

# Shriver Custody Projects Help Low-Income Parents in Child Custody Cases



## What is the Shriver Program?

The Sargent Shriver Civil Counsel Act program was legislatively established in 2009 (AB590) and expanded in 2019 (AB330) to provide legal services to low-income people in cases involving critical livelihood issues like housing, child custody, and family guardianship. This fact sheet describes the services provided between 2011 and 2019 by the three pilot projects funded to help low-income Californians in child custody cases. All pilot projects involve collaborations between legal services agencies and local superior courts. Projects' goals are to improve access to the legal system, increase court efficiency, and improve the quality of justice dispensed by California's courts.

## Why custody cases?

Child custody cases have critical implications for families and children, are complex and emotionally charged, and can remain open until the child turns 18. A court order for sole custody can leave the other parent with limited or no access to the child. Thus, these cases can be highly contentious and drawn out. Legal help can benefit the families and reduce pressure on the courts.

## What types of services are available?

Shriver services are provided to low-income people in contentious custody cases. Through 2019, one party must have been seeking sole custody and facing an opposing party with an attorney. Projects offer a range of services, including:

- **Legal representation** (an attorney represents the client and manages the case)
- **Unbundled legal services** (staff helps with discrete legal tasks such as brief legal advice or preparation of forms)
- Additional creative problem-solving services, such as **social work interns** at one project to assess client needs and offer social services referrals and counseling; and special **Shriver Settlement Conferences** at one court facilitated by a judicial officer.

## Are the pilot projects successful?

A multi-year evaluation of the Shriver pilot projects used data from multiple sources and included a study of one project's court case file data. That study compared outcomes of cases with parents who were represented by a Shriver attorney and offered a Shriver Settlement Conference with parents who received no Shriver services. The study found that Shriver services leveled the playing field, led to more settlements and more durable orders, all of which helped save court resources and support family stability. Study results are shown on reverse.

## Who received Shriver Services?

Between 2011 and 2019:

**2,824**

low-income parents were served

Of these parents:

**90%**

were people of color

**7,617**

children were impacted by services

**77%**

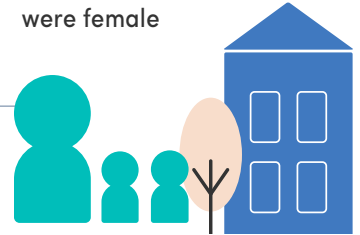
were female

**\$1,146/month**

Shriver custody clients' median household income

**\$1,778/month**

Federal Poverty Level (2019) for a household with one adult and two children



At service intake, most clients demonstrated needs with regard to employment, income, and food security.

Many cases involved current or previous risk factors for children, including:

**59%**

allegations of domestic violence

**38%**

allegations of substance use

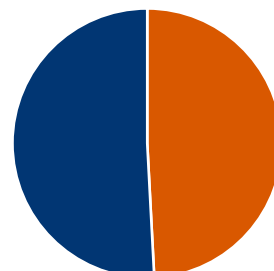
**20%**

involvement with child protective services

## What services were provided?

**51%**

received representation by a Shriver attorney



**49%**

received unbundled legal services

# Notable Impacts of the Shriver Custody Pilot Projects



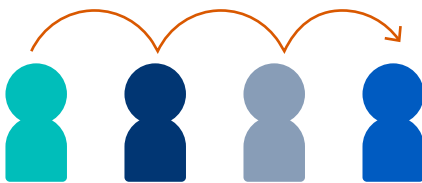
## Shriver Services Leveled the Playing Field

Shriver projects **balanced representation** in custody cases, thus offering both parents access to justice.

**75% of parents with Shriver representation faced an opposing party with an attorney.**

## Attorneys Educated Parents, Creating Efficiencies for the Court

Attorneys **calm emotional tensions** and **educate parents about the legal process**, often resulting in **more reasonable expectations** for case outcomes. As a result, **court proceedings become more efficient**, as parents are better prepared for hearings and judges receive **legally relevant and comprehensive information** on which to base custody decisions.



## Parents Felt Supported

Parents felt **informed about their cases, supported throughout the process, and not lost in the court system**. Having an attorney's expertise and support mattered to parents, regardless of the legal outcome of their case.

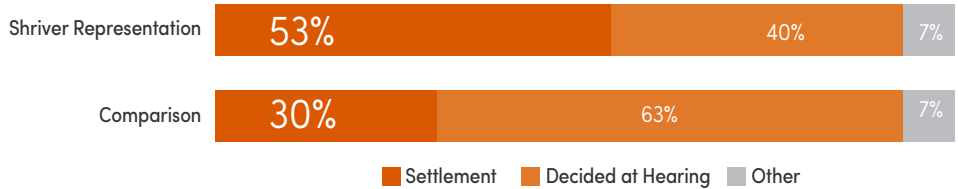


For more information, visit:  
[www.courts.ca.gov/shrivercommittee.htm](http://www.courts.ca.gov/shrivercommittee.htm)

## More Settlements and Fewer Trials

Supporting negotiations and reducing emotional tensions between parties, Shriver attorneys **increased the likelihood of pre-trial settlements**, positively impacting families and the court.

One pilot project provided clients with representation by a Shriver attorney and participation in a Shriver Settlement Conference. In this project, **Shriver cases settled significantly more often than cases without Shriver services, and fewer ended via hearing.**

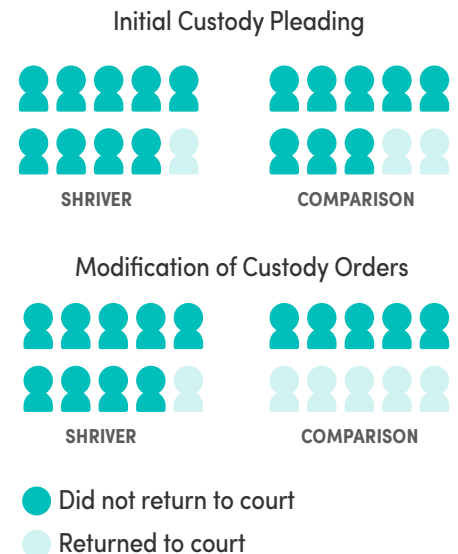


**Shriver Settlement Conferences** were facilitated by a judge and attended by attorneys for both parties. Of the Shriver Settlement Conferences held, **3 out of 5 reached full or partial agreement.**

## Agreements Last Longer

The project that offered Shriver representation and Shriver Settlement Conferences yielded encouragingly durable custody orders. Two years later, 9 of 10 Shriver cases had not filed court papers to modify the custody orders (thus keeping the Shriver orders in place longer). This effect was particularly notable when parties were further along in their custody case and had previously used the court to modify their agreement.

Among these cases, orders were durable for **9 of 10 Shriver cases but only 5 of 10 comparison cases.**



## SUMMARY

**Shriver attorneys ensure more balanced representation for cases involving low-income parents at risk of losing custody of their children. Projects also strive to help move families out of crisis and reduce emotional duress, enabling the creation of more stable environments for children and supporting sustainability of custody arrangements. With attorneys on both sides, courts avoid unnecessary hearings and parents are able to reach agreements sooner and keep them in place longer, thus reducing the burden on courts and creating cost savings over time.**