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OnlineTNJustice.org: Utilizing Technology to Expand Pro Bono Opportunities

By Danny Van Horn, President, Tennessee Bar Association and Erik Cole, Executive Director, TALS with updates by Samantha Sanchez, Operations Director, TALS

A Growing Need

The plight of low-income Tennesseans with unmet legal needs is well-documented. Any lawyer who has worked with vulnerable communities knows that minor legal issues can turn major without legal advice or information.

The statistics show that nearly 70% of Tennesseans living in poverty had a civil legal need in the past year. Legal Aid and pro bono attorneys can help, but they are not able to reach everyone in need, particularly those living in rural areas. The economic crisis makes matters worse as the number of people who need legal services continues to grow. Tennessee lawyers and legal aid programs are turning to technological innovation to help meet this need.

Unique Responses

This spring the Tennessee Bar Association and Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services launched OnlineTNJustice.org to help meet low-income Tennesseans' civil legal needs. Former TBA President Buck Lewis is credited with the vision for the project as he was very involved in his local pro bono clinic, but realized the limitations of this traditional model.

Lewis convinced the IT department at his firm Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz to develop the website in consultation with leaders from the legal community. The firm worked with its Microsoft representative to secure a grant to cover the cost of software and licensing for the website; in May 2010, the firm received a perpetual annual grant from Microsoft (valued at \$67,299). Also, thanks to Lewis' leadership, the state Supreme Court and its Access to Justice Commission lent their support to the program by including it in the commission's first strategic plan released in July 2010.

OnlineTNJustice.org

The concept of OnlineTNJustice.org is a web-based pro bono clinic for low-income Tennesseans who might otherwise fall through the cracks of receiving legal assistance. Using a web-based email platform, qualifying users can post questions about their civil legal needs and receive basic legal information and advice from attorneys. The website is easy-to-use, requires minimal commitment, and is convenient for both volunteer attorneys and low-income client/users. The goal of this project is twofold: to increase access to justice for low-income Tennesseans, particularly in rural areas and to remove barriers to attorneys providing pro bono services.

Currently there are more than 295 attorneys registered as volunteers and more than 1000 registered client/users. Most posted questions pertain to family law issues, but volunteer attorneys are available to answer questions related to all civil legal problems including disaster-related, fraud, and health care issues. Over the past four months alone, more than 400 questions have been posted and answered. Most questions are answered within a day or just a couple hours.

Volunteer Attorneys and Client Users Response

Volunteer attorneys are integral to the success of the project. They have shown enthusiastic support for the website as an additional pro bono tool. They appreciate that the program is flexible with their work schedules and meets their practice interests. More than 90% of participating attorneys report that they will use OnlineTNJustice.org to provide pro bono services in the future and will recommend this program to colleagues. One volunteer attorney praised the website's special features, such as the ability to subscribe to substantive law areas, but emphasized, "I like knowing that there is a place folks can ask a legal question."

Though it is still in its infancy, OnlineTNJustice.org is already making an impact on peoples' lives. The satisfaction surveys show that more than 87% of client/users found the website easy to understand and will share this resources with others. "God bless you!" one website user raved, "Thank you so much for the advice! This service is a vital asset to our community!"

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