

# Evaluation of the Glen Burnie District Court Self-Help Center



**Administrative Office of the Courts**

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## Acknowledgements

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## Executive Summary

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Building on the success of the state's Family Law Self-Help Centers, the Maryland Judiciary has developed and implemented a similar demonstration effort aimed at assisting the large numbers of self-represented litigants (SRLs) appearing in the high volume civil dockets of the District Court. The program, which operates out of the District Court in Glen Burnie, a suburban community in Anne Arundel County, is currently under expansion. This report presents process and outcome data of an evaluation of the program done during its pilot phase, roughly coinciding with its first 18 months of operation, from its opening in December 2009 through June 2011. The evaluation was conducted by the Institute for Governmental Service (IGSR) at the University of Maryland, College Park in collaboration with Court Operations at the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC).

Evidence concerning the operations of the Glen Burnie Self-Help Center (GBSHC) indicates that the operational objectives are being realized. GBSHC is a walk-in legal assistance clinic located adjacent to the clerks' offices at the District Court. The Center is open from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday and serves exclusively self-represented litigants involved in civil cases. The Center has been successful in developing a model that provides targeted and speedy assistance through face-to-face meetings with clients. Following a brief ramp-up period, the Center operated at full capacity during the pilot period, averaging 450 to 500 help sessions monthly. Through June 2011 there were just over 7,000 unique client visits where GBSHC staff members provided legal assistance.

Consistent with the population targeted by the Center's planners, its clients were representative of the larger District Court civil caseload, with most involved in contract or other debtor/creditor cases (49 percent) or landlord-tenant cases (32 percent); another seven percent of clients were involved in peace or protective order cases, and the rest had multiple case types. Data on the duration of help sessions showed an increase in efficiency over the evaluation period, attributable to a system devised a few months after opening in which intake and initial assistance was handled by the two junior staff members (an intake manager and paralegal), after which clients were forwarded to either the supervising attorney or junior staff attorney for review and additional advice or assistance as needed. The four GBSHC staff served under AOC's contract with Maryland Legal Aid to operate the Center.

Service data, as well as staff and client reports, show that GBSHC's service delivery has aligned with what was planned for the Center. Specifically, the Center has demonstrated effectiveness in: (1) clarifying case specifics, paperwork, and obligations; (2) assisting litigants in determining which court forms are needed and how to fill them out; (3) focusing litigants on those elements of a claim that can reasonably be addressed through the court; (4) listening to litigant experiences and concerns and responding to litigant questions; and (5) assessing case complexity and referring litigants for additional legal assistance when appropriate. Data in support of these conclusions came from observations and interviews or surveys with 35 GBSHC

staff, District Court administrators, and clerks, and about 500 Center clients. On exit surveys with clients, the average ratings indicated uniformly high levels of satisfaction and nearly all clients strongly agreed Center services were helpful to them.

Evidence of the effectiveness of GBSHC services was also seen in limited analyses conducted with data obtained from the Judiciary’s management information system. When a small sample of GBSHC cases was compared with all GBSHC-eligible cases in the Glen Burnie court, case events recorded for those involving Center clients included more filings of intention to defend motions, subpoenas, service of answers to interrogatories, and vacated judgments. All of these increases imply greater understanding and engagement of litigants about the case, and improved chances for judgments being based on merits and rights, rather than default.

These positive findings provide support for expansion of SHC services to more clients and other jurisdictions of the District Court. At the same time, the evaluation results indicated certain areas where GBSHC could be refined, and offer lessons that may improve the process used to initiate new SHCs.

### *Adjustments to GBSHC Operations*

#### 1. Increase GBSHC Referrals to ADR

Findings also showed that further efforts are needed to increase the use of mediation services by Center litigants; there was widespread consensus that GBSHC should serve as a more effective source of referrals to mediation.

#### 2. Engage District Court Judges in Identifying Self-Help Centers as an Option for Assisting Self-Represented Litigants in Civil Matters

Interview results, combined with data showing that only one percent of clients were referred by judges, suggested the need for renewed efforts to build relations with the GBDC judiciary. Further information exchange on the Center may help judges understand that encouraging its use does not equate with advocacy nor a means of providing an “unfair advantage” to anyone—indeed, a suggestion to litigants to consider use of the Center relieves the judge of any claim of improperly offering advice.

### *Maximizing and Expanding Self-Help Center Services*

#### 1. Modify Eligibility and Service Criteria, and Expand Outreach to Self-Represented Litigants

Data showed that while the Center operated at full capacity during all but the early months of operations, assistance was provided in less than one-quarter of all GBSHC-eligible cases. The expansion efforts undertaken subsequent to the pilot period clearly addressed the goal of reaching more SRLs. These expansion efforts were not evaluated as part of the current report.

The challenge of bringing self-help services to SRLs who do not routinely avail themselves of assistance—a group that has been shown in previous SHC research to be notoriously difficult to reach—may require modifications to eligibility policies (which currently do not address income) and outreach efforts beyond those employed during the pilot period, which appeared to have little impact on the number or nature of clients served by GBSHC. The Judiciary may wish to consider making additional efforts to reach less resourceful litigants, perhaps through encouraging use of Center services through community venues.

## 2. Develop Processes and Resources to Improve Self-Help Center Efficiency and Effectiveness

If the Judiciary chooses to take actions to expand the client pool, in light of evidence that GBSHC is operating at capacity, efforts to reach clients that are not currently served may need to be linked to eligibility, triage, and targeting of legal assistance services. Completion of the long-planned policies and procedures manual could serve as a means of articulating intake, triage, and other refinements to current policies (including those on follow-up visits), as well as specifying the function of new materials and how they would be employed in daily Center operations.

## 3. Replicate the GBSHC Model in Other Locations

Two specific areas of improvement on which there was consensus, particularly among the affected stakeholders, concerned earlier and greater involvement of self-help center supervisors and efforts to inform and involve clerks and other possible referral sources about the Center. This expansion should take into account staff knowledge that is specific to SHCs, a program of staff trainings and involvement of local District Court clerks (and perhaps judges) in orientation training of new self-help center staff. A GBSHC manual of policies, procedures, and standards could be a useful foundation to SHC expansion, staff training, and ongoing program development and monitoring.



## Introduction

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The Maryland Judiciary has been recognized nationally as a leader in responding to access to justice issues and specifically in efforts aimed at aiding self-represented litigants (SRLs) in legal proceedings. Among the most visible and widely utilized resources for SRLs in Maryland are the Family Law Self-Help Centers that operate in the state's Circuit Courts. These walk-in centers serve more than 35,000 people annually, primarily by offering assistance to persons seeking help with legal forms and more generally in navigating the court system in such matters as divorce and child custody and adoption. The success of the Family Law Self-Help Centers, together with concern among judicial leaders to "level the playing field" for the large numbers of self-represented litigants appearing in the high volume dockets of the District Court led to the development of a pilot Self-Help Center at the Glen Burnie Court in District 7 (Anne Arundel County). Aimed primarily at SRLs involved in landlord-tenant, small claims, debtor/creditor actions and other contract cases, the pilot Self-Help Center (SHC) has been in operation since December 2009.

This report concerns an evaluation of the Glen Burnie District Court Self-Help Center (GBSHC). This evaluation was included in the original plans for the Center as envisioned by the Maryland Access to Justice Commission. The main SHC planning document, the *District Court Self-Help Centers: Program Narrative* described the prospective evaluation as "...includ[ing] a full description of the program and operating procedures. It will identify promising practices and will note any impact on the experience of District Court users, and their ability to navigate the court and benefit from the protections Maryland law provides" (p. 14). The evaluation was conducted by the Institute for Governmental Service and Research (IGSR) at the University of Maryland, College Park in collaboration with the Administrative Office of the Courts, Court Operations (formerly Court Research and Development Department).

### *Evaluation Methodology and Organization of the Report*

#### **Evaluation Methods**

Prior assessments of self-help centers and other national research on self-represented litigants helped inform the approach and methods employed in the evaluation. The existing SHC literature made it clear that multiple methodologies were needed to address the evaluation aims outlined in the GBSHC planning document. Information on the planning process and goals for the Center was obtained through structured interviews and surveys with state and district-level administrative judges, directors, and managers in the District Court, the Maryland Access to Justice Commission, the Maryland Legal Aid Bureau which operates the Center, and other members of the GBSHC advisory group. Many of these individuals, as well as the manager and staff of GBSHC, and judges, clerks, and other Glen Burnie District Court (GBDC) personnel were interviewed and surveyed regarding program development and operations. Information on GBSHC operations and service delivery was also obtained from structured observations of a small sampling of GBSHC help sessions.

The perspectives of self-represented litigants and clients of the Center were solicited in several forums. Before the Center opened, brief interviews and surveys were conducted with a convenience sample of SRLs involved in cases that were to be targeted for GBSHC services. Exit surveys were completed by several hundred clients of the Center, and in-depth interviews were conducted with a small sample of clients after they received Center services. Most of the survey items employed with SRLs and GBSHC clients were borrowed or adapted from previous studies, as were interview questions used with the evaluation's study samples. A mix of results from the surveys and interviews with clients, GBSHC staff, and other District Court personnel and stakeholders was used to assess the impacts of Center services on litigants' access to justice and related experiences with the state court system.

Quantitative data were also sought for both descriptive and process and outcome evaluative purposes. Information about litigants that received assistance at the Center and on services provided by GBSHC was obtained from two primary sources. Prospective clients of the Center complete an online intake form at the outset of their visit, which includes self-reported demographic information and questions about how they found out about the Center. Information concerning visits to the Center, including case information and services delivered, is recorded in an internet-based log completed by GBSHC staff during and after each legal advice session. The data reported here from these sources are taken from entries recorded beginning in January 2010, the first full month of GBSHC operations, through June 2011.

Other sources of data external to GBSHC were used to make comparisons of those assisted at the Center with the larger pool of GBSHC-eligible District Court cases and local residents, and to assess the extent to which the Center was reaching the targeted SRL population and possible impacts of the Center on litigant outcomes, including access to justice indicators. These sources included statistical reports issued on a regular basis by the Maryland Judiciary and specialized reports with findings relevant to the present research. Additionally, data were obtained directly from the Judiciary's Judicial Information System (JIS) on GBDC cases that were filed in the six months prior to full GBSHC operations (i.e., July 2009-December 2009) and during its first year of operations (January-December 2010). This data set included all cases that had at least one self-represented litigant (plaintiff or respondent) and a GBSHC-eligible case type that was recorded and accessible in JIS. It is notable that case-level information on landlord-tenant cases, which account for a substantial portion of the GBSHC workload, is not included in the JIS data repository.

## **Report Organization**

In addition to this summary of the evaluation approach and methods, this introductory section includes a brief history of the legal self-help movement and a review of prior studies on SHCs and their key findings. Implications of the current state of knowledge on SHCs for the Glen Burnie Self-Help Center are also noted. To further set the context for the assessment, the Introduction section closes with findings from interviews conducted with SRLs involved in civil cases in GBDC prior to the opening of GBSHC. Results from the interviews provide a limited assessment of the level and types of needs that were to be addressed by GBSHC.

The report's second section begins with a discussion of the plans and goals for the Center, based on information from reviews of planning documents and interviews with GBSHC stakeholders. Implementation of the GBSHC plans is then described, including client eligibility and admission for assistance, Center staffing and management, and day-to-day operations in the delivery of legal assistance. Outreach activities and service efforts supplementing face-to-face sessions with clients are also described.

Results from the evaluation are presented in the next three sections of the report. The third section presents results from 18 months of data collection regarding GBSHC operations. Descriptive information on SHC clients and the quantity and nature of assistance provided by GBSHC staff are included, as are comparisons of GBSHC users with the GBSHC-eligible population of litigants and local residents. The fourth section discusses results from interviews and surveys of GBSHC clients, staff, stakeholders, and other GBDC personnel regarding their expectations and views on the Center's progress and performance. The last of these results sections presents findings from an analysis comparing case processing and outcome indicators before and after the opening of the Center. The sixth and final section of the report provides a summary of the major findings and recommendations for future development and expansion of the services for SRLs.

## *Overview of Legal Self-Help Centers in the United States and in Maryland*

### **Background**

The self-help movement rose to prominence in the early 1990s, as judiciaries became concerned with the dramatic increase in self-represented litigants (SRLs) in the courtroom. According to a 1991 ABA study in Arizona, the number of family law cases involving SRLs jumped from 24 to 88 percent between 1980 and 1991. Similar statistics have been found across the country in a wide range of case types (Greacen, 2002). As the number of SRLs in state court systems increased, they became the focus for initiatives designed to increase access to justice, providing them with services they need to competently represent themselves without demonstrating favoritism or unfair advantage. These initiatives have focused on a variety of issues, including:

- **Access to justice:** Do SRLs have access to the knowledge they need in judicial processes? Are SRLs aware of the resources available to them? Are they aware of their rights? Does a lack of legal knowledge subject SRLs to exploitation from represented parties? Are SRLs with limited English proficiency or literacy at a particular disadvantage when preparing for a hearing?
- **Special needs of SRLs:** Do court personnel understand the needs of SRLs? Can judges and administrators give them the help they need to meaningfully participate in the judicial process without showing favoritism?

- **Procedural issues:** Does lack of knowledge among SRLs increase processing times, mistakes, or postponements when compared to their represented counterparts? Can the courts ameliorate this problem in a cost-effective manner?

The development of self-help centers is one of many proactive steps that judiciaries have taken to narrow the gap between SRLs and represented parties. Though the procedures, services, and case types served vary among jurisdictions, all SHCs provide SRLs access to information that helps them navigate the judicial system and understand court process and procedure. Many, including GBSHC, are staffed by experienced legal professionals who provide procedural assistance, education, and referrals to other service providers.

### Previous Evaluations of SHCs

As SHCs have become more common across the country, evaluations and secondary analyses of evaluations have been conducted to determine who uses them, to discern the satisfaction level of clients and court personnel, and to identify best practices. Four evaluations discussed below illustrate major research findings over the past decade.

One of the earliest comprehensive evaluations was of the Van Nuys Legal Self Help Center in California (Empirical Research Group, 2001). As with many SHC evaluations, data were collected through observations in the SHC, courtrooms, and the clerk's office; interviews with SRLs, judges, and court personnel; a review of cases prior to the center opening to serve as a comparison; and a survey of SHC clients. The study found that clients were overwhelmingly satisfied with the services they received; that they tended to have more complete paperwork than non-users, which helped with case processing efficiency; and that the use of SHC services does not impact final judgments. The center's presence increased the number of respondents who appeared in court for Unlawful Detainer cases—a case type for which Failure to Appear is common—from 42 percent in 2000 to 48 percent in 2001. However, despite clients' satisfaction with the service and claims that they understood “all” or “most” of the information presented, many bench officers did not share this view. Complaints indicated that SRLs were unprepared for their hearings; that SRLs made defenses that they did not understand; and that the SHC gave clients unrealistic expectations as to the chances of winning a hearing, contributing to wasted time for both the court and the litigant.

Hannaford-Agor and Mott (2003) reviewed a National Center for State Courts study that evaluated SHCs in five jurisdictions across the country. They noted that the provision of self-help resources may not be enough to ensure access to justice, as the court structure is often a barrier to effective self-representation even among those who are prepared for the experience. Since court procedures are designed with the assumption that litigants will be represented, SRLs may have trouble navigating the system and performing well in court due to cultural barriers, lack of familiarity with the legal process, and the court's difficulty in responding to SRLs' special needs. The study also found that courts may be unsure of how to draw the line between assisting an SRL with the goal of ensuring a fair hearing and offering special treatment or legal advice that gives them an unfair advantage over their represented counterparts.

In their evaluation of a British Columbia SHC, Malcolmson and Reid (2006) questioned the center's ability to reach SRLs, especially among the least educated and lowest income population. The authors suggested that some users may be unable or unwilling to navigate the judicial system, even with assistance:

There are three levels. There are 'professionals' and their investment is in going it alone. In the middle, there are people who have sufficient confidence in the legal system and sufficient comfort with bureaucratic institutions that with some instruction they can fumble along... The third group is people who cannot do it—for various reasons it's too difficult... The question remains of what is happening to those whom the model is not reaching, for whom the self-help process is too difficult. In the broader context of assessing the service needs of unrepresented litigants, this population must remain on the radar. (pp. 28-29)

Malcolmson and Reid reported that over 75 percent of participants in this study had access to a computer, and more than half had sought legal advice on the case prior to consulting with SHC. These findings suggest that the British Columbia SHC was reaching clients who would have found their way to similar legal advice in its absence to a greater degree than the population least likely to have access to justice.

Collins and Greacen (2004) evaluated Family Division SHCs in five Maryland jurisdictions. They found that participation was high across centers, ranging from a low of 44 percent of all cases in Baltimore City to a high of 77 percent in Harford County. Though the five programs differed in service levels and data collection methodology, all reported high levels of satisfaction from litigants, in both general satisfaction metrics and ratings of specific services (e.g., help with forms, referrals, and hearing preparation). As in the Van Nuys evaluation described above, the high litigant satisfaction contrasted with the opinions of judges and lawyers, who felt that, even with SHC services, SRLs were unprepared for hearings, could not answer questions posed by judges, and were often required to return to the clerks' offices for clarification. One of the court stakeholders went on to remark that "self-represented litigants can handle only the simplest of cases and the court—by providing assistance to them—is misleading the public into thinking that they can handle more complex matters without legal representation." A lack of communication between SHC staff and other court personnel may have exacerbated this issue. SHC staff were not kept up to date on court procedure, and some of the surveyed judges were unaware of the centers and their purpose six months after opening.

### **Major Findings**

A growing body of knowledge indicates that SHCs are making progress in providing services that are satisfactory to clients, increasing SRLs' knowledge of the judicial system and ability to represent themselves, and removing some of the barriers and anxiety of self-representation. Judges and other court personnel, however, continue to express reservations regarding the value of SHCs. Barriers to assisting all SRLs in obtaining access to justice continue to exist. More specifically, the literature concerning SHCs indicates the following:

- **SHCs are used heavily.** Most centers report that they are running at or near full capacity given their current staffing and resources.
- **SHC clients are highly satisfied.** Among surveyed SRLs, the client satisfaction rate is over 90 percent regardless of region, demographics, case type, or services provided. Satisfaction metrics include overall satisfaction level, as well as more specific perceptions such as whether their questions were answered, whether they had a long wait, and whether the experience increased their trust in the judicial process.
- **SHCs are thought to positively impact court procedure.** Court administrative staff is generally positive about SHC's impact on court procedure, believing that the services help SRLs file more complete paperwork and gain a better understanding of the law. Although completed paperwork may increase processing efficiency, it is unclear whether center usage impacts average hearing length. While SRLs with more knowledge and completed paperwork may take less time during the filing stages, those who have been taught to present evidence or call witnesses—or simply an increase in the number of SRLs who appear in court—may lengthen hearing times.
- **Satisfaction of court and bench personnel varies.** While the majority of court staff members are positive about the impact of SHCs, some are concerned that the help offered does not adequately prepare clients to navigate the legal system. Some judges note that SRLs tend to perform poorly in hearings, with incomplete paperwork and limited understanding of procedure.
- **SHCs do not reach all clients in need.** Despite serving many clients, SHCs reach only a small percentage of potential clients. It is unclear whether this is due to lack of adequate outreach across populations; misunderstandings about what SHCs can offer; barriers to participation such as language, work schedule, or childcare obligations; or other unknown factors.
- **SRLs continue to face barriers to justice.** Even after visiting an SHC, SRLs may continue to face access to justice issues when compared to represented parties. This may be due to the complexity of the legal system, exacerbated by the fact that judicial systems are not designed with SRLs in mind. There is also speculation that these barriers are higher in limited jurisdiction cases such as landlord-tenant matters.
- **Inconsistency in record keeping, privacy concerns, and data collection errors make some outcomes difficult to measure.** Technological issues such as outdated record-keeping systems, software without the capabilities to collect necessary data, and lack of a systemic data collection process within judicial systems can make comparison data difficult to obtain, thus making evaluation results open to challenge.
- **Most studies are not generalizable to the entire population.** SHC populations vary widely with respect to demographics and most common case types. For example, while some evaluations find that the majority of SHC clients are low-income and



undereducated, others report that many clients have at least some college education and make livable incomes. Furthermore, evaluations are not comparable to one another, as most use different methodology and consider different outcome measures.

### **Recommendations and Recent Innovations**

Some consensus is evident among evaluators on recommendations for improvements to SHCs. Recommendations have included offering live chat and other online services, showing videos of the court process, teaching group classes on common challenges for SRLs, and changing the name from “Self-Help Center” to a name that reflects the face-to-face assistance that is offered. Recommendations also stress a need for SHC staff and court personnel to communicate and coordinate in the provision of services. It is not clear how many of these improvements have been adopted by courts, or whether their use produces significant impacts.

The expanding range of services offered by SHCs suggests that judicial systems are responding to the needs of SRLs and recommendations offered by evaluators (State Justice Institute, 2005; Van Wormer, 2007). Judicial systems are using technology to provide SRLs with increased access to information in increasing numbers of ways (Alexander et al., 2005; Moore et al., 2006). These changes are leading to a shift in the way court personnel perceive and interact with SRLs. Judges are increasingly called upon to structure court proceedings in ways that help SRLs understand the procedure and participate in hearings. Judiciaries are also sharing their knowledge with other jurisdictions through online clearinghouses such as the Self-Represented Litigation network, hosted by the National Center for State Courts, where available resources include a national directory of SRL programs, best practice documents, and guidelines for launching a self-help center (State Justice Institute, 2008). These services connect jurisdictions with mentors to help them launch new programs, and provide tools that help programs evaluate their impact. The availability of these resources allows jurisdictions to learn from the experience of others and should increase the speed with which courts adopt best practices in SRL initiatives throughout the country.

### ***Glen Burnie District Court Self-Help Center***

The earlier evaluation of the Maryland Judiciary’s Family Division SHCs is indicative of the Maryland court system’s role as a leader in developing programs aimed at increasing access to justice for SRLs. Family Division SHCs are located in each of the state’s 24 Circuit Courts and a best practices manual based on services in these centers was issued in 2005. Expanding on these principles, the Maryland Access to Justice Commission has put forth a set of recommendations to increase access to justice across the state, emphasizing the role of SHCs in furthering this initiative.

The GBDC Self-Help Center is notable because it is the first center in Maryland—and among the few in the country—to take the practices developed in family law SHCs and apply them to limited jurisdiction matters such as landlord-tenant cases, small claims and other contract cases, and peace orders. In this regard, GBSHC was modeled on the self-help center programs in the Hennepin County (Minneapolis) 4<sup>th</sup> Judicial District Court, which operates two SHCs, one

for family matters and the other primarily for civil matters involving housing and debtor/creditor issues. While SHCs have been successfully assisting self-represented litigants for family law matters in the Maryland Circuit Courts, the utility of this resource in District Court was unknown prior to the establishment of GBSHC. The demands of the District Court environment differ, as the overall case volume is approximately seven times larger than that of Circuit Courts. District Court cases are typically less complicated than Circuit Court cases, but many more litigants are self-represented in District Court. Planning documents for GBSHC cite the economic downturn that began in 2008 and 2009 as possibly exacerbating these circumstances—leading to increases in the number of cases in District Court civil matters, and in the likelihood that litigants in these cases will choose to represent themselves.

In addition to differences in case type and volume, the high failure-to-appear (FTA) rate in landlord-tenant cases is a concern in District Court. Failure-to-pay-rent cases—the most common landlord-tenant case type—are often filed en masse by corporate leasing companies; as such, a docket on any given day could contain up to 300 of these cases. In FY2010, of 32,477 Anne Arundel County landlord-tenant cases that were not dismissed, only 2.2 percent of respondents appeared in court.<sup>1</sup> Though the reasons for this high FTA rate are not clear, SHCs that service this population, such as that in Glen Burnie, are challenged to increase access to justice in landlord-tenant cases when the tendency among SRLs is to not engage with the court system.

### **Self-Represented Litigants in the Glen Burnie District Court**

On 17 days over a one-month period prior to the opening of GBSHC in mid-December 2009, observations were conducted of the GBDC civil court dockets, and interviews and surveys were administered with a sample of 90 self-represented litigants. The courtroom observations evinced statements made in GBSHC planning documents on the prevalence of self-representation in these cases, and the efficient manner in which a high volume of cases are processed. On four of the 17 days, the landlord-tenant docket numbered over 300 cases (topping at 382 on November 17), and the daily FTA rate in these cases was rarely below 95 percent. The disparity in preparation and understanding of the process between SRLs who appeared in the landlord-tenant and contract cases and attorneys representing corporate landlords and creditors was readily evident in hearings and in frustrated reactions of litigants leaving court. Further details on the experiences of SRLs in the District Court from the pre-SHC “baseline” survey and interview results are discussed below.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.courts.state.md.us/district/statistics/2010/fy2010>



## Baseline Characteristics

### *SRL Characteristics*

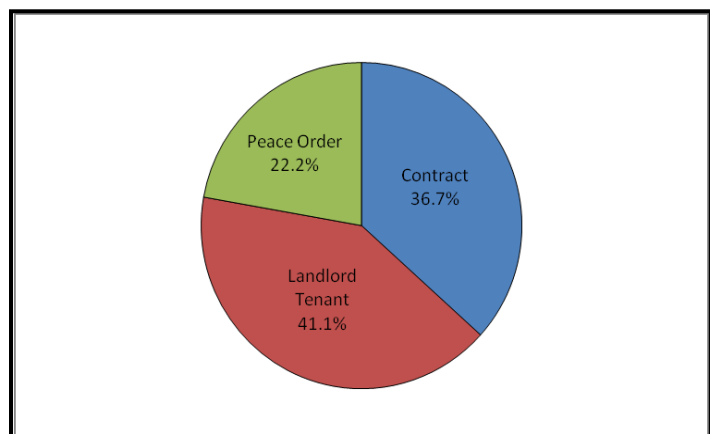
During the one-month data collection period prior to GBSHC implementation, court observations were conducted and SRLs were interviewed on days identified by GBDC clerks and GBSHC planners as having the busiest contracts and landlord-tenant dockets. Self-represented litigants were approached as they left the courtroom and asked if they would be willing to take part in a brief anonymous, voluntary interview and survey. There were no criteria employed in selecting SRLs to recruit for participation in the research—with the exception of the occasional litigant who left the courtroom in a clearly distraught condition, participation was sought by anyone who appeared to be self-represented and involved in a case that would make them eligible for SHC assistance. Just over half (51.7 percent) of those recruited for the baseline interview were willing to take part; those refusing nearly always stated that they did not have time to do the interview, often noting that they needed to get back to work.

More females than males were represented in the pre-GBSHC baseline interviews (64.3 percent vs. 35.7 percent). Whites represented the majority (59.5) of the SRLs interviewed, while African Americans represented one-third (33.3 percent); two respondents reported being Asian, and two reported being Hispanic. Self-reported income data showed that 42.6 percent had an average monthly household income of less than \$2,000, and half of these reported monthly income of less than \$1,000. About one in four of the SRLs (27.5 percent) reported an average monthly household income of \$5,000 or more. The data suggest that GBDC SRLs have a broad range of education levels. Approximately one-third (31.1 percent) reported no education beyond a high school diploma or GED. While the remainder of the sample reported at least some college attendance, just 21.7 percent had a college degree or more advanced degree.

### *Case Information*

There were somewhat more respondents (54.5 percent) than plaintiffs (45.6 percent) in the SRL sample. As seen in Figure 1, the largest group of the SRLs interviewed were involved in landlord-tenant cases (41.1%), followed by contract (36.7 percent), and peace order cases (22.2 percent). About one-third (32.2 percent) reported that they had had at least one court hearing on their case prior to the one observed in the research. On interview questions about mediation, roughly half (48.9 percent) reported knowing about mediation. This was much more common among those in court for contract cases (62.5 percent) than those in court for landlord-tenant cases (41.2 percent). Fifteen SRLs (16.7 percent) reported being offered mediation and

**Figure 1. SRL Case Type, Identified in Baseline Interviews**



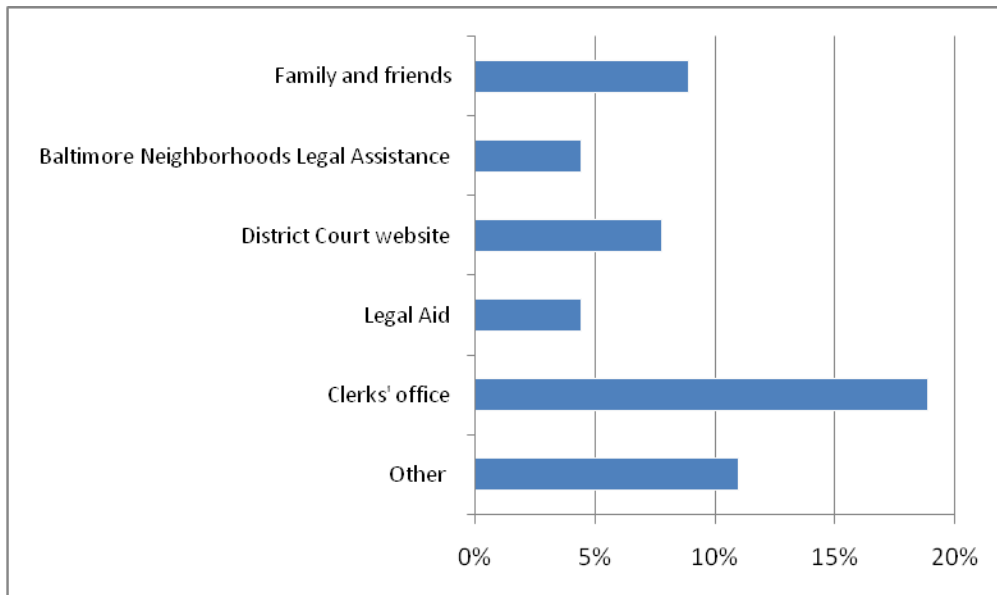
trying it, while another ten (11.1 percent) reported that mediation was suggested in their case, but they had not yet followed up on the suggestion.

### *Legal Assistance*

When asked whether they had received any type of assistance with their case, 38.9 percent said they were given some type of assistance. The clerk’s office (17 respondents or 18.9 percent of the total) and family and friends (8 respondents or 8.9 percent) were the most common sources of assistance reported. About 12 percent of the SRLs received assistance from multiple sources (Figure 2). Among those reporting that they had received assistance, most sources were judged as moderately helpful, with scores averaging between 3 and 4 on a 1 (not at all helpful) to 5 (very helpful) scale. Baltimore Neighborhoods Legal Assistance was considered more helpful than any other source of assistance (averaging a helpfulness score of 4.2), although only a small number of respondents had received help from this organization.

Similar percentages of clients with contract (46 percent) and peace order (45 percent) cases reported receiving assistance, while one-third of those involved in landlord-tenant cases received assistance. Plaintiffs were more likely to report receiving help than were respondents (39% of plaintiffs compared with 29% of respondents). This is consistent with the pattern seen in previous SHC research.

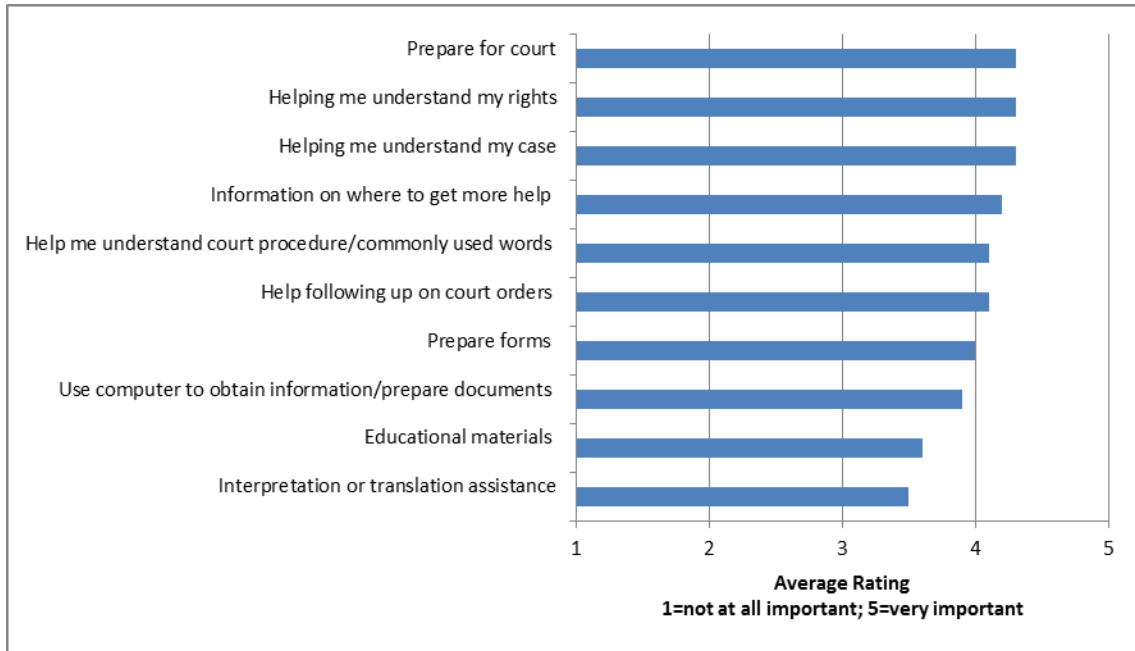
**Figure 2. Percent of SRLs at Baseline Receiving Various Types of Assistance**



Baseline interview respondents were also asked to rank the importance of obtaining different types of assistance with their cases, where 1 was not at all important and 5 was very important (Figure 3). All types of assistance had average scores of 3.5 or higher, indicating that they were viewed as valuable to these SRLs. Getting assistance in preparing for court, helping to understand their rights, and helping to understand their cases were judged the most important areas of assistance (all with mean scores of 4.3). SRLs also thought it was important to get

information on where to get more help (mean score 4.2). Of lesser importance were interpretation or translation assistance (mean score 3.5) and assistance with educational materials (mean score 3.6). There were no discernable differences between males and females or African Americans and whites in the rankings of areas of assistance. Unfortunately there were too few Hispanics in the sample to make any observations about their views on the importance of interpretation or translation assistance, or to compare their views with other SRL groups.

**Figure 3. Ratings of Importance of Obtaining Different Types of Assistance by SRLs at Baseline**



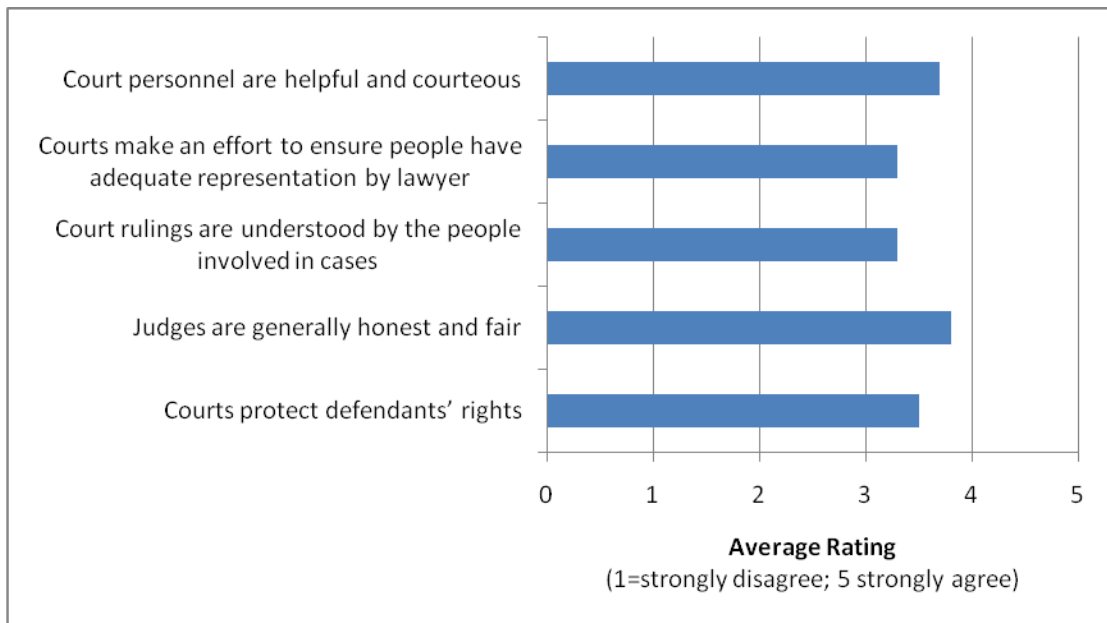
SRLs who reported that there was a judgment in their case and that the judgment was in their favor thought it was most important to be prepared for court (average score 4.3). Participants whose judgments did not go in their favor thought it was most important to have information on where to get more help and assistance in understanding their rights (both average scores of 4.4). SRLs for whom judgments were not reached thought it was most important to get help following up on court orders, understanding their rights, and understanding court procedures and commonly used court terms (average score were all 4.5).

Respondents were asked how they would prefer to access assistance if they became involved in another case in the future. Overall, SRLs expressed preference for direct contact with someone providing help over technology-based services (e.g., websites, a chat service, email) or written instructions. The use of phone-based assistance services got mixed reviews, with equivalent numbers saying they did and did not prefer this type of help. Generally, male SRLs appeared more willing to use online services for assistance than females, while whites also gave more favorable reviews to online assistance than did African Americans.

### *SRL's Views on Maryland Courts and Access to Justice Issues*

SRLs provided views on various statements regarding courts in Maryland using a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) rating scale. All items were phrased in a positive direction, and all had an average score of 3.3 or higher, indicating that SRLs had a moderately favorable opinion of the courts. Items that received lower scores were generally about litigant understanding of cases and court procedures, rather than about fairness or justice (Figure 4). Across gender and race, opinions were generally consistent. Those with higher levels of education (college or advanced degree) had more favorable opinions about the court, especially on the items such as “courts protect defendants’ rights” and “court personnel are helpful and courteous.” Plaintiffs and respondents expressed similar opinions of the courts on most items, although plaintiffs tended to agree more than respondents that court personnel are helpful and courteous.

**Figure 4. Ratings of Maryland Courts and Access to Justice Issues by SRLs at Baseline**

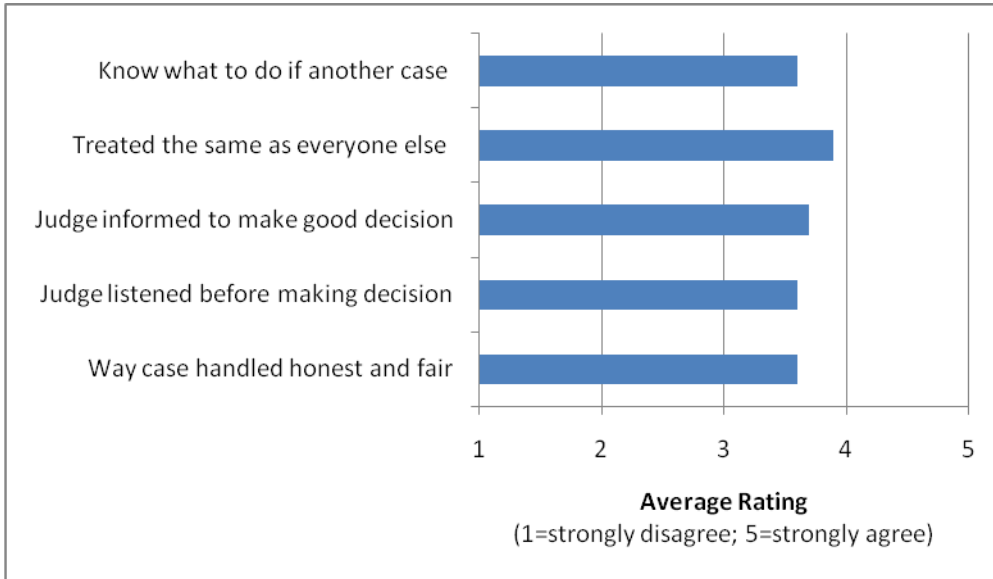


### *SRLs' Views on the Courtroom Experience*

SRLs were asked for their opinions on their experience in the courtroom using the same rating scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Again, the items were phrased in a positive direction and, with an average score of 3.6 or higher, most clients reported a positive experience in the courtroom with their current case. The item that received the highest score was a statement about the client perceiving that she or he was treated the same as everyone else in the courtroom (3.9). Although there appeared to be no differences based on the gender or race of respondents, SRLs with a college or advanced degree consistently had more favorable opinions

about their court experience. Plaintiffs had higher average scores on each item than respondents. Additionally, participants whose judgment went in their favor had higher average scores than those who reported an unfavorable judgment or who had no judgment entered.

**Figure 5. Ratings of Courtroom Experiences by SRLs at Baseline**



## Self-Help Center Planning and Program Description

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Informed by the Maryland Judiciary's experience with family law self-help centers established by AOC's Family Administration, an early vision of the GBDC Self-Help Center took form in a 2007 report, *Clearing a Path to Justice*, by the Maryland Judiciary's Work Group on Self-Representation. In a series of recommendations on assistance for SRLs, the work group encouraged the District Court to "...investigate the need for and feasibility of developing District Court self-help centers. With a large volume of self-represented litigants, and because it has jurisdiction over many case types which are dominated by the self-represented, the District Court might benefit from self-help centers for its litigants." (p. 9). Established in 2008, the Maryland Access to Justice Commission (MAJC) provided further impetus for the Center, describing plans for the Glen Burnie pilot in its *Interim Report and Recommendations*, issued in the months just prior to the startup of GBSHC. This section of the report briefly recounts the documented plans for the Center, and its early development and implementation. Center staffing, structure, and operations are also described. Information in this section was principally drawn from interviews with GBSHC planners, managers, and other stakeholders, along with reviews of planning materials and observations of sessions with clients.

### *Background and Planning*

#### **Background**

The Glen Burnie SHC was developed out of the commitment by the Maryland Judiciary to assess and improve court accessibility and fairness. Concerns associated with the burgeoning numbers of self-represented litigants in the state's circuit courts and District Court are in evidence in the 2009 *Interim Report*, and much of the MAJC's *Annual Report* (2010) and *Implementing a Civil Right to Counsel* (2011) is devoted to potential responses to those concerns. These reports and GBDC planning documents note the increasing numbers of litigants representing themselves in cases involving landlord-tenant, credit, traffic and other civil matters for which an attorney is not automatically appointed (and paid for) by the state. Consequently, courts are burdened by administrative delays, and case processing flow shifts under the weight of frequent explanations of procedure; most significantly, litigants' poor understanding limits the adequacy of the jurisprudence that they experience. These concerns gave birth to the following MAJC recommendations targeting self-represented litigants: evaluate the District Court's ability to improve knowledge and ability of SRLs; test the applicability of a self-help center model in a high volume trial court; identify resources to make services available to SRLs across the state; and develop best practices. The Commission has made clear that long-term goals for the Maryland Judiciary should include sustained services and resources for SRLs across the state.

Meeting initially in April 2009, the Self-Help Center Subcommittee of the Self-Represented Litigant Committee of MAJC developed planning documents and a timeline for the first self-help center serving civil litigants in the District Court. These documents aligned closely

with the recommendations of MAJC, while also drawing from the state's prior and ongoing efforts to address the needs of self-represented litigants in family law cases in circuit courts and national and state reports on assistance for SRLs. Planners noted the self-help center in Minneapolis, Minnesota was a model for their efforts. In addition to a program for SRLs based in the Hennepin County Family Justice Center, the 4<sup>th</sup> Judicial District Court established a second SHC at the County Government Center that addresses housing, small claims, and other debtor/creditor cases, as well as expungements and a few other criminal matters. The MAJC explicitly cited the Family Administration's *Best Practices for Programs to Assist Self-Represented Litigants in Family Cases* and a manual developed by the national Self-Represented Litigation Network, *Opening Technology Supported Help Centers for the Self-Represented in Courts and Communities* (Moore et al., 2006), as sources of recommendations that would be followed in planning the Glen Burnie Center.

These planning documents are notable for several reasons. First, they indicate a high level of planning, a consideration for the logistics of implementation, and a commitment to serving basic needs of SRLs, particularly as they relate to understanding the meaning of court documents and case specifications, and assistance in filling out paperwork. Second, these documents do not specify intended volume or metrics to assess goals for numbers of clients seen, assisted, and/or referred for further assistance. Third, these documents, prepared principally by the Executive Director of MAJC, indicate a strategic vision and leadership.

The timeline for development of GBSHC is interesting in that it anticipates nearly all of the main components and milestones of the pilot self-help center, while also detailing the development of some materials and services that—as described later in this section—did not materialize in the first 18 months of GBSHC operations. For example, in the period prior to the Center's opening, the timeline anticipates a need for client outreach materials and staff preparation through intake scripts and protocols that were never developed. The timeline also documents a concern for maximizing resources by identifying goals for the development of phone, web-based and walk-in services such as classes and written materials that did not materialize during the evaluation period.

The Glen Burnie District Court site was chosen for a combination of practical and theoretical reasons. The Glen Burnie District Courthouse sees a range of cases with a sufficiently high volume case flow to serve as a useful testing site for informing subsequent development of SHCs in the state's largest civil dockets. Perhaps most immediately, the District Courthouse in Glen Burnie had space available that could be devoted to the Center. Early in the planning stage a clear preference developed among project planners to have the pilot center located in this courthouse.

In May 2009, AOC issued a request for proposals (RFP) to staff the pilot SHC. In addition to providing SRLs with legal assistance and information about legal rights and consequences, the RFP indicated the vendor will provide intake services and referrals, and work with the Maryland Judiciary and the administrative judge and clerk of the Glen Burnie court to develop other material specified in planning documents such as program brochures, course curricula, and a "best practices" document. In June, the Maryland Legal Aid Bureau (MLAB)

was selected as the SHC vendor, and on July 1<sup>st</sup> the agency executed a contract with the AOC. The cost of the program was \$166,029 for fiscal year 2010 (program was operational beginning in December 2009) and \$273,360 for fiscal year 2011<sup>2</sup>.

### Planning Process

MAJC recognized a need to involve stakeholders from the various entities that would be involved with the Center. In addition to the office of the Chief Judge of the District Court, this included representatives of District Court Headquarters, the District Court's Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Program, MLAB, and judges and administrators from GBDC. The planning process was intended to be a collaborative effort. Yet by most accounts, the planning process was largely determined by the strong vision and leadership of the Chief Judge of the District Court, the Maryland Access to Justice Commission and its Self-Represented Litigant Committee. In interviews with stakeholders there was little mention of extensive discourse among them as decisions were made. At the same time, there was notable cohesion and cooperation among all stakeholders in carrying out the tasks—construction of the GBSHC office, coordination with court clerks, hiring staff, ensuring the automated intake process worked properly, etc.—needed to open the Center in mid-December 2009.

The chief attorney of the Anne Arundel office of MLAB, who had previous experience in operating and evaluating self-help centers for Family Administration, participated in much of the GBSHC planning. The onsite supervising attorney of the Center began work about six weeks before the Center opened and played a more limited development role, primarily around office logistics and hiring and training of the other three SHC staff members. These staff members were not involved in planning efforts and did not receive GBSHC-specific training beyond that provided by the supervisor; most training was “on-the-job,” rather than prior to the Center's opening. Similarly, while the automated intake system was in place for the Center's first clients, protocols for managing and serving clients after they completed the intake process evolved during the first months of Center operations. All staff members pointed to additional training, including communicating what they had learned, as useful additions to the model should the Center be replicated.

Because nearly all of the planning took place prior to hiring of onsite operations staff, District Court and AOC administrators helped to develop the plans for the GBSHC offices and oversaw their construction. Some stakeholders suggested that this approach was not ideal in terms of developing the most efficient layout or use of resources. One interview respondent noted that office size and layout could have been improved had attorneys been involved in planning the space. Another respondent discussed the importance of incorporating operational expectations—such as the use of phones and computers—at the construction stage to maximize efficiency and eventual capacity.

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<sup>2</sup> Costs are billed costs from Legal Aid during the specified time period. These do not include costs for remote access (online chat service) which was added in fiscal year 2012.



A general observation made by one respondent was that the GBSHC planning process occasionally struggled with aligning a strong vision from court leadership with the need to develop a voice for stakeholders who would be responsible for daily operations. This interviewee noted that planning meetings sometimes moved at such a rapid pace that it seemed inappropriate to interrupt them in order to spend additional time discussing the nuances of issues. Nearly everyone interviewed saw themselves as carrying out a plan that had been determined without their playing an active role, so while no one suggested that they felt undervalued or irrelevant, no one indicated that they took on responsibility for decision-making in the tasks in which they were involved.

### *Staffing, Structure, and Operations*

GBDC occupies the second floor of a three-story county multi-service building complex in central Glen Burnie, a community of 67,639 and the most populous area in Anne Arundel County. GBSHC is a walk-in legal assistance clinic operating within the GBDC from 8:30 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. Located adjacent to the clerks' offices, the Center's waiting area is open to the clerks' reception area, so clerks can literally point to GBSHC in making referrals for assistance.

Persons seeking GBSHC services complete a brief computerized intake form using computer monitors located in the Center's waiting area. The form serves as a screening device and, upon its completion, prospective clients are informed as to whether they are eligible for GBSHC assistance and will be seen by a staff member. Persons that are not eligible for services are often provided with informal referrals by the Center's intake manager, who occupies a small office on the other side of a wall opening between the Center offices and waiting area. Litigants are seen on a first-come-first-served basis throughout the day. As detailed further in the third section of the report, most litigants are seen for about 15 minutes, however litigants receive the time they need and may consume as much as an hour of staff time.

### *Staffing and Leadership*

Staffing of GBSHC was consistent with original plans for the Center. In addition to the supervising attorney, who splits her time between seeing clients and addressing logistic, administrative, and policy issues, the Center is staffed by an administrative assistant, a paralegal, and a junior attorney. The supervising attorney reports to the chief attorney of MLAB for Anne Arundel County, who ultimately oversees the Center under the guidance of the GBSHC Advisory Board, described below. As of the date of this report, there has been no turnover among GBSHC staff or administrators and stakeholders involved in the Center.

Prior to coming to GBSHC, the supervising attorney and paralegal had extensive experience working with MLAB clients in civil matters. The junior attorney had worked as an intern with MLAB prior to joining GBSHC. In the weeks before opening, Center staff received orientation training with the clerks' office of the Glen Burnie District Court and the District Court's ADR office. Staff members reported, however, that the on-the-job training they received was most meaningful in preparing them to provide assistance at the Center. After the Center's

opening, staff members continued to participate in training on various legal issues offered through MLAB and other sources, and were also provided more detailed training on mediation services by the ADR office.

GBSHC has benefited from guidance from the SHC Advisory Board, made up of key judicial, administrative staff and other stakeholders. The Chief Judge of the District Court, Executive Director of MAJC and other members of the Advisory Board facilitated project development and assisted with problem solving in the early months of GBSHC operation. Development assistance included establishing protocols for referrals to and from GBSHC, publicizing GBSHC services through the Chief Clerk's office, and improving communications with District Court's ADR Program. As a Board member, the Administrative Judge of GBDC has been a vocal supporter of the Center, and the Administrative Clerk for District 7 has played an important role in managing GBSHC logistics at the Glen Burnie courthouse. In the latter months of the evaluation period, the Executive Director of MAJC began working closely with GBSHC managers, staff, and other Advisory Board members in developing a substantive expansion of GBSHC services through phone and Internet applications such as Skype, Live Chat, and email. These services, most of which were envisioned in the original planning documents, were phased in over the latter months of 2011 and early 2012. Those newer services are not in the scope of the present evaluation report.

### **Organizational Model**

As noted above, planning documents specified that GBSHC would provide a pilot setting to expand services to self-represented litigants in District Courts with notably large dockets that include a variety of cases, including landlord-tenant, small claims, debtor/creditor disputes, traffic violations and domestic violence claims. After Glen Burnie was identified as the pilot site and planning progressed, a decision was made to limit services to litigants involved in landlord-tenant and contract cases (small and large claims, debtor/creditor, replevin), and peace and protective order cases.<sup>3</sup> Although there was initial consideration of setting an eligibility ceiling on client income, planners elected not to implement any income-eligibility screening.

In the early weeks and months of GBSHC operations, management of the flow of clients proceeded largely on an ad hoc basis and, as the client volume and demand for services grew, staff gradually developed a protocol to expedite service assistance. This often included forgoing lunch and putting off non-essential demands to meet with every litigant who appeared at GBSHC. This response to demand for GBSHC services has remained such that all self-represented litigants who seek assistance are seen in the order that they arrive and complete intake forms; cases are not prioritized by level of need or nature of the case. Instead, the Center's capacity to respond to client demands is expected to self-regulate. Indeed, the data reported in

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<sup>3</sup> Located in the same multi-service building as the GBDC SHC and courthouse, the YWCA operates a support and legal assistance center for victims of domestic violence. Generally, persons involved in peace and protective order cases are directed to obtain assistance there, and the SHC serves overflow from that service.

Sections 3 and 4 indicate that the average amount of time spent with each client has, over time, been reduced and stabilized, and that there have not been problems with long waiting times, despite the steady demand for Center services.

## Services

GBSHC provides information and assistance to litigants who are unfamiliar with court requirements, unable to complete essential court paperwork, afraid of the courtroom environment, uncertain of their rights, or any combination of these needs. Initially GBSHC focused on immediate one-on-one triage in which the first Center staff person available reviewed a client's paperwork and asked questions to determine the assistance most needed—for example to understand procedure, prioritize claims, or respond to court papers. In assisting clients, GBSHC staff often consulted with senior staff members. After several months this system was revised so that the client intake process is handled by junior staff members and then each case is transmitted to one of the two GBSHC attorneys who provide needed advice or assistance. If a GBSHC client only needs assistance in completing forms, a junior staff person is often able to handle the case with only a brief, final review by an attorney. The Center does not make appointments with prospective clients, and staff members report they typically do not work on the same case over multiple appointments. Data in Section 3 show, however, that nearly a third of the clients seen have been to GBSHC previously.

In spite of a high volume of GBSHC clients, all Center staff members clearly remain committed to providing friendly, unhurried attention to each litigant. One attorney interviewed noted that Center clients value staff members listening to their concerns: “Sometimes just showing a caring and friendly response—people relax. They feel like you are going to take in what they have to say and give them information based on what their situation is, and people appreciate that.” Staff member interviews and observation of program operation confirmed that GBSHC staff members help litigants prioritize their concerns by listening to them first and then, in consultation with the litigants, organizing the components of a case to focus on relevant factors for the court.

GBSHC also makes service referrals, most frequently to the YWCA's domestic violence assistance program and to mediation services provided through the District Court's ADR Office. Referrals are also made to private attorneys, the Office of the Public Defender, and to social service organizations. Due to constraints on staff time, relatively few referrals are made outside of those for legal assistance, and there is no tracking of referrals. The Center also makes use of its proximity to the District Court's clerks' office, not only referring litigants for forms, but also accompanying litigants to check on case status and other administrative uncertainties.

While planning documents specified that outreach would be conducted to increase awareness of GBSHC, efforts in this area appear modest. Notices of GBSHC services are included with eviction and court hearing notices issued by the clerks' office (data reported in Section 3 indicate these generate very few referrals). Signage within the courthouse is limited to a 30" x 8" wooden sign hanging from the ceiling outside the clerks' office; there are no signs or notices about the Center near the multipurpose building's lone entryway, or anywhere on the

building's first floor. There is neither a plan nor has there been any ad hoc effort to publicize Center activities or services in public venues such as schools, libraries, or community events. GBSHC has a webpage linked to the District Court's website. The webpage has relatively little information, and no links other than those simply repeating information available elsewhere on the Court's website. The website of MLAB posted a brief, positive report on the Center early in 2011, and links to this report and brief information on the Center can be found on The People's Law Library of Maryland and SRL advocacy websites such as [probono.net](http://probono.net) and [selfhelpsupport.org](http://selfhelpsupport.org). In July 2010, the Baltimore Sun printed a favorable story about the Center, and the Center has received positive publicity in small local newspapers.

## Self-Help Center Operational Results

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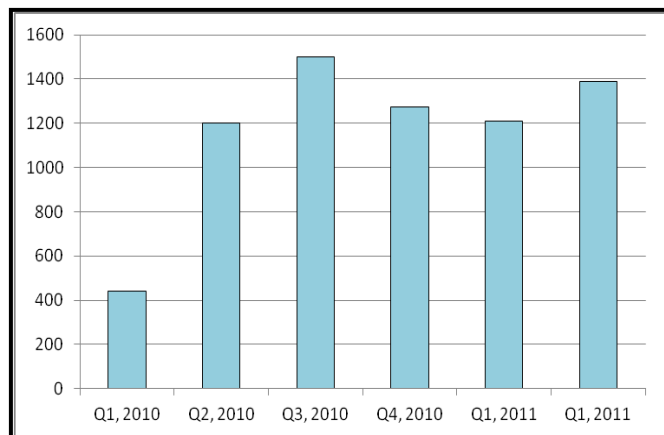
This section of the report presents information on the Glen Burnie Self-Help Center's client visits, client cases, and services provided by the Center from January 11, 2010,<sup>4</sup> through June 30, 2011. The operational results presented here are derived from intake questionnaires completed by GBSHC clients, a session log recorded by staff members, and communications between the staff members and the IGSR researchers. All GBSHC clients complete a computerized intake form at the outset of their visit (results of a voluntary exit survey completed by Center clients are presented in Section 4). The staff log is completed during and after each session, and includes details on clients, their cases, and the assistance provided in the session. To allow comparisons with the larger Glen Burnie District Court population, other sources of information reported here include Maryland Judiciary statistical reports, U.S. Census Bureau databases, and data maintained in the Judicial Information System. The descriptive and comparative results are presented here in three sections: SRLs' visits to the Center, client profiles, and GBSHC services.

### *Litigants' Use of the Self-Help Center*

#### **Number of Client Visits to the Center**

Figure 6 represents the number of GBSHC client visits by calendar quarter from the first quarter of 2010 through the second quarter of 2011. There were 7,061 unique visits to the Self-Help Center recorded by Center staff in the data logs from January 11, 2010, through June 30, 2011. Here and throughout the report, a visit or session refers to a meeting held with an SHC-eligible client where GBSHC staff members provided legal assistance of some kind. The number of GBSHC visits climbed steadily over the first nine months of operations, from just under 500 visits in the first quarter of 2010 to over three times that number (1,517) during the third-quarter months of July, August, and September 2010. Since then, the quarterly numbers of client visits have decreased slightly. The number of client visits during the first and second quarters of 2011

**Figure 6. Number of Client Visits by Calendar Quarter**

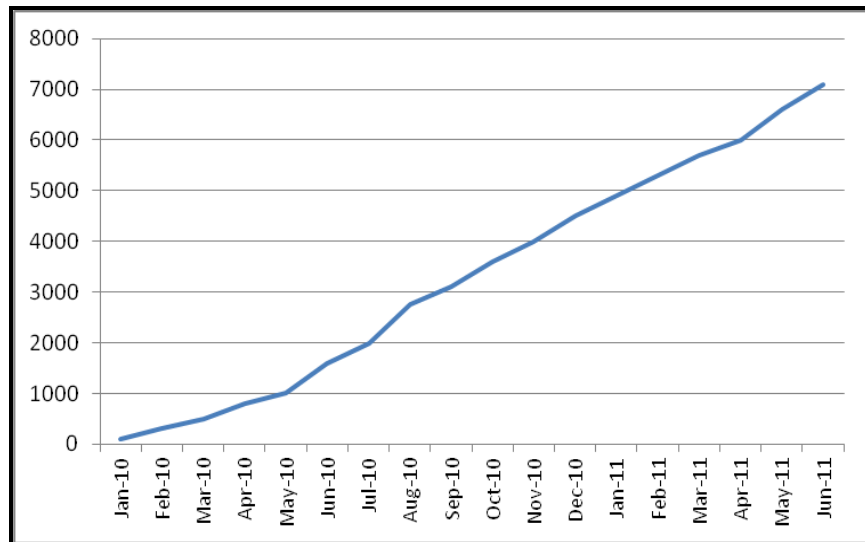


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<sup>4</sup>To afford time for training and pilot testing on the data collection protocols and avoid any anomalies due to the holidays and startup issues, formal tracking of center clients began January 11, 2010; about a month after the center had initially opened its doors for services.

exceeded the numbers in the same quarters of 2010, suggesting the decline from the third quarter may represent a seasonal variation, with the general trend remaining upward. Figure 7 displays the cumulative number of clients seeking assistance at the SHC over its first 18 months of operation.

**Figure 7. Cumulative Number of GBSHC Visits, January 2010 through June 2011**



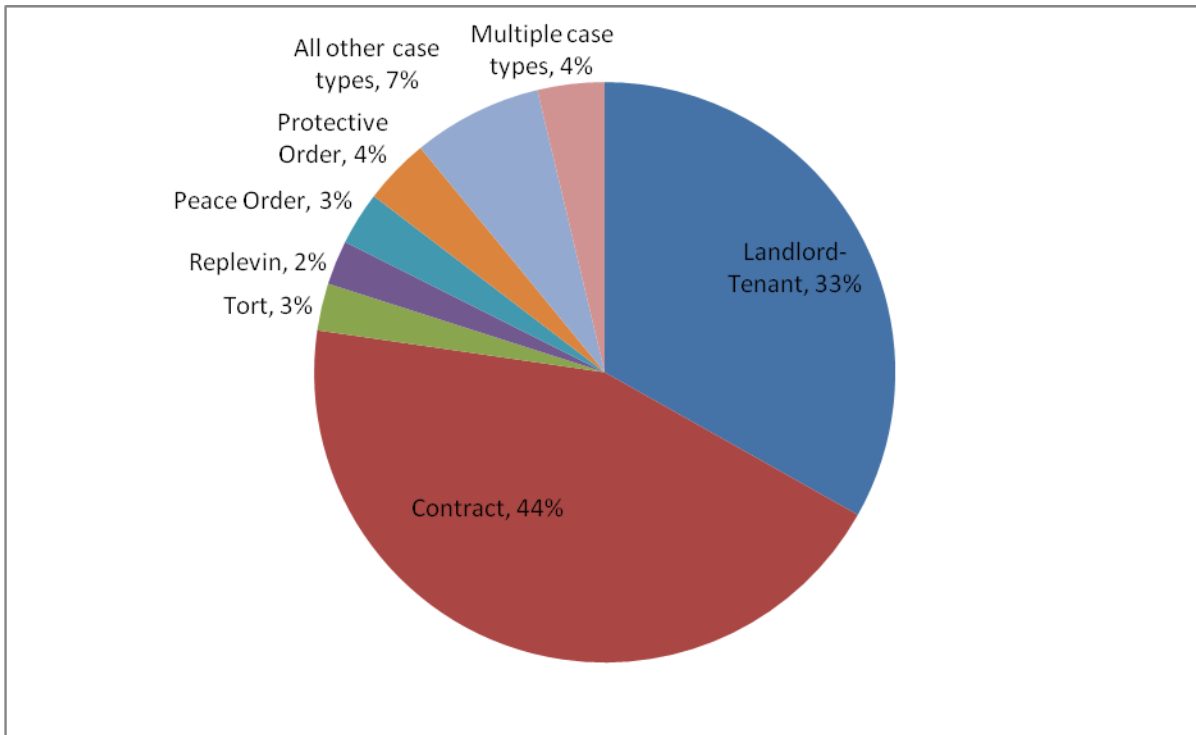
### Repeat Visitors

Data concerning the number of times clients had been to GBSHC were reported in 6,863 cases. Based on the clients’ reports, just under one-third of all visits to the Center (30 percent, or 2,098 visits) were repeat visits (i.e., the individual had been to the Center at least once previously). Of the repeat clients, 221 (11 percent) reported visiting the SHC four or more times. Due to confidentiality concerns, names or other identifiers that could link clients across visits were not recorded in GBSHC data logs, and thus data on number of prior visits depend on client self-reporting. The number of repeat visits is likely inflated to a slight extent by clients counting informal visits to the Center that would not be recorded as an assistance session by GBSHC staff.

### Number of Visits by Case Type

Information on case type was reported in 7,061 of the SHC visits, and just under 90 percent of these were identified as having a single primary case type that fell into one of six categories: large (12 percent) or small (32 percent) contract (total contract N=3,118); landlord-tenant (2,341; 33 percent); tort (185; 3 percent); replevin (174; 2 percent); peace (210; 3 percent) or protective order (260; 4 percent). No other specific case type accounted for more than one percent of those reported. Figure 8 represents the percentage of clients by case type.

**Figure 8. Percent of Client Visits by Case Type**



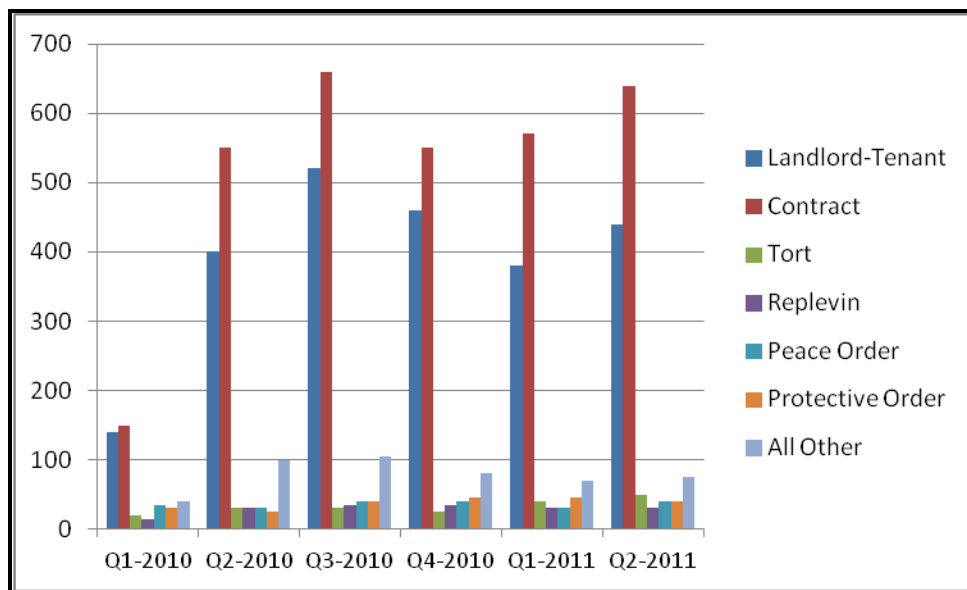
Other case types accounted for about 11 percent of those reported, including approximately four percent of the visits that were reported as presenting with two or more case types. Among the other case types, 123 (2 percent) were identified as having a “general” landlord-tenant issue (i.e., one that could not be classified as a failure to pay rent, rent escrow, breach of lease, tenant holding over, or wrongful detainer case), 44 (0.6 percent) had a family law case, and 41 (0.6 percent) were listed as an emergency evaluation. Among the remainder, individuals seeking help with a wage or job-related issue, general debt/credit matters, foreclosure, or detinue were the most prevalent. About 20 visits had primary case types specified that were ineligible for GBSHC services (criminal, traffic)—these were likely persons who presented with an eligible case type, but in conversation with the center staff, revealed an underlying criminal or traffic matter that was regarded by the staff as a more pressing or primary legal issue.

### Number of Visits by Quarter and by Case Type

Figure 9 displays the distribution of case types by calendar quarter for the data collection timeline. Contract cases represented the largest proportion of case types in all quarters, ranging from a low of 36 percent of all cases in the first quarter of 2010 to a high of 48 percent in the first quarter of 2011. Landlord-tenant cases made up the second largest percentage of cases across each quarter, ranging from a low of 32 percent of the case types in Quarter 1 of 2011 to a

high of 37 percent in Quarter 4 of 2010. No other individual case type accounted for more than ten percent of visits in any quarter.

**Figure 9. Number of GBSHC Clients by Case Type and Calendar Quarter**



### Comparisons with Glen Burnie District Court Population and SHC Service Rate

Data from JIS and annual statistical reports issued by the AOC were used to compare the GBSHC caseload with similar data on the larger Glen Burnie District Court population. As discussed earlier, the JIS data comparison pool was limited to cases in which at least one of the litigants was self-represented and case types that were eligible for GBSHC assistance. Landlord-tenant cases, while eligible for GBSHC services, are not part of the District Court JIS database. The AOC annual statistical report comparisons included cases listed there as “civil filings” (tort, contract, confessed judgment, replevin and detinue), landlord-tenant, protective orders, and peace orders. One caveat regarding these data is that they are reported for the entire District 7 and encompass courts in both Glen Burnie and Annapolis.<sup>5</sup> Since available JIS data included cases with filing dates through December 31, 2010, comparisons were based on cases filed during calendar year 2010, and GBSHC admissions during this same period.

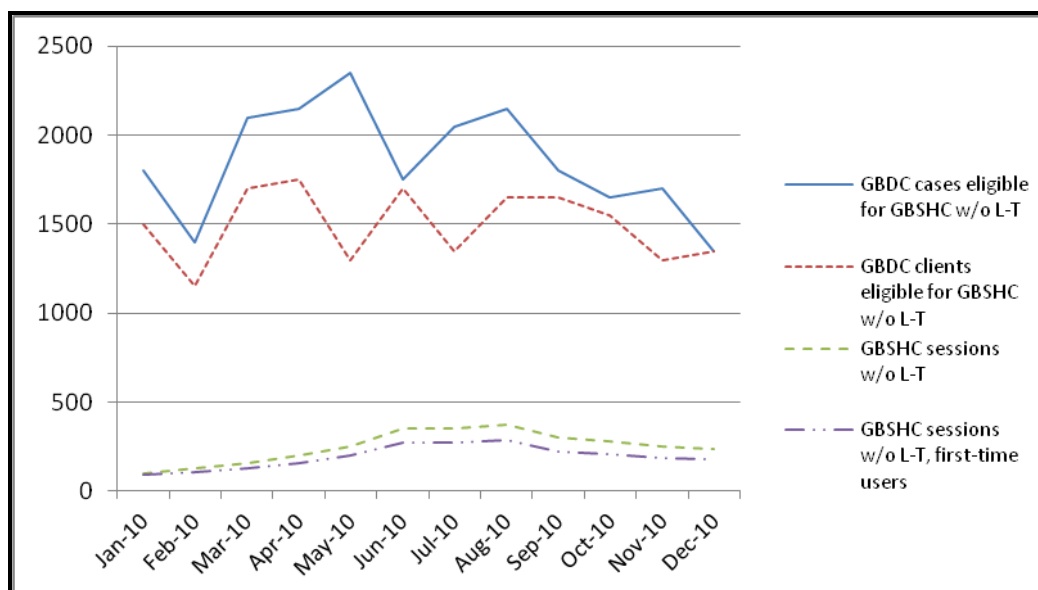
In general, the GBSHC caseload appears to reflect the larger District Court civil caseload inasmuch as landlord-tenant and contract cases account for the vast majority of cases, while other case types appear in relatively small numbers. One notable difference is that landlord-tenant cases accounted for almost two-thirds (64 percent) of District 7 filings in 2010, while comprising one-third of the GBSHC visits; contract (and tort, confessed judgment, replevin and detinue) cases accounted for 31 percent of District 7 filings and 48 percent of GBSHC visits.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.courts.state.md.us/district/statistics/2010/2010stats.pdf>



This is perhaps not surprising when the failure-to-appear rates in landlord-tenant cases, which are typically over 95 percent, are taken into consideration. Peace order and protective order filings accounted for three percent and two percent of the 2010 District 7 filings, respectively, compared to three percent and four percent of the SHC visits.

**Figure 10. Number of GBSHC-Eligible Cases and Clients, and GBSHC Sessions Held**



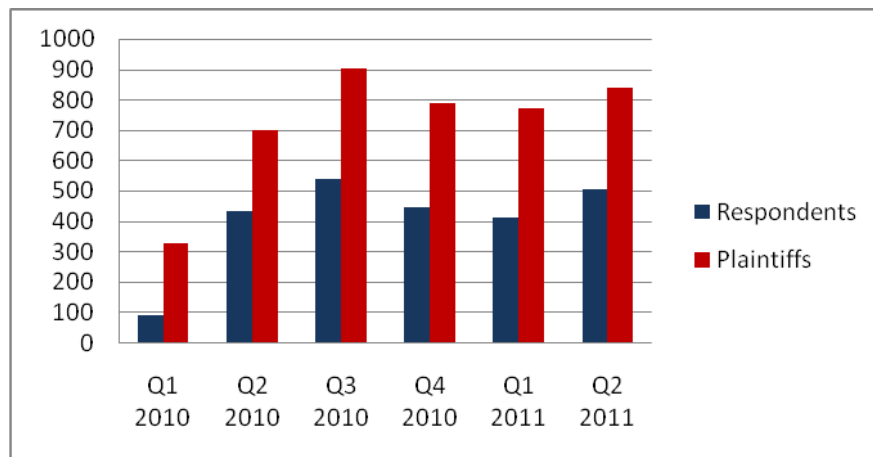
Data provided from JIS permitted a more detailed analysis of the extent to which GBSHC was reaching eligible litigants. Again, since landlord-tenant cases are not part of the JIS database, these case types were also removed from the GBSHC data for comparison purposes. The two top graph lines in Figure 10 display the number of GBSHC-eligible *cases* filed in the Glen Burnie District Court (i.e., GBSHC-eligible case types with at least one self-represented litigant, minus landlord-tenant filings) and the total GBSHC-eligible *clients* who could have been served (a case can have more than one eligible client if both the plaintiff and respondent are SRLs) during calendar year 2010. The bottom two lines depict the number of GBSHC sessions held over this period, as well as the number of sessions held with first-time users of the GBSHC; the latter figures effectively represent new clients served each month. These data yield what can be termed the GBSHC “service rate” or percentage of those served relative to those who could be served. Using a conservative measure of new clients served in the GBSHC relative to GBSHC-eligible SRLs in case filings, GBSHC reached and served 10 to 12 percent of the population during the most stable period, between May and November 2010. A more liberal measure, where at least one SRL in the case receives GBSHC assistance relative to the total eligible GBDC case filings, shows a service rate that ranges from 18 to 26 percent, or about one case served to every four or five cases filed during this period.

### Number of Visits by Plaintiff/Respondent

GBSHC is available to any self-represented litigant, regardless of income or position in a case. While the Center is intended to increase the resources available to any SRL, it is perhaps

not surprising that it would be most frequently used by litigants who feel empowered to pursue their cases and who are proactive in their approach toward the court. It is not, then, surprising that plaintiffs have outnumbered respondents in their use of GBSHC since its opening. Across the 18-month period tracked in the data, plaintiffs accounted for 64 percent of GBSHC visits. This overall figure actually reflects a reduction in the discrepancy between the number of plaintiffs and respondents using GBSHC since its first months of operation, when plaintiffs accounted for more than three-fourths (77 percent) of visits to the Center. Since the first quarter of 2010, plaintiffs have represented between 62 percent (Quarter 2 of 2010) and 65 percent (Quarter 1 of 2011) of all visits to the GBSHC. These data are represented in Figure 11. At least one prior evaluation of self-help centers showed similarly disproportionate use by plaintiffs (Malcolmson & Reid, 2006), while others have indicated a more even split between the numbers of plaintiff and respondent clients (Piazza et al., 2005).

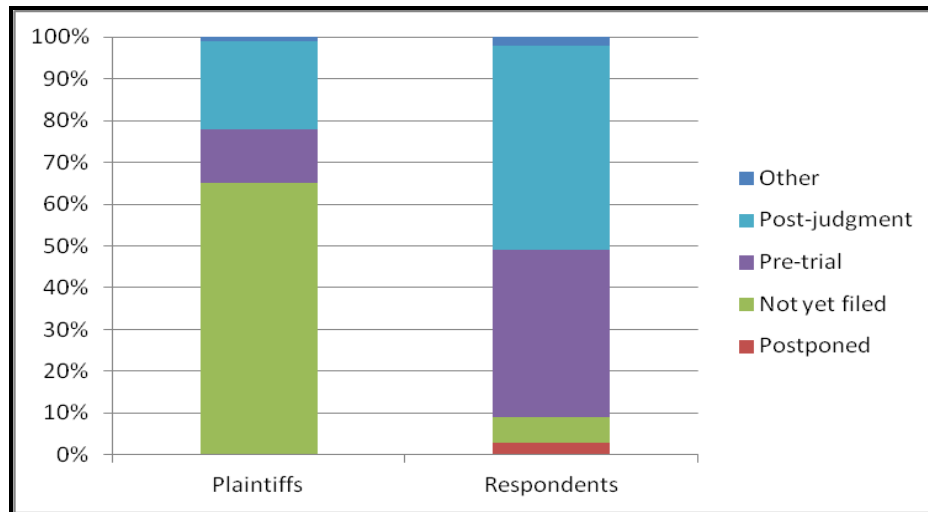
**Figure 11. Number of GBSHC Client Visits per Calendar Quarter by Plaintiff and Respondent**



### Case Status by Plaintiff/Respondent

The findings further demonstrate that litigants vary in their use of the Center depending on their role in the case and its status. Two out of three plaintiffs visited the Center before they filed their case. Conversely, among respondents, only seven percent sought GBSHC services before their cases were filed, and the majority of respondents (52 percent) sought help after judgment; 39 percent of the respondents availed themselves of Center services at the pre-trial stage. Figure 12 represents client visits for respondents and plaintiff by case status.

**Figure 12. Percent of GBSHC Client Visits  
for Respondents and Plaintiffs by Case Status**

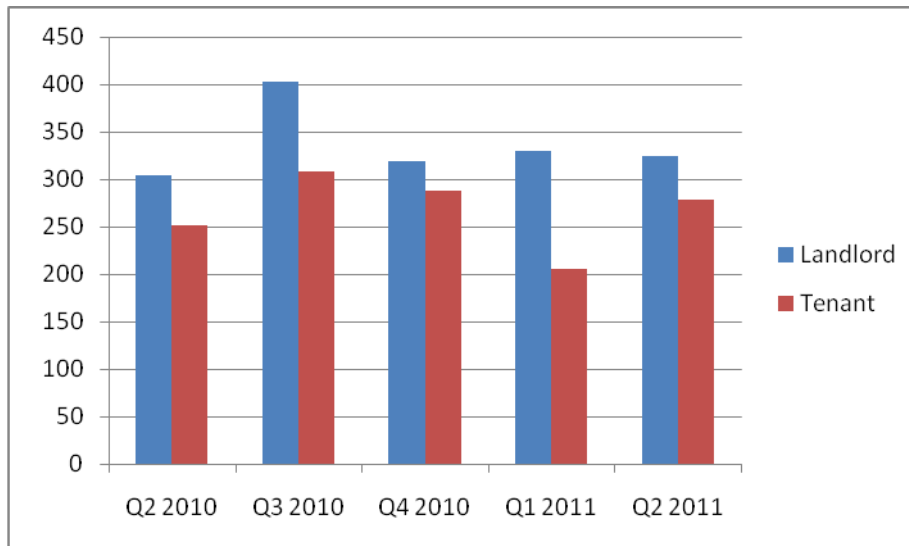


### Client Visits for Landlord-Tenant Disputes

As noted earlier, landlord-tenant cases comprised one-third of all GBSHC visits during the study period. The staff log included five different categories of these cases: breach of lease; failure to pay rent; rent escrow; tenant holding over; and wrongful detainer. The majority of landlord-tenant cases, 60 percent, were failure-to-pay-rent cases. Wrongful detainer cases comprised 16 percent of these cases while tenant holding over cases represented 12 percent of the landlord-tenant cases. Rent escrow and breach of lease cases made up the smallest percentages of landlord-tenant cases (6 percent and 4 percent, respectively).

When landlord-tenant cases are examined the relative numbers of landlords and tenants making use of the Center show a pattern similar to that observed in the breakdown of plaintiff and respondent visits. Specifically, landlords have consistently outnumbered tenants, with landlords accounting for 56 percent of all landlord-tenant case visits during the data collection period. This stands in contrast to plaintiffs making up 64 percent of all Center visits. As can be seen in Figure 13, when viewed across 15 months (April 2010 through June 2011) of GBSHC operations, the proportional distribution of landlords compared to tenants shows no discernable pattern. From the second through the fourth quarter of 2010, landlords represented between 53 percent and 57 percent of the landlord-tenant cases; in Quarter 1 of 2011 the percentage of landlords rose to 62 percent, but returned to 54 percent in the second quarter of the year.

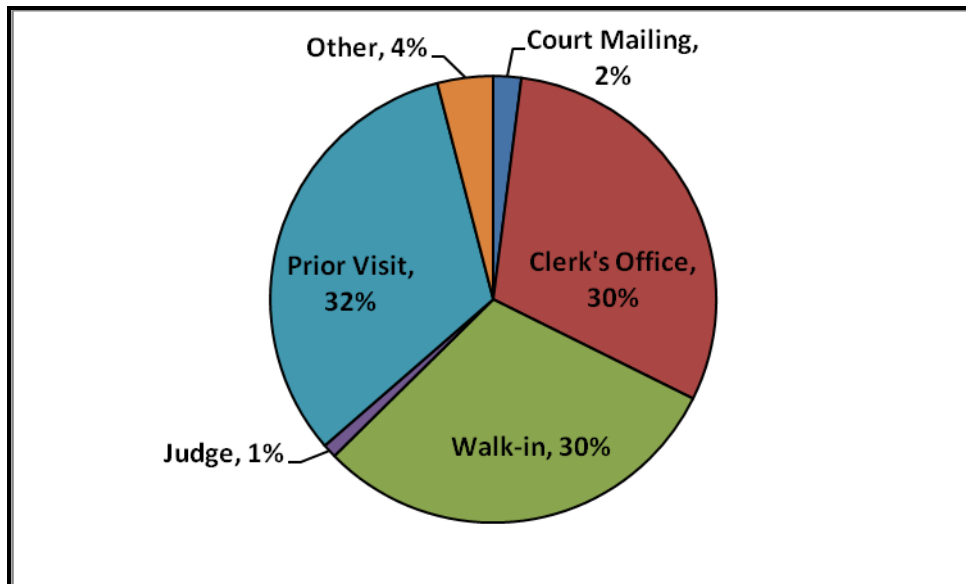
**Figure 13. Number of Landlords and Tenants Obtaining GBSHC Assistance by Calendar Quarter**



#### **Clients' Sources of Exposure to the Center**

Responses from clients on the intake form about how they learned about the GBSHC reflect the Center's limited outreach activities, as over 90 percent reported they had either heard about GBSHC from the District Court clerks' office (which is adjacent to the Center and accounted for 30 percent of all visits), were walk-ins (30 percent) or had visited the Center previously (32 percent). Despite efforts to increase awareness by including information about GBSHC in court mailings, only two percent of all visitors reported they heard about the Center from eviction and court hearing notices. Perhaps even more surprising, but in keeping with the response rate of judges in the evaluation's qualitative interviews, only one percent of GBSHC users said they heard about the Center from a judge. The remaining four percent, labeled as "other source" in Figure 14, came mostly through courthouse channels such as the court website, the county Department of Social Services, or the District Court Commissioner (both agencies have offices in the multi-purpose facility used by the GBDC and GBSHC), or an attorney's office. Figure 14 represents how GBSHC clients learned about the Center.

**Figure 14. Percent of Clients Reporting Referral Source or Other Reason for Seeking GBSHC Assistance**



*Note:* Other includes the Court Commissioner's Office, social service providers, the District Court website, Internet searches, attorneys, other courthouses, and the police. Data include all clients using the SHC between January 2010 and June 2011.

### Reason for Self-Representation

Clients were asked in the exit survey why they were representing themselves. Most indicated that they thought their cases were either not complicated enough for an attorney (43 percent) or they could not afford an attorney (35 percent). To a lesser extent, clients were self-represented because they did not want to spend money for an attorney (nine percent). Small percentages of clients stated that a lawyer would slow down the case too much (one percent) or that they did not trust lawyers (one percent). The remaining 11 percent listed a variety of reasons for not seeking representation, including that they required “more information” or wanted to “ask questions” before deciding on whether they needed representation, or simply “did not need representation at this point.” These findings are similar to those from the baseline interviews, conducted with SRLs before the Center opened and discussed in the first section of this report. While not surprising, these findings underscore the challenge faced by GBSHC staff members in educating a client base made up of people who may erroneously believe they understand both the law and their cases.

### Persons Ineligible for Center Services

From January 2010 through June 2011, GBSHC staff members logged 69 cases that were ineligible to receive assistance from the Center. Of these, 9 cases were ineligible because the client was already represented by an attorney and another 12 had case types, such as criminal, traffic, circuit or federal court cases that were ineligible for Center services. Others were ineligible for a variety of additional reasons, including involvement in circumstances that had no

legal remedy. GBSHC staff members recorded some kind of referral for 51 of these ineligible cases. Most commonly, referrals were made to a private attorney (18), the Anne Arundel Lawyer Referral Service (8), or the legal advice line (7). A variety of referrals were made to the remaining persons or entities, including to another legal service provider (4), the Office of the Public Defender (2), and the YWCA (2). The self-reported intake data on these ineligible cases showed them to be slightly more likely to be females and to have slightly lower average levels of income and educational attainment when compared to those receiving services.

Very limited information was available on another group of persons who came to the Center and were found to be ineligible for services. As described previously, upon first arriving at the Center, prospective clients complete a computer-based intake questionnaire. If they are determined eligible, they are given an opportunity to meet with a GBSHC staff member, who reports on the visit. A total of 484 persons had intake data, but no visit log. Most of these cases were likely determined to be ineligible, however they may also include small numbers of people who chose not to wait to meet with a GBSHC staff person (despite the evidence that long waits for GBSHC services are rare), or simply changed their mind about obtaining assistance. This group also includes some cases that could not be matched to a log entry due to a data entry error. Based on their self-reported intake data, this group was also somewhat more likely to be female (60 percent) compared to those that attended GBSHC sessions (53 percent), but was otherwise similar to those receiving services.

### *Profile of SHC Clients*

Unlike the findings on GBSHC visits reported elsewhere in this section, the profile information presented here is specific to 4,771 GBSHC clients (many of whom, as discussed above, had multiple visits to the Center, accounting for the total of 6,071 visits). Men and women sought GBSHC services with approximately the same frequency, with women accounting for 54 percent of all clients. Fifty-three percent of GBSHC clients were white, 29 percent were African-American, while Latinos accounted for 4 percent of clients and Asian/Pacific Islanders accounted for 3 percent of clients. Native Americans and “other” race were reported by four percent of clients. Six percent of the clients preferred not to report their race or ethnicity.

**Figure 15. Percent of GBSHC Clients Reporting Highest Grade Completed**

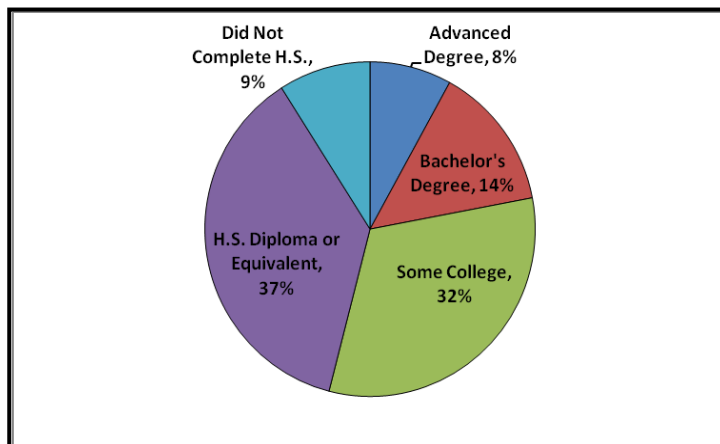
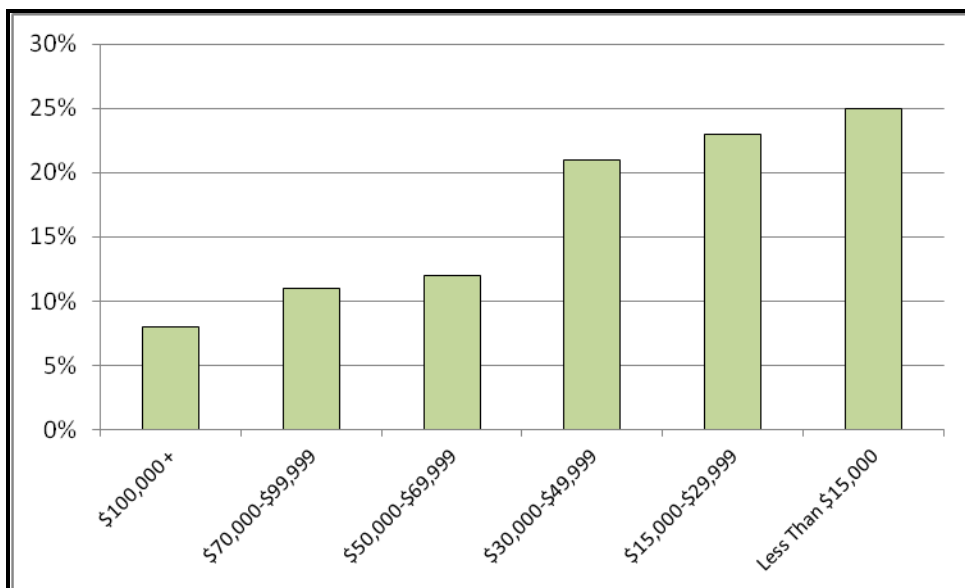


Figure 15 represents the education level breakdown for GBSHC clients. Nine percent of GBSHC clients had less than a high school education, and 37 percent had received a high school education. A little over half (53 percent) of the clients reported pursuing education beyond a high school diploma, and 22 percent of the clients had received their bachelor’s degree or an advanced degree. As can be seen in Figure 16, over half (52%) of Center clients reported an annual

household income above \$30,000, and roughly one-third were from households with annual incomes of \$50,000 or greater. One in four clients lived in households with annual incomes less than \$15,000. Over 80% of GBSHC clients reported household income below the median household for Anne Arundel County of \$79,843.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 16. Percent of GBSHC Clients Reporting Annual Household Income**



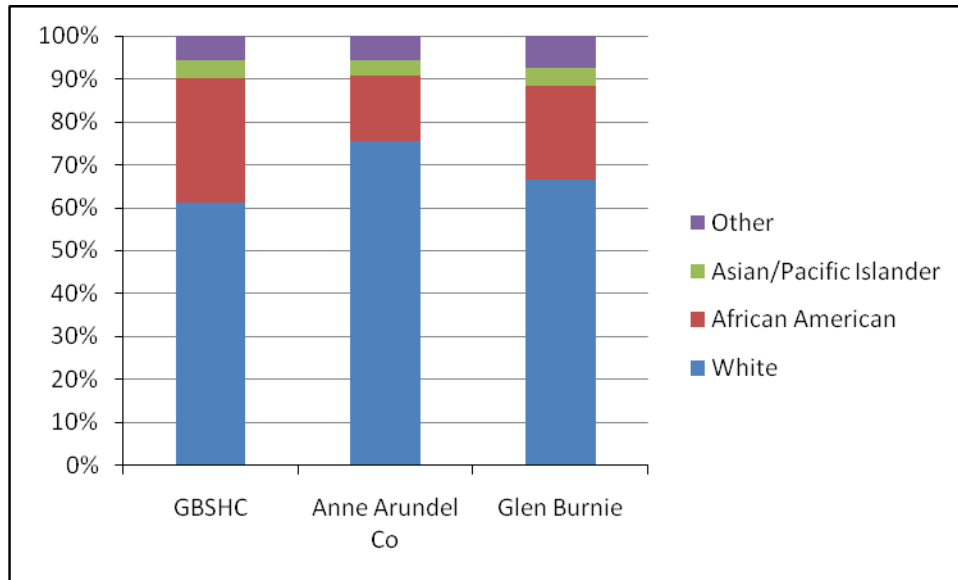
### Comparisons with the Anne Arundel County and Glen Burnie Resident Populations

Direct comparisons of GBSHC client characteristics with those of other GBDC users were not possible since demographic data are not collected on litigants involved in District Court civil cases. Instead, data from the 2010 U.S. Census<sup>7</sup> were reviewed to assess the extent to which GBSHC clients are representative of the local resident population. Since the GBDC is used by residents throughout Anne Arundel County, comparisons were conducted with both the county as a whole and Glen Burnie specifically. Before drawing comparisons, it must be noted that anecdotal evidence suggests that users of the civil District Court tend to be of a lower socioeconomic status—lower income, less education—and disproportionately people of color relative to the local population. Unfortunately, while there is widespread consensus on this matter, quantitative studies on the characteristics of litigants involved in District Court civil cases, or comparisons of these litigants with other groups or populations were not found for the current study.

<sup>6</sup> 2009 median household income reported for Anne Arundel County by the U.S. Census Bureau.

<sup>7</sup> [http://planning.maryland.gov/msdc/census/cen2010/PL94-171/place/Place\\_TotPop2010Share.pdf](http://planning.maryland.gov/msdc/census/cen2010/PL94-171/place/Place_TotPop2010Share.pdf);  
<http://censtats.census.gov/data/MD/1602432650.pdf>

**Figure 17. Racial Distribution of GBSHC Clients and Residents of Anne Arundel County and Glen Burnie**

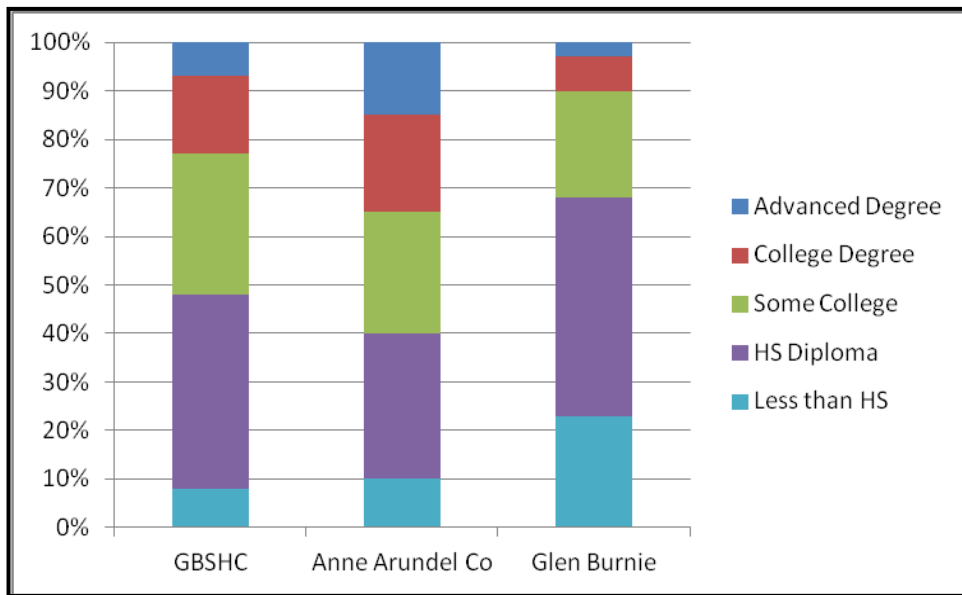


As seen in Figure 17, although the proportions of whites, African-Americans, and other racial groups are similar for GBSHC clients and Anne Arundel and Glen Burnie residents, whites are slightly underrepresented among GBSHC users (61.2 percent) compared to their numbers in Anne Arundel (75.4 percent) and Glen Burnie (66.4 percent). Conversely, African-Americans account for 29.1 percent of GBSHC clients compared with their representation in Anne Arundel County (15.5 percent) and Glen Burnie (22.0 percent). A smaller proportion of clients who identified themselves as Hispanic were clients of GBSHC (4.9 percent) compared to the percentage of residents identifying themselves as Hispanic in both Anne Arundel County (7.9 percent) and Glen Burnie (6.1 percent). Asian/Pacific Islanders appear to be represented in similar proportions across the county (3.5 percent), city, and Center (4.2 percent in both).

GBSHC clients show higher educational achievement than Glen Burnie residents, and their educational backgrounds more closely resemble those of Anne Arundel County residents as a whole. A little less than half (45.7 percent) of SHC clients have a high school education or less, compared with 62.3 percent of Glen Burnie residents and 41.5 percent of Anne Arundel County residents. Figure 18 provides graphic representation of these comparisons. Graduates of college or those holding a more advanced degree account for 23 percent of SHC clients, as compared with 11 percent of those living in Glen Burnie and 31 percent of those living in Anne Arundel County.

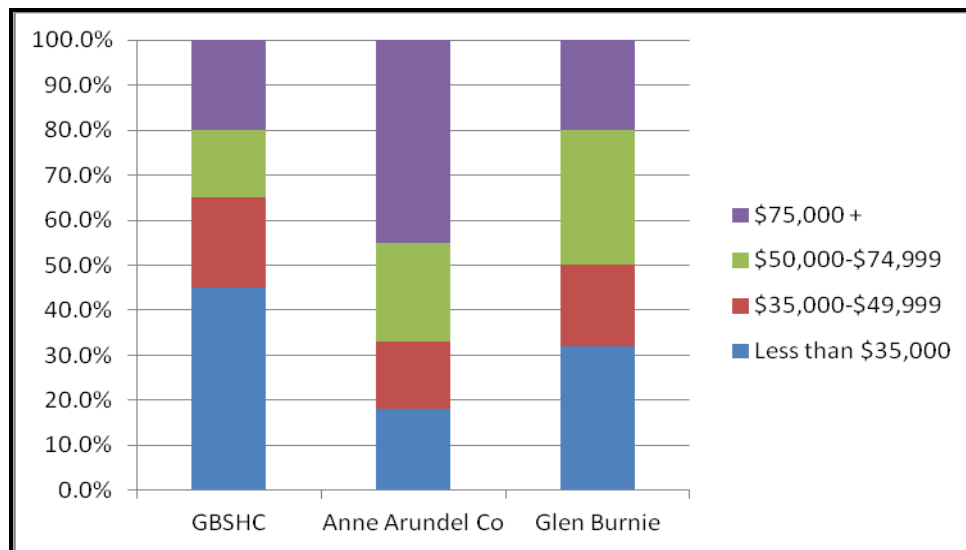


**Figure 18. Education Level of GBSHC Clients and Residents of Anne Arundel County and Glen Burnie**



Varying somewhat from the educational background data, as indicated in Figure 19, GBSHC clients reported lower annual household incomes compared with local residents. About two-thirds (68.0 percent) of GBSHC clients reported incomes under \$50,000 as compared to 55.2 percent of Glen Burnie residents and 38 percent of Anne Arundel County residents.

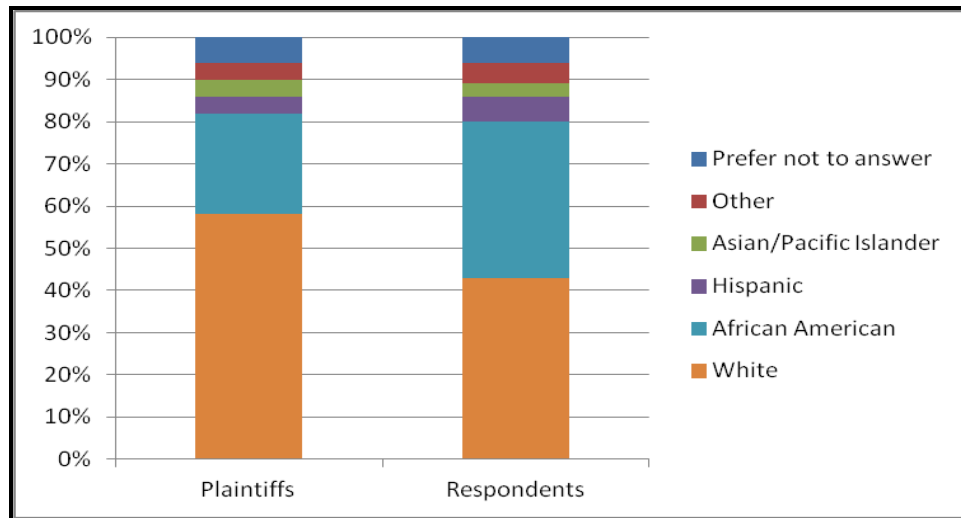
**Figure 19. Household Income of GBSHC Clients and Residents of Anne Arundel County and Glen Burnie**



### Client Characteristics by Plaintiff/Respondent

Females marginally outnumbered the males who visited GBSHC among both plaintiffs (54 percent of whom were females) and respondents (53 percent female). As indicated in Figure 20, racial/ethnic differences between plaintiffs and respondents visiting the Center were more marked. Whites accounted for 58 percent of the plaintiffs compared with 43 percent of the respondents. In contrast, African Americans accounted for a larger proportion of respondents (37 percent) than plaintiffs (24 percent) visiting the center. Latinos accounted for six percent of respondents and four percent of plaintiffs, and Asian/Pacific Islanders made up four percent of the plaintiffs and three percent of respondents. Persons electing to not report race/ethnicity accounted for six percent of the plaintiffs and six percent of respondents.

**Figure 20. Race/Ethnicity of GBSHC Clients by Plaintiff/Respondent**



□

**Figure 21. Education Level of GBSHC Clients by Plaintiff/Respondent**

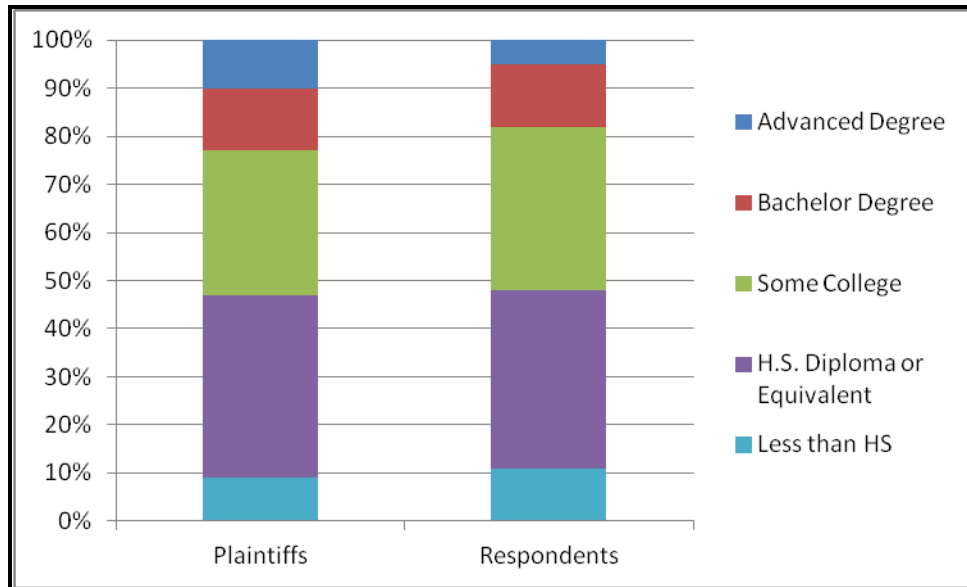


Figure 21 represents a comparison of the education level between plaintiffs and respondents at GBSHC. Educational achievement was slightly greater among plaintiffs, 54 percent of whom had some college education or higher compared to 51 percent of the respondents who had at least some college attendance. One in four plaintiffs had either a bachelors or advanced degree compared to one in five respondents, and 49 percent of the respondents had a high school education or less compared to 46 percent of the plaintiffs.

GBSHC plaintiffs reported higher annual household incomes than respondents, with just under one-fourth (22 percent) of the plaintiffs reporting a household income exceeding \$70,000 annually. About half this number of respondents (11 percent) indicated a comparable household income. Nearly one-third (30 percent) of respondents were in the lowest annual income bracket (\$15,000 or less) recorded on the client log, while 21 percent of the plaintiffs reported this level of income. Comparable proportions of clients in both groups (57 percent and 59 percent for plaintiffs and respondents, respectively) reported income in the middle range (between \$15,000 and \$69,999). Taken together, these findings show that, on average, plaintiffs who use the Center have higher incomes and education levels than respondents, and that there is a subgroup of plaintiffs using the Center who are notably more affluent and educated than the local population of Glen Burnie residents.

### Repeat Clients

Given that repeat clients accounted for nearly a third of all visits to the Center, analyses were conducted to explore whether repeat clients differed from other GBSHC clients. Due to confidentiality concerns, it was not possible to link repeat clients across visits, and therefore to identify the first visit and construct a comparison group of clients who visited only once. As a

result, this analysis was necessarily limited to a comparison of the repeat clients and all clients (which included the repeaters); the results of the comparisons thus understate any differences between the two groups. Repeat clients were slightly more likely to be male than the full client group (49 percent compared to 46 percent), but were otherwise similar on demographic characteristics. There were also slightly more plaintiffs in the repeater group (67 percent) compared to all clients (64 percent), and among landlord-tenant cases, the proportion of landlords was somewhat higher among repeaters (60 percent) than all visitors (54 percent).

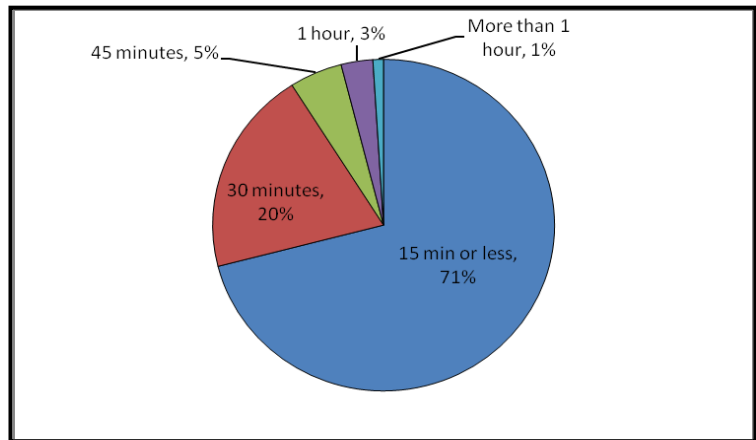
## *Self-Help Center Services*

### **Duration of Legal Assistance Sessions**

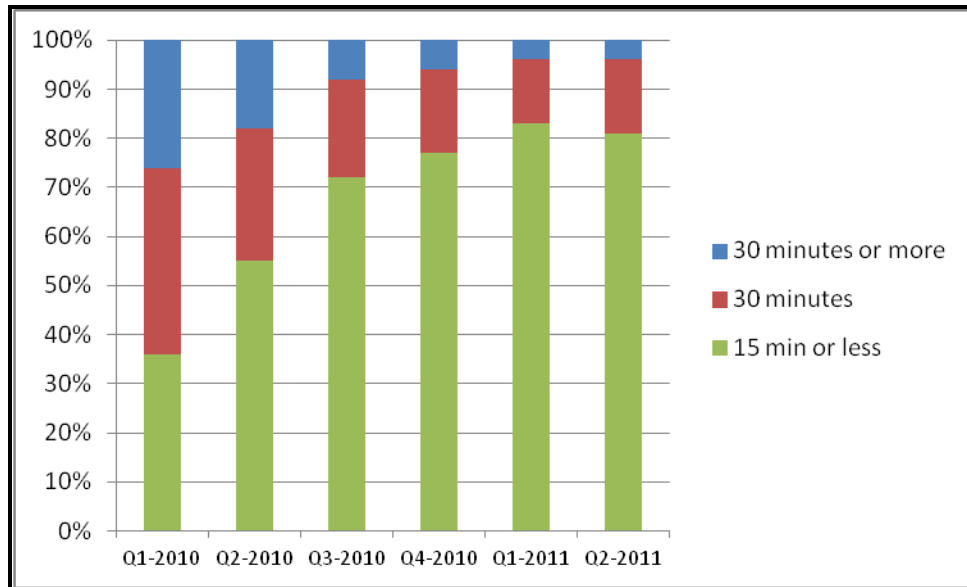
Figure 22 represents a breakdown of the duration of client assistance sessions at GBSHC. Averaged across the 18-month data collection period, over two-thirds (71 percent) of the SHC sessions with clients lasted for 15 minutes or less, and 20 percent lasted about 30 minutes. Staff members spent an hour or more with four percent of the clients.

Examination of the duration figures shows that the length of sessions has changed considerably over time. As can be seen in Figure 23, during the first full quarter of GBSHC operations, staff were more likely to spend about 30 minutes in each session (38 percent of all sessions) than 15 minutes or less (35 percent). By the second quarter, shorter (15 minutes or less) sessions were in the majority (53 percent). Sessions of 15 minutes or shorter became increasingly common until their numbers leveled off in late 2010 to account for roughly 80 percent of all sessions through the rest of the data collection period. The proportion of sessions that lasted more than 30 minutes went from 26 percent of all visits in the first quarter of 2010 to less than ten percent, and over the final half of the monitoring period averaged about five percent of all sessions.

**Figure 22. Duration of GBSHC Client Assistance Sessions**



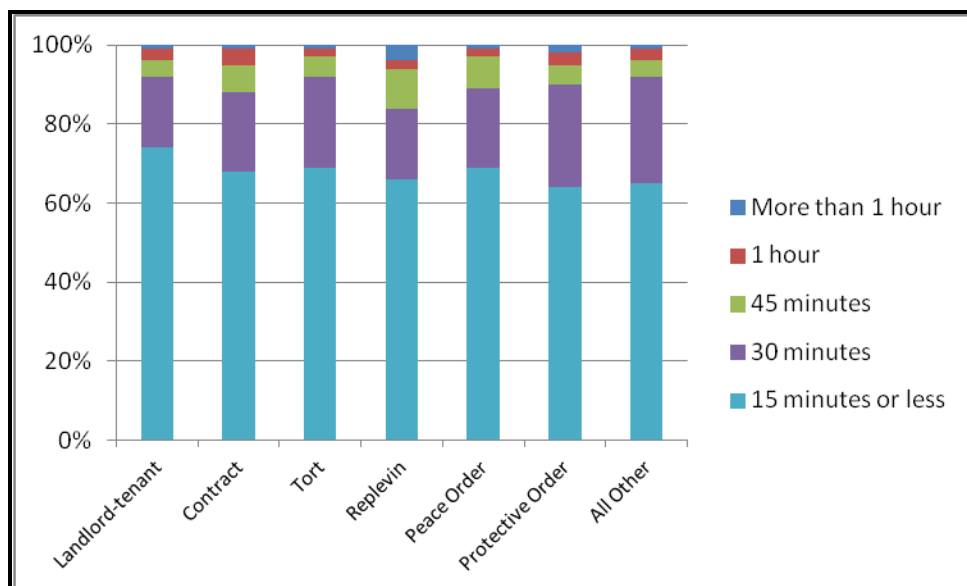
**Figure 23. Duration of GBSHC Client Assistance Sessions by Quarter**



**Duration of Assistance Sessions by Type of Case**

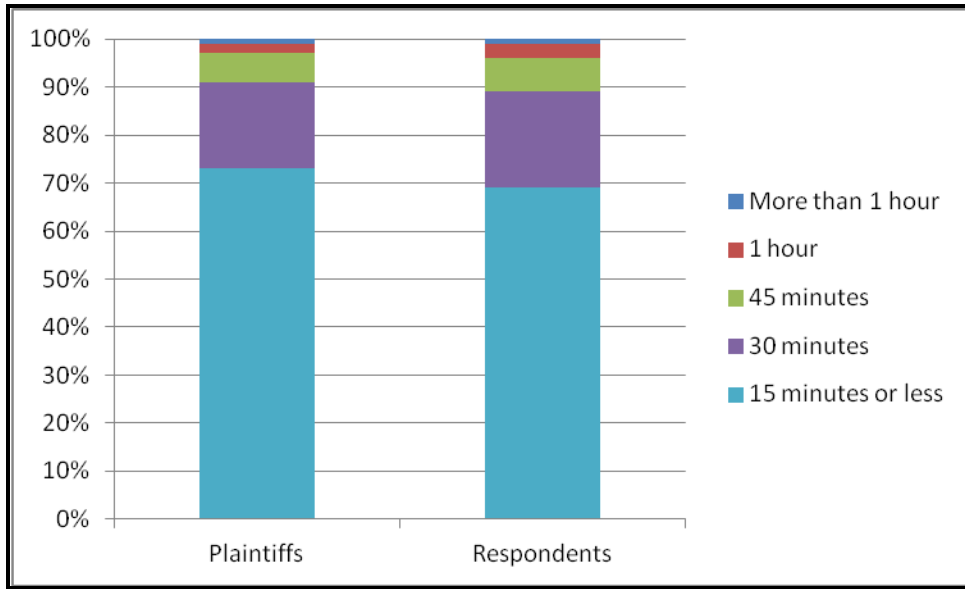
There were moderate differences in the amount of time GBSHC staff members spent with clients based on case type. On average, staff members spent the most amount of time with protective order cases, with 37 percent of the clients seen for 30 minutes or more. Landlord-tenants cases typically had the shortest sessions, with staff averaging 30 minutes or more with 26% of these clients. Figure 24 summarizes these findings.

**Figure 24. Duration of GBSHC Client Assistance Sessions by Case Type**



As can be seen in Figure 25, there was little difference in the length of assistance sessions spent with respondents and plaintiffs. Staff members spent 30 minutes or more with 31 percent of respondents compared to 28 percent of plaintiffs, and 1 hour or more with five percent of respondents compared to four percent of the plaintiffs.

**Figure 25. Duration of GBSHC Client Assistance Sessions for Plaintiffs and Respondents**



With landlord-tenant cases, GBSHC staff members spent slightly more time in sessions assisting tenants. Over four-fifths (81 percent) of the sessions with landlords lasted 15 minutes or less compared to 73 percent of the tenants who were seen for 15 minutes or less. GBSHC staff spent an hour or more with four percent of the tenants and two percent of the landlords. A comparison of the duration of assistance sessions with landlords and tenants is represented in Figure 26.

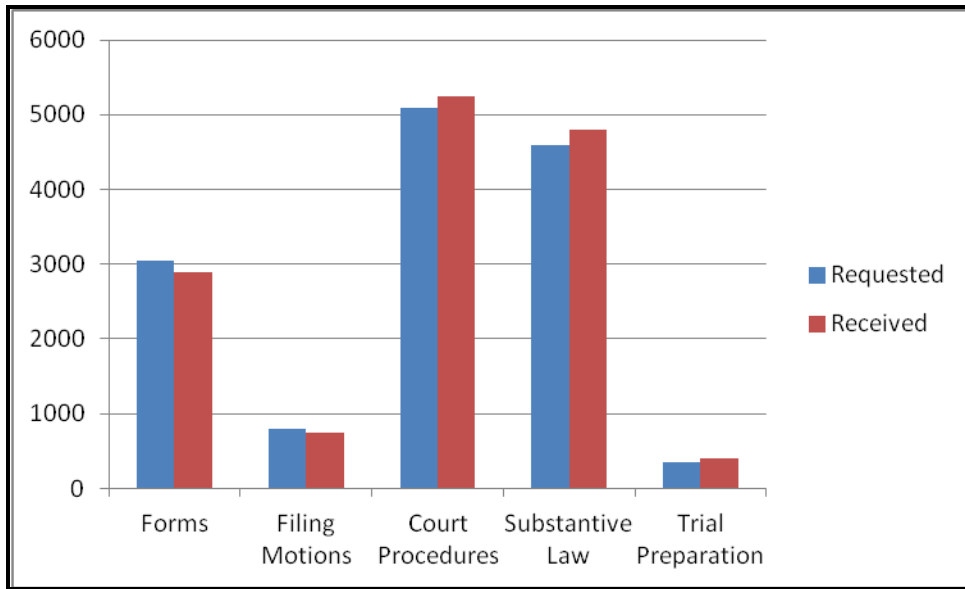
**Figure 26. Duration of GBSHC Client Assistance Sessions for Landlords and Tenants**



### **Types of Services**

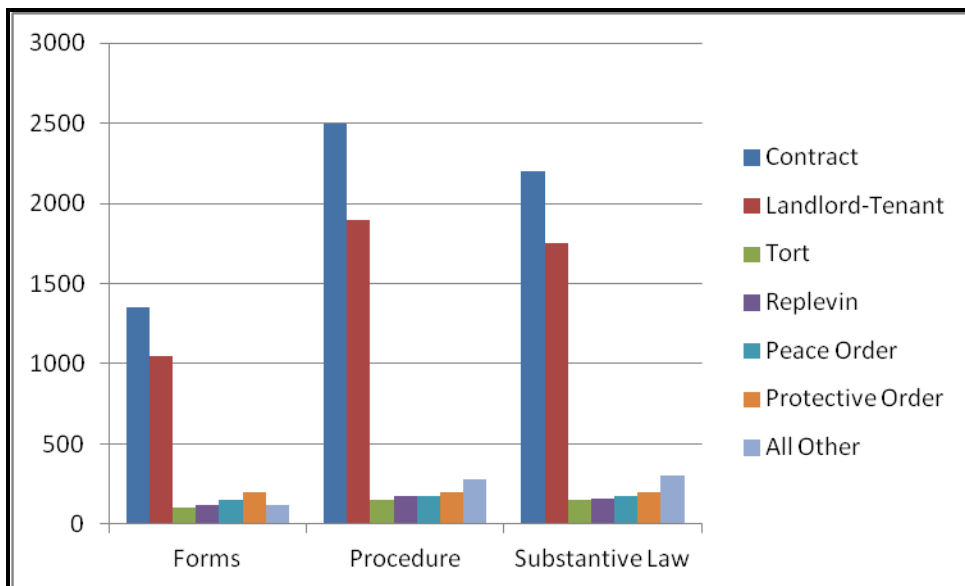
Figure 27 represents the numbers of five types of services requested and received by GBSHC clients. Session logs completed by GBSHC staff members showed that clients visiting the Center most often stated they were seeking assistance with court procedures (72 percent), issues with substantive law (65 percent), and help filing/filling out forms (43 percent). Staff members also recorded the types of assistance they provided to clients. The most common service was assistance with procedural matters, provided in three-fourths of all GBSHC visits. A similar number (68 percent of all visits) was provided assistance with substantive law questions. In 42 percent of visits, clients received assistance with legal forms. Fewer clients received assistance filing motions or with trial preparation. The majority (97 percent) of clients requesting assistance with specific issues received assistance with those issues.

**Figure 27. Types of Assistance Requested and Received by GBSHC Clients**



As can be seen in Figure 28, there were no notable differences in the types of assistance requested by clients or provided by GBSHC based on case type.

**Figure 28. Number of Cases by Case Type and Type of Assistance Provided by GBSHC**



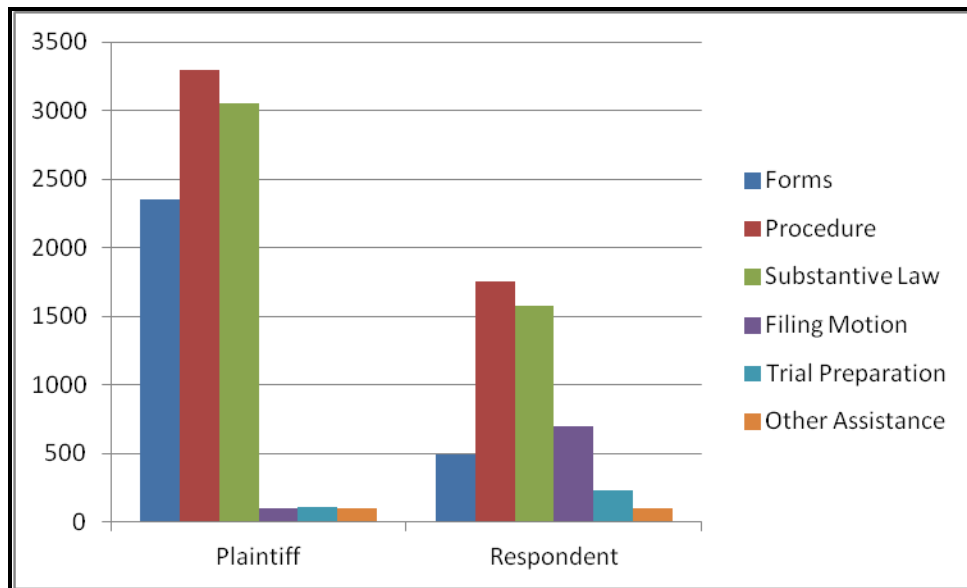
### Types of Service by Plaintiff/Respondent

The types of assistance provided by GBSHC varied based on whether the client was a plaintiff or respondent. As indicated in Figure 29, both plaintiffs and respondents received the



most assistance with procedural issues (77 percent and 73 percent respectively) followed by substantive law questions (71 percent and 65 percent respectively). Plaintiffs next received assistance most frequently for help with forms (55 percent) while respondents got aid filing motions (26 percent). Types of services requested by plaintiffs and respondents did not differ from those provided by GBSHC staff. For plaintiffs the most common request was for procedural issues (74 percent), substantive law (67 percent), and filling out forms (58 percent), while the most common requests made by respondents were for procedural issues (70 percent), substantive law (62 percent), and filing motions (26 percent).

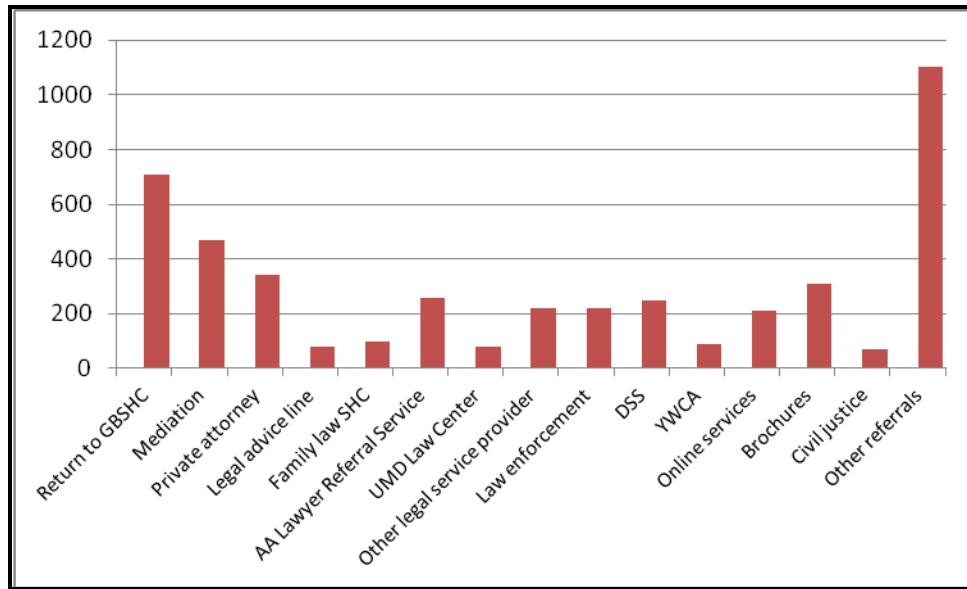
**Figure 29. Type of Assistance Provided by GBSHC by Plaintiff and Respondent**



### Referrals to SHC Clients

GBSHC staff members recorded referrals in a little over half (3,746, or 53 percent) of all visits to the Center, and multiple referrals were often made, totaling 4,565 referrals during the 18-month tracking period. As evidenced in Figure 30, staff members made a variety of referrals, and no single referral type was common. Most prevalent, occurring in 10 percent of visits, was referral to return to GBSHC for follow-up visits (usually to bring in more information or paperwork). The next most common referrals were to mediation (seven percent), to a private attorney (five percent), and to brochures made available by GBSHC and the District Court on a variety of topics (five percent). While staff members could check more than a dozen referral types on the data collection form, almost one-quarter (24 percent) of those recorded were for some type of referral other than those on the form.

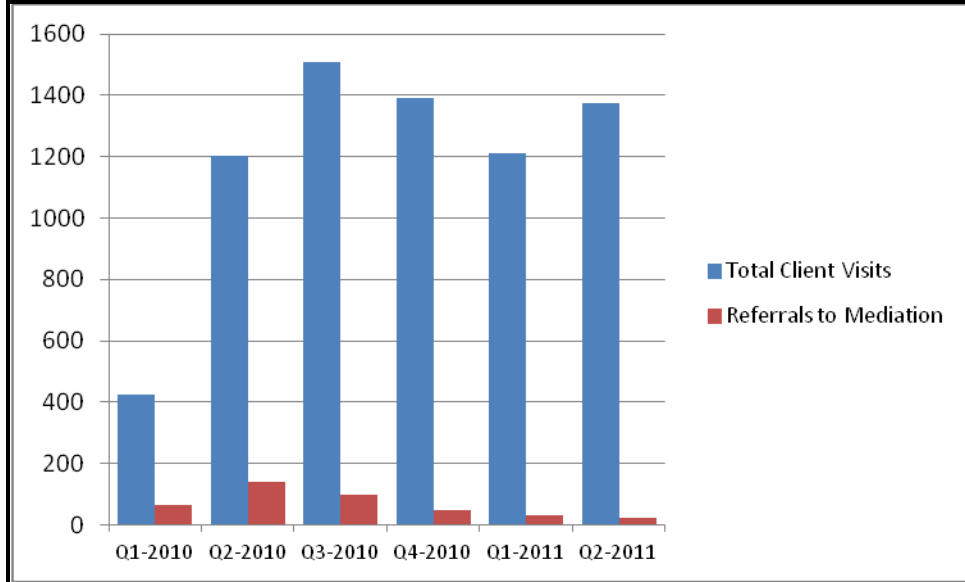
**Figure 30. Number of Referrals Made by GBSHC by Type**



### Referrals to Mediation

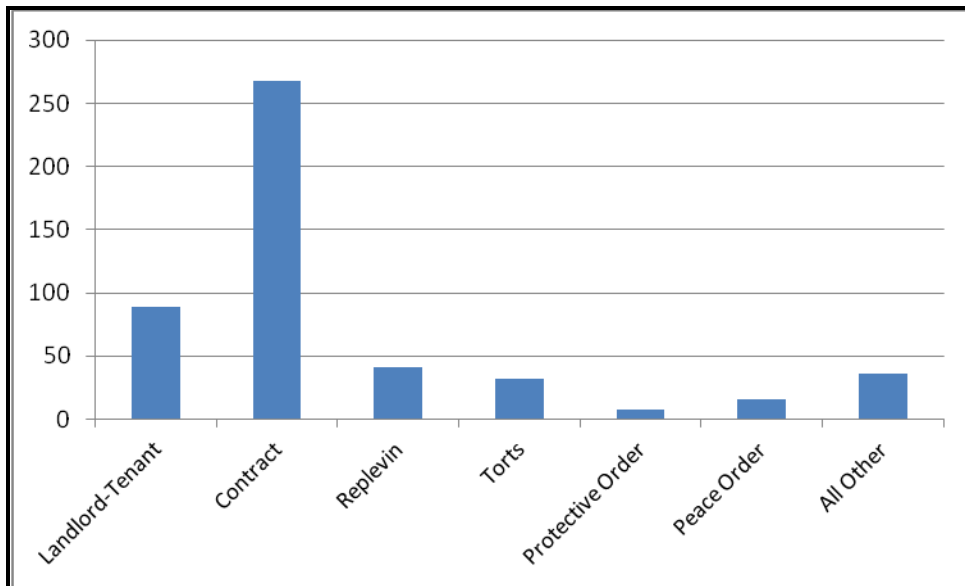
In spite of the interest expressed in mediation by staff members, GBSHC made relatively few referrals to mediation or alternative dispute resolution (ADR)—in just seven percent of all visits, and just ten percent of all referrals made. As is evident from Figure 31, the numbers of referrals to mediation have declined each quarter from a high in the second quarter of 2010 (144). When viewed as a percentage of visits, mediation referrals were highest in the first two quarters of GBSHC operation at 15 percent and 12 percent and have since decreased. In the last quarter of 2011, two percent of the clients who visited GBSHC were referred to mediation.

**Figure 31. Number of Referrals to Mediation Made by GBSHC by Quarter**



As shown in Figure 32, of 459 cases referred to mediation from January 2010 through June 2011, most were for contract issues (268 or 58 percent). The lack of ADR referrals for peace and protective orders is consistent with the nature of those cases, where emotions may prevent the parties from considering mediation; however, no such intuitive explanation is readily apparent in accounting for the scant use of ADR for landlord/tenant or contract cases. These data confirm qualitative indicators that mediation may be underused by the Center, and might suggest that it is considered appropriate in contract cases much more than in other types of cases.

**Figure 32. Number of GBSHC Clients Referred to Mediation by Case Type**



## Interview and Survey Results

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### *Results from Self-Help Center Staff, Stakeholders, and GBDC Clerks*

#### **Interview and Survey Methods and Sample**

Researchers interviewed and surveyed GBSHC managers and other staff members, stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of the Center, and court personnel working at the Glen Burnie District Court. Participants were recruited for the voluntary interview and survey following a protocol approved by the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to more than an hour and addressed GBSHC planning, goals, service capacity, operating effectiveness, and growth. Surveys solicited respondent opinions on these and similar topics, employing items that quantified their views on five-point scales. While most of the same interview and survey questions were asked of all respondents, there were additional questions asked of GBSHC staff members. GBDC clerks were given fewer and, in some cases, slightly different questions. All interviews and surveys were voluntary and confidential, meaning that respondents were told that their identity would not be attached to answers. Interviews were conducted either by telephone or in a private office location at the Glen Burnie District Courthouse, with the individual interviewee and one or two researchers. The survey could be completed via a secure online internet connection or in hardcopy form; in either case, respondents remained anonymous.

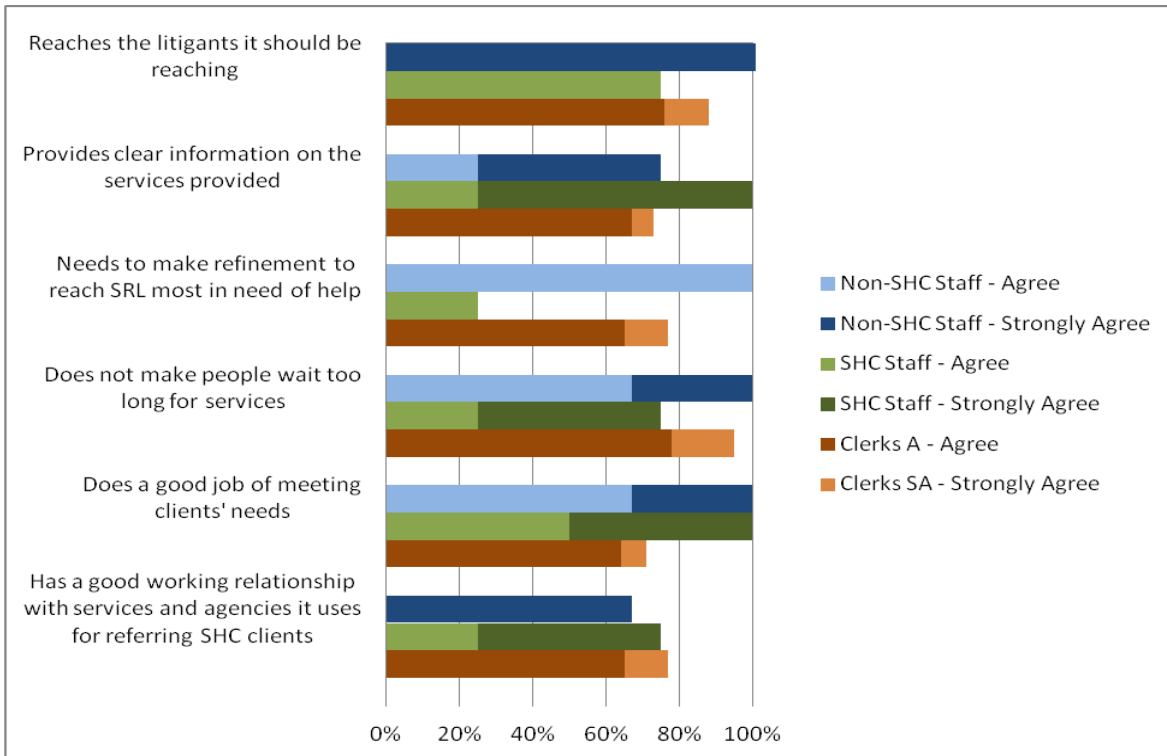
All four GBSHC staff members participated in interviews and completed the staff survey. In addition to the supervising attorney who managed the Center onsite, the chief attorney of the Legal Aid Bureau responsible for oversight of GBSHC was also interviewed. Eleven other stakeholders and members of the GBSHC advisory committee, including the Chief Judge of the District Court, the Administrative Judge for the Anne Arundel District Court, two GBDC judges, the Executive Director of the Maryland Access to Justice Commission, the Executive Director of District Court's ADR programs, three senior administrative clerks of the District Court, and two GBDC clerks; four of these individuals completed surveys. In addition to the clerk interviews, 15 GBDC clerks, including four bench clerks, completed surveys. Despite multiple requests for their participation, four judges who hear substantial numbers of cases in GBDC elected not to take part in the interviews or surveys.

#### **Staff, Stakeholder Survey Results**

Notable results from scaled survey items are shown in Figures 33, 34 and 35. These bar charts show the average scale score for each of the three groups of respondents. Caution should be used in interpreting these results in that only 15 respondents completed the surveys. Nonetheless, the findings are useful in that they indicate consistency across the groups, with what might be seen as predictable differences between the groups. Respondents expressed positive views about GBSHC's capacity to provide services and integrate with Glen Burnie

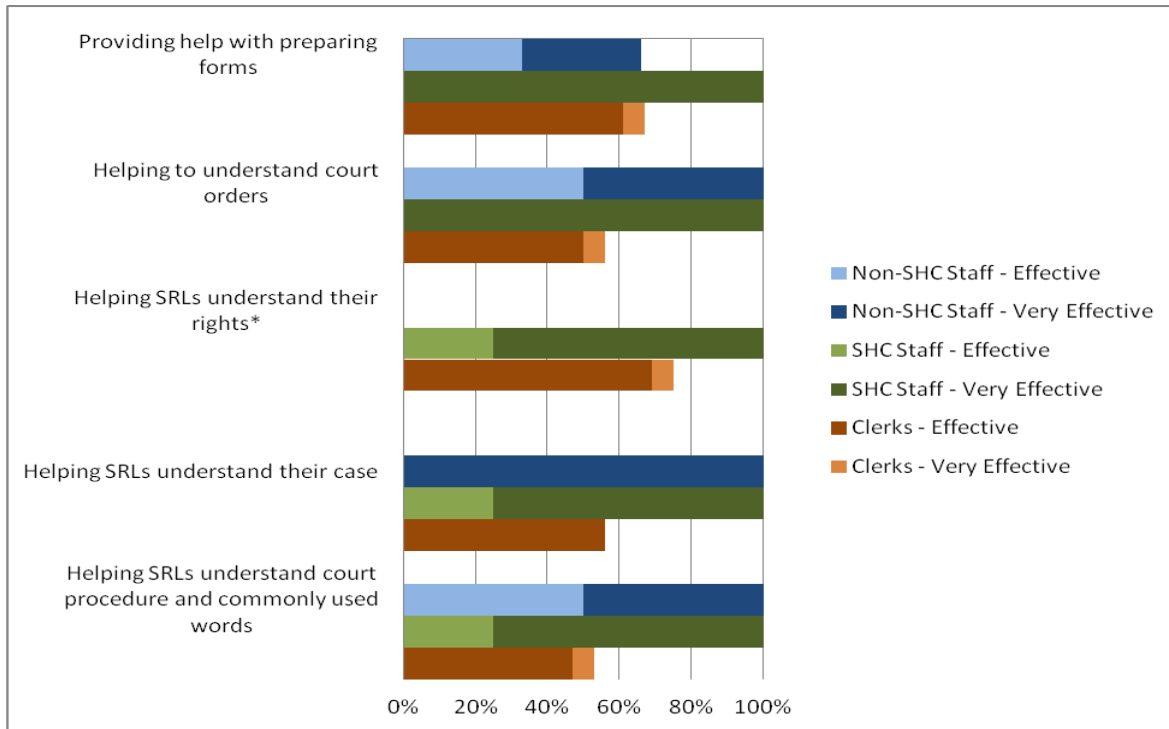
District Court. Not surprisingly, GBSHC staff members tended to be most favorable, while District Court clerks were comparatively less positive. This pattern of findings across the different types of stakeholders involved in self-help centers has been found in previous SHC evaluations (Collins & Grecean, 2004; Empirical Research Group, 2001).

**Figure 33. Survey Responses Concerning the Effectiveness of GBSHC**



Figures 33 and 34 display perceptions of how effective GBSHC is in key areas. In Figure 33, the lighter section of each bar represents the percentage of respondents agreeing with the statement and the darker section shows the percentage that strongly agreed. Across the groups, close to 90 percent of the survey respondents agreed that GBSHC reaches the clients it should reach and that it does not make people wait too long for services. About 70 percent of the clerks and all of the staff and stakeholders responded that the Center does a good job of meeting litigants' needs. A statement about the quality of relationships between the GBSHC and the services and agencies used for referrals received the most favorable response from clerks; while also generally positive, stakeholder and staff views on this item suggest it may be an area for improvement. One area where there was less agreement concerned whether the GBSHC should change tactics to reach people most in need. While just one GBSHC staff member agreed that refinements were needed to reach self-represented litigants most in need, all four stakeholders felt such efforts were needed, as did about 75 percent of the clerks. This may reflect themes raised in the interviews about plaintiffs being much more likely to be proactive in the court and in seeking assistance than defendants (see below).

**Figure 34. Survey Responses Concerning the Effectiveness of GBSHC by Service Provided**

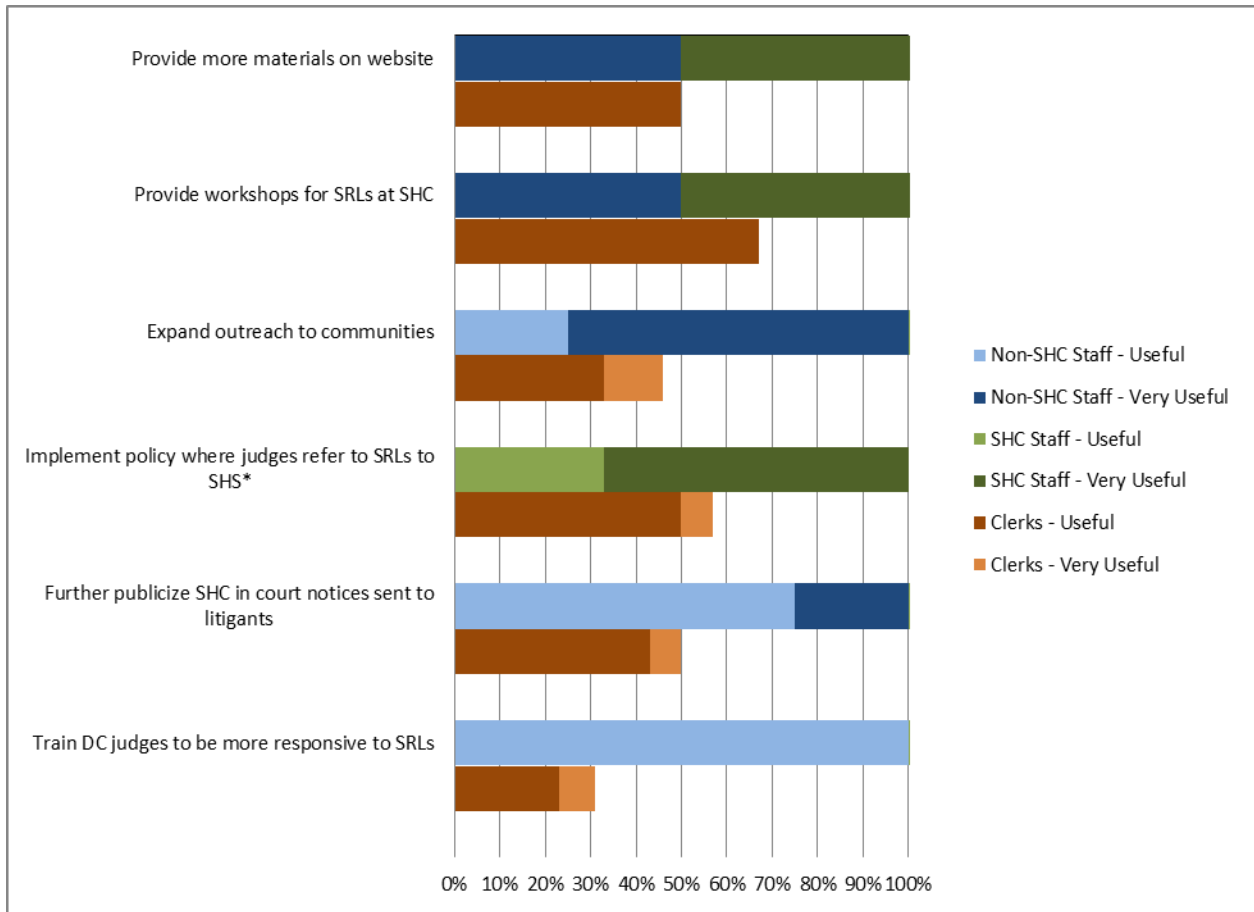


\*This item was not included in the stakeholder survey.

Respondents’ views on the Center’s effectiveness in providing services and addressing access to justice goals are shown in Figure 34. In all of these areas, nearly all the staff and stakeholders gave the SHC positive marks, with two to four respondents in each group saying the Center was “very effective.” District Court clerks, who may be in the best position to assess the practical impact of GBSHC assistance because they field questions and distribute paperwork before and after court appearances, were somewhat less positive on these items. Across the items, about 60 percent of the clerks judged the Center effective or very effective. Roughly half of the clerks judged GBSHC as effective in areas related to litigant understanding of their cases, court orders, and court procedure. Three-fourths of the clerks thought the Center was effective in helping SRLs understand their rights, and about two-thirds judged them as effective in assisting litigants with forms.

Survey results suggest that most stakeholders see GBSHC as integrated with the District Court operation in Glen Burnie, with the Center staff most optimistic in this regard. Those dissenting from this view noted that GBSHC was not fully responsive to the needs and concerns of its partners. Nearly all respondents indicated that GBSHC has yet to produce educational materials (or videos or workshops) that can provide information to clients beyond face-to-face services and existing brochures.

**Figure 35. Survey Responses Regarding Areas in Need of Improvement at GBSHC**



\*This item was not included in the stakeholder survey.

Regarding the suggested need for more educational material, all GBSHC staff members and half of other stakeholders would like to see materials developed to expand service delivery options including web-based materials, videos and workshop curricula. Stakeholders’ opinions about how GBSHC could be improved are represented in Figure 35. The interest of GBSHC staff members in expanding and improving services is evident in these results. The tendency of the staff members to look toward service enhancement contrasts somewhat with the views of the other two groups (stakeholders and clerks), which rated expanding services or service capacity (e.g., workshops, web-based materials, tutorials, Spanish-language services) as less useful. Some of this reluctance to support service enhancements, particularly among District Court stakeholders, may reflect concerns about the budgetary and administrative consequences that may result.

Differences among the groups were also apparent in respondents’ choices for the two or three areas for improvement that should be given highest priority. Clerks named familiar areas—

improved assistance in completing forms, understanding procedures, understanding court orders—as priorities. Stakeholders identified increased outreach efforts and more use of publicity attached to court notices as top priorities. In contrast, GBSHC staff members appeared to exhibit a more expansive view, supporting the use of workshops and tutorials, as well as expanding outreach through training judges and other court personnel about GBSHC and on working with SRLs generally, indicating an interest in distributing responsibility for addressing the needs of these litigants across court staff rather than solely through GBSHC.

Another set of survey items addressed to GBSHC staff members and stakeholders (but not clerks) pertained to perceptions about which GBSHC goals are appropriate and attainable. There was consensus among these respondents that process-oriented goals such as reducing hearing times or changing hearing outcomes were not necessarily attainable goals for GBSHC. Consistent with the findings reported above, however, goals associated with improving litigant understanding and increasing litigant ability to comply with court requirements were embraced by respondents. The stakeholder group was more likely to view GBSHC as a vehicle for increasing the use of mediation than were GBSHC staff members. Respondents demonstrated an apparent lack of enthusiasm for a goal associated with procedural fairness—increasing litigant perceptions that the court is fair. This is notable given that most of the other identified goals are indeed associated with procedural fairness in that they target litigant understanding, rather than court administration.

### Staff, Stakeholder Interview Results

The open-ended interviews offered GBSHC staff members and other stakeholders opportunities to discuss the planning, implementation, and growth of the Center in depth and in their own words. The interviews, taken together, provide support and context for the quantitative findings. Interview respondents highlighted the successful collaboration involved in developing the Center, GBSHC’s focus on helping litigants better understand the court and their cases, and the challenge of developing the GBSHC mission. Table 1 shows domains, themes, and implications explored in the interviews. The domains are discussed individually below the table. They are: planning; mission; client eligibility and needs; service structure and procedure; services; mediation and referrals; outreach; and replication.

**Table 1. Domains and Themes from Staff and Stakeholder Interviews**

| <b>Domain</b>   | <b>Theme</b>   | <b>Recommendations</b>  |
|-----------------|--|---|
| <b>Planning</b> | Strong leadership reassures staff and stakeholders but reduces opportunities for input, sense of ownership | Increase involvement of stakeholders, staff in development to enhance sense of collaboration, coordination between daily operations management and systemic planning. |
|                 | Steep learning curve for staff at start up   |   |
|                 | Development of space in partnership with local managers could maximize resources                           | Identify areas (e.g., law, resources, how to focus clients) where staff would benefit from training modules   |



| <b>Domain</b>                          | <b>Theme</b>   | <b>Recommendations</b>   |
|--|--|--|
|  | and make a welcoming and useful space  | prior to inception.  |
| <b>Mission</b>                         | Strong vision of SHC potential   | Specify priorities between serving more people, service quality, and reaching SRLs most in need  |
|  | Tension between serving the maximum number of SRLs, offering the maximum benefit to those seen, and reaching SRLs in greatest need | Identify services that can be best served without legal counsel  |
| <b>Client Eligibility and Needs</b>    | Consensus that there should be few, if any limits on client eligibility  | Align eligibility with core mission regarding intake and scope of services   |
|  | Appears to be little need on site for non-English language services  |  |
|  | Tenants more likely to be alienated and not make use of SHC  | Assess language needs in some systematic manner  |
|  | Possible need for expungement assistance   |  |
| <b>Service Structure and Procedure</b> | Effort to see everyone who comes in; SHC capacity defined largely by daily demand  | <p>Assess utility of developing priority system at intake</p> <p>Assess costs and benefits of developing and staffing pro bono position</p> <p>Encourage more judicial engagement</p> <p>Establish and document model of service including intake, case review and exit instructions provided to SRL</p> |
|  | Need for additional pro bono assistance and/or unbundled services recognized but would require resources, coordinator              |  |
|  | Preference that SHC is on site in courthouse, but difficulties in finding and managing space in court buildings                    |  |
|  | Local judicial awareness of SHC, and of judges' role and interest in SHC not clear   |  |
|  | Recognized need to develop procedures manual   |  |
| <b>Services</b>                        | Need to assist SRLs to focus on, understand, and in some cases set priorities for their cases                                      | Expand materials such as posters in waiting room, sample completed forms with explanations, descriptions of which forms; website; video)   |
|  | Need to prepare SRLs for what to expect in court   |  |
|  | Need to follow up with SRLs  |  |
| <b>Mediation</b>                       | Mediation supported by staff and   | Assess feasibility of training SHC staff   |

| <b>Domain</b>        | <b>Theme</b>   | <b>Recommendations</b>  |
|----------------------|--|---|
| <b>and Referrals</b> | stakeholders but not widely used   | as mediator specialist  |
|                      | Early miscommunication about nature of mediation   | Provide additional ADR materials, presentations and/or training to articulate use of mediation  |
|                      | Desire for mediator on site, but not feasible given limited ADR resources  |   |
| <b>Outreach</b>      | Recognized importance and challenges of outreach<br>No single responsibility for developing outreach                   | Assess outreach strategy and options<br>Determine who is responsible for outreach   |
| <b>Replication</b>   | Space as a central concern, more than size of dockets  | Rely on well-established SHC to provide strong model for replication<br>Develop full procedures manual to assist in replication<br>Obtain early input and buy-in from courthouse stakeholders |
|                      | Working with District Court administration to develop space while working with AOC administration to develop a new SHC |   |
|                      | Effect of culture on planning (AOC works very collaboratively; District Courts are more hierarchical)                  |   |

## **Planning**

Staff members and stakeholders generally agreed that the planning process benefited from the strong vision and leadership from the Judiciary. Confidence in that vision set the tone for collaboration with GBSHC staff during the first months of the project when many of the practicalities of seeing clients, and learning the inner workings of the court were still developing. At the same time, some interviewees suggested that courthouse stakeholders could have been more engaged in GBSHC development, and noted what they viewed as limited dialogue among administrators who conceptualized and articulated plans for the Center and those managing the program on a daily basis. This was raised as a particular concern with regard to the logistics of locating GBSHC in the courthouse and planning the space to maximize utility and comfort for litigants and staff. Regular meetings between GBSHC senior staff and court leadership were suggested as useful to coordinate daily management and systemic planning.

Several interview participants described a steep learning curve for GBSHC staff members as they familiarized themselves with both court procedures and the intricacies of relevant laws. Most agreed that a learning period is inevitable, but also suggested that staff members could be

better supported through structured trainings and stronger efforts to integrate GBSHC staff with courthouse operations. GBSHC staff members noted that revisions in staff responsibilities that took place as GBSHC evolved in its first year would help better define staff roles and facilitate training new staff.

### **Mission**

GBSHC's mission was described by interviewees in varying terms as responding to the requests of any SRL who presents for services, to establishing the court's commitment to improving access to justice for SRLs. GBSHC staff members offered a straightforward view that their job is to help all SRLs who ask for help with their cases and with understanding court processes and what they must do to adhere to those processes in advancing their interests. Due to the volume of SRLs in the District Court, staff members were clear in reporting that part of their responsibility is to work quickly. Some stakeholders described a somewhat different, less precise mission of both providing services to those with the greatest needs and addressing the general challenge of increasing numbers of SRLs in Maryland's courts. While these two visions of the GBSHC mission are closely related, concerns about maximizing the efficiency of the self-help center model, and its replication will likely require some resolution of the different emphases that they represent.

### **Client Eligibility and Need**

There was broad agreement among interview respondents that GBSHC should not have income requirements and should provide services to anyone who requests assistance and who can be served without full legal representation. There was also agreement that non-English speaking clients were a small percentage of the local population and, while multi-lingual staff are generally desirable (there are none at the GBSHC), currently available telephone translation services are sufficient. Respondents were less clear as to other needs of the Glen Burnie SRL population, which makes it difficult to target services and prioritize materials for development (e.g., should resources be devoted to creating a video to address SRLs need for understanding court processes, or to creating a protocol that can quickly inform litigants of the appropriate forms needed for their case?). Some stakeholders suggested that the current situation should be maintained, that is, service demand should determine which services can reasonably be offered. Others expressed interest in exploring which needs SRLs feel are the most pressing in order to tailor and refine intake and service mechanisms to address those concerns.

### **Service Structure and Procedure**

Non-GBSHC stakeholders had relatively little to say about the logistics of service delivery, but GBSHC staff described a walk-in only system that offers the benefit of expeditious service delivery but includes the drawback of limiting the scope of services. Staff members make noteworthy efforts to assist everyone waiting for help each day. This model may be difficult to reproduce or sustain. While Center clients did not report complaints about the length of waiting periods, there may be some people who choose not to use the service because they encounter the

occasionally crowded waiting area or because the length of their wait for service was longer than they were willing to endure. Many stakeholders expressed enthusiasm for the procedures manual being developed by GBSHC to document and establish intake, assessment, and service delivery.

Most stakeholders agreed that GBSHC's location in the courthouse, especially its proximity to the District Court clerks, is helpful in that clerks can readily refer prospective clients to the Center and because clients can obtain forms and get further questions answered at the clerks' desk upon leaving the Center. The notion that SRLs are more willing to go to GBSHC because of this close proximity suggests skepticism that more elaborate outreach would significantly increase the number of SRLs using the Center. Yet some stakeholders expressed interest in mobile or off-site services that would increase community visibility and word-of-mouth referrals to GBSHC. While some respondents stated that expanded hours could result in increased use of GBSHC, they also indicated that providing access to the court building and related logistics of being open outside of regular court hours could create problems that would outweigh the benefits realized. Likewise, the suggestion made by some respondents that pro bono case assistance should be provided at the Center could require more in terms of additional personnel, training, supervision and scheduling than could be justified by the benefit realized.

Among respondents, the role of judges in referring SRLs to and promoting the services of GBSHC was unclear. Most stakeholders expressed interest in increased judicial involvement, but judges themselves evidenced more reluctance, and many declined to be interviewed about GBSHC. Several stakeholders noted that increased judicial referrals and engagement could help the SHC reach more litigants.

### **GBSHC Services**

Interviewees described GBSHC services as primarily intended to help litigants understand the court and their cases. When SRLs come in with an array of concerns (not all of which are necessarily legally-related), GBSHC staff members see it as their responsibility to help clients prioritize their concerns and focus on what can be accomplished with help from the Center. Much of the service delivery involves assistance in determining appropriate forms and in completing those forms. In the course of providing this assistance, GBSHC staff members provide guidance about what to expect in court and how the court works, although this information is not tightly structured or delivered according to a standard protocol.

Some GBSHC staff members and other stakeholders expressed concern that GBSHC should also fulfill a less tangible role of communicating the "human side" of the court by making the court process more understandable, less intimidating and more trustworthy. In an attempt to lessen the anxiety associated with litigants' prospective hearings, GBSHC staff members describe what to expect in their hearings. A few stakeholders noted that GBSHC may not always succeed in this role of engaging clients who are afraid, insecure or who do not believe they can obtain a fair hearing in court. This appears to result from the lack of a standard protocol for addressing the fears of clients rather than any unwillingness on the part of staff members to be supportive for these more marginalized SRLs. Follow-up services and assistance at GBSHC are

limited to repeat visits to the Center by clients. While several stakeholders noted the utility of providing follow-up with GBSHC's clients, the demands of office service delivery as it is currently structured makes it infeasible.

### **Mediation and Referrals**

Stakeholders uniformly expressed interest in and support for mediation. Every staff member said that they think it is appropriate and preferred in many situations, and information on ADR in the form of a link to the District Court's video on mediation was placed on the touchscreen public access computers in the Center. Thus, several stakeholders noted disappointment that the use of ADR did not increase as a result of GBSHC referrals. Some interviewees were not surprised that the Center had not had a notable impact on the use of mediation, citing the limited role that ADR played in developing GBSHC and some early miscommunication and misunderstandings about the nature of ADR. GBSHC and ADR respondents reported that, although it might be helpful to have an ADR staff person on site at GBSHC, it is unlikely to happen because of limited ADR resources. A few stakeholders expressed an interest in having a GBSHC staff person more thoroughly trained in ADR and assigned to make ADR referrals and/or implementing a more rigorous referral protocol. Another suggestion was that ADR materials, presentations and trainings (beyond the computer link to the District Court mediation video) could be made more available to staff members and clients.

### **Outreach**

The primary outreach used by GBSHC cited by stakeholders was the notices attached to landlord-tenant cases. Given that the Center is operating at or near its capacity, one stakeholder pointed out that the question of outreach is fundamentally linked to decisions about how to manage intake and prioritize cases. According to this respondent, GBSHC could conduct more outreach but should only do so if there is a system in place for managing the additional clients who would respond to outreach. Several interview participants suggested that word-of-mouth was the most feasible and appropriate form of outreach and that GBSHC will naturally achieve a regular flow of clients without making significant adjustments to eligibility or case management. While many interviewees responded that outreach was generally a good idea, very few offered specific ideas about how to conduct outreach (e.g., such as through community appearances, engagement with libraries or schools, or public service announcements on radio programs). None of the staff or stakeholders reported that they or anyone had been assigned responsibility for coordinating and conducting outreach activities.

### **Replication**

All interviewees offered positive responses when questioned about the prospect for replicating GBSHC in other counties. All felt that GBSHC has provided the kind of practical experience which, coupled with resources such as its procedures manual, will significantly facilitate development of additional centers. Assuming that new centers would include in their planning and development explicit plans for intake and case processing scaled to a projected high

volume of cases, none of the stakeholders expressed concerns about large dockets being too challenging for SHCs. Several stakeholders noted that a key lesson from the GBSHC experience thus far is the importance of courthouse managers in developing the space and operating logistics of a center. One respondent suggested that AOC should pay attention to the local context in order to generate critical good will in the planning and development phases of new self-help centers.

## *Results from Client Interviews and Exit Surveys*

### **Interview and Survey Methods and Sample**

Questions in the client interview and exit survey were adapted from those employed in previous studies on programs for self-represented litigants (Collins & Greacen, 2004; Judicial Council of California, 2007). In addition to items on how they accessed and used the SHC, clients were asked about perceived utility and satisfaction with SHC services. For the most part, the survey was structured to solicit responses on a five-point scale, while the interviews were designed to provide more extensive responses to questions about satisfaction with the assistance obtained at GBSHC. Upon leaving GBSHC sessions, clients were told that the University of Maryland was conducting research on GBSHC and about the brief, voluntary exit survey. Each participating client completed the survey in the waiting area or on benches in the hallway outside the Center, placed the completed survey into a sealed envelope addressed to IGSR, and dropped the envelope into a covered box identified for this purpose.

Use of the client exit survey began in mid-March 2010, about three months after the Center opened, and the data reported here are on the 498 surveys completed through March 2011. The sample is sizable, representing about 18 percent of the clients seen during this period, but it is not known whether or in what ways the sample might be biased. It may be that clients who were more satisfied with the service were more likely to complete the survey, and while GBSHC staff members were asked to inform all clients about the survey, it is reasonable to expect that some clients who appeared less content upon leaving sessions were not told about the survey. In the interests of the clients, the use of the survey was suspended on days or parts of a day when the Center was busy with a high volume of clients. Despite these caveats, there are reasons to believe the results of the survey are generally valid and representative of the GBSHC client population. Survey findings were consistent with those obtained from the client interview sample, which was recruited by the researchers in a more systematic fashion (see below). Additionally, the positive survey (and interview) findings are consistent with those obtained in previous self-help center evaluations.

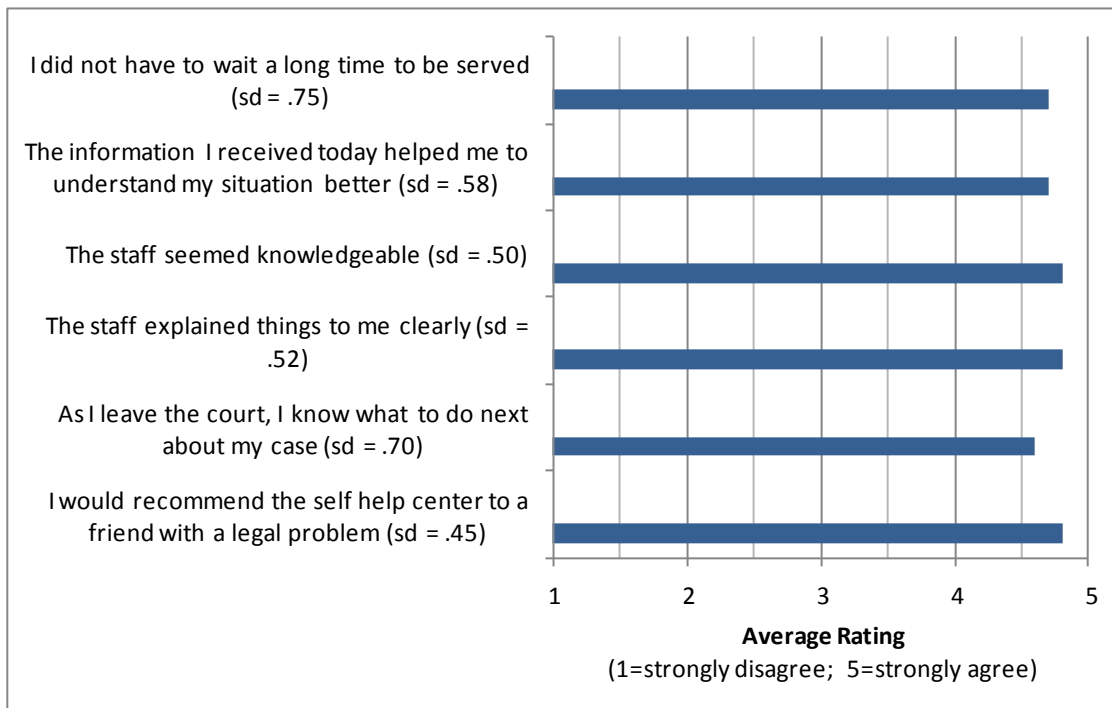
Client interviews were conducted by trained research staff during eight days over a one-month period between mid-January and mid-February 2011. Interviewers were stationed in the hallway outside GBSHC and approached clients as they left the Center. All clients observed leaving the Center were recruited to take part in the voluntary, anonymous interview. The interview instrument followed a protocol approved by the University of Maryland-College Park Institutional Review Board. Clients that indicated they were interested but not available to participate in the interview at that time were told the interview could be done over the phone. Of

the 50 clients approached by researchers, 11 elected not to participate and 4 did not speak English (and thus could not be interviewed). Three others consented to be interviewed over the phone but could not be reached for the interview. As a result, a total of 32 clients completed interviews and surveys.

### Client Survey Results

Clients responded to a survey that included a series of statements about services, staff and the impacts of GBSHC assistance on their understanding of their case using a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates extreme dissatisfaction or disagreement and 5 indicates extreme satisfaction or agreement. The overall level of satisfaction with GBSHC among respondents was very high throughout the survey data collection period and showed little variation across clients. The average rating among all clients was 4.8 (standard deviation = 0.59), indicating nearly uniformly high levels of satisfaction.

**Figure 36. Client Survey Ratings Concerning the GBSHC Experience**

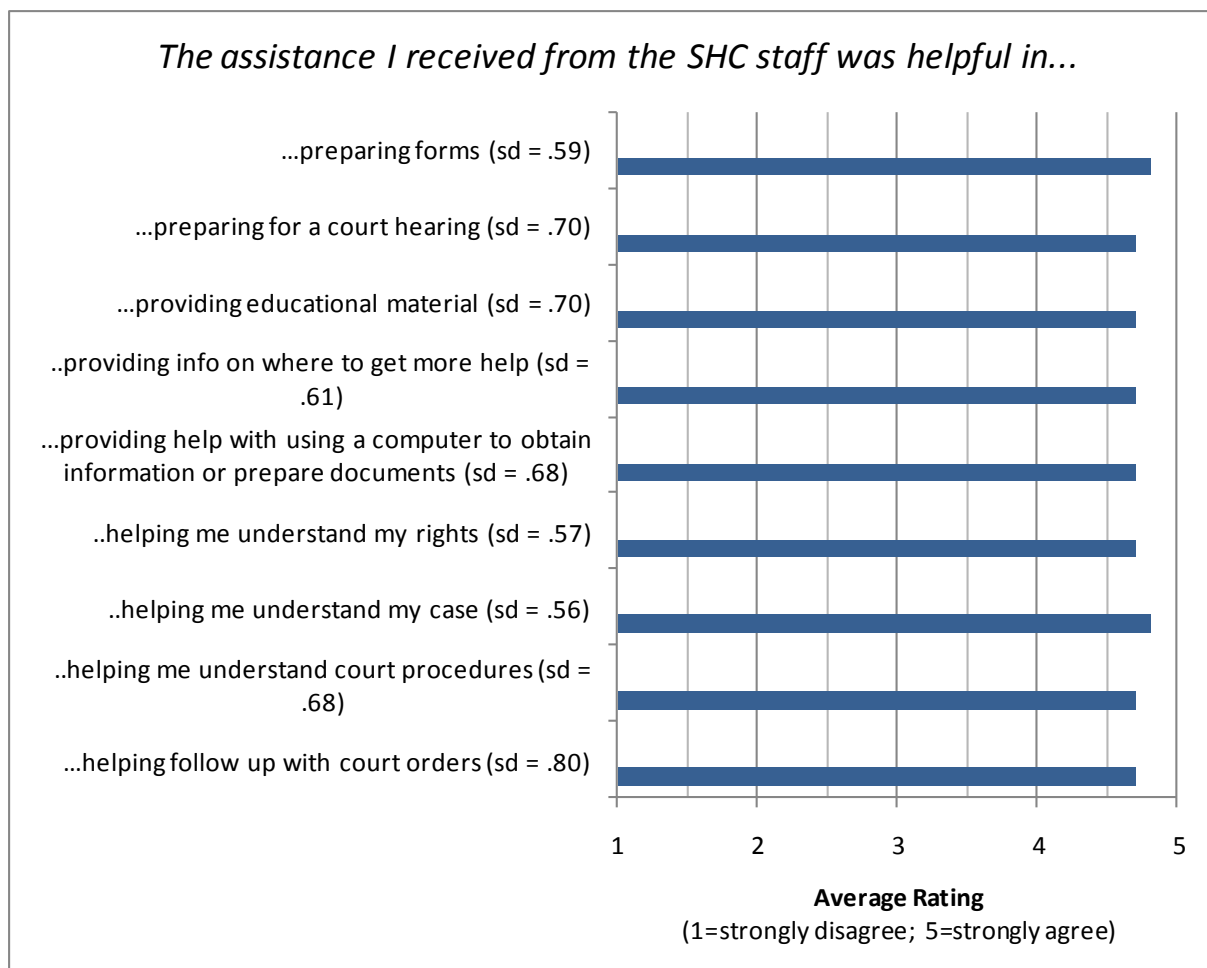


As evident from the results displayed in Figure 36, respondents found the GBSHC wait times acceptable, information useful, staff knowledgeable and communicative. Respondents also felt that they knew what they should do next for their cases, and strongly agreed that they would recommend the Center to others. While the ratings were high in all areas, the range of responses was slightly greater on questions about length of wait and knowledge about how to proceed with the case, suggesting that these two areas may be less uniformly successful compared with results on other dimensions that reflected a view that GBSHC offers a welcoming and useful experience, with helpful and knowledgeable staff.



Figure 37 displays high levels of client satisfaction with the specific services received at the Center. When responses were averaged across the nine service areas included in the survey, over 96 percent of the clients strongly agreed that the services were helpful. Again, the variation across client responses is minimal, but opinions about assistance for case follow up and preparing for hearings showed slightly more variation and lower ratings as compared to the other areas. GBSHC does not distribute a wide variety of detailed educational materials, so high levels of satisfaction with the materials distributed may suggest general good will among clients exiting the Center more than an accurate reflection of the availability and utility of materials. Four percent of respondents reported that the location of GBSHC made it difficult to access, three percent said they had difficulty with the Center’s hours of operation, and one percent said that childcare, transportation, wait time, and language were impediments to using the Center. These results do not match those reported by GBSHC staff members in their interviews, where they indicated that additional resources in all of these areas would increase usage. One interpretation of this apparent discrepancy is that the results reported here are from those who successfully access and use GBSHC, while staff views may reflect a broader awareness of those SRLs who cannot (at least do not) avail themselves of GBSHC services.

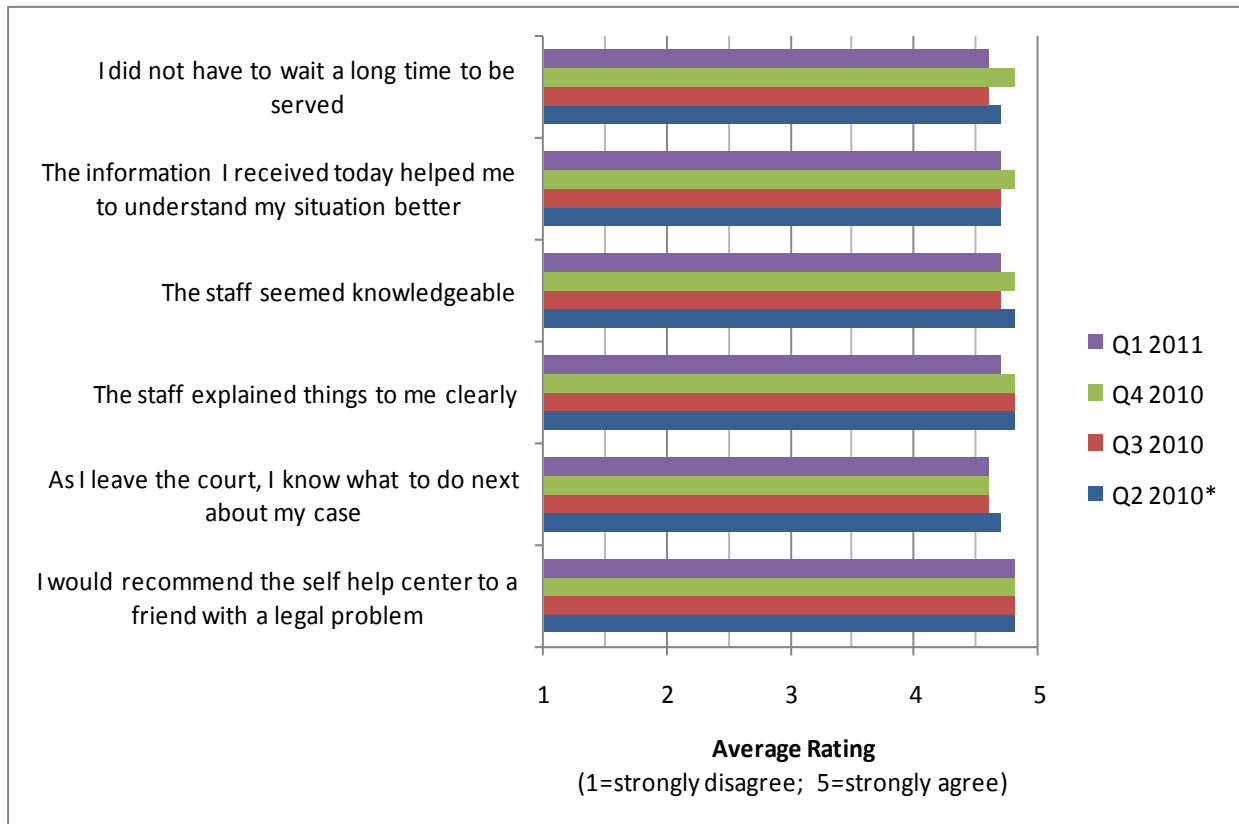
**Figure 37. Client Survey Ratings on GBSHC Staff Helpfulness**





It is evident from results shown in Figure 38 that client views about GBSHC have remained consistent over time. Taken together, the ratings suggest that the Center is consistently providing useful and needed services over a significant period of time.

**Figure 38. Client Survey Ratings Concerning the GBSHC Experience by Quarter**



\* Data for Quarter 2 also include surveys completed from March 12 (when exit surveying began) through March 31, 2010.

### Client Interview Results

In exit interviews, GBSHC clients were asked why they were representing themselves, about the services they received from the Center, their understanding of their cases after consulting with GBSHC staff, and awareness of GBSHC in their communities. These interviews suggested high levels of satisfaction and perceived helpfulness, but also revealed more nuanced needs and expectations among GBSHC clients than were evident in the quantitative surveys. Of the 32 clients interviewed, 14 sought help at GBSHC for landlord-tenant matters and another 14 sought help for contract issues. One client had received help with a peace order and three reported needing help for some “other” type of issue, such as discrimination in the workplace

and billing issues. The majority of clients interviewed were plaintiffs (22 or 69%), while nine clients (28%) reported they were the respondent (one did not report plaintiff/respondent status). Most of the clients interviewed were seeking assistance at GBSHC for the first time (22 or 69%), while 10 clients (31%) reported having been to GBSHC for assistance at least once before.

Most of the clients interviewed said they represented themselves either because an attorney would be too expensive for the size of the case or because they considered the case simple enough for them to handle without an attorney's assistance. Responses indicated that most self-represented litigants had conducted a simple calculation that led them to the decision to represent themselves. While two litigants said they might still retain an attorney, the overwhelming majority appeared to have neither doubt nor regret that they would be on their own in court. Despite an apparent confidence in self-representation, one of the dominant themes that emerged from these interviews was gratitude for the welcoming and informative services provided by GBSHC. This sentiment was also evident in responses to questions about problems with GBSHC. While most respondents demurred and cited no problems, those who elaborated noted that they valued the short waiting periods, ready answers, and patient explanations of legal issues.

## Outcome Analyses

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Analyses were conducted to explore impacts of GBSHC on a variety of client outcomes. As noted in the introductory section and literature review of this report, reviewers have found that prior evaluations of self-help centers have provided little evidence concerning their impact on client outcomes. Evaluators generally acknowledge that changes in case outcomes are often dependent on the circumstances of cases and that effective assistance by a SHC could cause outcomes to change in apparently contradictory directions. For example, SHC assistance could cause case processing times to become shorter (because litigants are better prepared for hearings, reducing delays) or longer (because litigants are better able to mount defenses that can lead to additional hearings). Studies have documented both outcomes (Greacen, 2002).

These current comparative analyses were limited by the lack of an available systematic way to identify GBSHC clients in the court's information systems. Respect for litigants' anonymity and autonomy was important to the atmosphere that GBSHC managers and staff members sought to establish. As a result, with the minor exception discussed below, case numbers of GBSHC clients were not recorded and thus could not be linked to the outcome data. Therefore, most of the present analyses relied on a simple comparison of cases that were filed before and after the implementation of the Center. Since just 20 to 25 percent of cases in the post-implementation group were actually exposed to the Center (see analysis in the third section of this report), in this type of "shotgun" comparison, the numbers alone make it difficult to detect a measureable change in this group that could be attributed to the Center.<sup>8</sup> For these reasons and other methodological limitations noted in the individual analytic discussions below, no definitive conclusions should be drawn by the results presented here. They are, nonetheless, of interest in pointing to reasonably inferable impacts of GBSHC, and in providing a level of understanding to support future evaluations employing stronger study designs that might better isolate the effects of GBSHC assistance.

### *Comparison of GBDC Case Events Pre- and Post-Implementation of the SHC*

In addition to dates and times of case activities, data provided by JIS included information on numerous events such as motions filed, court responses to petitions (dismissals, postponements, judgments), and post-adjudication actions. One set of outcome analyses examined differences in the occurrence of certain case events before and after implementation of the Center. Nearly 200 case events recorded in the JIS data were reviewed with the GBSHC

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<sup>8</sup>In statistical parlance, this simple pre-post comparison analysis risks Type II error, or yielding a false negative result. That is, the analysis would not detect pre-post differences and SHC impacts that actually exist because the post-implementation group in the analysis includes many cases that are not exposed to the center.

supervisor to identify those which could serve as indicators of impacts of GBSHC assistance. To account for the fact that there was often a three- to four-month difference between the case filing date and when SRLs visited the Center, a pre-post analysis was performed based on event dates rather than case filing dates. Comparisons were made between the rate of occurrence of selected case events during the months prior to implementation of the Center, between July 1 and November 30, 2009, and the post-implementation period, from January 1 through December 31, 2010. To compensate for the difference in length of the pre-post measurement periods, occurrence rates were calculated as a percentage of cases of a given event relative to the total number of cases shown in the JIS data to have any of the events selected for analysis during the period pre-SHC (N=8,219) or post-SHC (N=27,659).

## Results

Given the exploratory nature of the analysis, all case events that the GBSHC supervisor indicated might be affected by GBSHC assistance were examined in the pre-post comparisons. According to the JIS data, most of these events occurred infrequently. Of the 22 events that were initially identified and analyzed, 14 were eliminated from further analyses because the database showed them to occur in less than one percent of the cases in both groups. The events that remained in the pre- and post-GBSHC comparisons are listed in Table 2. With one exception, all of these events were expected to show an increase in rate of occurrence in the post-period as a result of GBSHC assistance; judgments in default entered was hypothesized to show a decrease from the pre- to post-period. As seen in Table 2, all events (including default judgments) showed an increase in occurrence between the comparison periods. These increases were small—usually one or two percentage points—although several of the events that were rarely observed in the pre-period (e.g., occurring in less than one percent of the cases) increased by four and fivefold in the post-GBSHC implementation cases.

**Table 2. Frequency of Selected Events, Pre- and Post-GBSHC Implementation**

| Event (hypothesized direction of change)            | Pre-GBSHC<br>(8,219 cases) |      | Post-GBSHC<br>(27,659 cases) |      |
|---|----------------------------|------|------------------------------|------|
|   | N                          | %    | N                            | %    |
| Notice of intention to defend filed (+)             | 946                        | 11.5 | 3,826                        | 13.8 |
| Notice of intention to defend filed, reason (+)     | 844                        | 10.3 | 33,165                       | 11.4 |
| Notice of service of interrogatories (+)            | 26                         | 0.3  | 340                          | 1.2  |
| Notice of service of answers to interrogatories (+) | 39                         | 0.5  | 454                          | 1.6  |
| Settlement agreement reached (+)                    | 83                         | 1.0  | 647                          | 2.3  |
| Dismissal upon Maryland Rule 3-506B (+)             | 34                         | 0.4  | 592                          | 2.1  |
| Judgment in default entered (-)                     | 5                          | <0.1 | 339                          | 1.2  |
| Vacated judgment (+)                                | 36                         | 0.4  | 516                          | 1.9  |

*Note:* Events that were initially analyzed but dropped due to occurring in less than one percent of the cases: oral examination held; body attachment; subpoena issued; supersedeas bond; and several events regarding the absence of the plaintiff and/or defendant and dismissals and requests of show cause orders.

In three of the comparisons (involving the two intention to defend and vacated judgment events), the increase in the occurrence of the event is consistent with a scenario where a self-represented respondent obtains assistance from GBSHC to engage in the process of defense. On the notice of service events, GBSHC assistance could have led self-represented plaintiffs or respondents to file the proper paperwork to serve witnesses. Each of these events that showed increases signal that more litigants are asserting valid defenses and suggest that their cases will be resolved on their merits rather than by default. A dismissal under Maryland Rule 3-506B is when both parties agree and stipulate to dismiss the plaintiff’s case; this could result from either the plaintiff or more typically, the respondent obtaining GBSHC assistance which, upon review of the particulars of the case, leads the parties to agree to the dismissal. A similar scenario may explain the increase in settlement agreements. There is no ready explanation for why there would be proportionally more cases with default judgments in the post-GBSHC period. Still, while by no means offering conclusive support for the impact of GBSHC, it is notable that seven of the eight comparisons in the analysis showed a directional change consistent with a favorable impact of GBSHC assistance to SRLs in these cases.

### *Comparison of SHC Clients and Other GBDC Cases*

Another exploratory analysis was performed comparing case processing measures from the JIS data for a sample of known GBSHC clients and other GBSHC-eligible cases in the

JIS/GBDC database that were filed after GBSHC was opened. For purposes of this comparison, GBSHC staff members were asked to recruit clients for voluntary inclusion in this part of the evaluation and to make their case number available to the evaluators (so their case information could be accessed from the JIS database). Due to understandable concerns about maintaining client anonymity and confidentiality, GBSHC staff members were reluctant to ask clients for case numbers, and this information was obtained for only 158 clients. As might be expected, case information showed the client sample of 158 to differ somewhat from the GBSHC client population as a whole. Perhaps most importantly, 77 percent of the client sample was made up of respondents, while respondents represented only 36 percent of the overall GBSHC clientele. It is possible that this client sample includes a disproportionate number of SRLs who were favorably inclined to the Center and proactive in responding to the assistance they received there. Results of outcome comparisons between the client sample and the GBSHC-eligibles must be interpreted with caution in light of these sample characteristics.

Another caveat to note in this analysis is that the GBDC cases that were used to compare with the known GBSHC client group also included a significant number of GBSHC clients (estimated to be just fewer than 25 percent of the group, as shown in the third section of this report). To simplify the comparison and ensure that the GBDC group was not a mix of pre- and post-GBSHC cases, the analysis was further limited to cases who had filing dates between January and December 2010, reducing the GBSHC group to 107 cases and the GBDC group to 18,874 cases.

## Results

Some basic case characteristics of the two groups are shown in Table 3. Although the groups appear very similar in terms of case type and claim size (for contract cases), small but perhaps notable differences in case status were observed. A somewhat higher percentage of GBSHC clients had closed cases (18.7 percent compared to 14.7 percent of the GBDC group) and, though appeals are relatively infrequent, three of the 107 GBSHC clients had appealed their cases, while less than one-tenth of one percent of the overall group of GBDC cases had an appealed case status.

**Table 3. Case Characteristics of GBDC Cases and Known GBSHC Cases**

| Information from JIS   | GBDC Cases<br>(18,874 cases) |      | GBSHC Cases<br>(107 cases) |      |
|------------------------|------------------------------|------|----------------------------|------|
|                        | N                            | %    | N                          | %    |
| <b>Case Status</b>     |                              |      |                            |      |
| Closed                 | 2,779                        | 14.7 | 20                         | 18.7 |
| Active                 | 15,441                       | 81.8 | 80                         | 74.8 |
| Bankruptcy             | 634                          | 3.4  | 4                          | 3.7  |
| Appealed               | 20                           | 0.1  | 3                          | 2.8  |
| <b>Case Claim Type</b> |                              |      |                            |      |
| Confessed judgment     | 203                          | 1.1  | 1                          | 0.9  |
| Contract               | 17,297                       | 91.6 | 97                         | 90.7 |
| Detinue                | 46                           | 0.2  | 1                          | 0.9  |
| Replevin               | 176                          | 0.9  | 3                          | 2.8  |
| Tort                   | 799                          | 4.2  | 5                          | 4.7  |
| Injunction             | 113                          | 0.6  | 0                          | -    |
| Emergency evaluation   | 240                          | 1.3  | 0                          | -    |
| <b>Case Claim Size</b> |                              |      |                            |      |
| Small                  | 13,071                       | 69.3 | 71                         | 66.4 |
| Large                  | 5,803                        | 30.7 | 36                         | 33.6 |

It was also possible to assess the frequency of the case events recorded in JIS for GBSHC clients compared to all GBDC cases. Compared to the analyses presented earlier of the overall pre- and post-GBSHC implementation groups, these results showed more marked evidence of the positive impacts of SHC assistance. This information is represented in Table 4.

**Table 4. Frequency of Selected Events for GBDC Cases and Known GBSHC Cases**

| Event   | GBDC Cases<br>(18,874 cases) |      | GBSHC Cases<br>(107 cases) |      |
|---|------------------------------|------|----------------------------|------|
|   | N                            | %    | N                          | %    |
| Intention to defend filed                       | 3,037                        | 16.1 | 62                         | 57.9 |
| Intention to defend filed, reason               | 3,553                        | 13.2 | 64                         | 42.1 |
| Subpoena issued                                 | 80                           | 0.4  | 4                          | 3.7  |
| Notice of service of interrogatories            | 205                          | 1.1  | 0                          | 0    |
| Notice of service of answers to interrogatories | 267                          | 1.4  | 4                          | 3.7  |
| Settlement agreement reached                    | 399                          | 2.1  | 3                          | 2.8  |
| Vacated judgment                                | 311                          | 1.6  | 7                          | 6.5  |

In 57.9 percent of GBSHC cases there was a record of intention to defend as compared to 16.1 percent of GBDC cases.<sup>9</sup> Other events that occurred in much higher proportions among the GBSHC group (if in low frequencies generally) included use of subpoenas, service of answers to interrogatories, and vacated judgments—again, all indicators of improved understanding about the merits of the case among litigants, more assertion of their rights, and case resolutions based on merit rather than default.

Analyses of case processing time for these cases and the larger pre-post comparison samples yielded mixed results, which would appear to speak more to the different ways in which the groups were constructed than to GBSHC effects. Specifically, in the analysis of known GBSHC users and GBDC cases, the period between filing and judgment was significantly longer for GBSHC users, while the comparison of processing time between the pre- and post-GBSHC samples showed much shorter processing times for the post-GBSHC group. These conflicting findings are also consistent with the variable impacts of self-help centers on case processing time reported in previous evaluations.

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that some, but not all of this difference may be attributable to the higher proportion of defendants in the GBSHC group



## *Comparison of Landlord-Tenant Cases*

As discussed in the third section of this report, landlord-tenant cases account for as much as one-third of all GBSHC sessions. Data on these cases are not included in the electronic JIS database for District Court, however. To explore the potential impacts of GBSHC assistance on these cases, data from a sample of landlord-tenant case files kept at GBDC were reviewed and abstracted. Due to limited resources for coding data, the review was limited to failure-to-pay rent (FTPR) cases. FTPR cases are the most common type of landlord-tenant case seen in GBDC and at GBSHC.<sup>10</sup> GBDC clerks provided the complete set of paper files on FTPR cases for the months of September and October 2009 and September and October 2010; the pre-GBSHC 2009 sample comprised 603 cases, and the post-GBSHC 2010 sample comprised 601 cases.

Inferences to be drawn from the landlord-tenant results are limited. Two of the findings, however, appear to point to favorable effects of GBSHC assistance, while the other results are inconclusive on the Center's impacts. Information in the paper files maintained by GBDC allowed researchers to distinguish whether cases were filed by corporate rental agencies, often represented by landlord agents, or by individual property owner/landlord.<sup>11</sup> The number and proportion of FTPR cases filed by individual landlords increased from just 20 (3.3 percent) to 79 (13.1 percent) between the pre- and post-GBSHC sample. To a limited extent this increase in filings by individual landlords is likely due to economic conditions. Yet, it may also be explained in part by more property owners being prepared for proceeding with FTPR cases due to assistance from GBSHC. Also potentially reflecting GBSHC assistance, motions for stays of evictions by tenants increased to 13 (2.2 percent) from three (0.5 percent) in the pre-SHC period.

Other results from the FTPR case review showed differences that may be interpreted as favorable indicators of GBSHC impacts. In cases involving individual landlords, the proportion that filed petitions for warrant of restitution dropped from 45.0 percent in the pre-GBSHC group to 35.4 percent of the landlords in the post-GBSHC cases. Another, largely unexpected difference was in the proportion of court dismissals due to landlords failing-to-appear (FTA) (either as the lone FTA party, or an FTA along with the tenant). In individual landlord cases, landlord FTAs went from 5.0 percent in the pre-GBSHC group to 19.1 percent in the post-GBSHC group (it also increased from 0.3 percent to 2.1 percent in the corporate landlord group).

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<sup>10</sup> FTPR cases accounted for 60 percent of all landlord-tenant case visits at GBSHC.

<sup>11</sup> In less than one percent of the cases this distinction was not clear.

## Summary and Conclusions

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Mirroring prior research on self-help centers for SRLs, the evaluation of GBSHC found it to be heavily used by litigants, and surveys completed by about 500 clients exiting the Center showed nearly all were highly satisfied with its services. Evidence gathered through in-depth interviews and surveys of an additional 37 clients and 27 District Court administrators and clerks working in the Glen Burnie court indicated that the program was effective in meeting the legal needs of its clients by helping them better understand their case and rights and assisting them with legal forms. These findings are consistent with quantitative results suggesting GBSHC favorably affected case processing and outcomes, although these impacts cannot be regarded as conclusive due to data limitations.

In addition to these positive findings, the evaluation results indicated certain areas where GBSHC could be improved and refined. Despite the diligent daily efforts of GBSHC staff members and steady progress in service efficiency, thousands of GBSHC-eligible SRLs—particularly respondents—did not receive assistance. Together with data showing that a significant portion of GBSHC services are used by repeat clients and, to a lesser extent, some well-resourced litigants, these results suggest the Center’s liberal eligibility policy, lack of admissions triage, and modest outreach efforts may need to be revisited. The evaluation results offer evidence to back expansion of SHC services to more clients and other jurisdictions, while also offering lessons that may improve the process used to plan and initiate SHCs in the District Court. Further discussion of the study’s findings and their implications for refinements to the provision of GBSHC services is presented below. Specific actions that the Judiciary may wish to consider in regards to improving GBSHC operation and expanding the SHC model to other locations are also included.

### *Primary Performance Measures and Outcomes*

#### **GBSHC Caseload and Clients**

On key measures of performance, GBSHC was found to be successful. Following a brief ramp-up period, the Center operated at full capacity during the evaluation period. Given the staffing level of the Center, management of a workload of 450 to 500 help sessions monthly appears to represent a high level of performance. The GBSHC supervisor and staff members are attentive to improving efficiency in service delivery and over time devised a system in which all intake is handled by junior staff members, and each case is then forwarded to two GBSHC attorneys who provide advice or assistance deemed most useful. If a client’s only need is assistance in filling out forms, a junior staff member is often able to handle the case alone.

Data on the duration of help sessions evinced an increase in efficiency over the Center’s initial 18 months of operations. During the first full quarter of GBSHC operations, staff members were more likely to spend about 30 minutes in each session (38 percent of all sessions) than 15

minutes or less (35 percent). By the second quarter, shorter (15 minutes or less) sessions were in the majority (53 percent), and these became increasingly common until they leveled out in late 2010 to account for roughly 80 percent of all sessions through the balance of the data collection period. There were moderate differences in the length of help sessions based on case type, and these differences appeared to reflect reasonable choices made by GBSHC staff members. Protective order cases, 37 percent of which were seen for 30 minutes or more, were given the most time, while the shortest sessions involved landlord-tenant cases, where 26 percent were 30 minutes or more.

The eligibility criteria employed by the Center were based on a goal to serve all SRLs who sought services and were involved in certain case types (contract, tort, replevin, detinue, confessed judgment, landlord-tenant, protective and peace orders). GBSHC was successful in attaining that goal. There were no apparent problems with long waits for service or denial of services. With the notable exception of serving a disproportionate number of plaintiffs (discussed below), the GBSHC caseload appeared generally representative of SRLs with these case types at the Glen Burnie District Court. When compared with a baseline sample of SRLs that were interviewed prior to the Center's opening, on average GBSHC clients were similar in terms of reported household income, education, and race/ethnicity. Comparisons with census data showed that GBSHC clients had lower incomes but more education than Glen Burnie residents, and considerably lower income and less education than Anne Arundel County residents as a whole. African-Americans were represented in slightly higher proportions at GBSHC than they were in the baseline interviews or in the local Glen Burnie resident population.

The finding that the Center primarily served contract (44 percent) and landlord-tenant (33 percent) cases was consistent with the high frequency with which these case types are represented in the Glen Burnie District Court civil caseload. GBSHC and overall District Court caseloads differed in that landlord-tenant cases accounted for about two-thirds of 2010 District 7 filings while comprising one-third of GBSHC visits. The difference is attributable to the high failure-to-appear rates among respondents in landlord-tenant cases. At GBSHC, respondents represented a large proportion of landlord-tenant cases seen at the Center (46 percent vs. 54 percent plaintiffs) compared with their representation in the overall GBSHC caseload (36 percent vs. 64 percent). When asked why they were representing themselves, GBSHC clients gave answers similar to those reported in the baseline SRL interviews, with most indicating that they thought their case was not complicated enough for an attorney or that they could not afford an attorney.

### **GBSHC Services and Case Processing Measures**

The Center has been successful in developing a model that provides targeted and speedy assistance through face-to-face meetings with clients. Because of the first-come-first-serve policy, this model has developed in part by necessity and in part as an efficient mechanism to help clients who frequently come in confused, emotionally wrought, and with multiple, often diffuse concerns to focus on what it takes to represent themselves in District Court. Service data, as well as staff and client reports, show that GBSHC's service delivery has aligned with what

was planned for the Center. Specifically, the Center has demonstrated effectiveness in: (1) clarifying case specifics, paperwork, and obligations; (2) assisting litigants in determining which court forms are needed and how to fill them out; (3) focusing litigants on those elements of a claim that can reasonably be addressed through the court; (4) listening to litigant experiences and concerns and responding to litigant questions; and (5) assessing case complexity and referring litigants for additional legal assistance when appropriate.

Data in support of these conclusions came from observations and interviews with GBSHC staff, District Court administrators, clerks, and Center clients. Exit surveys with clients assessed both their satisfaction with GBSHC services and perceptions of helpfulness of different services. On the satisfaction scales, the average rating among all clients was 4.8 out of a possible 5 points, indicating nearly uniformly high levels of satisfaction. When responses were averaged across the nine service areas on the helpfulness scales, 96 percent of the clients strongly agreed that the services were helpful. Interviews conducted with clients reinforced through anecdotes these quantitative survey findings and articulated a central theme of appreciation for GBSHC being welcoming and informative. Many of those interviewed linked their perception of the Center's helpfulness to a sense of gratitude for being treated respectfully. In the baseline interviews done prior to the Center's opening, SRLs judged help in understanding their rights and help in understanding their case and preparing for court to be the most important areas of assistance. Evidence gathered in this evaluation indicates that GBSHC is meeting this need. This success demonstrates GBSHC's adherence to principles of procedural justice, specifically those that improve litigant understanding, perception of fairness, and indication of the importance of individual voice.

Evidence of the effectiveness of GBSHC services also can be seen in the limited analyses conducted with data obtained on Self-Help Center sessions and GBSHC-eligible cases recorded in JIS. One analysis examined whether there was a difference in the frequency of certain "case events" as occurring before and after opening of GBSHC. Using the large samples available from the JIS data (pre N=8,219, post N=27,659), it was possible to assess eight event types that the Center's supervising attorney identified as being potential indicators of GBSHC effectiveness. While JIS data showed most of these case events occurred in a very small percentage of cases, and pre- and post-GBSHC differences were just one to two percentage points, seven of the eight showed a change in frequency that was consistent with a favorable GBSHC impact. Examples include increases in intention to defend filings (from 11.5 to 13.8 percent), notices of service to interrogatories (from 0.3 to 1.2 percent), and dismissals based upon Maryland Rule 3-506B (from 0.4 to 2.1 percent).

Another analysis compared events recorded in JIS on a small (N=107) sample of known GBSHC cases with all GBSHC-eligible cases (N=18,874); both groups had filing dates between January and December 2010. These tests yielded more marked evidence of the positive impacts of GBSHC assistance as, for example, 57.9 percent of GBSHC cases showed a record of intention to defend as compared to 16.1 percent of the GBDC cases. Other case events that were observed in higher proportions in the GBSHC group included the use of subpoenas, service of answers to interrogatories, and vacated judgments. All of these increases imply greater

understanding and engagement of litigants about the case, and improved chances for judgments being based on merits and rights, rather than default. Results of this analysis must nonetheless be interpreted with caution in that the GBSHC sample included a disproportionate number of respondents (compared to their representation among all GBSHC clients) and may have included a disproportionate number of cases in which the client was favorably disposed to the Center or GBSHC staff members were favorably disposed to the client.

## **Areas for Potential Judiciary Action**

### *Adjustments to GBSHC Operations*

#### **1. Increase GBSHC Referrals to ADR**

One concern regarding GBSHC service provision involves referral of cases to the ADR office and increasing the number of GBDC civil cases resolved through mediation. ADR referrals were found in only seven percent of all Center sessions and these accounted for just ten percent of all referrals made. These figures were below those reported in baseline SRL interviews, where 27.8 percent reported that it had been suggested to them that they consider mediation, and 16.7 percent had actually followed up on the suggestion. There was hope among GBSHC planners that the use of mediation would increase after GBSHC staff members were provided training on ADR. Evidence gathered for the evaluation shows that referrals to mediation declined each quarter over the final 12 months of the evaluation period. Uniformly, stakeholders expressed interest in and support for mediation. Each GBSHC staff member indicated that mediation is appropriate and ideal in many situations. Thus it was no surprise that several interviewees expressed disappointment that the use of ADR did not increase as a result of GBSHC referrals. Some interview respondents suggested that further involvement of ADR representatives in GBSHC planning may have led to more referrals. Some also noted the potential value of a protocol to help litigants assess whether mediation could be useful and how to challenge a litigant who resists what seems to be an appropriate referral to ADR, and when such a challenge is advised.

#### **2. Engage District Court Judges in Identifying Self-Help Centers as an Option for Assisting Self-Represented Litigants in Civil Matters**

Most GBSHC stakeholders taking part in interviews and surveys gave positive marks to the Center in regards to its integration with other court operations. These included some GBDC clerks who remarked that their support for GBSHC was well-earned after initial concerns about the value added by the Center. GBDC judicial involvement and support for the Center was less clear, as four of the seven judges who preside over large numbers of GBSHC-eligible cases elected not to discuss the Center with evaluators, despite repeated requests that included the option of a brief phone interview. The three District Court judges who were interviewed were favorably disposed to the Center and two reported that the benefits of GBSHC were observable among SRLs, who appeared better prepared and had fewer mistakes in their paperwork and in use of evidence.

While generally supportive of the Center, one of the judges who was interviewed indicated that the impact of GBSHC assistance was rarely evident among SRLs in the courtroom. This judge also expressed some reluctance about the appropriateness of making explicit referrals to the Center, and consistent with this stance, just one percent of GBSHC users said they heard about the Center from a judge. These latter findings, together with the other GBDC judges' unwillingness to offer any views about the Center, suggest the need for renewed efforts to build relations between the GBDC judges and the Center. Providing judges with a clearer picture of the Center (perhaps in part through transmitting results reported here) may help them understand that encouraging its use does not equate with advocacy nor a means of providing an “unfair advantage” to anyone—indeed, a suggestion to litigants to consider use of the Center relieves the judge of any claim of improperly offering advice. Such efforts would align with the views of GBSHC staff members and District Court administrators, nearly all of whom expressed interest in increased judicial involvement in the Center. The challenges of gaining full support and involvement of judges in legal assistance programs for SRLs has been evidenced in previous evaluations of SHCs, as well as the study conducted in 2004 on self-help services provided in the pilot Pro-Se Litigation Project of the Baltimore City Circuit Court (Collins and Greacen, 2004; Empirical Research Group, 2001).

### *Maximizing and Expanding Self-Help Center Services*

#### 1. Modify Eligibility and Service Criteria, and Expand Outreach to Self-Represented Litigants

With GBSHC appearing to be effective on most available measures of performance, Judicial leadership may wish to ask if there are ways to refine the program, and to improve and expand access to Center services. An analysis of GBSHC and JIS data underscores the reasonableness of these considerations.<sup>12</sup> This analysis reveals that, despite the Center appearing to operate at full capacity during all but the early months of operations, assistance is provided by the Center in less than one-quarter of all GBSHC-eligible cases, and about half of this proportion of GBSHC-eligible litigants sought and received help from the Center. There are more SRLs involved in civil cases at the GBDC who could be helped, and there is little doubt that those familiar with SRLs in this court—from GBSHC staff members to GBDC judges and clerks—would argue that these litigants would benefit from assistance.

Delivering self-help assistance to more SRLs was the aim of important service enhancements made in fall of 2011, after the close of the evaluation period. These include opening phone and real time online chat services that can be accessed by anyone throughout the state. The phone number and chat access points are posted on the website of the Center (now referred to more generically as the District Court Self-Help Center); both services are open six

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<sup>12</sup> Since landlord-tenant cases are not included in the District Court JIS database, the analysis was limited to contract cases.

hours daily Monday through Friday. The Center, which also added two new staff attorneys (one of whom is bilingual in Spanish and English), reports that the total number of monthly visits from these combined access points (phone, chat, and walk-ins) are now more than triple the monthly average recorded during the evaluation period.

One question that surfaces from the evaluation results that may not be addressed by these recent improvements is whether the SHC is reaching those litigants most in need of help, as opposed to those who are most resourceful and assertive in seeking and obtaining assistance. Findings showed that almost twice as many plaintiffs as respondents, and a quarter more landlords than tenants, obtain GBSHC assistance. Client data further indicated that nearly one-fourth (22 percent) of GBSHC plaintiffs reported a household income exceeding \$70,000 annually (11 percent of respondents reported this level of income). One-third of all GBSHC sessions involve clients who received help from the Center previously and were proactive in pursuing follow-up meetings. These repeat clients were slightly more likely to have a college diploma (56 percent) and to be men (49 percent) compared to all GBSHC users (52 percent and 46 percent, respectively), but were otherwise similar on demographic characteristics. There were also slightly more plaintiffs in the repeater group (67 percent) compared to all clients (64 percent) and among landlord-tenant cases, the proportion of landlords was somewhat higher among repeaters (60 percent) than all clients (54 percent).

Other data indicated that GBSHC clients were typical of SRLs—or at least similar to GBDC SRLs who appeared in court and were willing to take part in a baseline interview with a researcher. This pattern of findings is consistent with previous research (Malcolmson and Reid, 2006). Using Malcolmson and Reid's (2006) conceptualization of three levels of SRLs, it would appear that the GBSHC has succeeded in serving the first, more resourceful level and litigants in the second “middle [level]...who have sufficient confidence in the legal system and sufficient comfort with bureaucratic institutions that with some instruction they can fumble along.” Findings suggest the Center may not be reaching “the third group...for whom the self-help process is too difficult” (p. 29).

The challenge of bringing self-help services to this “third group” of SRLs was not fully addressed by the Center's modest outreach efforts, which appeared to have little impact on the number or nature of clients served at GBSHC. Use of a promotional flyer and references to the Center in eviction and summons notices did not result in an increase in respondents; by the end of the data collection period, just two percent of all clients reported they heard about the Center from court notices. Rather, client reports demonstrate that the most effective outreach resulted from District Court clerks directing litigants to the Center. Over 90 percent of GBSHC users said they had either heard about the Center from the clerks' office (30 percent), were walk-ins (30 percent), or repeat visitors (32 percent). There were no efforts to publicize and encourage use of GBSHC services through community venues such as churches, libraries, schools, community events, or public service announcements. Another type of outreach that had not been tried but should be considered (and was strongly endorsed by Center staff members) involves providing more information about the Center to GBDC judges and encouraging them to make GBSHC referrals.



While there was little evidence of GBSHC activity aimed at engaging the third level group described by Malcolmson and Reid (2006), GBSHC admissions procedures do not restrict access of the first, high level group of users to the Center's services. Planners considered but decided against setting any income eligibility criteria and case type and self-representation continue to serve as the only admission criteria. Center planners and the current advisory group have never set the goal of reaching *all* SRLs in the District Court; nonetheless, the Judiciary may wish to consider refinements to current policies and practices that may result in the Center not serving litigants representing the full spectrum of resources and needs.

## 2. Develop Processes and Resources to Improve Self-Help Center Efficiency and Effectiveness

If the Judiciary chooses to take actions to expand the client pool, in light of evidence that GBSHC is operating at capacity, efforts to reach clients that are not currently served may need to be linked to eligibility, triage, and targeting of legal assistance services. Data concerning service provision suggest that many GBSHC clients find needed answers within 15 minutes. A form of service triage emerged during the evaluation, wherein Center clients meet with staff lawyers only after seeing junior staff members. Building on this approach, the Judiciary may wish to consider developing protocols to assess SRL type and level of need at intake to the Center. In addition to the nature and demands of cases, litigants' resources (prior legal experience, access to and facility with using online information, as well as income) could be considered in determining the scope of service needed.

The phone service and chat line, as well as other program materials and activities that were not in place during the evaluation period but were part of the original GBSHC plans and remain in the picture or are in development could be incorporated into a streamlined triage system that matches client needs and resources with self-help center services. Printed and web-based fact sheets, step-by-step instructions, and videos tutorials about how to fill out forms or explain filing options could improve the efficiency and flow of service provision, particularly in conducting some initial triage and following-up after an in-person session. Classes and workshops could play a similar role, and if offered in the community offsite or after work hours, help extend Center access to SRLs that do not avail themselves of the walk-in, phone, or chat services. For the most part included in the initial plans and still under consideration by SHC advisors, these additional service delivery options were shown support in surveys of GBSHC staff members, District Court administrators and, to a lesser extent, GBDC clerks. Completion of the long-planned policies and procedures manual could serve as a means of articulating intake, triage, and other refinements to current policies, as well as specifying the function of new materials and how they would be employed in daily Center operations.

The Judiciary also may wish to examine the decision by GBSHC planners to permit largely unrestricted follow-up visits to the Center and the extent to which GBSHC staff resources are allocated to repeat clients. Staff members and clients attributed a high value to these sessions and the option to arrange follow-up help sessions. A review of studies on SRL assistance reinforces the view that comprehensive and ongoing support distinguishes SHCs from assistance



provided by clerks, and that very limited assistance programs “risk giving pro se litigants a false belief of competence early in the litigation process, only to leave them guideless as their case progresses” (Van Wormer, 2007, p. 1003). Thus, the Judiciary may wish to exercise caution in making changes to this policy. Rather than eliminating repeat visits, information gathered at intake on litigant resources, along with the development and use of the program materials noted above, could be incorporated into guidelines for the discretionary use of follow-up by GBSHC staff members.

### 3. Replicate the GBSHC Model in Other Locations

In addition to informing methods for expanding self-help center services at the GBDC, findings from the evaluation provide information that may be useful in replicating the SHC model developed in Glen Burnie to other District Court sites. Stakeholders generally gave positive reviews concerning the GBSHC planning process, describing it as collegial and citing the leadership and sense of mission imparted by District Court and Maryland Access to Justice Commission representatives. Two specific areas of improvement on which there was consensus, particularly among the affected stakeholders, concerned earlier and greater involvement of self-help center supervisors and efforts to inform and involve clerks and other possible referral sources about the Center. Participation of any new SHC center managers in planning around physical space and logistical issues was emphasized in these interviews.

Planning refinements to GBSHC and replication in other District Courts could benefit from involvement of the current Center supervisor and input from staff members. In interviews, GBSHC personnel noted difficulties associated with delivering assistance with little or no SHC-specific training. They also indicated that much of the knowledge they gained on relevant civil case litigation as well as the skills used in assisting SRLs at the Center were learned on the job. The supervisor’s prior Legal Aid experience likely contributed to the facility she has displayed in working with SRLs. The supervisor could play a central role in hiring and in structured pre-training and ongoing in-service training of staff members added as part of GBSHC expansion or replication. The GBSHC experience also suggests there could be value in involving local District Court clerks (and perhaps judges) in orientation training of new self-help center staff. A GBSHC manual of policies, procedures, and standards could be a useful foundation to SHC expansion, staff training, and ongoing program development and monitoring.

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