Chapter 6: The Michigan Legal Help Website and Additional Resources

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Introduction

MichiganLegalHelp.org is an interactive website built to enable self-represented persons to handle relatively simple civil legal matters on their own. This project of the Michigan Poverty Law Program (MPLP) is funded by a grant from the Michigan State Bar Foundation (MSBF) and was originally a project of the Solutions on Self-Help Taskforce (SOSTF). The SOSTF was created in April 2010 by (then) Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Marilyn Kelley to promote greater centralization, coordination, and quality of support for self-represented litigants in Michigan.

This website includes legal information and forms covering a variety of legal subject areas, currently including consumer, family, protection from abuse, housing, expungement, public benefits, and income taxes. Users can complete several of the forms by answering questions in a simple interview format; the interviews and forms are programmed so the answers complete the forms selected by the user. The site also provides self-represented people with jurisdiction-specific procedural instructions. These instructions guide users through the steps they need to take after completing their forms, and give them an idea of what to expect once they get to court. In addition, the website is a clearinghouse for referrals to community services and legal assistance (specifically, to legal aid programs, local self-help centers, and lawyer referral services operated by state and local bar associations).

When the website was being developed, two rounds of usability testing were conducted to make sure the design of the website was user friendly. To help ensure that all the legal information content is understandable, the content is written in plain language style and at a sixth grade reading level. All content on the website is reviewed at least once a year to make certain it is up to date, all the links work, and all style and plain language guidelines continue to be met.

All the content on the website is HTML content, so users don’t have to download documents to get information. The site is also accessible and fully functional on a mobile or tablet device; efforts continue to improve the look and operation of the website so users get the same experience no matter what device they are using. The Michigan Legal Help (MLH) website collects no personal information from users; it only passively collects anonymous analytics data.
An MLH User Guide has been created to help website users and to assist Navigators, librarians, and others who are helping users access the resources on the website. If you find that you need a User Guide or other promotional materials about the Michigan Legal Help website (such as business cards or flyers), you may download and print these from the website, or you may request that copies be sent to you using the “MLH PR Materials” link in the footer of the website.

More content is continually being added to the website. MLH invites users and those assisting users to provide feedback and ideas for improvements that will benefit self-represented people in Michigan. Input and suggestions may be submitted using either the “Contact Us” link in the footer of the website, or the “Please Tell Us What You Think” survey at the top.

Navigating the Website

Users can navigate the MLH website in a few different ways. Please consult the Michigan Legal Help User’s Guide for detailed instructions (www.MichiganLegalHelp.org/UsersGuide). Users start navigating by using the search box, or by selecting a legal information or referral subject area from the drop down menus or buttons on the home page. Once a user has searched or selected a subject area, she can narrow her results by filtering based on content type (i.e., articles, toolkits, forms, etc.) or specific legal issue (i.e., debt collection, garnishment, etc.).

Once a user selects a piece of content to view, he must select a county: either the county where he lives or where his legal case is pending. By selecting a county, the user will view referral resources and procedural instructions that are specific to that county. Once a user has selected a county, it will stay selected for the entire session, until the Michigan Legal Help browser window is closed. It is possible to change the county by clicking on the orange arrow between the words “Change County” and the name of the county.

Users can return to the home page by clicking on the Welcome/home icon in the header, or by clicking on the word “home” in the breadcrumb at the top of the page if they are already viewing an article or toolkit.

Getting the Most Out of the Legal Information Resources on the Website

The Michigan Legal Help website has several different types of legal information resources. All legal content is developed and updated by a staff of lawyers who follow qualify control protocols. Volunteer legal subject area experts also serve on content review committees; they review materials and provide suggestions before legal information is posted to the website.

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1 Navigators are individuals who help users access the resources on the MLH website. Navigators may be Self-Help Center staff, librarians or others who have been trained to assist MLH users.
2 This is true if the browser is set up to accept cookies. We recommend that browsers be set up to accept cookies in order for users to get the best possible experience on Michigan Legal Help.
**Articles**: These are longer pieces of content that are useful for researching common legal topics and for getting the big picture of a legal issue. Users are encouraged to read Articles to learn general information about a topic. Each Article is relatively short and has a table of contents which is linked to the different headings in the Article, so users can go directly to a specific area of the Article. Article pages also include subject- and county-specific referral resources in the right-hand column.

**Common Questions**: These give short answers to questions users most frequently have in a given area. These are useful for users who have a general idea of the topic they are researching, but who need a reminder of a detail, or who have a very specific question (e.g., “What is the purpose of a security deposit?”). Common Questions are only available in Toolkits (see “Toolkits” section below).

**Forms**: There are two types of forms on the website: Automated Online Forms and Fillable PDF Forms. All Form pages have explanations about what each form is, and when someone might use it. Form pages also include subject- and county-specific referral resources on the right hand column.

The Automated Online Forms have interviews that users must finish. The interviews generate completed forms based on the information and answers the users input. All interviews are drafted by Michigan Legal Help staff for use by Michigan litigants, and the court forms created through this process have all been approved by the State Court Administrative Office (SCAO). Some interviews complete other Forms aside from court forms, such as letters.

While all interviews have been drafted by MLH staff and are specific to Michigan forms, users are sent to a different website – LawHelp Interactive – to do the interview to complete the Automated Online forms. LawHelp Interactive is a nationwide website that hosts these types of interviews for many different states’ self-help websites. The LawHelp Interactive landing page for the interview selected by the user will open in a new tab or a new window. After a user answers all the questions in the interview, the finished forms will be ready for the user to print or email. When a user is finished with the interview, she can return to Michigan Legal Help by going back to the other open tab or window she was using.

Before leaving the LawHelp Interactive site, users can save their answers and forms on LawHelp Interactive. This lets them come back later and complete the form, or update information in the form. Because it does take in users’ personal information, the LawHelp Interactive website has a level of security that is equal to that of a bank or credit union. More information on the interview process can be found below.

Some forms, specifically the divorce and custody-related forms, are not available to the public as blank forms. The only way users can access them is through the Michigan Legal Help website and by completing the interview on LawHelp Interactive. The decision to not make blank forms available was made by the State Court Administrative Office, not by the Michigan Legal Help Program. Before these interviews were created by the Michigan Legal Help program, there were no free statewide divorce or custody forms for self-represented litigants in Michigan.
The Fillable PDF Forms pages have links to State Court Administrative Office-approved forms on the One Court of Justice website. The forms will download or open in a new window, depending on the settings on the user’s computer. Then the user must fill out the blanks on the form; many forms have instructions that were written by the State Court Administrative Office, but some do not.

**Checklists:** Checklists only appear in those Toolkits which contain forms to be filed in court. Checklists are printable step-by-step instructions that guide users through the process to handle a specific legal matter. The Checklist first appears as a set of steps. Under each step are the words “Read more” with an arrow. Click “Read more” to see detailed instructions and information in each step. Efforts continue to make all Checklists county-specific, including for family law matters, where procedures vary widely from county to county. However, this is a very time consuming process and will take a while to complete. Some counties require additional forms that are not completed as part of the interview. Links to those forms will be included in the Checklist or users are instructed that they can get the forms at the court clerk’s office.

**Toolkits:** Each Toolkit contains legal information and referral content about a particular issue such as divorce without children, eviction for non-payment of rent, or many other topics. Each Toolkit contains Articles, Common Questions, one or more Checklists, and one or more Court Forms related to the issue. It also contains referral resources corresponding to the user’s county and related to the legal issue. Some Toolkits may not have Forms or Checklists, depending on the type of legal matter covered by the Toolkit.

Some subjects have a ‘toolkit guide’ that asks users a series of questions to direct them to the proper Toolkit. Not every subject area has a toolkit guide, but these will be added to the website soon.

All information can be shared (via email or social media) or printed by using the print and share icons on the page. When Checklists or Toolkits are printed, all accordions open – meaning that the answers to Common Questions and the detailed information in the Checklists will appear on the printout, even if they are not opened on the computer screen.

Throughout the website, certain words or phrases are underlined with a dotted line; these words or phrases are defined in the website’s lexicon. When a user hovers over the word with a mouse, the definition of the word or phrase appears. This helps users who may not be familiar with a legal word or phrase.

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3 [http://courts.mi.gov](http://courts.mi.gov)
Automated Interviews for Creating Forms

The Automated Interviews are very helpful to self-represented individuals who need forms for court, or forms or letters for other legal processes. Here are some tips that can make these interviews even more useful:

- **Do the Research First** – Users are encouraged to do their research before starting an interview. They should review the Articles and other legal information content on the website to be sure they know what forms they need, and what information they need to gather to finish the interviews.

- **Create an Account on LawHelp Interactive** – Creating a user account on LawHelp Interactive enables users to log back in to finish an interview or to make changes to a completed form. Some interviews are fairly short and straightforward; others are not. Some require information that the user may not have when they begin the interview. Some interviews are long and complex, like the divorce interview, and produce forms that the user will need at different stages in the case. For instance, the divorce interview creates both a complaint for divorce and a judgment of divorce, although the judgment won’t be filed for many months after the complaint is filed. A user may need to make changes to the judgment of divorce based on things that happen over the course of the divorce. If the user has an account which enables work in progress to be saved and accessed again later, this is much easier – otherwise the user will have to do the entire interview over again.

- **Carefully Answer All the Questions in the Interview** – The interviews are screening tools as well as a way to complete the forms. Some users may be excluded from completing the interviews. This might happen, for example, when a user answers a question that shows that her situation does not meet the requirements for using the form, or that her case is too complicated for the interview to accommodate. Individuals in the latter category are advised that they may want to consult with an attorney in order to complete their legal processes. The website provides links to any user who would like to find a lawyer. Users must answer all questions in the interview in order to get to the point where the forms are created. All answers that the user inputs into the interview print out exactly as they are typed in, so users should be careful with spelling, capitalization, and punctuation when they answer questions.

- **Print or Email the Forms** – When an interview is complete, users can review their forms, and print or email the completed documents. The completed forms will be in either .pdf or .rtf format. Some users may need assistance opening an .rtf document in Word® depending on how the computer is set up. Even if they have chosen not to create a user account, until they close the browser or save their answers, users can return to the interview to correct errors they find in reviewing the forms. After the browser is closed, the only way a user can return to his answers is if he created a user account.

- **To Access a Saved Interview** – To return to an interview in process or to modify answers in a saved interview, users should return to that interview’s Form page on the Michigan Legal Help site and click on the link to go to the interview on LawHelp Interactive. Once on the LawHelp Interactive site, they can
enter their user name and password, and they will be taken back to the interview with their saved data in it.

Referral Resources

In addition to legal information, the Michigan Legal Help website contains referral information content. Referral information connects users to resources in their community that may help them solve their legal issues and obtain related assistance. There are four categories of referral information: Find a Lawyer, Self-Help Centers, Community Services, and Court Information.

- **Find a Lawyer** - Sometimes people decide they cannot handle their legal problems on their own, so they want to consult with an attorney. “Find a Lawyer” is a list of lawyer referral services and free legal aid offices that handle the type of law the user selected, and serve the county selected by the user.

- **Self-Help Centers** - Some counties have legal self-help centers (SHCs) located in a courthouse or library nearby. Seven local SHCs have been set up as part of the Michigan Legal Help Program, including three based in libraries. They are staffed by non-lawyer Navigators who can help visitors use the Michigan Legal Help website, and answer questions that don’t require legal advice. Several other SHCs are also in operation and help their patrons use the Michigan Legal Help website and other resources. If there is a Self-Help Center in the user’s county, the website lists that SHC’s location and hours. The MLH website will soon include a page listing all Self-Help Center locations so users can find the closest one if there is no SHC in their county.

- **Community Services** - Sometimes people need help from non-legal resources in order to resolve a legal problem – this includes help with low-income housing, or emergency shelter, or mediation services, among others. The Community Services on each page are tailored to the county and the legal problem the user is researching. More Community Services are continually being added to the website.

- **Court Information** – These pages include information about the court where a user’s case will be held. Each county has one Circuit Court, one Friend of the Court office, one Probate Court, and one or more District Courts depending on the size of the county. Each court page has a description of what types of cases each court handles, the address and hours of the court, and a link to the court’s website. Tribal Courts in Michigan are also included.

Other Resources on MLH

There are a few other features of the Michigan Legal Help website. Two of them collect feedback from users – the “Contact Us” link in the footer, and the “Please Tell Us What You Think” survey button.

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4 The seven Michigan Legal Help affiliated SHCs to date are located in Oakland, Oscoda, Allegan, Monroe, Marquette, Muskegon and Wayne Counties. The Oscoda, Oakland and Marquette SHCs are located in libraries. The Michigan Legal Help Program intends to open additional local SHCs in the future.
These are two ways users can communicate with the people who make and maintain the website. Is there something else they’d like to see added to the website? How was their experience with the website? Patrons should be encouraged to use these feedback tools, because their opinions are very important to helping the Michigan Legal Help Program continue to expand and improve.

The website also has videos for people who learn best by watching and listening. In the fall of 2013, Live Help was incorporated into the website. This service lets website visitors chat online with a navigator who can help them use the site, and answer simple questions that do not require legal advice. In 2014 some Spanish language content will also be added to Michigan Legal Help, including Spanish language videos.