

News Release



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Judiciary Ombudsmen: Bridging the Digital Divide to Help Those Without Tech Resources

A housebound senior being sued for unpaid medical debt. A parent unable to pay child support after losing a job. A family facing eviction.

Those are just a few of the serious legal issues many New Jersey residents face every day when they need to turn to a court for a resolution, even now as the state is under a stay-at-home order and many services have moved online. But what about those who don't have access to the internet at home?

With the COVID-19 pandemic forcing the majority of court operations to be handled online, the New Jersey Judiciary's Ombudsman Program is continuing to help self-represented litigants get the services they need, even if they have little or no internet access.

"The Judiciary is very mindful that not all residents have the technological capability or the equipment to access our services remotely," said Judge Glenn A. Grant, acting administrative director of the courts. "Our ombudsman program plays an even more critical role during this health crisis by assisting court users who may not have the ability to interact with the court remotely. The dedication of our ombudsmen in this manner is an outstanding example of their commitment to assist the public."

More than two-thirds of litigants in civil and family matters in New Jersey courts are self-represented, most because they cannot afford an attorney.

Unique among similar programs offered by other state courts nationwide, the New Jersey Judiciary's ombudsmen can assist litigants in every county and in every case type. Last year, Judiciary ombudsmen helped more than 75,000 people, 85 percent of whom were self-represented litigants.

Essex Vicinage Ombudsman Sarah Hatcher said her staff is preparing for an increased workload because of the challenges facing community service organizations during the pandemic. Even instructions on how to fill out court forms become more challenging when done over the phone, she said.

Serving urban and suburban populations, Hatcher said, “You can’t make assumptions. You can’t assume everyone can access court resources electronically. You can’t even assume everyone has a cellphone—some people don’t have one at all, or perhaps have only a phone for calls with very limited minutes.”

Hatcher has helped people in her court resource center in Newark who have taken three buses to get there. One older man had walked from several towns away because he could not afford the bus fare.

Judiciary ombudsmen are court employees, so they cannot give legal advice, but they can help the public navigate the court system. Ombudsmen can answer questions, explain court procedures, provide forms and instructions, and offer referrals to community service programs where needed. There is an ombudsman assigned to each of the 21 county courthouses.

Hudson Vicinage Ombudsman Pauline Daniels is concerned about the members of the community who have not received the message that the courts are open for business. She explained to her staff, “We have to tell court users that that we are here to help them; we just can’t do so in person.”

Daniels noted the challenges to helping court users by phone, now that they can’t visit the court resource center in Jersey City.

“Face to face interactions are very important, especially for non-English speakers or those for whom English is a second language,” Daniels said. She can conduct a three-way phone call with the court user and a court interpreter, but “being able to see the body language and facial expressions would help the court user even more.”

Mercer Vicinage Ombudsman Audrey Jones Butler said that relaying the message that the courts are open is vital. She noted that many calls she and her staff have received relate to ongoing cases.

“They are calling to ask if they still have an upcoming hearing, or if the court will be contacting them,” Jones Butler said.

She has been proactive on reaching out to community contacts, as have her colleagues statewide. Jones Butler prepared a flyer that explains how to contact the court for help and has shared it with more than 100 community organizations in the county.

Passaic Vicinage Ombudsman June Zieder said that even though the court has many online tools and resources, there are still people who cannot access them. For those court users, if there is no other option, she will print forms on her personal printer at home and mail them.

“If I have to print it out myself, I will. That is not going to be a barrier to someone being able to file their court matter,” Zieder said.

Zieder and her staff members are working from their homes rather than from their court resource center in Paterson.

“We truly have a team atmosphere even under these conditions,” she said. “If any of us needs help answering a court user’s question, we reach out to each other and to our divisional experts.” Two of her staff members can assist court users in Spanish, and the after-hours phone message provides information in both English and Spanish.

Camden Vicinage Ombudsman Vannessa Ravenelle said most of Camden’s court users visited the courthouse in person, some of them accustomed to making multiple visits. Since that isn’t possible right now, they are calling her with questions on court and non-court matters, knowing she’ll answer the phone.

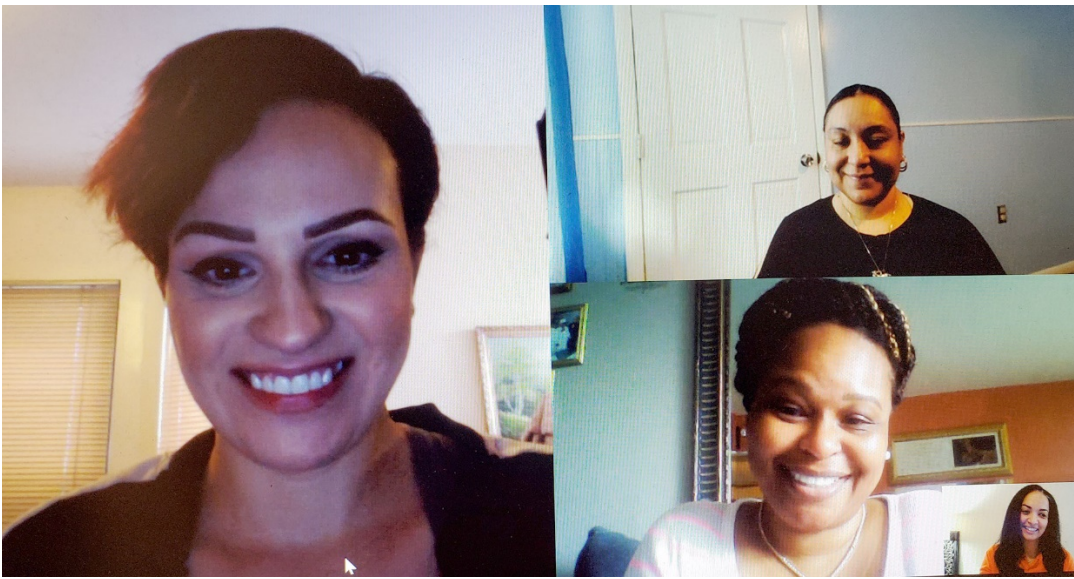
“I feel good about that. I will pick up the phone, and I will do my best to answer their questions,” she said.

She agrees that people are still calling to ask if the courts are closed. One day she saw an older woman in front of the courthouse, struggling with her walker, coming to report for jury duty.

Ravenelle knows that court users who have no access to the court’s online resources need help. Since she still must report to the courthouse periodically, she prints forms and instructions to mail to court users who have no other way to obtain these materials.

“I don’t think what I do is extraordinary,” Ravenelle said. “That’s just what Judiciary ombudsmen do for court users every day.”

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Essex Vicinage Ombudsman Sarah Hatcher (right inset) and her staff in a team meeting (New Jersey Judiciary)



Passaic Vicinage Ombudsman June Zieder (middle left) and her staff in a team meeting (New Jersey Judiciary)