

# **It's Never *Just* a Legal Problem: Meaningful Access, Responsive Design, and Procedural Justice**

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## **Introduction**

Forms. In California, the majority of court activities require forms. These forms were designed with lawyers and legal professionals in mind (Hough 2010) and are accordingly understood best by them. As a result of the legal training I have received through JusticeCorps and my resulting experience fielding questions from self-represented litigants, I have learned first-hand the extent to which the paperwork, the terms and conditions of the procedure, the names of judicial categories, even the method of stapling and presenting documents before the court, are all done in very specific ways. In part, this specificity is an outcome of bureaucratic pressures to standardize and to facilitate communication across all levels of judicial functions. However, the question remains: In a system meant to administer and facilitate something as crucial as justice for the people, why is the process so starkly inaccessible? Surely, the aim of a justice system is not comprehensibility solely for an elite, specialized few, even in moments when more comprehensibility is an option.

It is in these questions that one hears the consequences of alienated knowledge production (Grosfugel 2014), knowledge produced in historical time-spaces with very distinct and specific material conditions, conditions which in this case are affected by access to higher education, income, race, and gender. Knowledge that, despite its alienated production, is nevertheless universally applied to low-income (and at times, no income) persons for whom access to quality education was never an option. The consequences of this structural gap between the courts' functions and the public's need for meaningful access can be heard in the observations a self-represented litigant shared with me when she called the Self-Help Center to ask about her small claims court case:

*"Honey, I'm a 75-year-old Black woman. I've been dealing with this case for almost a year now. Let me tell you something about the so-called justice system. If you want to win anything, you need to be making the big bucks. Poor people like me will never be able to get what's rightfully theirs."*

Justice is undermined to the point where it is only accessible for people who can afford the high costs of lawyers, upwards of \$350 an hour and often requiring a retainer of approximately \$5,000 (Elkins Family Law Task Force 2009), for people who can afford the time to spend on a court case, and for people who speak the language of the court. Our justice system is suffering from a lack of justice at the very basic level of procedure. This essay focuses on procedural justice because procedure is the first point of contact with the court and it is also the category of mandatory work done prior to a court hearing. In theory, everyone has access to justice. However, if one does not understand the forms and procedures required, or the legal language, meaningful access is compromised or non-existent. Programs like Self-Help Centers (SHCs) and JusticeCorps are leading the movement toward responsive structures of procedure, toward meaningful access.

## Overview

In this essay, I will first trace the logic and creation of California's court-based Self-Help Centers. Then, I will provide an overview of the JusticeCorps program. From there, the essay will transition to an analysis of meaningful access as I grappled with it through the JusticeCorps program. Throughout this piece, litigants' stories will be intertwined so as to situate my experience and analysis within the matrices of experiences each litigant brings to the Self-Help Center. All names have been changed to protect litigants' identities. I hope that this article continues and contributes to an ongoing discussion about creating systemic changes that are responsive to the realities that condition the experience of pro-per litigants, litigants who represent themselves in a court of law. Drawing extensively on my experience and training as a JusticeCorps member, I argue that meaningful access consists of responsive procedure that incorporates the understanding that litigants' problems are not legal problems; they are personal problems, often traumatic problems, that necessitate legal solutions.

### Self-Help Centers

*Access to justice is a priority for California courts*

The Judicial Council of California's Task Force on Self-Represented Litigants produced a report which found that without legal assistance, access to the justice system was elusive for self-represented litigants. Exacerbating the problem, courts' structures "are designed to work with litigants who are represented by attorneys" (Judicial Council). Importantly, the Task Force's report asserts "a unity of interest between the courts and the public with respect to assistance for self-represented litigants" (Judicial Council). Legal structures that are incomprehensible to self-represented litigants exacerbate the already difficult and time-consuming process for pro-per litigants, especially for those who are English language learners. Additionally, the court motions or orders written by pro-per litigants, without the help of legal professionals, are often inappropriate, incorrect, or inconsistent. As a result, the judges must spend a longer time to understand the litigants' requests because they are written in non-legal language to which the judge is not accustomed, or because the forms are not completed in line with the prescribed procedure. This expenditure of judges' time places pressures on the judiciary budget at a time when the judicial branch's budget has been cut by 30% ("Chief Justice" 2012). In response to the diminution of its budget, certain courts have had to limit hours, causing another impediment (in an already long list) to the public's access to the justice system. Traditionally, the problem was defined as "not enough people have lawyers." Given that for every 8,000 low-income persons, there is only one legal aid lawyer (California State Bar 2007), the approach had to shift. The real issue is that lawyers and not the general public understand the current court system best. As an outcome of these discussions, California Rule of Court 10.960 prioritizes court based SHCs (rather than promoting other legal aid organizations):

"Providing access to justice for self-represented litigants is a priority for California courts. The services provided by court Self-Help Centers facilitate the timely and cost effective processing of cases involving self-represented litigants and improve the delivery of justice to the public. Court programs, policies, and procedures designed to assist self-represented litigants and effectively manage cases involving self-represented litigants at all stages must be incorporated and budgeted as core court functions" ("California Rule of the Court" 2014).

California's SHCs serve as the public's access point to comprehending and accessing the justice

system. Litigants who do not have (and often cannot afford) attorneys are provided with legal information (not legal advice) as to the proper procedure of court cases. Additionally, in January 2003, the Judicial Council made another move toward accessible justice by approving the first major change to its forms. The Judicial Council allowed for “the adoption of new plain-language domestic violence and adoption forms” (Hough 2010). These new plain language forms prove especially useful in my work as a JusticeCorps member because their larger font size, inclusion of graphics, and elimination of legal jargon are more accessible and easily understood by pro-per litigants who have little familiarity with court language.

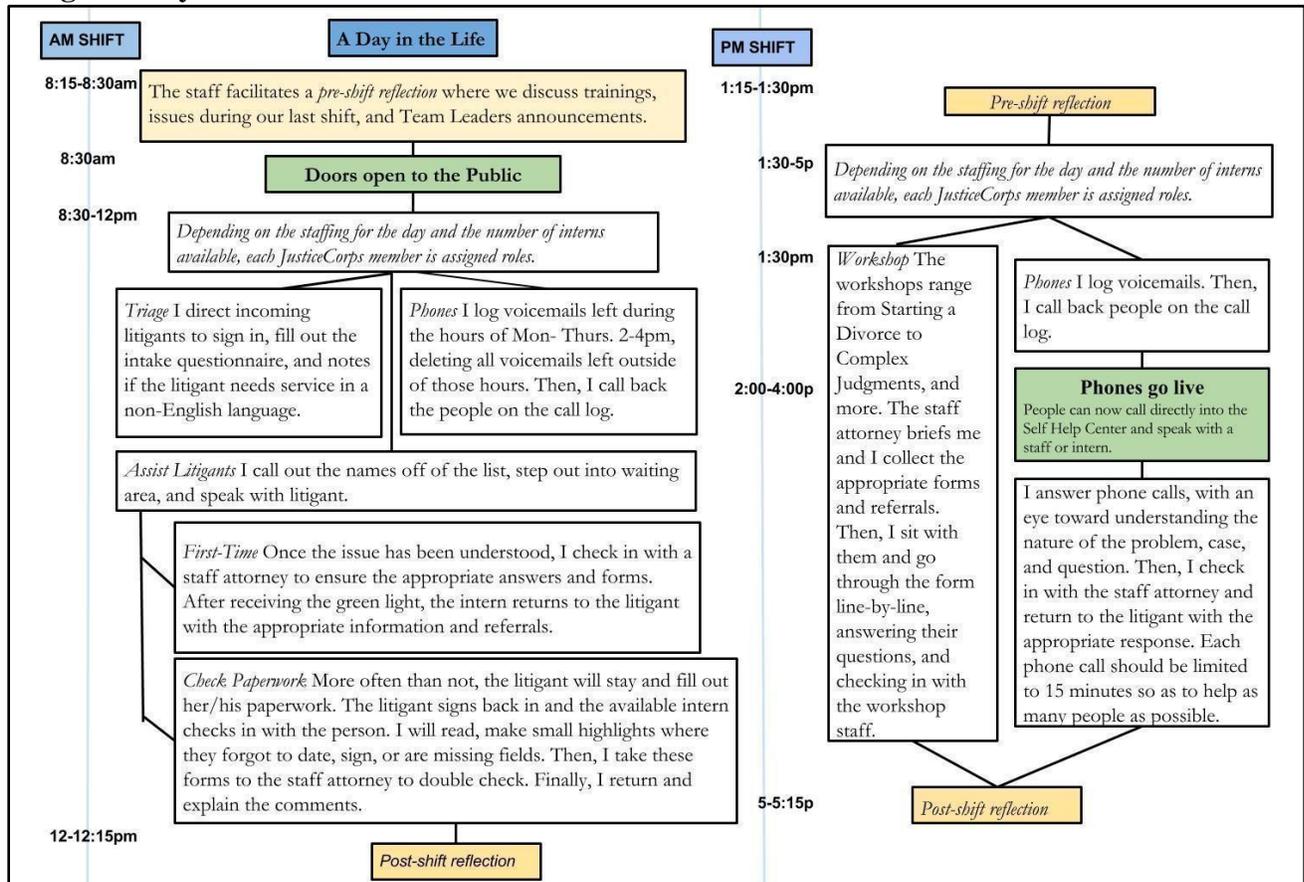
### **JusticeCorps Program**

*Helping provide equal access to justice in our communities*

Anchored to the movement that created court-based Self-Help Centers, the JusticeCorps program intends to supplement and support the work of SHCs. JusticeCorps’ pilot program was launched in Los Angeles County, whose Superior Courts are the largest in the nation (Los Angeles Times 2006). In Fall 2006, the JusticeCorps program expanded to incorporate the Bay Area, including San Francisco, Alameda, Santa Clara, Contra Costa, and San Mateo counties, as well as San Diego in Fall 2007. In any given year, JusticeCorps recruits and trains over 250 interns to augment the work of the staff in statewide SHCs (Judicial Council). The California Judicial Branch as well as an AmeriCorps grant fund the program. There are two main categories of member commitments: minimum-time and full-time. Minimum-time members commit to 300 hours of service in one academic year and receive an AmeriCorps education award of \$1,150. Full-time members serve 1,700 hours over a full year of service and receive a maximum living allowance of \$20,000, along with an AmeriCorps education award of \$5,500 (JusticeCorps 2014). These education awards can be used to repay student loans and to pay for future educational expenses. Members in both categories receive more than 30 hours of training. JusticeCorps trains its members to provide legal information to self-represented litigants as well as to facilitate a more positive experience within the U.S. judicial court system. A facet of creating this positive experience includes empowering members of the community to advocate for themselves as well creating an understanding and feeling of fairness, regardless of the outcome of the case.

As a JusticeCorps member, I provide legal information to people who are representing themselves in court – many of whom cannot afford the high costs of an attorney. For English language learners, whose dominant language is Farsi or Spanish, I translate legal forms and the staff attorney's instructions and provide legal information in their native tongue. As the child of immigrants, I have been responsible for translating from an early age; in many ways I derive a personal connection to the work that I do from my experiences on the other side of the counter. To date, I have provided legal information to more than 250 litigants relating to family law (e.g. dissolution, paternity, domestic violence, nullity, and legal separation), limited civil (e.g. small claims, unlawful detainers), and probate (e.g. guardianship) cases. The following **Image A** depicts a typical day as a JusticeCorps intern:

Image A: Day in the Life



### JusticeCorps: 75% Cannot Afford an Attorney Meaningful Access in the Context of Poverty

*I was reading through the Unlawful Detainer response paperwork of a woman from Oakland who was dealing with an eviction. As I highlighted fields, Maritssa shared with me that she worked two jobs from 6am-11pm, and had requested a week in advance the day off in order to come to the Self-Help Center. Maritssa and her daughter were worried that they'd be homeless soon. Without giving her any notice, the landlord transferred the ownership of the property and changed the due date for the rent. With the new date, Maritssa had become delinquent on two rent payments. One night, the manager knocked on her door and handed her the paperwork and explicitly assured her that there was nothing to worry about. Given these assurances, Maritssa didn't open the package to read the letters until a week later. When she opened the package, the paperwork communicated a sense of urgency but little or no content for someone who did not understand its jargon.*

According to JusticeCorps (2014) survey data, about 75% of the litigants who visit the SHC every month cannot afford an attorney. The inability to afford an attorney is an indicator of the level of poverty throughout the community of litigants who come to the SHC. Because the SHC has no cost for the litigants, it helps provide meaningful access. Additionally, in an attempt to cater to people who are unable to make it in during the 8:30 a.m.–12 p.m. open hours, the phone hours (2–4 p.m.) provide an alternative opportunity for those with access to a phone and

the free time to make a phone call. Finally, SHC protocol recommends limiting each session of assistance to 15 minutes in order to help everyone who has entered the Self-Help Center. When the clock hits 11:45 a.m. and there are still people remaining, the JusticeCorps intern triaging gives pink passes so that the litigants can return the next day (before 10 a.m.) and move immediately to the top of the list. In these ways, the Self-Help Center, with the assistance of JusticeCorps members, forms its availabilities and methods to respond to the socioeconomic conditions of the litigants.

As Maritssa's story reveals, though, the story of a litigant is never simply an inability to afford an attorney. Rather, an attorney, time, transportation, and energy are all expensive achievements when you work two jobs, care for your daughter, and attempt to care for yourself. The second lesson Maritssa's story teaches is that beyond the people who are able to come into the SHC, there are also those who are unable to come because their work's hours, no-days-off policies, and locations render such a visit impossible. My ability to provide support for Maritssa's response to her eviction only points toward all the other Maritssas who were unable to make it into the court.

In this context, the legal system proffers a solution for eviction that focuses on one case at a time, with the representation and full involvement of those most privileged, economically or socially, to engage. What the legal system fails to act upon are the problems Maritssa's story weaves together including the hardship of a more than full-time work schedule and the socioeconomic political push to evict low-income tenants (often attributed to gentrification, although other factors contribute as well). As another example, in many eviction cases, the final legal recourse available to a tenant is to postpone eviction and buy time. "Buying time" is understood literally as requiring the tenant to pay a pro-rated amount for each day he or she stays in the location.

And yet, a lack of access to legal solutions only adds to the hardships faced by litigants from low income backgrounds.

### **Responsive Access in the Context of Multi-Faceted People**

*She interrupted me to say, "No, ma'am. Let me explain it again. I am getting evicted, kicked out of my house. My case is about eviction. It's not 'unlawful' anything."*

At its face, the courthouse is a system whose every turn is strange and whose every word feels unnatural to those unfamiliar with legal language. At the very outset of the process, this litigant was confronted with terms foreign and, to her, unfitting to the situation, as she understood it (an unlawful detainer is a legal term that includes an eviction as a possible cause of action). The people who seek out the SHC find themselves sharing stories they've never spoken about to people they've never met. Some walk in with eviction notice letters, not understanding the foreign "unlawful detainer" language and seeking out the process for responding. Others are seeking restraining orders, dressed in long sleeves, sunglasses, and whispering in fear of the ears that might recognize their voice. As such, litigants seeking legal assistance are usually already experiencing personal, traumatic problems.

In this context, I serve as a JusticeCorps member. I consider myself a people person, someone who reads, reacts, and forms herself in relation to the people around her – not compromising my morals, beliefs, or values, but altering my presentation and expressions to create more comfortable spaces of interaction for those around me. However, my work at the SHC challenges me every day. It challenges my ability to work with and be a space of comfort and ease to people who are under stress or dealing with trauma. I have learned how difficult it

can be to be a compassionate guide through such an arduous process, which includes both dealing with the court and dealing with the issue itself outside of court.

The bureaucracy of the judicial system, as with most bureaucracies, can be very alienating. It often assumes its interactant to be a cookie-cutter, simple subject who fits neatly into its processes. Its instructions ask the person completing the paperwork to: fill out this form, understand your problem according to these terms, fit your story to these lines, tailor your answer to this prompt, and cut out all that is extraneous. Bureaucracy calls for a simplicity and consistency, but this simplicity becomes fractured where the concern is about justice. I experienced this fracturing force as I moved from hypotheticals to working with litigants.

During pre-shift reflection sessions, staff members supplemented our legal training with hypotheticals for which we'd have to ascertain the appropriate paperwork and responses. That is, given a particular set of facts, what forms are necessary for Person X and which fields are necessary to complete? After completing these hypotheticals, we were allowed to join the staff assisting litigants. Each time, even after mastering the hypothetical, the actual interactions revealed questions and situations that seemed alien to everything we had studied. Given that the "cookie-cutter interactant" is in truth multi-faceted, meaningful access must necessarily mean a responsive design.

### *Responsive Alternative Dispute Resolution / Mediation*

In recognition of the stressful and at times traumatic nature of the problems for which people come to the SHC, JusticeCorps provides tailored trainings for its members. These trainings focus on community services that resolve disputes through methods akin to those used in Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)/Mediation that embody cultural competency and that do not reproduce structures of power and privilege.

As part of the JusticeCorps program, Saturday trainings are held at the Administrative Office of the Courts in San Francisco. During one of these trainings, in a workshop on ADR and Mediation, Jason Stein, ADR administrator for the Superior Court of California, County of Alameda, placed us into groups of two where we practiced mediation techniques and reflective listening. For example, one group member presented himself as a frustrated recent divorcee who had been told by the judge that his paperwork was filled with errors. We were taught to communicate that we have heard and understood the speaker by: putting it in our own words, including the person's feelings, matching intensity (don't minimize), being specific and concise, and listening for the dominant theme. The knowledge ascertained from this workshop was solidified when it converged with cultural competency work.

### *Responsive Cultural Competency/Humility*

Cultural competency plays a crucial role in creating a safe space for people to feel heard and to be able to discuss the issues that they have. JusticeCorps trainings include two intensives with Cristina Llop, attorney at law and federally- and California-certified interpreter from the San Francisco Access Center. In this LanguageCorps training, we were taught the importance of recognizing cultural differences that we brought to the table as well as navigating the "iceberg of culture." This is an understanding that the majority of culture goes beyond the external "food, dress, music, language," that its unspoken rules encompass "courtesy, personal space, concept of time, [and] facial expressions" and, at its more intense emotional loads, rules about "concept of cleanliness, definition of obscenity, concept of 'self'" (Llop 2013). This cultural competency

intensive had immediate effects on how I viewed my work as a JusticeCorps member. Often there were people who came into the center who reacted negatively to the method of communication used by the person who was attempting to help them.

*One woman walked away and shouted at the staff member on her way out the door, “You need to work on your attitude.” Although the staff member assisting this litigant was communicating in what she felt was consistent with her norms of propriety, the litigant did not share in that feeling.*

In this way, these different cultural and personal understandings of respect are always being negotiated throughout the conversation. In this vein, a method that I derived from ADR/Mediation and that has worked for me is to learn to match the tone of the person speaking with me and greet people with smiles and greetings rather than short-circuiting all conversation so as to go straight to the business of “How may I help you?” This experience will no doubt be useful in my future interactions and lines of work, as I attempt to help people who are dealing with trauma and stress.

### *Responsive Diversity of Staff*

Cultural competency also recognizes the overlap between language and culture, and from there, determines ways of humbly interacting with English language learners.

*A newlywed couple had questions about the woman’s prior divorce that had occurred in Afghanistan. The person helping her had answered her questions and told her that if she can get the divorce paperwork from Afghanistan, it will be recognized here. If she can’t do so, she’ll have to go through the divorce process here. This woman, noting my hijab, turned to me and asked, “Are you Muslim?” Already knowing the answer, she proceeded, “I’m Muslim, too. I divorced my husband, Islamically. We have no court paperwork for it because you know this, Muslims don’t need court papers to divorce.” Her question switched language to Farsi and she re-told the entire story to me.*

I gave her the same answer that she had previously received from the staff person. And yet, there was a way in which my response validated that process because to hear it from someone who looked familiar and who could understand the religious practice made the answer more responsive to her question – even though it was the same answer. It is not that the original person did not display cultural competence. Rather, the litigant was able to identify me as someone with a similar background. This identification provided a level of confidence and comfort that the staff member could not provide. Thus, diverse staff and interns create an experience where the person feels heard and is more likely to view the answer provided as legitimate.

### *Responsive Spaces Create Safe Spaces Create Productive Spaces*

By mobilizing these methods of service that create safe spaces for people to ask the questions and share the stories they want, the service we provide litigants can prove more fruitful and productive. One JusticeCorps Saturday training, Bay Area Legal Aid’s Melody Saint-Saens led a workshop on Domestic Violence Restraining Orders (DVROs). She noted that in thoroughly discussing a litigant’s situation, often issues can be spotted that weren’t explicitly articulated. For example, I may learn that the person seeking a DVRO is worried about being unable to acquire citizenship for herself and her child if she reports her husband’s abuse. I can

then point her attention to remedies including the VAWA Self Petition/I-360 that will allow her to receive public benefits and employment benefits, and also puts her on the path to the adjustment of her and her child's status. In this way, through creating safe spaces for people to talk to us about their situation, we are able to spot issues beyond the original question and recommend other resources.

### *Dismantling Power and Privilege*

Ultimately, the work to produce procedural justice necessarily requires self-reflection and critical self-reflexivity on the part of the staff and interns. And so, a discussion of power and privilege is important to the discussion about listening, cultural competency, and the creation of safe spaces, especially in the context of the United States where privilege is often divided along lines of race, gender, and class. In this regard, JusticeCorps' trainings include a session with members' University Representatives. In these smaller groups, facilitated by campus representatives (who have received their own social justice training), we read and discussed a poem about a group of women who had a charity event in which they would go into impoverished communities and give the people there food. The poem was embedded with references to the "dirty poor" and the ladies who would lift their skirts so they wouldn't get soot on them (Dungy). My campus representative facilitated a discussion about how our privilege – be it economic, racial, or institutional – plays out within the context of the SHC. This conversation was an important reflective exercise because I could see my privilege play out early on in my work at the Self-Help Center.

For example, the interns and I were often skeptical of Property Declaration forms that had "None" in each category. It took a moment to step back and realize that the possession of a car, house, furniture, and bank accounts are not as commonplace as our own backgrounds might lead us to believe. And so, through constantly re-evaluating the places of privilege I occupy, I can better confront them and avoid perpetuating them back into the world.

### **Understanding Intersectionalities: Incorporating Service into Larger Contexts**

On the one hand, there is the discussion of all that can or cannot be incorporated into meaningful access at the site of the Self-Help Center. On the other hand, this discussion has continuously pointed to the larger context within which litigants and interns interact. And so, it is important to understand the service of providing meaningful access within a larger context.

### *Intersecting Community Service*

During the break, the judge overseeing the Domestic Violence Restraining Order hearings invited me and the other JusticeCorps members watching the case to her office. She spoke to us about how emotionally heavy these proceedings can be, especially because she reads through the entire case, including all the stories of violence. We asked her how she stays positive and not overwhelmed. She responded by telling us about her work with low income, youth of color in East Oakland as well as her walks around Lake Merritt. Her lesson to us was about the importance of self-care and community engagement: "You can get stuck in this bubble where you only see pain and violence. You have to go looking for the beautiful."

My work at the Self-Help Center has been emotionally heavy. There is the nature of the problems faced by people. In addition, every day the sheer number of people who experience

variations of problems and are seeking legal solutions confronts me. The sheer number of people who come in with different cases makes it difficult to remember names. There are so many people who deal with legal problems, so many people who come to the Self-Help Center seeking legal information. There are so many people for whom access to justice is impossible without the legal information provided by the SHC. In an attempt to locate our JusticeCorps work within the larger community, the JusticeCorps program's Team Leaders organize a service engagement project on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. This year, we pulled weeds at the Lake Merritt Garden. It is important that community engagement projects are embedded in the pedagogy of JusticeCorps service, because it situates our service within the larger community context.

### *Intersecting Alternative Justice Models: Homeless Court and Judicial Shadowing*

*In my first visit to the Homeless Court, I found myself engrossed in conversations with fellow Muslims who had just gone through the process and who, upon sitting with me to complete a survey, shared their happiness intertwined with Islamic phrases like "Allahu Akbar" and "Alhamdulillah." In this way, a shared understanding of a way of life and seeing the world facilitated the creation of a safe space.*

There has been a lot of headway in terms of providing alternative justice models that seek to help solve the underlying causes of legal problems rather than only providing solutions to the legal problems that surface. My participation in the JusticeCorps' Judicial Shadowing Day allowed me to learn from Judge Baranco about the variety of institutionalized, alternative justice models, including Drug Court, and the inner processes of Homeless Court. Here, I was introduced to a world in which justice was produced with an eye to the multiplicity of injustices for which the litigant is in court.

Additionally, JusticeCorps members have the opportunity to be directly involved with Homeless Court, where people who are homeless and show a record of moving to get back on track can have their traffic citations expunged from their records and, sometimes, have their parole dismissed. JusticeCorps members help complete exit surveys for each of the litigants; the responses are later used to quantify the impact of Homeless Court. Judge Baranco articulated an intention to use alternative justice courts to confront the reality that many formerly incarcerated people remain in poverty because their criminal records exclude them from employment.

### *Framework of Holistic Service*

Given that the Self-Help Center is literally the only point of access for many people, it is important to take advantage of this space to offer information about other resources, the same way that police officers or emergency room doctors offer criminal protective orders and refer people to the SHC when they respond to a call of domestic violence. The Self-Help Center's referrals to Clean Slate programs or Homeless Court provide a means for us to take advantage of our position assisting litigants and connect them with other services. By means of referrals and connecting individuals to other legal aid programs, the Self-Help Center and we, the JusticeCorps interns, are able to stay true to the mission of the JusticeCorps and provide support that empowers community members to advocate on their own; that means addressing issues in a holistic manner. However, this still falls short because inevitably the issues and the overwhelming nature of them are such that no simple referral will help. Moreover, encouraging follow-through is difficult within this short interaction. This frustration and the resulting discussions have allowed me to develop my own understandings of the limitations and resource

challenges that non-profit, legal aid organizations must confront, even in (or perhaps, especially in) the context of state budgeting and fund allocations.

### **Lessons in Limited Resources**

*Each day, I found myself faced with a similar frustration. Site policy did not allow for the provision of pens or family law forms. At a center dedicated to reducing the disparities in access to justice, we were to ask the litigants – some of whom are from low-income communities with very little access to computers, printers, and internet – to print the forms off of the internet or pay 50 cents per sheet at the local law library. As for those who did not have a black or blue pen, they were to go downstairs and pay \$1.75 for a pen – otherwise, they would have to fill out the forms at home. When I asked if I could just give my own pens, I learned that this would create an expectation that pens were provided and would result in unequal treatment. I found this argument to be legitimate, but the “no pens” situation to be wrong. And so, I went home, cleaned out a jar, and gathered together all the free, promotional pens I had received as a college student. On Monday morning, I went in for my shift and placed the pen jar by the doorway entrance to the Self-Help Center in a slightly inconspicuous corner. For that day, whenever anyone mentioned not having a pen, I referenced an unidentified jar that sat outside.*

Originally, my reaction to the “We don’t give out pens or family law forms” rule was a mix of frustration, skepticism, and surprise. Inevitably, in any organizational context, there are limited resources that include time, space, money, and people. In order to give out pens and free forms, the SHC needs additional funding so that the money that pays for the pens and forms doesn’t take away from its other core functions. The center has already reduced its drop-in hours and at 12 p.m. we have to close the door to incoming litigants, regardless of who the person behind the door is. I felt similar conflicting feelings when, at 12 p.m., I was to close the doors of the SHC and reject people whose pleas included the always tempting, “I only have one quick question!” One of the Team Leaders explained the ways in which maintaining limits creates a more sustainable program. Thus, closing the doors at 12:00 p.m. serves the purpose of sustaining open hours of 8:30 a.m.–12:00 p.m. five days a week. Ultimately, it is a difficult move to accept, but one must take into account the depletion of resources and the perpetuation of unfairness to the people who showed up earlier. One could deride the SHC for not being open 24/7, since the timing of problems does not always coincide with its business hours. However, this would again require the money for staffing and other resources. In this way, the limitations that are set are not arbitrary or intended to be discriminatory. Rather, they are reflective of the limitations of the funding structure, the inherent limitations of how much a small group of people can take on, and the ways in which legal institutions are really only one-track minded solutions to multi-faceted struggles.

All of this said, a few months back, the budget opened to allow the interns and staff of the Self-Help Center to give out pens. I, of course, welcomed this decision as by that point, I had run out of pens to put outside. Moreover, in mid-December, the Family Law Facilitator announced that, starting in January 2014, we would be allowed to give out free Family Law forms. Almost immediately, I volunteered to create the filing system, print copies of the forms, and organize a master copy binder for the Self-Help Centers in Oakland and Alameda. Through these acts, I learned how much justice relies on logistics and resources. Verbal commitments are not enough. A group of committed people who lack the necessary resources, also, is not enough. The work that happens behind the scenes is often deemed less worthy. However, in supporting the functioning of the Self-Help Center, and doing the tasks that require less specialized knowledge,

we, the members, contribute by freeing up time for the staff to work on projects for which we don't have the expertise. This humbling experience has taught me to understand the multiple roles involved in improving the justice system.

### Conclusion

*Once, a woman came in, limited linguistically and emotionally, her speech was stuttered with long gaps to collect tears and keep them inside, locked away. She wanted a restraining order on a man she used to love. Her paperwork was filled out completely with question marks. I sat next to her, shifting my seat to face her, saying hello to the young child with her who looked tired and bored. As I shifted my seat to face her, I learned the value of love exemplified through a smile of peace and a greeting of hope. Her case was in no way new, unique, or unseen prior. Regardless of who came in we provided them with information about the process, made sure their forms were correctly completed, gave them referrals to other legal help in the area. This woman's story is the source memory that reminds, re-signifies, and gives meaning to my work. Even as the temporal distance between that event and today increases, the emotional distance remains miniscule. As I spoke with her of solutions, her smile opened up a bit. She nervously laughed at my rolled eyes at filing requirements, eyes that provided a transition and mnemonic device to explain the importance of the original-copy-copy format for filing her paperwork. I explained, "So, after you make two copies you give the original and the two copies to the clerk. The clerk will then give you back the two copies you made, and keep the original for the judge." As I created to-do lists and highlighted forms and procedural flowcharts I found the power of public service as sharing – sharing one's time and one's borrowed knowledge, knowledge that someone before shared with me in order for me to share. Mercy and humility are the only consequences of this realization.*

*It was Friday morning, the next week, and I was sitting in on Friday's Domestic Violence court hearings. There, I saw her familiar name called and her restraining order approved. The moment was not the archetype of beautiful, as it was filled still with shaking hands and nervous throat clearings, with a man unsuccessfully attempting to assert power through eye contact.*

*While I never did catch her that day to thank her and wish her luck, it never really mattered because public service is never about me, it's about that continued transferring, growing, sharing of love, support, and empowerment.*

As my time as a JusticeCorps intern comes to a close, the journey of applying this new knowledge and experience begins. I entered what was then a new situation with what I believed to be developed notions about what service consists of and what it should or should not look like. And yet, each day in my internship, I was confronted repeatedly by questions and concerns that had not been previously factored into my evaluation of community service. My time at JusticeCorps has further embedded in me the passion to pursue experiences that tackle injustice and inequality from a variety of angles. As new paths appear, reappear, and reconfigure, I will remember the stories that were painstakingly shared with me: the fathers who wanted to visit their children but who had never learned how to read, let alone fill out paternity paperwork; the families facing eviction because of diminishing paychecks, layoffs, and lack of savings; and the mothers whose shaking hands struggled to fill out the restraining order paperwork. In my heart, these stories will be cherished and remembered as the stories of warriors against societal injustice, of immoral persons inflicting violence and pain, of systemic injustice and structures that were at times inaccessible, and of people who, regardless of the situation, were still able to push forward. I will also think of the people whose stories were untold, whose circumstances

never allowed them to come to the SHC to ask their questions and seek legal remedies. I will continue working to achieve justice, or what Cornel West calls, “what love looks like in public” (Shuster 2014), which I understand not only to mean social justice as a systemic struggle, but also as one that incorporates kindness, compassion, respect, mercy, and humility on an everyday level with everyone I meet.

~

Alhamdulillah.

I dedicate this essay to the people who, without attorneys, have dealt with U.S. legal system paperwork.

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