

**2024 ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

Minnesota Family Support & Recovery Council  
in partnership with Minnesota County Attorney's Association

**SRL<sup>2</sup>**  
**Self Represented Litigants**  
**Serving Real people Legal access**

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Self-Represented Litigant Program—MN Judicial Branch  
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**About me:**

- Supervising Attorney
- MN Judicial Branch **Self-Represented Litigant Program**
  - Statewide Self-Help Center and eFS Support Center
  - Joined team 8 years ago; supervising 5 years
- In private practice for 8 years prior to joining the MN Judicial Branch
  - Volunteer work with legal advice clinics
- Volunteered for the self-help center while in law school

18 years doing work with self-represented litigants

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**Self-Represented Litigant Program**

- Unit within the Minnesota Judicial Branch
- One of the largest SRL/Self-Help Programs in the country
  - Team of about 30 people
  - Attorneys and paralegals
  - Staff speak 8 languages
  - 80,000+ customer interactions per year

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**SRL Program Services**

**Direct Customer Service**

- Statewide Self-Help Center
- 4<sup>th</sup> District Self-Help Centers
- eFS Support Center

**Resource Development**

- Forms**: 600+ public facing forms
- Website Content**: 50+ Help Topics
- eTools**: Guide & File, Fillable Smart Forms

**Training and Outreach**

- About all the above
- Legal Advice v. Legal Information
- Plain Language
- Customer Service

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**M-F 9:00 am - 4pm**  
**(651) 435-6535**  
[www.mncourts.gov/selfhelp](http://www.mncourts.gov/selfhelp)

**Statewide Self-Help Center**

- Direct service provided by a team of 6 people
- Help with **most case types**
- Provides services **via phone and email only**; no walk-in location
  - 30,000+ phone calls (2023)
  - 3,000 emails (2023)
  - Support for more than 600 court forms
  - Knowledge and expertise in over 125 Help Topics
- 91 public workstations
  - In every county courthouse and some public libraries
  - Phone that calls Statewide SHC directly
  - Computer and printer

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**SRL<sup>2</sup>**  
**Self Represented Litigants**

**Serving** **Real people** **Legal access**

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**Serving**



“So often people with the knowledge get exasperated with those who don’t but your team had a gentleness in how they helped me.”  
—Self-Represented Litigant

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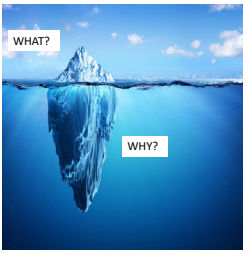
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**Real people**

**What?**

- Difficulty following instructions
- Disorganized
- Poor time management
- Disengagement
- Lack of concentration
- Emotional
- Difficulty making decisions
- Poor memory
- Difficulty expressing thoughts



**Why?**

- Trauma
- Mental illness
- Physical illness
- Disability
- Financial instability
- Cultural diversity
- Language barriers
- “isms”
- And more...

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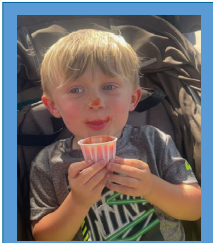
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**Real people**



“It’s all messy. The hair. The bed.  
The words. The heart. Life.”  
—William Leal

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**Legal access**

"Whenever I think about access to justice, a quote from Honoré de Balzac comes to mind. He said that **"Laws are spider webs through which the big flies pass, and the little ones get caught."** To me, that image perfectly captures not just the inequities in our legal system, but the tangible effects those inequities have on people. **While the system is meant to treat everyone equally, some people get stuck and expend a great deal of time and energy trying to break free. Others breeze through to resolution and move on with their lives. Giving people access to justice is like giving them the tools to free themselves from the spider's web."**

-Right Honourable Richard Wagner, Chief Justice of Canada



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**Serving Real people Legal access through plain language**

Oral



- Word choice ★
- Active voice
- You statements
- Tone

Written



- Word choice ★
- Active voice
- You statements
- Short sentences
- Font
- White space
- And more (visuals, headings, etc.)

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**Active voice**

Passive voice

A notice will be sent to you by the court.

➔

Active voice

The court will send you a notice.

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**"You" Statements**

**Party statement**

The COLA motion must be completed by the party and received by the court by April 30<sup>th</sup>.

➔

**You statement**

You must file your COLA motion by April 30<sup>th</sup>.

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**Tone**

<b>Face to Face</b>	<b>Ear to Ear</b>
Body <u>55</u> %	Tone <u>84</u> %
Tone <u>38</u> %	Words <u>16</u> %
Words <u>7</u> %	

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**Word Choice**

In the midst of disseminating erudition to the court's patrons, invariably aspire to do so at a scholastic gradation that is intelligible.

Give information to court customers in **plain language.**

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Activity



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...and we're back!



More on plain language and written communication:



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Word choice—again it matters!



54% of Americans between the ages of 16-74 read **below a 6<sup>th</sup> grade level.**



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### Short sentences

The education literature recommends the use of short sentences. Very short. Perhaps so short that they lack subjects and verbs. Some that are not grammatically correct. Write the way the intended user speaks and thinks. Write as though you are competing for the time and attention of busy and stressed individuals. Because you are."

-Self-Help, Reimagined by Professors Greiner, Jimenez, and Lupica



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### Font choice

#### Parental Rights Notice

The agency supervising the adoption of your child (or the Petitioner in the case of an adoption not supervised by an agency) will file your consent to adoption. Signing the consent does not terminate your parental rights.

Parental rights are terminated only by court order for adoption or terminating parental rights.

**NOTE:** Unless the child is adopted or your parental rights are terminated, you may be asked to support the child.

Times New Roman – Serif

#### Parental Rights Notice

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Parental rights are terminated only by court order for adoption or terminating parental rights.

**NOTE:** Unless the child is adopted or your parental rights are terminated, you may be asked to support the child.

Arial – Sans Serif



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### Formatting Fail

#### Email Notification of Service

By providing my email address below, I am indicating that I want to be notified by email when the respondent is served with the OFP. I understand that this is the only email I will receive from the court about the OFP unless I have signed up to receive other court notices via email. I understand that it will only be possible for the court to notify me by email when service information is received by the court. I understand that a technical or other error could occur preventing the successful delivery of the email, and that I have other options to learn of the service of the OFP on the respondent, including contacting law enforcement directly. I understand I must provide a valid email address in order to receive this notification of service, and that **THIS EMAIL ADDRESS WILL BE SEEN BY THE RESPONDENT.**

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_



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### Formatting Success

**Email Notification of Service**

By providing my email address below, I am asking to be notified by email when the respondent is serviced with the order for protection. I understand that:

- This is the only email I will receive from the court about the order unless I have signed up to receive other court notices by email;
- It will be possible for the court to notify me by email when service information is received by the court;
- A technical or other error could happen that prevents the successful delivery of the e-mail;
- I have other ways to learn of the service of the order on the respondent including contacting law enforcement directly; and
- I must provide a valid e-mail address to receive this notification of service.

THIS EMAIL ADDRESS WILL BE SEEN BY THE OTHER PERSON.

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Plain language resources

- <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/>
- <https://centerforplainlanguage.org/>
- <https://nacmnet.org/wp-content/uploads/NACM-Plain-Language-Guide-20190107.pdf>

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### Digital Accessibility: DOJ Order

- Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act has been revised
  - State and local government digital content
  - Must follow Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1
  - By April 24, 2026 (\* some exceptions)
- WCAG 2.1
  - Descriptions for pictures
  - Captions for recordings
  - Simple layout
  - Text and background color distinguishable
  - Text can be resized without losing content
  - Navigation without a mouse
  - Do's and Don't of using tables
  - Converting word documents to PDFs

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### Digital Accessibility: Resources

- MNIT Office of Accessibility
  - <https://mn.gov/mnit/about-mnit/accessibility/>
- MN Judicial Branch Employees
  - Digital Accessibility eGuide on OneCourtMN
- University of MN's Accessible U's
  - <https://accessibility.umn.edu/what-you-can-do/start-7-core-skills>



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**S**erving

**R**ead people

**L**egal access

“The language of law must not be foreign to the ears of those who are to obey it.” –Judge Learned Hand



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