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## Family law court has online help

**Interactive forms allow people to serve as their own attorneys.**

**By Ramon Coronado -- Bee Staff Writer**

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Searching the Internet for tips on navigating the court system, Michelle Vasquez found information that showed her exactly what she needed to obtain a restraining order.

A new online service available on the Sacramento Superior Court Web site helped Vasquez avoid standing in long lines at the family law court and thumbing through a maze of forms bound in booklets.

"Instead of spending the whole day at the courthouse you go to the Web site and it tells you what forms you will need," said Vasquez, a customer service representative for a Sacramento company.

Vasquez was bolstered by its ease and thoroughness. By acting as her own attorney, she joins a growing number of Californians representing themselves in family court using the online service.

"It walks you through the process and it takes out the guesswork," Vasquez said of the software program that Sacramento court officials linked to the court's Internet site in December.

The service, called EZ Legal File, was introduced in San Mateo Superior Court three years ago, where it was developed as a pilot project. Since then, 200,000 Californians have used the interactive service as more counties have implemented the online program, said Tim Benton, the technology director for San Mateo County's courts.

In Sacramento County, more than 200 people used the online service during the first month of operation; that grew to 332 in March. The use is expected to increase as more couples learn about the service.

From 1999 to 2004, the number of those in Sacramento County representing themselves in family law court increased more than 10 percent. Of the 6,700 legal breakups in 2004, 4,900 couples, almost 74 percent, did their own legal work, records show.

"The self-litigants I see are schoolteachers, people in construction and others in the working middle class who want to spend their money on their children's college tuition and their mortgage," said Sacramento Superior Court Judge Jerilyn L. Borack, who presides in family law court with six other judges and commissioners.

Those involved in family law disputes often have various notions of justice. Sometimes it's fairness, sometimes it's revenge, said Borack, who hears cases two days a week and sees about 10 self-

litigators each afternoon.

The step-by-step structure of the online service helps them focus on what they want and why, she said.

The online service, modeled after a popular do-it-yourself income tax software program, leads people through the process for filling out summonses, preliminary injunctions and other forms necessary in family law court. The forms can be printed from a home computer, then filed in court along with fees.

Users know what is required before making their mandatory appearance before a judge, avoiding delays.

Filing fees differ depending on the legal action, but for a simple uncontested divorce the cost could be as low as \$317.50 compared with a divorce handled by a family law attorney that could cost \$10,000 or more.

Despite the cost difference, lawyer Robert J. O'Hair said family law attorneys shouldn't feel threatened by the online service.

"There is almost two worlds," the Sacramento family law attorney said of do-it-yourself divorces and divorces requiring professional help. Most divorces and legal separations can be worked out by couples, but about 5 percent require the service of a family law specialist, O'Hair said.

"In deciding who gets the sofa and who gets the love seat you don't need lawyers. Putting a value on a business or a pension plan is complex," said O'Hair, who heads the family law committee for the Sacramento County Bar Association.

Throughout the state, court officials have reported a growing number of people representing themselves in nearly every area of law. Last year, there were more than 4 million self-litigators. Of those, 82 percent were in family law cases, according to the Judicial Council, the administrative arm of the state's courts.

Over the years, court officials have provided court staff, workshops and other services to help people do their own legal work.

Large bundles of forms, however, are intimidating and confusing to many. The online service, which can be accessed as many times as needed, doesn't allow users to advance unless each form is filled out correctly and with all the pertinent information.

The service assures thoroughness and also helps cut down on another common problem.

"Handwriting is a major issue," said Sacramento Superior Court Judge James M. Mize, who before joining the bench in 2002 was a family law attorney for more than 20 years.

"Often we spend a great deal of time trying to figure out the words," Mize said.

San Mateo County residents can file court papers and pay fees online. But the 37 other counties that provide the service, including Sacramento, El Dorado and Yuba, have yet to develop the convenience to file and pay online.

and costs each county a \$4,800 annual maintenance fee. The service is accessible on the Sacramento Superior Court's Web site at [www.saccourt.com](http://www.saccourt.com).

Sacramento County residents who don't have a computer at home, or want to do everything in one trip, have access to two computer kiosks recently installed at the William R. Ridgeway Family Relations Court on Power Inn Road.

Vasquez, who was filling out a form at one of the kiosks this week, likes the online service.

"It is cleaner, quicker, less work and less aggravation," she said.

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