



powered by probono.net

South Carolina Saves Time and Lowers Access **Barriers for Parents in Child Support Cases**

"Creating pleadings faster and more accurately is a huge step forward.... Child support flows to the kids who need it. With LawHelp Interactive, we're helping the system to work the way it's supposed to work for all."

-Gale DuBose, Jobs-Not-Jail Project Director, SC Fathers and Families

These days, non-custodial parents find it tough to pay child support, and tougher still to get timely modification orders. Custodial parents seeking support increases face similar challenges. A South Carolina partnership uses Pro Bono Net's LawHelp Interactive to standardize and automate forms, giving parents faster access to the judicial system. By re-engineering processes, the partnership estimates it has shaved about three months off the time it takes parents to create pleadings.

Situation

The recession is over, but the slower-than-usual recovery means continued pain for people throughout the country. In South Carolina, the number of people eligible for services from the state's Department of Social Services has doubled since the recession's start, to one million. Unemployment was 8.1% in August 2013 (compared to 7.3% for the U.S.).

That means more people who can't pay their bills-including more non-custodial parents who can't pay court-mandated child support. By one measure, the unemployment rate among such parents has doubled to 79%. Non-payment puts parents at risk of contempt citations and criminal sentences. Parents behind bars are even less likely to pay child support, and less likely to play meaningful roles in the lives of their children.

"In South Carolina, low-income and no-income parents face a huge threat of going to jail for nonsupport," says Andrea Loney, Executive Director, South Carolina Legal Services. Modifying support orders to levels that parents can afford to pay makes a huge difference— but it's been increasingly difficult for parents that need help with child support to get that help, because the budgets of public and nonprofit agencies have been cut, even as the requests for help increase. Staff cuts at the South Carolina Integrated Child Support Services unit have increased workloads for each staff member by 13% over the past four years. Legal Services has had to redirect the resources it spends on child support modification to other priorities. Overburdened courts, often forced to work with poorly documented or incomplete filings, take anywhere from six months to a year to hear these cases.

Partnership:

- South Carolina Legal Services
- SC Bar Foundation
- SC Center for Father and Families
- SC Access to Justice
- SC Judicial Department
- SC Department of Social Services
- Pro Bono Net

www.modifychildsupportsc.com/

LawHelp Interactive is a national online document assembly solution focused on access to justice. The service provides training and project management support for court staff and access to interview templates and forms being developed to serve low-income and unrepresented litigants by legal-aid and court programs in more than 40 states.

For more information about Law Help Interactive, go to: <u>www.probono.net/lhi</u>

For more information about Pro Bono Net, go to: http://www.probono.net

LawHelp Interactive is supported by



Solution

In South Carolina, a public/private partnership, including state agencies, nonprofits and the private bar (see sidebar, page 1), formed to address these issues. By standardizing and automating court-approved child support modification forms, they have been able to improve outcomes for litigants and reduce costs for all parties. To fund their effort, the partners sought Title IV funding from the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement; theirs was one of only a few applications in the country to earn a grant.

Benefits

With its use of LawHelp Interactive, South Carolina has increased access to justice for parents who cannot afford lawyers in child support cases.

Cuts Waiting Time by 3 Months

Now, parents don't need to wait for overworked agency staff to assist them. They can produce simple, complete, well-supported court-approved forms on demand and on their own in as little as



35 minutes. The partnership estimates that this reduces the time that parents need to produce accurate pleadings by about three months.

"Creating pleadings faster and more accurately is a huge step forward for parents and the system," says Gale DuBose, Esq., Jobs-Not-Jail Project Director and Legal Coordinator for SC Fathers and Families. "It keeps parents in control of their cases, instead of depending on agencies that would normally ask them to wait. They get the tools to help stay in jobs and out of jail. Child support flows to the kids who need it. With LawHelp Interactive, we're helping the system to work the way it's supposed to work for all."

Reduces Administrative Burden

Because forms created on the website are typically correct and complete, clerks need less time to process them. That means better customer service at lower cost. "Everyone's looking for a way to do more with less," says Pat Muller, Information Technology Manager for South Carolina Legal Services. "We're us-

"We succeeded in part because our courts, lawyers, child support services, and legal aid were all working together," says Pat Littlejohn, Executive Director, South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families. "We had what it took to succeed."

Part of "what it took to succeed" was the right technology. The legal aid programs in the coalition had discovered that technology two years earlier, when they adopted LawHelp Interactive (LHI) and LawHelp.org, both from <u>Pro Bono Net</u>, to offer online self-service divorce forms. LawHelp Interactive is a national, online, document service for self-service, personalized court forms. <u>LawHelp.org</u> is an award-winning web site that makes it easy for litigants to find, create, use, and submit forms.

Now, the partnership directs parents seeking help to either the project website (<u>www.modifychildsupportsc.com</u>) or to the statewide legal aid portal (<u>www.lawhelp.org/sc</u>), where they can find and complete court-approved forms in an easy-to-use format. Consumers answer questions in an interview format (see diagram), submit their answers, create their documents on demand, and download them for printing. They also receive instructions on next steps in easy-to-read language.

ing LawHelp Interactive to do just that."

Meets Litigants' Needs

Surveys show that 93% percent of users of the LHI divorce forms say they will print and file the divorce forms for their legal actions; 89% say they would use the process again; and 88% say they would recommend it to others.

"If we achieve similar or better satisfaction numbers with the LawHelp Interactive child support modification forms —and we expect to—then this will be our next success," says Muller.