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Internship Report

This past summer I was fortunate enough to be an unpaid intern at Illinois Legal Aid Online thanks to funding from the Political Science department. Below is a brief report on my organization and how it has enhanced my understanding of law and legal aid.

Illinois Legal Aid Online (ILAO) is an online unbiased website that works to simplify a complex legal system. ILAO was created in 2001 through generous amounts of funding from The Chicago Bar Foundation, The Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois, and IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law. As the demand for legal aid services continues to grow, ILAO utilizes technology so that everyone has access to justice through efficiently delivering free legal services to the poor while providing pro bono information for their attorneys. Although there are many legal aid organizations, ILAO's use of technology makes its work an unprecedented statewide collaboration between Illinois legal services providers, funding entities, the private bar and law schools. The main problem that ILAO faces is a result of the problem that the legal aid community in general faces. There will always be a demand for free legal services since many people are unable to afford a lawyer, but legal aid organizations are almost always underfunded. Organizations like Legal Assistance Foundation (LAF) and other legal aid organizations can only help a limited number of people due to a lack of funding and resources. The people that are eligible to receive this help must meet certain socioeconomic standards such as being below the federal poverty guidelines, so these people tend to be the working poor or newly arrived immigrants. Therefore, legal aid organizations serve as a safety net for these people in order for them to receive free legal services. ILAO acts as a safety net to this safety net since not everyone can be helped by legal aid services if they have a low priority status or don't meet the economic eligibility standards. Due to this massive demand for legal services, ILAO faces several challenges in trying to leverage technology in its efforts to help people who can't afford a lawyer.

From a funding standpoint, one obstacle that ILAO encounters when attempting to get more funding is that since ILAO serves as an online presence it is difficult to show the impact that ILAO makes. All of the site's users are anonymous and online, so ILAO does not know what its users do with the information and tools provided except for those that give direct feedback on their experience. For example, while ILAO knows exactly how many people visit the site, it is nearly impossible to tell how many people were positively affected by the sites resources. Therefore, when ILAO works to gain more funding from private resources they can only show how many people use their site and not necessarily the impact of the site. When problems in people's lives arise, it is almost never exclusively a legal issue. However, issues such as a broken window or elderly living are not only social issues, but also legal issues and ILAO struggles to help people identify their problem as a legal one. Often when people search for their problem on the web and end up on ILAO they are confused as to why they are on a legal site. In order to help combat this matter, ILAO works to ensure high quality search engine optimization so that people can end up on ILAO's site and get the legal help they need while understanding when the law can and can't help them even if they do not believe their problem to be a legal one.

As a legal aid non-profit, ILAO receives the majority of its funding from the Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois (\$680k) each year since the fund collects interest from every single case in the state and that interest then goes to help fund legal aid organizations. Other considerable sources of renewable revenue come from The Chicago Bar Foundation, the Illinois Bar Foundation, and the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation. New sources of annual revenue include the Major Gifts Initiative, Annual Fund Individual Giving, and many private corporations and law firms. This year ILAO managed a balanced budget and its most costly expense was personnel. Since ILAO gains funds from private law firms, these corporations are also some of ILAO's biggest allies. The legal aid community has a symbiotic relationship with private law firms, for legal aid can not exist without the Bar Association and donations from private corporations, but at the same time these companies and all lawyers have an oath to serve. Outside law firms use legal aid organizations to obtain pro bono cases, and working with legal aid organizations helps create a good image for their company and shows that they care about the community. Some other allies include public libraries since they allow ILAO to supply legal help and information, and social services provide another key ally for ILAO since people never just have a legal problem so often times their issue requires a case manager if other social problems are involved.

Another role that ILAO plays in its efforts to make legal information and resources available to anyone who has access to the Internet, is through being an organizer. I never initially thought of ILAO as an organizer, but recently I have been exposed to all the different aspects of both the legal and non-legal world that ILAO is connected to. ILAO utilizes these valuable connections with the legal aid community and offers a get legal help button on its site. If a user clicks on this button, depending on their legal issue, they will be directed to an appropriate legal aid organizations through an online triage system that can represent them if they do require a lawyer. Once people find the appropriate legal help they need the law does not seem so much a barrier to them, but rather a tool that can be used to ensure justice, for "the organizers job is to build confidence and hope...in the people themselves" (Alinsky, 1989). ILAO not only organizes and connects its users, but it also provides these services to the rest of the legal aid community. ILAO works with lawyers, paralegals, and administrators at legal aid organizations and companies to ensure that they find practice resources and the answers they need to more effectively and efficiently represent clients. Furthermore, ILAO takes advantage of those in the legal community, who may not work at a legal aid organization, but wish to give back to their community through their talents and skills with law. Law students, lawyers, paralegals, and other professionals who wish to do pro bono work can find their perfect volunteer opportunities at ILAO, for ILAO provides the necessary training and practice resources in order for these professionals to be successful in their pro bono work. ILAO's efforts as an organizer can also be seen through its work with the Illinois courts through the creation of self-help centers in every county and interactive versions of standardized court forms. An organizer's role in its community is to get people passionate about an issue so that change comes about, but this change must come from the people, which is why it so important for an organizer to serve rather than help or fix the issue for the people themselves. I believe ILAO's role as an organizer is invaluable, for they are not only able to empower people by connecting them with the proper resources to tackle their

legal issues, but they also enable professionals, who have the ability to, to serve their community as well.

Within the rest of the legal aid field, ILAO also holds a very unique nature of power being the only legal aid organization of its kind in the state (and arguably the best in the country). The fact that ILAO is online as opposed to traditional legal aid organizations that have attorneys working face to face or one on one with clients, allows ILAO to not be grounded by the material barriers that the cyber world can transcend. This technological approach to legal aid is relatively uncharted territory and there are no rules, regulations, or institutions to hold ILAO down, in fact, associations such as the Chicago Bar Foundation and many others want to promote ILAO and its vision of using technology to make justice accessible for everyone. As a non-profit funding will always be an issue, but due to its uniqueness ILAO is able to gain significant funding from sources that otherwise spread their resources thinly throughout other traditional and sometimes even competing legal aid organizations. Additionally, unlike many other legal aid organizations, ILAO does not directly represent clients, so there is never a conflict of interest or a time when they could not serve someone. Although ILAO is certainly a legal aid organization, I see it more as in a field of its own, and while this unexplored field will surely offer hidden challenges, I believe there is also great potential for legal aid to reach new heights and create a community where justice is accessible to all through technology.

The legal community needs an organization like ILAO, and as my interviewee put it, ILAO acts as the safety net to the safety net for legal aid, but I disagree. I see ILAO as more of a portal to other resources, information, and organizations, and somewhere that users should go to first rather than as backup plan regardless of if they believe their issue to be a legal one or not. ILAO still faces many problems today and while legal aid will always be underfunded, I believe that in 10 years from now ILAO will expand beyond an online presence (voice, text), and hopefully it will become more integrated with the court system, for with 102 counties a more centralized system would enable ILAO to offer better services to the people they serve. Nevertheless, if ILAO wants to create positive social change by bridging the gap between the supply and demand for legal aid, I believe it is crucial for ILAO to get better at triaging corporations and others in the legal community in order to make legal aid available for the powerless and the most vulnerable.