

## Proposal for Texas Law Help Computer Terminal

### History and Summary of Project:

In January of 2009, Lone Star Legal Aid and Texas Legal Services Center (as the sub-grantee) received grant 08469 from the Legal Services Corporation Technology Initiative Grant (TIG) Program to build a searchable online guide to the Texas Civil Courts System. Texas Legal Services Center (TLSC) would manage the grant and work with the Office of Court Administration to collect the necessary information. Pro Bono Net, which is a national non-profit that assists legal aid organizations with technology projects, was identified as the designer for the guide. Upon completion, the searchable guide would be made available to the public on the TexasLawHelp.org website, also managed by TLSC.

In addition to creating the online guide, the grant outlined the establishment of a single computer terminal that would be made available to the public exclusively for the use of Texas Law Help. There are several questions the computer terminal project hopes to answer:

1. If a public computer station is made available exclusively for the use of legal information and self-help materials, will the public use it?
2. How easily do people find the materials to use? How much assistance do they need from a trained assistant?
3. Specifically, are people using the Court Guide, and if so, for what types of cases?
4. How easy is it for the host site to manage the computer terminal?
5. Is this something that could be, and should be replicated in other locations?

However, the grant did not have a location for the computer terminal. TLSC had to identify a location where the terminal would be most accessible but, also wanted to place it somewhere that did not already have something similar. Not long after receiving the TIG grant, Hidalgo County was identified as a potential partner.

### Why Hidalgo?

The Hidalgo County Bar Association (HCBA) is located in an idyllic spot. The offices are within walking distance of the Hidalgo County courthouse, Law Library, Hidalgo County Court Administrative Offices and the Thirteenth Court of Appeals as well as the offices of Rio Grande Legal Aid. This location makes the HCBA offices the ideal location for the computer terminal because it is easily accessible to people who are seeking immediate assistance and information.

Hidalgo County also does not currently have anything similar to the computer terminal model. There are public access points at libraries and monthly legal clinics, but there is currently no designated space for people to seek legal information and materials to represent themselves. By participating in a

program that would be the first of its kind in the area, the HCBA could also stand to gain a great deal from this project.

### **Self-Represented Litigants- Legal Information, Not Legal Advice**

An important distinction to make about Texas Law Help, the Court Guide and the proposed computer terminal is that it is an informational resource only. None of these resources, or the staff that support them, seek to provide legal advice to clients. All resources are labeled as such and users are encouraged to seek the counsel of an attorney if they have any questions or concerns. However, by making informational resources comprehensive and easy to understand self-represented litigants will be better prepared to go to court. This improved preparedness will reduce the amount of court staff time that self-represented litigants currently command.

### **Benefits to the Bar and Local Legal Community**

**Outreach and improved community relations:** It comes as no surprise that many people are skeptical of the legal system and lawyers in particular. However, feedback from self-help centers across the country show that people view the courts and lawyers in a more favorable light if they are first given the opportunity and tools to tackle a case on their own. Once people have done some research, and work of their own, they often have a new respect for the complexity of a lawyer's job. Hosting the computer terminal would be a wonderful way to provide a community service and improve community relations.

**Potential for new clients:** As noted above, many people come to realize that their cases and the work needed for the best outcome, is much more complicated than they anticipated. It is at this point that many people will begin seeking the advice of an attorney. One lawyer referral service in California received so many referrals from self help centers that they stopped advertising. Although Hidalgo County does not currently have a local lawyer referral service, the clients of the computer terminal may be a good testing ground for the potential number of clients a local service could bring in.

On that note: a self-help computer terminal will not take away business from local attorneys. Many lawyers and legal communities are understandably skeptical about any form of pro se assistance. Many people fear it will take away business or make their jobs irrelevant. Time again this has been shown to not be the case. Those people that can truly afford an attorney will continue to seek legal counsel. Self-help materials are designed for people who truly cannot afford the full services of an attorney and who may not qualify for legal aid. The advantage to providing these people with some thoughtful information and guidance is that if they proceed to represent themselves they will be better prepared and present less of a challenge to the court system. And again, there are many of these people who will come to realize that this is beyond their capabilities and they need the assistance of an attorney. Additionally, seeking formal legal advice is encouraged at every stage.

**Preventing the unlicensed practice of law:** Sadly, there are many people who seek to take advantage and exploit people's lack of knowledge about the law or their rights. In Texas and particularly along the border, there are the infamous 'notarios' who offer to fill out and file paperwork for people at exorbitant prices. By providing a safe place for people to get legal information for free, there is a hope that it will deter people from going to 'notarios' and other unlicensed businesses.

**Unique project:** This truly is a unique opportunity for the HCBA. As mentioned, there is currently no other project like this in Hidalgo County. It is an opportunity for the Hidalgo County Bar Association to pioneer new services in the area. By hosting the terminal, the HCBA will be furthering access to justice for all Texans.

**Minimal time commitment:** The computer station will be provided and maintained by Texas Legal Services Center. It will be set up so that patrons are only able to use Texas Law Help and any corresponding links and resources. There will be minimal maintenance required once it is installed. TLSC will also train anyone who may be available to answer questions about using the computer terminal. Most people are able to use Texas Law Help with little or no assistance.

## **Conclusion**

As members of the legal community we know that there are thousands of Texans every year who suffer for lack of representation and knowledge about their legal rights. Many of these people will try to go it alone with little information or resources resulting in further congestion in our courts. This problem has been recognized and there is a momentum building to create a better infrastructure to improve access to justice across the state.

The Texas Law Help computer terminal project will be an important testing ground for how to best reach self-represented litigants. The Hidalgo County Bar Association has a unique opportunity to help pioneer this movement. As more counties seek to implement their own projects they will look to Hidalgo for lessons learned, making the legal community there a valued statewide resource. The feedback provided from this project will also be an invaluable resource to the future development of Texas Law Help.

This is a wonderful opportunity to build a strong partnership that will help inform how we, as a community, address issues of access to justice in our state.