

Dedicated space for pro se litigants opens at Milwaukee Justice Center

By Justin Metzger, Milwaukee Justice Center

On July 7 the Milwaukee Justice Center (MJC) officially reopened its doors on the ground floor of the Milwaukee County Courthouse, revealing, for the first time, a permanent, purpose-built space for helping *pro se* litigants in Milwaukee County.

"This is a fabulous asset to the people of Milwaukee County," said Chief Judge Jeffrey A. Kremers, Milwaukee County Circuit Court. "I'm very appreciative of the work of everyone involved."

The physical history of the MJC is long and varied. It started as a single desk handled by attorney, and ultimate MJC visionary, Ernesto Romero.

"Back in the mid 1990s, Wisconsin's Chief Justice Shirley S. Abrahamson challenged lawyers with her vision of having the private bar and judiciary creatively address the needs of the unrepresented," said Romero. "As a former Legal Aid Society

attorney, I knew that all I needed was two chairs and a table and some courthouse signs," Romero added.

From there, it grew to four bank-teller-style windows, to eight tables in a newly cleared office space behind the windows. And that is where the fun, and demolition, began. With a temporary relocation to a space on the fifth floor of the courthouse able to serve up to six clients at a time with overflow into the corridors if needed, Room G-9 was torn down to the studs. Sledgehammers, jackhammers, and asbestos abatement teams were followed by carpenters, painters, flooring specialists, and electricians. Finally, after eight months of work, it was done.

Old, worn-out carpets were replaced with durable rubber flooring. More interior windows were used, and exterior windows were exposed to make more use of the natural light that enters the ground-floor space. Twelve modular cubicles were installed, and two more on-demand spots were added to increase the MJC's service capacity to a maximum

of 14 people. When the MJC's neighbors, the Milwaukee Legal Resource Center (law library) and Milwaukee County Civil Records Center (compacted as a result of record digitization) arrived, our space became a one-stop shop for litigant services.

"I like the remodel," Milwaukee County Clerk of Circuit Court John Barrett said. "Customers will get help in a dignified space which affords some privacy when dealing with personal, legal matters. Unrepresented litigants are

already going through difficult times, so it's my hope that the frustrations of court processes will be diminished when individuals can go to one place for help," Barrett said.

During the rededication ceremony held on Sept. 15, Kremers dubbed the project an "amazing collaboration" between the county, the Milwaukee Bar Association (MBA), and the Marquette University Law School.

MBA Foundation President Francis Deisinger reminded attendees that the MBA helped found two pillars of Milwaukee's legal community – the Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee, and what would become Marquette's Law School. He then said he hoped the MJC would be considered as a third pillar.

Since the MJC was formalized in 2009, it has helped more than 43,000 litigants with the contributions of more than 1,500 volunteer interns, law students, paralegals, and attorneys. This amounts to more than \$3 million in value donated to the Milwaukee community. Now, with the capacity to help more than ever, the MJC expects that service to continue to increase at an accelerating pace.

"I believe equal access to justice must extend to all people, including the vulnerable and poor who would be unable, without such centers, to assert, protect, or defend their rights. Continuation of this clinic is essential to ensuring access to our courts," Romero said. ■



Staff of the Milwaukee County Legal Resources Center was on hand for a Sept. 15 ceremony celebrating the opening of its newly renovated space in the Milwaukee County Courthouse. The Milwaukee Justice Center and Records Center also were renovated as part of the project.

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coordinator position.

The budget request also includes \$2.1 million start-up funding for two years to implement eFiling throughout the circuit courts. As of Oct. 24, Wisconsin circuit courts provide attorneys and *pro se* litigants with the ability to electronically file and receive court documents for certain case types. This budget item would expand eFiling to all circuit courts for all types of cases, and would provide judges, clerks of court, attorneys and litigants a more efficient, affordable and convenient system.

The budget request also seeks increased compensation for judges to bring their salaries more in line with other

Midwest states. Additionally, the budget request calls for the creation of a Wisconsin Judicial Compensation Commission to independently assess and recommend judicial salaries to be set by the state.

Two other requests are designed to improve court interpreter services, including a two-year pilot project in three counties that would establish a centralized interpreter station offering centralized scheduling and video and telephone conferencing interpreter services.

Gov. Scott Walker is expected to determine which court system requests to include in his 2015-17 budget proposal to be introduced in late January or early February 2015. ■