

Click of the Mouse Will Provide Free Legal Help for Tennesseans

Free access to a lawyer in Tennessee soon will be as simple as printing out and sending legal forms.

The state Supreme Court hopes two websites will combat the need for free legal help. Of the more than 1 million Tennesseans who meet federal poverty guidelines, 70 percent faced legal problems in a year's time, according to the Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services.

"We only are able to serve 20 percent of the need that is out there," said Erik Cole, the alliance's executive director. "There are a lot of people not getting any help. The website will at least point people in the right direction."

This spring, the Tennessee Administrative Office of the Courts will launch justiceforalltn.com, which will provide state Supreme Court-approved, plain-language legal forms for civil issues such as divorces, wills and landlord/tenant documents.

Also this spring, the Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services and the Tennessee Bar Association will start a website that will allow people who qualify as low-income to post a legal question anonymously on the site. A lawyer can then click on a question and answer through e-mail.

Cole declined to release the specific site name until it is finished but will be accessible through justiceforalltn.com when launched.

The top legal aid needs? Issues with creditors, health insurance disputes and family law, including divorce and protective orders, Cole said.

Cindy Boron's biggest need is a will for her and her husband. The Murfreesboro mother and grandmother is 55 and has put off drafting a will for years.

"I shopped around for an attorney, but they wanted \$500 or \$1,000," she said. "We can't afford that."

Several times, she started and stopped writing her will at various online legal websites. She was worried about the sites being legitimate, giving too much of her personal information and whether the forms would stand up in Tennessee courts.

"I know a lot of people out there are just waiting for a website like this," she said. "I would definitely use it."

Jad Duncan, a Nashville civil lawyer, said giving legal advice remotely will make it easier for attorneys to manage pro bono work. They can answer legal questions on their cell phones or laptops while traveling or waiting in court.

But, he warns that in most cases, people should not venture to represent themselves.

"People really need to have someone explain to them exactly what they're signing," Duncan said. "The bottom line is, you can get all the way to the final court date and the judge tells you the form is wrong or a form is missing, and you have to start all over. It happens all the time. I've had to pick up the pieces on several of those."

While Duncan said he would be on-board to provide pro bono assistance through the site, he worries that he could open himself up to be held liable if there is a misunderstanding through the e-mail conversations.

It's a real concern among pro bono lawyers, Cole said. Because of that increased risk with a website, the Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services has increased its usual professional liability insurance for lawyers who help on the site.

Some forms, including plain-language divorce forms, are already available on the website for the Tennessee Administrative Office of the Courts. A list of legal aid services in Tennessee is available at las.org.

Contact Erin Quinn at equinn@tennessean.com or 615-726-5986.

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