ILAO Legal Answers: New Online Program Increases Access to Legal Help

A new program at Illinois Legal Aid Online (ILAO) will not only eliminate barriers to accessing legal services, but also barriers for attorneys to do pro bono work. Legal Answers, launching this October and made possible through funding by the Illinois Bar Foundation, leverages pro bono attorneys and technology to deliver critical legal advice to people who cannot afford or access an attorney. The innovative website makes it easy for attorneys to volunteer and provide civil legal advice to those in need at any convenient time and place.

Every year millions of people in Illinois face serious legal problems on their own. People living in rural areas often can’t find legal help because there are very few legal aid and pro bono resources in their communities. People living in urban areas may be unable to access legal aid services because they lack transportation or childcare, or they may work during the day. Legal aid offices around the state do not have enough resources to help everyone and are turning people away. The legal system is scary, confusing, and nearly impossible to navigate without an attorney. Many lower income Illinois residents face a stark choice: try to represent themselves or simply walk away from the relief and justice to which they would otherwise be entitled.

Legal Answers uses technology to help people overcome these barriers presented by geography and scarcity of legal resources. Legal Answers is an easy to use, secure website. Qualified users post their civil legal question to the website. Volunteer attorneys log in to the website, select questions to answer that are sorted by practice area, and provide information and basic legal advice. Users will then be emailed when their question receives a response. The program allows attorneys to choose to remain anonymous and provides malpractice insurance to volunteer attorneys.

Legal Answers makes it simple for attorneys to do good and fulfill their professional responsibility. An interactive pro bono website such as Legal Answers can reduce many barriers to doing pro bono work, particularly the oft-cited barrier of lack of time. The time commitment by each attorney for each client is relatively minimal. Legal Answers’ volunteers provide limited scope representation and not ongoing representation. This brief advice pro bono opportunity is similar to a walk-in legal clinic or ISBA’s Ask a Lawyer Day, but saves the travel time to and from the clinic site.

ILAO is very excited to announce that they are actively recruiting pro bono attorneys for the October 2016 launch. The first set of volunteers will need to use their substantive expertise in responding to questions, only taking questions they feel qualified to answer.

Legal Answers needs practitioners from all civil law areas. The highest demand will be for family law practitioners and those who can answer questions related to housing and landlord/tenant issues. If you practice in another area, postings may be less frequent and you may not get your first question as quickly, but ILAO still wants your help!

Be the answer for lower income Illinois residents by joining a group of attorneys helping to meet the need one question at a time. Training consists of three short online videos totaling about 30 minutes.

For more information about the program and to volunteer, visit http://bit.ly/ILAOLegalAnswers Questions? Contact Nicole Capretta ncapretta@illinoislegalaid.org.

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