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What Is a Legal Assistance Portal?

Pew framework can help policymakers and the public recognize these tools and understand how they work

Overview

When people turn to the internet to find legal help, they can quickly become overwhelmed by the amount of information available, and by uncertainty about which sources are reliable. To make it easier for users to access timely, relevant, and accurate guidance, legal services organizations and court self-help centers in some states have launched legal assistance portals.

Earlier this year, The Pew Charitable Trusts released a fact sheet describing the promise of legal assistance portals.¹ These portals, which are part of a rapidly evolving landscape of online legal resources, have so far lacked a unified way of describing what they are and how they function. To address this gap, Pew examined the available research on portals and consulted legal and technology leaders about the various types of portals and how they operate.

With that information, Pew created a framework that describes the four essential elements a portal should provide to help users navigate a legal issue and take informed action. They should enable users to **ask** questions about a legal issue, interactively **refine** their requests, **learn** about their options, and **connect** with relevant resources—such as legal aid and social services organizations or court websites—that can help.

The four essential elements of online legal portals

1. **Ask.** Provide keyword search, natural language processing—i.e., technology that allows plain-language questions²—or similar functionality that lets users interact with the tool by asking about their legal problem or selecting an appropriate option from a list of issues. For example, a person looking for information about a housing issue would begin an inquiry on the Illinois Legal Aid Online (ILAO) portal by typing “housing” in the keyword search. ILAO would then generate a list of content that is relevant to the user’s problem.
2. **Refine.** Initiate guided interviews or a series of questions that prompt the user with refining questions to clarify the issue and generate more tailored responses. For example, the Minnesota LawHelpMN portal would present a user who asked about divorce with a series of questions—such as “Do you have children in the marriage?”—to generate responses that target the user’s specific needs and legal issues.
3. **Learn.** Deliver relevant legal information through multiple formats, such as text and video, that help users understand more about their legal issues. The Michigan Legal Help portal, for example, directs users seeking information on home foreclosure to a foreclosure prevention toolkit that includes self-help videos and links to relevant court forms, a checklist of property tax credits, and other materials.
4. **Connect.** Make referrals to legal and social services so users can contact organizations or access other resources that can help them with their legal issues. The Massachusetts Legal Resource Finder, for instance, connects eligible users to their local legal aid office. And because legal issues often occur in conjunction with other problems, some portals offer even more opportunities for support. The Ohio Legal Help portal, for example, connects users to health and social services, such as local food banks.

Under Pew’s framework, portals must be usable by members of the public without requiring disclosure of personally identifiable information. To that end, a portal must incorporate structural and design features—such as mobile responsiveness, data privacy, and accessibility—to ensure access for all users across a variety of electronic devices. For example, the Connecticut Legal Help Finder employs responsive design to adjust to the size of any device’s screen, and the Minnesota LawHelpMN portal adheres to multiple accessibility standards, including optimization for screen-reading software and high color contrast.

Pew focused its analysis on 15 publicly available, statewide, multi-issue portals, meaning they allow users to obtain information and resources on various civil legal issues in one online location. The framework was then used to examine each portal, and eight met the criteria:

- CTLawHelp (Connecticut), <https://ctlawhelp.org/en/legal-help>
- Illinois Legal Aid Online, www.illinoislegalaid.org
- Pine Tree Legal Assistance (Maine), http://ptla.org/triage/me_triage
- Massachusetts Legal Resource Finder (Massachusetts), <https://www.masslegalservices.org/FindLegalAid>
- Michigan Legal Help, <https://michiganlegalhelp.org/guide-to-legal-help>
- LawHelpMN (Minnesota), <https://www.lawhelpmn.org/lawhelpmn-guide>
- Ohio Legal Help, <https://www.ohiolegalhelp.org/>
- Legal Help Tool (Vermont), https://vtlawhelp.org/triage/vt_triage

Endnotes

- 1 The Pew Charitable Trusts, “Interactive Online Portals Offer Targeted Legal Resources on Demand,” accessed Sept. 23, 2019, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2019/01/interactive-online-portals-offer-targeted-legal-resources-on-demand>.
- 2 The Pew Charitable Trusts, “How Artificial Intelligence Could Improve Access to Legal Information,” accessed Sept. 23, 2019, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2019/01/24/how-artificial-intelligence-could-improve-access-to-legal-information>.

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