

LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION
JULY 2017

STATEWIDE WEBSITE ASSESSMENT

REPORT FOR THE JUSTICE COMMUNITY

Statewide Website Assessment

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Legal Services Corporation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Legal Services Corporation (LSC) is an independent, non-profit organization established by Congress in 1974 to provide financial support for civil legal aid to low-income Americans. LSC was founded on the shared American ideal of access to justice regardless of one's economic status. LSC is the largest single funder of civil legal services to the poor in the United States. LSC is a grant-making organization, distributing more than 93% of its federal appropriation to eligible, nonprofit organizations delivering civil legal aid. LSC also administers special grant programs supporting innovative practices in the areas of technology and pro bono engagement.

Beginning in 2000, LSC invested in the development of a network of state-specific legal aid websites to serve low-income litigants who are unable to afford an attorney. Statewide websites seek to provide users with a variety of legal tools and resources, including overviews of common poverty law issues and step-by-step guides for individuals representing themselves. They aim to connect users to appropriate legal aid providers, self-help centers, and lawyer referral services in their community. Increasingly, sites host collections of automated court forms, known as interactive interviews, to guide users through simple questions and then deliver the forms necessary to engage in a legal process (e.g. filing for a simple divorce).

LSC also supported the development of two statewide website templates (i.e., DLaw and LawHelp). They awarded grants to local legal aid providers to create websites in every state using one of the templates. All 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. territories have websites, and the majority of these sites still utilize one of the two original templates. This network of 53 websites was the focus of the assessment described in this report.

LSC applied for and received a private grant from the Ford Foundation to assess key components of the statewide website network to determine what has worked, what more needs to be done, and how successful components can be replicated. Through this grant, LSC contracted EY Intuitive in the spring of 2016 to do the following:

1. Identify aspects of the statewide websites and the templates that work well, can serve as a model, and can be leveraged across the network.
2. Understand barriers to use and identify areas for improvement within the website templates and statewide websites.
3. Create a toolkit that can be shared across the network highlighting leading practices.

4. Identify opportunities for LSC to provide ongoing support to strengthen statewide websites.
5. Disseminate key insights through actionable summaries and participate in relevant conferences.

This report provides a summary of key findings from research activities conducted between May-November 2016. The research methods included interviews and a survey with website managers and template providers, which informed the creation of a detailed User Experience Assessment (UX Assessment). The UX assessment was the main method and focus of this project and involved a set of 63 usability criteria across nine focus areas (i.e., Plain Language, Language Access, Content Presentation, Accessibility, User Support, Mobile Friendly, Community Engagement, Ease of Navigation, and Visual Design & Iconography).

The executive level findings from the project are:

- **Sites that used visual design purposefully to enhance usability performed best.** There were no sites that fully met all criteria for the assessment, but a few standout sites included Illinois, Michigan, and West Virginia. These sites not only met a majority of the baseline usability criteria, but also had visually appealing, modern look and feels that will ultimately enhance both usability and the end user experience.
- **Information density and content presentation was a consistent challenge.** Most sites across the network were information dense (i.e., contained long lists of onsite and/or offsite links), which made scanning difficult. These experiences would make it hard for users to resolve legal issues on their own. Some sites, like Illinois, Michigan, and West Virginia achieved the right balance of information density by curating a set of guides that provided a limited number of articles. Finding content for a given legal issue on these sites was simple.
- **The customization available to Drupal-based sites allowed them to produce more usable experiences.** Template providers created templates that were either flexible, but required some development expertise, (i.e., DLAware), or more restricted but came with support from the template providers themselves (i.e., LawHelp). As a result, LawHelp may be easier to use, since many websites managers functioned as content managers and not developers. By comparison, the DLAware template may be more difficult to learn initially, but offered greater flexibility for creating a positive user experience. The customization of the Drupal-based sites produced more usable experiences as demonstrated by the higher overall scores of the Modified DLAware websites. However, they required increased access to development resources, which may not be available to all sites in the network.
- **A future system of templates should deliver a streamlined experience for end users, while removing the guess work for website managers about how to implement a great user experience.** As demonstrated by leading sites across the network, a great site did not require complexity. Rather, it required simplicity. Templates that provide straightforward navigation, flat information architecture, and a curated set of articles will establish a strong foundation for statewide sites.

The key areas of opportunity for the network include:

- 1. Balance flexibility and structure in the templates** enabling website managers to focus on quality content. A template (or set of templates) has many advantages. Striking the right balance between flexibility and ease of use will allow website managers to focus their time and energy on providing the most relevant, useful content and less time worrying about whether or not users can access content.
- 2. Take a mobile-first approach.** A truly mobile optimized experience takes context into consideration. Users do not have the luxury of exploring the full navigation and browsing that a wider screen (e.g., desktop experience) permits. In order for users to effectively take action, sites should reorganize content so it is not only viewable on a small screen, but enhanced so that a user can consume (e.g., read) and interact with the content (e.g., tap into and edit a search field).
- 3. Modernize visual and interaction design to enhance usability.** Although icons and other design patterns were typically understandable, they did not enhance the user experience due to their inconsistent use or outdated style. Legal aid sites and the templates they originate from should reflect the same kinds of interactions users experience elsewhere. An updated, modern design strategy will help them put relevant content front and center, and support task-based browsing so users can find, understand, and take action on the rich content these sites provide.
- 4. Guide users through workflows and offer next steps.** Sites should help users follow a straightforward path toward resolving their legal issues. An optimal workflow a user may want to follow is to identify a legal issue, then read articles to self-educate on that issue, then complete a form to resolve the issue. At any point in that workflow, a user may want to contact a lawyer for help. Curated content is a first step toward guiding a user to useful information. Homepage real estate should be dedicated to ensuring users can identify their legal issues and access self-education, interactive forms, or proceed directly to finding help (e.g., legal referral services, language access, etc.). Clear actions or next steps should appear in the main body of the page, where users have their attention focused already.
- 5. Improve readability, translation, and organization of content** particularly on content-rich pages. In order to reduce users' workload, sites should consider how they can help users comprehend information and take action on the most important details. They can achieve this by improving readability, offering translation services where it counts (on select content pages and for callouts to referral services), and organizing content with the most important information at the top.
- 6. Support multiple navigation strategies for alternate methods for interacting with content.** This includes navigating via assistive technologies, use of site search, and getting to content from search engines. As sites move towards meeting higher accessibility standards, they should focus on supporting alternate ways that users access and use a site with assistive technologies (e.g., via keyboard, screen reader, mobile device, etc.). Considering how people will use and access content on a site (e.g., via keyboard, screen reader, mobile device, etc.) is a more holistic approach to providing access than

focusing on specific disabilities and will support a broader population of end users. Similarly, site-side search is an important feature that acts as site navigation for many users. All sites should move toward offering robust site search and enhancing content so that search engines connect users with the content they are looking for.

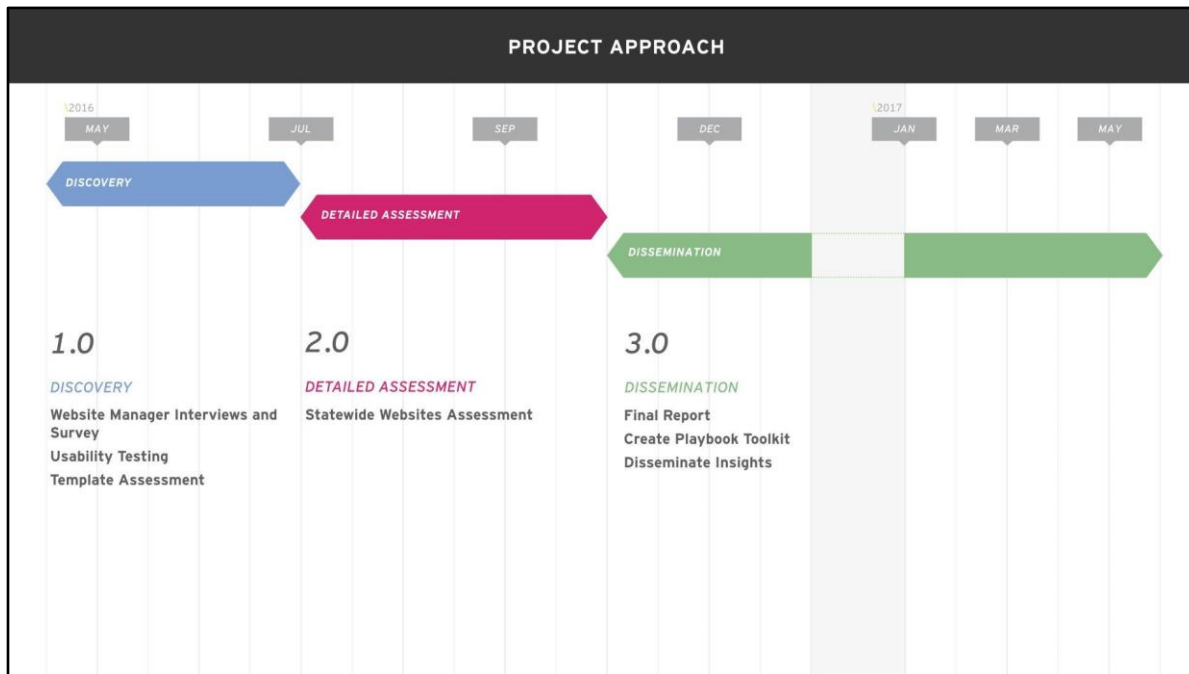
- 7. Connect navigation elements to page content.** Secondary navigation should demonstrate clear purpose and connectivity (visually and in proximally) to page content. Similarly, filtering mechanisms (if available) on listing pages should be clearly tied to the information that it is filtering.
- 8. Provide contextual help.** Sites should provide dynamic, contextual help – help that delivers just-in-time information in the context of use (e.g., rollover/hover tooltip definition of a legal term) so users do not have to interrupt current task or workflow. Contextual help is crucial in circumstances where users need additional assistance to understand content or next steps. If users do not feel as if they are being helped or empowered to help themselves, users will become frustrated and abandon the site. Sites should focus their resources on providing content-specific help such as in-line glossaries or live chat.
- 9. Collect and analyze direct user feedback.** To move toward more user-centered experiences on legal aid websites, website managers should gather direct feedback from site visitors on an ongoing basis. Collecting and analyzing user feedback is an important step in improving a user experience. Sites should also consider developing approaches that will allow them to analyze the site analytics they collect and augment that data with qualitative insights from user interviews and usability testing.

For additional findings and discussion, please see the Detailed Assessment section of this report. The report describes what sites did well, where there are opportunities to improve, and how to prioritize resources when addressing the opportunities. Refer to the design examples provided in the Statewide Website Assessment toolkit on LSC's website to view visual concepts that articulate each of the recommendations above.

PROJECT APPROACH

To meet the core objectives of the project, the researchers used a mixed-method, phased research approach where each research activity built upon the other (see Figure 1, below).

Figure 1. Phased research approach for the statewide website assessment.



The Discovery Phase began in May 2016 to understand the perspectives of key stakeholder groups related to the network of statewide legal aid services websites, including:

- Website managers
- Template providers
- Potential site visitors/end users

The goal of the Discovery Phase was to gain a clearer understanding of the capabilities and constraints of the Cold Fusion-based LawHelp template and the open-ended, Drupal-based DLAU template. The researchers also interviewed and surveyed website managers to gain insights into the varied nature of the website manager role across states, including access to resources like in-house developers and other full-time/part-time/volunteer staff support. Through usability testing (i.e., observing real people using the sites) the researchers learned about ways site visitors might approach looking for information on the sites, like trying to learn more about a particular legal issue or getting in touch with a pro bono lawyer for more help.

The Detailed Assessment phase was the primary focus of the project where the research team reviewed each site against a set of usability criteria. The User Experience (UX) Assessment tool for LSC included 63 criteria (see Appendix B).

The assessment reviewed criteria in the following focus areas:

- **Content:** Plain Language, Language Access, Content Presentation
- **Access:** Accessibility, User Support, Mobile Friendly, Community Engagement
- **Design:** Ease of Navigation, Visual Design & Iconography

The report provides detailed descriptions and key findings for each area in the Detailed Assessment section. See Appendix B for the UX Assessment tool, which includes all 63 criteria that were assessed, the sampling approach, and scoring methods.

All 53 statewide sites were scored. One of the states, South Dakota, did not have a site at the time of the assessment. Just over half of sites ($n = 26$) were on the LawHelp template; seven were on the DLAU template; six were Modified DLAU sites; and 14 were Custom sites.

Limitations: It is important to note that the nine focus areas that our researchers reviewed help to establish a baseline understanding of the usability of the sites in the network. These are considered minimum standards and are not all-encompassing of what a fully usable site should be. They also do not account for an enjoyable user experience more broadly. Usability is a necessary foundation for a positive user experience, but other factors, such as engaging aesthetics and modern interaction patterns are also important to consider when redesigning or improving sites. Future research that includes broader qualitative user experience methods could help to further assess the sites against a broader set of user experience criteria.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report provides key findings and insights from the project. Within each focus area, best practices are highlighted so that successful aspects of the sites can be replicated or improved in order to leverage the resources of the statewide network. The report also prioritizes the opportunities for the network to achieve many of the aims suggested by the findings from this study.

Glossary of Terms


The findings and examples refer to specific types of content, features, and functionality of the sites. These items are defined below to aid readers as they go through the report. Where appropriate, there are screenshot examples for the terms in the pages that follow this glossary:

- **Article detail page.** A content page on a legal aid website, such as an information article page. Most other pages of a site direct users to these detail pages. Many sites across the network are designed with the expectation that a user will begin on the homepage, identify a topic, navigate to a subtopic, choose a particular article from the list, and ultimately end up on an article detail page (see Figure 2 for article detail page example).
- **Callout.** An element on a website that directs a user's attention to something. A callout that directs a user to take action is sometimes referred to as a call to action (CTA). They can be displayed simply as a line of text, text and link, or use additional visual design elements such as a box or block of color, directional arrow, or supporting image (see Figure 3 for callout example).
- **Forms.** Components of websites that require users to input information (e.g., users enter their zip code into an open text box or use a search tool) (see Figure 3 for an example of a form).
- **Homepage.** The main landing page of a website, sometimes called the “front page” of the site, is its homepage. The homepage can function as a table of contents or directory for the site. It serves as “home” so that users can always go back to this page as a starting point if they get lost within the site or cannot find what they are looking for (see Figure 4 for homepage example).
- **Interactive Interviews.** A process to elicit information so that pro se litigants can fill out a form related to a legal issue (see Figure 5).
- **Left rail or right rail** (also called a sidebar). Refers to the sections of a webpage that sit on either side of the main body content. The left rail of websites often holds secondary navigation, while the right rail often holds callouts and tertiary links. Users may experience “banner blindness” due to the historic placement of banner ads in the right rail (and top section) of websites. Banner blindness is a tendency


to ignore these regions of a site, which can negatively impact users' ability to navigate a site (see Figure 3 for left rail example).

- **Navigation.** A designated element of the website that enables users to move across or within (i.e., navigate) its web pages. There are many kinds of navigation such as primary, secondary, utility, global, and footer navigation.
 - *Primary navigation* refers to the main way designers intend users to navigate a site (other than through Search). This sometimes appears as a horizontal bar across a site or page, or is launched from a menu icon on the top right on all pages (see Figure 3 for LawHelp primary navigation and Figure 4 for Modified DLAW primary navigation).
 - *Secondary navigation* is a mechanism to navigate a specific section or page of a site. Secondary navigation can be displayed as an extension of the main navigation (drop-down menu accessed from the primary navigation), or as a separate component (e.g., right rail) (see Figure 3 for a secondary navigation example).
 - *Utility navigation* is often located at the very top, or “header” region of a site and houses functional tools such as “search” or “sign in” (see Figure 3).
 - *Footer navigation* sits at the bottom, or “footer”, region of a site (see Figure 4).
 - *Global navigation* may refer to primary, utility, or even footer navigation. It indicates any navigation component that lives on every page (i.e., globally) of the site.
- **Referral services** references the workflow for legal referrals provided on statewide legal aid websites. Referral services may be presented as a “Get Legal Help” link that takes users to a form where they identify their location and legal issue. Once they’ve entered that information, they are presented with a list of lawyers or legal organizations that they can contact or visit to seek assistance (see Figure 6 for referral services example).
- **Subtopic.** Subtopic refers to a specific legal issue within a topic (e.g., “Custody” or “Divorce” are subtopics often found within the “Family” topic).
- **Subtopic page, or article listing page.** A directory page of a site that presents a list of available content for a given legal issue see Figure 3 for subtopic page example).
- **Summary.** A short description of a particular piece of content on a page. This may appear within a list (e.g., within search results), or as an introduction (e.g., initial overview section of a textual article, or description of a video) (see Figure 3).
- **Topic.** A category of legal issues used on most sites across the network as a means to organize specific legal issues (e.g., “Family”, or “House and Apartment”) (see Figure 3).


Figure 2: Article Detail page example.


Legal Information Get Legal Help For Legal Professionals [Donate](#) [Log in](#)

[Home](#) / [Legal Information](#) / [Family & Safety](#) / [Getting parental responsibilities for a child \(custody\)](#)



GETTING PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES FOR A CHILD (CUSTODY)


Average: 5 (1 vote)

Having [parental responsibilities](#) means making important decisions for a child, and spending time with them. The court usually decides who gets parental responsibilities when married parents get a divorce. If the parents were never married, parental responsibilities are decided when:

- The court needs to decide if a person is a legal parent of a child. This is called [parentage](#); or
- One of the parents asks for [child support](#) or time with the child.

When a child is with a parent, that parent is in charge of day-to-day care for the child. This includes:

- Feeding the child
- Getting the child up and off to school
- Taking care of the child when the child is sick
- Making sure the child is clean and dressed
- Getting the child to activities
- Playing with the child
- Getting the child to medical appointments
- Punishing the child, if necessary
- Making sure the child does chores
- Arranging for someone to watch the child

You have probably heard the words [custody](#) and [visitation](#) before. As of January 1, 2016, Illinois no longer uses these words. Instead it uses the words [significant decision-making responsibility](#) and [parenting time](#).

- **Significant decision-making responsibility** means important decisions for a child in the areas of education, healthcare, extracurricular activities, and religion. The court can give one or both parents significant decision-making responsibility. If the parents share decision-making responsibility, they have to talk to each other before making decisions about the child. This is what used to be called joint custody. If the court gives one parent decision-making responsibility, that parent can make decisions without asking the other parent. This is what used to be called sole custody.
- **Parenting time** means time the child spends with each parent, including which parent the child lives with. The court usually gives both parents some parenting time, but time is not always equal. Usually, the child lives mostly with one parent (this used to be called the custodial parent) and has regular contact with the other parent (this used to be called visitation).

Who can get parental responsibilities for a child

Usually, only the child's parents can ask for parental responsibilities. If you are unsure whether you are a child's legal parent, see our article on [Establishing parentage by going to court](#).

Displaying information for [Illinois](#) [\[change\]](#)

FORMS

Parenting plan (Easy Form)
A program to help you create a plan to split parental responsibility and parenting time.

Petition for allocation of parental responsibility (custody)
A form for asking the court to give you parental responsibilities (custody/parenting time) for a child.

Counter-petition for allocation of parental responsibilities
A form for asking the court to give you parental responsibilities when the other parent has already filed a petition.

RELATED

Starting a parental responsibilities case for a child
Steps to get parental responsibilities or custody from the forms you need to going to court.

Divorce and custody (Lawyer Manual)

Figure 3. Subtopic/article page on a LawHelp site. This example shows primary navigation [1], topic [2], secondary navigation [3], summary [4], utility navigation [5], form field [6], callout [7], and a right rail callout [8].

The screenshot displays the Legal Aid OK.org website interface. At the top, the header includes the site name, a language selector (English/Spanish), and a text size adjustment tool. Below this is a primary navigation bar with a dropdown menu for 'Legal Information' (labeled 1) and a 'Find Legal Help' button (labeled 6). A search bar is also present. The main content area features a breadcrumb trail (HOME > LEGAL INFORMATION > FAMILY LAW) and a 'Set your location' button. The central topic is 'Adoption' (labeled 2), with a sub-section 'Know the Law' (labeled 4). A list of related topics is shown on the left, including 'Getting a Birth Certificate' (labeled 3), 'Adoption In Oklahoma', 'DHS Adoption Services and Frequently Asked Questions', 'Grandparent's and Other Relative Caregiver's Guide to Raising Children with Disabilities', 'Oklahoma Adoption Assistance Program', and 'National Foster Care & Adoption Directory Search'. A callout box (labeled 7) provides information about the 'Know the Law' section. On the right, a sidebar contains a 'Need help finding information?' callout (labeled 8), a 'What is LiveHelp?' section, and a list of 'More Languages'.

Figure 4. Homepage of a Modified DLAW site demonstrates primary navigation [1], and footer navigation [2].



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Figure 6. Referral services workflow on a LawHelp site.

LawHelp.org powered by [probono.net](#) Text size: A A A

PALawHelp.org Helping low-income individuals solve legal problems
[About Us](#) | [Site Help](#) | [Using this Site](#) | [Feedback](#)

Understand Your Legal Issue **Find Legal Help** Search

HOME **Search Legal Directory** FRIENDLY
View legal directory A-Z

[+ VIEW LEGAL DIRECTORY A-Z](#)

Find Legal Help
Enter your city, county, or zip code: *
Philadelphia County

Choose your legal issue: *
GO

* Required field

Philadelphia County
+Change/Remove your location

More Languages
Spanish / Español
Vietnamese / Tiếng Việt
Russian / Русский
French / Français
[All Languages](#)

News from PALawHelp.org
[PUC Offers Top Five Tips for Energy Shopping & Savings on Black Friday](#)

DISCOVERY PHASE

KEY INSIGHTS BY STAKEHOLDER GROUP

During the Discovery Phase a variety of methods were employed to reach out to key stakeholder groups associated with building, maintaining, and using the sites. The research team connected with website managers of the statewide legal aid websites; template providers who supported the creation and maintenance of the website templates; and pro se litigants, who are the anticipated end users of the legal aid websites. The following stakeholder outreach was conducted:

- **Website managers** via a web-based survey (n = 43; 40 states and 3 territories) and phone interviews (n = 5)
- **Template providers** from [Urban Insight](#) and [Pro Bono Net](#) through phone interviews (n = 3 interviews lasting 60-90 minutes each)
- **Potential visitors (i.e., end users)** to the websites via desktop and mobile experiences through one-on-one, in person, 30-minute usability testing sessions (n = 18)

Key insights from the Discovery Phase informed the Detailed Assessment Phase.

Website Managers

Website managers from California, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois and Michigan were interviewed. Of these states, two of them represented LawHelp sites, one represented a modified version of a DLAU template site, and two represented Custom sites (i.e., they were not using a template). For purposes of this report, non-template sites are categorized as Custom sites or Modified DLAU sites (as reported by the state) throughout the report.

The Website Manager Survey included mostly closed-ended questions, with a few open-ended questions to:

- Understand the roles and resources available to implement and maintain the sites;
- Understand perceptions regarding the templates' capabilities;
- Document key workflows and site tasks;
- Understand state-specific Limited English Proficiency (LEP) needs and current language support;
- Better understand challenges and opportunities related to the key criteria for the assessment (e.g., mobile, community engagement); and
- Provide insights into valuable information for the LSC toolkit.

Respondents from 40 states and three territories participated in the survey. A little more than half of the respondents (n = 22) used the LawHelp template; six used the DLAW template; six developed Modified DLAW sites; and ten developed Custom sites. Key insights from the website manager survey that informed the Detailed Assessment Phase included the following:

- Website managers of statewide sites were typically taking on the role of content managers (81%, n = 35), rather than more technical roles that would include front-end and back-end website development. Fewer than half of the website managers (42%, n = 18) selected a technical role (i.e., “front-end developer,” “back-end developer,” or both) as part of their job function.
- Access to front-end and back-end development resources (either in-house or via contract resources) played a role in the type of template states selected. States with more access to development resources more frequently reported use of the DLAW template or no template at all (i.e., Custom or Modified DLAW).
- Site managers indicated that language access (LEP content) and plain language (content that’s understandable) were very important to them, but described that it was difficult to maintain with limited human resources.
- Having mobile-friendly sites was on every site manager’s radar. The majority of states reported having either a distinct mobile site or a site that could be viewed readily on a mobile device (e.g., a responsive/adaptive website).
- Site managers indicated a high interest in and a low pre-existing knowledge of user-centered design practices (i.e., gathering insights from users to inform design decisions). Most site managers rated themselves between 2 and 3 (on a 5-point scale) in user-centered design practices.
- Site managers reported wanting to have a stronger understanding of the templates’ capabilities.
- Site managers expressed a great interest in learning more about accessibility standards; plain language; production and online delivery; and user experience design.

Template Providers

The research team interviewed representatives from Urban Insight (DLAW) and from [Pro Bono Net](#) (LawHelp) to learn more about their templates. Key insights gained from these conversations include:

- Both templates providers regularly maintain and update their products (DLAW more frequently than LawHelp). Website managers indicated that they have access to the most up-to-date code on a regular basis.
- Website managers took advantage of the LawHelp template as a software-as-a-service model (SaaS). This meant that Pro Bono Net provided the template and supporting services to help website managers implement the templates. Pro Bono Net described providing regular updates to the template and pushing out these updates to websites using the template. About half of the states reported taking

advantage of this service, especially if they had limited in-house development resources and/or limited staff capacity.

- The DLA^W template can be downloaded and configured as much as a website manager wants. This flexibility was something states that used the template appreciated and has led to Modified DLA^W sites.
- Maintaining and managing content on the websites was a critical function that the templates supported.

End Users of the Statewide Websites

The researchers conducted one-on-one, 30-minute usability testing sessions with potential visitors (i.e., end users) of the Maryland and Pennsylvania sites. Participants were recruited from the Prince George's County District Court in Upper Marlboro, MD, Community Legal Services in Philadelphia, PA, and the Richmond Branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia. Participants completed a series of information- and resource-related tasks via the desktop and mobile experiences of the People's Law Library of Maryland site (n = 6 potential website visitors and 3 potential mobile site users; <https://www.peoples-law.org/>) and the PA Law Help site (n = 6 potential website visitors and 3 potential mobile site users; <http://www.palawhelp.org/>) (see Appendix A for the usability testing protocol used at each site).

These sessions were helpful in developing the procedures the researchers employed for the Detailed Assessment. The team learned that it needed to consider both topics (e.g., broad legal topics such as "Family" or "Money and Debt") and subtopics (e.g., legal issue such as "Custody") when assessing Plain Language, Language Access, and Content Presentation because these were key paths people took to navigate the site (ignoring much of the navigation options in the side banners of the sites). Search was also an important feature of the user experience that potential website visitors needed to work more effectively. The sessions also highlighted the importance of summaries on article listing pages to support navigation. Lastly, it showed that navigating to referral services was a key workflow to include in the assessment since it was one of the key tasks that many study participants experienced challenges with during the testing sessions.

DETAILED ASSESSMENT

KEY FINDINGS BY FOCUS AREA

Identifying Focus Areas and Defining Criteria

The primary objective of this project was a large-scale, detailed assessment of the network of state-specific legal aid sites. The assessment included nine focus areas, which are organized into three major sections: Content, Access, and Design.

CONTENT

1. **Plain Language:** Sites written in plain language provide content that is understandable by a wide audience.
2. **Language Access:** Language Access is the extent to which a site provides access to diverse users through Limited English Proficiency (LEP) support.
3. **Content Presentation:** Content Presentation considers the type of content the site provides and how well it supports users in finding it.

ACCESS

4. **Accessibility:** Accessibility considers how the site supports alternate ways of accessing and interacting with information used by people with disabilities (e.g., with a keyboard or screen reader).
5. **User Support:** User Support refers to how the site handles help, alerts, and messaging for its users.
6. **Mobile Friendly:** A mobile friendly experience considers the extent to which the site supports varying screen sizes, particularly smaller, smartphone screens.
7. **Community Engagement:** Community Engagement considers how a site connects with users (e.g., feedback, search engine optimization) and how website managers engage with other website managers and legal organizations across the network.

DESIGN

8. **Ease of Navigation:** Ease of Navigation considers to what extent a site allows users to move through its content, features, and functionality in order to complete key tasks.
9. **Visual Design & Iconography:** Visual Design & Iconography considers how a site is designed to enhance usability (e.g., how consistent, representative iconography facilitates navigation).

LSC and the research team arrived at these nine focus areas through collaboration and discussion. In order to finalize the criteria for the assessment, the researchers identified a list of leading industry practices: 1) through careful review of the literature, 2) through collaboration with LSC, and 3) based on their extensive experience designing and developing websites. After several iterations to refine the list, the final assessment consisted of 63 criteria.

Assessment Procedures, Sampling Approach, And Scoring

Procedures and sampling protocols for each criterion were identified to allow for consistent assessment across all of the state websites and to remain within scope and timeline for the project. For example, it would not be possible to review every page and all pieces of content to assess Plain Language criteria. To address this, a subset of pages and topics were reviewed, such as Family Law and Housing, that would be highly likely to exist on every site. To maintain a user-centered approach to the assessment, there was a focus on topics and pages that were likely to be visited by end users.

Within each focus area, criteria were categorized as having a large impact, medium impact, and small impact (see column F in the UX Assessment tool) on the user experience. This level was based on the research team's professional experience and the insights gained during the Discovery Phase of the project. The impact level was used to weight each criterion within a focus area, so that critical issues and opportunities for improvement stood out.

As the research team assessed the criteria, they determined whether the site did not meet the criteria, partially met the criteria, or fully met the criteria (see column G in the UX Assessment tool). The team assigned a value to the Impact and Rating categories and calculated scores for each heuristic. This approach helped highlight critical failures by weighting a failure to meet high impact heuristics more negatively than failing to meet lower impact heuristics. Fully meeting criteria for any item, regardless of its impact size, received an equal overall score.

CONTENT

When sites were assessed for the usability of their content, the team looked at how the content was written (i.e., Plain Language); who could read it (i.e., Language Access); and how it was presented (i.e., Content Presentation).

In the sections below, key findings from the focus areas are provided. Screenshots and examples of top performing sites, and a list of tools, resources, and open opportunities are presented for the network to explore and apply.

1. Plain Language

Definition: Sites written in plain language provide content that is understandable by a wide audience.

Background: Website managers reported that plain language was a major area that they focused on in their role. However, they indicated that it was difficult to maintain due to limited resources and volume of content. Most states reported that they have a process in place for content to be written in plain language, but only one-quarter of these respondents indicated having in-house expertise for writing in plain language.

Through the usability testing with end users, the research team found that simple terminology for topics or legal issues and well-written summaries are key to users succeeding in finding useful content. The assessment criteria for Plain Language examined whether sites provided content written at or below a 6th grade reading level, and whether they provided clear summaries to aid users in finding information.

Assessment Approach: The team assessed how well each site across the network met a series of Plain Language criteria by sampling content from key pages such as the homepage, the Custody subtopic page (found within Family Law), and the first onsite content article listed on the Custody subtopic page.

Tools: The team used two third-party tools for parts of this assessment:

- The reading level on a sample of content was assessed using the [OpenAdvocate WriteClearly Free Plain Language Authoring Tool](#).
- The [Hemingway Editor tool](#) was used to assess active voice.

High Impact Criteria for Plain Language:

- Content is readable - written at a 6th grade reading level or below.
- Content is free of jargon.
- Content is free of spelling and grammar errors.

- The site uses varied language to reiterate key concepts and accommodate for differences in natural language (i.e., the site describes Interactive Interviews in two or more distinct ways).

Findings:

At higher levels of the site (e.g., homepages), the researchers found that most sites provided adequate plain language support to help users find content initially. Sites achieved this through homepage readability and error-free content. However, the sites did not provide the same level of support for users on content detail pages, which were typically text-heavy pages.

With regard to readability, sites performed well on high-level pages that lead users to more text-heavy content pages (e.g., from the homepage to subtopic pages). Most of the sites' homepages (77%, n = 41) and sites' subtopic pages for Custody or Divorce (83%, n = 44) fully met the criteria for reading level (6th grade reading level or below). Sites that met this guideline supported broader audiences with their content. The average reading level across sites for the three pages we assessed was Grade 6.4, which is an encouraging result (Median = 5.4, Mode = 4.0, Min = 1.15, Max = 28.4).

However, sites generally did not meet criteria for readability on content-rich pages (e.g., articles). For the content pages that were assessed (the first onsite article about Custody), the reading level was too high on most sites; 74% (n = 39) and did not meet criteria because they were above a 6th grade reading level. This may negatively impact the site visitor's ability to educate themselves on legal issues.

Although the strong readability of homepages and assessed subtopic pages can help users *find* content, the readability of content pages is critical to help users *comprehend* information and take next steps (e.g., find help or fill out a form). Additionally, sites did not consistently provide content that supports reading comprehension (e.g., Interactive Interviews and topic summaries).

With regard to spelling and grammar, sites performed well. Most sites (79%, n = 42) had no errors in headers (e.g., major page headings and titles) and had fewer than five errors in body text, fully meeting the criteria.

During usability testing, summaries proved helpful to users when trying to figure out where to go on the site, because they were not always sure where the answer to their question would be. More than half of the sites (64%, n = 34 partially met criteria) provided some form of a brief summary for key content. However, sites were not always consistent in their use of summaries across articles on the sites. Some articles had summaries, while others did not.

Finally, when providing access to key services/tools (i.e., Interactive Interviews and Referral Services) in multiple ways, most sites did this for at least one of the key services/tools we assessed (34%, n = 18 fully met criteria; 42%, n = 22, partially met criteria). A statewide site that fully met criteria for providing access to key services/tools might use “Find a Lawyer” and “Get Legal Help” to describe Referral Services, and “Self-Help Legal Forms” and “Find a Form” to describe Interactive Interviews. However, one-quarter of sites did not provide access to either service/tool or only used one way to describe both Interactive Interviews and Referral Services (25%, n = 13 did not meet criteria). It is important that states provide access in multiple ways to accommodate differences in how different people might think about that key service or tool. This is a usability concept known as supporting the “natural language” of users.

Figure 7. Vermont's (Custom) site uses simple navigation headings like "Money/Debt" in place of the legal jargon equivalent "Consumer Issues".

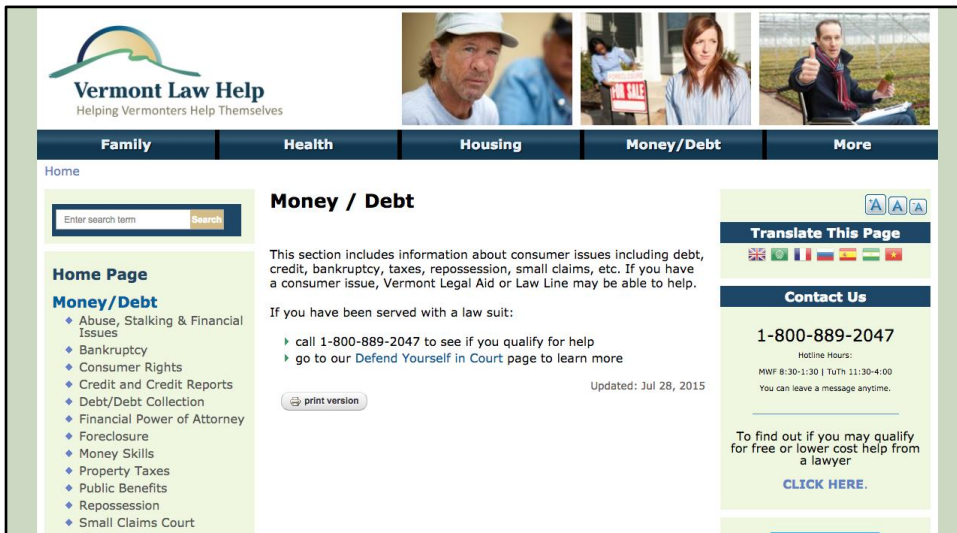


Figure 8. Vermont's (Custom) site provides brief, yet descriptive and meaningful summaries for topics, subtopics, and articles.



Opportunities for improving Plain Language:

- **Revise content pages for easier readability.** If not already in use, website managers can add the free WriteClearly bookmarklet to their browser to test a sample of content pages. See Figure 9 for an example of WriteClearly in use on Alabama's site (LawHelp).
- **Provide multiple pathways** to key workflows such as Interactive Interviews. See Figure 10 for an example of how Hawaii's site (LawHelp) uses global callouts to draw attention to key workflows and remind users that they are available throughout the experience. Users can also access Interactive Interviews on Hawaii's site (LawHelp) through content detail pages (see Figure 11) and search.

- **Provide summaries** for topics, subtopics and articles in user-centered terminology. See Figure 8 for an example of how Vermont (Custom) breaks down complex topics with short, but meaningful summaries.
- **Tools & Resources to consider:**
 - Use a tool to check and lower reading level of key content (e.g., [OpenAdvocate WriteClearly](#)).
 - Use a tool to check and reduce use of legal jargon (e.g., [OpenAdvocate ReadClearly](#)).
 - Try using a tool that helps identify and edit complex sentences and remove passive voice (e.g., the [Hemingway App](#)).

Figure 9. Alabama (LawHelp) uses the OpenAdvocate WriteClearly bookmarklet to support plain language.

LawHelp.org powered by [probono.net](#) Text size: A A A [Hide Visit](#)

AlabamaLegalHelp.org

Helping low-income individuals solve legal problems
[About Us](#) | [Site Help](#) | [Feedback](#) | [Self-Help Forms](#)

Understand Your Legal Issue **Find Legal Help** Search [GO](#)

HOME [SHARE](#) [EMAIL](#) [PRINT FRIENDLY](#) [+ Set your location](#)

Getting and Keeping Custody of Your Children

Authored By: Legal Services Alabama ^{LSC}

Information

What can I do to get a Court to give me custody of my children?

- Be a good parent.
- Spend quality time with your children so they feel loved and cared for.
- When you have to leave your children alone with someone, make very sure that person is able to care for them. The person has to be old enough to know how to meet children's needs.
- Keep your children away from people who could hurt them. This includes people who use illegal drugs and people who drink too much.
- Do not leave your children with others for too long. You need some time to yourself away from work, but if you spend too little time with your children, it will look like you do not want them.
- Make sure your children see a dentist, see a doctor and, if they need one, see a counselor.
- Have your children get their shots, and keep records of the shots.
- Follow advice your children's doctor gives you.
- Talk to your children's teachers and other care givers. Learn how your children are doing in school. Learn about any problems your children have - and what you can do to help correct those problems.
- Make sure your children are safe, both physically and emotionally.
- Make sure your children always use a seat belt or child seat.
- Make sure your children are clean.
- Make sure your children eat healthy food.
- Make sure your home is clean.
- Be loving, understanding and patient when your children need discipline.

You may qualify for free legal help
 Call Legal Services Alabama
 Toll Free 1-866-456-4995
 En Español 1-888-835-3505
 OR
 Apply ONLINE
[Click here for our Application for Services](#)
 Application hosted by LegalServer
 To report technical issues, complete [this form](#).

LEGAL SERVICES ALABAMA

Many documents on this site require a PDF Reader. To get Adobe's PDF Reader, click on the Get Adobe Reader icon to download.

OpenAdvocate WriteClearly 0 of 15 Go First < Previous Next > Last Close X

4.62 Suggestion Summary: Shorten long paragraphs. Replace polysyllabic words where possible.

Last 4.62 [See suggestions](#)

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level

[Give us Feedback](#) "The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak." -- Hans Hofmann

For selected text only.

Figure 10. Hawaii (LawHelp) provides multiple pathways for users to reach Interactive Interviews including a global callout (“Legal Form Helper”) in the right rail [1] which takes the user to the Self-Help Interactive Form landing page, shown below.

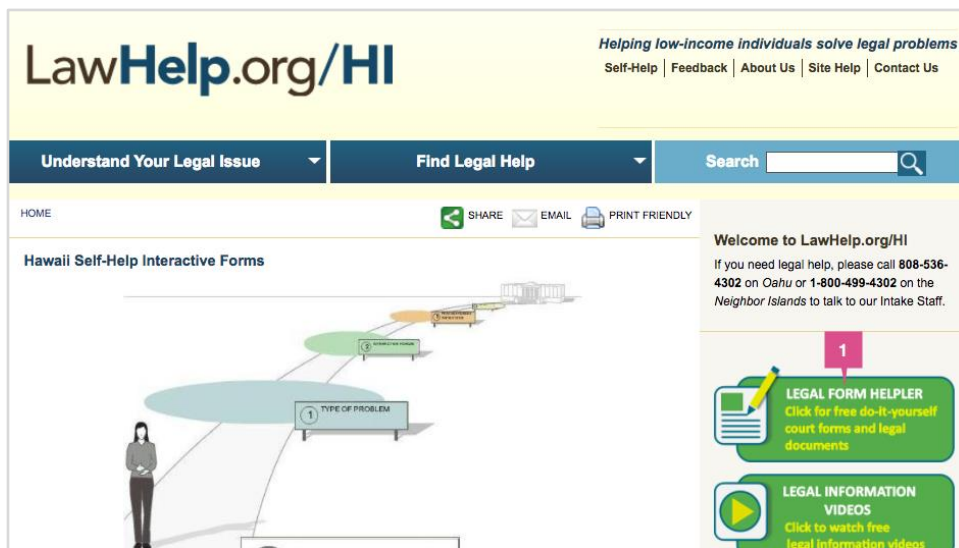
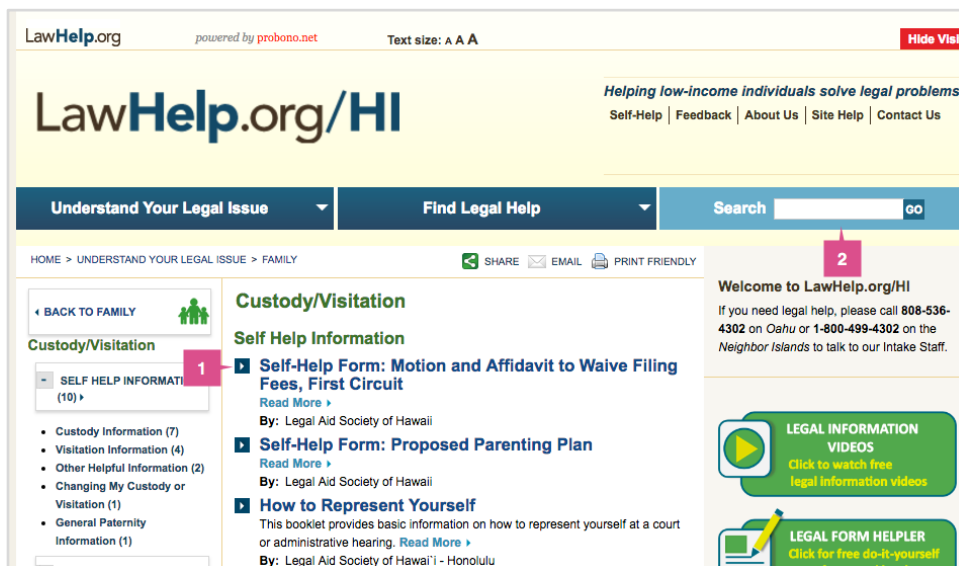


Figure 11. The first two listings on Hawaii’s (LawHelp) Custody/Visitation page begin with “Self-Help Form: ...” [1], providing a second pathway for users to access Interactive Interviews. Search [2] provides a third pathway.



2. Language Access

Definition: Language access is the extent to which a site provides access to diverse users through Limited English Proficiency (LEP) support.

Background: A key aspect of this focus area is determining which languages a site should provide access to. LSC provided us with population data for each U.S. state and territory. To determine the minimum population threshold for providing content in other languages, the researchers looked across industries that serve populations similar to those LSC serves. LSC and the team determined that an LEP population of 5,000 people or greater would be the minimum threshold for providing translation services in an alternative language.

Assessment Approach: To assess Language Access, the team reviewed the translation services on each statewide website (if available), first at the global level, second at the subtopic level, and third at the referral services access point (e.g., Find a Lawyer landing page). If available, the researchers always assessed the Custody subtopic page (a subtopic of Family Law) so that the review could remain consistent across all sites. Finally, for sites that provided translation services, the source code was inspected to determine if a site relied predominantly on human-translation or machine-translation.

High Impact Criteria for Language Access:

- Provides translated content at the subtopic level (e.g., Custody).
- Provides translation at referral services access points allowing LEP users to find and act upon legal help.

Findings:

Overall, the assessment showed that many sites did not provide access for the three largest LEP populations in their state. Those that provided some form of translation for all three LEP populations did not consistently provide the same content to LEP populations as they did to English speakers.

Figure 12. New Hampshire (Modified DLAW) provides a global link in the utility navigation so users can easily toggle between the English and Spanish versions of the site at any point during the experience.

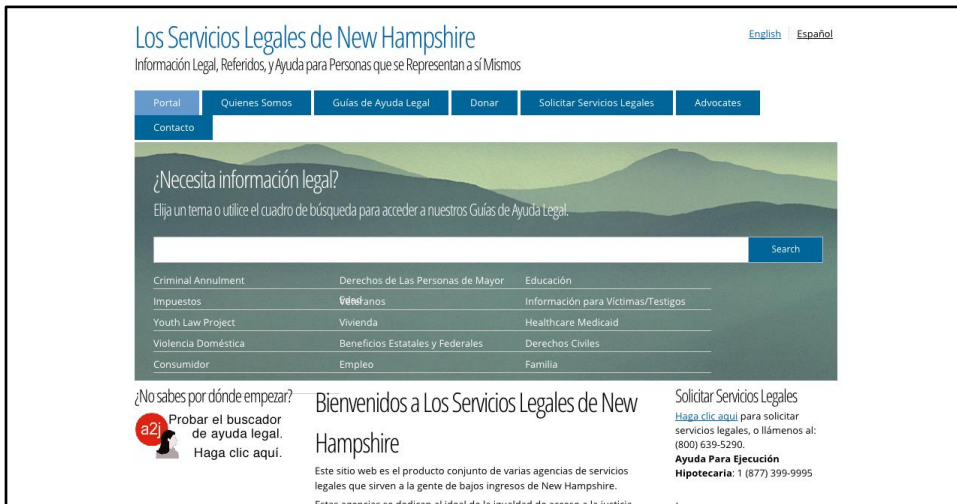


Figure 13. Similar to New Hampshire (Modified DLAW), Massachusetts (Custom) provides global navigation for translation services. The languages are also listed in their native language.



Opportunities for improving Language Access:

Providing access to content in multiple languages can be resource intensive, but is critical for meeting the needs of the largest possible audience of pro se litigants. There are ways that sites can prioritize what to translate and how to provide the translation based on the resources they have available:

- **Provide human-translated mirror sites for top LEP populations.** Professional translators can help the site use proper dialect and lingo with respect to the cultural and regional differences within an LEP population. Maryland (Custom) is an example of a site that offers human translation (i.e., professional

translation by a translator for select content; volunteer student translators, with volunteer attorney review) (see Figure 14). A leading practice that helps lower costs is to use machine translation as a first step, and use a human translator to review and edit the content as necessary as a second step.

- **Provide human translation for all major user tasks (or workflows)** or create landing pages that direct LEP site users to resources (e.g., lawyers, organization contact information) in their own language, for top LEP populations. When resources are available, sites should strive to provide full global translation.
- **Provide global access to translated content** via a global site link displayed in the language (e.g., en español, Tiếng Việt). LEP users may enter the site through a subpage (not the homepage) via a search engine, so the language access link should be accessible at the global level (all pages).
- **Tools & Resources to consider:**
 - To learn about LEP and an extensive list of translated resources visit LEP.gov.
 - Engage low-cost human translators (e.g., volunteers, students/interns, online fee per word/per hour services) for general content on the site.

Figure 14. Although Maryland's site (Custom) does not provide full global translation, it provides distinct landing pages for the top three LEP populations in the state. Each landing page contains information about key topics and a link to the referral services workflow.

The screenshot shows the '简体中文 (Chinese, Simplified: Landing Page)' of the Maryland Legal Services website. The page layout includes a sidebar with navigation links, a main content area with three columns of text, and a footer with additional links. The text is in Simplified Chinese, providing information about the Maryland court system, legal resources, and family law topics.

3. Content Presentation

Definition: Content Presentation considers the type of content the site provides and how well it supports users in finding it.

Background: This focus area considers the extent to which content supports the goals and needs of users based on how content is structured and presented. Through interviews and the website manager survey, website managers and template providers indicated that content quality and maintenance is one of their primary challenges. During usability testing with end users, the team observed that users did not differentiate between onsite and offsite content. LSC and the researchers identified a set of topic areas that should be covered on all sites within the network (e.g., Divorce, Eviction) and developed assessment criteria and procedures around these key topics.

Assessment Approach: To assess Content Presentation, questions from the website manager survey were referenced to better understand how they gathered content for their sites. The researchers then reviewed the first onsite content page and article listing page for the legal issue “Custody.” If “Custody” was not an available legal issue, pages under “Divorce” or “Bankruptcy” were reviewed. We followed this procedure on each site to document the availability, structure, variety and presentation of content.

High Impact Criteria for Content Presentation:

- Provides content on all key topics and legal issues (as defined by LSC).
- Places most important information in articles first to support readability and easy scanning.
- Cross-links related content.
- Provides media to enhance comprehension of content.

Findings:

Overall, sites varied in their performance against the criteria in the Content Presentation focus area. Two-thirds of the sites provided content on all key topics and legal issues (66%, n = 35 fully met criteria). Similarly, two-thirds of the sites successfully indicated from where their content originated (i.e., indicating the source of the content; 60%, n = 32 fully met criteria). Half indicated when the content was last updated (51%, n = 27 fully met criteria). Many sites (60%, n = 32, did not meet criteria; 11%, n = 6 partially met criteria) did not support discovery by cross-linking content (i.e., linking content within the site so that visitors can discover it in different locations), missing an opportunity to help users access key topics from different areas of the site.

In terms of how sites presented materials and prioritized information for users, most (45%, n = 24 partially met criteria; 23%, n = 12 did not meet criteria) did not follow an inverted pyramid hierarchy for content pages. The inverted pyramid is a common approach to website writing that provides the most important content first and then moves to less important content down the page. This approach makes scanning and comprehension of content easier for users. When sites do not use the inverted pyramid approach, content may appear to be weighted equally. As a result, users must read very carefully in order to differentiate between important content and supplementary facts.

Figure 15. Hawaii's site (LawHelp) is a top performer in Content Presentation because it uses relevant media to enhance understanding of key topics, emphasizes related content, and indicates when content was last updated.



Opportunities for improving Content Presentation:

- **Provide breadth and depth of content for all key topic areas.** Include high-quality content for key legal topics and issues. This includes information to self-educate about a legal issue (e.g., onsite text or video

content), a mechanism to solve the legal issue (e.g., form and instruction on how to use the form), and a mechanism to get legal help (e.g., referral services, a phone number).

- **Use an inverted pyramid approach on content pages to elevate and emphasize critical information.**
The inverted pyramid represents how to organize content so that the most important information is at the top of the page and information that is less important is displayed further down the page, in a progressive fashion. The inverted pyramid also represents how to structure the content so that the most important content is presented centrally, where the user is focused, and not off to the side. Structuring content in this way positions content on the page so that it is presented in priority order (most important/relevant to least important/relevant). For an example of how sites in the network have achieved this standard, see Figure 16.
- **Provide contextual links to related onsite content** in order to support discovery of important information or workflows. Usability testing showed that end users engaged in contextual browsing. For example, a user might read an article about Divorce with minor children. To find a lawyer to help with this issue, the user might follow a link to referral services from the article (i.e., a contextual link) rather than go back to the primary navigation. See Figure 17 for an example of how sites can apply contextual links on content pages.
- **Tools & Resources to consider:**
 - For insight on how to organize content, reference the “toolkits” provided on the [Michigan website](#) (Custom) and [West Virginia website](#) (Custom). These “toolkits” assemble articles and forms for a particular issue and guide users to the help they need.
 - For more details on inverted pyramid hierarchy, reference credible writing resources and instructional material (e.g., [Purdue OWL](#)).
 - See articles by Nielsen Norman Group for examples of [how to write meaningful, descriptive hyperlinks](#).

Figure 16. This article on Kansas' site (DLAW) is a strong example of inverted pyramid hierarchy. It begins with an overview of who the information applies to and under what circumstances it might be useful. More detailed information about how to take action follows.



[Topics / Family Law](#)

Affordable Care Act and Divorce (and other Life Changes)

"...In the post-ACA era, health insurance isn't the binder it once was for holding bad marriages together. With more options available on the market and preexisting conditions no longer an issue, people once reluctant to divorce for fear of losing health insurance coverage would do well to reconsider."

Robert Clandra, *Insurance No Longer May Hinder Divorce*, @ The Inquirer, March 2014

[Read about 2016's open enrollment period here.](#)



Many people put off getting a divorce out of fear for their financial futures. Some of these fears often have to do with healthcare options.



In the past, stay-at-home moms, for example, may have waived more for fear of getting kicked off their spouse's health insurance plan and not being able to afford insurance on their own.

The Affordable Care Act seeks to ease these blocks through special enrollment for people going through a qualifying life event (see *definition below*).

In 2012, the University of Michigan released a study @ that found that 115,000 women lose their private health insurance every year in the wake of divorce. The study also found that women do not regain coverage quickly after a divorce. Roughly 65,000 of these women become uninsured. Many of the women:

- Did not have jobs outside the home;
- Worked at jobs that did not offer insurance;
- Could no longer afford the premiums of their employer-sponsored plans;
- Qualify for post-divorce COBRA health benefits under their ex-spouse's plan, but that is of a limited duration of 36 months - and is often too expensive.

[Print](#) [PDF](#) [Scan](#)




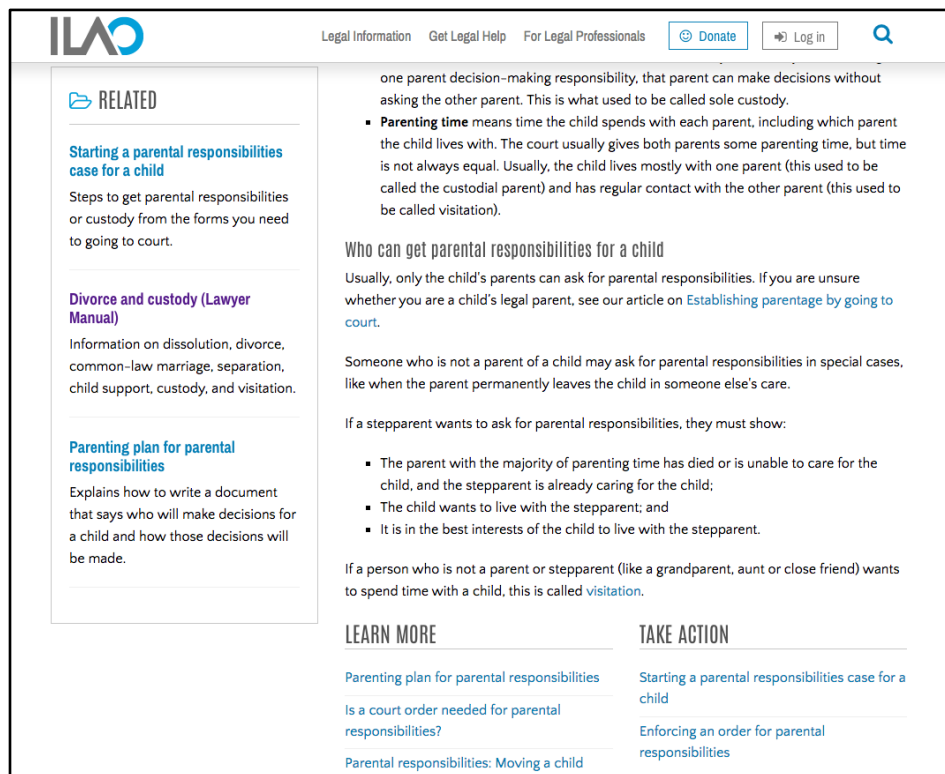


Figure 17. This article on Illinois' site (Custom) supports contextual browsing through a "Related" content module in the left rail; callouts to "Learn More" and "Take Action" at the bottom of the page; and contextual links to other articles throughout the body content.



ACCESS

When the researchers assessed sites for Access, the team looked at alternative methods for navigating the site through keyboard and screen reader use (i.e., Accessibility); whether and how help was provided to users (i.e., User Support); how sites performed on smaller screens (i.e., Mobile Friendly); and how others connected to the sites (i.e., Community Engagement).

The sections below provide more detailed findings; screenshots and examples of top performing sites; and a list of tools, resources, and open opportunities for states to explore for improving Accessibility, User Support, Mobile Friendly design, and Community Engagement.

4. Accessibility

Definition: Accessibility considers how a site supports alternate ways of accessing and interacting with information that are used by people with disabilities (e.g., a blind person who navigates the page with a keyboard instead of a mouse and listens to the content spoken by a screen reader).

Background: Template providers indicated that both DLA and LawHelp templates supported accessibility to varying degrees. Website managers reported that they were not sure what level of accessibility their sites supported or aimed to achieve. Website managers also indicated that they were interested in learning more about leading practices for accessibility, suggesting that the community would benefit from greater attention to this focus area.

Assessment Approach: To evaluate sites for Accessibility, the research team used a mix of automated tools and manual tests. Automated tools checked images on the homepage for alternate text and software tested compatibility with screen readers and other assistive technologies.

The research team manually tested other aspects of accessibility, such as closed captioning for audio/media and tab order (a feature that makes sites accessible to users who navigate with keyboards), by visually inspecting and manually tabbing through the site. The assessment was not inclusive of all assistive technologies for differently-abled user groups, such as persons with intellectual or cognitive disabilities.

When assessing images and all other media, a site's homepage was first assessed. If media was not present on the homepage, the search for media continued elsewhere on the site. For the closed-captioning criterion, the team used the search term "video" and assessed the first audio/media search result that was not an external link. We tested form field accessibility using NVDA (NonVisual Desktop Access) software to navigate to the

referral services access point (or other area in the site with form fields). We then attempted to enter, fill out, and submit a form field in the same way a screen reader user might.

Tools: The research team used three third-party tools for parts of the assessment in this focus area:

- It assessed availability of alternate text for images on the homepage using the [Varvy SEO tool](#).
- It assessed support for non-visual site visitors using [NonVisual Desktop Access \(NVDA\)](#) software.
- It assessed conformance with WCAG 2.0 Level AA and AAA contrast ratio standards using [WebAim's Wave tool](#).

High Impact Criteria for Accessibility:

- Uses descriptive alternate text (or backup text) for images.
- Input fields are accessible for users who navigate the Web with assistive technologies.
- Selected page elements have an obvious focus state to support navigation by keyboard.

Findings:

Most sites satisfied requirements for providing alternative methods to *consume* content (e.g., watching a video with closed captioning), but did not adequately support alternative methods for *interacting* with content (e.g., filling out a form like “Contact Us” with a screen reader). Just over half of the surveyed website managers (58%, n = 25) reported that they were not sure which level of accessibility their sites aimed to achieve. Of those who answered the follow up question about compliance level (n = 38), 21% (n = 8) thought their sites met Section 508 accessibility standards. However, our assessment revealed that only 1 out of the 53 sites fully met Section 508 standards (<https://www.section508.gov/summary-section508-standards>).

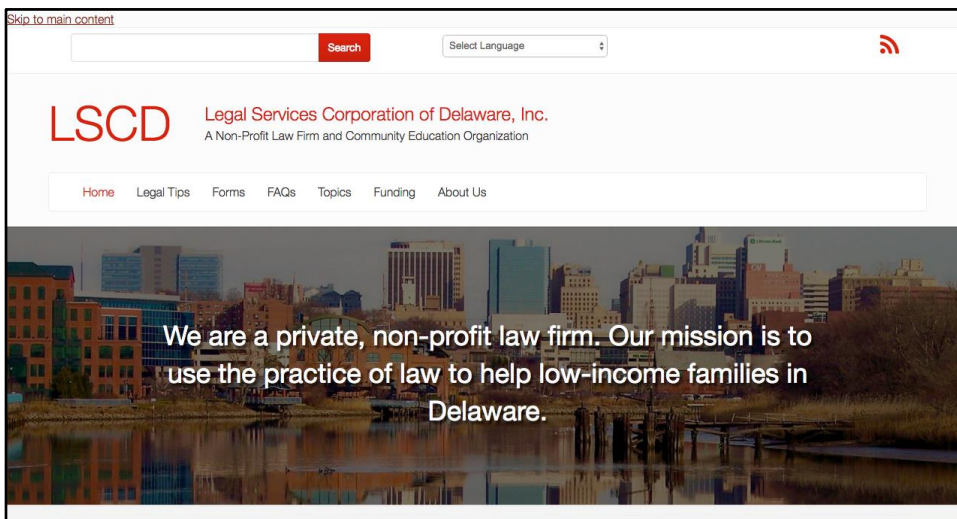
Section 508 sets accessibility standards that are mandatory only for federal agencies. For other entities, those standards are one of many voluntary benchmarks and a good common standard for comparison. They address many different aspects of website accessibility such as site navigation and alternative formats for content. More than half of the sites (59%, n = 31) had five or fewer Section 508 Compliance errors, which is encouraging. The most common issues were:

- Heading structures were not logically nested, meaning heading levels were not consecutive or they were skipped (e.g., there was no H1, or H2 was followed by H4 instead of H3) (see Figure 20 for an example of illogically nested heading structures).
- Links did not have link labels.
- iFrame elements were missing title text and thus would not be identifiable for a screen reader user.
- Heading tags were not used properly.

In terms of key criteria for this focus area:

- Alternate text, which helps users with low visual acuity understand images, was not consistently available and was not typically meaningful, descriptive, or representative of the image. Very few sites (6%, or n = 3) fully met assessment criteria for alternate text.
- Input fields were typically accessible and labeled appropriately, but the forms were difficult to locate (e.g., the user would first need to know how to navigate to a referral services page). Most sites (64%, n = 34) partially met criteria.
- Focus state, which is a way of signaling to a user where they are on a page, was not visible or was inconsistently visible on most sites (26%, n = 14 partially met criteria; 60%, n = 32 did not meet criteria). Similarly, tab order and skip link navigation were not reliably consistent, making it difficult for keyboard users to navigate through sites using the Tab key (30%, n = 16, fully met criteria; 13%, n = 7 partially met criteria; and 57%, n = 30 did not meet criteria)

Figure 18. Delaware's (DLAW) site has an obvious indicator of focus state and provides skip link navigation, which makes it possible for keyboard users to navigate this site.



Opportunities for improving Accessibility:

As of 2013, approximately 63.6 million people were financially qualified to receive help from Legal Services Corporation. As determined by data from the U.S. Census Bureau, persons with disabilities represent 18%, or 11.5 million of those eligible for LSC-funded services. As such, accessibility initiatives should be a top priority for the legal aid community. Accessibility is not only about making accommodations for users with disabilities. It is about making the Web inclusive of a wider range of abilities.

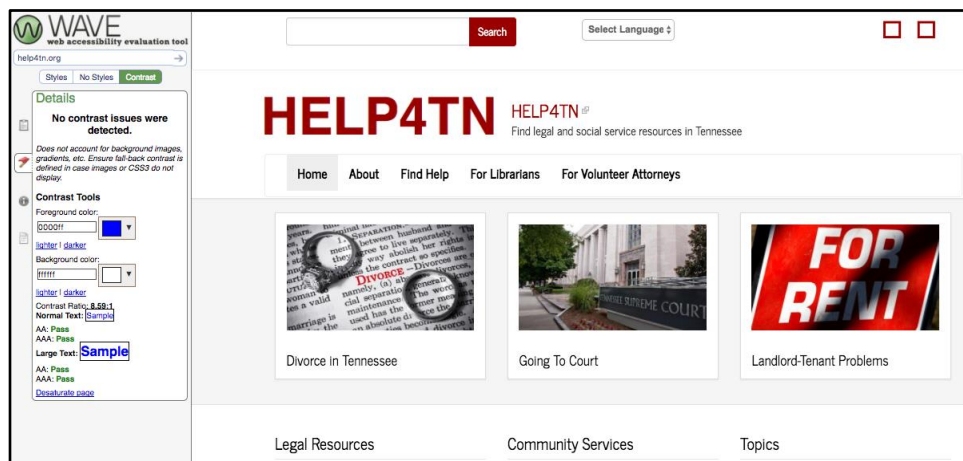
With assistive technologies and accessibility features, humans can adapt and overcome changes to their bodies and minds. Without proper attention to detail (i.e., making sure a site is configured for assistive

technologies), statewide sites can be unintentionally exclusive. WCAG 2.0 (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) provides a good starting point. Ideally, accessibility is considered during website development, preferably in the early phases of design. Regardless, website managers have many options for maintaining and improving the accessibility of their sites.

- **Work toward meeting common standards for web accessibility** (e.g., [Section 508](#)), and strive to achieve higher standards (i.e., [WCAG 2.0 AA Guidelines](#)).
- **Provide equal access for users who navigate by keyboard.** Test for consistent tab order, focus state, and skip link navigation. Tab order is the sequence in which site elements appear selected for users who navigate by keyboard (e.g., instead of using a mouse). Focus state is a visual indication that an element is selected. Skip link navigation is functionality that allows users to “skip” directly to the main content on a page. See Figure 18 for an example of a state site that employs all three leading practices.
- **Improve contrast ratios to minimize eye strain.** Test color contrast ratios to see that they meet WCAG 2.0 AA guidelines at a minimum. Appropriate color contrast ratios are a benefit to all users, but can be especially helpful for users with low visual acuity. See Figure 19 for an example of WCAG 2.0 AA compliant contrast ratios.
- **Develop input fields with assistive technologies in mind** (e.g., users who require a screen reader or navigate with a keyboard should be able to navigate the site and fill out forms). For more information on how to make form fields accessible, reference the [World Wide Web Consortium’s \(W3C\) Techniques](#) for WCAG 2.0.
- **Tools & Resources to consider:**
 - To check if your site conforms with the most commonly accepted web accessibility standards (Section 508, WCAG 2.0 Level A, AA, and AAA), consider using an accessibility audit tool, such as [HTML CodeSniffer](#).
 - To check for the presence and quality of image alternate text (also referred to as “alt text”), use an accessibility audit tool or Search Engine Optimization (SEO) tool (e.g., the [Varvy SEO tool](#)). Assess the quality of alt text as well. Alt text should be meaningful, descriptive, and representative of the image. Alt text that repeats the text link or uses generic descriptions is not useful to screen reader users.
 - To check site accessibility for screen reader users, test key workflows using screen reader software (e.g., [NVDA software](#), which stands for NonVisual Desktop Access, is a free screen reader software for Windows. iOS users can use the built in [Voiceover](#) capabilities).
 - To test for conformance with WCAG 2.0 Level AA and AAA contrast ratio standards, use an online contrast checker tool (e.g., [WebAim's Wave tool](#)).
 - To enhance usability for keyboard users, manually check for tab order consistency, skip link navigation, and focus state. Use the Tab key to quickly and easily check all three on a given website. Hit Tab to go forward

or Shift + Tab to move backward. Skip link navigation (if available) should appear the first time you hit Tab. Skip link navigation allows keyboard users to jump straight to main content on the page. Focus state is a visual indication of tab selection. If it is not apparent which element of the page is selected, focus state is not visible. A site's focus state should be high contrast and visible at all times. As you tab through the site, the tab order should be logical, flowing from one element of a page to the next.

Figure 19. Tennessee's homepage complies with WCAG 2.0 AA contrast ratio standards. It uses dark text on light backgrounds and keeps the user focused on text by using few colors.



5. User Support

Definition: User Support refers to how the site handles help, alerts, and messaging for its users.

Background: Providing help at the right place and time in a user experience can be critical for end users on self-help sites. We assessed key aspects of user support including availability of global help, speed of page load, and error messaging.

During usability testing, the research team learned that users may have time constraints when searching for legal aid information, because they are using a computer at a public library or looking for help during a crisis. Page load speed, a key criterion in this focus area, can impact a user's ability to get information quickly.

Assessment Approach: Similar to the Accessibility focus area, the team assessed user support with a combination of automated tools and manual tests. Automated tools included [Google PageSpeed Insights](#) for testing page load speed on both desktop and mobile and the [Tota11y](#) Chrome extension, which was used to check heading levels. Other aspects of user support such as visibility and quality of help (e.g., contextual help, and/or dedicated FAQ/Site Help pages) was manually tested. The team reviewed key pages such as the homepage, the global utility navigation, and the search results page for assessing this area consistently across all sites.

High Impact Criteria for User Support:

- Generates clear, actionable, and timely error notifications.
- Provides access to help through in-line/contextual help (e.g., an in-line glossary or live chat feature), a help section (when appropriate), and/or FAQs and other support. Help documentation is written in the user's terminology (Plain Language).
- Uses appropriate heading tags: H1 is the first heading level and all heading tags follow a sequential, logical structure that reflects the page layout.

Findings:

Most sites supported users with consistent text link targets and error notifications. However, they did not provide adequate help to support a user's understanding of the site architecture, which would allow them to access needed information and resources more quickly.

- Heading tags did not consistently reflect the layout of the page. Headings were often nonconsecutive (e.g., jumped from h2 to h4 when one would expect an h3) and rarely had H1 as the first heading. Most sites (74%, n = 39) did not meet criteria for appropriate heading levels. See Figure 20 for an example of properly tagged, consecutive heading levels.

- Many sites did not provide contextual help (e.g., an in-line legal glossary), which may be available at different levels of a site’s architecture, and/or dedicated help pages (e.g., FAQs) (47%, n = 25 did not meet criteria). Just over half of the sites (52%, n = 28) provided at least one form of help; 43% (n = 23) provided either contextual help or a dedicated help page, but not both; and only 9% (n = 5) provided both forms of help.
- Error notifications, although usually generated, did not provide actionable advice for users (85%, n = 45 partially met criteria). For example, error messaging for misspelled words in searches often read: “There were no results found. Please modify your search.” This information does not provide users with helpful next steps, because it does not indicate the correct spelling, nor does it suggest alternative search terms.
- Only 8% (n = 4, fully met criteria) of sites met Google PageSpeed Insights standards for acceptable load speed on desktop. None of the sites met acceptable load speed standards on mobile. See [About PageSpeed Insights](#) for more details about the PageSpeed Score.

Figure 20. On Delaware’s homepage (DLAW) H1 is the first heading level and all heading tags appropriately reflect the layout of the page.

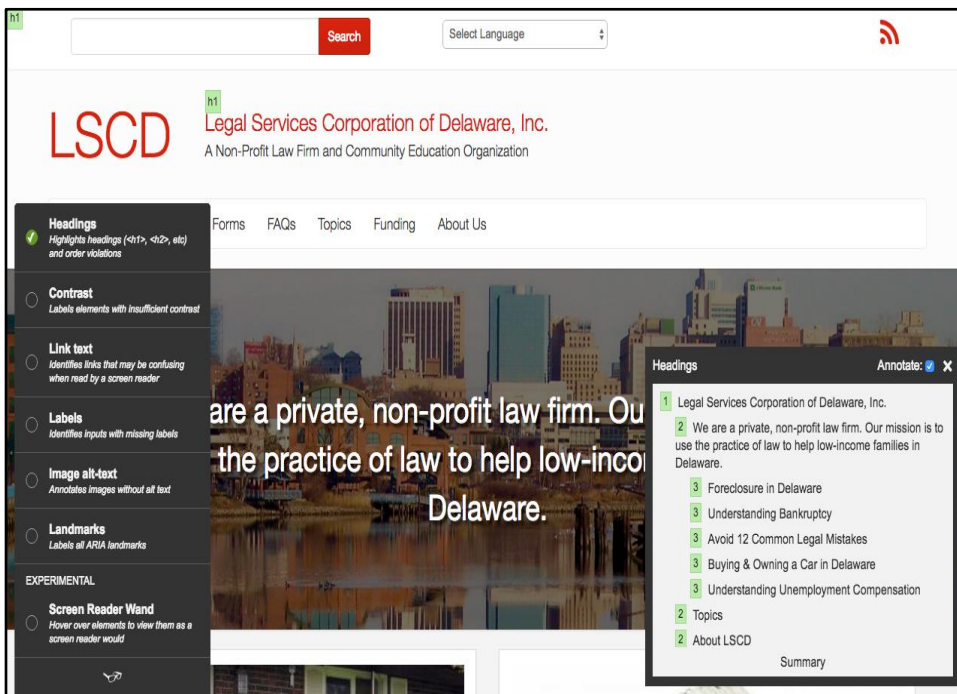


Figure 21. Maryland (Custom) provides users with contextual help in the form of a global callout to “Live Chat” and dedicated help pages such as the “Glossary”, available in the global utility navigation.

The screenshot displays the homepage of 'The People's Law Library of Maryland'. The header includes the site logo, navigation links (About, Contact Us, Glossary, RSS), and a search bar. A left sidebar contains a 'How Do I' section with links like 'Evaluate My Situation' and 'Find Alternatives to Court', as well as a 'feedback' section and language options (Español, Français, 简体中文, 한국어, Non-English Help). The main content area is titled 'Glossary' and lists legal terms starting with 'A', such as 'a/k/a', 'Ab Initio', 'Abandon', 'Absolute Divorce', 'Adjudicatory Hearing', 'Administrative Decision', and 'Administrator'. A 'Chat with us' callout box is overlaid on the right side, containing a survey with questions about education level, household income, gender, and race/ethnicity. A vertical 'LIVE Chat' button is visible on the far right edge.

Opportunities for Improving User Support:

- **Make heading tags (i.e., H1, H2, H3, etc.) reflect the layout of the page.** Do not skip heading levels, which can confuse users who navigate sites with a screen reader and make information hierarchy difficult to determine for sighted users. Refer back to Figure 20 for an example of how to use proper heading tags.
- **Provide contextual help** to support discovery of new or related information and help users problem-solve without navigating away from a page of interest. Some forms of contextual help (e.g., in-line links to related content or curated lists of related content) may require careful tagging of content and more complex backend code. However, other forms (e.g., an in-line legal glossary) require less effort to implement. See Figure 22 for an example of how some sites are providing contextual help.
- **Design robust help pages** if contextual help or dynamic site help is not possible. See Figure 23 for an example of a robust help page from a well-known web service that supports traditional search and task-based browsing.
- **Enhance forms to prevent errors** by using the right form field type and launching the correct keyboard for mobile device visitors.
 - If errors cannot be prevented, provide clear and actionable error messaging that notifies users that an error exists and tells them how to resolve it.
- **Tools & Resources to consider:**
 - Use an automated accessibility tool (e.g., [Tota11y](#)) to check sites for appropriate heading levels.
 - Use a speed and performance optimization tool (e.g., [Google PageSpeed Insights](#)) to check page load speed on desktop and mobile experiences.
 - Reference a mobile design pattern library (e.g., <http://pptrns.com/>) for design inspiration for components such as [coachmarks](#) (a form of contextual help).
 - Utilize an in-line legal glossary (e.g., [OpenAdvocate ReadClearly](#)) to help pro se litigants understand legal terminology without navigating away from an article.

Figure 22. Idaho (DLAW) and a few other states across the network use the ReadClearly plugin to provide an in-line glossary for users. This is considered a form of contextual help because it allows users to solve a problem without interrupting or leaving the experience (e.g., taking the user to another page).

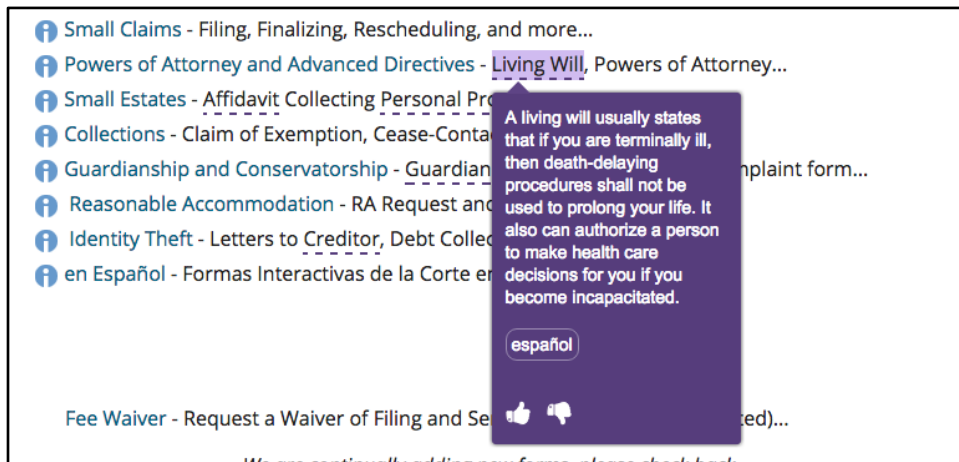
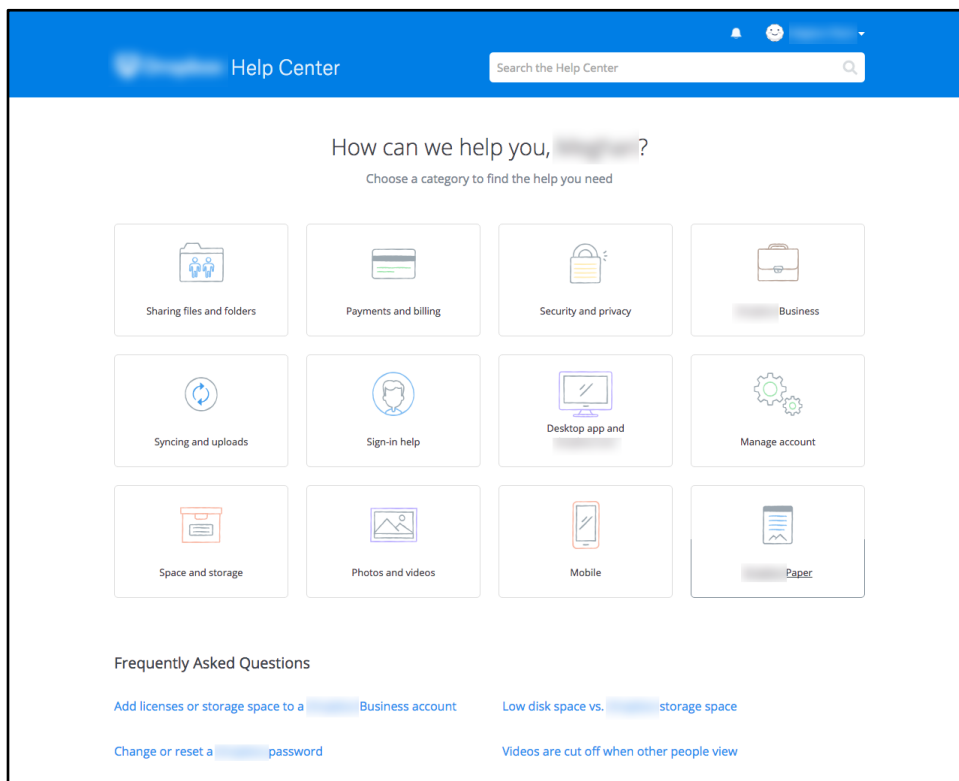


Figure 23. This Help Center for a leading file sharing experience allows users to find help through traditional search or exploration of task-based issues.



6. Mobile Friendly

Definition: This focus area considers the extent to which the site supports varying screen sizes, particularly smaller, mobile screens.

Background: Mobile access was on website managers' radars. Three-quarters (75%, n = 30) of them reported that their site was accessible on mobile devices in some way. Template providers shared that mobile use accounted for half of the traffic to legal services websites, confirming the importance of attending to this focus area.

We observed during usability testing that users had difficulty completing tasks for the statewide sites we reviewed (PA and MD) on a mobile device. For example, reading a content page was difficult if the content did not sit within the mobile device window (i.e., the user was forced to scroll left and right or attempt to pinch and zoom to get the entire page in view). With this background in mind, the research team defined procedures for assessment that mirrored a typical user's path on a mobile device: navigate from home to a topic, to a legal issue, and then to a content article page.

Assessment Approach: The data from website managers' survey was reviewed to better understand each state's approach to mobile support. The research team checked to see that each state had a mobile site and used a mix of automated tools and manual procedures to determine if the site was responsive/adaptive and to what extent it supported key workflows.

Tools:

- Touch (or tap) target size was assessed using [Google's PageSpeed Insights tool](#).

High Impact Criteria for Mobile Friendly:

- Availability of key workflows (content and functionality is easy to find and use on mobile devices).
- Links and buttons are designed for touch interaction (also called touch target or tap target).

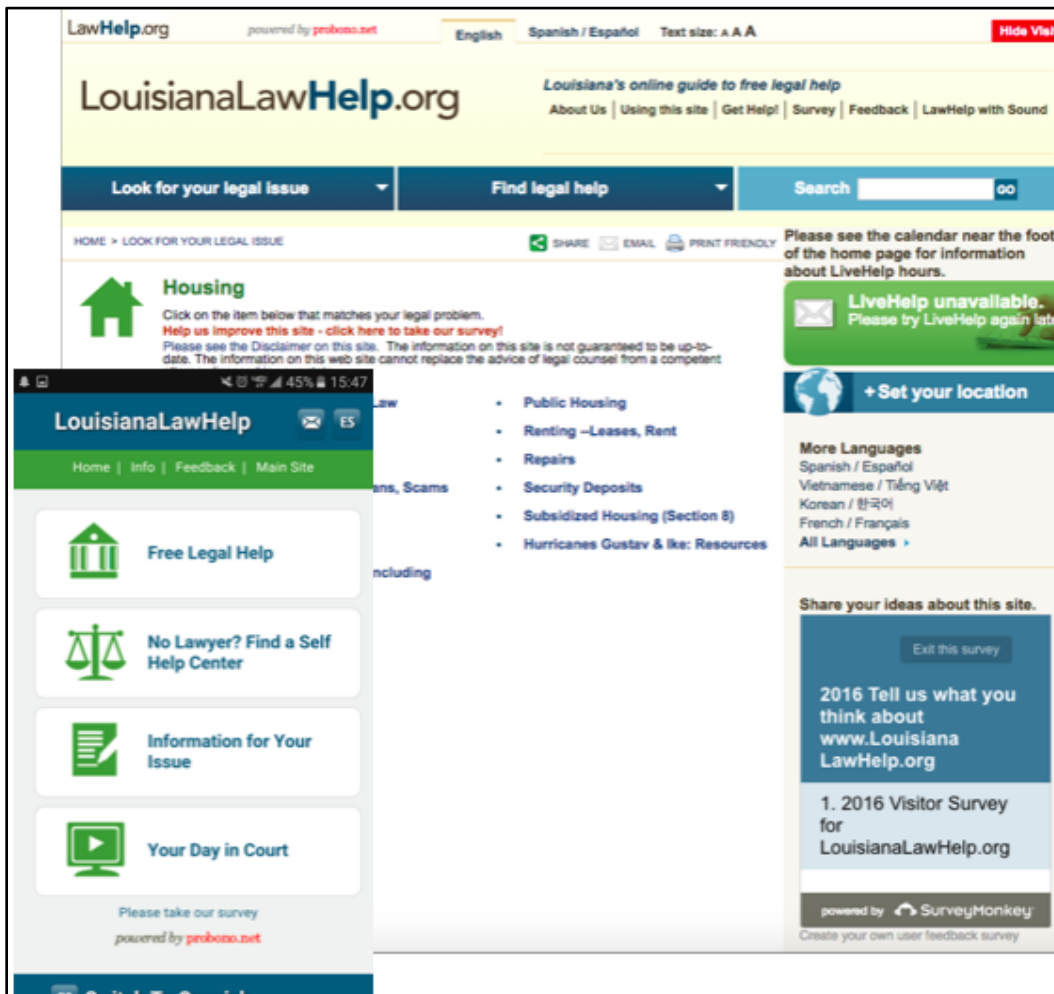
Findings:

Most sites were mobile friendly in some way. The mobile experience for many sites could be improved by increasing the tap target size (i.e., the tapping area dedicated to objects and content on a page when using a mobile device with a touch screen). Some other key findings include:

- 74% (n = 39, fully met criteria) of sites were optimized for mobile use either with a dedicated mobile, or m.dot site, or with a responsive/adaptive site.

- 51% (n = 27, fully met criteria) of sites displayed the same content in portrait and landscape orientation.
- 85% (n = 37, partially met criteria; n = 8, did not meet criteria) of sites did not meet Google's recommended size for tap targets (e.g., text links, buttons), indicating that links are difficult to accurately tap on the mobile versions of most sites.
- Eight mobile optimized sites were m.dot sites. Of these, half (n = 4) did not provide a link to the desktop version, which is an important backup for users if they are unable to find their content on the mobile version of the site.
- The LawHelp template provided a consistent and easy-to-navigate path from main topic to subtopic on the mobile experience.

Figure 24. Louisiana's mobile experience (LawHelp) provided adequately sized tap targets and prioritized access to key workflows (e.g., finding a lawyer and finding legal information). A screenshot of the mobile version is inset on the bottom left of the figure below, with the desktop version of the site behind it for comparison.



Opportunities for improving Mobile Friendly:

- **Provide a mobile enhanced experience.** Statewide sites should be available to and enhanced for users on a variety of viewports, including mobile, tablet, and desktop. See Figure 24 for an example of a statewide site with a mobile enhanced experience. Moving forward, states should consider enhanced mobile access as a part of any redesign effort at the same time that they design for desktop, rather than designing for desktop and trying to scale down to mobile. This strategy streamlines content and adds the most important features and functions to a site along the way.
- **Increase tap target size so that users can access all links and buttons.** Not only should tap targets be large enough for finger tapping, but there should be enough separation between tap targets so that users do not mistakenly tap on a nearby link or button. See Figure 25 for an example of a statewide site that uses appropriately sized tap targets in its mobile experience.
- **Provide link to desktop version (m.dot sites only).** If there is a mobile website, sites should provide a link to the desktop version of the site. Some users may be more familiar with the desktop experience and thus rely on this version to find content if they could not find it on the mobile version. See Figure 26 for an example of how a statewide site currently incorporates a link to its desktop version on its mobile site.
- **Take context into consideration.** Users are likely to access legal aid websites at the library or at home, with limited time or computer literacy skills, or on a mobile phone with small screens and limited bandwidth. Sites across the network can use mobile friendly design (i.e., clean layout, minimalist architecture, fast load speed) to combat these barriers to use.
- **Tools & Resources to consider:**
 - Reference a mobile design pattern library (e.g., <http://pptrns.com/>) for design inspiration for components such as navigation, search, filters, libraries, etc.
 - Use a performance optimization tool (e.g., [Google PageSpeed Insights](#)) to detect if certain touch targets (e.g., buttons, links, or form fields) may be too small or too close for a user to easily tap on a touch screen.
 - Shortly after we completed the Detailed UX Assessment, Google released a [Mobile Friendly Test](#), which provides a more detailed report on a site's mobile user experience. Reference next steps from the Mobile Friendly Test report for more information about how to size tap targets appropriately, reduce page load time, and design for a mobile viewport.

Figure 25. Kansas' mobile experience provides appropriately sized tap targets and sufficient separation between tap targets so that users do not mistakenly click on a nearby link or button.

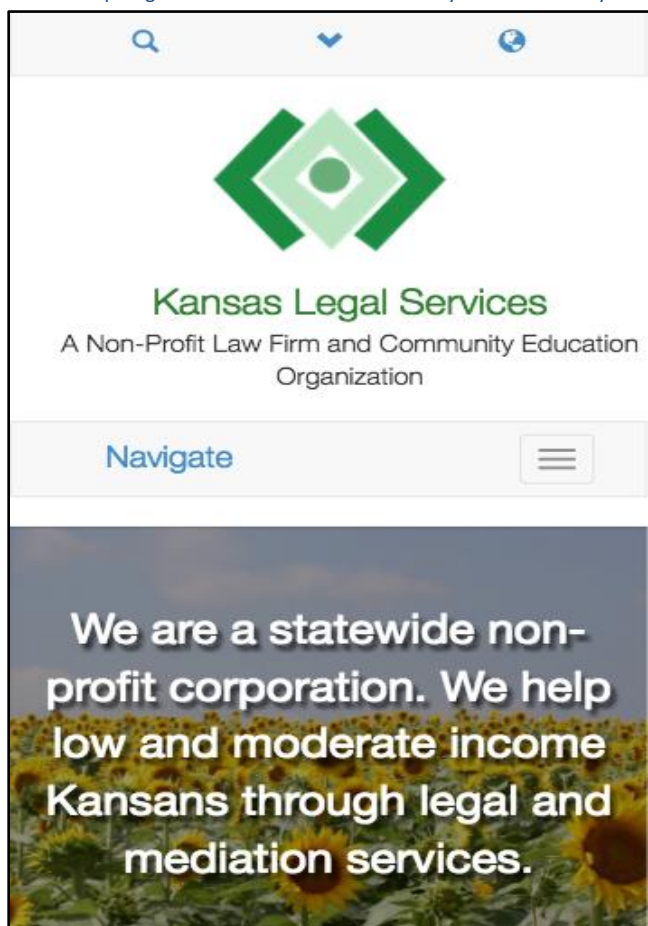
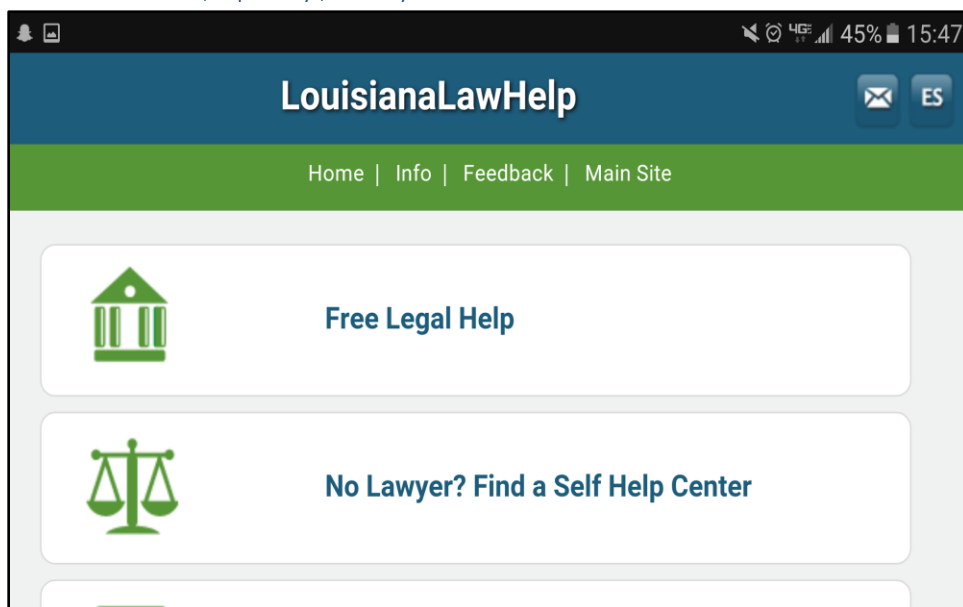


Figure 26. Louisiana's mobile experience provides a link to the "Main Site" or desktop experience to help users find additional content, or pathways, that may not be available on the mobile site.



7. Community Engagement

Definition: Community Engagement considers how a site connects with users (e.g., feedback, SEO) and how site managers engage with other site managers and legal organizations across the network.

Background: The goal of this focus area was to understand how sites and website managers engaged with their community partners (e.g., libraries and courts, other website managers, and other legal aid services). Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a component of this focus area because making the site (and site content) findable through search is critical to connecting people in need of legal help with the site. Community Engagement also looks at how states gather direct feedback from users (e.g., survey, usability testing, onsite feedback form, etc.), or indirect data from site use (e.g., Google Analytics). A recently completed doctoral dissertation that included interviews and surveys with website managers highlighted that they lacked a connection with the end users of their sites, pointing to a big opportunity for this focus area across the network.¹

Approach Assessment: To assess Community Engagement, the research team referenced the survey responses from website managers regarding who they collaborated with in the justice community (e.g., courts, public libraries, etc.). The research team also used an automated tool to assess and understand how easy or difficult it is for users to connect to the site.

Tools: The [Website Grader tool](#) was used to sample SEO components from each site.

High Impact Criteria for Community Engagement:

- Site has a mechanism to collect and incorporate user feedback (e.g., usability testing, feedback form, analytics).
- Site managers collaborate with a variety of organizations in the community (i.e., courthouses, public libraries, and other statewide sites).
- Use of meaningful, appropriate page titles, meta descriptions, heading tags, and sitemaps to increase search engine optimization (SEO).

¹ Gorham-Oscilowski, U. (2015). "It's not just all about the technology": Understanding the role of statewide legal information websites in expanding access to justice in the United States. Dissertation. College Park, MD.

Findings:

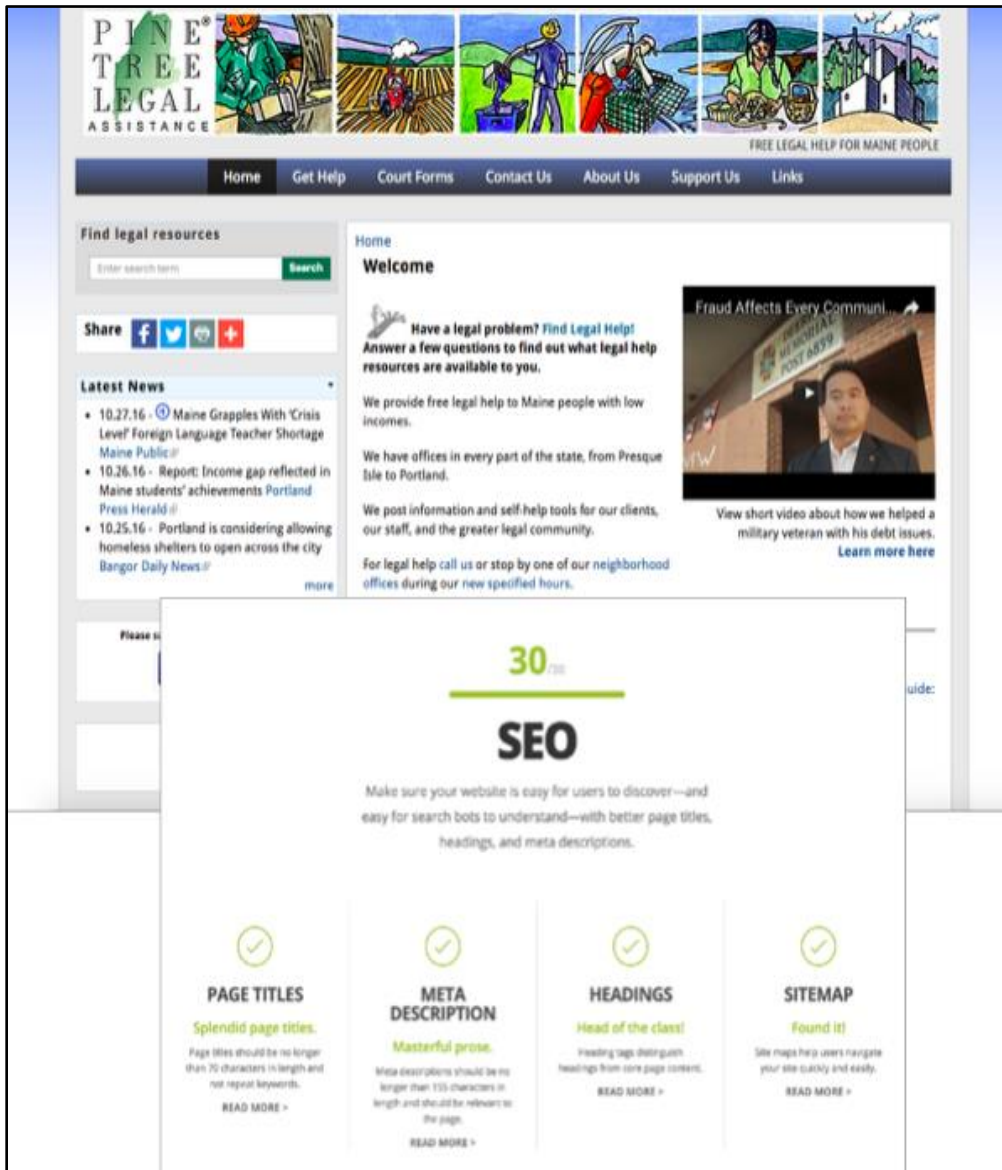
The majority of states indicated that they collaborated with other legal aid organizations to share practices, create content, and sometimes leverage code in order to add features to their sites (particularly for sites that used Drupal). However, the research team found that content is often not optimized to support getting to the legal aid sites from a search engine like Google. Only 8% (n = 4, fully met criteria) of statewide sites met the minimum guidelines for SEO defined by [Website Grader](#).

Website managers using the DLA and LawHelp templates reported that their organizations primarily collaborated with courthouses to reach their target audience (84%, n = 16 of LawHelp sites; 80%, n = 4 of DLA sites). Modified DLA and Custom site managers reported collaboration with a wider variety of organizations to drive traffic to their sites. Most of the Modified DLA site managers (80%, n = 4) reported collaboration with courthouses, public libraries, and other state sites. Similarly, most of the Custom site managers reported collaboration with courthouses (80%, n = 8), public libraries (90%, n = 9), and other state sites (70%, n = 7).

Website managers reported using onsite surveys and website analytics to gather information about site use. All but one survey respondent reported that their sites collected website analytics to better understand site use (97%, n = 38). However, only half (52%, n = 20) reported having a process in place to analyze that data. Site managers of all site types reported using Google Analytics and page views as their primary method of analytics. They collected this data at varying time intervals, ranging from an as-needed basis to weekly or continuously.

Website managers from 23 states reported collecting some form of user feedback. Over half of these respondents reported collecting feedback through surveys (52%, n = 12) and feedback forms (57%, n = 13). A few website managers mentioned other methods of eliciting feedback including Live Chat, onsite comment feature, and focus groups. These latter approaches are ideal for connecting more directly with end users. Sites should also utilize interviews, observations, and usability testing to help them better understand their audience and make more informed design decisions for their site and its content.

Figure 27. Maine's site (Modified DLAW) met all minimum guidelines for SEO.



Opportunities for improving Community Engagement:

- **Elicit feedback from end users regularly and directly.** Sites that obtain feedback from end users on a regular basis will be able to make user-centered design decisions.
- **Continue to collaborate with local courts and legal organizations.** Look for opportunities to streamline and reuse high-quality content across the network when appropriate.
- **Review and adopt leading techniques for SEO.** (e.g., decrease page title length, use short meta descriptions, use tags to distinguish headings from body content, and include a site map). Careful attention to meta-tagging makes it easier for users to find the content they need, regardless of

whether they are already on a state site or just starting an organic search (e.g., a Google search). See Figure 27 for an example of a statewide site that meets all minimum guidelines for SEO.

- **Tools & Resources to consider:**

- Use a tool to check fundamental SEO components to identify big issues and establish a baseline measurement (e.g., [Website Grader](#)).
- Use an online guide to get started with SEO basics (e.g., [Google's SEO Starter Guide](#)).
- Add a feedback form to your website (e.g., [Usabilla](#), [Usersnap](#)). LawHelp templates provide a built-in feedback feature.
- Develop consistent practices for analyzing website analytics and other user feedback. Consider collaborating with others in the network to develop analysis tools and a dashboard.
- Find ways to connect more directly with users and gather qualitative data through interviews and observations and/or usability testing. Consider a protocol like the ones in Appendix A. If face-to-face testing is not feasible consider remote, unmoderated usability testing (e.g., [UserZoom](#), [Loop11](#)).

DESIGN

When the researchers assessed the sites for the usability of their design, they focused on how the site's information was organized, allowing users to navigate through it (i.e., Ease of Navigation). They also considered how visual elements were displayed and the ways in which components, like icons, supported users in completing tasks (i.e., Visual Design & Iconography).

The sections below provide key findings from the assessment; screenshots and examples of top performing sites; and a list of tools, resources, and open opportunities for states to explore for improving Ease of Navigation, and Visual Design & Iconography.

8. Ease of Navigation

Definition: Ease of Navigation considers to what extent a site allows users to move through its content, features, and functionality in order to complete key tasks.

Background: The research team first observed end users in usability testing to understand how they accomplished key tasks on the statewide websites to inform our understanding of how real users would engage with the site. The participants approached navigating these information-dense websites by locating a topic or legal issue via links on the homepage, search, or from the primary navigation. They expected to find relevant content (e.g., information, lawyers, or forms) contextually within a topic or issue section of the website. When users were looking for this kind of content, they did not find it if it was available in the left or right rail of the sites, likely due to banner blindness. Banner blindness is a tendency to ignore these regions of a site due to a historical placement of things like ads in these regions. Sites that adopt layouts that result in banner blindness can negatively impact users' ability to navigate a site.

The researchers also observed users struggling with the two primary navigation options, "Understand Your Legal Issue" and "Find Legal Help" on the LawHelp template's desktop experience. Participants expected to see the same kind of information within each section, suggesting that the labeling was unclear. The research team also observed lower task completion rates when participants encountered lists of content that were long or had no clear organization. Users found the long lists of articles overwhelming. They scanned the list on the first page in view only (they did not use pagination to explore the continuation of the lists on additional pages). If they could not quickly determine which article was most relevant, they gave up.

To assess navigation that reflects these observations, the following criteria were included in the User Experience Assessment: navigation architecture and site structure, robust search functionality, and ability to scan and navigate from content sections of the site. In addition, the team reviewed the LawHelp and DLAW

template capabilities for navigation to understand the flexibility and architecture options for primary and secondary navigation.

Assessment Approach: The researchers assessed the sites' navigation by examining the consistency, hierarchy, purpose, and style of various types of navigation including global, primary, secondary, tertiary, utility, and footer navigation (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). In order to assess navigation consistently across all sites, the team followed a predetermined set of task-based procedures. For example, to determine if a site had clear pathways to content (i.e., clear and visible information architecture), the team navigated from Home to the Custody article listing page or other article listing page.

High Impact Criteria for Ease of Navigation:

- Each form of navigation has consistent placement, a clear purpose, and distinct levels.
- Allows users to search from anywhere in the experience (i.e., global search capabilities).
- Clearly indicates a user's location within the site hierarchy.

Findings:

The global navigation was consistently placed on 94% (n = 50, fully met criteria) of the sites. Consistent placement of global navigation gives users the option to return to the homepage or navigate to a new page at any point during the experience, so it is very positive that statewide sites met this criterion. Consistent placement also helps users familiarize themselves with the site hierarchy. Sites also did well in providing key content and workflows to users from the homepage on 87% (n = 46, fully met criteria) of statewide sites.

Based on this assessment, the greatest opportunities for improvement in Ease of Navigation were clarity and differentiation of secondary navigation, global search functionality, and stepped workflows. On most sites, secondary and tertiary navigation did not have a clear purpose and were not easy to distinguish from the main navigation (60%, n = 32 did not meet criteria). For example, on LawHelp sites, the placement of secondary navigation (in the left rail) on subtopic pages did not appear tied to the content (see Figure 3). On many sites, agnostic of template, use of extraneous links and excessive content in the left and right rail made it difficult to discern contextual navigation and key calls to action. Although sites did not typically contain banner ads, the extraneous information placed in those regions may have had a similar effect on the user, leading them to ignore these areas.

The assessment found that search functionality on most sites was very limited. While search results were often relevant to the term we searched for, they were rarely displayed in a meaningful order to help users find intended content. Additionally, most results pages did not have a filtering mechanism to help users narrow

down their search results. This was the case for 94% of sites (n = 39, partially met criteria; n = 11, did not meet criteria).

Only 6% (n = 3, fully met criteria) of sites had forgiving search tools (e.g., the results offered corrected spelling if the user misspelled a search term). Most sites (87%, n = 46 did not meet criteria) did not generate actionable error messages when a search term was misspelled. For example, a typical error message read: “There were no results found. Please modify your search.” This information does not provide helpful next steps, because it does not indicate the correct spelling, nor does it suggest alternative search terms.

As part of Ease of Navigation, the researchers also assessed whether or not sites indicated a user’s progress in stepped workflows (e.g., an online application). Just under one-fifth of sites (19%, n = 10) of sites used an onsite, step-by-step workflow to assist users in applying for services, or finding help or content. Of these ten sites, five (9%, n = 5) displayed the total number of steps in the process and accurately indicated the user’s progress, fully meeting the criteria. Many sites did not utilize stepped workflows at all.

Figure 28. Michigan's site (Custom) uses breadcrumbs and an obvious focus state to help users understand where they are in the site's hierarchy. The site supports ease of navigation with clear, succinct, and easy to distinguish navigation headings. These features make it easier for users to determine where information lives within the site.



Opportunities for improving Ease of Navigation:

- **Use clear and distinct navigation labels** to help site visitors quickly identify the correct section of the site that meets their needs (see Figure 28 for an example of a simple and user-centric navigation).
- **Clarify purpose and visual connectivity of secondary and tertiary navigation.** Secondary and tertiary navigation, if available, should be easy to distinguish from primary navigation, have a specific purpose, and be clearly connected to the body content (see Figure 29 for an example of how top performing sites distinguish secondary and tertiary navigation from primary navigation).
- **Provide a robust global search feature** which supports:
 - Auto-suggest functionality; see Figure 30 for an example of West Virginia's (Custom) auto-suggest feature in action.
 - Search input forgiveness (i.e., search suggestions and results for misspelled search terms); see Figure 31 for an example of how Massachusetts (Custom) handles misspelled search terms.
 - Sorting (e.g., by relevancy or alpha); see Figure 32 for an example of West Virginia's (Custom) sorting mechanism. Sites should present lists in a logical, identifiable order (e.g., lists of articles) to facilitate scanning, help users determine how information is organized, and empower them to reorganize information in a way that is meaningful to them.
 - Enhanced filtering mechanisms; see Figure 33 for an example of Michigan's (Custom) search filters.
- **Implement stepped workflows with progress indicators** and/or provide "next steps" when appropriate for a more guided user experience. For example, West Virginia's (Custom) online intake displays the total number of steps in the application process and indicates the current step (see Figure 34 and Figure 35).

- **Present lists in a logical, identifiable order** (e.g., lists of articles) to facilitate scanning. This helps users determine where to find the most useful information.
- **Tools & Resources to consider:**
 - Visit [Michigan Legal Help](#) or [Legal Aid of West Virginia](#) to view great examples of secondary navigation from within the network of statewide sites.
 - Reference Nielsen Norman Group for [right rail design tips](#).
 - Reference Nielsen Norman Group to better understand [computer literacy of adults in the U.S.](#) and how it impacts the way we design navigation.

Figure 29. The purpose of Massachusetts' primary navigation (horizontal navigation) is to help users select a self-help topic, and the purpose of the secondary navigation (left rail) is to help users identify a specific legal issue within a topic. Navigation headings are clear and distinct.

MassLegalHelp
Promoting justice in Massachusetts with legal information

Search

BASIC LEGAL INFORMATION

Children and Families Consumer & Debt Criminal Records (CRR) Disability Domestic Violence Employment and Unemployment Health and Mental Health Housing and Homelessness Immigration Income and Benefits School

Site Search: GO

English » Basic Legal Information » Children and Families » Custody

Custody

Print | Email

Listen

There are different types of custody arrangements which are appropriate in different situations. These custody arrangements are defined by law.

Sole legal custody

Sole legal custody means that one parent has the right and responsibility to make major decisions regarding the child's welfare, including matters of education, medical care and emotional, moral and religious development.

Shared legal custody

Shared legal custody means continued mutual responsibility and involvement by both parents in major decisions regarding the child's welfare, including matters of education, medical care, and emotional, moral and religious development.

Sole physical custody

Sole physical custody means that a child resides with and is under the supervision of one parent, subject to reasonable visitation by the other parent, unless the court decides that such visitation would not be in the best interest of the child.

Shared physical custody

You have the right to an interpreter

Find Legal Aid

You may be able to get free legal help from your local legal aid program.

[Find Legal Aid](#)

Helpful Links

[Planning for Shared Parenting: A Guide for Parents Living Apart](#)

Ask a Law Librarian

TF it's

Figure 30. As the user starts typing in the search field, West Virginia’s site uses auto-suggest functionality to narrow down the search results.

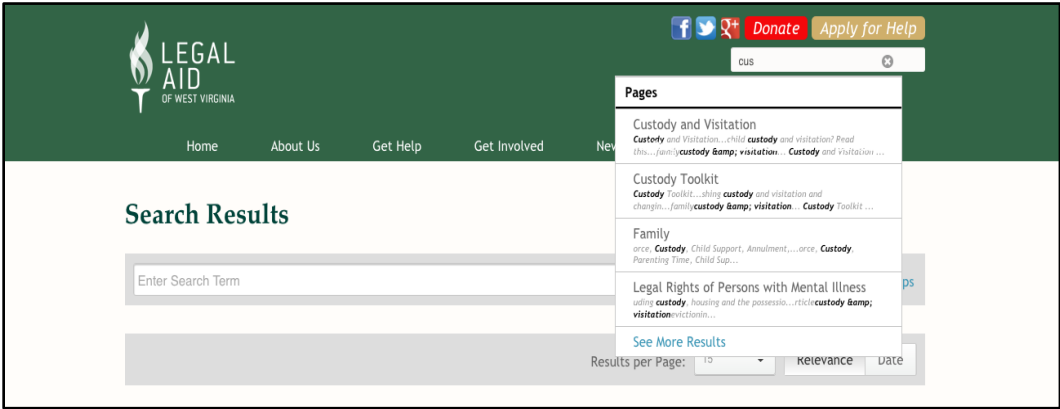


Figure 31. Massachusetts (Custom) uses the Google Custom Search Engine integration, which helps users find what they need even if they spell a word wrong. This page displays a suggested search term “Custody” in place of “Custdy” and the results for the corrected search term.

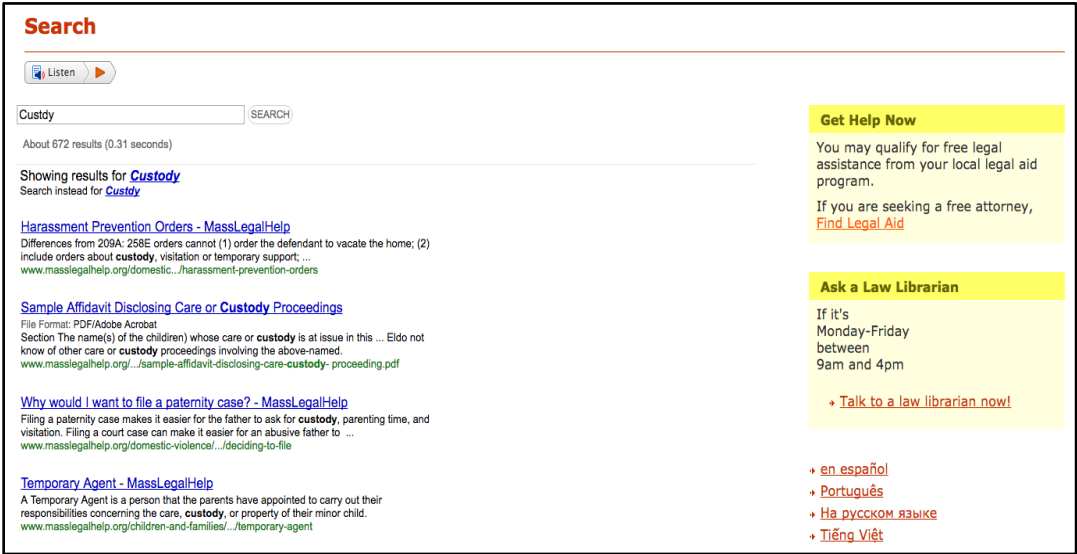


Figure 32. The West Virginia site allows users to sort search results by “Relevance” or “Date”. The button style indicates that the list is currently sorted by “Relevance”.



Figure 33. Michigan (Custom) allows users to filter search results by “Content Type” and “Legal Issue”.

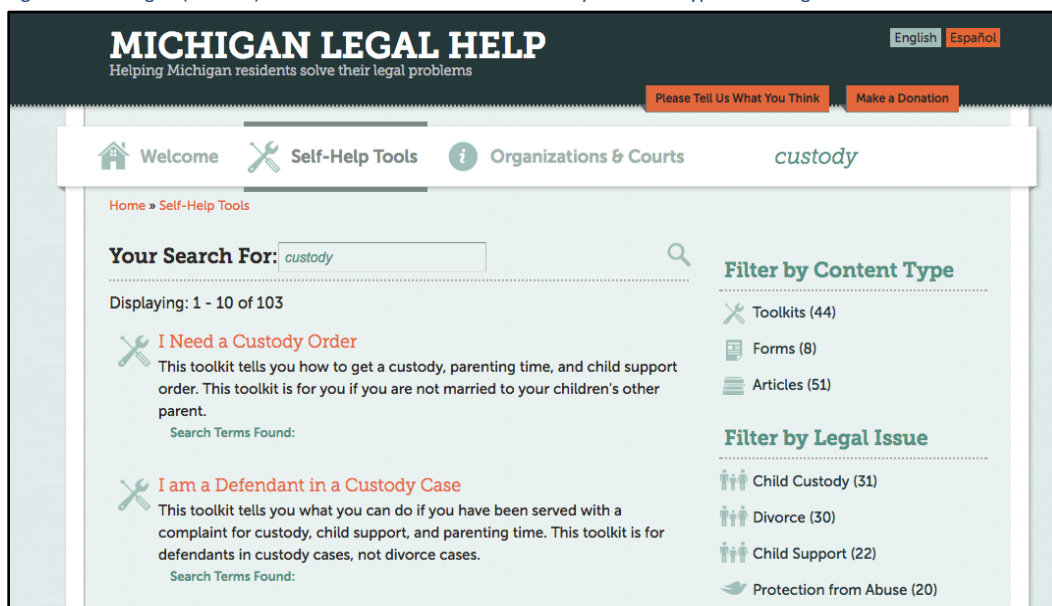


Figure 34. West Virginia's (Custom) online intake form displays the total number of steps in the process and indicates the user's progress by increasing the font size of the current step.

Online Intake

Welcome

Eligibility

Page 1

Page 2

Page 3

Page 4

Page 5

Page 6

Review

Do you have a safe phone number where we can call you?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you have a deadline or hearing within the next 10 days?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you already submitted an Online Application for this same legal issue?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Previous Next

Figure 35. Puerto Rico offers a stepped workflow survey for collecting feedback.

INICIO

COMPARTIR CORREO ELECTRÓNICO PARA IMPRIMIR

¡Gracias por ser parte de ayudalegalpr.org! Espere unos segundos mientras preparamos nuestra encuesta.

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9. Visual Design & Iconography

Definition: Visual Design & Iconography considers how a site is designed to enhance usability (e.g., how consistent, representative iconography facilitates navigation).

Background: During usability testing with end users, the research team observed that users had a difficult time finding key content (e.g., links to forms or referral services) if pages have extraneous content, or if information is not clearly tied to the main content region of the page where users were focused. Website managers and template providers shared that content was the main focus of the sites. The team defined criteria in this focus area to assess how visual design impacts findability of information, task completion, and overall usability.

Assessment Approach: Several members of research team, including User Experience researchers and designers, assessed criteria for this focus area. The layout, alignment, and consistency of design elements across all states and templates were assessed to identify opportunities to improve usability through design.

High Impact Criteria for Visual Design & Iconography:

- Aesthetics and interaction design enhance usability.
- Page elements are left-aligned to facilitate scanning and readability.
- Design elements have a consistent treatment and placement throughout the experience.

Findings:

Nearly all sites failed to use visual and interaction design effectively. Sites scored lowest in this criteria on average compared to all other criteria. The exceptions included two custom websites (Illinois and Michigan) that presented a modern aesthetic that did not detract from the overall user experience. All LawHelp sites presented a consistent visual experience with minimal differences in interaction design. One noted exception is the New York website which leveraged a unique tabbed approach to organize legal issue content (see Figure 36). While there was variation amongst DLAW and Modified DLAW sites, as with all LawHelp sites, they did not conform to current design standards or interaction patterns to help users complete tasks. There is tremendous opportunity for improvement across the network of sites in this focus area.

More than half of the sites had properly aligned page elements (59%, n = 31, fully met criteria) on the Family topic page and first onsite article about Custody. Similarly, over half of the statewide sites (62%, n = 33, fully met criteria) used visual hierarchy to successfully differentiate and call attention to important elements on the page (e.g., key calls to action). Only 6% (n = 3, did not meet criteria) of sites had critical alignment issues that

impacted usability (e.g., center-aligned body text). However, the overall visual design and layout of the sites should be improved to facilitate scanning. In particular, layout and spacing, although sufficient on 38% (n = 20, fully met criteria) of sites, could be improved across the network to facilitate scanning and readability.

Although icons and patterns on most of the sites (85%, n = 45, partially met criteria) did not detract from the usability of the experience, they could be leveraged more effectively to enhance the user experience. Many of the sites used inconsistent or outdated icon styles that did not enhance usability and findability of content.

Figure 36. The New York LawHelp site uses a unique tabbed feature to organize the three paths a user might want to explore (Know Your Rights, Going to Court, and Find a Lawyer) for a particular topic.

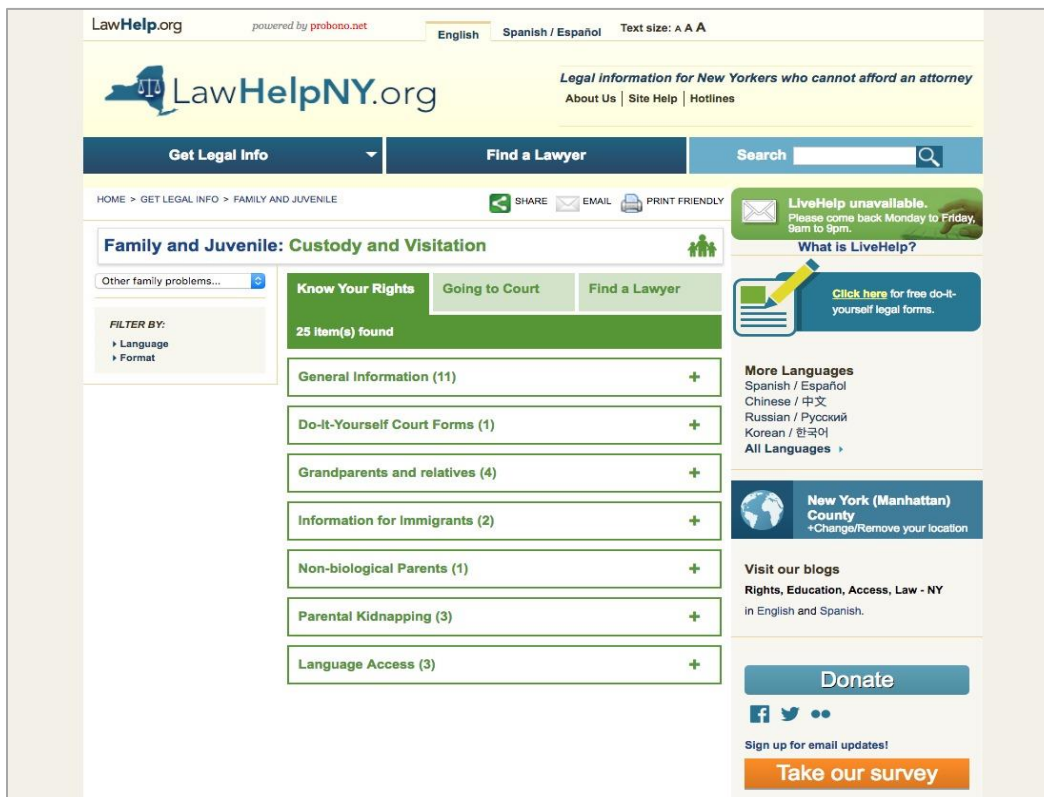
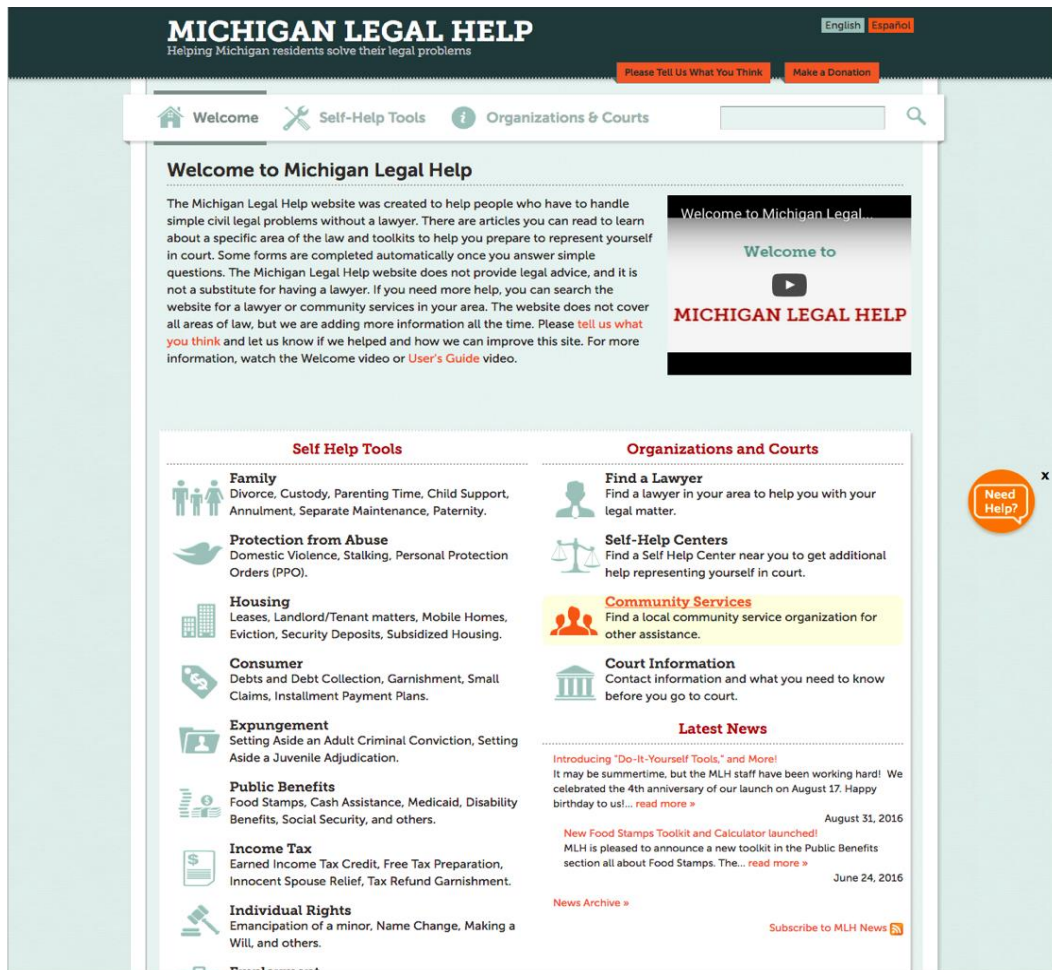


Figure 37. Michigan's homepage (Custom) aided information gathering by applying principles of visual hierarchy, supported wayfinding with appropriate icons, and facilitated scanning with attention to spacing.



Opportunities for improving Visual Design & Iconography:

- **Use modern design and interaction** to enhance usability. Template and custom websites should consult with designers to create an experience that meets the needs and expectations of site visitors. In general, sites should move toward a simple, clean layout with a balance of content and whitespace.
- **Update the icon library and use icons consistently** to enhance recognition of recurring topics or features throughout a site. This could be done at the statewide network level, so that all sites have access to a universal set of icons. At a minimum, states should consider consistent icon use across legal aid sites in their state network to support users as they move across state and program sites (see Figure 37). Icons can increase findability of important links and help users differentiate between types of content, such as articles, videos, and other forms of media. They also create natural touch areas on mobile devices that are generally larger than text links and thus easier to access by touch.

- **Streamline design patterns and styles** (e.g., button style, graphics, and links), so that users can scan the experience and quickly decode the meaning of styles. (see Figure 38).
- **Use principles of visual hierarchy** to differentiate and call attention to important page elements (see Figure 39).
- **Increase space between design elements** and remove any unnecessary elements to de-clutter site pages and enhance the layout for consumption (see Figure 40). This is also in-line with encouraging mobile friendly site design (refer back to Mobile Friendly section).
- **Tools & Resources to consider:**
 - View the Design Resources section of this project's toolkit (on LSC's website) for design examples Concepts and examples of modern iconography for the legal aid community.
 - Collaborate within and among the statewide network to create a modern legal services-specific icon library.
 - See online icon libraries (e.g., [the noun project](#)) for an example of updated icons that apply style consistently.
 - See [Legal Services of Northern California's website](#) for an example site that leverages visual design and iconography principles to enhance usability.

Figure 38. The visual style for Illinois' homepage (Custom) is a top performer. The site uses consistent styles for links, headers, body copy, and other page elements. There is a good balance of white space and features/content.



Figure 39. Focal points of the experience on Kansas' (DLAW) referral services page (e.g., important actions and ways to access each main section of the site) are visually and experientially differentiated from other site content. For example, the chat bubble in the bottom right corner has a specific color and button treatment.

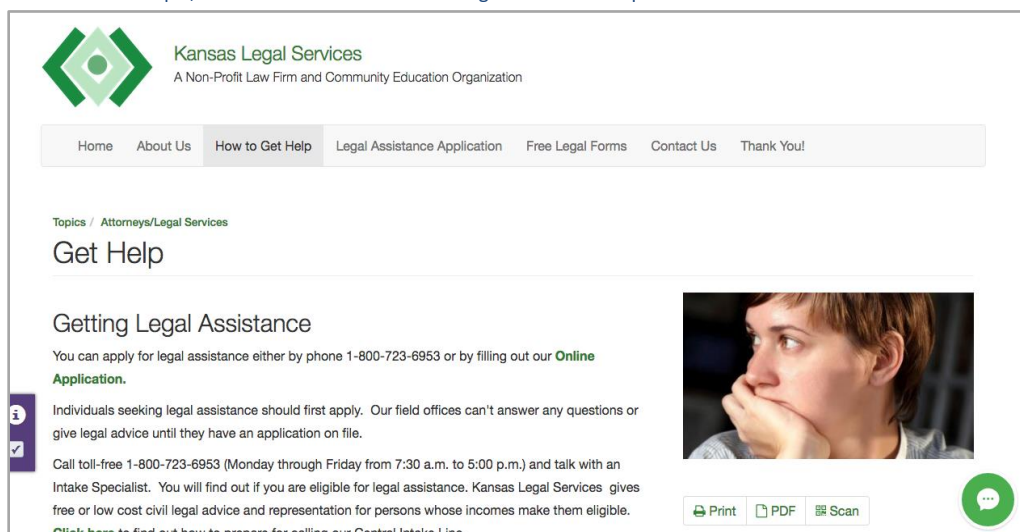
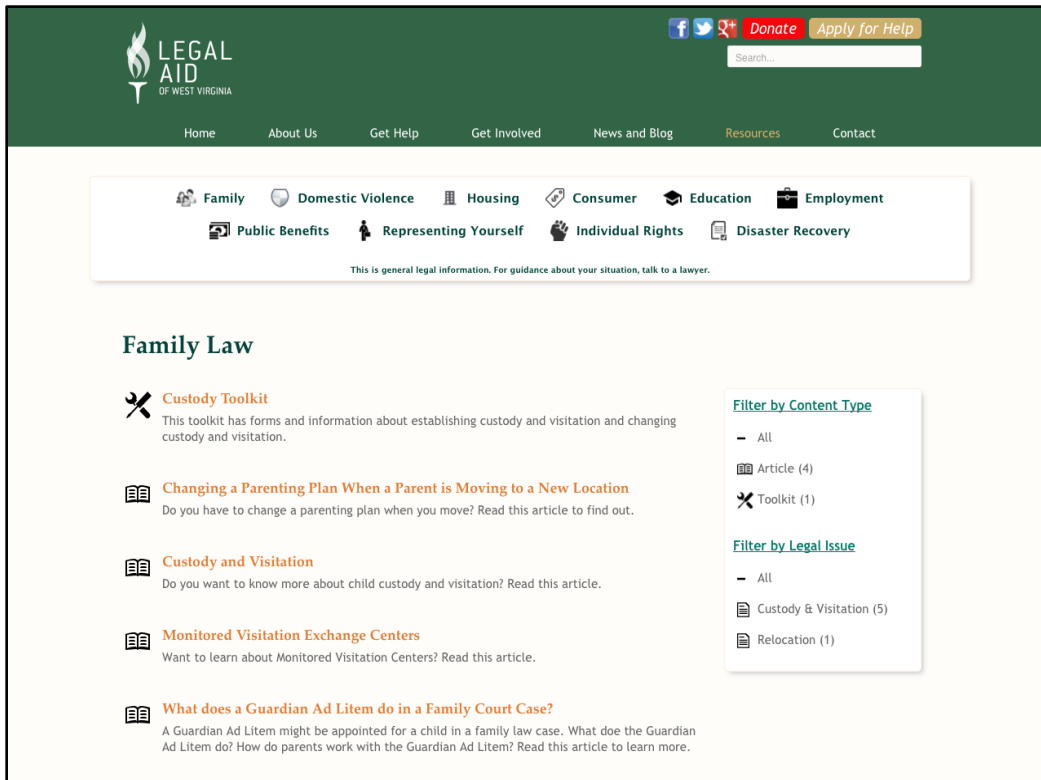


Figure 40. The Custody subtopic page on West Virginia's site (Custom) utilizes appropriate micro-space (the space found within words and similar elements) and macro-space (the space found between major elements) white space principles. There is no unnecessary or extraneous content on the page.



CONCLUSION

Overall, the detailed assessment of the statewide network of legal aid websites highlighted sites that performed well in specific aspects of the nine focus areas: Plain Language, Language Access, Content Presentation, Accessibility, User Support, Mobile Friendly, Community Engagement, Ease of Navigation, and Visual Design & Iconography. No sites fully met all criteria for the assessment, but a few standout sites included Illinois, Michigan, and West Virginia. These sites not only met a majority of the baseline usability criteria, but also had visually appealing, modern design elements that ultimately enhanced both usability and the end user experience.

A modern online user experience relies less on text and traditional navigation hierarchies, and more on the dynamic and contextual nature of the Web as we know it today – one that helps users identify what it is they are looking for and allows them to take action. The experiences users come to expect on devices of all sizes are fast, simple, and personalized, as if the site already knows what the user came to find. Legal aid sites are no different. Legal aid sites and the templates they originate from should reflect the same kinds of interactions users experience elsewhere. They should put relevant content front and center, and support task-based browsing so users can find, understand, and act upon the rich content these sites provide to address their personal legal concerns.

Most sites across the network were information dense (i.e., contained long lists of onsite and/or offsite links). Some sites like Illinois (Custom), Michigan (Custom), West Virginia (Custom) and the newly launched [Legal Services of Northern California site](#) (which was not part of this assessment) achieved the right balance of content presentation by providing a limited number of articles that were easily consumable. Particularly on Legal Services of Northern California, finding a legal issue is simple, and interaction design is leveraged to help the user navigate the site. Every piece of content follows the same workflow (content > additional resources / forms > need more, contact us). There is no extraneous information and visual design is used to enhance the user experience (e.g., icons are meaningful even without the text to aid comprehension).

All three of the standout sites were custom sites, meaning that they did not use either the LawHelp or DLAH templates from the network. Both Illinois and Michigan were also well-funded sites that demonstrated strong visual design and usability through straightforward navigation. Illinois most recently completed a redesign of their site to improve it further. Although West Virginia did not report the same level of resources as the other two sites, it appears that West Virginia worked together with Michigan, almost as a “mini-network” to leverage Michigan’s site features, function, and design in recent years. It is clear that sites across the network

can benefit from leveraging what top performers are doing and a template framework that supports this will be important for the network moving forward.

Template providers have worked to create frameworks up to this point that were either relatively easy to learn or that came with support from the template providers themselves (like LawHelp). The templates are a valuable way to help website managers create sites that require minimal development experience as indicated by the fact that 74% (n = 39) of sites across the network leveraged one of them.

In order to deliver on the promise of helping site visitors resolve their personal legal issues, the templates should evolve and adopt current leading design practices. In parallel, website managers need to stay up-to-date with the evolution of the templates as well. As demonstrated by leading sites across the network, a great site does not require complexity. It requires simplicity. A straightforward navigation, with a flat architecture that allows users to reach content efficiently, and a curated set of articles is the ideal place to begin. A future system of templates should offer and deliver a streamlined experience for end users, and take the guess work out of how to create a great design.

Below is a summary of the key areas of opportunity for improvement of the websites across the network as well as a summary of practices that template providers and website managers might adopt as they continue to evolve the network of statewide sites together.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Usability Opportunities

There were a few key areas where statewide websites performed well. Many sites were already leveraging resources within the legal aid network by collaborating with each other and other legal organizations, public libraries and/or courthouses to provide sufficient legal information and resources to their users. Additionally, many sites used plain language tools (e.g., WriteClearly) to make content readable and accessible. Many sites also provided access to users with disabilities by providing closed captioning and/or transcripts for onsite audio/media.

While template providers and statewide sites have taken great strides to provide useful content and broader access to site visitors, there is still much that can be done to improve the user experience for pro se litigants and the broader legal aid network. The assessment's findings suggest that template providers and the statewide network should focus their efforts and resources to:

- 1. Balance flexibility and structure in the templates.** This enables website managers to focus on quality content. A template (or set of templates) has many advantages. Striking the right balance between flexibility and ease of use will allow website managers to focus their time and energy on providing the most relevant, useful content and less time worrying about whether users can access content.
- 2. Take a mobile-first approach.** A truly mobile optimized experience takes context into consideration. Users do not have the luxury of exploring the full navigation and browsing that a wider screen (e.g., desktop experience) permits. In order for users to effectively take action, sites should reorganize content so it is not only viewable on a small screen, but enhanced so that a user can consume (e.g., read) and interact with the content (e.g., tap into and edit a search field).
- 3. Modernize visual and interaction design to enhance usability.** Although icons and other design patterns were typically understandable, they did not enhance the user experience due to their inconsistent use or outdated style. Legal aid sites and the templates they originate from should reflect the same kinds of interactions users experience elsewhere. An updated, modern design strategy will help them put relevant content front and center, and support task-based browsing so users can find, understand, and take action on the rich content these sites provide.
- 4. Guide users through workflows and offer next steps.** Sites should help users follow a straightforward path toward resolving their legal issues. An optimal workflow a user may want to follow is to identify a legal issue, then read articles to self-educate on that issue, then complete a form to resolve the issue. At any point in that workflow, a user may want to contact a lawyer for help. Curated content is a first step toward guiding a user to useful information. Homepage real estate should be dedicated to ensuring users can identify their legal issues and access self-education, interactive forms, or proceed

directly to finding help (e.g., legal referral services, language access, etc.). Clear actions or next steps should appear in the main body of the page, where users have their attention focused already.

5. **Improve readability, translation, and organization of content.** This is particularly relevant to content-rich pages. In order to reduce users' workload, sites should consider how they can help users comprehend information and take action on the most important details. They can achieve this by improving readability, offering translation services where it counts (on select content pages and for callouts to referral services), and organizing content with the most important information at the top.
6. **Support multiple navigation strategies for alternate methods for interacting with content.** This includes navigating via assistive technologies, use of site search, and getting to content from search engines. As sites move towards meeting higher accessibility standards, they should focus on supporting alternate ways that users access and use a site with assistive technologies (e.g., via keyboard, screen reader, mobile device, etc.). Considering how people will use and access content on a site (e.g., via keyboard, screen reader, mobile device, etc.) is a more holistic approach to providing access than focusing on specific disabilities and will support a broader population of end users. Similarly, site-side search is an important feature that acts as site navigation for many users. All sites should move toward offering robust site search and enhancing content so that search engines connect users with the content they are looking for.
7. **Connect navigation elements to page content.** Secondary navigation should demonstrate clear purpose and connectivity (visually and in proximally) to page content. Similarly, filtering mechanisms (if available) on listing pages should be clearly tied to the information that it is filtering.
8. **Provide contextual help.** Sites should provide dynamic, contextual help – help that delivers just-in-time information in the context of use (e.g., rollover/hover tooltip definition of a legal term) so users do not have to interrupt current task or workflow. Contextual help is crucial in circumstances where users need additional assistance to understand content or next steps. If users do not feel as if they are being helped or empowered to help themselves, users will become frustrated and abandon the site. Sites should focus their resources on providing content-specific help such as in-line glossaries or live chat.
9. **Collect and analyze direct user feedback.** To move toward more user-centered experiences on legal aid websites, website managers should gather direct feedback from site visitors on an ongoing basis. Collecting and analyzing user feedback is an important step in improving a user experience. Sites should also consider developing approaches that will allow them to analyze the site analytics they collect and augment that data with qualitative insights from user interviews and usability testing.

Refer to the design examples provided in Statewide Website Assessment Toolkit on LSC's website to view visual concepts and code-based demonstrations that articulate each of the recommendations above.

Template Provider Opportunities

Website managers would benefit from a system of templates that offer the right level of flexibility on top of a reliable content management system. Easing the effort it takes to create and manage content would allow website managers to increase their attention on other focus areas (e.g., Accessibility). In building out a new system of templates, some things to consider include:

- 1. Be a good tour guide.** Implement stepped workflows with progress indicators, so that users know where they are in the steps, to provide a more guided user experience. A stepped approach would be especially useful for key workflows such as finding a lawyer, filling out a form, and providing feedback. If contextual help or dynamic site help is not possible, template providers should still provide well-designed, dedicated help pages that encourage cross-linking of content throughout the site.
- 2. Design with a purpose.** Visual design and iconography should be aesthetically appealing, but more importantly, they should be functional and applied purposefully to enhance usability. For example, icons should be easy to understand, even in the absence of text to serve LEP populations. Providing an updated library of icons for use across the network would benefit many of the sites.
- 3. Provide a robust search feature.** Search is a powerful navigation tool for users, and a robust search tool has a number of key elements. Include a search feature in the templates that provides auto-suggest functionality and search suggestions and results for misspelled search terms. Allow users to sort (e.g., by relevance or alpha) and filter (e.g., by topic or legal issue).

Website Manager Opportunities

While template providers can aid design from a structural and functional perspective, website managers can enhance usability by focusing on content quality and clarity.

- 1. Aim for quality over quantity.** Website managers can provide the most support to end users by making content consumable. Concentrate efforts on making sure content is written in plain language and findable (from both an SEO perspective and a navigation perspective) rather than creating breadth within a topic, or covering additional topics. This may be achieved by using existing content as a starting point and using resources to enhance the content to meet the standards across focus areas.
- 2. Clarify site hierarchy.** Website managers should review heading tags (i.e., H1, H2, H3, etc.) to confirm that they reflect the layout of the page. Check for consecutive heading levels, as skipping levels can confuse users who navigate sites with a screen reader. Site managers can also clarify site hierarchy by clearly defining the relationship between secondary and/or tertiary navigation and body content.
- 3. Create an inclusive framework.** Website managers can support a multitude of user types by ensuring content is accessible in multiple languages and via assistive devices. This means providing global translation services for the largest LEP populations (or at the very least for the primary LEP population) of each state. It also means testing key workflows (e.g., finding a lawyer or applying for help) with end users to see a variety of navigation approaches.

Prioritizing the Opportunities

By directing attention, time and resources to these key opportunities for improvement, the network of statewide sites can provide an up-to-date and usable experience for pro se litigants. The following steps represent a path toward getting there based on different levels of available resources.

BE A GOOD TOUR GUIDE

Small Effort

Use user-centered terminology (e.g., for topics, legal issues, and key calls to action).

Communicate functionality of templates to the network.

Add text to forms that request a user's location to explain the reason for asking.

Medium Effort

Create dedicated 'next steps' on content pages (e.g., articles).

Enhance key page templates (e.g., Home) with a focus on users' needs (e.g., topics, issues, get help).

Update other page templates to reduce potential for banner blindness.

Large Effort

Develop app-like guided workflows that move users from identifying their issue to resolving it.

Provide tag linking on content to facilitate organic navigation.

Collaborate with the network to create a framework of templates and tools.

DESIGN WITH A PURPOSE

Small Effort

Create a common set of modern icons (e.g., for topics, legal issues, key calls to action, and content types).

Medium Effort

Implement responsive web fonts.

Create logical header structure for page templates.

Increase white space to ease content consumption.

Large Effort

Deliver a user-centered admin experience that enables website managers to produce beautiful, usable sites with limited development or design resources.

PROVIDE A ROBUST SEARCH FEATURE

Small Effort

Indicate how the search results are ordered (e.g., relevance, alphabetized, etc.).

Provide a link to Help when there are no search results.

Medium Effort

Reorganize results so that relevant results display first.

Add details to results such as date published and type of content.

Provide contextual help and suggestions when there are no search results.

Large Effort

Build a robust search feature that includes 1) search input forgiveness, 2) auto-suggest, 3) sort and filter capabilities.

AIM FOR QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

Small Effort

Inventory existing site content.

Medium Effort

Identify content that serves users.

Remove old or infrequently used information.

Refresh outdated content.

Implement SEO technical solution.

Large Effort

Enhance all content for plain language, readability, and SEO. Convert content to interactive (versus text-based).

CLARIFY SITE HIERARCHY

Small Effort

Collect user feedback (e.g. interviews, usability testing, survey).

Update copy (e.g., article pages) with contextual links to related information.

Revise navigation labels to clarify meaning.

Medium Effort

Reorganize information (lists of content) based on user need. Include next steps for site visitors within the in context of articles and other key workflows.

Remove extraneous content from left and right side bar, as well as the Home page.

Provide progress indicators on all workflows.

Large Effort

Implement guided workflows.

CREATE AN INCLUSIVE CONTENT FRAMEWORK

Small Effort

Review accessibility guidelines. Assess accessibility compliance using automated tools.

Update search input box so it is findable and touch-friendly.

Analyze current website analytics data.

Medium Effort

Create single-page content for top 3 LEP populations. Plan future redesign or re-architecture with accessibility in mind. Plan mobile-first future redesign.

Enhance existing content for mobile readability (tap target size, responsive web fonts).

Large Effort

Update site to meet accessibility guidelines (leveraging template solutions from template providers).

Human translate site content for top 3 LEP populations.

Leverage template that provides a mobile enhanced experience.