

**Legal Services Corporation
Technology Initiative Grant Program
Renewal Web Site Grant Narrative Final Report**

Legal Services Law Line of Vermont

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Contact Person: Tom Garrett

Email: tgarrett@lawlinevt.org

Telephone: 802.863.7153

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I. Project Goals:

We had many goals we wanted to accomplish with this grant.

First of all we wanted to increase awareness of Vermont Law Help in Vermont and make its information available to more people. We wanted to increase our outreach efforts through mass mailings, flyers, and personal visits to individuals and groups around Vermont, focusing on lay advocates as well as individuals and agencies that have regular contact with low-income Vermonters.

We also wanted to make Vermont Law Help easier to find on the web by increasing links from other sites and taking steps to make our site more visible on internet search engines such as Google, Yahoo, and AOL.

We wanted to expand the amount of legal content on Vermont Law Help. We recognized that because Vermont does not have a large amount of already developed pro se legal content we needed to produce our own. We planned to work with the joint substantive Task Forces of Law Line and Vermont Legal Aid to encourage and guide the development of additional content that is relevant, usable and appropriate for low-literacy website users.

We needed to assist individuals and groups of advocates who are developing low-literacy content for Vermont Law Help. To do this we needed to provide training, information and support for writing at a low literacy level and develop those skills in legal services attorneys.

We identified several areas where we want to develop content, including employment law, subsidized housing, health care including Medicare, Medicaid, and private insurance, and Vermont benefits programs such as Reach Up and Fuel Assistance. We also wanted to begin to provide material for immigrant groups who are not fluent in English and to continue using our client testing tool to evaluate the site=s impact and utility for clients, and make appropriate adjustments.

Another goal was to install and refine a search engine called ASmartSearch@ on our site. SmartSearch is a powerful search engine that allows us to observe how users are searching our site and how well the site is responding to their queries.

Finally, we wanted to increase the utility of our pro bono site and develop the ability to refer cases to pro bono attorneys through the site.

II. Web Site Description

We initially created a client web site on our own server. We moved to the Kaivo template in 2002.

Our client site is still relatively simple. Our top banner provides a search field and links to HOME, LAWS, FREE LEGAL HELP, HELPFUL GROUPS, COURTS, NEWS and PRINT THIS PAGE. The banner follows all of our html content pages, allowing users to link back easily.

Our opening page displays 13 content categories: Housing, Benefits, Family, Money & Debt, Health, Abuse, Work, Taxes, Small Claims, Education, Work, Seniors, and Disability. Each category displays an icon as well as the language. All of the categories are populated with information including html txt, PDF documents and links to pamphlets, booklets, and web sites.

Our housing section is the most thoroughly developed and widely used section on our site. The decision to emphasize this area was made by the advisory group early on in the process. This section includes sub-sections on Renters, Homelessness, Mobile Homes, Fair Housing, Homeownership, Housing Costs, and Housing Forms. Much of the content is html pages that Law Line and its partners have developed. The html content on eviction includes information on the eviction process, fair housing, instructions for answering eviction complaints, forms for answering eviction complaints, information on illegal evictions and lockouts, information and forms on filing counterclaims against landlords, security deposits, guests and landlord access, and a glossary of terms used by courts and lawyers.

The second most used section is Money & Debt. It includes sub-sections on Buyers Rights, Growing and Keeping Your Money, Debt and Bankruptcy, and Junk Mail and Telemarketing. It includes several html pages written by Law Line discussing debt collection, exemptions, and repossession. It also includes several links to the Vermont Attorney General's consumer protection hotlines and to informational pamphlets developed by the AG.

Currently the third most visited section is the Health section. This section includes sub-sections on Vermont Health and Pharmacy Programs, Private Health Insurance, Help if You Need Health Insurance or Drug Coverage, and Advance Directives. The Vermont Health Care page includes several html pages, drafted by our partner the Vermont Health Care Ombudsman, that describe all of the Vermont health care programs, explain how

payment works, explain how to appeal decisions on public and private health care programs, and where to get help.

Currently our five most visited pages are Repossession, Renter Rebates, Overview of Debt Collection, Overview of Evictions, and Foreclosures.

Our web site has no multimedia capacity. We have used a commercial video server, blip.tv, to host a 12 minute film, *Vermont Stories* that we link to from our site. *Vermont Stories* is a video we produced in which former clients of Law Line and Vermont Legal Aid describe the legal problems they had and their experience with Vermont legal services.

We are developing a document assembly system using HotDocs and A2J. We expect to have our prototypes up within a month. They will include forms for answering eviction complaint, filing counterclaims in an eviction complaint, opposing a court order for payment of rent into court, moving to reopen a default judgment, and moving to dismiss an eviction complaint.

Our advocate site, <http://www.vtlawhelp.org/Home/PrivateWeb/>, includes links to news items as well as to several advocacy cites such as court calendars, legal research sites, judiciary sites, the case management system, Citrix files, Code of Federal Regulations on line, Vermont statutes on line. It contains documents published by advocates at Law Line or our partner organization, Vermont Legal Aid. Published documents include Legal Pleadings and Documents (395 documents); VLA Program Documents (98 documents); VLA and Law Line Shared Program and Committee Documents (15 documents); Training and Backup Materials (167 documents); Law Line Program Documents (4 documents); and Computer and Technology Help (22 documents). The document library is searchable. When a document is uploaded to the site, its availability can be restricted to one or both programs or to private attorneys who have access through their membership in the Vermont Volunteer Lawyers Project.

III. Achievements to Date

Overall, the client site is quite successful. It covers a broad spectrum and is heavily used. Its growth in terms of use has been steady and consistent. However it continues to be challenging to find the resources to maintain and develop it, much less expand it.

Our partners represent a fairly broad group. They include Vermont Legal Aid, the largest provider of legal services in the state; a tenant advocacy group; the protection and advocacy organization in Vermont; a local domestic violence shelter, the Vermont Network against domestic violence and sexual assault, and the court administrator's office. We have recently asked a representative of an immigrants group to be on the committee. The advisory group continues to be actively interested in the client site. They use the site and refer others to it.

One of the challenges has been to get attorneys at Vermont Legal Aid, who see themselves as direct advocacy attorneys rather than informational or preventive lawyering attorneys, to buy in to the value of the client site and contribute actively to its success. It is critical to our success that this group be involved and active as we proceed. We encountered a lot of skepticism initially but I think most of the attorneys now see the value. Our strategy has been to be consistent and persistent in talking about the need for information. One of the things that persuasively demonstrates the need is the number of people who use the site.

Our on going efforts at outreach also helps persuade staff of its value. For example, at a recent statewide training of lay advocates, in which many legal services attorneys from both Law Line and Vermont Legal Aid took part, we presented information on the site to the group, and received several acknowledgements from lay advocates in the audience about how much they used, appreciated, and valued VTLAWHELP.

We also have been persistent in efforts to raise consciousness in the legal services community about readability and the needs of people, many of whom are our clients, with limited English proficiency. Working with a joint training committee of VLA/Law Line, we have sponsored two training events on writing for people with limited English proficiency at the annual staff college. This allows us to connect the needs of our clients with VTLAWHELP. It also raises the confidence level of advocates by making them more comfortable with the task of writing for clients.

The increase in use of the site is a strong indicator of its success. Members of the Advisory Group are consistently appreciative of the site and its contents.

Results of the Survey of Client Website Users

Based on the information from the Client Website User Survey, 90% found the information they were seeking on the website. All survey-takers found it easy to very easy to find the information they were seeking. They liked the headings, icons, links, and Q&A format. When asking the survey-takers about understanding the wording of the website 70% found the terminology very easy. The remaining 30% said “easy.” The language was described as clear, well-explained, and in plain English.

100% of the survey takers found the website “very useful.” Survey takers liked that their questions were answered, information was on point, and they were given different options. General comments about the website were that the site was quick to access, organized, and that it was easy to find an answer to their legal issue. Survey takers wanted more content on the website.

These results show that we accomplished our goals of making the website searchable, comprehensive, and easy to understand. The results also show that we need to continue to add material and to increase our outreach efforts.

Advocate Survey:

Based on the information from the Advocate Survey Instrument, advocates are only using a small portion of the website. 100% of the advocates use the Briefs Banks, 20% use Listserv, 20% use the bulletin boards, 10% use the calendar and 70% use the search feature. Of the advocates who use Listserv, they find it very easy to use. Of the advocates who use the Briefs bank 50% found it very easy to use, 30% found it easy, and 20% found it hard to use. Of the advocates who access the bulletin board, two find it easy, and one finds it very easy. All who use the search feature find it very easy or easy to use.

The advocates who use the different sites found the sites to be useful and helpful. The Listserv site was described as helpful and very helpful. 60% of the advocates found the Brief Bank site very helpful, 30 % found it helpful and 10% found it not helpful. The advocate who felt the site was not helpful explained he wasn't sure how current the information was. Also the advocates who used the search feature found it very helpful and helpful. General comments about these sites revealed advocates like to use these sites when starting in a new area. Many advocates requested that more information be added to the site, and to have it reorganized.

These results show that once the advocates know how to access these services, they find the sites useful. The results also show that we need to continue working on outreach so more advocates understand and can use the tools available to them. In addition, we need to keep expanding the information to better serve the advocates' needs.

Our current assessment sees four important tasks that need to be undertaken.

The first task we want to undertake is an evaluation of the overall look and functionality of the site. We do not think the opening page is as interesting, inviting, or useful as we want it to be. Although our testing indicates that the search function is generally useful and effective, we do not think the overall hierarchy of topics is as clear as it could be. We have just begun to think about this. We are working with a local nonprofit, the Center for Media and Democracy, to rethink the look and functionality of our site.

The second task we see involves information on family law problems. Family Court in Vermont has a very high volume of pro se users. Approximately 70% of divorce cases do not have attorneys on either side. It is an area where Law Line has always had a high volume of cases. It has been difficult to develop all of the material we need in this area and we see gaps in the information available. We need to speed up the development of content in Family Law issues. We are working with the Family Law Task Force to do this. We recently set up a wiki to allow several users to comment on and propose modifications to new content. Wiki technology should be helpful as we proceed.

The third task we need to undertake is to review our older content to make sure it is still current, particularly in Housing law.

The fourth task is to move forward on the development of a remote intake module. This effort is led by Vermont Legal Aid, using a grant for seniors to develop a remote intake module that will be used by Area Agency on Aging staff around the state. The initial version of this was just completed and should be ready for testing within a few months.

IV. Partnerships

Our principal partner in this has been and continues to be Vermont Legal Aid. Vermont Legal Aid is the oldest and largest legal services organization in Vermont. It serves clients through six specialized projects and has offices in St. Johnsbury, Montpelier, Springfield, Rutland, Waterbury and Burlington.

Vermont Legal Aid has assisted us in all aspects of the project, from initial planning through development, implementation, and testing. They provide technical assistance on hardware and software issues. They assist in the evaluation and review of content. They also help to develop content, through their special projects and through joint task forces in family law, welfare law, and housing law. The task forces include members from Law Line as well as Vermont Legal Aid.

Vermont Tenants Inc. has also been an active partner, principally in reviewing and suggesting content. They use the site for their own work and have a useful, client-based perspective.

The Office of the Court Administrator has been a consistent supporter of VTLAWHELP. Their web site, www.vtjudiciary.org, includes a Self Service Center that includes pro se forms, information pamphlets, and links to VTLAWHELP. The courts also display our poster describing VTLAWHELP.

Vermont Protection & Advocacy, Central Vermont Community Action, and the Vermont Network Against Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence are members of the Advisory Group. They comment on content and provide referrals. Some community action agencies provide computer stations for clients.

Libraries are important resources for clients. Many of them provide work stations for people to use. We have contacted nearly all of the libraries in Vermont to let them know about the site.

Partners also help get the word out about the site through links from their own web sites to ours.

V. Factors Affecting Ability to Implement VTLAWHELP and Accomplish Project Goals, and Strategies to Address Those Challenges.

I would not say that there were any huge surprises as far as challenges in doing this work. There were certainly many challenges, from the trivial to the significant, but they were treated as problems to solve. Our prior relationship with Hugh Calkins and Kathleen

Caldwell at Pine Tree Legal Assistance was a hugely important resource for us. They were always available to help us work through problems and, because of the depth and breadth of their experience, had often dealt already with things that seemed new to us and could quickly guide us through what we thought were uncharted waters.

Another key resource was and is the Open Source Template circuit rider and the active, supportive and knowledgeable community that was available to us through the OST list serve and the regular OST conference calls.

The amount of resources available to put toward the client web site is often frustrating. It would be nice to have all of the resources we want but this is a universal problem in the work we do. We devoted a half time attorney to the work. She had legal skills as well as an interest and understanding of computers. She was comfortable using html and developed good skills in working around the back end of the web site. When she left early in 2006 we were left without web support for several months until we hired a new web coordinator, who worked part of the time as a staff attorney and part of the time as a web coordinator. Because she was new to both sides of her job, it took time, patience, and training to bring her up to the level of effectiveness we had earlier. The amount of resources to put toward the site continues to be a problem although we have been able to increase the knowledge base in Law Line and VLA and tap into technical support staff at VLA.

We contracted with Kaivo to host the site. This gave us control of the overall look and content. Kaivo's response to our requests was slow at times but by being persistent and patient we got what we needed from them and still work with them.

The biggest challenge we faced in developing VTLAWHELP involved broadening the definition of legal services among experienced legal services attorneys to include informational and prevention work. Attorneys like to continue doing what they have been doing. We were asking them to leave their comfort zone in order to help us. We needed to make them understand that providing readable information and forms is part of their responsibility rather than an annoyance that keeps them away from real lawyer work.

We brought the leaders around early by including them in all of the initial planning and development of the site. To bring around the staff attorney group we had to continually remind them of the site's work and usage. We did two training sessions at staff college to talk about writing for limited English proficiency. We brought in outside trainers to add credibility. This helped us to overcome some ingrained attitudes about the legal language they were used to. We helped them to realize the need to think more about the language they use and the problems legal language presents for clients. In other words, we developed, within our program and Vermont Legal Aid, the understanding of the importance of writing for people with limited English proficiency as well as the skills and resources that attorneys knew it to do it themselves. Finally, we publicized the usage of the site to make sure that everyone knew how many people were using the material so that staff attorneys could better understand its significance.

We hoped to develop some information for clients with limited English, particularly among immigrant communities. We have not yet succeeded with this.

Our efforts to install Smart Search were also unsuccessful because of the cost of achieving these changes.

VI. Financial and In-Kind Support for the Web Site

We recently received a \$4000 grant from the Vermont Bar Foundation to upgrade the software on our web server.

I do not have precise or even approximate figures for all of the non-TIG resources that went into the web site. Since the TIG grant only pays for a content manager, who must marshal other resources of programs to post content to the site, the quantitative value of the non-TIG support is very high, probably significantly higher than the TIG money itself. Non-TIG support includes all of the time of the Executive Director, who is supported principally by the LSC Basic Field grant, as well as the work of staff attorneys and paralegals at Law Line and Vermont Legal Aid.

VII. Major Lessons and Recommendations

Look for successful web sites and try to follow their example.

Pay attention to community resources and keep them involved.