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Interactive Online Portals Offer Targeted Legal Resources on Demand

Next-generation technology can provide information, support

Overview

For Americans with legal questions, finding answers can be difficult without professional help. Some courts and nonprofit organizations offer materials to help people navigating the civil legal system without a lawyer, but the barriers to finding, understanding, and using that information are high.¹ The burden is especially heavy for low-income individuals, who are more likely to experience civil legal problems—such as domestic violence, divorce, wage theft, landlord-tenant disputes, and consumer debt—that affect their home, family, or livelihood.²

One promising innovation that can help people facing legal problems and proceedings on their own is the development of legal information and assistance portals.³ These internet-based resources can transform the way litigants interact with the civil legal system by providing immediate and accurate answers and support.

Technology already has eased the burden of other complicated processes—such as filing tax returns and managing finances⁴—and evidence suggests that the legal field can leverage tools from the financial and health sectors to improve the accessibility and affordability of legal services.

What is a portal?

A portal is an online gateway to legal resources tailored to each user's needs. Unlike a static website, a portal uses an interactive approach to guide users through an assessment of their legal needs and connect them to relevant information and referrals for assistance and support. To be effective, a portal must include three key elements:

- **Technology.** A simple user interface that people can navigate on their own.⁵
- **Content.** Relevant, actionable information to help users research and resolve their situations.
- **Connection.** Referrals to appropriate service providers.

Some states and organizations have launched or begun developing their own legal information and assistance portals that include these elements.

What do next-generation portals look like?

Portals continue to evolve, and more states and organizations are starting to develop promising technologies, such as:

- **Natural language processing.** Allows people to ask a question in their own words without legal jargon and be led to the appropriate information. For example, the sentence, "My landlord is kicking me out of my house" would be identified as an eviction issue.
- **Triage.** Automated interactions to help users determine the level of assistance they need.⁶
- **Automated communication.** Uses recognized data standards to support effective communication across systems, enabling users to be matched with relevant resources, such as legal aid intake, court case records, social service providers, and local homeless shelters. Automation also enables the development of new features, including the ability to share (with permission) a user's information with providers to improve the efficiency of service referrals.
- **Machine learning.** Analyzes each search to continuously improve the user experience.

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How is success measured?

Portals are only as useful as the resources and information they can connect to. Although this technology alone cannot close the gap in access to legal support, it can help streamline connections between people and resources if implemented appropriately. In addition, portals generate data that can be used to monitor the value a system delivers for users and help legal providers and policymakers make evidence-based decisions about resource allocation, updates, and service options. Key indicators for monitoring include:

- Frequency of searches for specific types of resources.
- Percentage and frequency of searches for which appropriate resources are not available (or some measure of unmet need).
- Intake rates—admissions and rejections—for individuals referred to service providers.
- Case filings and other use of legal tools, such as payment demand letters and consumer complaints.
- Social and legal outcomes for people who use the portal.

In the near term, portals are likely to help reduce the time that legal providers lose in receiving and rejecting ineligible referrals and increase their capacity to deliver services to eligible applicants. Portals will also help ensure that users receive the most current and accurate information, because they pull directly from existing sites rather than manually duplicating content from those primary sources.

In the longer term, successful portal adoption and implementation should lead to more effective resource allocation and an increased opportunity for litigants to exercise their legal rights. Data about the kinds of searches people conduct and the frequency with which search results fail to yield the necessary information and support will allow policymakers to more effectively target resources to areas of need and to monitor the impact of those allocations.

For example, a high number of searches related to eviction might indicate that people in the community need more resources to help them navigate their cases, but it could also reveal a growing demand for housing. In the latter case, that finding could in turn inform policymakers' efforts to address the residents' housing needs. Similarly, more accessible and specific information could help people better understand their legal rights and options and help them leverage the laws and precedents that support and protect those rights.

Endnotes

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- 3 Thomas M. Clarke, Richard Zorza, and Katherine Alteneider, "Triage Protocols for Litigant Portals: A Coordinated Strategy Between Courts and Service Providers" (2013), State Justice Institute and National Center for State Courts, <https://ncsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/ctadmin/id/2045>.
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- 5 Thomas M. Clarke, "Building a Litigant Portal: Business and Technical Requirements," National Center for State Courts and State Justice Institute (2015), <https://www.srln.org/system/files/attachments/Report%20Building%20a%20Litigant%20Portal%20%28Clarke%202015%29.pdf>.
- 6 Richard Zorza, "The Access to Justice 'Sorting Hat': Towards a System of Triage and Intake That Maximizes Access and Outcomes," *Denver University Law Review* 89, no. 4 (2011): 859-86, <https://www.srln.org/node/183/article-access-justice-%E2%80%9Csorting-hat%E2%80%9D-towards-system-triage-and-intake-maximizes-access-and>; Conference of Chief Justices and Conference of State Court Administrators, "Reaffirming the Commitment to Meaningful Access to Justice for All" (2015), https://www.ncsc.org/-/media/Microsites/Files/access/5%20Meaningful%20Access%20to%20Justice%20for%20All_final.ashx.

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