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## Free online legal service goes bilingual

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Law Bulletin staff writer

Spanish speakers in Illinois now have 24-7 access to more than 300 articles, videos and interactive forms of free, understandable legal information, thanks to the new Spanish-language version of Illinois Legal Aid Online.

Since 2001, the legal aid online service has provided free legal information and referrals to low-cost attorneys for visitors to its site. The service was designed especially for people who can't afford to hire an attorney.

The website's old version had some Spanish resources, but those didn't make it into the August launch of the new, centralized website. As of last week, the website can now be accessed entirely in Spanish at [IllinoisLegalAid.org/es](http://IllinoisLegalAid.org/es).

The online service used Lingotek, a translation program integrated into its website, to do the initial translation. A Spanish-speaking staff member and AmeriCorp VISTA staff member with the help of 13 Spanish-speaking volunteers oversaw the content and double-checked translations.

"The really cool thing about it is that it gets smarter as it translates more," said Lisa A. Colpoys, the service's executive director.

As staff and volunteers correct translations, especially legal terms that can be tricky for machine translators, Lingotek remembers the correction for the next time.

"It's a program we're excited to see grow," said Samantha Kyrkostas Mills, the service's development director.

Kyrkostas said the legal aid service now has 30 more volunteers interested in translating to Spanish.

Staff members are able to edit the English and Spanish versions of an article in the same framework. If the service needs to add an update to its information about how to get a divorce in Illinois, for example, staff can update both the English and Spanish version simultaneously.

All the information is now available in both languages, but different articles have gained more traffic on the Spanish version than the English one so far. Immigration law, for example, is not even on the list of most popular topics searched for on the English version, but it's the most popular topic on the Spanish version.

It's thanks to a stakeholders committee composed of people from Latinos Progresando, the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, the National Immigrant Justice Center, LAF's immigration

project and others who are out in the Spanish-speaking community that Illinois Legal Aid Online set priority topics for its Spanish version.

“They’re on the ground and they’re the folks who help us identify areas of law where there are emerging legal issues,” Kyrkostas said. “We can learn a lot from what our analytics and web metrics show us based on where people are visiting, but there might be issues on the ground that might be happening that haven’t yet come through our analytics.”

That committee also advised on how Spanish speakers may react differently than English speakers. For example, the word “resident” wasn’t received the same way by Spanish speakers as by English speakers.

“By using the term ‘resident,’ sometimes Spanish speakers thought that they had to be legal permanent residents,” Colpoys aid. “Or that, if they weren’t a legal permanent resident, that maybe they didn’t trust the site because they thought there might be some connection to government or they might be at risk by using it.”

The site changed “Are you an Illinois resident?” in English to a translation of “Do you live in Illinois?” and only uses the Spanish cognate of “resident” when referring specifically to legal permanent residence.

In 2016, the service’s websites had 2.9 million visits, Kyrkostas said. Before August 2016, about 10 percent of all visitors used the Spanish language resources, Colpoys said.

Since the beta Spanish version launched two weeks ago and the public Spanish version launched last Friday, 0.5 percent of visitors used the Spanish version. Colpoys said the online service expects that number to come back up once word gets out in Spanish-speaking communities that its information is available in Spanish again.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 12.74 percent of Illinois residents speak Spanish. The next most common non-English language is Polish, spoken by 1.64 percent of Illinoisans, and Colpoys said the online service will launch a Polish version next after it secures grant funding for the project.

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