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LawPulse

New Illinois Legal Aid Online website serves legal professionals, consumers
By Matthew Hector

By consolidating its five websites and removing duplicative content, ILAO has managed to create a one-stop website for laypersons and lawyers alike.

On August 1, 2016, Illinois Legal Aid Online (ILAO) launched a new website, which consolidated the five websites it had previously maintained. ILAO originally was a website directed at lowering the barriers to finding legal aid in Illinois. By consolidating the five websites and removing duplicative content, ILAO has managed to create a one-stop website for (mostly low-income) laypersons and lawyers alike.

"We found that most people went to the illinoislegalaid.org site first," says ILAO director Lisa Colpoys. "We decided to consolidate the sites; now the single site also includes resources for attorneys."

Mobile friendly

Even from a quick scan, the changes to the new site are significant. The legal information sections are divided into more intuitive categories. For example, "Money & Debt" and "House & Apartment" help users navigate to a range of topics related to those keywords. Headings like "Consumer Law" or "Landlord/Tenant" might not be as obvious to the layperson. The site has also been made mobile-friendly. According to Colpoys, at least half of the site's visitors come to it via smartphones.

In addition to making the site easier for non-lawyers to use, it provides valuable resources for attorneys, including those who do pro bono work and those who work in legal aid clinics. ILAO is involved in some projects that lawyers might not be aware of.

For example, the Borderless Pro Bono Project (BPBP) is a program that is offered in conjunction with Prairie State Legal Services. It allows lawyers to assist people remotely - so long as those clients are within the state of Illinois. However, an attorney in DuPage County would be able to assist an individual in Gallatin County, for example. The main topic covered by the BPBP is family law, and in particular addressing the needs of single parents.

ILAO is launching a new program this fall, which has a potentially broader reach. It is a secure, web-based virtual walk-up legal clinic. Pro bono lawyers will be able to answer legal questions through a secure portal, expanding ILAO's reach and meeting its primary goal - increasing access to the legal profession. (For more about the "Legal Answers" program, which is supported by the Illinois Bar Foundation, see YourISBA at page 56).

https://www.isba.org/ibj/2016/10/lawpulse/newillinoislegalaidonlinewebsiteser
Colpoys says that the site's "Get Legal Help" feature is designed to act as a triage system to help people find the best legal resources for where they live. "There may not be services everywhere because many legal aid centers have very tight budgets and limited resources," she adds. However, the tool helps eliminate the problem of having to call multiple places to see which ones can help. This process can be frustrating for people seeking legal aid. Some might just give up. ILAO plans to expand to additional services in the future, possibly referring clients to private attorneys who might do unbundled or "low bono" work for them.

Colpoys says that expansion is still in the strategizing phase. The group is considering talking to "branded networks like Avvo" and other referral services to expand its scope. "The bottom line is that everyone using the site wants a lawyer, but there aren't enough to go around." By connecting people to lawyers who will work on alternative pay scales, ILAO can expand its reach, providing more people with access to the profession.

She points to the Justice Entrepreneurs Project (http://jepchicago.org/) as another group that serves a similar purpose. It is funded in part by the Chicago Bar Foundation.

**Signing on**

The new website also allows users to set up their own accounts. Colpoys encourages practitioners and laypersons alike to register accounts. By getting an account, attorneys can register for events on the site's event calendar.

A quick glance at the calendar for September 2016 shows 31 events available to lawyers. Some are CLE programs, some are lectures, some are social events like Race Judicata. Legal aid attorneys can also participate in discussion groups specific to their practice areas.

Attorney members will be able to rate pages, comment on them, and edit and update page content. If an attorney finds a page that contains an error, they can correct it. This helps keep the site's content accurate and current.

The website also hosts some automated legal documents, which assist laypeople and pro bono lawyers alike. Examples include motions to vacate (among others), discovery packages, answers, and fee-waiver petitions.

Colpoys hopes that the redesigned website will be an improvement for individuals and practitioners alike. She encourages attorneys to sign up for the site and provide their input. As ILAO grows and changes, more opportunities for pro bono and legal aid work will become available. Attorneys interested in donating their time to pro bono legal work should visit the ILAO site at https://www.illinoislegalaid.org/for-legal-professionals/volunteer-opportunities.

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