

Legal Services Corporation Technology Initiative Grants (TIG)

Sample Letter of Intent for TIG

Category: Innovations and Improvements

Amount Requested: \$ 100000

Are you also requesting funding for this project through LSC's Pro Bono Innovation Fund program? **No** Are you applying for a Pro Bono Innovation Fund that complements this grant? **No**

Description of Project - *Briefly describe the basic elements of the system(s), how they will be developed, how they will operate, the function they will serve within the legal services delivery system, their expected impact, and similar factors. (The impact should only be highlighted here; more details about the system's benefits should be provided below.)*

The "Legal Case Navigator" is a mobile-friendly web-app that will allow a user the ability to access and navigate the court process for his or her legal case, anytime and anywhere. The portal will be designed in a secure, easy, and convenient way that will enhance a user's interaction with the court system and provide information and resources to make better-informed decisions about their legal rights.

Legal Aid Organization (LAO) will work with a developer who will program and develop a portal that will wrap around a hybrid app. The target users fall into two categories, the legal aid client and the pro se litigant. The features within the app will allow the user (legal aid client or pro se litigant) to better pilot their own legal case.

LAO will pilot the app in partnership with State's busiest jurisdiction, the Central County Courts, in particular the Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court (J&DR) and the General District Court (GDC). The ultimate goal will be to allow pro se litigants to have access to court dates, court documents and court information in reference to their case, within the limitations of the court's infrastructure and privacy policies.

The "Legal Case Navigator" app will be designed in a unique way with features that will be specific to the end-user. Some of the features that will be built into the system include:

1. Calendar feature will monitor court dates, hearings or important deadlines (such as discovery and subpoenas); The Calendar feature would: (a) link to information about the type of court date or deadline and what to expect; (b) push reminders of upcoming dates and times, with suggestions about parking and security;
2. Interactive map of the Central County Courthouse complex
3. Link to pro se form pleadings and resources
4. Video library and links(e.g. "Getting ready for court," "What can I expect at my hearing?" other know-your-rights topics
5. Information and links on how to apply for legal aid or the lawyer referral service
6. Local Resources

Although most of the features in the "Legal Case Navigator" will be available to both the legal aid client and the pro se litigant, the system will include a component exclusive to our legal aid clients. These features will include information on upcoming office appointments, contact information for the client's assigned attorney, and a correspondence feature that will allow the client to text the attorney, who will receive it via email.

Major Benefits - *Describe the specific ways in which the system(s) will increase or improve services to clients and/or enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of program operations. To the extent feasible, discuss both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of these benefits.*

Navigating the legal system can be daunting and confusing. This is especially true for pro se litigants who are often inexperienced in dealing with the courts. Judges are frustrated every day by litigants who miss hearings or arrive late because they mixed up dates and times or failed to allow the extra 15-30 minutes to park, walk up the hill, and go through security. Pro se litigants are prevented from introducing evidence in their cases because they fail to subpoena witnesses in time or do not understand discovery. We believe that the “Legal Case Navigator” will be of great value to legal aid clients and pro se litigants as it will guide and navigate them through the process of their legal cases.

We have spoken with clerks and administrative staff of both the J&DR and GDC of Central County and they are interested in working with us on this project, especially because they often deal with pro se litigants who are confused and unaware of how to navigate the complexities of the court system.

Research has shown that 90% of American adults have a cell phone, and 58% of American adults have a smartphone (Pew Research Center – January 2014). Our project can reach a greater number of users that are now accessing their cell phones as their one source of getting readily available information and services. As a web-app, the system will transfer seamlessly from the user’s cellphone to, for example, the full desktop computer at the law library, where they can prepare and print pleadings and documents. This new and innovative project will be another tool for users to access their legal case, anytime-anywhere. The intended project will also improve communications between the court and the pro se litigants with reminders, guides and interactions.

Estimated Costs - *Start by stating the amount of funding you are seeking from the TIG program, and then give the estimated total project cost, summarizing the anticipated costs of the major components of the project. List anticipated contributions, both in-kind and monetary, of all partners involved in the project.*

We are requesting \$100,000 for our project. The estimated total cost of the project is \$165,000. The estimated costs associated with the project:

Application Development - \$70,000
Content Development - \$30,000
Usability Testing and Refinement - \$20,000
Outreach and Marketing - \$15,000
Training \$15,000
Evaluation \$10,000
National Promotion & Sharing via GitHub \$5,000

The Central County social innovation fund will provide a \$15,000 matching grant to fund develop of the mobile app. We also estimate \$25,000 of in-kind contributions from the Central County courts. LAO and other provider partners will also provide \$25,000 of in-kind contributions.

Major Partners - *Identify organizations that are expected to be important partners. Specify the role(s) each partner will play.*

The major partners for this project are Legal Aid Organization, and Central County Courts - Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court and the General District Court. We will also work with the Circuit Court of Central County and the law librarians in our efforts to reach a greater number of pro se litigants. LAO will coordinate with the Central County Courts a plan that will allow pro se litigants to have access to court dates or court documents in reference to their case to the extent permissible under existing privacy policies. Currently the Central County Courthouse allows cell phones, tablets, and other portable electronic devices inside the Courthouse. LAO would also work with the Central County Courts in establishing a framework and protocols regarding accessibility of a client's case information and security. As previously mentioned, in planning the concept of this project we have spoken with the Director of Court Services for the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court. The Director expressed interest and enthusiasm in the project. In addition, court directors and clerks frequently see the challenges that many pro se litigants face in dealing with a complex legal system and therefore they were very much supportive of LAO's efforts to create an app that would serve as a personal case navigator.

Innovation/Replication - *Identify how and why the proposed project is new and innovative. Identify how and why the proposed project can significantly benefit and/or be replicated by other legal services providers and/or the community at large.*

The proposed project "The Legal Case Navigator" is new, as we are not aware of other personal case navigators that guide the legal aid client or pro se litigant through their legal case. The project is innovative, yet can easily be replicated by others legal services programs because the issue of self-represented litigants and legal aid clients needing legal information and assistance in navigating the court system is not unique to LAO or to this state; it is a problem that is commonly found in every state.