

**Public Service and Trust Commission  
Self-represented Parties Workgroup  
Focus Group  
Minutes  
November 9, 2009**

The Self-represented Parties Workgroup conducted a focus group on Monday, November 9, 2009 at 225 Spring Street, Wethersfield, CT.

Those members in attendance: Hon. Raymond R. Norko (co-chair), Atty. Bruce Loudon, Atty. Johanna Greenfield, Ms. Krista Hess.

Attorneys from the Hartford County Bar Association's Family Law Section in attendance: Atty. Shirley Pripstein, Atty. Louis Keefer, Atty. Jennifer Height, Atty. Susan Busby, Atty. Leo V. Diana, Atty. Monica Harper, Atty. Barbara Ruhe and Atty. Donna Convicer.

The focus group began at 5:10 p.m.

1. Judge Norko welcomed the attorneys and thanked them for attending and their participation in a discussion and focus group on a proposed Advice Days pilot program slated to be held in the Hartford Superior Court at 90 Washington Street, Hartford, where family cases are heard and adjudicated.
2. Ms. Hess gave the invited attorneys a brief history of the Judicial Branch's Strategic Plan, which is the blueprint for how the Branch provides services to the public and which was completed by the Public Service and Trust Commission (PSTC) in June 2008. The Self-represented Parties Committee completed its work earlier this year and Chief Justice Chase T. Rogers accepted the Committee's 29 recommendations and established this Workgroup to implement those recommendations. (The summary of the Committee's report is available at: [http://www.jud.ct.gov/Committees/pst/pst\\_ExecutiveSummary\\_FullReport\\_063009.pdf](http://www.jud.ct.gov/Committees/pst/pst_ExecutiveSummary_FullReport_063009.pdf) ) The Advice Days pilot project calls for volunteer, or *pro bono*, attorneys to provide legal advice to self-represented parties who have pending cases in family court. The Advice Days program is intended to assist self-represented parties by providing them with the understanding they need to resolve their cases in a timely manner.
3. Judge Norko gave a brief overview of what Committee recommendations the Workgroup has completed thus far, including the grouping of Judicial Branch forms related to family cases. Those grouped forms are available at Judicial Branch Court Service Centers and Public Information Desks, as

well as online at the Branch's Website:

<http://www.jud2.ct.gov/webforms/default.htm#FAMILY>

4. Judge Norko and Ms. Hess told the attorneys that their input in today's focus group is crucial to determining the structure of the Advice Days pilot program. The current tentative plan calls for the pilot program to be conducted on a Short Calendar day, from 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.
5. Judge Norko and Ms. Hess asked the attorneys what they, as experienced members of the Family Law Section of the Hartford County Bar Association who frequently conduct business at 90 Washington Street, would make such a program work effectively.

The comments of the attorneys were:

- The family plan that is required in custody cases will likely draw the most requests for assistance.
- Reconsider the 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. Tuesday timeframe for the program because it does not fit with the operational structure of some courts. Judges conduct pretrial conferences with attorneys prior to coming on the bench, and parties may be waiting and unaware that they should be meeting with Family Relations (when necessary). If the parties can complete certain court-required forms prior to their courtroom proceedings, it would save them and the court time.
- If parties have a family plan that is mutually agreeable, they do not need to meet with Family Relations. The attorneys said that self-represented parties who are able to complete the plan with or without assistance from a pro bono attorney can alleviate lengthy waits to see Family Relations specialists. Holding Advice Day in the morning, before the judge goes on the bench, will likely result in more of those plans being completed and result in fewer people unnecessarily waiting at Family Relations.
- Consider holding the Advice Days pilot project in the morning from 9-10:30am on a busy Wednesday short calendar day look for available space on the courthouse's lower level when the two Support Enforcement Services offices are empty.
- The pro bono attorneys should be clearly identified in their functions by the help that they will provide such as, "financial affidavits," "parenting plans," and so on.

- Have the proposed courthouse “greeter” be clearly identified and actively approach waiting parties, to direct them to the appropriate assistance area (family plan, financial affidavits, etc.)
- The Judicial Branch should consider establishing a specialized self-represented docket in family court. Those parties often require more time before the judge and a special docket would make that allowance. It would also help the judicial process move more quickly by allowing parties with attorneys to conduct their business more quickly.
- Several attorneys expressed concern that self-represented individuals may expect the pro bono attorney to tell them “what to do.” There are pros and cons in each scenario and the self-represented person must understand that they alone are responsible for choosing the action they take.
- Comments were made that the advice days program might divert clients away from the private bar. Judge Norko explained that this program would not deter a potential client from retaining an attorney. In fact, Judge Norko explained, the self-represented parties that were likely to utilize the services of a volunteer attorney were unlikely to formally retain the services of counsel. In addition, the volunteer attorney will explain that the advice is not given from the Judicial Branch, but from the volunteer attorney.
- There are language concerns as well. Many people speak English as a second language and have a limited ability to speak English. Ms. Hess said that the Hartford Judicial District has available a “language line,” which is a dedicated phone line that provides translation for dozens of languages between court clerks and those who use the court and need assistance. The language line could be an option for Advice Day, Ms. Hess said.
- The current pilot program proposal says the conferences between self-represented parties and the volunteer attorneys would be limited to 15 -30 minutes maximum, to provide parties with additional time to receive the information from the attorney.
- A discussion was held as to whether the attorneys would act as mediators with each other and on behalf of the self-represented party they are working with, when each of the parties in a case has sought advice from the volunteer attorney.
- It was suggested that more explicit signage be displayed in the courthouse telling people where to go, either for assistance from a

volunteer attorney, the Court Service Center, Family Relations, or magistrate court.

- It was also suggested that it may be a possibility to combine cases when parties have pending actions in both family support magistrate court and family court.
- Counsel suggested that the Rules Committee of the Superior Court should consider the economic impact when considering certain Practice Book rules and rule changes. When attorneys must follow every standing order, the cost of completing unnecessary and cumbersome paperwork is passed along to the clients.

6. Judge Norko and Ms. Hess thanked everyone for coming and the focus group concluded at 6:05 p.m.