

Lincoln County Court Partners with Legal Aid and Public Library to Serve Needs of Pro Se Court Clients



- **Key Players:**
 - Judges for the 11th District: Judge Donald Rowlands and Judge Richard Birch
 - Attorney Jeff Eastman of Legal Aid Nebraska
 - Bailiff Patty Wonch
- **Resource:** Class for self-represented litigants to fill out paperwork, schedule hearings, and ask questions
- **Where:** North Platte Public Library
 - 120 West 4th Street, North Platte, NE 69101
 - Phone: (308) 535-8036
 - Email: library@ci.north-platte.ne.us
- **When:** Once a month, 1:00 – 3:00 pm
 - A calendar with the class schedule is given to the litigant when they file
- **Goals:** To improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the legal process for self-represented litigants

Pro se litigants in the North Platte area have the opportunity to receive legal help and guidance through a program that began its work in 2012. Judge Donald Rowlands and Judge Richard Birch were both interested in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the current system. They reached out to attorney Jeff Eastman, the Legal Aid manager in the North Platte office, to voice their concerns and brainstorm possible solutions. Jeff got right to work on setting up a class to help litigants understand the necessary paperwork required for their case. Bailiff Patty Wonch got involved with the program to make it easier for litigants to schedule hearings. Once a month, Jeff and Patty host a class for two hours in the afternoon to help pro se litigants complete paperwork and schedule court dates. The class is held at the public library and about 8-15 people attend each month. People come from all over the surrounding area and from several counties to receive help. When litigants first file with the court, they are given information on the class including a schedule of upcoming dates when the class will be held. Litigants are asked to have their paperwork with them to attend the class. While the program does not currently provide the paperwork, litigants are directed to the Nebraska Judicial Branch website on a library computer. They can print the paperwork off for a minimal cost right before class begins. Once a litigant attends the class and has shown Patty that they have the proper paperwork completed, she schedules their court date.

This process has worked out well for both the judges and the litigants. The judges set aside one day a month specifically for pro se litigants, typically seeing child support cases in the morning followed by cases on name changes and dissolutions in the afternoon. Litigants who attend the class at the library are instructed by Patty to arrive a half hour before their hearing so they can go over paperwork and make sure they have everything they need. Patty says it really helps litigants who may be confused or anxious about the whole legal process to see a familiar face right before entering the courtroom. Both Judge Rowlands and Judge Birch feel that the process for self-represented litigants has improved efficiency tremendously and express great enthusiasm for the program.

For more information, contact:

Jeff Eastman at (308) 532-5793 or Patty Wonch (308) 534-4350.

Written: May 22, 2014