

How to Implement a Successful Early Resolution Program

**As Demonstrated by the
Nineteenth Judicial Circuit**

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How to Implement a Successful Early Resolution Program for Uncontested Divorces

As Demonstrated by the Nineteenth Judicial Circuit

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I. Background and Overview

The fundamental mission of our court system is to deliver justice to all litigants by protecting their rights and liberties, upholding the rule of law, and serving as a fair and neutral arbiter to resolve disputes. However, the complexities inherent in the legal process can significantly amplify stress, particularly for individuals navigating the court system without legal representation.

Stakeholders within the Illinois judicial system—including court leadership, legal aid organizations, and the private bar—are actively confronting several critical challenges:

- More than half of civil litigants attempt to navigate a legal system designed primarily for lawyers without any legal representation.
- Public trust and confidence in courts' ability to resolve disputes effectively and fairly has been declining.
- Poverty remains widespread, with nearly one-third of Illinois residents living in or near poverty.
- The current number of pro bono and legal aid lawyers across the state is insufficient to adequately meet the needs of low-income litigants.

In response to these pressing issues, Illinois courts have begun developing innovative strategies specifically designed to support self-represented litigants. This white paper outlines the history and development of one such initiative.

In 2018, members of the 19th Judicial Circuit became aware of Early Resolution Programs for divorce cases through participation in the Court Navigator Network, an initiative facilitating information exchange about statewide access to justice programs. The insights gained through this network, particularly the resources and experience shared by the 22nd Judicial Circuit, directly informed the creation and implementation of materials tailored for the 19th Circuit's own Early Resolution Program.

This initiative has also benefited substantially from partnerships with organizations dedicated to providing essential legal support, notably Illinois JusticeCorps and Prairie State Legal Services (PSLS), specifically through their Waukegan branch.

When the Early Resolution Program for Divorces was introduced to the 19th Circuit, the deputy chief judge at the time, Judge Diane Winter, was extremely supportive of the initiative and instrumental in its approval and eventual success. The presiding judge of the family division, Judge Charles Smith, was supportive and involved as well. Other stakeholders that provided their support were: the 19th Circuit Court administration, the Clerk of the Circuit Court and deputy clerks, the Lake County Bar Association, Illinois JusticeCorps, and the Waukegan branch of Prairie State Legal Services.

The original program format was managed by two circuit court staff members: Principal Staff Attorney Elizabeth Howlett-Bogie and Judicial Assistant Unnikue Edwards. The Self-Represented Litigant Coordinator and Coordinator of the Early Resolution Program from 2020-2024 was Frances Paparigian, co-author of this paper. The current Self-Represented Litigant Coordinator and Coordinator of the Early Resolution Program is Mireya Garcia who continues to be supported by Elizabeth Howlett-Bogie, Chief Judge Daniel Shanes, Presiding Judge of the Family Division, Michael Nerheim, and the entire Family Division of the 19th Circuit.

II. The 19th Judicial Circuit Early Resolution Program

A. Introduction

The Early Resolution Program for Divorces (Program) in the 19th Judicial Circuit (19th Circuit) offers Self-Represented Litigants (SRLs) the opportunity to quickly and efficiently resolve their uncomplicated, uncontested divorces. The Program has been recognized and praised as a welcome alternative to the typical divorce track that can cost SRLs and the court alike significant time and resources.

Inspired by the Illinois Supreme Court and its Commission on Access to Justice's encouragement to prioritize, "plain language, process simplification, procedural fairness, equal access, and continuous improvement,"¹ the 19th Circuit evaluated its own procedures regarding Self-Represented Litigants (SRLs) and took various steps to improve upon services dedicated to this population.

¹ "Advancing Access to Justice in Illinois, 2017-2020 Strategic Plan ." www.illinoiscourts.gov.

In 2019, the 19th Circuit adopted this Program in partnership with Prairie State Legal Services and with the support of the Commission on Access to Justice and the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts. Since then, the Program has undergone various evolutions following consistent evaluation and improvement in accordance with the needs of SRLs and in response to external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The Program remains a successful service for litigants in Lake County representing themselves in an uncontested divorce.

The following details the 19th Circuit's Early Resolution Program process and procedure and includes data, analysis, and best practices with the anticipated purpose of serving as a guide that other circuits can use to implement similarly successful programs in their courthouses.

B. Program implementation in the 19th Circuit

The first steps taken in pursuit of the implementation of an Early Resolution Program for Divorces in the 19th Circuit were to evaluate the circuit's needs, clearly state program goals, establish the program procedure and eligibility criteria, create materials, and obtain stakeholder support.

Evaluating the circuit's needs

Court staff involved in the creation of this Program gathered and reviewed data that supported the need for services dedicated to SRLs involved in family cases. Consistent with data across the state, divorce cases in which one or both participants were unrepresented were rising. A dedicated SRL family courtroom, established in 2018, was one solution to this issue, but SRLs involved in an uncontested divorce were still waiting at least 90 days to see a judge and were adding to the quickly growing caseload of this new courtroom.

Clearly stating program goals

Once the need for additional SRL services in divorce cases was identified, Program goals were developed. The 19th Circuit identified the following goals for the ERP:

- Establish a simplified process
- Reduce the number of court appearances
- Reduce the number of post-case motions and hearings
- Increase education for court users to create reasonable expectations
- Increase public trust and confidence in the judicial branch of government
- Increase user satisfaction with the court process
- Provide meaningful access to the judicial system

Establishing procedure and eligibility criteria

With the above goals in mind, the 19th Circuit established the procedure detailing how this Program should be managed and the criteria that would make a case eligible to participate. The 19th Circuit describes their program as follows, “The Early Resolution Program (ERP) uses a problem-solving approach to assist couples in reaching dissolution of their marriage in a reduced timeframe.” ²

The established procedure allows participants to move directly to a prove-up hearing to finalize their divorce within 30 to 60 days of filing, eliminating the need for preliminary proceedings. Participants receive assistance from legal professionals, including lawyers and court staff, ensuring the process remains accessible and straightforward while preventing delays caused by missing or incorrect documentation. Prospective participants undergo screening for eligibility; those who qualify receive support in preparing all required documentation for finalizing their divorce. Additionally, eligible participants are assigned a final hearing date scheduled well before the initial case management hearing. Successful resolution through this program eliminates the need for that initial hearing, allowing the court to redirect resources toward more complex cases and relieving participants from the burden of multiple court appearances and paperwork-related frustrations for straightforward divorce matters.

The criteria established ensured the Program accepts only simple divorces due to the lack of litigation or judicial review prior to the final hearing. As such, participants with complicated agreements or significant assets to divide that typically require judicial review prior to finalization were deemed inappropriate for the Program. Eligibility criteria are defined and reviewed regularly so that they can be communicated clearly to interested participants.

The current criteria are as follows:

1. Both participants are unrepresented;
2. The participants are in agreement and willing to participate³;
3. There are no significant or complicated debts or assets;
4. There are no minor children; and

² Nineteenth Judicial Circuit. Early Resolution Program for Divorce Cases Brochure, 2023.

³ While the preference is that the respondent also participate in the proceedings, it is possible for just the petitioner to coordinate with program staff and attend the hearing if the respondent consents and has signed the necessary documents. See section III E for further considerations.

5. There are no orders of protection or pending domestic violence cases as participants need to be able to work together and safely communicate throughout this process.

Creating materials

Coordination with circuits that had already established similar programs was a key element in the early development stages. Materials and procedures from these existing programs were shared and carefully reviewed to evaluate how they could be adapted to meet the needs of the 19th Circuit. The 22nd Circuit, in particular, provided valuable resources that directly informed the creation of the materials for the 19th Circuit.

Materials deemed necessary consisted of:

- A pamphlet explaining the program
- A letter inviting SRLs to participate in the program
- A memorandum of understanding with the local legal aid agency
- A disclaimer to be signed by SRLs after meeting with the local legal aid agency
- A list of forms required to finalize divorce cases along with copies of those forms
- A cover sheet to provide to the judge
- A survey to provide to participants

Obtaining stakeholder support

In the 19th Circuit, staff developing the Program recognized early on that its success would depend on the support and collaboration of all stakeholders involved in the divorce procedure. As a result, many different stakeholders were involved in the Program's development and implementation. These included the chief judge, the judges of the family division, and court administration. The clerk of the circuit court was also involved for the purposes of scheduling and document coordination. External stakeholders, such as Illinois JusticeCorps and the Waukegan branch of Prairie State Legal Services (PSLS) contributed additional support to ensure the Program's effectiveness.

Illinois JusticeCorps provides the 19th Circuit with a fellow each year. The fellow assists the Coordinator with SRL services, including the Early Resolution Program as needed.

PSLS is an integral part of the Program in the 19th Circuit. They entered into a memorandum of understanding with the 19th Circuit in which PSLS agreed to provide an experienced family law lawyer to meet briefly with the Program's participants at the courthouse immediately prior to their finalization hearing.

PSLS lawyers do not represent any of the participants nor give them legal advice. Instead, they explain the proceedings to the participants and help prepare them for the hearing by assisting them with filling out and reviewing paperwork to ensure that it is fully completed and that their agreement is accurately reflected. This process of ensuring that the participants understand the proceedings and have the necessary forms prepared reduces the time participants spend in court and exemplifies the Program goals.

A grant from the Commission on Access to Justice funds the involvement of PSLS lawyers in the Program.⁴

C. Original program procedure and staffing

The original Program was managed by two circuit court staff members: one staff lawyer and one judicial assistant. The 19th Circuit also has a court data analytics department which helped provide a list of eligible cases and capture prospective participant contact information. The circuit clerk's office, judges from the family division, and other court staff helped coordinate court dates and other logistics.

At the end of each month, staff mailed invitations to participate in the Program to all SRLs who had filed divorce cases during that month. Participation was limited to an invitation-only basis, due to concerns that advertising would lead to an unmanageable number of requests to participate. Invitations were typically sent to the petitioners only unless the respondent already had an appearance on file to avoid unintentionally informing a respondent of their divorce before the petitioner had the chance to do so. Upon receiving an invitation, interested participants were directed to attend court on a scheduled prove-up day the following month (typically the third Tuesday of the month). Participants were provided with contact information for any questions but were not required to register ahead of time.

On the scheduled prove-up hearing date, participants were directed to check in at a table outside of the courtroom and meet with court staff as well as the lawyer from PSLS to prepare for the hearing, review their paperwork, and complete any outstanding forms. After it was determined that all necessary documents were in order, participants would proceed into the courtroom for the prove-up hearing to finalize their cases. Finally, prior to leaving the courthouse, they were provided with a survey to collect feedback on the Program.

While this procedure was successful, it was often challenging not knowing how many people may show up to participate. Additionally, some participants that did show up were ultimately

⁴ See sections II. F. and III. H. for additional information about this grant and other program funding considerations.

unable to prove up if they were not qualified for the Program or were unprepared to proceed with their divorce. Furthermore, there was often hardship associated with coming to the courthouse, even if only for one hearing, due to transportation and employment barriers. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the 19th Circuit to confront these issues, as it was then impossible for participants to come to the courthouse, and the Program was transformed.

D. Program evolution

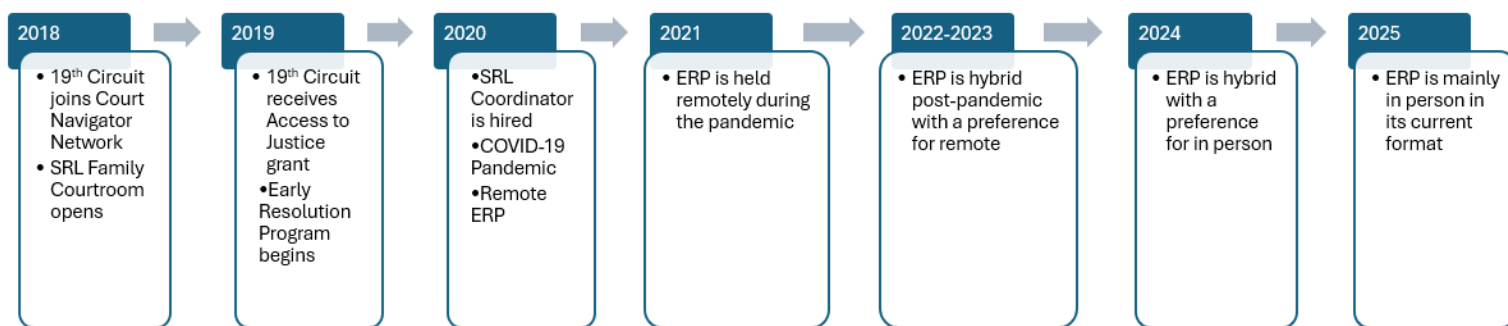
The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic happened simultaneously with the 19th Circuit's hiring of a Self-Represented Litigant Coordinator (Coordinator). This Coordinator was tasked with managing the Early Resolution Program along with other SRL initiatives, with the added duty of converting these services into a remote platform accessible during the pandemic. In June of 2020, the Program was held using Zoom rather than in person. At that time, the Program added a pre-registration requirement as it would have been too difficult and time-consuming to have all invited participants log in at the same time and wait to meet with the PSLS lawyer.

The new Zoom-based process followed these steps:

1. Invited participants were instructed to email or call to sign up for the Program.
2. The Coordinator reviewed their file to determine which documents were still needed and assist the participants with completing any such documents (e.g. the respondent's appearance).
3. A brief (15-20 minute) Zoom meeting was scheduled with the participants and the PSLS lawyer prior to the hearing during which the lawyer would review the forms and instruct the Coordinator to make any necessary additions or changes.
4. Participants electronically signed the judgment of dissolution, disclaimer, and any other necessary documents through the electronic signing platform, Docusign.
5. The participant's case was added to the docket on the Early Resolution Program call.
6. Prior to the hearing, the Coordinator ensured participants were able to use Zoom. If participants were unable to use Zoom, access to the court hearing was provided in the law library at the courthouse.
7. The Coordinator provided the participants' documents to the judge and clerk on the day of the hearing along with a cover sheet detailing information important to the judge such as the participants' names, if they require an interpreter, the date the appearance was filed, and the names of the documents included for the judge's review.
8. All participants joined by Zoom at the same time and logged off once their cases were finalized.
9. Participant satisfaction and feedback surveys were provided using a Microsoft Forms link emailed to the participants after their case finalized.

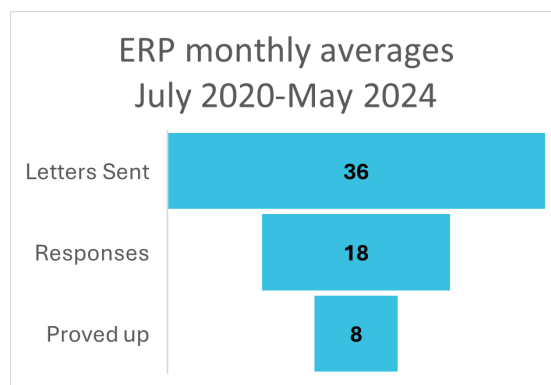
After the pandemic ended, the Program was converted into a hybrid format; participants were able to choose to appear remotely or in person. Initially, most participants elected to appear remotely. Eventually, enough participants elected to appear in person that the Coordinator reverted to the initial procedure of the participants meeting with the PSLS lawyer in person immediately prior to their hearing instead of via Zoom, however, they maintained the pre-registration requirement and coordination of documents ahead of time. If participants cannot appear in person, a remote option can still be arranged.

This evolution of the Program is a result of consistent evaluation of participant preferences and program data.



E. Program data

The 19th Circuit typically holds 11 sessions per year, or once per month except for December. Data was collected between July 2020 and May 2024 to track the number of cases invited to participate in the Program, the number of prospective participants that called to register in response to the invitation, and the number of cases that ultimately finalized through the program. During this time, the preferred capacity was determined to be 10 cases per session.

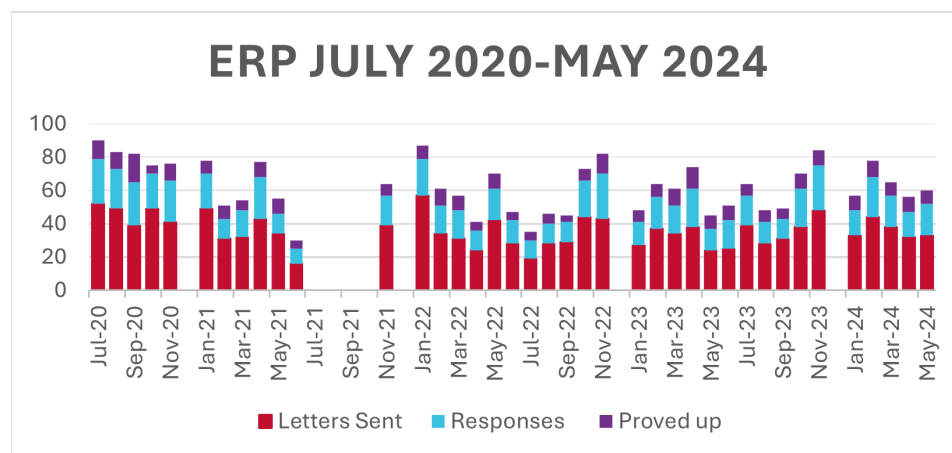


The average number of eligible cases per session during the aforementioned time period was 36, with 18 participants on average indicating interest in the Program. Of those interested, typically between eight and nine cases proved-up each session. The most cases finalized in one session was 17 in September of 2020, while the least was four in September 2022. Each session, the Coordinator could typically expect half of the invited cases to respond and a quarter of the invited cases to prove up. These results are reflected in the charts below.

The total number of divorce cases finalized during this timeframe was 322. Each of those 322 cases was finalized remotely in one court appearance within 30-60 days of filing for divorce.

“Great experience, the staff was extremely helpful, saved us a lot of time, money and aggravation. The process was broken down in easy to understand, logical steps. I am very thankful.”

Upon finalizing their divorce, all parties were provided with a link to a participant satisfaction and feedback survey. An overwhelming majority of participants strongly agreed that the program was helpful, and many left positive comments such as, “Great experience, the staff was extremely helpful, saved us a lot of time, money and aggravation. The process was broken down in easy to understand, logical steps. I am very thankful” and “A great program that made a very difficult time less stressful than anticipated.” This positive feedback along with the numerical data assured the 19th Circuit staff and various stakeholders that this Program was a success.



Note:

Lack of information in the chart for June 2021 to October 2021 is due to the Coordinator’s leave of absence.

F. Program funding

The 19th Circuit applied for the *Access to Justice Improvement Grant* through the Commission on Access to Justice. Recipients of this grant receive funds to develop access to justice initiatives in their courthouses. The 19th Circuit was awarded this grant each year between 2019 and 2024 and used the funds for the Early Resolution Program in addition to other initiatives such as a live chat on the circuit website, technology for the self-help center, and a dedicated space for a JusticeCorps fellow. The funds received for the ERP were also used to obtain a DocuSign subscription to coordinate electronic signatures and to compensate Prairie State Legal Services for their monthly services. Grant expenses were tracked and reported on a quarterly basis.

It should be noted this grant has since changed its requirements and no longer allows the court to pass grant funds through to legal aid organizations, rather legal aid organizations must

directly apply for funding through a new Commission grant called the *Reducing Barriers to Meaningful Participation in Court Grant*.

III. Best Practices and Considerations for Adoption

An Early Resolution Program for Divorces should embody the Commission on Access to Justice's prioritization of "plain language, process simplification, procedural fairness, equal access, and continuous improvement." Program procedure, frequency, capacity, criteria, staffing, stakeholders, technology, materials, funding, and evaluation must be considered along with the overall needs of the particular circuit. With that in mind, some of the best practices and considerations gleaned from the 19th Circuit's experience are detailed below.

A. Program procedure

Invitations to the Program can be sent by mail, email, or both depending on the information captured in the petition and case management system. Invitations and instructions should be brief and in plain language. Invitations should be sent to the petitioners but can also be sent to respondents if their appearance is on file. If the capacity to respond to requests is not a concern, the program can be advertised more generally in addition to or instead of sending invitations. It should be noted that instituting a pre-registration requirement helps to prevent participants arriving at court uninformed and unprepared.

A staff member or program partner, such as a Justice Corps Fellow or legal aid lawyer, should be available by phone, email, or in person to answer questions about the program, coordinate with participants, and assist with the necessary documents to finalize a divorce to ensure that the experience is accessible and simplified. This communication with the participants can be as needed or during a specific timeframe based on availability. It is not essential to partner with a legal aid agency, but it does enhance the service by providing the participants with free access to a lawyer. It also strengthens the partnership between the circuit court and the agency.

When possible, remote participation in the Program should be made available to eliminate any hardship associated with participants participating in person at the courthouse due to transportation, employment, childcare, or other barriers. In-person participation should also be offered for those that lack the technology or knowledge to access court remotely. If in-person proceedings are not offered, then a Zoom station with assistance should be accessible at the courthouse. Ultimately, a hybrid solution that provides both options is best practice.

B. Frequency

The frequency with which these proceedings are held can vary based on demand and capacity. A monthly program ensures that self-represented petitioners in divorce cases can register for the Program within 30 days of filing, but it could also be held on a biweekly, bimonthly, or even a rolling basis. In the 19th Circuit, the hearings were all held on the same day for efficiency and ease of scheduling purposes, but cases could be scheduled on an individual basis if that makes sense for a particular courthouse.

C. Capacity

Once it is determined which judge(s) will be presiding over the Early Resolution Program prove-up hearings, the staff managing the Program should coordinate with them and their clerks to determine the ideal caseload. The 19th Circuit chose 10 cases per month because that amount was manageable for a single afternoon court call in under two hours. It was also consistent with the average number of cases eligible to participate in the program. Capacity should be determined by using those two factors: time limitations and number of eligible cases.

D. Staffing

In most situations, court or circuit clerk staff can manage a monthly Early Resolution Program while performing other assigned duties. There should, however, be a dedicated email address used to coordinate with program participants not associated with any particular staff member's name (for example, *ERP@_____court.gov*). This helps organize and manage requests to participate in the Program and eliminates disruption in the Program due to absences or staff turnover.

The staff entrusted with managing the program should be familiar with the Safe Harbor Policy. The Safe Harbor Policy, "provides guidance to circuit clerks, court staff, law librarians, and court volunteers about services they may and may not offer to assist court users in achieving fair and efficient resolution of their cases."⁵

E. Criteria

Eligibility criteria should be defined and reviewed regularly so that they can be communicated clearly to interested participants. If possible, cases should be screened ahead of time to avoid inviting obviously ineligible participants to the program. Participants that call or email about the program but are ultimately determined to be ineligible to participate should still be provided

⁵ Illinois Supreme Court Policy on Assistance to Court Users ("Safe Harbor Policy") , 2015. www.illinoiscourts.gov.

with information and resources about divorces on the non-ERP track. When determining criteria, the following should be considered:

Representation

This type of program is created for Self-Represented Litigants only; cases in which a lawyer has filed an appearance on behalf of either party do not qualify. Other programs or resources may need to be implemented for cases in which only one side is self-represented.

Participation

Program staff must decide if only the petitioner is required to participate in the proceedings if the respondent has signed the necessary documents, or if both participants are required to participate.

Contested and complex cases

Due to the lack of litigation or judicial review prior to the final hearing, only simple cases are suitable for the Program. Participants involved in a contested divorce should not be accepted into the Program. Participants with complicated agreements or significant assets are not appropriate for the Program either. It is important to note that while cases with significant assets may not be eligible to participate, there should not be specific financial eligibility requirements to participate in this Program. Participants should not need an approved fee waiver or need-based assistance to qualify. Eligibility is based upon assets and the complexity of the agreement rather than the income itself. The goals of the program do not target a specific demographic, rather they aim to simplify the divorce process and provide a service to any SRL involved in an uncontested and uncomplicated divorce.

Children

The staff managing the program and their partners must decide if participants with minor children are eligible. Divorces with children often take longer to finalize due to the additional requirements and considerations such as child support, parenting classes, and parenting plans.

Real estate and spousal support

Program management must determine whether ownership of real estate should automatically disqualify participants or if their eligibility depends on the terms of their particular agreement. Similarly, the managing staff must decide if participants with a spousal maintenance agreement can participate.

Domestic violence

Finally, there should be safety considerations for cases in which participants have an active order of protection or pending domestic violence case. While a party that has experienced domestic violence may be motivated to resolve their case quickly through this Program, the best practice is to allow such cases to move through the typical divorce process to ensure that it is as safe and fair as possible.

F. Stakeholders

Judges, the office of the circuit clerk, and court administration should be involved in the creation of an Early Resolution Program to ensure that there is sufficient support for the Program and a consensus on how it will operate. Program management must decide if they will also collaborate with lawyers from a legal aid organization, local bar association, or individual volunteers. While access to a lawyer benefits the participants, it is not a necessary component of an Early Resolution Program. Court or circuit clerk staff, volunteers, or a JusticeCorps Fellow trained in the Safe Harbor Policy can also assist participants with the necessary paperwork to finalize a divorce and guide them through the process.

Any partnership with an external entity should be documented in a memorandum of understanding or similar document signed by the agencies involved. If the partnering agency is providing a lawyer, a disclaimer should be provided for Program participants to sign indicating their understanding that their meeting with a lawyer does not create a lawyer-client relationship.

G. Technology and materials

Ideally, a court's electronic case management system could be used to identify cases that meet the initial eligibility criteria. Program coordinators can work with circuit clerk's office or information technology staff to determine if their system can export a list of cases recently filed without a lawyer along with the contact information of the participants to expedite the invitation process.

If participation is by invitation, an email template or letter inviting participants to the Program must be created. A brochure, webpage, or other advertisement explaining the program can also be considered. Any information about the Program must be clear, concise, and in plain language. If a community has a significant population that does not speak English, this information should be translated into that population's language to ensure equal access to the Program.

Courthouses should have computers available for participants to complete forms, e-file, or join a hearing by Zoom. Printed forms should also be available for participants that come in person.

If the Program is remote, an electronic signature subscription can be used to assist with obtaining signatures on court forms and Program documents such as a disclaimer.

Program coordinators can consult with the judges to determine if a coversheet provided in addition to the prove-up documents would be helpful in expediting these cases. A cover sheet may include the following:

- Participants' names
- Participants' pronouns
- Case number
- Need for interpreter services
- Checklist of documents filed
- Checklist of documents prepared for the prove-up hearing
- Notes about unique circumstances.

H. Funding

The cost of operating an Early Resolution Program can vary. If existing court staff manage the Program along with volunteers, the only costs associated may be the printing and mailing of court forms and other documents. If a legal aid agency is involved that needs to be compensated, there are options for funding. Currently, legal aid organizations can directly apply for the *Reducing Barriers to Meaningful Participation in Court Grant* through the Commission on Access to Justice. The 22nd Circuit's Early Resolution Program has a partnership with its local Prairie State Legal Aid office which is funded by the county budget following approval by the board.

I. Data collection and evaluation

A Program must have a data collection process in place to track the number of cases resolved during a certain timeframe. This can help identify trends and evaluate the Program's success. It is also helpful to track the number of eligible cases overall during that same timeframe along with how many of those cases were enrolled in the Program but ultimately were unable to proceed and for what reason. Additionally, tracking the amount of time passed between the filing of a new divorce case and its finalization through the Program versus the amount of time it for those divorce cases on the standard track may provide important information about the Program's impact.

It is imperative to conduct participant feedback surveys. The surveys should evaluate satisfaction and collect suggestions for improvement. Surveys can be filled out in person or online depending on program staff and user preference. Online surveys are beneficial for tracking and charting responses and can aid in demonstrating the success of a Program.

IV. Conclusion

The Nineteenth Circuit's Early Resolution Program for divorces is a successful service that has simplified divorce proceedings and made the process more accessible to its participants. Hundreds of self-represented litigants in Lake County have benefitted from resolving their uncomplicated divorces in a reduced timeframe. Best practices and considerations learned from their endeavors can be utilized in the creation of similar programs in other courthouses.

While this paper aims to serve as a guide for any local court in its pursuit of such a program, it is important to note that each jurisdiction's needs and resources are unique and should be considered in the planning stages. A sample list of program development steps can be found in the appendix. While each jurisdiction's needs may be different, they share one common thread; every courthouse in Illinois serves self-represented litigants in divorce cases, many of whom experience barriers accessing the court in the attempt to finalize their cases. An Early Resolution Program can be an effective solution to eliminating some of those barriers and ensuring that simple divorce cases are resolved quickly and efficiently with access to help along the way. Implementing a successful Early Resolution Program for divorces is an achievable goal so long as there is available staff, stakeholder support, a review of best practices, and, above all, an unwavering commitment to access to justice.

Sample Program Steps

1. Invite all possible stakeholders to discuss the possibility of creating a Program
 - a. Chief Judge
 - b. Circuit Clerk
 - c. Trial Court Administrator
 - d. Court Staff
 - e. Program Coordinator (if applicable)
 - f. Legal Aid Program (if applicable)
 - g. JusticeCorps Fellow (if applicable)
2. With stakeholders determine:
 - a. Needs of the circuit or County
 - b. Goals for Program
 - c. Criteria for participant selection
 - d. Staffing responsibilities
 - e. How to provide a hybrid option (Zoom or In Person)
3. Using the court's case management system, create a list of recently filed divorce cases and review them for eligibility according to pre-established criteria.
4. Send invitations with program information and instructions to petitioners (and possibly respondents with appearances on file).
5. Manage the requests to participate in the program.
 - a. When the prospective participant reaches out to register, explain the program and make further inquiries to establish eligibility.
 - b. If they are not eligible, provide basic procedural information and assistance so that they can continue with their case on the standard track.
 - c. If they are eligible, review their file to determine which documents have already been filed and which are still needed.
6. Coordinate documents with the participants.
 - a. Work with the participants to ensure that all documents needed are completed and submitted according to court and program guidelines
 - b. Optional: Participants meet with a legal aid partner to review the documents and prepare for their hearing.
7. Provide court date information to participants.
8. Guide participants on the day of their hearing and provide other assistance as needed.
9. Disseminate surveys and collect responses.