

Call for Justice, LLC—United Way 2-1-1 Training Paper

Session 19: Minnesota Legal Advice Online, LawHelpMN.org, and other State Support Resources

May 15 and 16, 2014: Mary Kaczorek, Supervising Attorney, Legal Services State Support

Featured Speaker's Topics

This month, we hear from Mary Kaczorek, the Supervising Attorney for Legal Services State Support. She'll present on Minnesota Legal Advice Online, a revolutionary new resource for connecting low-income Minnesotans with Minnesota attorneys as a means of obtaining legal advice. Mary will also talk about our long-time fallback referral resource, LawHelpMN.org, and other resources from State Support.

What is State Support for the Legal Services Coalition of Minnesota?

Legal Services State Support (State Support) was founded in 1981 by the Minnesota Legal Services Coalition, which is an association of the seven Minnesota regional legal services programs that serve low-income Minnesotans. Formed to enhance cooperation and coordination, State Support assists the seven programs in a variety of ways. State Support's overall mission is to:

- prevent duplication of effort,
- assist field staff in identifying emerging issues affecting clients, and
- keep program advocates trained and informed about legal matters that impact the legal rights of low-income people in Minnesota.

In some respects, State Support is similar to Call for Justice—it doesn't provide direct representation to people with legal needs, but rather works behind the scenes to strengthen the civil legal system. We are a big fan of State Support!

A hallmark of State Support's work is innovative thinking. Thus, it has refined LawHelpMN.org into the state's premiere legal resources website for low-income people. It also presents cutting edge continuing legal education programs on unique topics such as intercountry adoptions, reasonable accommodations in housing and disability law, and estate planning for low-income people.

Most recently, with the brand new Minnesota Legal Advice Online (MLAO) program, State Support has branched out to act as coordinator between people with legal needs and attorneys who can provide legal advice via the Internet. It's this very new program that we seek to highlight with this 2-1-1 training session.

Minnesota Legal Advice Online

1. Background

As you know, in Minnesota (as in elsewhere in the United States), there are too many low-income people with legal needs and too few lawyers to help them. The majority of Minnesota attorneys are concentrated in the Twin Cities. This is very problematic for low-income people in rural Minnesota, who may be hours away from volunteer lawyers working in the Twin Cities.

Enter the concept of legal advice online, where people in legal need can be matched with attorneys regardless of each person's respective geographic location. Even more so, this connection can take place at any time of the day (daytime or nighttime), and thus be far more convenient than traditional business hours.

Online legal advice for low-income people is a relatively new phenomenon. In 2009, State Support started working with Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota on a regional online advice pilot program, the Legal Information Online Network (LION). Through LION, residents of Northwestern Minnesota obtain online legal advice from Judicare or legal services attorneys. Minnesota Legal Advice Online (MLAO) expands on the success of the LION project to bring online advice to a statewide audience. Through this model, any pro bono (volunteer) attorney licensed in Minnesota can answer questions submitted by clients throughout the state.

The MLAO model is adopted from OnlineTNJustice.org, a partnership between the Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services and the Tennessee Bar Association. Tennessee's online legal advice program launched in 2011. Since launch, 212 volunteer attorneys have answered over 6,300 client questions. The program has attracted many new attorneys who had never before provided pro bono legal services to low-income people. Because this system is so convenient – the attorney never has to leave his or her office and even can provide advice from home – new attorneys are motivated to volunteer.

RED FLAG: While legal advice helps people in need, it is not the same as full legal representation. An advice-only attorney will not file papers or represent the client in court. Advice alone can be a huge benefit for clients in many situations, though. Communicating with an attorney about a particular legal question (such as “My ex-spouse is usually a half hour late in bringing our children back to my house; is this a good reason to go to court to change the parenting time order?”) can make a big difference on how a person perceives an issue and what action that person takes. (The answer to the above question: “Probably not.”)

2. Eligibility Requirements for MLAO

MLAO clients must have a household income at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines. Clients must be Minnesota residents aged 14 or older. There are no asset limitations or other limitations, such as immigration or incarceration status.

MLAO is only for civil, or non-criminal, legal questions. If a client’s question is about something he or she could go to jail for, that client cannot get legal advice for that question through MLAO.

Clients cannot get advice from a volunteer lawyer through MLAO if they are already working with another lawyer on that legal issue.

3. How Minnesota Legal Advice Online Works

Client Side

MLAO is easy to use for both clients and attorneys. Clients sign up for the system by answering some basic eligibility questions, reading through a client agreement, and selecting a username and password. After signing up, a client can then ask his or her question. The screen asks some background questions, and includes a large text field for the client to input his or her question:

New Question

Kind of Problem

▼

Don't see your legal issue listed? Click [here](#) if your question is about:

- bankruptcy,
- sealing (expunging) criminal records, or
- being sued by a debt collector or credit card company.

This site can't help you with a problem you could go to jail for. Click [here](#) for other places to get help with a criminal problem.

What is your question about?

If you have a court date, enter it here. **You might not get an answer to your question before your court date.**

What is the name of the person or organization causing your legal problem? If you don't know, just leave it blank.

If this question is about an open legal case, what county is your case in? (leave blank if you do not have an open legal case)

Type your question here:

B *I* U |   |  |   |  |   

Once the client clicks the “Send” button, the question gets added to the queue with all other client questions. Questions are kept in the queue for 14 days. If no attorney answers the question within 14 days, the MLAO administrator notifies the client and provides the client with other referral information.

When the client signs up, he or she has the option to include an e-mail address. If a client enters an e-mail address, the system will send the client an e-mail when an attorney responds to that client's question. If the client does not enter an e-mail address, the client is responsible for checking back into the system to see whether an attorney has answered his or her question.

Once a client receives a response from the volunteer attorney, he or she has the option to ask follow-up questions. The attorney might also have follow-up questions for the client. If the attorney asks for follow-up information, the client can enter that information into the system by replying to the attorney's message. Both the attorney and the client can end or close out a question at any time.

Attorney Side

Attorneys sign up by providing basic information and their attorney ID number. The MLAO administrator at State Support then approves that attorney to use the system. All volunteer attorneys can access the entire queue of client questions. Attorneys can choose to receive e-mail alerts when a client asks a new question in a particular area, such as family law or housing law.

Attorneys cannot choose to remain anonymous. The attorney can choose to provide the client with contact information, but any representation occurring outside the scope of the website would need to be covered by a separate attorney/client agreement.

Once an attorney takes a client question, he or she has three days to respond to the client. If the attorney needs more information, he or she can ask the client for follow-up information. Again, the client can also respond to the attorney if the client has follow-up questions about the attorney's response. Once the attorney has adequately answered the client's question, he or she can then close the question to end the question thread.

Attorneys are encouraged to write in plain language (not "legalese") when responding to the client. (This may be a challenge for some lawyers...) In the MLAO training materials, State Support has provided many resources to help attorneys write in plain language. The resources and training materials for attorneys also include information about how to make a good referral. If a client has a complicated issue and needs more help than legal advice, attorneys are encouraged to refer that client to 2-1-1 or their local legal aid office to try to find additional representation.

4. The Value of MLAO for 2-1-1

Some of you may not know that 2-1-1 was a stakeholder (as was Call for Justice, LLC) as MLAO was being planned. This represents a crucial intersection between social service and nonprofit legal providers and is a model for future collaborations.

It's hard to overstate the value of MLAO for 2-1-1 (and for the general social services community). With MLAO, 2-1-1 can readily offer low-income legal needs callers a true access point to a lawyer and legal advice. **Along with LawHelpMN.org (see below), the court self-help centers, and the county/state law libraries (all of which we've trained on), MLAO should become a standard fallback referral.** It's our belief that the MLAO program will prove to greatly increase legal access. In the end, it may mean that a certain percentage of people refrain from filing legal matters and that another percentage will be enabled to more easily progress their on-going legal matter. Only time will tell how this resource will ultimately play out.

LawHelpMN.org

We have long trained on the resources found in State Support's website, LawHelpMN.org. (www.lawhelpmn.org) and urged it to be a regular fallback referral when providing callers with legal referrals. Your regular referrals to LawHelp have helped propel it to the most visited legal resource website in Minnesota: in 2013, LawHelp received a total of 350,381 visits from 282,613 different people.

As you know, LawHelp is organized by category of legal need, which in turn identifies/describes both legal and some social organizations as possible resources.

Additional features on LawHelp include:

- LiveHelp, an online chat service where the user can communicate with a State Support representative or state law librarian to answer navigation questions;
- A fully integrated Spanish language version of LawHelp, lawhelpmn.org/es, and many fact sheets and resources in Hmong, Somali, and other languages;
 - Hint: click the "more languages" button on the right navigation bar to see resources in other languages.
- FormHelper, automated do-it-yourself guided interviews to help users fill out court forms and other documents;
- Calendars for clinics and other places to find legal help; and
- News, an area of the website highlighting new resources and other seasonal information.

Let us know if you have any questions!

Ellie and Emily, Call for Justice, LLC