

TIG FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

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Project Goals and Objectives

North Penn Legal Services (NPLS) and the Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network, Inc. (PLAN Inc.) in partnership with the entire Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network of civil legal aid programs (PLAN) and the Pennsylvania Commission for Justice Initiatives' Website Sub-Committee, a part of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court appointed Public Education and Community Outreach Committee, proposed to develop a special Court Channel as part of the PaLawHelp.org website. We set out to replicate a previous TIG grant by our equal justice partners in New York. Over the past two years, the Project Partners have worked to develop the Court Channel on PaLawHelp.org. Additionally, legal services representatives have been invited to serve on various Court appointed committees to make future recommendations to the Pennsylvania Courts in order to aid self-help litigants using a more far-reaching, web-based strategy. This updated Court Channel now available on www.PaLawHelp.org and provides comprehensive information about the Courts, Court procedures, the law, Court forms, access to lawyers, and the lawyer-client relationship.

In order to develop and implement this Court Channel effectively, the Project Partners* set forth the following objectives:

1. Identify the content and information that will best meet the needs of users and the Courts;
2. Develop and/or obtain the necessary content;
3. Collaborate with Court in site administration as appropriate; and
4. Publicize the (Court Channel of the) PALawHELP.org site to community-based organizations, low-income citizens of Pennsylvania, and the general public.

The Court Channel was developed on PaLawHelp.org. Then, in order to gauge its success and guide the ongoing development of the Channel, the Project Partners conducted various surveys, consultations, tests and expert opinions. This way, the we were able to evaluate this newly-developed Court Channel and produce recommendations that will enable low-income court users and pro se litigants to have full access to the Courts.

* "Project Partners" will be the term used to describe the collaboration of North Penn Legal Services (NPLS), the Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network, Inc. (PLAN Inc.), the Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network of civil legal aid programs (PLAN), and the Pennsylvania Commission for Justice Initiatives' Website Sub-Committee.

Evaluation Data and Methodologies

To effectively identify what content would best suit users of PaLawHelp.org's Court Channel, members of Court staff, judges, and low-income individuals were consulted, surveyed, and interviewed. A comprehensive survey of Court operations of all 67 Pennsylvania counties, representing the state's 65 judicial districts, was conducted on behalf of the Website Sub-Committee of the Task Force on Self Representation, which was formed in recognition of the vast numbers of self-represented persons, and the need to make the legal system more accessible to them. Interns under the direction of the Honorable Jack Panella of the Pennsylvania Superior Court conducted this survey.

The Sub-Committee interviewed staff and searched the internet to find out which counties had a self-representation website. If there was a website presence, the interns recorded the way in which the site can help self-represented individuals. This data was compiled in a spreadsheet and delivered to PLAN Inc.'s Training and Information Facilitator, Henry Leone, who then catalogued the content and placed court related information onto the PaLawHelp.org.

Mr. Leone serves as the project manager and leads the content coordination efforts for Pennsylvania statewide websites: www.PALawHelp.org; and www.PAprobono.net. Mr. Leone also updates the information provided by the Courts when changes occur on a district's Court-related sites.

A usability test was conducted in which the respondents were low-income people with legal problems. 15 individuals were surveyed at Neighborhood Legal Services Association (NLSA) in Pittsburgh. They were given scenarios from which they had to solve a legal problem commonly confronted by self-represented individuals. The data obtained from this test helped to determine the navigability and effectiveness PaLawHelp.org.

In order for PaLawHelp.org to have any impact on the community, those who would benefit from its use must be aware of what the site has to offer. PLAN Inc. has distributed regular information to stakeholders, including a quarterly mailer to individuals, organizations, leaders in the legal field and government officials, and distributed brochures and bookmarks describing PaLawHelp.org to Courthouses, law libraries, and public libraries promoting the website and Court Channel. The project partners also worked with the Pennsylvania News Service to secure radio features and podcasts promoting the Court Channel on PaLawHelp.org. Usage data and feedback received through online surveys will demonstrate the effectiveness of this publicity campaign. We also developed a statewide mailing announcing the launch of the Court Channel and describing its features/benefits. To date, there is an ongoing effort to promote PaLawHelp.org, as we have realized the continuing need to do so.

Summary of Major Accomplishments, Recommendations and Future Steps

The initial survey or scan of web content conducted by the Website Sub-Committee of the Task Force on Self Representation revealed that the area of family law requires the most

attention. The consensus of Task Force members is that the area of greatest need is in family law, including such substantive areas as divorce, child custody and support, and child abuse and neglect matters, among others. For example, it has been estimated that between 85% and 90% of litigants in the Family Court division of the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas are self-represented. This information directly contributed to each county's ability to aid low-income court users and self-represented litigants and revealed substantive content development priorities. This past May, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court approved the development of a unified set of family law forms that will be accessible through the Internet and for use by all counties as a result of the work of the Task Force on Self-represented Litigation and that of the Public Education and Community Outreach Committee's Website Committee. As part of our accomplishments, online custody pleadings using our document assembly capabilities were developed for each county/judicial district. Representatives of Pennsylvania's legal aid community will also be represented on the court-work group to develop the common standards for forms in the state.

The **client usability survey** revealed that PaLawHelp.org is very useful in helping low-income people locate information about the Courts. The survey showed that it was easy for users to narrow down their search in terms of topic and subtopic, thanks mostly to the strong visualization of the icons on the homepage, and the listing of subtopics that result from clicking one of those icons. Some users had difficulty finding specific information because of the "tab" structure of the Search Results page. This will be corrected to a significant degree, however, as plans are in place to update the interface to accommodate today's internet users.

In order to create a broad-based Courts resource package, the **Task Force on Self Representation** suggested several ways that PaLawHelp.org could better serve self-represented litigants. The consensus of Task Force members is that the area of greatest need is in family law, including such substantive areas as divorce, child custody and support, and child abuse and neglect matters, among others. Another primary suggestion by the Task Force was for there to be an online system of "plain language" forms that applied to the entire state of Pennsylvania, as opposed to specific counties. The existence of uniform, state-specific forms with clear instructions can help judges, administrators and other Courthouse personnel minimize the amount of personal assistance required for self-represented persons. Other recommendations include a link for each judicial district, language tools, and the implementation of document assembly software, which makes it easier for a self-represented individual to fill out complex forms.

While the Project Partners planned to offer program sites to each county and to train Court staff and judges to be Contributors/Administrators to the Court Channel of PaLawHelp.org, this proved to be unnecessary, as most Courts were in the process of creating their own county websites, which we were to link up to the statewide site.

The publicity campaign for PaLawHelp.org included the development, updating, and distribution of the PaLawHelp.org brochure. The brochure was distributed to all Courthouses, bar associations, public and law libraries, legal aid programs, pro bono programs, and other places of interest. PLAN Inc. staff also developed and distributed press releases and e-bulletins as well as implemented "Quarterly Mailings" in order to announce the expanded Court resources on the site. The "Mailings" are sent to approximately 5,000

key stakeholders such as Court personnel, social service agencies, and government officials. (Please see PLAN Quarterly Court Channel mailing sample).

Analysis of Accomplishments

Formation of Court Channel Content

The information present on the Court Channel of PaLawHelp.org has been compiled with the help of the Task Force on Self Representation and Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC), and compiled by PLAN Training and Information Facilitator, Henry Leone.

Pennsylvania's statewide website project manager ensures that all of the links to the various external sites are checked regularly. When links do not return as they should the link is reviewed and updated. This has already been necessary on several occasions due to Courts/counties reorganizing or relocating their websites, so the system is working.

The Task Force on Self Representation confirmed that a **state-wide website** is an essential tool in helping those who cannot afford representation to represent themselves in Court. An increasing number of individuals who interact with the legal system obtain information about the system over the internet.

Through its work, the Task Force on Self Representation recognized the value of PaLawHelp.org and decided not to recreate the wheel, but instead strengthen the already-existing website by contributing to the Court Channel.

The Task Force claimed that a state-supervised website would increase the possibility that a self-represented litigant will have sufficient and accurate information to proceed with his or her case. In addition, a statewide site that includes such links may help reduce possible confusion as to each Court's specific needs.

Although some standardized forms in family law areas such as divorce and custody now exist in Pennsylvania, they are not fully accepted in all counties. Some counties have even added required elements to the forms, thereby negating their standardized nature. The Task Force recommended the implementation of **standardized statewide forms** in the various practice areas of family law and a standard way to access these forms. At the same time, this approach must accommodate a variety of practices and procedures that reflect the needs of individual counties. The Task Force also recommended that these forms be in "plain language," so that novice litigants will not have to worry about unfamiliar legal terminology.

To this end, the Pennsylvania Courts recently adopted these recommendations. The Supreme Court approved the development of a unified set of family law forms that will be accessible through the Internet and for use by all counties. A new Sub-Committee was formed within the Domestic Relations Procedural Rules Committee.

Once these statewide standardized forms and procedures are developed in the family law area, then the next task is to make those and all comprehensive forms readily accessible to self-represented litigants. Slow progress on the development of a comprehensive set of family forms can be reported.

As we have learned with our document assembly infrastructure, document assembly will assure higher quality results when completing a form. The program forwards the user's personal information to the right place on the form, helping to avoid any confusion or errors while dealing with unfamiliar formats. North Penn Legal Services (NPLS) have used extensive HotDocs technology on their legal services website, northpennlegal.org, and have led the way in promoting this technology for use by all providers of legal aid in Pennsylvania.

The Task Force, in large part due to the leadership of NPLS' document assembly expertise, recommended a three-step process to be adopted over time, taking into account the resources required. First, printable and hard copy forms should be available over the web and at key locations, including Courthouses. Second, standardized forms should be made available in a document assembly formatting (**HotDocs**). Finally, websites resources could be used to offer document assembly through more consumer-friendly and efficient means. Examples of these are I-CAN, which is a tool for filing for the federal earned income tax credit, and A2J, which can be integrated with HotDocs to allow a person to walk through the development of a document in a visually appealing way.

PLAN Inc. has taken advantage of this technology, and has made three forms available on PaLawHelp.org:

1. **Food Stamp Estimator:** This is located in the Legal Information channel at Public Benefits>Food Stamps
2. **Pennsylvania Complaint for Custody:** This custody form is for PARENTS only. This allows users to create a "Complaint for Custody" that can be used to start a NEW custody case. The site will ask the user a series of questions about their custody situation and then create a custody complaint based on the answers provided. This complaint can then be printed and filed in the local Court.

This appears in both the Legal Information and Court Information channels at: Children and Families>Child Custody.

3. **Pennsylvania Petition for Modification or Contempt of a Custody Order:** This custody form is for PARENTS only. This allows users to create a "Petition for Modification or Contempt of a Custody Order" that can be used to ask a Court to change or enforce a custody order that is ALREADY IN EFFECT. The site will ask a series of questions regarding the user's custody situation and existing order and then create a petition based on the user's answers. This petition can then be printed and filed in the local Court.

This appears in both the Legal Information and Court Information channels at: Children and Families>Child Custody.

PaLawHelp.org will provide more and more forms related to problems faced by low-income individuals as they become available.

The Task Force recommends that the statewide Court system utilize current technological advances in ways that not only help the self-represented but also make the Court system more efficient and cost-effective. Using technology to make form pleadings, standard definitions, instructions, and online document assembly for forms more accessible can not only aid the self-represented, but also ease the burden on judges in matters in which one party has counsel and the other is self-represented. These advances may also be useful in expanding another means of access, namely, pro bono assistance from lawyers in private practice. To the extent that technological efficiencies reduce the costs of litigating even simple claims, such as out-of-pocket costs associated with preparing and filing pleadings, the more likely lawyers are to do pro bono.

Usability Testing and Results

The following is a survey evaluation of PaLawHelp.org. The purpose of this evaluation is to discover the strengths and weaknesses in the navigability and efficiency of the website, and to take these into consideration when prescribing improvements to the site. Specifically, the evaluation survey is designed to elicit information pertaining to the “Court Channel” on the site, which would enhance the user’s ability to locate self-help information before going to Court. Two out of three scenarios presented to the interviewees (attached) provide instances where specific Court information is required.

During debt and family advice clinics on June 4 and 11, 2008 held at Neighborhood Legal Services Assoc. in Pittsburgh, we asked individuals to take part in a website evaluation survey. Users were given scenarios that provided them with the necessary experience to assess the website’s usefulness and provide helpful information. 11 total users were interviewed. Their familiarity with the internet varied, but many of the site’s strengths and weakness showed through each user’s experience.

The first scenario, which required online forms related to custody or visitation, was the easiest for users out of the three available options. Even the two users who had limited ability to speak and read English were able to find them without the assistance of the translation tool. There are several reasons for this.

The icons and descriptions related to the different fields of law on the homepage are large and easy to identify. The user immediately found the field of concentration through these icons, and proceeded to specify the information further by choosing one of the clear-cut options on the next page (in this case, “Child Custody”). The final option was easy to see on the next page. The first link under the first tab had a very informative description, which included the information listed on the scenario sheet. Almost all of the users were successful in a short amount of time on this option because of large icons on the homepage and the concise description under the appropriate link. The link also happened to be the first option on the page which, as noted later, isn’t always the case.

The second and third scenarios highlight the difficulties that users had with the specific tasks required of them by the given scenario. The scenarios both involve landlord/tenant issues, which were easily discovered under the “Housing and Shelter” icon on the homepage. Once users arrived at the search results, they tended to overlook the *Court Information* tab, since so

much information is immediately presented to them under the default tab, *Legal Information*. If and when users discover the tabs, they tend to immediately click on *Find Legal Assistance*, because its title lends itself toward any scenario where a user is seeking help. This could be another reason why the *Court Information* tab often goes overlooked.

Several of the users attempted to utilize the “Search This Site” tool, but mostly, this proved to be ineffective. This was primarily because users were unaware that the listed results only applied to the tab that they were viewing when they searched. The yellow boxes to the right housed the rest of the search options, which were unused in all cases.

Positive points of interest:

- The **icons** on the home page allow an easy, straightforward way to access the desired area of law
- The **topic/subtopic structure** given within the specified fields of law cover many issues that affect low-income individuals, and they are very easy to understand.
- The ***Legal Information*** tab on the Search Results page provides a wide range of forms, suggestions, and rights available to low-income individuals in vulnerable situations.

Negative point of interest:

- The presence of the **tab structure** in the Search Results page was ignored by a significant number of users. This may be due to the structure itself, or to the titles or colors of the tabs. This sometimes causes a lack of direction, keeping users from finding information that can help them get to the next step.

The content on the Court Channel is extensive, containing Court information related to 12 topics from all of Pennsylvania’s counties and districts. The complexity of information led us to address the formation of content on a macro level, instead of having a representative from each district facilitate their own content on the site.

The goals of the PaLawHelp.org publicity campaign have been met. Literature intended to inform users and advocates about PaLawHelp.org and its newly revised Court Channel were updated and distributed. This campaign is in addition to ambitious publicity campaigns in the past, in which print and electronic information was spread state-wide. Other forms of publicity for PaLawHelp.org include bookmarks that have been made available and distributed in local libraries, legal aid agencies and social service agencies.

In order to judge the effectiveness of this publicity and of the site overall, we will be using user data and survey findings compiled by Henry Leone of PLAN Inc. The Court Channel Survey is located on the top of every page of the “Court Information” section of PaLawHelp.org, and includes questions that will give an accurate illustration of the overall effectiveness, navigability, and popularity of the site.

Concerning usage data, PaLawHelp.org offers two types of usage reports: a Summary Report and a Detailed Report. The Detailed Report, which measures how many pages were viewed on uploaded resources, such as brochures, web page links, and program profiles, showed that about 10-12,000 uses take place in a month range. The Summary Report, which is a breakdown of total public page views (including the home page, subtopic pages, search results, news articles, etc.), showed that about PaLawHelp.org gets around 30,000 page views per month.

Specific data concerning the Court Channel from 2007 indicates that the Channel received 1,956 page views. As the Task Force indicated, the primary area of concern was family law. The top 30 in terms of page views were all sites under the Children and Families topic, the first of which was the online form “Pennsylvania Complaint for Custody,” provided by North Penn Legal Services, which received 245 views. Data collected from January 1, 2008 through June 30, 2008 indicates a huge jump in the number of views in the Court Channel: 3,747. Family law topics still are the overwhelming focus for users, followed by consumer and housing law.

Factors affecting project accomplishments

The collaborative nature of the project presented a challenge. Although PaLawHelp.org offers legal advice that pertains to the entire state, one of the primary goals of this project was to enable people to locate information specific to their area of residence. The discrepancy between laws in each county created an “uneven playing field” from which the project partners had to collaborate. Legal rights and online forms are two key pieces of information that tend to vary from district to district, and are susceptible to change. This makes it difficult to keep the site updated, especially if a district doesn’t have its own information system as up to date as possible.

Strategies to Address Major Challenges

Sustaining a project with such a wide scope of partners and contributors requires that each partner be as proactive and communicative as possible. We had and continue to have a strong presence in this project, so that any challenge that occurs may be met as quickly and effectively as possible.

The first challenge faced was simply gathering up information about the web presence of the various trial and appellate Courts in Pennsylvania. This was confronted by the Website Sub-Committee, which was tasked with evaluating the existing Court capacities for working with unrepresented litigants and was in the process of examining the various Court websites that were in existence. The Sub-Committee shared their information with us which gave us a good starting point for the development of the information we sought to make available through PALawHELP.org. We took their initial survey of the Court websites and verified and enhanced that information for PALawHELP.org.

The second major challenge was in working with the Courts to share existing content and develop new content. This task was slowed by transition in the Courts and the existing Court administrative structure.

As stated above, the Court was in the process of evaluating how it could improve the access to the Courts by unrepresented litigants and the Pennsylvania legal aid community was invited into those discussions due to our mission and the existence of our own efforts to provide some level of service to unrepresented litigants through PALawHELP.org and related initiatives.

Our participation with the Court's Task Force, particularly the Website Sub-Committee, resulted in recommendations of significant partnering between the Court and the Pennsylvania legal aid community to address some of the needs of the unrepresented litigant. However, transition in the Court, including the seating of a new chief justice, in conjunction with some delays in key decisions relating to the Court's website initiatives by the Administrative Office of the Court, has caused a delay in movement toward the implementation of those recommendations.

Major Lessons and Recommendations

General Recommendations

Throughout this process, we have learned that it is in a legal services organization's best interest to work with the Courts where ever possible. It is important to get into the discussions of the important issue that that the Courts are facing regarding caseloads and particularly unrepresented litigants.

In taking on a project of such complexity, it helps a great deal to have a committed individual such as chair of the Task Force for Self Representation's Web Site Sub-Committee, the Honorable Judge Jack Panella, to champion its objectives. In working with and individual such as Judge Panella, it was important to offer our own solutions. Once you get into the discussions, try to offer solutions to the problems the Court is facing rather than going into the discussions with an eye toward obtaining funding or other assistance from the Courts. If you can offer solutions, the Courts will be willing to invest in your efforts which will benefit both the Court and legal aid clients and organizations.

For other groups that wish to accomplish similar objectives, we recommend that the grantee offers and provides useful service to the Court. Don't just enter the discussion to offer your point of view. Offer the use of resources you may have that the Court does not to assist in solving the problems being addressed. These solutions benefit the legal aid community through improved access to the Courts by our clients, as well as strengthening relations between legal aid and the Courts. Strong cooperative relationships with the Court will yield many benefits, both tangible and intangible, that will benefit your projects now and in the future.

Recommendations from Usability Testing

The primary function of PaLawHelp.org is for users to access law information that can help them to address legal problems they commonly face. The page is effective in informing individuals of their rights and correct course of action, but has slight structural obstacles to

overcome. In order to serve users more effectively, the site should include links on “How To” file claims under each of the areas addressed on the home page.

Some of the links, especially in the *Court Information* tab, need to be revised and organized. For example, a link that leads to a local District Court should not simply say what it is and direct the user to its rather intimidating and confusing general web page. The site should, instead, create links to the Court’s page that take the user directly to the specific page needed to address their legal problem (such as filing a Child Custody claim in that Court), not just to the main site. Again, these are structural suggestions that will be addressed as the site’s interface is updated.

Promoting the Court Channel and www.PaLawHelp.org to both the court system and the general public will require ongoing efforts. Outreach, trainings, and press/radio releases are necessary. Pennsylvania stakeholders must utilize a variety of tools to spread the word and take advantage of opportunities to promote enhancements/additions to the website. An example of this is a radio news spot recently developed. This spot can be found on the Public News Service web site at:

<http://www.publicnewsservice.org/index.php?/content/article/5734-1>.