ERIC C. TAYLOR PRESIDING JUDGE



SHERRI R. CARTER EXECUTIVE OFFICER/ CLERK OF COURT

January 3, 2022

A Message from the Presiding Judge and Executive Officer/Clerk of Court:

We are pleased to present the first comprehensive report on Guide & File (G&F), a free online tool that promotes access to justice through easy-to-use technology to assist Self-Represented Litigants (SRL) complete complex court forms.

The pandemic's sudden onset in March 2020 required the Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles (Court) and courts across the state to transform traditional in-person services to safe and convenient remote alternatives for the most vulnerable litigants, including SRLs. Already established and offered as an option prior the pandemic, G&F's benefits became increasingly more important as litigants relied on the Court for this safe, convenient option to fill out their court forms on their own time – without needing to skip work, find and fund childcare, or pay to get a ride to the courthouse.

G&F is a software application that helps SRLs complete the court forms needed to get divorced, get a Restraining Order, file a Small Claims case and more. It provides an efficient and effective way to increase this unprecedented expansion in remote access to justice. The availability of this tool is an ideal example of the types of remote and self-service options favored by the public, as demonstrated in a report from Chief Justice Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye's Workgroup on Post-Pandemic Initiatives.

We hope you enjoy learning about this critical tool that has helped courts continue to provide access to justice to those who need it most during this era of rapid change in California's trial courts.

Sincerely,

Mie C. Tuy h

Eric C. Taylor Presiding Judge

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Sherri R. Carter Executive Officer/Clerk of Court

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Expanding Access to Justice in the Nation's Largest Trial Court Before and After the Pandemic

## **GUIDE & FILE REPORT**

Expanding Access to Justice in the Nation's Largest Trial Court Before and After the Pandemic



## Introduction to Guide & File: Increasing Importance for Increasing Access to Justice

After a year of emergency COVID-19 response measures, Chief Justice Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye appointed the Ad-Hoc Workgroup on Post-Pandemic Initiatives in March 2021 to identify, refine, and enhance successful court practices that emerged during the pandemic that increase access to justice, modernize services, and promote consistency and uniformity in court practices. Chaired by Justice Marsha Slough, the workgroup provides periodic recommendations to the Judicial Council of California (JCC) and policymakers to address the need for timely action on access to justice initiatives.

On August 16, 2021, the Workgroup released its first interim report, which recommended "that California expand and maximize remote access on a permanent basis for most court proceedings and should not roll back the increased access to the courts made possible by remote technology to pre-pandemic levels of in-person operations." The report, which includes public input from 76 presenters, including judicial officers, trial court leaders and staff, justice partners, attorneys, and advocates representing court users, recommended the JCC "encourage and support courts to substantially expand remote access through all available technology and should work to promote consistency in remote access throughout the state to ensure that Californians have equal access to the courts while providing flexibility to meet local needs." Just before the report's release, the Chief Justice remarked during a JCC meeting that "remote access to justice, hands down, serves our most vulnerable."

One of the primary ways courts across California have maintained and promoted uniform access to justice for people without attorneys during the pandemic is a free tool known as Guide & File (G&F). At the Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles (Court), the platform has become an integral part of an innovative service model that promotes remote access to justice through easy-touse technology, particularly for Self-Represented Litigants (SRLs), while making it possible to shift valuable staff resources to assist the public with other services in the Court's Self-Help Centers and Clerk's Office.



Although G&F was available before the pandemic struck suddenly in March 2020, its prominence as a safe and convenient alternative to in-person service came into sharp focus when it was necessary to reduce foot traffic in Los Angeles County courthouses. G&F is a software application that helps people without attorneys complete the paperwork they need to get divorced, file a Small Claims case, get a restraining order, and more. The online tool virtually escorts litigants through the detailed process of filling out court forms by using plain-language questions and answers, or "interviews," in a process akin to popular tax preparation software. G&F is a critical resource to access justice for the state's SRLs, many of whom - as the Chief Justice noted - are the vulnerable people who benefit when they can access justice without having to skip work, find and fund childcare, or pay to get a ride to the courthouse.

When the Court encouraged people during the first year of the pandemic to use remote services to avoid coming to court, G&F user statistics demonstrated the technology's increased significance. Statewide, more than 160,000 people visited the G&F website in 2020, and 2021 is on pace to have even more as nearly 110,000 people have used the site during the first six months. Completed interviews using G&F increased by 150% from 2019 to 2020. During that same time, the number of efiled documents increased by 225% (see more information related to G&F usage during the pandemic on page 6). G&F has proven its worth as an efficient and effective solution to help courts maintain and expand access to justice during one of the most challenging times in generations. This report, which contains extensive user data and feedback, solidifies its status as an essential tool for accessing justice in California.

## **Background on G&F**

In California, court forms produced by the Judicial Council of California are the mechanisms for case filing, case processing, and case resolution. The forms are often complex, lengthy and can be overwhelming for those without legal expertise. Prior to G&F implementation in Los Angeles, the only options available to SRLs to complete their forms were to:

- Find the correct forms online, print and fill out the forms on their own;
- Go into a courthouse and ask for the specific form by form number at the Clerk's Office, to then fill out by themselves; or
- Locate a Self-Help Center nearby to get inperson guidance on filling out the forms (including the use of HotDocs).



Recognizing the need to increase access through technology to assist with the completion and filing of court forms, a group of superior courts collaborated in 2017 to implement a technology that accomplished these goals. In Fall 2017, Los Angeles used one-time funding to hire an attorney to lead the G&F statewide initiative that was primarily done by self-help attorneys and paralegals from the collaborating courts. When presented with information about G&F and how it simplifies filling out court documents and integrates with the Odyssey case management system, the courts then implemented this technology, including the ability for SRLs to efile completed forms through the application. Currently, G&F interviews are available for select Civil, Family Law, Probate, Guardianship, and Small Claims forms (*more on page 12*).

Created by Tyler Technologies, G&F is used in court systems nationwide. It eliminates the confusion associated with filling out multiple legal forms for individuals unfamiliar with the legal field and its processes. G&F interviews also determine if a litigant is ready to file a case in superior court, the type of case the litigant needs to file, and ultimately assists the litigant to fill out and file the correct court forms needed to start and resolve a court case. The litigants may access G&F from home or on the go, using a computer, smartphone or tablet, at their own convenience.

While residents in all 58 counties use G&F, only 26 of the courts currently fund the use of G&F. Of those 26 courts, several work directly with the G&F team to develop interviews for local forms included as part of the interview and filing process. These select courts can access a library of developed interviews to find the one that most closely relates to the local need and then work with the G&F team to edit and adapt as appropriate. Once the interview is developed, the local form/ interview can be incorporated into the library and serve as a launching point for other courts for local adaptations, including L.A. (more information about G&F, including additional history and funding sources, can be found on page 8).

## Serving the Largest County in the Nation

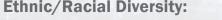
The Court serves the nation's most populous county, an area in which more than 10 million people reside and which encompasses 88 cities and 140 unincorporated areas spanning over 4,700 square miles. The county's size and diversity present geographic, cultural and language access challenges to provide litigants with effective self-help services. Without adequate legal support, SRLs face hurdles that translate directly to poorer outcomes in their cases.

### **Statistics for Los Angeles County**

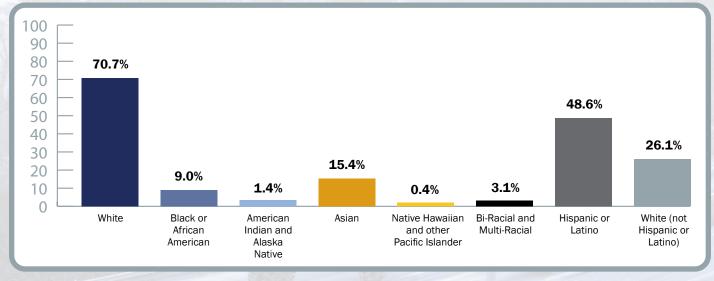
**Population of Los Angeles County:** 

**Geographic Size:** 





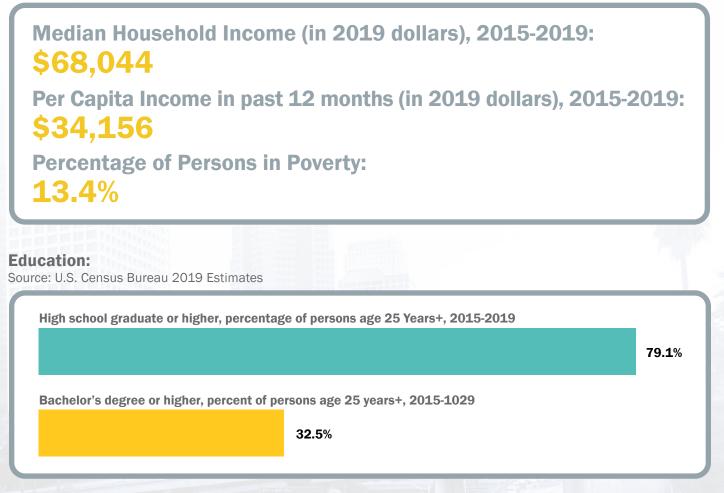
Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2019 Estimates\*



\*The U.S. Census Bureau collects race data in accordance with guidelines provided by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and these data are based on self-identification. People may choose to report more than one race to indicate their racial mixture, such as "American Indian" and "White." People who identify their origin as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish may be of any race. OMB requires that race data be collected for a minimum of five groups: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. OMB permits the Census Bureau to also use a sixth category - Some Other Race. Respondents may report more than one race.

#### Socioeconomic Diversity (Income and Poverty):

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2019 Estimates



Language Diversity:

#### Spoken Languages 220+

Most requested languages other than English:

- Spanish
- Korean
- Mandarin
- Eastern Armenian
- Vietnamese
- Cantonese

Size/Scale of the Court:

Largest Trial Court in the U.S.

- 37 Courthouses
- 12 Judicial Districts
- 580 Judicial Officers
- 1.7 Million annual filings
- 4,600 Employees

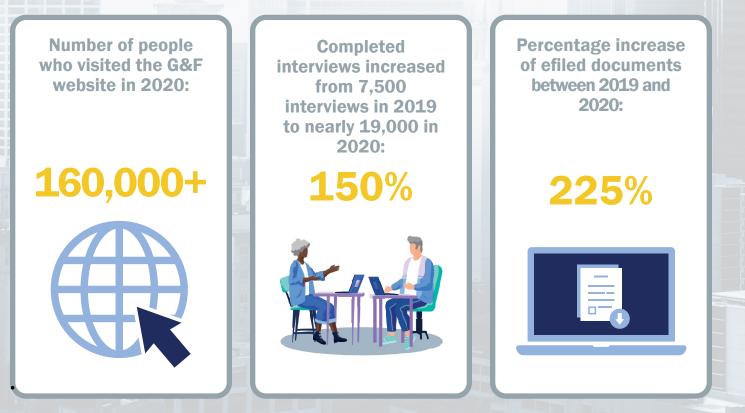
## **Continuing Access to Justice: How G&F is Helping** Litigants During the Pandemic and Beyond

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, courts across California confronted the public health threat with restrictions on courthouse access and the prioritization of statutorily mandated services such as restraining orders, arraignments, and other emergency matters. As the pandemic continued, courthouse capacity restrictions remained, limiting in-person access to courthouses, courtrooms, the Clerk's Office and Self-Help Centers.

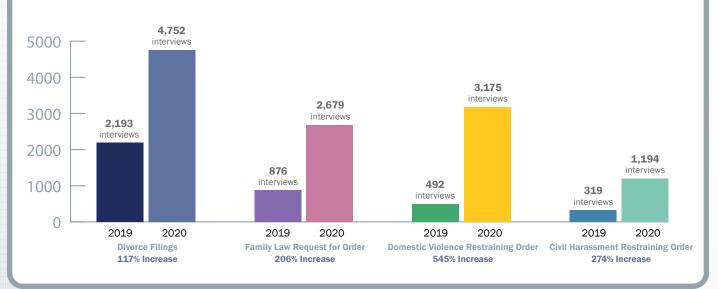
These restrictions on in-person service emphasize the need to prioritize online resources to help litigants resolve their matters, elevating G&F's prominence as a solution. Even after social distancing ended on June 28, 2021, the Court strongly encouraged the public to continue using remote services. Due to the G&F system's flexibility, pandemic-related adjustments were relatively simple, helping the Court better serve its communities during the unprecedented worldwide emergency. For example, the courts in California quickly modified the Domestic Violence Restraining Order (DVRO) interview to make it available to efile, where available, to help people file this emergency petition as quickly as possible during the pandemic. The DVRO interview also was updated to provide information on how to file DVRO documents when efiling was not available. In Family Law, the courts translated interviews for divorce cases into Spanish. Also, the courts developed and added the Petition for Name Change and Default Judgment interviews during the pandemic.

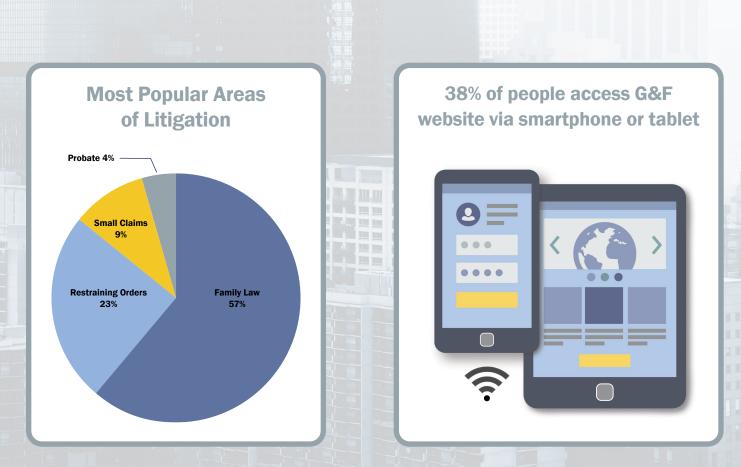
Due in part to its convenience, accessibility, and availability at a time when in-person service was limited, G&F usage greatly increased in 2020 during the pandemic:

### **Statistics for G&F Usage**



**G&F** usage of all case types increased in number of interviews except for Unlawful Detainers, which decreased due to legislation delaying landlords' ability to evict tenants. The biggest increases were seen in Civil Harassment and Domestic Violence cases:





## **Funding, Partners and Usage Across California**

G&F's operational costs were about \$250,000 in Fiscal Year 2020/2021. Since its launch in FY 2017/2018, G&F's operational costs have totaled about \$750,000.



#### **G&F COST SHARING COUNTIES**

1. Lassen	10. Calaveras	19. Kings
2. Tehama	11. San Mateo	20. San Luis Obispo
3. Glenn	12. Alameda	<b>21. Kern</b>
4. Butte	13. Stanislaus	22. San Bernardino
5. Yuba	14. Santa Clara	23. Santa Barbara
6. Sutter	15. Santa Cruz	24. Los Angeles
7. Sonoma	16. Merced	25. Orange
8. Napa	17. Monterey	26. San Diego
9. Alpine	18. Fresno	

Currently the cost is shared by 26 superior courts, including the Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles, even though all 58 superior courts offer this service to their litigants (see the Appendix for usage information by county). These 26 superior courts annually sign a voluntary Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to fund the work to implement

G&F statewide (two Business System Analysts at the Orange County Superior Court and one Project Manager at the Superior Court of Los Angeles County).

The cost is divided among the courts using the Judicial Council of California funding Workload Formula to fairly split the annual G&F cost. The Workload Formula uses annual filings as an indicator of the workload processed by each trial court. Recognizing that it takes more time and resources to handle a felony case than a traffic ticket, the Workload Formula weighs filings in each case category differently. The weights are based on time studies of thousands of court employees, in dozens of courts, and are refreshed every few years to recognize changing circumstances. Based on the time required to handle each type of case, the Workload Formula calculates the funding required to support the requisite staff.

Tyler Technologies, which created and supports G&F, also provides case management systems for 31 superior courts in California ("Tyler Courts"), but not all courts contribute to the G&F operating costs. The Tyler Courts support G&F end-to-end, which enables users to complete online interviews and immediately efile with the court through the G&F platform. The G&F software is integrated with Odyssey to electronically send the complete documents directly to the court for filing.

Even if a court does not utilize Tyler's case management system, litigants may still complete interviews online through the platform. Users can navigate through the process of filling out their legal paperwork and once the interview is completed, the user can save the document, print and bring it to the courthouse to file in person, or save the completed form as a PDF and upload it to an efiling service provider the court uses to file electronically.

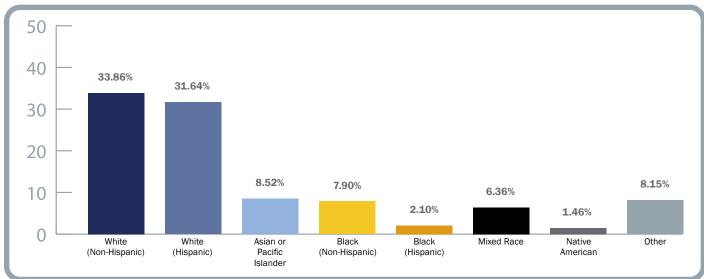
Despite the clear value G&F offers litigants across California, its funding remains precarious due to the MOU's short-term, annual renewal options for the 26 courts as well as the imbalance in contributing courts.

## **User Profiles and Available Interviews**

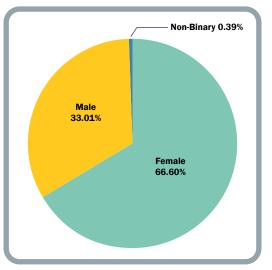
One of G&F's unique features is the real-time feedback users provide after they finish their interview. The system automatically offers an optional, anonymous exit survey to provide information about user demographics and feedback about their experience, allowing G&F developers to improve the interviews and make other system improvements.

More than 12,000 G&F users in California voluntarily took the survey in 2020. Below is some self-reported information about the demographics of G&F users.

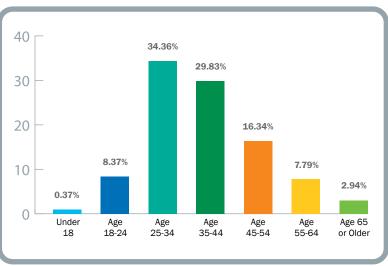
**Racial Diversity:** 



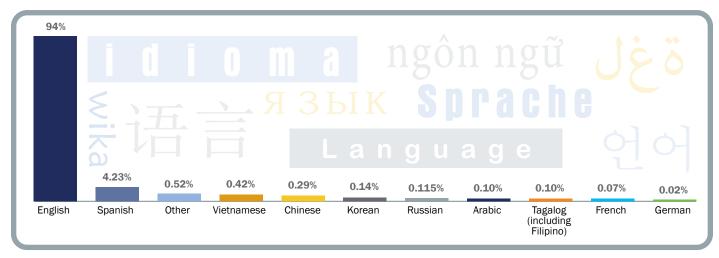




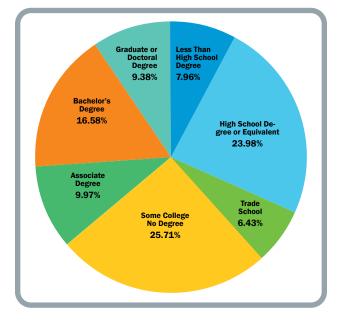




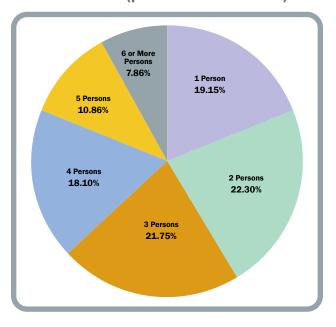
#### **Preferred Languages:**



#### **Education Level:**



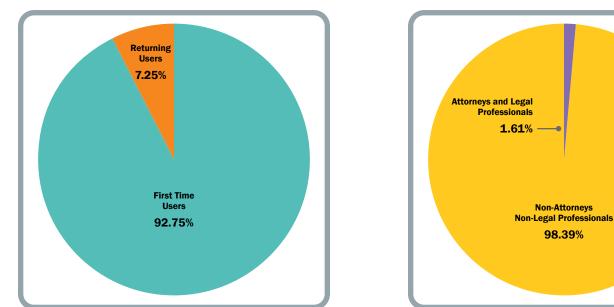
#### Household Size (persons in household):



#### Household Income:

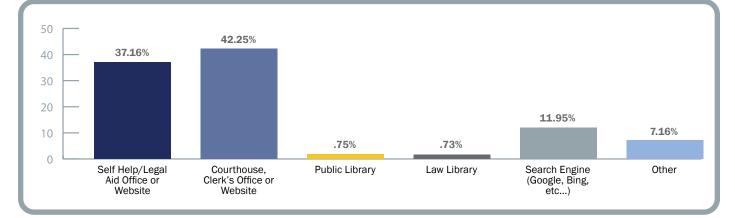


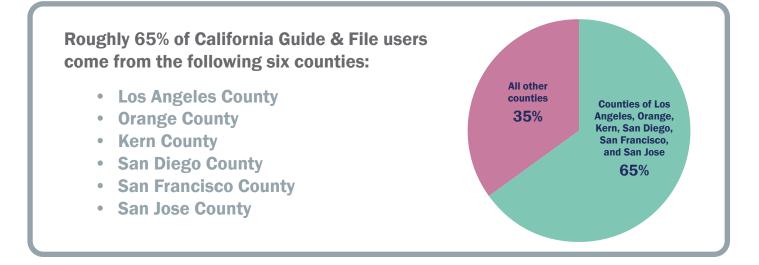
**Attorneys and Legal Professionals:** 



#### **First Time Users:**

How Did You Hear About G&F?:





#### Interviews Available:

Petition for Change of Name for an Adult

Civil Harassment Restraining Order Request

Divorce, Legal Separation or Nullity Triage

Divorce, Separation or Nullity - Initial Request

Divorce, Separation or Nullity - Amended

Divorce, Separation or Nullity - Response

Domestic Violence Restraining Order Request

Domestic Violence Restraining Order - Response

Elder or Dependent Adult Abuse Restraining Order Request

Eviction/Unlawful Detainer Answer

Income and Expense Declaration

Notice of Change of Address or Other Contact Information

Petition for Appointment of Guardian

Petition to Establish Parentage or Custody and Support

Proof of Service of Summons

Request for Order

Requesting a Limited Conservatorship

Request to Enter Default and Default Judgment

**Restraining Orders Triage** 

Small Claims

#### **Interviews In Development:**

Eviction/Unlawful Detainer Complaint - in testing

Response to Petition to Establish Parentage/Custody and Support – next to be developed

Conservatorship interview is translated in Spanish and will be available soon – in testing

## Most Popular Interviews in Los Angeles County in 2020-2021:

Divorce, Separation or Nullity - Initial Request

Domestic Violence Restraining Order Request

Request For Order

Petition to Establish Parentage or Custody and Support

**Civil Harassment Restraining Order Request** 

"G&F will be upgraded to a new platform to reduce the response time of the interviews. The amount of time to complete an interview will improve significantly for a better user experience."

## **Success Stories**

G&F users in California provide positive feedback about their experience using the program. Their feedback underscores G&F's usefulness, particularly its ease of use and the user's comfort level in accessing justice and helping them solve their problems easily and affordably – all without having to come to court.

Almost half of G&F users reported the interview was "easy" or "very easy" to complete (Chart 1), while more than 57% said the G&F interview was "helpful" in completing their legal filings and nearly 28% said it was "very helpful" (Chart 2). Nearly 80% of users said the interview made them "comfortable" with handling their legal issue (Chart 3).

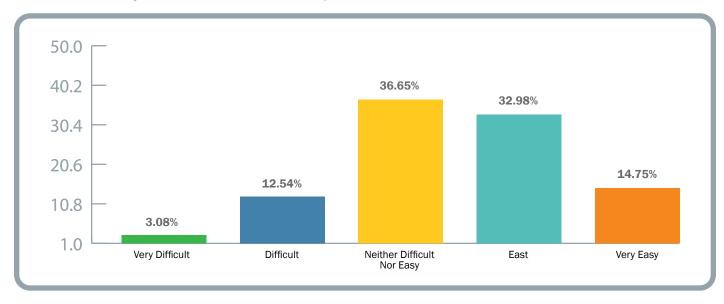
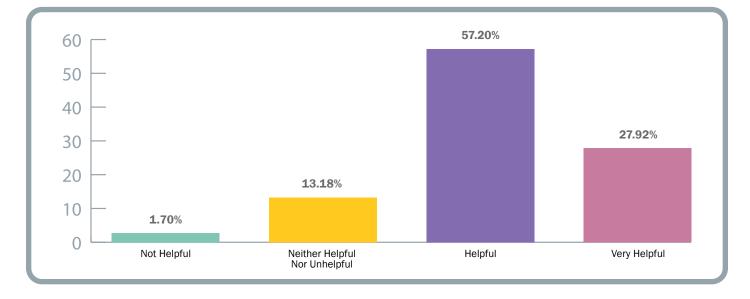
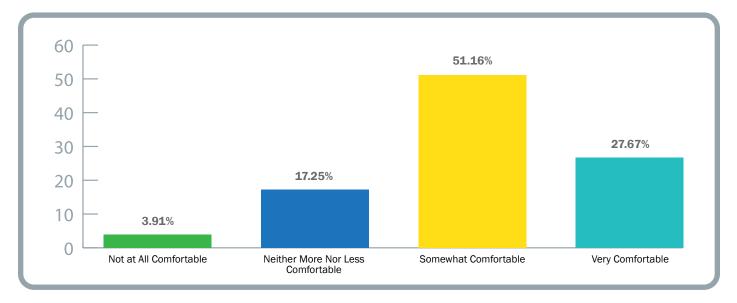


Chart 1: How easy was this interview to complete?

#### Chart 2: Was this interview helpful in completing your legal filing?





#### Chart 3: How comfortable did this interview make you about handling your legal issue?

Through several open-ended questions in the exit survey, G&F users provide comments about their experience:



## **Conclusion: G&F is an Essential Tool for Access to Justice**



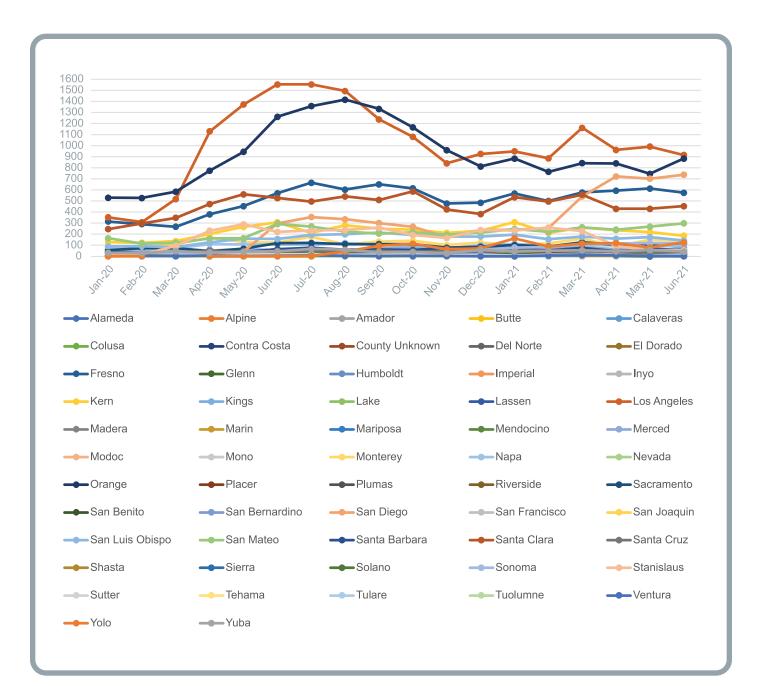
G&F is a critical tool for SRLs and those needing help filling out and efiling their court documents – not only in Los Angeles County but across California especially when social distancing limited courthouse capacity during the pandemic. More than 85% of G&F users find the software "helpful" or "very helpful" in completing the necessary court documents. The number of completed interviews increased by 150% from 2019 to 2020.

G&F helps SRLs overcome anxiety and confusion when faced with filling out and filing court forms for the first time. The software's name truly exemplifies its purpose and outcome – the system easily guides users through the process of filling out legal documents, delivers completed forms to litigants for filing, and where available, these petitions may be filed electronically with the court. Users can fill out the documents from home, on the go, or wherever – using a phone, tablet, or computer. This saves time, transportation, parking and legal expenses. Stable, reliable funding would provide more resources to sustain and expand this program, allowing for the development of more interviews for statewide use to help litigants fill out and file court forms.

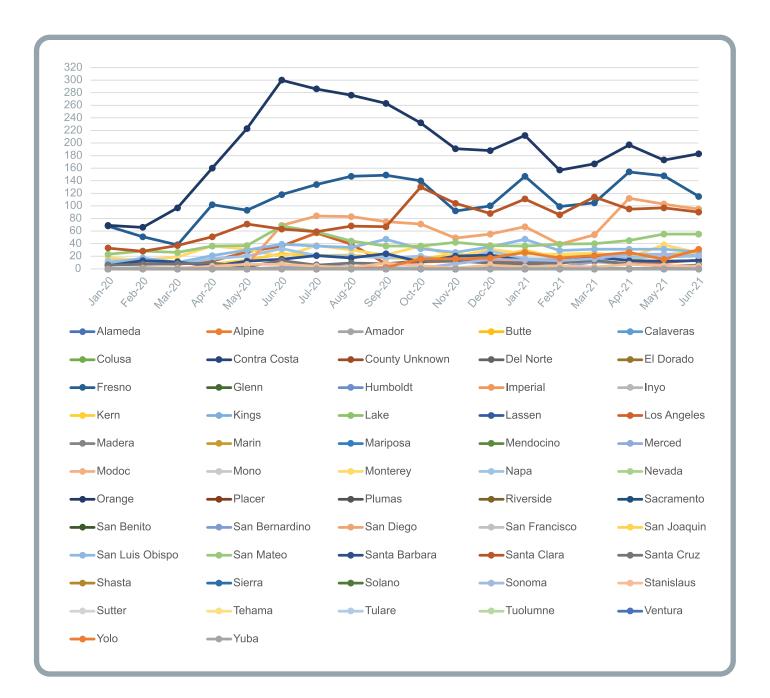
G&F's value will continue to shine as courts strive to improve online services for the state's most vulnerable people who cannot afford attorneys and need help during a crisis or solving a legal issue. Building on the success of lessons learned during the pandemic, trial courts will continue to innovate and improve equal access to justice for all Californians. As selfrepresentation becomes even more common, G&F represents a critical bridge between those without the means to hire counsel and the legal resolutions they seek to improve their lives. Statewide funding will ensure this platform receives the investment and attention necessary to become a permanent, stable and accessible remote service to increase access to the courts in California.

## **Appendix**

### From January 2020 through June 2021, 87,020 G&F interviews were started throughout California:



## From January 2020 through June 2021, 31,198 interviews completed in California using G&F:



## **GUIDE & FILE INTERVIEWS: JANUARY 2020 - JUNE 2021**

<b>Counties in California</b>	2020	2021	Grand Total
Alameda			
Sum of Total Started	136	73	209
Sum of Total Completed	29	23	52
Alpine			
Sum of Total Started	1	1	2
Sum of Total Completed	0	1	1
Amador			
Sum of Total Started	5	6	11
Sum of Total Completed	2	0	2
Butte			
Sum of Total Started	19	22	41
Sum of Total Completed	2	7	9
Calaveras			
Sum of Total Started	55	28	83
Sum of Total Completed	13	8	21
Colusa			
Sum of Total Started	2	0	2
Sum of Total Completed	1	0	1
Contra Costa			
Sum of Total Started	462	322	784
Sum of Total Completed	159	138	297

County Unknown	2020	2021	Grand Total
Sum of Total Started	15	2	17
Sum of Total Completed	0	0	0
Del Norte			
Sum of Total Started	3	5	8
Sum of Total Completed	1	1	2
El Dorado			
Sum of Total Started	15	10	25
Sum of Total Completed	6	6	12
Fresno			
Sum of Total Started	5,768	3,426	9,194
Sum of Total Completed	1,999	1,345	3,344
Glenn			
Sum of Total Started	3	8	11
Sum of Total Completed	1	4	5
Humboldt			
Sum of Total Started	7	9	16
Sum of Total Completed	1	2	3
Imperial			
Sum of Total Started	6	3	9
Sum of Total Completed	0	0	0
Inyo			
Sum of Total Started	1	0	1
Sum of Total Completed	0	0	0

Kern	2020	2021	Grand Total
Sum of Total Started	2,587	1,419	4,006
Sum of Total Completed	873	557	1,430
Kings			
Sum of Total Started	544	562	1,106
Sum of Total Completed	140	178	318
Lake			
Sum of Total Started	3	5	8
Sum of Total Completed	1	0	1
Lassen			
Sum of Total Started	3	4	7
Sum of Total Completed	0	2	2
Los Angeles			
Sum of Total Started	12,361	5,863	18,224
Sum of Total Completed	4,104	2,122	6,226
Madera			
Sum of Total Started	26	18	44
Sum of Total Completed	11	5	16
Marin			
Sum of Total Started	21	12	33
Sum of Total Completed	7	7	14
Mariposa			
Sum of Total Started	3	1	4
Sum of Total Completed	1	0	1

Mendocino	2020	2021	Grand Total
Sum of Total Started	18	13	31
Sum of Total Completed	4	3	7
Merced			
Sum of Total Started	718	392	1,110
Sum of Total Completed	201	131	332
Modoc			
Sum of Total Started	0	3	3
Sum of Total Completed	0	0	0
Mono			
Sum of Total Started	19	7	26
Sum of Total Completed	6	7	13
Monterey			
Sum of Total Started	1,452	759	2,211
Sum of Total Completed	493	287	780
Napa			
Sum of Total Started	1,120	590	1,710
Sum of Total Completed	329	197	526
Nevada			
Sum of Total Started	18	28	46
Sum of Total Completed	6	6	12
Orange			
Sum of Total Started	11,661	4,957	16,618
Sum of Total Completed	4,297	2,156	6,453

Placer	2020	2021	Grand Total	
Sum of Total Started	337	165	502	
Sum of Total Completed	123	61	184	
Plumas				
Sum of Total Started	0	3	3	
Sum of Total Completed	0	0	0	
Riverside				
Sum of Total Started	157	97	254	
Sum of Total Completed	44	37	81	
Sacramento				
Sum of Total Started	1,047	647	1,694	
Sum of Total Completed	337	244	581	
San Benito				
Sum of Total Started	8	7	15	
Sum of Total Completed	3	5	8	
San Bernardino				
Sum of Total Started	153	111	264	
Sum of Total Completed	42	43	85	
San Diego				
Sum of Total Started	2,041	3,197	5,238	
Sum of Total Completed	773	1,189	1,962	
San Francisco				
Sum of Total Started	32	53	85	
Sum of Total Completed	5	24	29	

San Joaquin	2020	2021	Grand Total	
Sum of Total Started	59	43	102	
Sum of Total Completed	15	13	28	
San Luis Obispo				
Sum of Total Started	1,862	1,002	2,864	
Sum of Total Completed	616	361	977	
San Mateo				
Sum of Total Started	2,341	1,536	3,877	
Sum of Total Completed	803	602	1,405	
Santa Barbara				
Sum of Total Started	630	367	997	
Sum of Total Completed	261	148	409	
Santa Clara				
Sum of Total Started	5,388	2,900	8,288	
Sum of Total Completed	1,973	1,171	3,144	
Santa Cruz				
Sum of Total Started	491	269	760	
Sum of Total Completed	187	110	297	
Shasta				
Sum of Total Started	6	9	15	
Sum of Total Completed	1	4	5	
Sierra				
Sum of Total Started	2	0	2	
Sum of Total Completed	0	0	0	

Solano	2020	2021	Grand Total
Sum of Total Started	135	67	202
Sum of Total Completed	33	19	52
Sonoma			
Sum of Total Started	337	629	966
Sum of Total Completed	123	244	367
Stanislaus			
Sum of Total Started	2,186	923	3,109
Sum of Total Completed	666	299	965
Sutter			
Sum of Total Started	127	40	167
Sum of Total Completed	43	14	57
Tehama			
Sum of Total Started	10	4	14
Sum of Total Completed	3	1	4
Tulare			
Sum of Total Started	32	19	51
Sum of Total Completed	8	7	15
Tuolumne			
Sum of Total Started	7	3	10
Sum of Total Completed	1	1	2
Ventura			
Sum of Total Started	38	26	64
Sum of Total Completed	11	10	21

Yolo	2020	2021	Grand Total
Sum of Total Started	391	688	1079
Sum of Total Completed	127	256	383
Yuba			
Sum of Total Started	507	291	798
Sum of Total Completed	159	98	257
Total Sum of Total Started	55,376	31,644	87,020
Total Sum of Total Completed	19,044	12,154	31,198



SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES