How Legal Aid and Tech Collaboration Can Bridge the Justice Gap

"Technology, when thoughtfully developed and implemented, has the potential to expand access to legal services significantly," write Kelli Raker and Maya Markovich.

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The legal aid sector is no exception in an era where technology is reshaping every aspect of our lives. As organizations dedicated to providing free legal services to those in need grapple with limited resources and overwhelming demand, many explore technology as a potential solution. But how exactly can tech help bridge the justice gap, and what challenges do legal aid organizations face in working with these new solutions?

In August 2024, Legal Aid of North Carolina's (LANC) Innovation Lab, the first organization with a mission to identify and implement creative solutions, including technology solutions, to bridge the justice gap, convened a series of listening sessions with legal aid organizations across 13 states. The goal, as stated by LANC's chief innovation officer, Scheree Gilchrist, was to "understand the opportunities and roadblocks around adoption

of tech tools and collaboration with entities eager to provide support for access to justice and to use those findings to create a process by which legal aid organizations can carefully vet tech partners." Their findings illuminate eagerness for change but caution about the promise of technology.

The Current Landscape

Legal aid organizations across the United States face a daunting reality. As one listening session participant noted, "There's almost no chance we will ever be fully funded to serve everyone who needs it," underscoring the critical need for innovative solutions to expand access to justice. Anywhere from 50% to 90% of those seeking help from legal aid are turned away for lack of capacity, income disqualification, unsupported matter types, or other reasons. LANC itself is only able to help 20% of requests for assistance.

The Promise of Technology

Several success stories emerged from the listening sessions, highlighting the potential of technology to streamline internal processes at legal services organizations:

1. **Document preparation tools**: Some organizations have developed custom tools that dramatically reduce the time legal aid attorneys spend on paperwork, cutting tasks from two hours to just 15 minutes.

2. **Chatbots**: In Nebraska and North Carolina, chatbots are helping clients identify their legal issues, create forms, and navigate self-help resources.

3. **AI and web scraping**: A few forward-thinking organizations are experimenting with AI tools like Microsoft's Copilot for internal use. Others use web scraping to proactively offer services to people with upcoming court dates, particularly in eviction cases.
These examples demonstrate the potential for technology to make legal aid organizations more efficient in the services they already provide and increase their capacity to serve those seeking free legal representation.

Challenges and Concerns

Despite the potential benefits, legal aid organizations face several hurdles in working with new technologies:

1. **Funding and incentives**: Most funding for legal aid is tied to direct legal representation, leaving little room for investment in general case management or exploration of innovative service delivery methods to exponentially scale impact.

2. **Jurisdictional inconsistency**: The lack of a unified court system or standardized forms across regions makes it challenging to develop accurate and widely applicable tech solutions in certain types of matters.

3. **Organizational capacity**: Many legal aid organizations lack the time and resources to thoroughly evaluate new tech offerings or collaboration opportunities or identify internal workflows and areas of unmet need with the highest chance for impact.

4. **Data privacy and security**: Legal aid providers need assurance that tech protects client data and avoids misuse of sensitive information.

5. **Ethical considerations**: There's significant concern about the accuracy of information produced by consumer-facing technology and the potential for inadvertent unauthorized practice of law.

Key Considerations for Tech Collaboration

For legal aid organizations considering technology partnerships, several factors emerge as crucial:

1. **Mission alignment**: Does the tech provider share a commitment to access to justice? Do they understand the unique challenges and funding structures of legal aid?

2. **Experience and reputation**: Has the provider worked successfully with other legal aid organizations? Are they stable and well-established?

3. **Customization and integration**: Can the product be tailored to the specific needs of legal aid and integrated with existing systems?

4. **Vetting and approval**: Has the product been vetted by respected entities like the Legal Services Corporation or state bar associations?

5. **Long-term sustainability**: Who will use and maintain the technology long-term, and does the organization have the necessary expertise?

6. **Data security**: What measures are in place to protect sensitive client information?

The Role of Justice Tech

Understanding these concerns is crucial for technology companies looking to serve the legal aid sector. The most successful partnerships are likely to be those where tech providers:

1. Demonstrate a deep understanding of legal aid's unique workflows, challenges, and constraints, and share a commitment to access to justice.

2. Offer solutions that are easy to use and integrate and require minimal setup time.

3. Prioritize client data privacy and security.

4. Provide clear information about jurisdictional coverage and limitations.

5. Are open to pilot programs with flexible contracts.

Legal aid and pro bono are doing incredible work, but are under-resourced and overwhelmed. Even with all the technology in the world to streamline internal processes, they will not be able to close the justice gap: at least 75% of all civil cases in U.S. state courts involve at least one unrepresented party, and over 120 million people per year are left to navigate the system alone. As a result, there is no single solution to the access to justice crisis—technology can and should be part of the solution.

Many legal aid organizations express a preference for working with nonprofit tech partners, assuming their nonprofit status signals that they are more aligned with their mission and values. However, a new sector is rapidly emerging: mission-driven for-profit or public benefit corporation justice tech companies are forging a new path to access to justice for those who legal aid cannot support, empowering the public to navigate the justice system on their own on a more level playing field. They serve not only traditionally underserved communities, but a much larger group. One-hundred million working Americans—half the U.S. population—do not qualify for legal aid, yet struggle to access legal services, and justice tech delivers an affordable alternative to traditional legal services. Working hand in

hand, legal aid organizations and justice tech companies can help a much broader swath of those who need help than would otherwise be possible.

A New Resource

With the proliferation of solutions targeting the access to justice sector, legal aid organizations have been overwhelmed with options and little time to sift through inbound inquiries for collaboration, pilots, or sales engagements. LANC's Innovation Lab identified this challenge as it has been inundated with requests for consideration from prospective partners, tech providers, and entrepreneurs.

The Lab worked with its justice tech subcommittee and advisors to create The National Justice Tech Intake Form to streamline and standardize the evaluation process. Launched in August 2024, the form enables mission-aligned tech companies with innovative access to justice solutions to share their ideas for consideration by the Innovation Lab. Incorporating essential requirements gleaned from the listening sessions, the form collects project details along with prior experience with legal aid organizations, and confirms whether the proposed solution promotes equal justice, especially for marginalized communities.

The form has significantly decreased the staff time needed to evaluate and compare tech innovation proposals. It is also a unique data source for the justice tech landscape and activity trends that will grow as it is used. Another unexpected benefit of the form is that it represents the first time a thoughtful and informed list of parameters for collaboration with legal aid has been created, and impact-focused innovators have already used it as a checklist of sorts in their solution development.

Looking Ahead

As the justice gap widens, the need for innovative solutions becomes ever more pressing. Technology, when thoughtfully developed and implemented, has the potential to expand access to legal services significantly. However, tech alone cannot create justice equity.

Continued collaboration between legal aid organizations and technology providers will be crucial as we move forward. By working together, we can develop solutions that truly serve

the needs of those seeking justice whether through legal representation or those representing themselves, ultimately moving closer to the ideal of equal access to legal representation for all.

One participant in the listening sessions noted that our goal is not just to serve more people but to "serve people better." The journey to close the justice gap through technology is just beginning, and while challenges remain, the potential for positive impact is immense.

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