Provide Legal Aid to Vulnerable Populations

By Maura Mahoney | APRIL 21, 2020

While the courts are mostly closed, people still have legal problems. Some are in the middle of litigation. Even the relatively simple tasks of printing out forms, filling them in, and delivering them to a courthouse (or scanning and submitting them electronically) can be a hurdle right now. Many people don’t have a printer or a scanner at home, and lack access to a library or retail printing service.

Those needs prompted a group of students and staff members at Suffolk University Law School, in Boston, to organize an assembly line of volunteers to design mobile-friendly court forms and assist lawyerless people with their filings. Court officials are sharing relevant documents with Suffolk’s Legal Innovation & Technology Lab, which parcels out the tasks based on volunteers’ skills. Lawyers, paralegals, and law students provide brief explanations that will show up on the screen of anyone using a form. Tech specialists and students in the law school’s legal-innovation-and-technology concentration are assisting with technological aspects. Volunteers without a legal background can test early versions or help translate forms into languages other than English. Local legal-aid programs refer clients to the forms, which will be hosted on a Suffolk website and can be submitted electronically by the university. In the future, court sites may link directly to the mobile forms.

The impetus for the project came from the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court’s Access to Justice Commission Covid-19 Task Force, which is trying to fill cracks in the justice system that have been widened by reductions in court hours and availability, says David Colarusso, director of Suffolk’s legal lab.

The new mobile forms could, for example, help a domestic-violence victim seeking a restraining order or a tenant who has been illegally locked out by a landlord, says Quinten Steenhuis, a legal technologist and clinical fellow in the lab. “Domestic violence — which unfortunately we know is worsened by people being stuck inside all day — and housing emergencies are our two priority areas,” he says. Beyond that: custody issues, adoption, and debt collection. The project’s immediate goal is to build 30 forms involving family and housing issues. That would normally take several months or even years, says Steenhuis. But the volunteers, working together, hope to do it in a few weeks.

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