As Courts Go Remote, Law Schools' Tech Development Looks to Fill the Gaps

Some law schools are quickly developing and revising technology to help those in need of court services during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it likely will be a limited effort.

By Victoria Hudgins | April 15, 2020 at 01:57 PM

As COVID-19 drives courts to close and go remote, the needs of those requiring legal services may hang in the balance. Law schools' tech development efforts may be offering a vital, and safe, way for court filings to continue as usual. Still, it may be a limited effort.

Recently Suffolk University Law School's Legal Innovation and Technology Lab developed its own website-based forms in response to the closure of Massachusetts state courts.

Created with the help of volunteer lawyers, paralegals, coders and law students, the lab created web-based app forms for people to fill out if they’re experiencing domestic violence, tenant lockouts or landlord disputes, said Legal Innovation and Technology Lab director David Colarusso. Once an applicant fills out a form, someone will reach out to them to complete the court filing process, Colarusso said. He added that the restraining order and landlord dispute forms are scheduled to be released this week.

While state courts in Massachusetts are largely closed, services are available for emergency orders, including temporary restraining orders and tenant disputes. To avoid in-person filing and risking COVID-19 exposure, Colarusso decided a tech-based solution would be useful.
Other schools are also turning to tech to help address coronavirus-specific legal needs. University of Arizona James E. Rogers College of Law Innovation for Justice Program director Stacy Butler noted the school revised its Hello Landlord online tool to generate COVID-19-specific letters for tenants that cite the federal stimulus when explaining an anticipated late payment to their landlords.

The tool was originally created last year in partnership with Brigham Young University's LawX legal design lab and Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati's tech subsidiary SixFifty, looking to help renters draft a letter to their landlord regarding anticipated late payments or needed fixes on the property. But clients' needs quickly changed when COVID-19 began to spread in the U.S., Butler said.

"This is the time for law schools to get creative and think about how to reach and serve those [low-income] populations when traditional models of service are failing," Butler wrote in an email. However, she added, "Technology won't be the magic access-to-justice bullet here, just as it wasn't the magic bullet before a global pandemic."

To be sure, many law schools don't have the staff to pull the trigger on many tech-based solutions, noted Suffolk's Colarusso.

"Other schools want to help, this just isn't a place where they have made a lot of investments. Most law schools don't have the in-house ability to do this sort of thing, and they haven't built the relationships needed to collaborate with the partners they need to build big projects during an emergency," he said.

"A number of apps for justice programs at law schools are one-offs without much institutional support," he added. In turn, he said it's unclear if COVID-19 will spur more law schools to develop tech-based access to justice solutions.

However, law schools don't need to necessarily leverage or develop technology to help the legal industry adjust to situations like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Albany Law School professor and Community Economic Development Clinic director Edward De Barbieri, for instance, noted that law schools should teach students the importance of remotely providing legal services.

"One way we can train the next generation of lawyers is by teaching them to facilitate meetings with video conferencing platforms and deliver legal content remotely too," he said. "Integrating that into our teaching offerings increases the ability of lawyers to meet the needs of clients these days."