

Legal Services National Technology Assistance Project



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Goodbye: Michael Harris

Well, summer is ending, and so is this fellowship. First, I would like to thank the Legal Services Corporation, the Legal Services National Technology Assistance Project, and the Northwest Justice Project for making the Access to Justice Tech Fellows Program possible, informative, and enjoyable.

I learned so much during my time at LSNTAP. To me, this fellowship was all about improving access to justice through creative and technology-driven means, and over the past ten weeks, I believe that I have made at least some small contribution to this effort. I have worked on a wide variety of projects, ranging from contract drafting and plain language writing to creating videos and research copyright law.

Most low-income people will need an attorney at some point in their life, and due to a lack of resources, many will receive little to no assistance. Access to justice must be improved to meet this gap, and one of the ways to accomplish this is to help improve existing legal organization's services.

Many of my projects this summer revolved around that. You may have read my blog post, which discussed how journals (both legal and non-legal) were changing their practices to keep up with modern times, including sharing, commenting, and open-source articles.

Some of my other projects involved writing in plain language. Writing in plain language is important because the language of the law is often a wall that prevents the people they affect from understanding it. One of my earliest projects was to draft a plain-language contract. Contracts are notorious for being full of legalese, but it doesn't have to be this way. Plain language can go a long way in understanding and conveying complex legal ideas to clients. It's not just an issue with people who can afford clients - the average reading level is at a 5th to 8th grade level. I also worked on drafting a "bring your own device" and data destruction policies, also written in plain language because these policies are for non-lawyer trained persons. For a policy to be effective, everyone should be able to understand it, not just the lawyers who draft it.

I also worked on creating a syllabus for a class inspired by my fellowship. Unlike traditional law school courses, this class would focus on learning how to deliver legal services as a legal aid attorney. In this class, students will create deliverables to target specific needs of civil issues, such as making videos and leading a discussion on such topics. The final is not an essay, but rather a larger project to creatively deliver a legal solution (think like a legal hack-a-thon without having to create the final product).

These projects culminated in the project I am proudest of – NJP's Name Change video. For this project, not only did I have to work with technology that would encourage access, but I had to convey the topic so that everyone would be able to understand it.

I first read over the Washington Law Help packet on name changes. After I drafted my script, I visited the local courthouse to observe the name change process itself. Fortunately, the hearing was quick (at least in King County) and each petitioner was done in less than a minute, excluding the time it took for the petitioners to get their paperwork.

Next was the tricky part – recording audio and creating the visuals for the video. While this took the most time, it was relatively simple – I just needed a microphone and some video editing software. After learning the program and some technical issues, I had finally produced a video that I felt could be easily accessible and used. Keep an eye out for my video soon – it just needs final approval!

Over the past two years, I have learned just how much I can assist the people who need help with my legal knowledge. I'm not nearly done with my work in social justice, and I can't wait to see what else I can do.

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