Illinois’ Legal Aid Tech Hub Gets a New Platform

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Back in 1999, when planning for the project that would become today’s Illinois Legal Aid Online first began, the state of technology was quite a bit different than today. Computers were just starting to become common on lawyers’ desks, and large numbers of people did not have access to computers in their homes. Smart phones, Facebook and Twitter weren’t on anyone’s radar yet and would not come on to the scene for several more years.

Even so, there were a few visionaries back then who believed that we could do a much better job of delivering legal information and resources to pro bono and legal aid lawyers and to the public by harnessing the power of the internet. After a lot of planning and often spirited discussions, that vision became a reality in 2001 when Illinois Legal Aid Online (ILAO), one of the many outstanding organizations you are supporting through the Investing in Justice Campaign, officially was formed. Along with Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois and IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law, the CBF provided the necessary seed funding and was one of the founding
partners of ILAO, which initially was called the Illinois Technology Center for Law and the Public Interest.

The idea definitely caught on over time, spurred on by the advent of mobile internet access, smart phones and other technologies we now take for granted that made ILAO much more widely accessible to the public than in those early days. Today, more than three million people visit ILAO each year.

With ILAO’s explosive growth in visitors came challenges from this rapidly-evolving technology as well, and the organization has spent the last two years planning for a complete overhaul of the original 15-year-old model. ILAO recently unveiled the new version of IllinoisLegalAid.org on August 1st.

“We need to make sure the technology we’re developing and the ways we’re communicating with people is really accessible to them,” said ILAO Executive Director Lisa Colpoys regarding the update.

At the time of its inception, ILAO was such a groundbreaking innovation that it required a custom content management system built from scratch. However, an aging technology that was increasingly more difficult to maintain drove ILAO to find a solution with an existing system, Drupal. Twenty other states use the platform for their statewide legal aid websites, allowing for community sharing of information and innovations.

The new website is also a consolidation of ILAO’s five previous websites—for the public, the Spanish version, for pro bono lawyers, for legal aid advocates, and ILAO as an organization. Lisa envisions the new ILAO website to be a hub where the entire community can function more efficiently, and the new site contains a number of features that will make it more user-friendly and accessible for its many visitors.

“The real benefit of technology in the legal aid community is it is a tool to increase efficiency both of lawyers and of people with legal problems, and to connect people, whether clients with lawyers, or people with information, or pro bono lawyers with volunteer opportunities,” Lisa added.

ILAO is unique in the community in being the only legal assistance center available 24/7, 365 days a year to provide immediate information. It also allows users to be anonymous: sometimes, people with legal issues
may not seek out help because they’re afraid it may expose them to other problems, which can be especially true in immigrant communities. To address barriers to access to technology, ILAO is looking to incorporate SMS technology to communicate with people via text.

For the future, ILAO’s focus is to be data-driven—collecting and analyzing data about its users, what their needs are, how they interact with the website, and what the outcomes of their cases are—in order to continuously innovate and effectively serve the community.

Another goal is connecting more people to lawyers, and there will always be people who may not be able to afford traditional legal services yet make too much to qualify for legal aid. ILAO is seeking ways to connect them with other resources, especially lawyers starting innovative practices like those in the Justice Entrepreneurs Project or other lawyers willing to take cases on an unbundled basis or fixed fees.

“We’d like to use technology to connect people with this new group of lawyers that’s emerging that’s willing to serve people in new ways,” Lisa concluded.

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