entity that uses VISTA members for navigator programs, another potential source of funds falling under CNCS. For example, one court, the Akron Municipal Court in Ohio, is exploring this option. VISTA funding is noncompetitive, and court volunteers could be secured for a year from another intermediary organization, or the court could act as a sponsoring organization. These grants are often extended, which is another advantage of the VISTA approach. It is well worth checking into this option as it can be an "on-ramp" to securing a state and national AmeriCorps grant which are the larger operational grants.⁹

In closing, Stacy Weiler explains how a recent AmeriCorps grant is enabling major expansion of the statewide program in Illinois:

Illinois JusticeCorps places AmeriCorps members in courthouses throughout the state of Illinois to serve as court navigators who provide legal information and procedural guidance to people without lawyers. Since its launch in 2012 the program has grown from providing services in three courthouses, the Daley Center in Chicago, an additional suburban Cook

County district courthouse and piloting a model in McLean County in Bloomington, IL, to supporting members and navigator services in 17 circuit courts throughout the state — a truly statewide effort. The program model is flexible to meet the needs of each community.

Just this year, Illinois JusticeCorps applied for and has received funding to undergo significant statewide expansion and we will begin operating in five new Illinois Circuits in August 2023 in addition to previously existing courthouse locations. Notably, the increase in funds is not directly proportionate to the number of additional service sites. The program was able to build increased living allowances for members, additional staff and other operating expenses such as member travel into the request in order to make sure that the expansion is sustainable, and the program continues to build on its strengths.

2. Court support

Unquestionably, in-kind support from a court is needed in order to start and sustain programs that are housed in courts and are often overseen by court staff. Extra effort is likely needed by program nonprofit leaders who come from outside the court and seek to build good relationships and to integrate their programs into the court environment, as we observed in the 2019 report.

As various program leaders underscored, what is essential is not only the critical offer of financial (dollars and in-kind) support and allocation of space by senior court leaders but demonstrating through actions and words that they respect and value navigators. That perspective is apparent in the words of leaders of the Hamilton County Municipal Help Center effort. Again, Robert Wall, who says:

Strong institutional leadership has been crucial to the success of our navigator program. The Help Center is a partnership between the Hamilton County Clerk of Courts and the University of Cincinnati College of Law. The Clerk of Courts provides stable funding for the Help Center, integrates the Help Center into the public-facing Clerk operations and acts as a strategic partner for increasing innovations aimed at increasing access to justice. The College of Law brings administrative assistance and a strong commitment to bringing students to the Help Center to enhance their legal education and provide an important community service.

And the County Clerk of Courts underscores his support for navigators:

Our commitment to funding the Help Center as a vital part of our operations for over 5 years has been a no-brainer for the Hamilton County Clerk of Court's Office. And the use of nonlawyer navigators is essential to providing a robust service to the public. Many people who walk into the Help Center on a daily basis are not having their best day. They might be confused about the court system and the process, or even just need guidance for getting around the building. Having well-trained navigators enables us to triage and make sure that visitors are given the personalized help they need in the most efficient way possible."

Pavan Parikh, Hamilton County Clerk of Courts

Another example of court financial support comes from the earlier highlighted Michigan Legal Help which has grown its staff, including nonlawyer navigators, over the years. Originally supported by start-up grants from the Michigan State Bar Foundation, its primary subsequent

source of funding has been the Michigan Supreme Court through its judicial legislative appropriation. Director Angela Tripp notes: “This secure funding, plus being housed within a large legal aid organization (the Michigan Advocacy Program) has allowed the MLH program to grow upon a strong and solid foundation and find funding for additional projects from other funding sources.”

And of course, offering stipends to student navigators, as noted earlier, lends a big boost to any program.

D. Data collection and assessment practices

As we observed in the 2019 report: “Managing and analyzing data is a challenge. Without adequate resources, it is difficult to secure good data, and, without data, it is difficult to make the case for untapped resources and/or maintain current funding.”

In our 2023 research, we did not take a deep dive into this issue, and hence, we have little new to offer beyond the 2019 report. We learned in 2023, as before, that programs collect SRL usage numbers as well as their feedback. Funders like the federal government in the AmeriCorps programs require evaluation and assessment by programs. Certainly, more of these efforts in all programs will be beneficial going forward, and we encourage them. Still, major players around the country are adopting the navigator program concept. Many are persuaded to do so by learning from the experience of their peers or witnessing firsthand the personal benefits that these programs can bring to SRLs. We heard that sentiment repeatedly in undertaking this research.

V. CONCLUSION: PROGRAM EXPANSION AND LOOKING FORWARD

Program leaders emphasize that navigator programs have become more critical than ever. As one leader put it, there has been “a tripling of clientele post-COVID.” And Angela Lovitt, again, a lawyer who not only directs an AmeriCorps program discussed earlier, but is also the deputy director of Legal Aid of Hawaii, sees the ongoing value of navigators: “Even though our innovations in the use of non-attorneys is continuing, we still need the benefit of individuals like the court navigators who can provide legal information to unrepresented people.” Like many, Lovitt believes we need more of these and other innovative approaches in play to come closer to securing access to justice for litigants.

Not only have programs identified in 2019 maintained their initiatives during and after the pandemic, but many have expanded their operations in various ways. As noted above, Wisconsin and Illinois extended their operations with AmeriCorps funding this year; the New York Court Navigator Program developed another site in an additional county, even in the depths of the pandemic, and it continues to push for additional sites in new counties around the state; the Legal Navigator effort in the Southwest Georgia Self Help Center extended its well-received operations; the Hamilton County, Ohio program is increasing the types of cases served by its navigators; and the Franklin County, Ohio operation added another navigator program during COVID. And Sheriece Perry notes that Massachusetts is going statewide with its services!

As the need for CSC services has grown exponentially with the expansion of remote services during the pandemic, CSCs are now undergoing a massive staff expansion across Massachusetts to be able to provide full-time in-person and remote services.

As operations continue to grow, there will still be a tremendous need for navigator interns. The support navigator interns provide to daily operations is immeasurable. CSC staff rely heavily on navigator interns and are committed to the professional growth and success of the navigator interns. The experience and professional development navigator interns receive in the CSCs through providing services to high needs populations is unparalleled.

In a July/August 2023 Kansas Bar Association Journal article, a senior court leader highlights the state's promising project to establish a broader court navigator program:

These programs involve non-attorneys helping litigants navigate the courthouse and understand basic judicial processes. The Johnson County District Court has already piloted this concept in its flagship help center for several years. OJA is now exploring the expansion of this model to other areas of the state, potentially using AmeriCorps volunteers, retired court staff, or other community stakeholders to make the court process more accessible and comprehensible for all parties involved.

Stephanie Smith, Judicial Administrator, Kansas Office of Judicial Administration

Finally, although not reported here (as they were not yet up and running to meet our October 2023 publication deadline), we learned of plans for exciting new navigator programs that are in various stages of development and should emerge in 2024 in New Hampshire, DC, Maine, Iowa, Kentucky and Wyoming.

Danielle Hirsch of NCSC sums it up well:

It has been exciting to watch court navigator programs spring up and grow across the country over the past five years. There is not a one-size fits all court navigator program that will work in all courts across the country. Instead, there needs to be — and we are increasingly seeing — a diversity of court navigator programs that work in coordination with court leadership and community partners to meet the needs of all court users. Not to mention that court navigator programs often provide important diversity pipeline opportunities for members of the community to engage with the courts and to mentor future justice partner leaders.

A Cheat Sheet: Ten Quick Tips to Get a Program Started

Since publication of the 2019 report, justice leaders have asked for suggestions to begin developing navigator programs.

We recommend starting the process by reviewing the fuller analysis of design elements relevant to your jurisdiction as described in the 2019 report and here. To underscore that, leaders offer these ideas for you to consider:

1. **There is no per se recipe, because one size does not fit all.** So, let your creative juices flow and just “go for it.” Don’t delay, over think or “let the perfect be the enemy of the good!” It is worth the experimentation.
2. Establish your **overall program goal and purpose:** What target group(s) do you want to help and what issues do you want to address?

3. **You don't need to go it alone.** Engage **potential partners and champions!** Seek out judges or your state access to justice commission, bar associations or court staff who see the value of these programs and can help attract even more believers! Once the program is established, building strong relationships throughout the court is critical to integrating the program into the court environment.
4. Be prudent but **don't get distracted over the question of legal advice versus legal information.** Your navigator staff can be trained and supervised on this issue. Safe harbor policies are helpful. Remember: We learned of no official complaints about any of the programs we have highlighted.
5. **Scope out** and assess **your court environment and its infrastructure.** Is there already a self-help center from which to build? Or a good existing legal aid or nonprofit program from which you could operate? Can you get space in the court?

The more integration or connection to other programs in the court the better to optimize service for SRLs.

6. **You may want to start with a pilot program to explore and refine operations in phase one.** For example, have navigators assume the most basic tasks or simply deploy a small number of navigators at first.

If you already have a small program, ask if you can now **encourage navigators to assume higher-level tasks and bigger roles?** In short, keep pushing for a more advanced effort as you go forward. Many underestimate navigators in terms of tasks and skills and, if well-trained and supervised, they can do even more.

7. Focus on **essential operational concerns**, such as appropriate training and supervision, data collection tools, good recruitment techniques, and whether to offer in-person only or hybrid services. Develop a plan for data collection. Funders will seek data when you apply for new money, and it also helps to tell a valuable story about what you are accomplishing.
8. **Do some basic research on funding options.** While it will be all important for sustainability, it should not preclude you from moving forward even with a small pilot. There are many opportunities through state, city and federal funds, court support and private resources, like foundations, wherever you are located. Think about what revenue is needed at the start and build from there.
9. When creating new paid or volunteer positions for **navigators, think about their overall involvement in the work.** If they are volunteers or AmeriCorps members, consider how to make their experience more productive and beneficial. Be open to change as you get a program started. Navigators who are on the ground can help identify service gaps and other needs, and they can offer other good ideas. Seek their feedback.
10. Although working with a committee or commission will help establish essential shorter- and longer-term in-kind support, it is wise to **identify a point person to run the ball** for your group in the initial stage. This should help keep you on track to make the program happen!

Bottom line: Don't forget that there are many individuals with experience in designing, initiating, and running programs who are referred to here and/or are identified on the list of

contacts in Appendix B (in addition to others). Seek them out for their ideas and insights as you get started.

END NOTES

1. As noted in our 2019 study, there are many programs using nonlawyers that do not fall within the scope of this research. We did not include as examples: those using paralegals operating under an attorney, often based in legal aid offices; law school clinics that use attorney supervised second- or third-year law students who are authorized to form attorney-client relationships; or mediation programs that serve two opposing SRLs simultaneously. Also, in our earlier study we focused on three programs as illustrative of domestic violence programs found in the courts since many of those advocates are not attorneys. See [NATIONAL NETWORK TO END DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COUNTS: 17TH ANNUAL CENSUS REPORT 2, 20 \(2022\)](#) (Reporting in this most recent version of the annual census shows that more than 1,400 domestic violence (DV) programs in the United States provide nonlawyer court or legal accompaniment/advocacy to DV survivors). These programs have existed for many years, and largely share a major source of federal funding. We did not include DV programs such as these in our 2023 survey.

2. [American Rescue Plan Act](#) (ARPA). And, under the umbrella of ARPA, is the [Emergency Rental Assistance Program](#) (ERAP) funding for eviction diversion and housing navigation services.

3. The NCSC Eviction Diversion Initiative provides grant funding and technical assistance to state courts to hire eviction diversion facilitators. These facilitators are charged with designing and implementing eviction diversion programs that use the formal housing court process as an opportunity to connect landlords and tenants with stabilizing legal and non-legal resources that can prevent or mitigate the harm of eviction. Visit ncsc.org/eviction to learn more about eviction diversion.

4. Examples include models developed in places such as Washington, DC and New Hampshire where some court employees are now actually called “court navigators” and do the work of navigators to assist SRLs directly. Further, it should be noted that, in an effort to secure access to justice for SRLs, an entire spectrum of activity is evolving, utilizing people trained as specialists not as lawyers — from the courts to the community. Examples of models where states have enabled nonlawyers to give some type of legal advice is discussed in the [IAALS report](#).

5. In addition, the principal investigator for this update and the 2019 study created and initially chaired an SRLN navigator working group which has been in place from November 2019 to May 2023. It is now co-chaired by Stacey Weiler and Robby Southers, leaders who are frequently mentioned herein. Through that effort, we have been able to encourage the sharing of information among and between programs, which has helped to offer insights and contacts for those who wish to develop new programs. See recordings of webinars for the working group that give suggestions and share advice with current and potential program leaders. [SRLN Navigators Resource Page](#)

6. Examples of three thoughtful state “safe harbor” policies from Minnesota, Kansas and Illinois are: [Minnesota Rule](#); [Kansas Rule](#); and [Illinois Policy](#).

7. There was an uptick in program leaders who expressed interest in initiating the practice of having navigators accompany SRLs to their court appearances to: take notes on judges’ orders to share with the SRL to help him or her understand what happened and what follow up is needed; and/or to provide emotional support to the SRL.

8. Most AmeriCorps grants are secured as [state and national grants](#). A respective [state service commission](#) is a good point of contact to learn more about starting a program.

9. Information about [AmeriCorps VISTA](#).

APPENDIX A

Executive Summary — 2019 Report

Background

The access to civil justice crisis looms large. A stunning 86% of the civil legal problems of low-income Americans receive inadequate or no legal help and an estimated 30 million people each year are reported to lack legal representation in the state courts. Without legal assistance, these individuals are at risk of suffering dire consequences for their families, their homes and their livelihoods.

A full spectrum of approaches is required to mitigate this crisis. The chief justices and top administration officials of the state courts affirmed this concept, calling in 2015 for “100% access to effective assistance for essential civil legal needs...through a continuum of meaningful and appropriate services.”

One important approach to help solve the puzzle is the use of “nonlawyer navigators” who come from outside the state courts to assist self-represented litigants (SRLs) with their civil legal problems.

This survey of the current national landscape identified and analyzed 23 programs in 15 states and the District of Columbia. It is based on extensive outreach and interviews with more than 60 informants who created, oversee or manage nonlawyer navigator programs in court settings. The report describes program features and offers practical considerations for creating and implementing such programs.

The programs use nonlawyer navigators who are not court staff, operate physically within a court, and provide direct “person to person” assistance to SRLs. Navigators in the study are defined as individuals who do not have full, formal legal credentials and training (i.e., a law degree), who assist SRLs with basic civil legal problems. They do not act or operate under an attorney/client relationship and they are part of a formal program and institutional auspices that provides specialized training.

Findings

There is a breadth of creative activity within programs using nonlawyers to assist SRLs in the state courts. There is also strong potential for further experimentation and taking these programs to every state and, ultimately, to scale.

Navigator programs advance a number of goals. They:

- enhance the effectiveness of, and build public trust in, the courts;
- facilitate access to justice for SRLs by helping them understand and navigate their cases;
- provide an additional way for justice advocates to supplement their own client services and allow lawyers to operate “at the top of their licenses”; and
- enable an array of community actors to better understand the plight of SRLs and help them manage the often unfamiliar and daunting court process.

Programs show significant variations in their features and characteristics with no “one size fits all” model. Court context matters and program managers are adapting programs to optimize operations according to their particular circumstances.

The programs have been initiated by multiple champions, often in partnerships, including the judiciary, official bodies like state access to justice commissions or specially appointed task forces, discerning nonprofit and legal aid lawyer leaders, bar foundations, and creative court staff. These trailblazers have brought a range of diverse resources and strategies to help meet the SRL demand and have created programs without major regulatory reform or rule changes.

Navigators work on a range of case types such as family, housing, debt collection, domestic violence, conservatorship, and elder abuse.

Programs demonstrate that well-trained and appropriately supervised navigators can perform a wide array of tasks. For example, they help SRLs find their way around the court; get practical information and referrals to other sources of assistance; or complete their court paperwork. Navigators also accompany SRLs to court to provide emotional back-up, help answer the judge’s factual questions, or resolve a matter with opposing counsel. Program managers are mindful of admonitions against nonlawyers providing legal advice and take the need for quality assurance measures seriously.

Navigators come from a range of backgrounds, including paid staff, AmeriCorps members, and volunteers, among them college and graduate students, recent graduates, and retirees. The diversity of backgrounds and skill sets show the potential for using many more of these individuals, as well as for recruiting new types of community actors as navigators.

The institutionalization and longer-term sustainability of programs is an overriding concern. Although program leaders have been creative in securing resources to run programs, and in-kind support from court staff along with volunteer service is valuable to a number of operations, the patchwork funding of many programs poses real obstacles to their long-term viability. Adequate resources are crucial to staff up programs; to bolster training, supervision and recruitment; to measure progress and outcomes; and to expand efforts.

Some programs have an integrated system using both lawyers and navigators, who complement each other’s work. Further integrating the navigator programs into ongoing court operations and/or with other legal providers can foster institutionalization of programs, enhance court efficiency, and provide an improved system in which to serve SRLs.

APPENDIX B Program Contact List

This appendix lists nonlawyer navigator programs which are described in the 2019 report and this 2023 update, as well as several additional programs discovered since the 2023 update. Those programs with asterisks (*) are ones either identified in the 2023 update or are newly discovered ones thereafter. To the author's knowledge, contacts are generally current as of September 2025.

Alaska

Legal Advocacy

Abused Women's Aid the 2023("AWAIC")
Contact: Corrine Williams, Program Manager,
corrine_w@awaic.org

Arizona

Providing Access to Court Services (PACS)

Superior Court of Arizona in Maricopa County
Contact: Jackie Traher,
LLRC Administrator/PACS Program Director,
jackie.traher@jbazmc.maricopa.gov

California

California JusticeCorps

Judicial Council of California (in partnership with
CA Superior Courts)
Contact: Nicole Claro-Quinn, JusticeCorps
Statewide Director, Judicial Council of California,
nicole.claro@jud.ca.gov

Elder Abuse Restraining Order Clinic

Bet Tzedek
Contact: Bertha Hayden, Director, Access to Justice
Programs, bhayden@bettzedek.org

Self-Help Conservatorship Program Clinic

Bet Tzedek
Contact: Bertha Hayden, Director, Access to Justice
Programs, bhayden@bettzedek.org

District of Columbia

***DC Superior Court Family Court Self Help Center**

Georgetown Law Navigators
Contact: Erin Larkin, Director, Access to Justice
Unit, DC Courts, erin.larkin@dsc.gov

Supportive Advocacy

DC SAFE
Contact: Bridget Claborn, Development Director,
bclaborn@dcsafe.org

Georgia

Legal Navigators

Southwest Georgia Legal Self-Help Center
Contact: Nai'ja Bridges, Executive Director,
nbridges@dougherty.ga.us

***R.E.A.C.H. Clinic**

Magistrate Court of Fulton County
Contact: Maria Banjo, Senior Staff and Managing
Attorney, Magistrate Court of Fulton County,
maria.banjo@fultoncountyga.gov

Hawaii

Access to Justice Paralegal Fellows

Hawaii Judiciary Self-Help Centers
Contact: Angela Lovitt, Deputy Director, Legal Aid
of Hawaii, Angela.Lovitt@legalaidhawaii.org

Volunteer Court Navigator Program

Second Circuit, Maui, Hawaii
Contact: Chief Judge Joseph E. Cardoza (Ret.),
Second Circuit (Maui),
jcardoza.hawaiiattj@gmail.com

Illinois

Illinois JusticeCorps

Illinois Bar Foundation (in partnership)
Contact: Stacey Weiler, Director of Grants and
Access to Justice Programs, Illinois Bar Foundation,
sweiler@illinoisbarfoundation.org

Legal Advocacy Program

Family Rescue, Inc.

Contact: <https://familyrescueinc.org/programs-services/legal-advocacy-program>

***Remote Self-Help Center Navigators**

Michigan Legal Help

Contact: Nora Ryan, Managing Attorney, Michigan Legal Help, nryan@mplp.org

Iowa

***Clinton County Resource Center**

Contact: Danny Davis, District Court Director of IT,
Danny.davis@iowacourts.gov

Kansas

***Kansas Court Navigator Program**

Contact: Sarah Hoskinson, Director of Access to Justice, Kansas Judicial Branch,
hoskinsons@kscourts.org

Kentucky

***Fayette County Legal Help Center**

Kentucky Access to Justice Commission
Contact: Glenda Harrison, Executive Director,
Kentucky Access to Justice Commission,
glenda.harrison@kyaccesstojusticecommission.org

Maine

AmeriCorps Legal Access Navigators Program

Contact: Krystal Williams, Program Director,
Krystal@AlphaLegalFoundation.com

Maryland

Court Navigator Project

The University of Baltimore

Contact: Justin Hollimon, Program Director, Legal Studies for BA and MA Programs,
jhollimon@ubalt.edu

Massachusetts

Court Service Center

Massachusetts Trial Court

Contact: Sheriece M. Perry, Director, Court Services and Law Libraries Department, Massachusetts Trial Court, sheriece.perry@jud.state.ma.us

Michigan

***Wayne County Circuit Court Legal Self-Help Center**

Contact: Lynn Reeves, Supervisor, Wayne County Circuit Court Legal Self-Help Center,
lynn.reeves@3RDcc.org

Minnesota

***Hennepin County Self-Help Center**

Contact: Jena Reed, SRL Program Manager, Court Services Division, Minnesota Judicial Branch,
jena.reed@courts.state.mn.us

Mississippi

Justice Court Navigator Program

Mississippi Center for Justice

Contact: Charity Bruce, Director, Economic Justice Campaign, cbruce@mscenterforjustice.org

Montana

Justice for Montanans

AmeriCorps program based at Montana Legal Services Association and partnered with the Montana Supreme Court Help Program

Contact: Harley Ternes, JFM AmeriCorps Program Coordinator, MTA Legal Services Association,
hternes@mtlsa.org

New York

Court Navigator Program

New York State Courts

Contact: Lisa Zayas, Director, Division of Access to Justice, Office of Justice Initiatives,
lzayas@nycourts.gov

Housing Court Answers

Contact: Jenny Laurie, Executive Director,
jennyl@hcanswers.org

North Carolina

***Mecklenburg Self-Serve Center**

North Carolina Judicial Branch
Contact: Darwin Rice, PhD., Family Court Administrator (Trial Court Administration), North Carolina Judicial Branch, darwin.f.rice@nccourts.org

***Wake County Legal Support Center**

Contact: Anh Ly Jordan, Director, Wake County Legal Support Center, Raleigh, North Carolina, anh@wakelsc.org

Ohio

***Eviction Prevention Coordinator**

Franklin County Municipal Court
Contact: selfhelp@franklincountymunicourt.org

Hamilton County Municipal Help Center

Contact: Nick Zingarelli, Director, zingarna@ucmail.uc.edu

***Student Navigator Program**

Franklin County Municipal Court
Contact: selfhelp@franklincountymunicourt.org

Oklahoma

Cleveland County Courthouse Navigator Project

Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma College of Law, and Oklahoma ATJ Commission (in partnership)
Contact: Holly Lantagne, Managing Attorney, Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma, holly.lantagne@laok.org

Pennsylvania

Family Court Help Center

Philadelphia Legal Assistance
Contact: Susan Pearlstein, Family Law Unit Supervising Attorney, spearstein@philalegal.org

Philadelphia Eviction Prevention Project (PEPP)

Community Legal Services of Philadelphia (Lead in PEPP partnership)

Contact: Rachel Garland, Managing Attorney, Housing Unit, Community Legal Services, rgarland@clsphila.org

Residential Mortgage Foreclosure Diversion

Program (First Judicial District of Philadelphia) Partnership of the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas and the City of Philadelphia Department of Housing and Community Development (in conjunction with local non-profit housing counseling agencies and local legal / legal aid providers)

Contact: Michelle Brix, Paralegal, Homeownership and Consumer Rights Unit, Community Legal Services of Philadelphia, mbrix@clsphila.org

Rhode Island

***Eviction Help Desk**

Rhode Island District Court
Contact: Eliza Vorenberg, Director of Pro Bono and Community Partnerships, Roger Williams University School of Law, Bristol, Rhode Island, evorenberg@rwu.edu

Tennessee

***Eviction Right to Counsel Program**

Legal Aid of Middle Tennessee and The Cumberland
Contact: Elizabeth Leiserson, Project Director, Legal Aid of Middle Tennessee and The Cumberlands, eleiserson@las.org

Virginia

***Fairfax Courthouse Self Help Resource Center**

Contact: Teresa Warkel, SHRC Coordinator, teresa.warkel@fairfaxcounty.gov

Wisconsin

AmeriCorps Courthouse Navigator Program

Milwaukee Justice Center
Contact: Mary L. Ferwerda, Chief Deputy, Clerk of Circuit Court, mary.ferwerda@wicourts.gov

Wyoming

Wyoming Court Navigator Program

Contact: Victor Payne, Court Services Counsel,
vpayne@courts.state.wy.us