



# POTENTIAL FUTURES FOR THE PHILADELPHIA FAMILY COURT HELP CENTER



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# FAMILY COURT HELP CENTER & ITS CURRENT STATUS



*Family Court Help Center in action*

The Philadelphia Family Court Help Center (FCHC) began as a joint project between Philadelphia Legal Assistance (PLA) and Women Against Abuse (WAA), aided in part by the Philadelphia Family Court. Housed in an office on the 11th floor of the Family Court building, the Help Center provides legal information to self-represented litigants struggling with custody, divorce, and specific types of domestic abuse cases. The center is staffed by two dedicated paralegals and by volunteers from the Jenkins Law Library and local law schools. The Help Center is managed by attorneys from PLA and WAA. These collaborators assist litigants in completing and filing court forms, such as petitions to modify custody and divorce filings.

The Help Center is open for custody help three hours a day, from 12:00pm-3:00pm, Monday through Friday, and for divorce from 9:30am to noon on Tuesdays and Thursdays.<sup>1</sup> While these times may seem limiting, the service no doubt has a positive impact. According to the Jenkins Law Library, the Help Center was able to assist over 600 people in divorce cases in 2023.<sup>2</sup> Just as many, if not more, have been helped in custody matters each year.

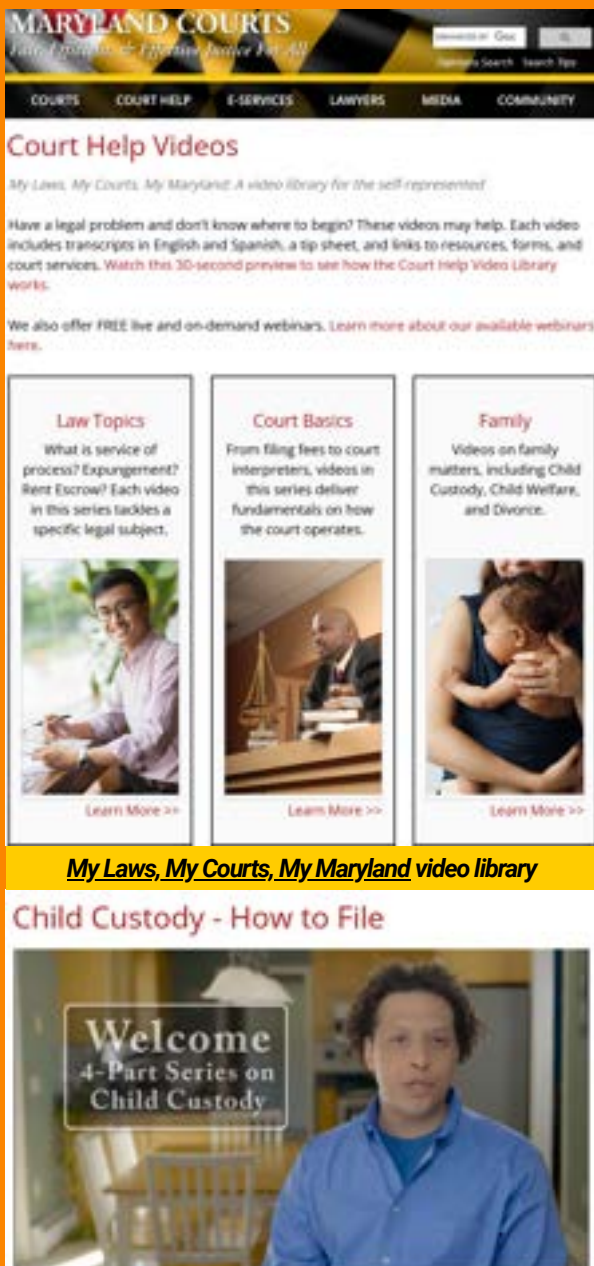
When first created, the project was jointly funded through the efforts of PLA, WAA, and the Philadelphia Bar Association.<sup>3</sup> The center was later able to apply and receive a grant from the Office on Violence against Women (OVW) within the U.S. Department of Justice. The grant funded nearly all operations for the center for several years. The grant is up for renewal in fall 2025, but it is unclear, given the policy objectives of the current federal administration, whether renewal will occur.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, this report assumes the OVW grant will not be available after fall 2025 and instead suggests alternative sources of support for the Help Center.

The suggestions set forth in this report are divided into two sections, short-term and long-term. The short-term suggestions focus on the Help Center's current services and how they might be continued, in full or in part, given current circumstances; long-term suggestions focus on methods of building a more secure structure for the Center's future. None of the ideas presented here are, individually, adequate to sustain the Center in full, much less to expand it. But in combination, they may offer a way forward.

# SHORT-TERM: MAINTAINING THE CENTER'S CURRENT PRESENCE

The likely expiration of OVW grant funding has created a ticking clock. However, this does not mean the Help Center staff cannot take immediate action towards preserving the services of the FCHC. These short-term suggestions address ways of staffing the FCHC, alternative methods of distributing information, and other strategies for maintaining or bolstering existing services even in the absence of OVW funds.

## IMPROVING ONLINE MATERIALS



In today's digital age, many self-represented litigants are likely to look up their questions online before visiting the Help Center. While the Family Court currently provides several forms on their website, the site can be difficult for users to navigate and understand. **Two suggestions are to create videos advising litigants** on how to find or fill out specific forms, and **to advise the Court on specific improvements to the navigation of the website** to benefit people looking for information on the Family Court and specifically the Help Center.

Many courts and help centers **provide videos to help litigants navigate the court system**. For example, the Maryland Judiciary offers an online video library on their court website called "My Laws, My Courts, My Maryland" to help self-represented litigants.<sup>5</sup> The videos cover a variety of topics from court basics to specific legal issues, such as family law matters or guardianship. A helpful example is their "Child Custody Series," which is a four-part video series that goes over legal terms, filing procedures, court proceedings and the actual trial.<sup>6</sup> Hosted on YouTube, the videos themselves are straightforward with only a single person talking through the topics interspliced with PowerPoint slides and images. While this may not entirely replicate the benefit of in-person services, hosting videos on either the Court website or PLA's website would provide self-represented litigants with some guidance before they even arrive at court.

# SHORT-TERM: MAINTAINING THE CENTER'S CURRENT PRESENCE

## IMPROVING ONLINE MATERIALS

Additionally, the **navigation of the Philadelphia Court website can be improved**. Google reviews of the Family Court report stress with the process of visiting the website, becoming confused and calling the Court for more information, only to be directed back to the website after difficulty getting a response from an operator.<sup>7</sup> These reviews underscore the importance of a user-friendly interface. There are several website improvements that could support and even expand on the services being offered at the FCHC. These improvements are in the areas of centralization of specific court information and simplification of plain language forms.

Once on the website, there is a lack of direction on how to get the information a *pro se* litigant would need. The Domestic Relations page for the Philadelphia Family Court has a list of tabs and links at the bottom that may not be intuitive for an unrepresented litigant to navigate and obtain needed information. A way to address this would be to develop a specialized Family Court portal. Such a portal would include the information on the current page such as phone numbers, as well as new and updated assets such as direct links to individual forms and court dockets.<sup>8</sup> An example of a system which is not radically different, but provides greater ease of access to a self-represented litigant is the website of the Second Judicial District of New Mexico, featured below.<sup>9</sup>

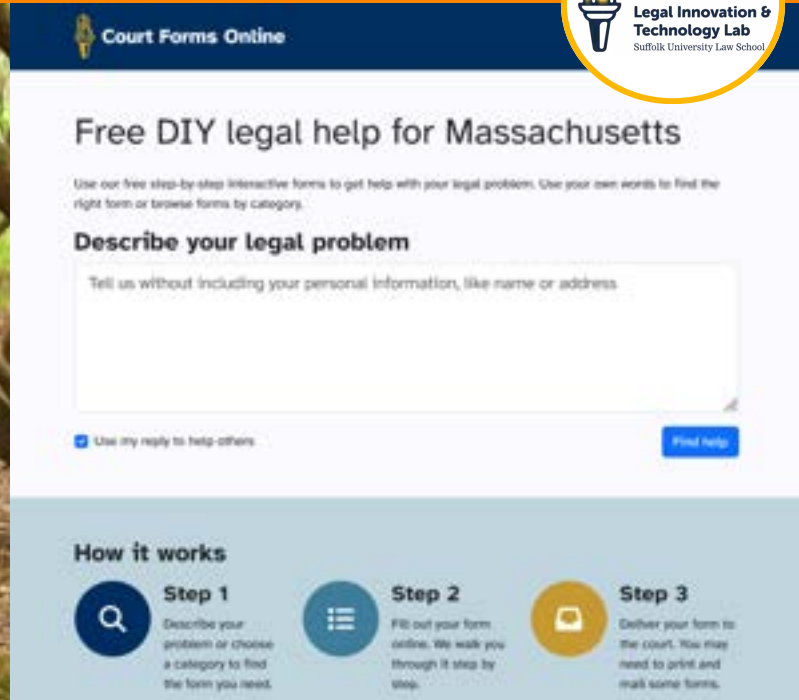
While many forms are currently on the website, organizing each form by subject or searchable keyword and developing interactive plain language versions would allow for greater comprehension, explanation of example documents, and could direct to the video guides mentioned earlier.<sup>10</sup> Although the current forms include some instructions at the beginning, making these documents interactive will allow for greater flexibility for individuals who may have not understood the instructions. All forms would feature a disclaimer on how the plain language or video tutorials do not substitute for direct help or information and would encourage visiting the Help Center for more personal assistance.

*The Self-Representation section of the Second Judicial District of New Mexico's court website*



# SHORT-TERM: MAINTAINING THE CENTER'S CURRENT PRESENCE

## INTEGRATING AI



Left: Docassemble website; Right: Court Forms Online, a guided interview portal part of the Document Assembly Line project

Another way to keep the FCHC running is to **lean into AI resources**. There has been a growing investment into utilizing AI in the expansion of access to justice. One method is incorporating AI technology into online programs guiding self-represented litigants on how to fill out court forms. In Massachusetts, Suffolk University Law School's Legal Innovation & Technology Lab developed the Document Assembly Line, which is a system built on online guided interviews to help litigants complete and file court forms.<sup>11</sup> A key feature is the online guided interview portal that allows litigants to type in their legal problem, choose the relevant form, and answer questions that help them fill out the form. Their system is free and open source because it is built with Docassemble, a free, open-source software developed and maintained by PLA's very own Jonathan Pyle. Legal aid organizations in Missouri and Illinois have also launched their own guided interview portals.

Launching the FCHC's own guided interview portal could be an option for continuing its operation online. PLA's Family Law unit has expressed interest in a guided interview portal as a means of saving time and avoiding confusion for pro se litigants.<sup>12</sup> However, there may be some impediments that would have to be discussed with the Court. Some potential obstacles are the Help Center's lack of internet access and required coordination with the Court on the approval of the guided interviews used.

# SHORT-TERM: MAINTAINING THE CENTER'S CURRENT PRESENCE

## HOSTING WORKSHOPS



In the event that adequate funding is no longer available to cover staffing costs, one way to maintain services at a lower cost could be **to offer workshops, group classes or webinars**. These alternatives would allow the FCHC to continue to provide aid in filling out forms and answering questions regarding legal information. All these options can be held in-person or online on a weekly or monthly basis; the timing is flexible depending on the available staff. Each could potentially be staffed by volunteer attorneys, who could commit to set hours rather than an undetermined time in taking on a case. These types of workshops offer flexibility to determine how the FCHC can best serve litigants.

For example, San Diego County Superior Court hosts workshops for assistance with guardianship or divorce agreements.<sup>13</sup> Utilizing Microsoft Bookings, litigants can book an hour to an hour-and-a-half appointments to receive assistance from a Family Law Facilitator. Booking an appointment requires litigants to fill out information relevant to their case and share the language they feel most comfortable speaking. San Diego County Superior Court's bookings are continuously filled, demonstrating that many people are interested in getting aid through the workshop. This approach may be a viable option for flexibly maintaining the FCHC's services.



# SHORT-TERM: MAINTAINING THE CENTER'S CURRENT PRESENCE

## REFRAMING GRANTS

The Federal government is not the only potential source of funding for the Help Center. There are many **private organizations that might also provide assistance**. Each of these organizations has different criteria for the projects it will support. And while there may be no funder that would fully support the FCHC, it is possible that a combination of private grants could meet some of the Center's needs.

At the local level, few if any funders have articulated a specific interest in legal help centers. Accordingly, for local funders, it would be essential to **reframe the FCHC's work in terms likely to resonate with the funder's expressed priorities**.

For example, the **Albert M. Greenfield Foundation** is a Philadelphia-based Family Foundation which aspires to "strengthen the fabric of community life" in the city.<sup>14</sup> Their mission statement is to promote "locally driven, civic, and community-centered initiatives" to establish "long-term collaboration on projects."<sup>15</sup> They look to fund grants which connect to some aspect of education, civics and community, or arts and culture. They have stated a preference for not funding regular operational expenses but instead supporting "special projects and innovative programs that can make a significant difference in the organization's future and that of its constituents."<sup>16</sup>



The FCHC could present itself as having values and priorities similar to the 2017 Education Law Center's approved grant to improve Child-Serving Professionals' Capacity to Advance Student's Rights, or 2006 Philadelphia Mural Art's approved grant for a Restorative Justice Program.<sup>17</sup> Looking at those previous projects for reference, the FCHC could market itself as an appealing community initiative that could fit within the foundation's mission. Alternatively, an application could revolve around a new structure for the Help Center and how the grant would help lay that new foundation. This reimaged Help Center would have greater collaboration and sustainability, and this relaunch might be the sort of "special project" that the foundation would be interested in supporting.

Potential grantees must apply through a portal on the foundation's website.<sup>18</sup> An applying organization must present materials such as the separate budgets for the parent organization and the prospective project being applied for, the most recent 501(3) letter, multiple references speaking to the organizer's credibility, and a plan to measure the program's results.<sup>19</sup> A potential introduction to a grant application could be something akin to, "The Philadelphia Family Court Help Center is dedicated to helping disenfranchised individuals with the complexities of child custody and divorce through guided legal assistance. Having already helped hundreds of pro se litigants in its few years of service being run by PLA and WAA, the Help Center provides the opportunity for people to make the most informed decisions regarding their families. Changes in the funding landscape have created a need to reimagine the Center and put in place new and more collaborative methods of serving its clientele."

# SHORT-TERM: MAINTAINING THE CENTER'S CURRENT PRESENCE

## REFRAMING GRANTS



An example of a funding option at the national level is the **State Justice Institute (SJI)**. The Institute is entirely based around helping “state courts address the most critical issues.”<sup>20</sup> Examples of recent grantees are a research team at the University of Texas Arlington, which implemented a Family Recovery Court in Williamson County, and Good Neighbor Emergency Assistance, who partnered with the Iowa Judiciary to develop a Housing Navigator program.<sup>21</sup>

The Institute provides grants in five different categories. Those most relevant to the Help Center are likely the project grant (PG) or the technical assistance (TA) grant. PGs look for local court projects that do not exceed \$200,000 over 24 months; however, such grants may not be used to operate routine court operations, including salaries for court employees.<sup>22</sup> Because of the Help Center’s status of being court affiliated but not operated with the Court, the FCHC may be eligible under these guidelines.

Technical assistance grants are designed to fund expert assistance to help courts diagnose

a problem and implement solutions.<sup>23</sup> The TA grants have a relevant successful example in the State Court of Fulton County, Georgia, which was awarded \$50,000 for their Self-Help Strategic Planning Project. The project supported the “existing court Self-Help Center to meet the needs of a rapidly growing number of self-represented litigants in Fulton County, Georgia.”<sup>24</sup> TA grants factor in criteria such as how vital the grant would be to the applicant’s needs, and the “soundness” of the approach to the problem.<sup>25</sup>

Deadlines for the SJI grant occur quarterly in February, May, August, and November. Submissions are made via the SJI grant management system. All SJI grants require cash-matching; for the project grants, the cash match must be greater than or equal to the SJI grant. TA grants require a “total match (cash and in-kind) of not less than 50 percent of the SJI award amount, of which 20 percent must be cash.”<sup>26</sup> Because of these match requirements, the Help Center could seek an SJI grant in conjunction with another grant. The two grants together would allow for the FCHC to receive a greater total amount; the Help Center could also request less when applying to other grants, potentially making the Help Center more attractive to donors. For example, if the FCHC applied for a non-SJI grant and were awarded \$60,000, it could then apply for a TA grant from SJI requesting \$60,000. If accepted, it would then need to put up \$30,000, in cash and kind, but then receive \$60,000 and have a total of \$90,000 to work with.<sup>27</sup>

# SHORT-TERM:

## MAINTAINING THE CENTER'S CURRENT PRESENCE

### REFRAMING GRANTS: QUICK SHEET

GRANTOR INFO & CONTACT	AMOUNT ESTIMATE & DURATION	PRIORITIES	APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS
<p><b><u>Albert M. Greenfield Foundation</u></b> Philadelphia, PA</p> <p>Application and contact through <a href="#">website</a>.</p> 	<p>Amounts vary greatly from <b>\$5,000 to \$140,000</b>.</p> <p>Grants typically last between <b>one to two years</b> but can last <b>up to five</b>.</p>	<p>The Albert M. Greenfield Foundation has a preference for supporting <b>projects that address significant problems in new ways and that have the potential to be replicated by others, both locally and nationally</b>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awardees typically have strong track records, a Board-approved strategic plan, and exceptional volunteer and staff leadership.</li> <li>• Generally does not provide operating support</li> <li>• Prefer to support special projects and innovative programs that can make a significant difference in the organization's future and that of its constituents.</li> </ul>	<p>Applications are rolling.</p> <p>Applications require budgets for parent org. and project, 501(3) forms, references, and details on project's measurable success terms</p>
<p><b><u>State Justice Institute</u></b> Fairfax, VA</p> <p><a href="#">Application Guide</a> E: <a href="mailto:contact@sjj.gov">contact@sjj.gov</a> P: 703-660-4979_</p> 	<p>Amount depends on how much is able to be matched.</p> <p><b>PG max:</b> \$300,000 in 36 months <b>TA max:</b> \$75,000 in 12 months</p>	<p><u>Relevant Priority Investment Areas:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Promoting Access to Justice and Procedural Fairness</b> by developing court-based solutions that address increases to <b>self-represented litigants</b></li> <li>• <b>Advancing Justice Family and Civil Reform</b> by developing court-based solutions for civil case types that are overwhelming court dockets</li> </ul> <p>SJI encourages applicants to integrate the following <b>factors</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence based, data-driven decision making; Cross sector collaboration; Systemic approaches (as opposed to standalone programs); Institutionalization of new court processes and procedures; Ease of replication; Sustainability.</li> </ul>	<p>Applications are rolling.</p> <p>Applications require budgets for parent org. and project, 501(3) forms, references, and details on project's measurable success terms</p>

# SHORT-TERM: MAINTAINING THE CENTER'S CURRENT PRESENCE

## EXPANSION OF VOLUNTEERS: LAWYERS AND NON-LAWYERS

The Help Center can pursue **alternative staffing methods** to ensure services continue even without funding for employee salaries. One way is to reframe the use of volunteer lawyers. Many help centers utilize volunteer lawyers to provide legal information rather than advice. For example, Hawaii's self-help centers use volunteer attorneys and AmeriCorps advocates almost exclusively to provide "limited legal information."<sup>28</sup> Because only information and guidance on court procedures are provided, volunteer attorneys can sign up for shifts as short as one hour.<sup>29</sup> The training and resources available at the center are meant to provide guidance for volunteer attorneys in case they encounter questions. In return, volunteer attorneys can receive CLE credits and recognition in newsletters, social media, and the local bar's journal.

Hawaii's self-help model could be replicable by the FCHC. Currently, the Help Center has at least one paralegal on site to supervise law students or volunteers. Similar to how Hawaii self-help centers utilize volunteer lawyers, lawyers could receive training at the FCHC and commit to time slots to provide legal information without in-person supervision.

Melinda deLisle, the Director of Pro Bono Engagement for Cozen O'Connor P.C., spoke on some **benefits and drawbacks to the use of volunteer attorneys**.<sup>30</sup> While a time slot may be easier to commit to than a case, there may still be difficulties with getting lawyers to commit to a specific time given their varying priorities. This drawback could be mitigated by working with multiple firms and ensuring there are back-up volunteers. On the other hand, providing legal information for custody cases is likely to be "uncontroversial." In our current climate, some law firms are hesitant to take on big impact cases. This leaves the door open for more available lawyers willing to do pro bono hours in less controversial areas, such as helping pro se litigants file for custody. Furthermore, junior associates eager to contribute pro bono service early in their career can contribute to the Help Center as volunteer attorneys before even passing their bar exam. To pursue this route, the first steps would be to contact pro bono coordinators at firms that PLA and WAA already have relationships with and to reach out to the Philadelphia Bar Association Law Firm Pro Bono Committee to flesh out the idea further.

Additionally, help centers such as the First Judicial District's Elder Justice & Civil Resource Center take **non-legal volunteers**. With training, retired community members have taken up the job of helping explain forms and answering phones. The FCHC already makes use of law students, but there are other groups in similar positions who would be of significant use to the Court. Undergraduate students interested in law, political science, or social work would likely be eager to volunteer their time. MSWs are often trained in helping indigent individuals file complicated forms and oftentimes require pro bono hours and experiences to complete their degrees. Schools such as Penn, Drexel, Temple, and Rutgers could all put the FCHC in contact with their undergraduate and graduate programs that might be sources of interested faculty and students.

# LONG-TERM: THE HELP CENTER POST-OVW

This section discusses solutions past the immediate services of the Help Center and focuses on reimagining its structure and looking at alternative sources of funding.

## ONGOING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE COURT

A path currently being pursued but nonetheless important to recognize is a stronger relationship with the Philadelphia Family Court as an avenue for support. Proper communication and good working relationships with court leadership are integral to the success of a court-based help center. The Maryland Judiciary released a report in 2021 on Best Practices for Court Help Centers, in which they assert that full integration into local court operations is how help center programs can be most effective.<sup>31</sup> Maryland help centers use various staffing models, such as court employees, pro bono volunteers, and contractors, but all cooperate and communicate with court staff, including administrators, clerks and judges.<sup>32</sup>



One program the report spotlights is the District Court Help Center in Salisbury, Maryland.<sup>33</sup> The Salisbury District Court Help Center identifies their close relationship with the clerk's office as a key to their success. The clerks can directly refer litigants who need legal help to the help center, and the help center can directly reach out to the clerk's office to facilitate solutions to issues that can only be addressed by the Court.<sup>34</sup> A strong relationship between the Court and the help center, as in the Salisbury District Court Help Center, is essential to ensuring that self-represented litigants receive timely and effective assistance.

Our FCHC's relationship with the Philadelphia Family Court is a work in progress. While a good working relationship continues to be facilitated, the importance of a strong, ongoing relationship between Court leadership and the Help Center cannot be understated. To further galvanize support for the Court's involvement in the FCHC, it would be beneficial for the Help Center to advocate the advantages that would arise through further Court collaboration. For example, such a relationship ensures that the Help Center's services can remain accurate and aligned with evolving Court policies and procedures. Robust communication between the Court and the FCHC could also bolster the efficiency of referrals and mitigate confusion for unrepresented litigants. Furthermore, visible Court support behind the Help Center reinforces its commitment to fairness and access to justice and strengthens public trust in our court system. The developing relationship between the Help Center and the Court seems promising and may yield these benefits in the future.

# LONG-TERM: THE HELP CENTER POST-OVW

## GREATER FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FROM PA IOLTA



SUPREME COURT OF PENNSYLVANIA

Pennsylvania Interest on  
Lawyers' Trust Accounts Board

Helping to Secure Equal Access to Justice

[PA IOLTA website](#)

As a program partially operated by Philadelphia Legal Assistance (PLA), an existing recipient of **Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts (IOLTA)** funding, the Help Center presents a compelling case for this established grant program to expand their financial support. This section examines the current funding scheme, eligibility for greater funding, and strategic pathways for **securing additional IOLTA resources** to enhance the Help Center's operations and service capacity.

The Pennsylvania IOLTA program distributes funds through multiple channels, with the primary allocation going to the Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network (PLAN, Inc.). As a PLAN subcontractor, PLA currently receives IOLTA funding to support its legal aid services. Since the FCHC operates under PLA's purview, it may already benefit from these allocated funds.<sup>35</sup> PLA could nonetheless advocate for increased funding to support the FCHC. This approach would require PLA to demonstrate how the FCHC's services align with IOLTA's core mission of serving low-income individuals in matters affecting fundamental needs, including family law, domestic violence cases, and child custody disputes. Documentation should emphasize quantitative measures of the Help Center's impact, such as the number of litigants served, types of legal guidance provided, and potential service expansions enabled by increased funding.

Several key factors strengthen the case for greater IOLTA funding for the sake of FCHC. The program's services directly address IOLTA's stated priorities by assisting vulnerable populations in civil legal matters that affect basic human needs. The Help Center's existing partnership with PLA provides an established connection to the IOLTA funding stream, while its potential collaboration with law school clinics could further align with IOLTA's educational objectives. The upcoming application cycle presents a critical opportunity for action. With the next funding window opening on November 12, 2025, for the grant year beginning July 1, 2026, PLA could immediately begin preparatory work.<sup>36</sup>

By pursuing a grant amendment PLA can secure dedicated resources to enhance the Help Center's staffing, services, and overall capacity. Proactive preparation for the November 2025 application cycle will be essential to maximize the likelihood of funding success and, ultimately, to expand access to justice for unrepresented litigants at the Philadelphia Family Court.

# LONG-TERM: THE HELP CENTER POST-OVW

## THE SOCIAL SERVICES BLOCK GRANT

The FCHC could qualify for Social Services Block Grant funding thanks to its work matching the grant's goals. The **Social Services Block Grant (SSBG)** is a federal program administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that provides flexible funding to states and territories to support a wide range of social services tailored to the needs of their populations. The SSBG enables states to design and deliver programs that promote self-sufficiency, protect vulnerable individuals such as children, seniors, and victims of abuse or neglect, and help people with disabilities or other challenges maintaining independence or access to appropriate care.<sup>37</sup>



The Help Center supports these objectives by guiding low-income individuals through complex Family Court processes like custody and divorce cases. This assistance helps parents secure stable living arrangements and protects children from harmful situations. The FCHC's services likely fall under SSBG approved categories such as legal services and case management.<sup>38</sup> Pennsylvania uses PLAN as a subgrantee to fund legal aid services, so this may mean applying to PLAN for funds.

To strengthen the case for funding, the Help Center should show how it helps in preventing long term problems. For example, by helping parents resolve custody issues properly, the service may reduce the need for government assistance in the future. While the SSBG could be a good fit, the final decision depends on Pennsylvania's spending priorities and whether the FCHC can apply for PLAN funding.<sup>39</sup>

Even if not funded directly, the FCHC might partner with other SSBG supported programs that serve families in crisis. The FCHC could explain the posture and procedure custody hearings and help organizations like PLAN meet their goals of providing legal access to people across the state.

### Five broad goals for the SSBG.

Achieve or maintain economic self-support to prevent, reduce, or eliminate dependency	Achieve or maintain self-sufficiency, including reduction or prevention of dependency	Prevent or remedy neglect, abuse, or exploitation of children and adults unable to protect their own interests or preserve, rehabilitate, or reunite families	Prevent or reduce inappropriate institutional care by providing for community-based care, or other forms of less intensive care	Secure referral or admission for institutional care when other forms of care are not appropriate, or providing services to individuals in institutions
1	2	3	4	5

# LONG-TERM: THE HELP CENTER POST-OVW

## AMERICORPS



**AmeriCorps**, which has a \$1 billion budget, funds community programs in education, disaster relief, and conservation and deploys over 200,000 volunteers nationwide.<sup>40</sup> There have recently been significant changes regarding AmeriCorps and its continued presence and operations. As of April 16, 2025, 75% of full time AmeriCorps employees have been placed on administrative leave, including many members of the Civilian Community Corps.<sup>41</sup> This poses serious challenges for organizations that rely on its grants and service members. However, if AmeriCorps can regain funding within the next few years, the FCHC could potentially use such funding to hire staff to recruit and train volunteers, including law students and paralegals, to assist with intake, legal research, and client support.

This approach would expand the Help Center's capacity to serve more individuals while offering volunteers valuable professional experience.

Since the gutting of AmeriCorps, twenty-four Democratic-led states and Washington, D.C., have sued the Trump administration for attempting to dismantle AmeriCorps, a federal service agency, by canceling grants and cutting its workforce.<sup>42</sup> The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Baltimore, argues that President Trump lacks the constitutional authority to defund and effectively eliminate an agency created by Congress. The cuts are part of a broader government downsizing effort led by Trump and adviser Elon Musk under the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).<sup>43</sup> The administration defends the move by citing audit failures and improper payments.

A **strategic partnership with PennSERVE and AmeriCorps**, through its Americorps VISTA program would allow the FCHC to significantly expand its services while providing transformative service opportunities for AmeriCorps members.<sup>44</sup> The program's dual benefit of serving vulnerable populations while also training the next generation of legal advocates creates a compelling case for support. That case aligns perfectly with AmeriCorps' mission of strengthening communities through service and volunteerism. Though this opportunity might not be viable within the next cycle, it is something to think about in the future.

# LONG-TERM: THE HELP CENTER POST-OVW

## A PROPOSAL TO THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

**Reenvisioning the role that the City of Philadelphia could play** in providing funding to the FCHC could produce several different results. It could be a one-time donation of funding or the creation of a longer-lasting relationship. The FCHC provides a crucial service to residents of Philadelphia navigating Family Court; most often those people are without the means to hire an attorney. By offering free legal information on custody and divorce, the Help Center ensures that low-income families, domestic violence survivors, and vulnerable individuals have access to essential guidance.

Philadelphia has historically funded legal aid projects, such as a prior legal defense initiative for immigrants facing deportation and an expanding right to counsel for tenants in eviction disputes.<sup>45</sup> Continuing this support would align with its present ongoing commitment to providing legal representation for low-income Philadelphians. The case for sustained city funding is clear. Without it, countless Philadelphians risk losing access to vital legal support, exacerbating inequities in a system already stacked against marginalized communities. The City's prior investment in legal aid underscores its recognition of this need and renewing this commitment would reaffirm Philadelphia's dedication to equity, fairness, and the well-being of its residents. By institutionalizing funding for the FCHC, the city can move beyond reactive stopgaps and toward a proactive model of justice that empowers those most in need.

## CONCLUSION

The Philadelphia Family Court Help Center has managed to help hundreds, if not thousands, of pro se litigants with their custody and divorce cases. The services the Center provides are invaluable in assisting many people who otherwise would be forced to brave the often-confusing court system on their own. These confusions lead to delays, both for Court staff and the people whose families and relationships lie in the balance. The Help Center plays a key role in addressing those issues before they become problems.

Now that the Help Center is in a time of upheaval, it is important to remember what the FCHC provides and how to preserve its services. The conservation efforts can come in different forms, as this report has suggested. Whether through a reimagining of the services, or a shifting of the responsibilities of the Help Center, it is important to keep an open mind about the Center's future. The Help Center has many potential allies in the Court and among volunteer lawyers, law students, and potentially outside groups. The FCHC is not alone in its mission, and building coalitions can be its path forward to a reenvisioned potential.

# APPENDIX:

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