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Legal aid groups seek help for virtual assistance

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With most court help desks and legal aid clinics shutdown during the novel coronavirus outbreak, some legal aid groups are asking Illinois lawyers to lend their time to virtually answer questions from low-income pro se litigants throughout the state.

Public Interest Law Initiative Executive Director Michael G. Bergmann said the group's COVID-19 Illinois Free Legal Answers Task Force will serve as an emergency response team of volunteer lawyers who can answer civil law questions posted on the Illinois Free Legal Answers website.

Illinois Free Legal Answers, which has been administered by the Public Interest Law Initiative since August, allows residents of Illinois' 102 counties to pose questions about a civil legal issue to attorneys on an online message board.

"We are relying on [the task force] to be there at the ready, and to be in regular communication with us about what the need is and how they can help," Bergmann said.

Illinois Legal Aid Online Executive Director Teresa L. Ross said her organization has seen an increase in questions about issues such as evictions, domestic abuse, job termination and unemployment benefits.

"For example, traffic to ILAO's online resources on getting unemployment rose 1,056%, from week (March 8-14) to week (March 15-21). We recognize there are significant fears and concerns from the public, and that they are in need of answers and solutions," Ross said in an email.

"Our message is that we are here during this time of crisis as a resource to the public, offering 24/7 support on their legal matters and at any hour of the day," Ross added.

She said Illinois Legal Aid Online has a 'Get Legal Help' tool to connect the public to self-help tools, information and referrals to free and low cost legal services.

The website also has a 'LiveHelp' chat that allows the public to ask questions online in real-time, typically, with law students, who staff the chat site Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Ross said the organization could use volunteers to help edit content on the site by researching and reviewing existing articles.

Illinois Free Legal Answers has roughly 75 volunteer lawyers, including Sara T. Ghadiri, an associate and pro bono counsel at Chapman and Cutler LLP.

Ghadiri has been answering questions since 2017, and signed up to be part of the task force.

"It is trying to help fill in the gaps where people could normally go get information but they can't because things are closed," Ghadiri said.

For example, a parent may inquire about an appropriate place to have supervised visitation with their child when the usual sites are currently closed.

But Ghadiri said she is still responding to procedural and other questions that are unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The regular questions are there and we are stepping up to help with new questions," she said.

She said this type of pro bono work is a flexible and ideal way to help out for those who don't have time to take on a whole case.

"This is here for you to be able to help on your terms," she said.

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