

NORTH DAKOTA LEGAL SELF-HELP PROPOSAL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Objective

The proposed project aims to establish a comprehensive, statewide self-help legal assistance program in North Dakota. This initiative from LSND seeks to enhance access to legal resources for pro se litigants through a combination of in-person self-help clinics, a law school clinic component, expanded pro bono attorney involvement, and advanced virtual self-help options. The ultimate goal is to provide a streamlined and accessible legal aid system that leverages both human and technological resources to better serve the needs of North Dakota's residents.

Impact

This project will significantly improve access to justice for individuals who cannot afford legal representation by providing them with the necessary tools and guidance to navigate the legal system on their own. By incorporating law students and pro bono attorneys, the program also fosters practical legal education and professional development while extending legal services to underserved communities across the state. The introduction of a virtual self-help platform, including an AI-assisted tool for form completion, will further democratize access to legal resources, ensuring that even those in remote areas or without access to in-person services can receive the help they need.

Funding Needs

To realize this vision, substantial funding will be required for several key components: developing and maintaining the self-help website and virtual clinic platform, recruiting and training volunteer attorneys, and coordinating the law school clinic. Additional resources will be needed for technology integration, such as video conferencing capabilities and remote assistance kiosks in underserved areas. The budget will also cover ongoing evaluations and the development of a long-term sustainability plan.

Timeline

The project will be implemented in four phases over the course of two years, with planning and coordination in the first four months to make sure the design is sustainable and scalable. In months 5 through 18, full implementation and expansion takes place, ending the second year of the plan with evaluation and continued sustainability discussions.

I. Problem Statement

A. Current Challenges

Access to legal services is a significant issue in North Dakota, particularly for individuals who cannot afford to hire an attorney and those in rural areas. The existing civil legal aid system is strained, with limited resources and services available to the growing number of pro se litigants—those who represent themselves in legal matters. These individuals often face complex legal processes without sufficient guidance, leading to errors in form completion, missed deadlines, and unfavorable legal outcomes. The current self-help resources are comprehensive for many legal issues, but can be difficult to navigate without advice and do not adequately meet the needs of the state's diverse population, especially those in rural or remote areas.

B. Community Impact

The lack of accessible legal assistance disproportionately affects low-income individuals, who are more likely to face legal issues related to housing, family law, and consumer debt. Without proper legal support, these individuals are at risk of losing their homes, custody of their children, or essential income, further perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality. The challenges are compounded in rural areas, where legal services are even more scarce, and residents must travel long distances to access help. This disparity in access to justice undermines public trust in the legal system and contributes to an increasing backlog of cases in the courts.

C. Need for Revamp

The current civil legal aid framework in North Dakota is insufficient to meet the growing demand for legal assistance. A comprehensive overhaul is necessary to address these challenges and ensure that all residents, regardless of income or location, have access to the legal support they need. The proposed project will fill these gaps by integrating in-person and virtual self-help services, leveraging technology to provide real-time guidance and resources, and involving law students and pro bono attorneys in the delivery of legal aid. This multifaceted approach is essential to creating a more equitable and efficient legal aid system that can adapt to the evolving needs of the community.

II. Project Components

The proposed project will enhance North Dakota's existing civil legal aid services by introducing several key components designed to provide additional support and resources

to pro se litigants. These components will work in tandem with the current self-help resources to offer a more comprehensive and accessible legal aid system.

A. Statewide Self-Help Clinics

1. The project will establish self-help clinics across North Dakota, partnering with courthouses, community centers, and other public locations. These clinics will serve as accessible venues where pro se litigants can receive hands-on assistance with legal forms, guidance on their legal options, help navigating the court system, and a la carte legal advice.
2. Each clinic will offer practical support for individuals navigating the legal system on their own. This includes help with form completion, explanations of court procedures, and general legal advice tailored to the specific needs of the litigants. Law students, under the supervision of experienced attorneys, will play an active role in these clinics, providing essential services while gaining valuable practical experience.
3. The clinics will operate on a regular, predictable schedule to ensure consistent availability across the state. Efforts will be made to align clinic hours with peak times for specific types of cases, such as housing or family law, to maximize their impact and accessibility.

B. Law School Clinic Component

1. This component will be integrated into the law school's curriculum as a clinical course. Law students will receive classroom instruction combined with supervised practice at the self-help clinics. The course will focus on specific case types, such as divorce, bankruptcy, and name changes, as well as essential client management skills.
2. Students will undergo comprehensive training on relevant legal forms, common legal issues, and effective client counseling techniques. An adjunct faculty member from Legal Services of North Dakota (LSND) will provide ongoing supervision and support during clinic activities, ensuring that the services offered are both high-quality and educational for the students.
3. Scope of Representation. The clinics will provide limited-scope representation, offering assistance only during the clinic sessions without extending to ongoing legal representation. This approach ensures that clients receive the help they need while maintaining a manageable workload for students and volunteer attorneys.

C. Pro Bono Attorney Involvement

1. The project will actively recruit pro bono attorneys to support the self-help clinics, particularly in regions distant from the law school. This will help

extend the reach of legal aid services to underserved areas and ensure that all pro se litigants have access to professional legal assistance.

2. LSND will collaborate with the State Bar Association of North Dakota (SBAND) and local bar associations to inform attorneys about upcoming self-help clinics. Using platforms like Paladin, LSND will manage volunteer sign-ups and ensure that attorneys can participate based on their availability and area of expertise.
3. To prepare attorneys for their roles in the clinics, the project will offer targeted training and resources, including sample forms, guides on common legal issues faced by pro se litigants, and best practices for delivering effective legal aid in a limited-scope setting.

D. Augmented Virtual Self-Help Options

1. The project will build upon the existing self-help resources by introducing new virtual tools that augment the current offerings. These tools will include AI-assisted guidance for form completion, access to legal information tailored to specific needs, and referrals to additional resources or in-person clinics as necessary.
2. A virtual clinic model will be implemented to allow law students and pro bono attorneys to provide remote assistance via video conferencing and email. This will make legal help more accessible to individuals in remote or underserved areas who may not be able to attend in-person clinics.
3. The project will also explore the installation of additional kiosks in remote locations, providing pro se litigants with easy access to virtual self-help tools and resources, even if they lack internet access at home.

By complementing the existing self-help services with these new resources, the project aims to create a more robust and accessible legal aid system that meets the diverse needs of North Dakota's residents. These enhancements are designed to support and extend the reach of the current offerings, ensuring that more individuals can navigate the legal system successfully, regardless of their location or financial situation.

III. Funding Requirements

To successfully implement and sustain the proposed enhancements to North Dakota's civil legal aid system, securing adequate funding is crucial. The following outlines the key financial requirements for the project.

A. Pro Bono Director

1. A dedicated Pro Bono Director at LSND is essential to the success of this project. This role will focus on recruiting, coordinating, and supporting volunteer attorneys across the state, ensuring that pro bono services are

efficiently integrated into the self-help clinics and other project components. The Pro Bono Director will also be responsible for maintaining relationships with the State Bar Association of North Dakota (SBAND) and local bar associations, managing volunteer attorney training programs, and overseeing the legal aspects of the self-help services.

2. The total cost for the Pro Bono Director, including salary and benefits, is estimated at \$140,000 per year. This investment is critical to ensure the ongoing success and expansion of pro bono services, particularly in underserved regions.

B. Law School Adjunct Faculty for Self-Help Clinic

1. The proposal includes a practical self-help clinic for credit at UND Law for law students. LSND has an experienced attorney to propose as an adjunct faculty to teach the curriculum and supervise the law students in the self-help clinic.
2. The cost for this piece will depend on the law school's policy on faculty pay or structuring it as line-item in the budget payable to LSND for support of the self-help program.

C. Self-Help Website Project

1. The self-help website project, which is central to enhancing virtual legal aid options, has a total budget of \$405,845 over two years. This budget includes costs for platform development, integration with existing resources, user interface design, AI-assisted form completion tools, and ongoing technical support. The website will serve as a critical resource for pro se litigants, providing them with the tools and information needed to navigate the legal system more effectively.
2. A grant application has been submitted to fund this project, but approval has not yet been secured. While the project is poised to have a significant impact, additional financial support will be necessary to ensure its successful implementation, especially if the grant is not awarded.

D. Virtual Options and Materials

1. In rural areas, kiosks at strategic locations will assist in getting clients access to the virtual self-help options, including website resources and Zoom clinics. These kiosks will be in locations, such as libraries, VFW buildings, and other community buildings with a secure location for the units. Rack cards, intake cards, application information, and common legal issue handouts have been very successful at court locations in the past 6 months, so building in a budget for printing is important to continue to reach those in need.

2. Many communities have expressed interest in local funding for kiosks in their communities. With a solid plan for supporting additional kiosks, funding can be pursued. Each kiosk costs approximately \$7,000 with \$2,000 of maintenance per year. Printed materials are currently running approximately \$5,000 per quarter to keep up with current demand.

E. Need for Additional Support

1. If access to justice is to remain a priority for North Dakota, increased support from the state government, courts, and SBAND is essential. This support could take the form of direct financial contributions, advocacy for state funding allocations, or in-kind resources such as office space, technology, or personnel.
2. To ensure the long-term sustainability of the self-help website and the broader project, it is imperative to establish a stable funding stream. This could involve exploring additional grant opportunities, state budget allocations, and partnerships with private foundations or corporations interested in supporting access to justice initiatives.

Investing in these critical areas will enable North Dakota to create a more equitable legal aid system, ensuring that all residents, regardless of their financial situation, have access to the legal resources they need. The proposed funding requirements are not just expenses—they are strategic investments in the state's commitment to justice and the rule of law.

IV. Implementation Timeline

The implementation of the proposed enhancements to North Dakota's civil legal aid system will be carried out in four distinct phases over a period of 24 months. Each phase is designed to ensure a structured and strategic rollout, allowing for adjustments based on feedback and the evolving needs of the community.

Phase 1: Planning and Coordination (Months 1-4)

- **Establish Core Planning Team:** Assemble a core team with representatives from Legal Services of North Dakota (LSND), the law school, judiciary, SBAND, and other key stakeholders to oversee the project's implementation.
- **Secure Clinic Locations:** Identify and secure venues for the self-help clinics across the state, including a central location in Grand Forks for the law school clinic component.
- **Develop Law School Curriculum:** Collaborate with the law school to finalize the curriculum for the self-help clinic course, ensuring it is approved for the second semester of the 2024-2025 academic year.

- **Recruit and Train Attorneys:** Begin recruiting pro bono attorneys and provide them with the necessary training to participate in the self-help clinics.
- **Paladin Platform Setup:** Set up and customize the Paladin platform to manage volunteer attorney sign-ups and clinic scheduling.

Phase 2: Pilot Program (Months 5-8)

- **Launch Pilot Clinics:** Implement a pilot program in select locations to test the self-help clinic model, gathering data and feedback from participants, volunteers, and stakeholders.
- **Evaluate and Select Website Platform:** Hire a consultant to lead the evaluation and selection of the most suitable platform for the self-help website, incorporating feedback from the pilot phase.
- **Develop Resources:** Create sample forms, FAQs, and other materials that will be used across various clinics to ensure consistency and efficiency in service delivery.

Phase 3: Expansion and Full Implementation (Months 9-18)

- **Statewide Rollout of Clinics:** Expand the self-help clinics to additional locations based on the feedback and lessons learned from the pilot program, ensuring statewide coverage.
- **Launch Self-Help Website:** Finalize the development and launch the self-help website, integrating it with the existing resources and the new virtual tools to enhance user experience.
- **Ongoing Attorney Recruitment and Training:** Continue to recruit and train pro bono attorneys, particularly in areas with high demand for legal aid.
- **Monitor and Adjust:** Monitor the performance of the clinics and the self-help website, making necessary adjustments to improve service delivery and user satisfaction.

Phase 4: Evaluation and Sustainability (Months 19-24 and Ongoing)

- **Conduct Evaluations:** Perform comprehensive evaluations of the self-help clinics, law school component, and self-help website, assessing their effectiveness, user impact, and areas for improvement.
- **Feedback Loop:** Establish a feedback loop with stakeholders, including the judiciary, legal professionals, and clinic users, to continuously refine the services offered.
- **Develop Sustainability Plan:** Create a long-term sustainability plan that includes strategies for securing ongoing funding, maintaining volunteer engagement, and integrating new technologies as they become available.
- **Final Adjustments and Scaling:** Make final adjustments to the project based on evaluation results, with the potential to scale successful components to other regions or areas of legal need.

This phased approach ensures a systematic and measured rollout of the project, allowing for continuous improvement and adaptation to meet the needs of North Dakota's residents. The timeline is designed to balance urgency with careful planning, ensuring that each component is fully operational and effective before moving on to the next stage.

V. Impact Metrics and Evaluation

To ensure the success and sustainability of the proposed project, it is essential to establish clear impact metrics and a robust evaluation plan. These will allow for ongoing assessment of the project's effectiveness, enable data-driven decision-making, and demonstrate the value of the initiative to stakeholders.

A. Impact Metrics

1. Access to Legal Services
 - Number of Individuals Served. Track the number of pro se litigants who utilize the self-help clinics, virtual tools, and the self-help website. This metric will provide insight into the reach and accessibility of the services offered.
 - Geographic Coverage. Monitor the distribution of services across urban, rural, and remote areas to ensure equitable access to legal aid throughout North Dakota.
 - Demographic Data. Collect demographic information on the individuals served, including income levels, age, gender, and ethnicity, to assess whether the project is reaching underserved populations.
2. Quality of Legal Assistance
 - Form Completion Accuracy. Measure the accuracy and completeness of forms submitted by pro se litigants after receiving assistance, comparing error rates before and after the implementation of the project.
 - Case Outcomes. Evaluate the outcomes of cases involving pro se litigants who used the self-help resources, focusing on whether they achieved favorable results or successfully navigated the legal process.
3. User Satisfaction
 - Client Feedback. Implement regular surveys and feedback forms to gauge user satisfaction with the services provided at self-help clinics, through the law school component, and via the self-help website.
 - Repeat Usage. Track the frequency of repeat visits or usage of the virtual tools by the same individuals, indicating satisfaction and perceived value of the services.

4. Volunteer Engagement

- Pro Bono Attorney Participation. Monitor the number of attorneys volunteering at self-help clinics and the hours contributed. This will help assess the success of recruitment and retention efforts.
- Law Student Involvement. Track the number of law students participating in the clinic component, as well as their reported satisfaction and learning outcomes through surveys and reflective assessments.

5. Operational Efficiency

- Clinic Throughput. Measure the number of clients served per clinic session and the average time spent per client to assess the efficiency of clinic operations.
- Website Traffic and Usage. Analyze web traffic data, including the number of visitors, pages viewed, and the time spent on the self-help website, to evaluate the website's effectiveness and user engagement.

B. Evaluation Plan

1. Ongoing Monitoring

- Data Collection. LSND's case management system has the capability for collecting and managing data related to the impact metrics outlined above. This system will be used to generate regular reports for project stakeholders.
- Real-Time Feedback. Implement mechanisms for collecting real-time feedback from users and volunteers at clinics and through the self-help website. This will allow for immediate adjustments to improve service delivery.

2. Quarterly Reviews

- Performance Analysis. Conduct quarterly reviews of the collected data to assess progress toward project goals. These reviews will include analysis of key metrics, identification of trends, and evaluation of any challenges or barriers encountered.
- Stakeholder Meetings. Hold quarterly meetings with the core planning team, including representatives from LSND, the law school, judiciary, and SBAND, to discuss findings and determine any necessary adjustments to the project.

3. Annual Impact Report

- Comprehensive Evaluation. At the end of each year, produce a detailed impact report that summarizes the project's achievements, challenges, and lessons learned. This report will include a thorough analysis of the

impact metrics, as well as qualitative insights from stakeholder interviews and user testimonials.

- Recommendations. Based on the findings from the annual report, provide recommendations for the next phase of the project, including potential areas for expansion, improvement, or scaling to other regions.

4. Final Project Evaluation

- Summative Assessment. Upon the completion of the two-year project timeline, conduct a final evaluation to assess the overall impact of the initiative. This will involve a summative assessment of all impact metrics, as well as an analysis of the project's long-term sustainability and scalability.
- Final Report and Dissemination. Prepare a final report to be disseminated to all stakeholders, including funders, state officials, and the legal community. This report will highlight the successes of the project, document lessons learned, and offer guidance for future initiatives in the field of civil legal aid.

VI. Conclusion

The proposed enhancements to North Dakota's civil legal aid system represent a crucial step toward ensuring equitable access to justice for all residents, particularly those who are unable to afford legal representation. By leveraging a combination of in-person clinics, law school involvement, pro bono attorney support, and augmented virtual resources, this initiative aims to address the significant gaps in legal assistance currently faced by pro se litigants across the state.

The successful implementation of this project depends on the collective commitment of stakeholders, including state officials, the legal community, and educational institutions. With strategic funding, careful planning, and ongoing evaluation, this initiative has the potential to transform the delivery of legal aid in North Dakota, making it more accessible, efficient, and impactful.

As we move forward, it is essential to secure the necessary resources and support to bring this vision to life. Together, we can create a more just and equitable legal system that serves the needs of all North Dakotans.