Tips to Help Self-Represented Litigants Navigate the Courthouse
An Initiative of the Tennessee Supreme Court Access to Justice Commission

Many Tennesseans who must represent themselves in a legal matter do not have prior experience with the court system. The Access to Justice Commission seeks to find simple ways to improve access to the court system to help people who cannot afford a lawyer and are representing themselves. Self-represented litigants are not familiar with legal procedures and do not know where they need to go to file paperwork or for court hearings. When the self-represented litigant enters the courthouse, locating the correct clerk's office and the correct courtroom can be difficult. The ATJ Commission believes that simple, plain language signage can be an effective tool to provide self-represented litigants with correct information and directions. In addition, providing this information through signs will decrease the amount of time court personnel must spend answering similar questions.

The following is a list of the types of signs and easy steps court personnel can use to develop plain language signs for their courthouse.

1. Post signs in the lobby, elevators and outside the court clerk offices listing what things they can do in the clerk's office and other offices (pick up forms, file forms, etc.).

2. Post a sign or signs with the floor and room number for each court clerks' office and courtroom that people will see immediately as they enter the building (or after they go through security).

3. Post signs indicating how to find stairs and elevators.

4. Include arrows on signs that indicate directions (left, right, upstairs, downstairs).

5. Post signs outside the court clerks' offices listing the types of cases that the offices handle (divorce, custody, probate, etc).

6. Keep sentences to fifteen words or less.

7. Never use ALL CAPS or *italics*. These make words harder to read.

8. Use common terms as much as possible. Example: "lawyer" instead of "attorney".

9. Use contractions. For example, use "can't" instead of "cannot".