

By James Holmes

The Technological Revolution for Legal Services Organizations May Change Your Practice

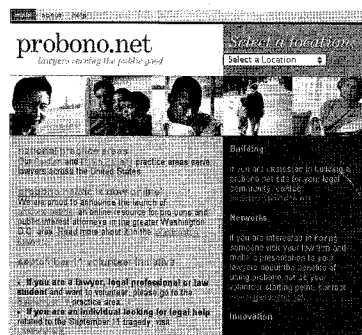
Many believe that a technological revolution for how we provide legal services suffered a great setback with the end of the "dot com" era and the go-go days of the late '90s. Actually, such a revolution is in full swing for Legal Services Organizations (LSOs), which provide free legal services to lower-income individuals. In fact, LSOs are rapidly creating rich technologies that soon may improve how all attorneys practice law. Many private practitioners stand to benefit from the fact that no one has told LSOs that the technological revolution has ended — in fact, they're still partying like it's 1999.

LSO Technology Projects are Well-Funded

The leading LSOs in each state receive a large part of their operating budget from the Legal Services Corporation (LSC), a private non-profit corporation based in Washington, D.C. See www.lsc.gov. LSOs with LSC funding collectively handle about one million clients per year; however, LSC estimates that total client demand for LSO services approaches 5 million clients per year. With existing staff and resources, LSOs must turn away millions of potential clients. Consequently, LSC has encouraged LSOs to utilize technology to handle more clients. As part of its "Technology Initiative," LSC awarded \$4.25 million in 2000 to 32 separate LSO-operated "technology projects," and \$7 million in 2001 to 55 separate projects, which are underway in 45 states and territories. The projects are using LSC funds for computers, telecommunications and video-conferencing equipment, networking hardware and software, and Internet equipment and connections. The projects also are developing websites and Internet-based software applications, utilizing teleconferencing and video-conferencing

technology, integrating comprehensive case-management systems into LSO practice, and creating self-help kiosks for clients. To further the Technology Initiative, LSC will award another \$4.4 million in 2002.

A healthy amount of competition exists among LSOs seeking LSC technol-



probono.net

ogy funding because LSC awards funding to the most innovative projects with the greatest potential to reach many clients. This competition drives an LSO to adopt or develop novel technologies that set it apart from the rest. Despite the competition, LSOs share resources and

know-how when appropriate. See, e.g., www.lstech.org and <http://ntap.lstech.org>. In fact, a collegial community of attorneys and technology consultants is arising among the key players in the various technology projects. This community is likely to share ideas and collaborate on technology projects in the future.

LSOs receive additional funding for technology projects from non-LSC sources such as IOLTA grants, state bar funding, and private donors. Coupled with LSC funding, these sources annually provide many LSOs with hundreds of thousands of dollars for technology projects.

A Sampler of Projects

Technology projects are steadily creating valuable technologies for LSO attorneys, volunteer attorneys, and clients. For instance, Pro Bono Net (www.probono.net), a New York-based legal services cooperative, has developed **LawHelp.org** — a powerful website template that many technology projects are adopting. The LawHelp.org template allows LSOs to build state-specific websites that provide legal education and referral information for LSO clients and the advocates who represent them. The template organizes LSOs and social services providers within a given state/region, matches clients with appropriate LSOs or social services providers, educates clients about courts, instructs clients on representing themselves *pro se*, and provides a framework within which individual states can display online legal content, organized by legal topic and relevant geographic area. See, e.g., www.lawhelp.org/ny/. Other states are opting for an "open source code" template

developed by Kaivo, a Colorado-based software consulting and development firm. The Kaivo template provides many of the same functions as LawHelp.org. See, e.g., www.helpmelaw.org.

Many LSO technology projects are

[.icandocs.org](http://www.icandocs.org)) that uses video clips and touch-screen controls to walk a client through creating a court filing. The software then instructs the client on how to use that filing and represent him or herself *pro se*. The LegalMeetings Project (www.legalmeetings.org), which is coordinated by Joyce Alexander of Lone Star Legal Aid in Houston, is a “virtual conference center for legal aid programs.” This site allows LSO attorneys and staff to schedule and conduct on-line conferencing using WebEx technology (www.webex.com).

LSO technology projects are bringing valuable legal content to the Internet. Many are publishing existing LSO research memos, essays, manuals, and forms as a component of LSO websites. See, e.g., www.lsn.org/nav/ho.asp. This legal content, which formally existed only in the desk drawers of LSO practitioners, is a tremendous informational resource for practitioners who represent individuals. Other projects are creating new legal content for online use by LSO attorneys, volunteer attorneys, and clients. See, e.g., www.ptla.org/cliented.htm, www.illinoisprobono.org, and www.nwjustice.org. And, the LawHelp.org and Kaivo templates will encourage LSOs in many states to develop and refine more online legal content, as they enhance their statewide websites.

Many technology projects are implementing and experimenting with cutting-edge case management systems. Leading system developers are moving their core technologies away from desktop/LAN environments and toward Internet database environments. See, e.g., www.kempcaseworks.com; www.wnylce.net/web/home/software.htm; www.reallegal.com. LSO practice will test — and improve — the new Internet-based case management systems under exacting

conditions involving thousands of clients and demanding amounts of client data.

Texas-Specific Technology Projects

LSC-funded projects in Texas are actively creating valuable technologies. First and foremost is the statewide website, which is under development and will eventually appear at www.texaslawhelp.org. The Texas Legal Services Center (LSCenter), Legal Services of North Texas (LSNT), and Texas Access to Justice Commission are pooling their staff and LSC funds to create this website on Pro Bono Net’s LawHelp.org template. Neish Carroll of LSCenter is serving as the Project Coordinator, with Jonathan Vickery of LSNT overseeing development. Texas’s LawHelp.org website will answer client FAQs, match clients with LSOs and social services providers, educate clients and advocates with specific legal content, facilitate *pro se* representation, and provide the other LawHelp.org features discussed above. Currently, several Texas attorneys are



LawHelp.org

working together to define common standards for “document assembly systems,” which allow LSO staff or clients to create various legal documents (e.g., wills, divorce petitions, and repair requests to landlords). These projects’ efforts are enhancing document-assembly technology beyond current desktop limitations. The resulting document-assembly systems will have robust and easily-modified core technologies, user-friendly interfaces, and capabilities to operate on a LAN or on the Internet. The systems eventually will include a plentiful inventory of legal documents/forms that are state-law specific. These projects are working with developers like Rapidocs (www.rapidocs.com), GhostFill (www.ghostfill.com), Grantha (www.ssquaretech.com), and HotDocs (www.hotdocs.com) in order to develop new standards for Internet-based systems.

Several projects are developing video and conferencing technology. The Legal Aid Society of Orange County, Calif. has developed kiosk-based software (

LegalMeetings.org

volunteering significant time to supply legal content for this website. Such content will cover family, housing, elder, consumer, public benefits, and estate planning law, along with other areas.

Several non-LSC sources are also

actively contributing to technology projects in Texas. The Beaumont Foundation, under the direction of former State Bar President Frank Newton, is administering millions of dollars to supply lower-income community centers, churches and schools in Texas and other states with computers and Internet connections. The Texas Bar Foundation (TBF) and the Texas Equal Access to Justice Foundation (TEAJF) annually administer grants programs that over the past few years have provided substantial amounts of money for technology-related equipment purchases by various Texas LSOs. These groups' efforts, along with LSC funding, will ensure that lower-income people have the necessary computers, networks, and Internet access necessary to use the emerging technologies. TBF and TEAJF have also funded software purchases, Internet projects, and technology-related salaries for many Texas LSOs.

LSO Technologies May Benefit Private Practitioners

The development of technology standards and tools by LSO-operated technology projects could directly benefit any private practitioner who represents individuals. The projects are actively creating technologies that help lawyers provide better, more efficient services. And, by serving thousands of people per year with these technologies, the projects are developing invaluable practical experience; testing — and then rejecting or adopting — experimental technologies; further enhancing the technologies in use; and fostering a community of attorneys, consultants, and programmers around the country who are committed to improving — with technology — how we provide legal services. Initially, these technologies will assist LSOs and volunteer attorneys to provide the best legal services to lower-income communities

— which is reason enough to fund and develop the technologies. Nonetheless, the overwhelming benefits spilling over from the technology projects in many ways can improve the practice of law for all attorneys.



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