

# Guide for Expanding the Court Navigator Program in Wyoming



## Introduction

The Wyoming Judicial Branch is committed to expanding the Court Navigator Program to further assist self-represented litigants (SRLs) across the state. The Court Navigator Program plays a crucial role in improving access to justice for individuals who are navigating the legal system without formal representation. In order to strategically expand the program, the Judicial Branch must identify which counties would benefit most from the introduction of court navigators. To achieve this, the Branch has developed and approved a set of criteria that will help guide decision-making regarding where to prioritize the program's expansion.

This guide outlines the criteria for selecting counties and provides a scoring framework to assess each county's potential for receiving the Court Navigator Program. The goal is to ensure that the program is introduced where it will have the most significant impact on SRLs, while considering the resources and infrastructure available in each county.

## Court Navigator Program Overview

The Court Navigator Program aims to enhance access to justice for self-represented litigants while easing the burden placed on judges, clerks, and court staff by pro se parties.

The primary role of the court navigator is to offer guidance and support to pro se litigants, helping them navigate the complexities of the court system. The core duties of the court navigator include:

- Assisting in identifying and completing the appropriate pro se forms;
- Providing basic procedural information about how cases move through the court system;
- Referring litigants to legal and community services; and
- Offering guidance on court hearings and explaining how litigants should conduct themselves during court proceedings.

In addition to supporting pro se litigants, court navigators are also responsible for collecting and entering data related to the litigants they assist. This data is crucial for evaluating the success of the program and informing any potential future expansions.

Court navigators provide assistance both in-person and electronically, where feasible and appropriate.

The court navigators' support is focused on three main case categories:

1. Protection Orders.

2. Domestic Relations, including divorce, custody, and child support matters.
3. Forcible Entry and Detainer actions.

## Criteria for Expanding the Court Navigator Program

The criteria for selecting counties to expand the Court Navigator Program are based on four primary areas: demand for assistance, availability of legal resources, judicial and court resources, and community support.

### Demand for Assistance

Ideally, the demand for the Court Navigator Program would be primarily determined by the volume of SRLs in a county, particularly in those cases identified as areas of focus for court navigators – domestic relations, protection orders, and forcible entry and detainer (FED) actions.

Currently, the data on the number of SRLs can be unreliable. As a result, the Branch will assess the demand based on the number of relevant cases filed in these areas of focus. By calculating the proportion of these case types relative to the total number of civil cases in a county, the Judicial Branch ensures fairness across counties of varying sizes and case volumes.

#### Volume of SRLs:

- **Primary Metric:** Counties with a high percentage of self-represented litigants (SRLs) in case types where navigator assistance is offered, such as domestic relations, protection orders, or forcible entry and detainer (FED) actions.
- **Alternative Metric (If SRL data is unavailable):** The number of cases filed in the relevant case types. Calculate the proportion of these cases relative to the total number of civil case filings in the county to estimate the demand for the program.

### Availability of Legal Resources

The presence of adequate legal resources in a county can affect the need for the Court Navigator Program. Counties with fewer legal professionals and limited access to pro bono or low-cost legal aid are more likely to benefit from the program.

#### Attorney Density:

- **Metric:** The number of attorneys practicing in the county relative to the population. Counties with fewer attorneys per capita may have a greater need for the Court Navigator Program.

### **Pro Bono Services:**

- Metric: The availability of free or low-cost legal aid services in the county. Counties with limited access to such services should be prioritized for program expansion.

## **Judicial and Court Resources**

Judges and court clerks play a crucial role in identifying the need for the Court Navigator Program. Their feedback on the demand for SRL assistance and their willingness to accommodate the program are key factors in deciding where the program should be implemented.

### **Input from Judges:**

- Metric: Feedback from judges regarding the demand for SRL assistance in their courtrooms. Counties where judges report a high demand for SRL support should be prioritized.

### **Clerk Feedback:**

- Metric: Feedback from court clerks on the demand for SRL assistance and the challenges SRLs face in navigating the court system.

### **Existing Infrastructure:**

- Metric: Availability of space within courthouses for court navigator offices. This metric focuses on identifying counties with suitable, available space—such as dedicated office areas (e.g., the Townsend Justice Center in Natrona County)—to support in-person program implementation. However, if space is not available, this does not disqualify a county from participating, as remote access to the court navigator program will still be an option.

## **Community Support**

Community involvement and local support are essential for the success of the Court Navigator Program. The presence of local stakeholders and a volunteer pool will enhance the program's effectiveness and sustainability in a given county.

### **Local Stakeholders:**

- Metric: Willingness of local judges, clerks, and community leaders to support the program. Strong support and collaboration from local stakeholders will ensure successful implementation.

## Volunteer Pool:

- Metric: The availability of volunteers, such as paralegal students, AARP members, or other community groups, to serve as court navigators. A strong volunteer base is vital for the program's success.

## Percentage Methodology for Fair Comparison

To ensure fairness in the comparison of counties, the Branch will use a percentage-based methodology, particularly when dealing with counties that have smaller caseloads. This approach will help avoid bias toward counties with larger case volumes.

### Calculate Case Type Percentages:

For each county, calculate the percentage of cases in the program's focus areas (e.g., domestic relations, protection orders, FED actions) relative to the total number of civil case filings in that county.

The formula for calculating the case type percentage is:

$$\text{Percentage} = (\text{Case Type Count} / \text{Total Civil Case}) \times 100$$

### Compare Proportions Across Counties:

Rank counties based on these percentages rather than raw case numbers. This approach ensures that smaller counties with a higher relative need are not overlooked simply due to their overall case volume.

## Scoring Framework for Court Navigator Expansion

To help prioritize counties based on the evaluation criteria, a scoring system is implemented. Each criterion will be assigned a score within a specified range, and counties will be ranked based on their cumulative score.

### Demand for Assistance (0–20 points)

- Volume of SRLs (or Case Type Percentage):
  - **16–20 points:** Counties where SRLs (or relevant case types) make up more than 75% of civil cases.
  - **11–15 points:** Counties where SRLs (or relevant case types) make up 50–74% of civil cases.
  - **6–10 points:** Counties where SRLs (or relevant case types) make up 25–49% of civil cases.

- **0–5 points:** Counties where SRLs (or relevant case types) make up less than 25% of civil cases.

### Availability of Legal Resources (0–20 points)

- Attorney Density:
  - **10 points:** Fewer than 1 attorney per 1,000 residents.
  - **5 points:** 1–3 attorneys per 1,000 residents.
  - **0 points:** More than 3 attorneys per 1,000 residents.
- Pro Bono Services:
  - **10 points:** No known pro bono or low-cost legal aid resources.
  - **5 points:** Limited pro bono services available.
  - **0 points:** Adequate pro bono services available.

### Judicial and Court Resources (0–20 points)

- Input from Judges:
  - **10 points:** Judges report a high need for SRL support.
  - **5 points:** Judges report a moderate need for SRL support.
  - **0 points:** Judges report little to no need for SRL support.
- Clerk Feedback:
  - **10 points:** Clerks report a high need for SRL support.
  - **5 points:** Clerks report a moderate need for SRL support.
  - **0 points:** Clerks report little to no need for SRL support.

### Community Support (0–20 points)

- Local Stakeholders:
  - **10 points:** Judges, clerks, and community leaders strongly support the program and offer collaboration opportunities.
  - **5 points:** Moderate interest from stakeholders with some willingness to collaborate.
  - **0 points:** Little to no support from stakeholders.

- Volunteer Pool:
  - **10 points:** Strong volunteer base available.
  - **5 points:** Moderate volunteer pool.
  - **0 points:** Limited or no volunteer availability.

**Total Scoring Example**

- Demand for Assistance: 16 points
- Availability of Legal Resources: 15 points
- Judicial and Court Resources: 18 points
- Community Support: 12 points
- Total Score: 61/80

Counties will be ranked based on their cumulative score, with higher scores indicating higher priority for program expansion.

**Expansion Request Process for the Court Navigator Program**

When the Judicial Branch seeks to expand the Court Navigator Program, a formal request will be sent out to all District Court and Circuit Court Judges and District and Circuit Court Clerks. This request will include this guide and Appendix A: Questionnaire for Courts. The purpose of this request is to assess the need for a Court Navigator Program in specific counties, ensuring that the program is expanding to areas with the greatest need and the greatest community support.

**Step 1: Completion of Appendix A**

Each judge and clerk office interested in participating in the Court Navigator Program must complete Appendix A. This form will gather relevant information to assess the county’s current need for the program and its ability to support it. A deadline will be set for the return of the completed forms, and all responses must be submitted by this date to be considered.

**Step 2: Evaluation of Responses**

Once all completed forms are received, the Judicial Branch will evaluate the responses based on the criteria outlined in this guide, using the scoring framework in Appendix B: Evaluation Process & Score Sheet. Courts will be ranked according to their needs, available resources, and the readiness for program implementation.

**Step 3: Ranking and Recommendations**

The evaluation process will determine the priority order for program expansion. Counties with higher scores will be prioritized for earlier implementation of the Court Navigator Program. Once all evaluations are complete, the rankings will be submitted to the Wyoming Judicial Council (WJC) for a final determination on where expansion will occur.

#### **Step 4: Notification and Program Initiation**

After the WJC makes its final determination, the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) will contact the selected courts to begin implementing the Court Navigator Program in the chosen counties. The AOC will work with the selected courts to ensure a successful rollout of the program.

#### **Ongoing Expansion Requests**

Requests for expansion will be sent out periodically to assess whether there have been any significant changes in the need for the program in any given county. These requests will help determine if additional courts should be included in the program or if any adjustments are needed based on changes in caseloads, available resources, or other factors affecting access to justice.

## **Conclusion**

This guide provides a structured, data-driven approach to expanding the Court Navigator Program in Wyoming. By assessing counties based on the outlined criteria and scoring system, we can ensure that the program is rolled out in the areas where it will have the most impact. With local support, adequate resources, and a focus on addressing the needs of SRLs, the program will help improve access to justice across Wyoming.

## Appendix A: Questionnaire for Courts

**Instructions:** Please complete this form to help assess your county's need for the Court Navigator Program. Responses will be evaluated using the scoring framework outlined in the Policy.

### Section 1: Demand for Assistance

1. What percentage of civil cases in your county involve self-represented litigants (SRLs)?

- 75% or more
- 50-74%
- 25-49%
- Less than 25%
- Data unavailable

2. If SRL data is unavailable, please provide the number of new case filings in the following areas over the past year. If you do not have this information, the AOC can retrieve these numbers:

Domestic Relations: \_\_\_\_\_

Protection Orders: \_\_\_\_\_

Forcible Entry and Detainer (Eviction) Cases: \_\_\_\_\_

Total Civil Case Filings: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Based on your observations, do SRLs in your county experience significant challenges in navigating the legal system?

- Yes, frequently
- Occasionally
- No, rarely

## Section 2: Availability of Legal Resources

4. How many attorneys actively practice in your county? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Are pro bono or low-cost legal aid services available in your county?
  - No known pro bono services available
  - Limited pro bono services available
  - Adequate pro bono services available
6. How often do court clerks refer SRLs to legal aid services?
  - Frequently
  - Occasionally
  - Rarely

## Section 3: Judicial and Court Resources

7. Do judges in your county perceive a strong need for SRL assistance?
  - Yes, a high need
  - A moderate need
  - No significant need
8. Do clerks in your county perceive a strong need for SRL assistance?
  - Yes, a high need
  - A moderate need
  - No significant need

9. Does the courthouse have a designated space where a Court Navigator could work (e.g., an office, workspace, or available area)?

- Yes, space is available
- No, but space could be arranged
- No space available

## Section 4: Community Support

10. Are judges, clerks, and other stakeholders supportive of implementing a Court Navigator Program in your county?

- Strongly supportive
- Somewhat supportive
- Not supportive

11. Are there potential volunteers available to assist with the program (e.g., paralegal students, AARP members, community groups)?

- Yes, a strong volunteer base exists
- A moderate volunteer base exists
- No available volunteer pool

## Appendix B: Evaluation Process & Score Sheet

### Evaluation Process

1. Each court's responses will be scored based on the above criteria.
2. The total score (out of 80 points) will determine priority ranking for expansion.
3. Counties with higher scores will be considered for earlier implementation of the Court Navigator Program.

### Score Sheet

Criteria	Response Options	Points
<b>Demand for Assistance</b>	75%+ SRLs or high case percentage	16-20
	50-74% SRLs or moderate case percentage	11-15
	25-49% SRLs or low case percentage	6-10
	<25% SRLs or minimal need	0-5
<b>Legal Resources</b>	<1 attorney per 1,000 residents	10
	1-3 attorneys per 1,000 residents	5
	>3 attorneys per 1,000 residents	0
	No known pro bono services	10
	Limited pro bono services	5
	Adequate pro bono services	0
<b>Judicial and Clerk Support</b>	Judges report high SRL need	10
	Judges report moderate SRL need	5
	Judges report low/no SRL need	0
	Clerks report high SRL need	10
	Clerks report moderate SRL need	5
	Clerks report low/no SRL need	0
<b>Infrastructure</b>	Courthouse has dedicated space for Navigator	10
	Some space could be arranged	5
	No available space	0
<b>Community Support</b>	Strong stakeholder support	10
	Moderate stakeholder support	5
	No stakeholder support	0
	Strong volunteer base	10
	Moderate volunteer base	5
	No volunteer availability	0