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# Tennessee Supreme Court

## TASK FORCE TO STUDY SELF REPRESENTED LITIGANTS ISSUES IN TENNESSEE

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July 30, 2007

Marcy Eason  
President, Tennessee Bar Association  
Volunteer Building, Suite 1000  
832 Georgia Avenue  
Chattanooga, TN 37402

Dear Ms. Eason,

On behalf of the Tennessee Supreme Court Task Force on the Study of Self-Represented Litigant issues in Tennessee, I am writing to enlist your assistance in connection with an important part of our efforts to carry out our charge to

... study the challenges of assuring meaningful access to justice for self represented litigants and to recommend what action(s) should be taken regarding meeting these challenges. This study can include but will not be limited to: simplified forms for use throughout Tennessee for legal proceedings; efforts to expand availability of legal services by facilitating limited scope representation; clarifying roles played by court clerks to assist self represented litigants; consideration of development of guidelines for judges regarding the conduct of hearings in which one or more parties are self represented; and development of programs to assist persons in securing the assistance they need to have meaningful access to the court system in Tennessee.

After considerable review, the Task Force has concluded that the availability of standardized and simplified forms and instructions is a critical first step toward addressing the myriad of issues created by the ever-increasing number of self-represented litigants in Tennessee courts. These litigants are often now denied access to the courts because they cannot secure a lawyer to help them and have no idea about what forms are needed and how they must be completed in order to have their day in court. The availability of simplified forms and instructions for use by self-represented litigants will alleviate many of the problems facing these litigants and the courts that must hear their claims. Building on the prior work of the AOC's Self- Represented Litigant Working Group, the Task Force has now developed forms and instructions for use in divorce proceedings based on irreconcilable differences. One set is for an irreconcilable differences divorce involving children and the other is for such divorces without children. The proposed forms and instructions are attached. We have proposed no changes to the parenting plan forms or child-support guidelines as have already been approved for state-wide use.

To help us in our work, the Task Force specifically asks that you look at the forms and instructions that accompany this letter and offer any suggestions about how they might be improved. In this regard, you should be aware that many of the self-represented litigants who will use these forms will not be high school graduates. In addition, we hope that these forms and instructions will be used by lawyers who are not family law specialists but who will provide limited scope representation on a pro bono basis to persons who would otherwise have to represent themselves in their irreconcilable differences divorce. You should also know that our current thinking is to recommend to the Supreme Court that these forms be accepted for filing in all courts if they are properly completed. We will not be asking the Court to require use of these forms. We would like to receive your comments about the proposed forms and instructions **by November 1, 2007**.

We are turning to you for assistance because of your demonstrated commitment to access to justice and your expertise concerning the matters about which we are concerned. We look forward to hearing from about this important project. Also, if you would like, I, or other members of the Task Force, would be happy to meet with you at a mutually convenient time to discuss the proposed domestic relations forms that we have developed in response to the Supreme Court's charge to the Task Force. Thank you in advance for your interest and anticipated assistance in our in work.

Yours truly,

Carl A. Pierce  
Task Force Chairman

Enclosure: Forms and Instructions  
Cc: Allen Ramsur, Executive Director TBA