

***the digital edge***

**LiveHelp – Increasing Access to Legal Information Online**

*By Liz Keith*

Pro Bono Net, a national nonprofit that is dedicated to increasing access to justice through the innovative use of technology, has partnered with legal aid programs around the country to develop a robust network of online resources to assist people in need, including [www.lawhelp.org](http://www.lawhelp.org) Web sites in twenty-eight states. Collectively, this network of Web sites provides millions of visitors each year with information about free legal aid programs in their communities, answers to questions about legal rights, court information, links to social service agencies, and more. However, some users of these Web sites lack the legal knowledge to know what information is most useful in their situations. Others are inexperienced Internet users and are unsure how to conduct online research on their own.

To help these users find relevant and useful information to protecting their legal rights, Pro Bono Net, in collaboration with local service partners, developed LiveHelp. LiveHelp is a chat-based, real-time support service that helps persons find self-help resources and referral information on legal services Web sites. Implemented with LivePerson software, the service allows visitors of the Web site to click a button, connect with a trained specialist, and ask for information about a legal problem. The specialist then provides visitors with a link to the appropriate information or escorts visitors to relevant resources on the site. If a specialist is unavailable, visitors can choose to leave a message and receive information via e-mail. In situations where legal advice may be needed, the specialist will inform visitors about how they can apply for legal services or contact a lawyer referral service.

The first two LiveHelp initiatives were launched on [MontanaLawHelp.org](http://MontanaLawHelp.org) and [IowaLegalAid.org](http://IowaLegalAid.org) in 2006, with pilot funding from the Legal Services Corporation's Technology Initiative Grant program. With replication support from Pro Bono Net, LiveHelp has been replicated in six other states as well as Ontario, Canada.

A wide variety of persons staff LiveHelp projects—AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers, law students, paralegals, interns, attorneys, and staff members. In fall 2008, LiveHelp was implemented on [TexasLawHelp.org](http://TexasLawHelp.org) as a rapid-response tool in the aftermath of Hurricane Ike. More than forty law firm attorneys, who were recruited by the Houston Volunteer Lawyers Program, volunteered to staff LiveHelp and respond to urgent questions about FEMA appeals and other disaster-related issues.

LiveHelp offers an innovative avenue for pro bono work by corporations or law firms. Typically individuals staff LiveHelp for one to two shifts a week and can be engaged in non-LiveHelp work during the course of their shifts. LiveHelp specialists can be located anywhere and provide LiveHelp assistance at times convenient to them. The system also can route queries to attorneys based on substantive area, language proficiency, location, or other criteria. For example, in early 2010, [LawHelp.org/NY](http://LawHelp.org/NY) will launch bilingual English and Spanish LiveHelp assistance with the help of statewide volunteers.

To date, LiveHelp has assisted more than 5,000 persons in need. An evaluation of the LiveHelp pilot initiatives found that LiveHelp significantly increases the extent to which visitors are able to find the information and the speed with which they are able to find such information. LiveHelp can increase users' understanding of their legal problems and of what needs to be done to solve them.

In addition to LiveHelp, Pro Bono Net offers a range of other tools for attorneys interested in doing pro bono work. To find volunteer opportunities in your area and resources to support you, visit [www.probono.net](http://www.probono.net).

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