Online Resources Provide Pro Se Guidance and Reveal Pro Bono Opportunities

by Kathryn Dahlke

Legal services programs and the court system are experiencing a swelling number of civil law cases. This is due in part to the growing U.S. population and the current economic issues the country is facing. Unemployment and homelessness have increased, thus forcing individuals who might normally be able to retain the services of an attorney to represent themselves in legal matters. Online resources are valuable in helping pro se litigants access information they need to help them work through the legal system. Law students and lawyers interested in volunteer and pro bono opportunities also can take advantage of online resources and networking communities that seek to increase access to justice for individuals in need.

Assistance for the Pro Se Litigant

A major challenge for pro se litigants in Colorado is the accessibility to and availability of affordable and dependable legal information, as well as guidance on the specific issue before them. Although obtaining formal legal representation is recommended for most legal actions, the cost of representation continues to encumber the pursuit of legal assistance for many individuals. The growing availability of online resources and the convenience of accessing those resources present opportunities and methods for pro se litigants to educate themselves regarding legal issues and actions.

Colorado Legal Services

Colorado Legal Services (CLS) strives to maintain an updated, informative website for pro se litigants in Colorado. Since the beginning of 2009, the CLS website has had more than 22,400 page views. However, despite this tremendous initial contact with the site, when visitors of the site were asked if they knew that further civil legal information was available on the CLS website and on the Colorado Judicial Branch website, only 50 percent of the respondents were aware that additional information is offered. Visitors to the CLS website appear to be reluctant to investigate the site to its fullest to discover available services that could potentially address their legal needs. Consequently, CLS strives to educate the public about the range of its services and what can be accessed online.

Because the number of civil legal cases continues to increase as affordable human resources dwindle, it is important that public resources be comprehensive and user-friendly. Access to online resources offers pro se litigants a viable alternative to constructively self-educate, and provides encouraging methods to help them prepare to meet with their attorney or further understand and effectively build their cases if they are forced, due to lack of financial resources, to represent themselves.

For example, pro se litigants pursuing claims in small claims court will find assistance on the CLS website, www.coloradolegal services.org. The visitor will find links to the Colorado Judicial Branch’s Small Claims Court Instructions; a training video entitled “How to File a Small Claims Case”; and the “Small Claims Handbook: A Guide for Non-Lawyers,” also published by the Colorado Judicial Branch. These resources provide the information pro se litigants need to improve their understanding of the larger implications and processes required to pursue or defend their small claims case.

The use of technology in addressing legal issues offers countless benefits outside the traditional approach to legal representation. With legal resources available and properly promoted, pro se litigants can readily access legal information specific to their cases. This knowledge has the added benefit of helping individuals develop life skills and competence in dealing with future legal issues. In short, the expanding Internet-based repertoire of dependable legal resources connects pro se litigants to the necessary information they need, and broadens their exposure to the complexity of legal topics.

Colorado Judicial Branch

The ability to pay court fees, obtain the necessary court forms, and file motions online are additional examples of the potential of modern technology to facilitate access to justice. The Colorado Judicial Branch website, www.courts.state.co.us, provides a wealth of information about the Colorado state court system, including the ability to print a specific court’s daily docket; search court records; find jury-related information and current press releases regarding the courts; and access court orders and opinions. The variety of records and resources available on this website illustrates the grow-

About the Author

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ing inventory of online legal information and the necessity of access to technology to benefit from these resources.

**Denver and Colorado Bar Associations**

The Colorado Bar Association (CBA) website, www.cobar.org, offers several resources for the public, including the Find a Lawyer directory, a list of legal assistance programs, and a list of public legal clinics. The Denver Bar Association, which sponsors many programs for the public, has additional information on its website, www.denbar.org. Specifically, the website’s “Public Interest” section provides pro se litigants a list of public legal clinics, as well as Self Help Centers for various district courts, educational resources, and useful legal Internet links.

**Resources for the Lawyer Seeking Pro Bono Work**

The access to reliable legal information online also can assist legal professionals in providing pro bono services to those in need. Internet research is a convenient way for attorneys to discover myriad pro bono opportunities in Colorado, and can serve as a resource for building virtual legal aid communities and locating networking opportunities within the legal field.

**Colorado Advocates Forum**

Colorado Advocates Forum (Forum), www.coadvocatesforum.org, is an online community for attorneys, paralegals, and other individuals involved in Colorado's legal aid community, as well as law school faculty and students concerned with serving the public. Members have access to an expansive online library of articles, letters, forms, pleadings, briefs, case law resources, statute and regulatory information, training materials, and numerous links to helpful complementary organizations. Currently, more than 400 individuals are members of the Forum.

The Forum currently offers its members access to training videos on a variety of legal topics. For example, the video entitled “Healthcare and Income Benefits Programs” trains advocates on government benefits, as well as the eligibility requirements of each program. This video educates on the history and implementation of programs, and outlines how the programs supplement one another. It also describes limits to receiving multiple benefits.

Forum members also benefit from a calendar that lists statewide legal events, meetings, and trainings, as well as a roster of its members. In addition, members have access to a variety of listservs, which can foster communication between advocates in similar areas of law and help the professional development of individuals looking to expand their expertise.

**Access to Justice Commission**

The Colorado Access to Justice Commission develops, coordinates, and implements policy initiatives to expand access to justice and enhance the quality of justice in civil legal matters for persons who encounter barriers in gaining access to Colorado’s civil justice system. The Commission maintains a list of pro bono opportunities for lawyers, law students, and paralegals.

**CBA**

The CBA offers an ample directory of helpful legal resources under the “For Lawyers” section of www.cobar.org. This section provides easy access to current court opinions, as well as professionalism resources, pertinent programs sponsored by the CBA, ethics-related considerations, and the “Litigator’s Handbook.”

The section also provides access to law-related websites, including those of external law libraries, government departments, and federal courts. In addition, individuals interested in pro bono opportunities can find volunteer opportunities or join one of the many listservs to become more involved with the online community in a specific area of law.

**Metro Volunteer Lawyers**

The Metro Volunteer Lawyers (MVL) website, www.metrovolunteeralawyers.org, contains a sign-up sheet that makes it easy for lawyers to volunteer to perform pro bono legal services for needy individuals that reside in the counties MVL serves. MVL strives to seamlessly match its pro bono attorneys with prospective clients within their preferred practice and geographic areas. For example, family law attorneys may be matched with the MVLs Family Law Program, which assists clients with relatively uncomplicated, uncontested divorce or custody matters where the other party is not represented by an attorney.

**Conclusion**

The availability of online legal resources creates incentive for pro se litigants to proactively educate themselves and assert their civil rights. In addition, online resources can make it easier for members of the legal community to provide pro bono services to those
in need. The information found on the public and advocate sites of Colorado Legal Services, the Colorado Judicial Branch, the Colorado and Denver Bar Associations, and other legal organizations can have a positive impact on individuals who cannot afford or access legal representation.

Notes


2. Id.

3. To access these resources, visit www.coloradolegalservices.org; select “legal information”; select “Consumer Issues”; select “Small Claims”; and then type in your zip code, city, or county.

4. Visit www.cobar.org and select the “For the Public” link in the upper-left navigation box.

5. Visit www.denbar.org and select the “Public Interest” tab. From this page, select the “legal clinics” link for available public legal clinics, or scroll down the page for Self Help Centers and numerous links to additional legal information.

6. Attorneys and paralegals who do pro bono work or who are involved in Colorado’s legal aid community; law school faculty and students in public service clinics; and social services advocates involved in legal aid are encouraged to join Colorado Advocates Forum. To join, select “Civil Law” and then “Join this Area.”

7. Visit www.coadvocatesforum.org; select the “Civil Law” link in the left navigation pane; and select “Webcasts.”


9. Visit www.cobar.org and select the “For Lawyers” link in the upper-left navigation box. This opens a drop-down list of all the resources available to lawyers on the Colorado Bar Association website.
