

LawHelp Interactive

Customer Case Study



New York State Courts Enhance Access to Justice for Unrepresented Litigants with LawHelp Interactive

“Every thousand court forms completed in LawHelp Interactive saves the Bronx County Family Court hundreds of staff hours. With the recent budget cuts, if we hadn’t built our DIY forms with LawHelp Interactive, we could not process the volume of petitions we receive.”

—Mike Williams, Clerk of Court, Bronx County Family Court

The New York State Unified Court System needs to assist an overwhelming number of litigants that cannot afford legal representation. To enhance access to justice for unrepresented litigants and ease the burden on court staff, the New York State Courts Access to Justice Program uses LawHelp Interactive to support and host online court forms for New York courts statewide.

Situation

The New York State Unified Court System oversees all state and local courts in New York. It is one of the busiest judicial systems in the United States. In 2009, local civil courts in New York State received more than 1.26 million filings, including nearly 50,000 foreclosures and almost 750,000 Family Court cases.

Its tremendous caseload is complicated by a large and growing number of litigants who come to court alone because they cannot afford a lawyer. Due to current funding gaps, legal-aid organizations cannot represent all eligible applicants for civil legal assistance. Statewide, defendants in 70% of foreclosures and 99% of consumer debt and landlord-tenant cases have no lawyer, and 88% of petitioners and respondents in child and spousal support cases are unrepresented.

For unrepresented litigants, court processes are complex and intimidating. It can be confusing and time consuming just to complete the necessary forms. “People come into the court who don’t know the system and often don’t understand the options available to them,” says Mike Williams, the Clerk of Court for the Bronx County Family Court. “It can take people several hours just to file a petition, and if they haven’t completed the form adequately, it can delay their case or affect its outcome.”



LawHelp Interactive

Customer:

New York State Unified Court System
15,000 employees
www.nycourts.gov

Customer Profile:

Based in Albany and New York City, the New York State Unified Court System administers all state and local courts in New York.

LawHelp Interactive is a national online document assembly solution focused on access to justice. It provides training and hosting, support for court staff, and access to interview templates and forms developed to serve low-income and unrepresented litigants by legal-aid and court programs in more than 40 states. LawHelp Interactive has been funded, in part, by the Legal Services Corporation.

For More Information About LawHelp Interactive, go to:
<https://lawhelpinteractive.org>

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Providing assistance to unrepresented litigants puts extra pressure on court staff and contributes to delays and increased costs throughout the system. At the same time, the NY State Unified Court System is struggling to manage a \$170 million reduction in its fiscal 2011/2012 budget, which has resulted in staff cutbacks and reduced hours at some courts.

For more than a decade, the NY State Unified Court System has implemented initiatives to provide relief for unrepresented litigants, and in 2007, some NY courts began working with Pro Bono Net to develop do-it-yourself (DIY) court forms. In March 2009, the court system launched the [New York State Courts Access to Justice Program](#), directed by Judge Fern Fisher, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge of the New York City Courts. The program develops pro bono, language, self-help, and technology resources, such as the New York [CourtHelp](#) website, to improve court access for New Yorkers who cannot afford an attorney. The Access to Justice Program wanted to develop a solution that would help unrepresented litigants more easily understand and file effective court documents and ease the burden on court staff.

Solution

Since 2009, the Access to Justice Program has been using LawHelp Interactive, a national online document assembly service, operated by [Pro Bono Net](#), to support and host DIY court forms for New York courts statewide. The DIY forms are online applications that help litigants prepare personalized, ready-to-file forms by leading them through a series of simple questions.

Pro Bono Net delivers the computing resources for LawHelp Interactive as online services so that the NY State Unified Court System does not have to support its DIY forms program with its own IT infrastructure. By using LawHelp Interactive, lawyers, clerks, and other staff in the Access to Justice Program can use software such as HotDocs Developer and the Center for Access to Justice and Technology's A2J Author to easily build, host, and update DIY forms that are used by litigants to assemble hundreds of documents each week.

"The enhanced accessibility and decreasing costs of these technologies have made DIY court forms an ideal mechanism for serving the unrepresented public," says Rochelle Klempner, Chief Counsel at the New York State Courts Access to Justice Program. "Access to justice and court operations are both greatly improved through their use."

The Access to Justice Program has developed 13 DIY forms for New York Family, Supreme, Surrogate's, Civil, and Housing Courts, and in 2010, litigants in New York State generated over 55,000 court forms with LawHelp

Interactive. In September 2011, the program expects to release more DIY forms for 1,200 courts throughout the state.

Benefits

By building and hosting DIY court forms with LawHelp Interactive, the NY State Unified Court System is improving access to justice for unrepresented litigants, easing the administrative burden on court staff, and working within its tightening resources.

Enhanced Access to Justice

Litigants can visit the New York CourtHelp website to easily find links to the DIY forms they need at LawHelp Interactive. At the Bronx County Family Court, Williams and his staff have developed two help centers with eight terminals dedicated to DIY forms.

"People at the terminals can usually generate a completed petition by themselves in about 16 minutes," says Williams. "It's easier to get people over that initial hurdle so that they have access to the justice they deserve, and whenever you improve access, you're likely to improve outcomes."

Reduced Administrative Burden

By referring litigants to DIY forms, court staff throughout the New York court system ease their own administrative burden and help to expedite cases. At the Bronx County Family Court, multiple staff used to spend hours interviewing litigants and typing their petitions. Now, one or two staff can help multiple litigants at the DIY form terminals, freeing other staff to assist other litigants, support judges, or meet other court priorities.

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More Litigants Served with Fewer Resources

In the current economic climate, the courts in New York are seeing an increase in the types of cases with the highest incidence of unrepresented litigants. At the same time, the New York court system has had to meet shrinking budget resources by cutting staff and reducing hours, but by using LawHelp Interactive it can process more cases and help more unrepresented litigants.

"I see this as the future of the court system," says Klempner. "We can use DIY court forms to help make better filings, give unrepresented litigants greater access to justice, and alleviate the burden on our court staff and our judges."