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BUSINESS OF LAW

Illinois Legal Aid Online earns praise as the best website of its kind in the country

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BY RICHARD ACELLO



Lisa Colpoys says the new ILAO website is more mobile and user friendly. Photograph by Wayne Slezak.

If Oscars were awarded for legal aid websites, Lisa Colpoys might be working on her acceptance speech.

Since its launch in August, the executive director of Illinois Legal Aid Online has been fielding compliments about the redesigned, refocused ILAO website.

David Bonebrake, a program counsel for technology at the Legal Services Corp., has called it the “best legal aid website in the country.”

“We are getting positive feedback from users of the website, our legal partners and funders,” Colpoys confirms. “The new design, the new functionality, the simplicity is all focused on how members of the public can easily access legal information.”

Colpoys realized not long ago that the Illinois site needed improvement.

“It wasn’t mobile friendly,” she explains. “Another issue that we tried to remedy was ease of finding information. Often the information will be categorized using legal terms like ‘consumer law’ or a term people don’t understand. If they’re having a car repossessed, they might not know to click on consumer law, so we tried to simplify the navigation structure and use common terms so people can get the information.”

For example, headlines on the new website provide simple directions for getting a divorce. Other headlines include “Enforcing my child support order” and “My landlord is trying to evict me.”

The site also seeks increased interaction. “Users can rate content and leave comments, and they can connect with the various social media channels,” Colpoys says. “The website detects where [users] are located, so we can deliver more localized content, and if they become members, they get a dashboard that allows them to register for events and manage information more personally.”

LEADING THE WAY

The Illinois site is providing a model for other states. “We worked with Michigan to help them design their website; we provided guidance to Florida, which is also building a website and a network of self-help centers. We continue to get calls from those interested,” Colpoys says. “One of the great things about the new site is it was built with the open source software Drupal.

“There are several other legal aid websites that use Drupal, so we can share our work and take advantage of other people’s work.”

A hunger for legal aid information exists on the web. In 2015, ILAO’s five websites received 2.9 million visits from about 2.3 million users. Texas’ statewide legal aid site, TexasLawHelp.org, logged about 1.1 million users from Jan. 1 to Sept. 20, 2016, totaling more than 7 million page views, a 91 percent increase in users and a 63 percent hike in page views over the same period in 2013.

District Judge Lora Livingston in Travis County, Texas, chair of the ABA Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defendants, likes what she sees in Illinois.

“I’ve seen it displayed and demo’d, and it is really well done,” she says. “It’s easy to navigate, uses clear language, and it’s really user friendly. Other states are holding it up as a best practice for what their sites should look like because of the features and ease of navigation.”

Livingston says a site such as Illinois’ is overdue. “It’s very clear that for the general public and the population who come to court to represent themselves, the legal world is one that is difficult to navigate,” she says. “Even lawyers are challenged sometimes.”

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