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Help Yourself
LawHelp Interactive provides online assistance for pro se litigants.

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Every year, millions of people who can't afford a lawyer find themselves in court, facing the potential loss of property, money, or even their children. LawHelp Interactive is a web-based document assembly program that helps pro se litigants — or volunteer attorneys — prepare needed legal documents.

Managed by New York-based **Pro Bono Net**, the software helps litigants, — as well as pro bono and legal aid attorneys seeking to help more people in less time — create complete, properly formatted legal documents.

Users start by completing an interactive, online questionnaire. The system then analyzes the responses and generates the documents. (Think TurboTax for legal documents.)

Among the most frequently created documents: child support and custody forms; requests for orders of protection for victims of domestic violence; responses to creditors; and forms for eviction and divorce.

Interview templates are created by participating pro bono attorneys and legal aid programs, using Capsoft's **HotDocs Professional**. These experts also can use **A2J Author**, from the **Center for Access to Justice and Technology.** The flash-based program helps experts create additional content that can be viewed by the litigants.

LawHelp Interactive is built on **Microsoft** Windows Server 2003, SQL Server 2008, and HotDocs Server 2009. The document assembly website was written using the Python-based **Plone** framework. From 2003 to 2009, **LexisNexis** donated server and desktop HotDocs licenses. Capsoft, which recently acquired HotDocs, has pledged to continue to support the program, says CEO Russell Shepherd.

When finished, templates are uploaded to the national LawHelp Interactive server and made available to the public through state legal aid websites, such as **www.LawHelp.org**. The program also is available in many court-based self-help centers. For example, in New York, a child support modification form can be found on **www.LawHelp.org/NY** .

Given the shortfall in legal aid funding, self-help tools are "absolutely critical," says Glenn Rawdon, program counsel for technology at the **Legal Services Corp**. "If we can't provide people with lawyers, they will have to serve themselves — meaning they will need the tools to go into court. Information alone is not enough."

In the **Los Angeles Superior Court**, online forms are a key part of a self-help program. Litigants use terminals at the court to fill out basic information on online forms, then attend workshops to learn about the legal issues involved.

Michelle Hopkins is supervising attorney at the L.A. Superior Court's Resource Center for Self-Represented Litigants. "Self-represented litigants have more time to understand and process all of these legal concepts and to make the critical decisions in their case, such as child custody decisions," she says. And complete, legible paperwork helps court clerks, judges, and other staff.

In Canada, LawHelp Interactive has been used by **Pro Bono Law Ontario** (which won the 2009 *LTN* Award for most innovative use of technology for a pro bono project), for a court-based self-help center in the Toronto Superior Court. Pro bono lawyers meet with clients and advise them on filling out forms. The client then uses LawHelp Interactive to complete the documents, and bring them back to the lawyer for review. Streamlining the process enables more people to receive help, and provides a more satisfying experience for the lawyers.

A major benefit of LHI is that it helps attorneys who lack expertise in a particular practice area but want to participate, as they can rely on the questionnaire to cover key questions.

For example, in Georgia, forms related to family law, consumer law, public benefits, wills, and advance directives are available via GeorgiaAdvocates.org, explains Michael Monahan, pro bono director at the Georgia State Bar.

"The law and the proper fact-gathering are 'baked' right into the online client interview," Monahan says. The online forms "help us guide volunteer lawyers to the right result for the client and reduce the supervision time we must spend with volunteers."

LawHelp Interactive also has the potential to create new avenues for pro bono work. The L.A. Superior Court plans to start a remote access program this year — pro bono attorneys in their own offices can review guardianship forms that have been completed by litigants at the self-help center.

LHI's centralized infrastructure makes it possible for cash-strapped justice programs to extend their reach, and also facilitates replication of successful programs — because content from one state can be easily adapted elsewhere.

Pro Bono Net actively encourages the sharing of best practices. For example,LHI templates developed in Pennsylvania for pro bono and legal aid attorneys working on foreclosure cases are now being replicated in Kentucky. LHI is now available in 40 states and generated more than 113,000 documents during 2009.

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