"Thank You" Inspires Law Student's Pro Bono Work

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I think the most remarkable thing about volunteering for LawHelp/ NY is that every single client I've communicated with has said "thank you." This is doubly remarkable first, because all the contact clients have with me is through an online chat program called LiveHelp on the LawHelp/NY website. They can't see me, I can't see them, we're typing at each other through a little text box. Here are all the conditions that are supposed to lead to rampant online incivility, if not threats, profanity, or worse. The theory goes that no one quite believes the person on the other side of the computer screen is real, and so we have no compunctions about making that other person the target of all the irritation and annoyance that seem to go along with the convenience of living our lives online. But the clients who type out their problems to me have usually been frustrated, frequently angry, often frightened — but never uncivil.

In fact, they have never been anything but gracious, which is, as I said, doubly remarkable: not only am I for them only a line of text on a screen, but I am often an *extremely unhelpful* line of text on a screen. Sometimes I feel like all I say/type over the course of a three hour shift is "No":

No, I'm sorry, I can't give you any legal advice, but I can try to find you an organization that may be able to give you advice.

No, I'm sorry, I can't give you my phone number so we can talk about your problem over the phone; I'm sorry your time on the library computer is almost up but I can only talk to you online.

No, I'm afraid we don't offer help with criminal cases.

No, I'm so sorry, but there are very few lawyers who will work pro bono on divorce cases unless there are special circumstances involved. And yet everyone says "thank you."

But sometimes I do feel like I've done something more than help people understand that there is no one out there who can help them. There is information that I can provide that is useful: for instance, I've gotten very good at scouting out subway and bus stops online so that I can steer clients with children toward public agency offices that are closest to public transportation without too many stairs to climb with a stroller. But much more importantly, I can often put clients in touch with organizations that can and do help with precisely the problems my clients are facing.

Several of NYC's direct legal service providers put on monthly or weekly clinics on particular legal topics, and these are a lifeline for many of LiveHelp's clients. Knowing that there is a place where they can speak to an actual person about a specific problem is an enormous relief. When I've told a client how to find one of Housing Court Answers' information tables, or when they can attend a clinic with the Workplace Justice

Project to fill out a claim for worker's compensation, or which organizations provide assistance in Spanish, or simply given them the number for the City Bar Justice Center Legal Hotline, I do feel that I have been of real use to my client. While contact information for these and many other wonderful organizations is available on the LawHelp/NY website and elsewhere, many clients have trouble navigating through the information, or evaluating which organizations will be able to help them. I can help with that.

But in the end all I can do is pass on the information; I can't give advice, and I can't make my clients' problems any less severe. I'm only an intermediary between people who desperately need help and lawyers who give of their time, their energy and their other resources to diminish some of the staggering barriers to access that many New Yorkers experience every day. So to those of you who staff and support the organizations to which I refer LiveHelp clients, I would like to pass on the words I hear from every client, every day: Thank you.

Staggering Statistics

The Task Force to Expand Access to Civil Legal Services in New York found that 99 percent of tenants are unrepresented in eviction cases in New York City, and 98 percent are unrepresented outside of the City; 99 percent of borrowers are unrepresented in hundreds of thousands of consumer credit cases filed each year in New York City; 97 percent are unrepresented in child support matters in New York City, and 95 percent are unrepresented in the rest of the State; and 44 percent of homeowners are unrepresented in foreclosure cases throughout our State.