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Students provide legal assistance

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SF State students are helping to improve customer service at several court-based, self-help centers in the Bay Area. The students, along with students from CSU East Bay and University of California, Berkeley, comprise JusticeCorps, a new program that trains undergraduates to provide free legal information to people representing themselves in a range of civil cases.

Judy Louie, director of the San Francisco ACCESS Center, a self-help center in the Civic Center Courthouse, said JusticeCorps has been a great help in assisting clients with such issues as small claims, evictions, family law, harassment restraining orders and name/gender changes. Although law students volunteer at the center as well, the JusticeCorps members provide a more consistent and extended commitment, Louie said.

"They don't have the stress and pressure of law school, so they come in fresh and committed," Louie said. "Often their performance has exceeded that of the law students."

More than 4.3 million California court users are self-represented, usually because they cannot afford a lawyer, according to JusticeCorps. While defendants in criminal cases are entitled by law to representation by a public defender, participants in civil cases are not.

A recent report by the [California Commission on Access to Justice](#) found that less than one-third of the legal services needs of low-income Californians are met. The report also stated it would cost nearly \$400 million to meet the legal needs of all low-income Californians.

Administrative Director of the Courts William C. Vickrey said JusticeCorps provides significant help to address the issue.

"California is experiencing an explosion in the number of individuals appearing in court without legal representation in many legal matters, ranging from family law to housing issues," Vickrey said. "JusticeCorps members will provide the court staff and legal aid attorneys working in self-help centers much-needed assistance to meet the growing demand for services."

Some of the 13 SF State JusticeCorps students are criminal justice studies majors. Several are able to speak with litigants in Spanish or Japanese.

Charlene Tanisawa, a senior psychology major and criminal justice minor, said all of the litigants she has assisted have been grateful and gracious.

"These are people who cannot afford legal representation and are at their wit's end with stress and frustration," said Tanisawa, who plans a career in international law. "You feel like you're making a significant difference in their lives."

Laura Lopez, a senior criminal justice major, aspires to be a criminal prosecutor. She has found JusticeCorps helpful in reaching career goals.

"Being exposed to different kinds of issues in civil law is great," Lopez said. "I've also had a couple friends with small-claims issues, and I've been able to help them."

JusticeCorps students are required to complete 300 hours of service in the academic year. Most of



SF State student Laura Lopez (left) works with a client

their hours are spent assisting litigants at the self-help centers, but they also have time set aside to observe cases in the courtroom, follow judges for a day and take part in community service projects.

Upon completion of the program, students receive a \$1,000 education award from JusticeCorps.

JusticeCorps, funded by an [AmeriCorps](#) grant and the [Administrative Office of the Courts](#), began as a pilot program in Los Angeles County in 2004. It launched last fall in Alameda, San Francisco and San Mateo counties.

JusticeCorps is recruiting students for the 2007-08 academic year. For details, visit the [JusticeCorps Web site](#) or contact program coordinator Daniel Siskind at (510) 268-7611 or dsiskind@alameda.courts.ca.gov.

-- [Matt Itelson](#)

Photo: Courtesy of JusticeCorps



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