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Ohio Legal Help and Montgomery County Domestic Relations Court to Create Virtual Self-Help Center for Litigants Who Don't Have Access to an Attorney

*Online Platform Will Help Everyone, Regardless of Income,
Better Navigate the Legal System*

DAYTON, Ohio – Dealing with family law matters like divorce, child custody and child support is difficult for anyone. But it's especially hard for individuals who don't have access to an attorney and must navigate the legal system on their own.

[Ohio Legal Help](#), working in partnership with the [Montgomery County Domestic Relations Court](#), is hoping to make going to court a little easier and a lot less daunting for people who don't have legal help.

Ohio Legal Help, a free civil legal assistance web portal, and the Domestic Relations Court plan to build a virtual self-help center for people who must deal with family law matters without the aid of an attorney. Funded with a grant from the Dayton Legal Heritage Foundation of [The Dayton Foundation](#), the self-help center will enable self-represented litigants to find information pertaining to the Domestic Relations Court, fill out and save court forms, file forms electronically, get support via a chat function and connect with a lawyer. The secure, mobile-first platform will seamlessly integrate with the court's existing online resources.

"More than 80% of legal issues faced by low-income individuals receive little or no legal help, and many people are forced to navigate complex legal issues, including family law, on their own," said Denise Cross, the administrative judge for the Montgomery County Domestic Relations Court. "The virtual self-help center reflects our commitment to increasing court access for all citizens of Montgomery County, regardless of their means or ability to access an attorney.

"The DR Court already has a website, but this virtual self-help center will leverage technology to integrate, augment and amplify our existing resources," Cross added. "It will remove many of the barriers to justice that people face when they're dealing with the legal system."

The court, which has jurisdiction over divorce, dissolution, domestic violence, child custody, child support and other family law matters, has been working to improve access to justice for all of its constituents. For example, it hosts legal clinics to help low-income litigants connect with volunteer lawyers, who give valuable advice and basic education about the court.

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing need for remote, online services, Ohio Legal Help and the Domestic Relations Court began exploring a partnership to create and pilot a virtual self-help center. Ohio Legal Help has a proven track record of developing and launching online services that focus on usability, simplicity and scalability. Its website, [OhioLegalHelp.org](#), provides easy-to-understand and action-oriented information to help Ohioans

resolve common civil legal problems, including divorce, eviction, foreclosure, debt and issues with public benefits.

“We’re grateful for the generosity of the Dayton Legal Heritage Foundation and really looking forward to working with the Montgomery County Domestic Relations Court on this project,” said Susan Choe, executive director of Ohio Legal Help. “Making the legal system more equitable and accessible to people who couldn’t otherwise afford legal help is critical to eliminating the justice gap.”

Montgomery County has about 530,000 residents, and more than 17% of them live below the federal poverty level. Those in the lower income brackets who cannot afford legal representation will be the primary beneficiaries of the virtual self-help center, but it will be available for all self-represented litigants going through a matter in the Montgomery County Domestic Relations Court, which handles between 5,000 and 6,000 cases a year.

“We’re excited about this project because it’s going to make a significant difference for thousands of people in our community who are dealing with difficult family law matters,” said Gordon Arnold, president of the Dayton Legal Heritage Foundation. “It’s going to provide people with the information they need to navigate the court process and connect to resources in the greater Dayton area.”

The project will take about three years to complete. In the first year, Ohio Legal Help will envision, design and begin building the platform, working with the court. In the second year, Ohio Legal Help will complete the technical and content build of the self-help center, engage in user testing and launch the platform. In the third year, they’ll evaluate and refine the platform based on data and user feedback.

Ohio Legal Help and the Montgomery County Domestic Relations Court plan to share the project evaluation with local, statewide, and national stakeholders with the hope that other county and state courts can replicate the virtual self-help center.

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Ohio Legal Help is a nonprofit organization that launched in 2019 to help all Ohioans access the civil justice system. We provide plain language legal help information, interactive self-help tools and connections to local legal and community resources that can help people resolve their legal issues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ohio Legal Help has helped over 400,000 users access free legal information, court forms and resources. To visit Ohio Legal Help, go to www.ohiolegalhelp.org.

The **Dayton Legal Heritage Foundation** is the successor organization to The Dayton Law Library Association, which was formed in 1868 by Dayton attorneys for the purpose of acquiring and maintaining a law library for the betterment of the legal profession in Dayton, Ohio.

State legislation in 2010 converted the law library associations to county agencies, yet the private assets of the association remained under the oversight of its trustees. They formed The Dayton Legal Heritage Foundation for the purpose of awarding grants and donations to support programs and initiatives, which improve the practice of law and elevate the awareness of the legal and justice systems.

Since 2016, the assets of the Foundation have been secured as a donor-advised fund of The Dayton Foundation with the trustees of the Dayton Legal Heritage Foundation serving as advisers.

Celebrating 100 years in operation, **The Dayton Foundation** is the Greater Dayton region's largest community foundation with more than \$630 million in assets. Since its establishment in 1921, the Foundation has helped people to help others, managing nearly 4,000 charitable funds for individuals, families and organizations that have awarded more than \$1 billion in grants to nonprofits locally and nationwide. More information about The Dayton Foundation is available at www.daytonfoundation.org or follow the Foundation on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) or [LinkedIn](#).