



# **SIMPLIFYING THE LEGAL AID SERVICES FOR SELF REPRESENTED LITIGANTS**

# THE CLIENT

**LEGAL AID OF NEBRASKA (LAN)** provides access to free civil legal advice, brief service & representation to low-income people in areas like, consumer law, family law, housing law, disability benefits, public benefits, unemployment benefits, clearing a criminal record, medicare, education, tax issues, & power of attorney. It is a non-profit law firm since 1963 with offices in Grand Island, Omaha, North Platte, Lincoln, Norfolk, Bancroft, Scottsbluff and Lexington, providing free civil legal services to low-income Nebraskans across its counties.

LAN assist clients through special programs like Domestic Violence, AccessLine®, Spanish AccessLine®, ElderAccessLine®, Rural Response Hotline, Native American AccessLine®, Nebraska Migrant Coalition, Private Attorney Involvement, Pro-Se Clinics, Juvenile Court, Farm & Ranch, Low-Income Taxpayer Clinics, Native American, Elder Law and Homeless Prevention. These services allow people to clear their legal barriers without incurring the debts of lawyers' fees.



# THEIR CHALLENGE

Legal institutions assist disempowered people in acquiring their entitlements from government offices where they often face hassles. However, Ignorance on how to act when faced with law-related situations is a common issue faced by such disempowered people.

Surveys show that, **15%** of adults have issues dealing with any written documents in court and **27%** struggled with any tasks beyond simple reading. Few people even have a different first language and very less understanding of legal procedures.

For instance, Donna has struggled with low literacy and income her whole life and seeking legal assistance was too overwhelming for her, she says :



"I couldn't make out what I was supposed to do," Donna said. "I couldn't even find my court date on the forms and legal notices I recieved." "I don't tell everyone I can't understand what is being asked," she said. "It's embarrassing. But I figured that if I don't tell someone, I wouldn't have had any chance at getting legal aid and a lawyer to help me. I also didn't want to have to explain that I couldn't fill out the papers. "

After several unsuccessful attempts to understand what legal notices meant, she finally got help from Family Law Information Center.

Legal Aid of Nebraska wants to help such low literate and low income group deal with the legal formalities smoothly, help them understand the case, fill up forms quickly, and provide more oppportunities for verbal communication to avail benefits irrespective of their literacy or income level. They wanted to develop a web based self help interview system which helps the low income and less literate litigants of Nebraska find solutions to their legal problems.



# FINGENT'S APPROACH

Fingent proposed a solution designed to serve a diverse, low-income population, consisting of a knowledge base, sufficient to address Self Represented Litigants' (SRL) questions of increasing complexity in the substantive areas of landlord/tenant and debtor/creditor law. Details metrics about how the forms are being filled in, where clients are running into difficulty and thus abandoning the forms etc. were gathered and analyzed to make the forms better. The Ultimate goal was to provide users greater access to useful legal information, solutions and services in real time and simplify their legal processes.



# THE SOLUTION

## An Expert System to Simplify The Legal Interview System

Fingent created a web based solution that enables appropriate personnel from LAN to create Interview trees where questions can be added which are accessed by the litigants from the front end. How the interview should progress based on the answers selected by the litigants can be decided by setting the Skip Logic for the questions. The interview leads the litigants to various endpoints such as legal informations, videos, links to other sites, legal form and Legal Aid of Nebraska intake system. In legal forms endpoint, litigants will answer questions to fill up the blank fields in an actual legal form, litigants will get a completely filled legal form via email or as a downloadable pdf file.

These legal forms questions are integrated into mail interview tree and transition is seamless. In certain endpoints, litigants will be taken into the Intake process of Legal Aid of Nebraska, if necessary. Once they are in the intake process they may receive call backs, aid and facetime with attorneys affiliated to the Legal Aid. This intake system is also developed and integrated

The system can be used by an SRL to obtain the information and forms necessary to prepare themselves to :



Defend/prosecute  
a civil case in  
country court



Apply for help  
through an  
online application, or



Obtain a referral to an  
appropriate agency  
in the community

A state-wide triaging portal for Nebraska was created that would collect data from a person with a civil legal issue. The self help system allows the litigants to find solutions to their legal problems on their own. Using algorithms within the expert system, the system will then refer the user to a specific URL for the most appropriate online resource.



The expert system would receive information on the nature of the civil legal issue, the complexity of the issue, the capacity or sophistication of the user, and the desired referrals or referral parameters of participating resources & programs.



Based on the detailed questions, question logic, features, and the data collected, the system will then produce the optimum referral for that user as its output.



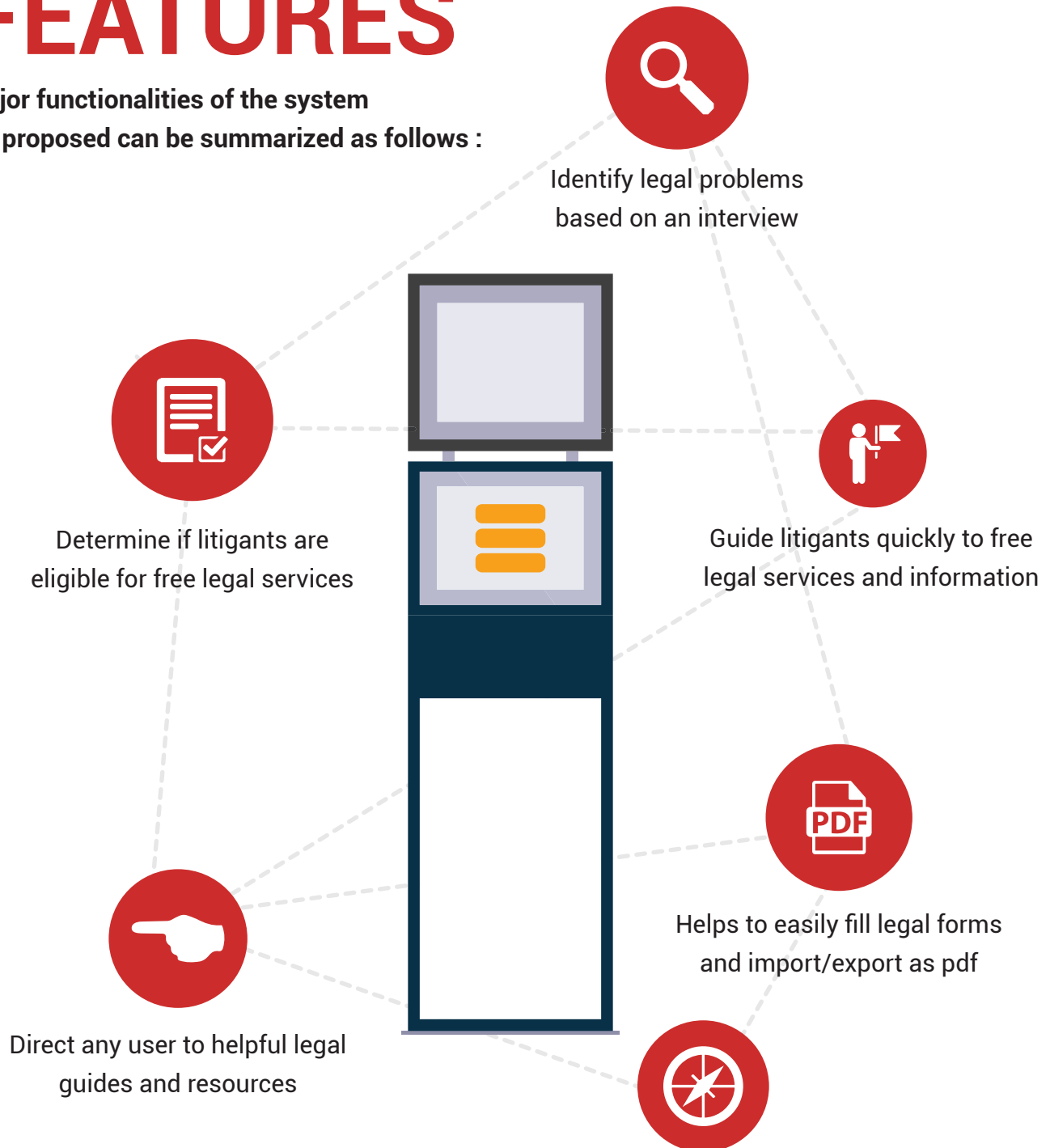
The program directs the user to the appropriate solution / advice including :

- Free standing information
- Informational videos
- Factsheets and/or single page excerpts depending on the issue
- A form builder
- LAN intake line
- Other referral source

A legal knowledge base is made available to them which can be accessed online, allowing litigants save money spend in travelling, phone calls etc. The turnaround time for solving legal problems is getting reduced substantially as the information is available few clicks away, provided they have access to the internet.

# FEATURES

Major functionalities of the system we proposed can be summarized as follows :



Directs people with legal needs to LAN's legal services intake or away from legal services intake depending on the case acceptance guidelines of the client's local legal services program and the client's eligibility for legal services.

# THE IMPACT

Fingent successfully developed the core of a robust online system for low-income less literate population to serve as a bridge between them and the organization (LAN) by transferring key information about the applicants' potential eligibility and the basic facts of their situation.

The system operates on a highly sophisticated platform. Though it was deliberately designed to present a simple, uncluttered interface to the user, it is capable of expanding to more complex interactions, as experience with the system grows and new needs are encountered. The solution has been a large first step toward forming the core of a coordinated statewide approach for identifying and responding to the legal needs of low income population statewide, with a diligent commitment to quality and effectiveness.

Often legal aids are hard pressed for time as they have to manage plethora of cases all year round. The application allows Legal Aid of Nebraska to manage their time more efficiently by allocating their time to more serious legal issues faced by litigants.

Nearly half (**45.5%**) of the persons interviewed said it took them less than 5 to 10 minutes to complete the online interview through the expert system. More than half of the respondents found the online interview "Very easy" to use. Ease-of-use is arguably not as important as the degree to which the system actually provided them solutions to their legal problems. In this regard, a high percentage of the respondents (more than 60%) felt that the online tool did well at helping them explain their problem or need.



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