Evaluations of Legal Assistance Portals

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Executive Summary

This report summarizes the key findings of our series of four evaluation studies of legal assistance portals operating across the United States and was conducted by the Auburn Center for Evaluation on behalf of the Pew Charitable Trusts. These studies include:

- Nationwide Scan of Legal Aid Portals
- Evaluation of the LawHelpMN.org Legal Assistance Portal
- Evaluation of the OhioLegalHelp.org Legal Assistance Portal
- Evaluation of the Alaska and Hawaii Legal Assistance Portals

Key findings of these studies include:

- Legal assistance portals are diverse and have become a significant resource in helping the public address legal problems, receiving over 67 million visits annually.

- Minnesota's LawHelpMN.org and Ohio's OhioLegalHelp.org have exemplar features, are accessible, provide a wealth of legal resources like information and forms, attract high visitation, and are held in high regard by critical stakeholders. While the exemplar portals provide timely, relevant, and accessible resources, lack of data prevents us from knowing whether website visitors subsequently use the information they obtain to resolve their legal problems.

- The Legal Navigator portals being implemented in Alaska and Hawaii represent a major advance in providing highly targeted information and individualized case plans to persons seeking to address legal problems. While the Legal Navigator software platform has experienced serious delays, it will become available to other states as an open-source system in mid-2022.

- Organizations seeking to develop new legal assistance portals, expand the functionality of their current websites, or evaluate portal outcomes should follow best practices in doing so. We provide a framework that organizations can use to evaluate portal outcomes and returns on investment.

- Portal sponsors can use our recommended framework for conducting evaluations and benefit-cost studies of their legal assistance portals.

Background

As noted by The Pew Charitable Trusts,

> For Americans with legal questions, finding answers can be difficult without professional help. Some courts and nonprofit organizations offer materials to help people navigating the civil legal system without a lawyer, but the barriers to finding, understanding, and using that information are high. The burden is especially heavy for low-income individuals, who are more likely to experience civil legal problems—such as domestic violence, divorce, wage theft, landlord-tenant disputes, and consumer debt—that affect their home, family, or livelihood. One promising innovation that can help people facing legal problems and proceedings on their own is the development of legal information and assistance portals.[1]

Legal assistance portals have become widespread in recent years.[2] Our nationwide scan, conducted in 2020, identified 164 such websites operating across the United States, with at least one in each state.[3] The portals share the common goal of enhancing access to civil justice by providing educational information and online tools to help visitors understand their rights and legal options, and they often provide referrals to trusted service providers that can help portal visitors.

Legal assistance portals vary in their content, functionality, and usage. Some are robust, covering a wide range of legal issues and offering advanced functionalities such as guided interviews that direct visitors to relevant materials, chat features that enable users to pose questions and receive legal information or advice, and the ability to complete legal forms and file them. In contrast, other portals are narrowly focused on a small set of legal topics and/or offer limited features other than links to other websites. In general, portals that offer more robust functionalities and content receive greater visitation than those that lack these features.

Methodology

We used a variety of quantitative and qualitative research methods to carry out our evaluations. To conduct our nationwide scan, we examined reports issued by The Pew Charitable Trusts, conducted comprehensive Google searches, and examined national websites that provide links

[1] The Pew Charitable Trusts. (2019). *Interactive Online Portals Offer Targeted Legal Resources on Demand.* Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts.

[2] This report uses the term 'legal assistance portal' for websites that provide legal information; these sites may also be called other terms such as "legal information and assistance portals" and "legal aid portals."

[3] Auburn Center for Evaluation. (2020). *A Nationwide Scan of Legal Aid Portals*. Auburn, AL: Auburn University.

to state legal aid portals. This search protocol identified 164 regional, state, and national legal assistance portals operating within the United States. We examined these websites to identify their usage and assess the extent to which each had essential elements of legal assistance portals identified by The Pew Charitable Trusts: whether they help users as, refine, learn about, and connect with resources related to their civil legal problems.

We conducted in-depth evaluations of two legal assistance portals selected by The Pew Charitable Trusts as exemplar sites – LawHelpMN.org and OhioLegalHelp.org portals. We examined these portals' design, digital accessibility, network security, features, and usage. We also examined visitor satisfaction with the portals through user experience surveys, focus groups, and interviews with key stakeholders in both states including legal aid directors, courts system staff, and state bar representatives. We further examined the sites' accessibility to diverse audiences including persons with disabilities, using multiple tests including automated analyses, targeted code inspection, and focus groups in which we observed participants' interaction with the websites and interviewed them regarding their perspectives of the platforms' ease of use and value as a legal resource. We also conducted manual and automated tests of each portal's information security features to determine the extent to which the sites protect user identities and are resistant to external hacking.

We also assessed two portals selected by The Pew Charitable Trusts that are not yet operational but will provide exemplar functionalities – the Legal Navigator portals in Alaska and Hawaii. These portals have experienced substantial development delays but are expected to become available to the public in mid-2022. We examined documents related to these portals' conceptualization, design, and development history. We additionally interviewed staff of the organizations sponsoring the portals as well as key stakeholders including the Legal Services Corporation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, and relevant local stakeholders such as state court officials, bar representatives, and legal aid directors.

Limitations

Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, we were able to travel to only the Ohio portal site to conduct in-person observations and interviews with key stakeholders. While we conducted extensive interviews with stakeholders in each site via Zoom, and performed focus groups with Alabama residents, we would likely have obtained richer qualitative information if we had been able to conduct these evaluation tasks in person.

Additionally, we received few usable responses from the user experience surveys that we placed on the Minnesota and Ohio portals. Although these surveys appeared as popup boxes

for all portal visitors when they left the sites, offered a $25 incentive for completing the survey and a subsequent follow-up questionnaire, and were operational for several months, we received usable responses from relatively few annually persons (215 in Minnesota and 123 in Ohio); accordingly, survey respondents may not represent the full range of platform users. Further, too few of these respondents participated in a subsequent follow-up survey intended to identify the actions they had taken after visiting the portal to provide reliable data and we did not use follow-up survey results in our analyses.

Due to robustness of our other evaluation protocols, we do not believe that these limitations materially impacted our overall evaluation conclusions, although they limited our ability speak with portal users or gauge their use of information obtained from the legal assistance portals to address their legal issues.

Key findings across our reports

Our evaluations of legal assistance portals identified several cross-cutting findings.

- Legal assistance portals are diverse and have become a significant resource in helping the public address legal problems, receiving over 67 million visits.

- Minnesota's LawHelpMN.org and Ohio's OhioLegalHelp.org have exemplar features, are accessible, provide a wealth of legal resources like information and forms, attract high visitation, and are held in high regard by critical stakeholders. While the exemplar portals provide timely, relevant, and accessible resources, lack of data prevents us from knowing whether website visitors subsequently use the information they obtain to resolve their legal problems.

- The Legal Navigator portals being implemented in Alaska and Hawaii represent a major advance in providing highly targeted information and individualized case plans to persons seeking to address legal problems. While for the Legal Navigator software platform has experienced serious delays, it will become available to other states as an open-source system in mid-2022.

- Organizations seeking to develop new legal assistance portals or expand the functionality of their current websites or evaluate portal outcomes should follow best practices in doing so.

- Portal sponsors can use our recommended framework for conducting evaluations and benefit-cost studies of their legal assistance portals.

Key Finding 1: Legal assistance portals are highly diverse and have become significant legal resource in helping the public address legal problems, attracting an estimated 67 million visits annually.

As noted by The Pew Charitable Trusts, many persons facing legal problems use the internet to seek help, but their search results often include a bewildering mountain of information, much of it lacking in relevance or of questionable reliability.[4] To make it easier for people to find timely, accurate, and relevant legal information, many entities created legal assistance portals in recent years.

[4] The Pew Charitable Trusts. (2019). *Interactive Online Portals Offer Targeted Legal Resources on Demand.* Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Our 2020 report, *A Nationwide Scan of Legal Aid Portals*, found 164 legal assistance portals are operating across the nation, with at least one offered in every state. Some of these websites serve local regions, while others have a statewide or national focus. The portals share the goal of enhancing access to civil justice by providing online access to high-quality educational materials and tools to help visitors understand their rights and legal options. They are sponsored by a broad array of organizations, including nonprofit organizations (91 portals), state court systems (29 portals), collaboratives of multiple organizations (29 portals), state bar associations and foundations (9 portals), and other entities such as for-profit organizations (6 portals).

The portals vary in their content, functionality, and usage. While some focus narrowly on specific issues, others cover a wide range of legal topics. For example, at the time of this evaluation, Minnesota's LawHelpMN.org provides access to over 1,200 educational materials that address twelve broad legal subjects and 94 specific legal issues. While some portals are static websites that offer little but links to other entities, others provide advanced features such as guided interviews that help direct visitors to relevant materials, chat features that enable them to pose questions and receive legal information or advice, and the ability to complete and sometimes file online court forms.

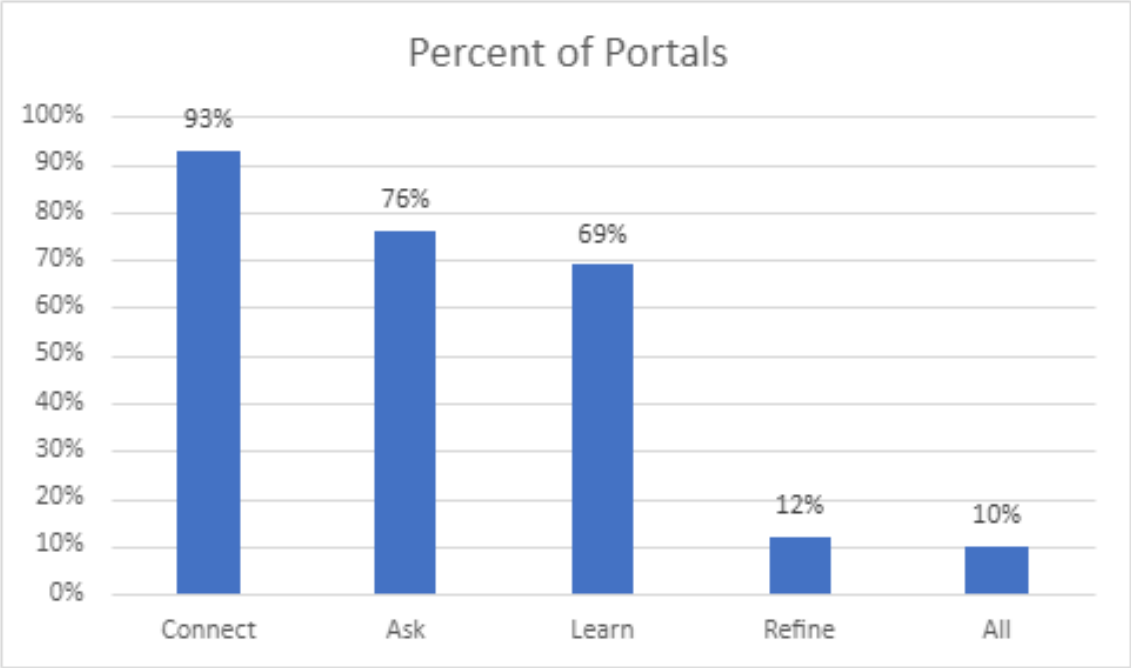
This diversity is reflected in how closely the websites adhere to a framework that the Pew Charitable Trusts created in 2019 identifying essential elements that portals should provide to help users navigate a legal issue and take informed action.[5] These essential elements include an *Ask* feature that enables users to self-identify their legal issue of interest; an interactive *Refine* feature that helps users screen search results; a *Learn* feature that provides individuals with relevant and current legal information; and a *Connect* feature that provides referrals to legal or other services.

As shown in Exhibit 1, our 2020 nationwide scan found that while most portals provide at least one of these features, only seventeen provide all four. Almost all (93%) of the websites (153 of 164) provide Connect features that help visitors apply to or obtain referrals to legal and other social services. Most (76%) provide *Ask features* that allow users to self-select issues, use keyword searches, and/or use natural language processing to find relevant information. Similarly, 69% of the portals provide *Learn features* that allow access to relevant information in at least two legal issue areas. These portals enable users to preview results and provide information through multiple formats such as written texts and videos. However, only 12% of the portals provide *Refine features* that enable visitors to use guided interviews, interactive assistants, or

[5] The Pew Charitable Trusts. (2019). *What is a Legal Assistance Portal*? Washington DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts.

questionnaires to generate links to specific resources applicable to their interests. Only 10% of the portals provided all four features to their users.

Exhibit 1 – Few legal assistance portals offer all key features



Source: *A Nationwide Scan of Legal Aid Portals*. (2020). Auburn Center for Evaluation.

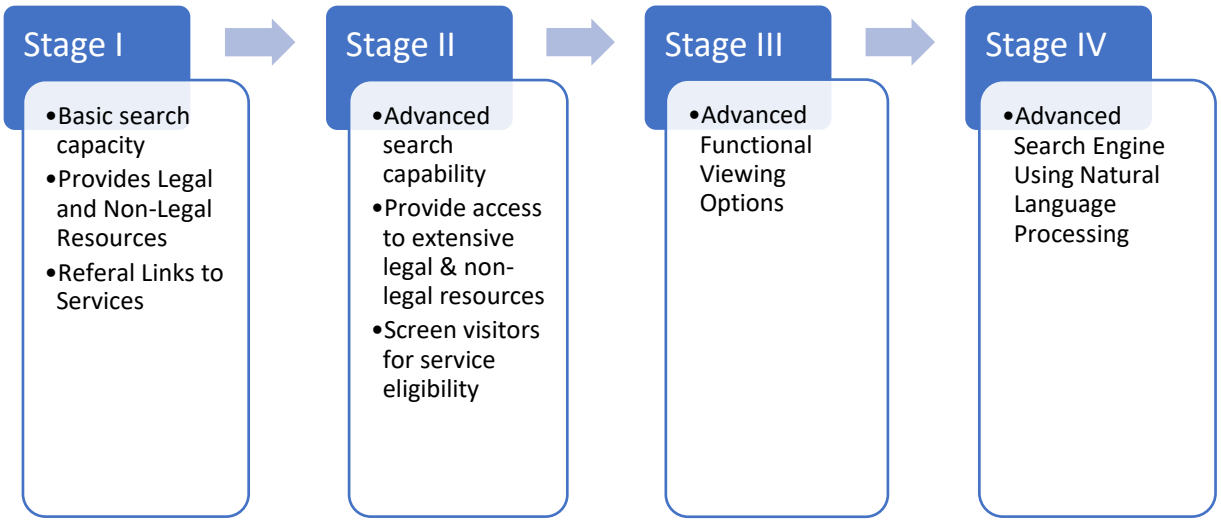
The legal assistance portals attract significant but varying levels of traffic. We were able to measure visitation of 122 of the portals; the rest were incorporated within larger sites and portal-specific web traffic could not be identified. Overall, the portals we assessed averaged 45,500 visits per month (based on July 2020 figures, the time this report was completed). A small group (14) attracted over 100,000 users per month, and many (37) received less than 5,000 monthly visits. For the two portals we evaluated, LawHelpMN.org saw average monthly traffic of about 46,355 visitors in 2021 and OhioLegalHelp.org OhioLegalHelp.org saw monthly traffic of about 66,124 visits in 2021.

As shown in Exhibit 2, portals can be classified into four stages based on the features they provide for visitors.[6] These stages are consistent with the four key features discussed above and recognize

[6] The development stages are additive, meaning that in addition to the features required for prior stages, portals must provide more features to reach the next stage. Fifteen portals are classified as Phase 1, 36 are in Phase 2, 107 are in Phase 3, and only five have reached Stage 4. The remaining portal has not yet reached Phase 1.

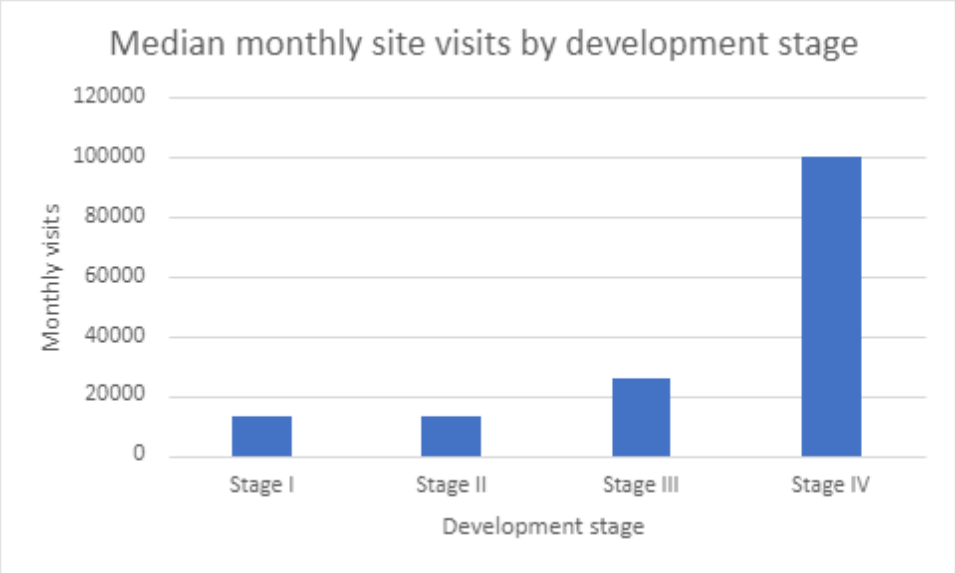
that portals often expand their functionalities over time. Portals in Stage I offer basic search capabilities, such as keywords to help visitors find relevant information, allow access to few legal and non-legal educational materials, and some capacity to refer users to attorneys and court resources. Portals in Stage II offer more advanced search capabilities, access to extensive legal and non-legal educational materials, and eligibility testing for legal aid services. Portals in Stage III provide functionalities that preview information for visitors via text boxes and/or inlaid descriptions of hyperlinked information and enable visitors to view information in multiple formats such as online views, downloadable pdfs, and videos. Last, Stage IV portals offer advanced features such as natural language processing to interpret user questions and help them navigate to relevant resources. See Appendix A for detailed criteria regarding each stage and descriptions as to where portals lie across each of the four developmental stages.

Exhibit 2: Portals can be classified into four stages of development



As shown in Exhibit 3, portals at higher stages of development receive higher average monthly visitation than those at lower development stages, demonstrating wider use.

Exhibit 3: More advanced portals tend to attract higher visitation



Source: Analysis of data from 2020 Nationwide Scan

Key Finding 2: Exemplar portals provide a wealth of legal resources and attract high visitation. While the exemplar portals provide timely, relevant, and accessible resources, it is unknown how successful they are in enabling users to resolve their legal problems.

To explore usage in exemplar legal assistance portals, we evaluated two sites selected by The Pew Charitable Trusts – Minnesota's LawHelpMN.org, Ohio's OhioLegalHelp.org. While these portals differ in their functionalities and contents, each is a significant resource in helping visitors address legal problems.

Minnesota. LawHelpMN.org is built on the open-source Drupal content management system and enables visitors to view educational materials on a broad range of legal topics, search for legal aid providers, and access court documents. The portal is managed by Legal Services State Support, a project of the Minnesota Legal Services Coalition, an association of seven Minnesota regional legal services programs. During 2021, the portal received over 556,265 visits, or an average of over 46,355per month, and this web traffic is growing over time.

LawHelpMN.org is one of several Minnesota technology platforms that help meet the legal needs of the state's low-income residents. Others include ProJusticeMN.org, which supports legal aid and pro bono attorneys; MNLegalAdvice.org, which enables the public to ask online legal questions that are answered by volunteer lawyers; the Legal Organizations Online Network (LOON), which enables state-funded legal aid providers to update information about their services, case acceptance guidelines, eligibility criteria and clinic information to facilitate effective case referrals among providers; and LegalServer, an online case management system used by many of the state's legal aid organizations. LawHelpMN.org is electronically linked to LOON and LegalServer; the LOON database populates the portal's list of relevant legal aid providers, while LegalServer facilitates online intake for these providers. The portal does not directly share information with the state courts system, although it provides links to the state court website (MNcourts.gov), which enables users to access and complete many online legal forms.

As of December 31, 2021, the portal provided access to 1,213 resources, including fact sheets, educational booklets, forms, videos, question and answer documents, and links to other information websites. Many of these materials are available in four languages – English, Spanish, Hmong, and Somali. Fact sheets are written to be understood by someone with a sixth grade reading level and are developed by the Legal Services State Support's Education for Justice Program and legal aid attorney partners, who update the materials at least annually in consultation with Minnesota's legal community. New materials are added based on perceived and expressed community need. These materials may be viewed on the portal or downloaded as

an accessible PDF. Other resources provided on the website include pamphlets, questions and answers, and similar documents written by other organizations such as the Minnesota State Bar Association, the Minnesota State Courts, the Minnesota Attorney General's Office, and other nonprofit organizations.

While the portal's primary focus is on civil legal topics, it also provides materials and resources for selected criminal law topics. As shown in Exhibit 4 below, as of January 17, 2022, the portal covered 12 broad legal topics and 94 unique legal issues.

Exhibit 4: LawHelpMN.org addresses 12 legal topics and 94 legal issues

Legal area	Issues	Legal area	Issues
Family	• Custody & Parenting Time • Delegation of Parental Authority • Divorce • Child Support • Paternity • Adoption • Third-Party Custody & Grandparent Visitation • Termination of Parental Rights • Name Change	**Housing**	• Evictions & Lockouts • Ending a Lease • Security Deposit • Repair Problems When Renting • Renter Safety • Low-Income Housing • Eviction Expungement • Housing Discrimination • Reasonable Accommodations • Mortgages, Foreclosures, & Contract for Deed • Mobile Homes
Car Issues	• Buying & Selling • Towed • Tickets • Other	**Money, Debt, & Taxes**	• Debt Collection & Garnishment • Conciliation Court & Collecting Money • Credit & Personal Finance • Bankruptcy • Tax Credits & Refunds • Tax Disputes & Problems • Scams & Contract Problems • Cars & Car Problems • Financial Aid & Student Loans
Work	• Unemployment Benefits • Job Discrimination & Harassment • Wrongful Termination • DHS Licensing & Disqualifications • Personal Records & Background Checks • Time Off from Work • Wage Claims • Work Safety	**Planning Ahead** & **Elder Law**	• Wills & Probate • Powers of Attorney • Guardianship & Conservatorship • Assisted Living & Nursing Homes • Planning Ahead • Elder Abuse • Disaster Relief

Immigration	• Citizenship • Delegation of Parental Authority • Permanent Resident Status • Asylum & Protection • Crime & Trafficking Victims • Domestic Abuse Protection • Government Benefits for Immigrants • Other Immigration Issues • Removal Defense	**Benefits & Health Care**	• Social Security Benefits (SSI & SSDI) • Food Support (SNAP) • Emergency Assistance (EA) • Government Health Care Programs • MFIP • General Assistance • Community-Based Services & PCA's • Sanctions, Appeals, & Problems • Other Benefit Programs
Abuse & Crime Victims	• Domestic Violence • Harassment • Crime Victims' Rights • Sexual Violence • Elder & Vulnerable Person Abuse • Child Abuse • Identify Theft • Trafficking	**Disability**	• Special Education & Learning Disabilities • Assistive Technology • Home & Community-Based Services • Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) • Discrimination & the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) • Other Disability Issues
Kids, Teens, & School	• Youth Living Away from Home • Abuse & Harassment • Pregnancy & Parenting • Education • Juvenile Delinquency • Immigrant Youth • Right to Seek Medical Care • Youth Rights with Parents and Guardians • Passports for Youth	**Criminal**	• Expungement & Criminal Records • Traffic Tickets • Driver's License Issues • Subpoenas • Criminal Defense

Source: Retrieved from LawHelpMN.org on January 17, 2022.

Users may access these materials as well as apply to legal aid providers by answering a series of screening questions or by searching through intuitively designed screens. Our nationwide assessment concluded that LawHelpMN.org was one of only 17 portals with features that met each of the four key features – Ask, Refine, Learn, and Connect – identified by the Pew Charitable Trusts as essential elements that help users navigate legal issues and take informed action. The website generally follows digital inclusiveness best practices that enable persons with low educational levels or who have disabilities to use the site, and it has robust internet security features.

While LawHelpMN.org provides links to the state's legal aid organizations, it is not intended to provide legal diagnoses of uses' problems and does not use software applications such as Spot that use natural-language processing to classify legal issues raised by users in text descriptions.[7] However, the website does offer a guided assist feature – the LawHelpMN Guide – that curates users' search results based on answers to closed-ended screening questions about their legal

[7] The Spot application was developed by the Suffolk University Law School's Legal Innovation & Technology Lab, directed by David Colarusso, to interpret the non-technical language used by persons to describe legal problems and identify their likely legal issues based on the National Subject Matter Index [NSMI], version 2, which provides the legal aid community a standard nomenclature for talking about client needs.

needs, and it displays resources and referrals relevant to the users' selected legal topic. The portal also includes a directory of organizations that provide legal assistance to Minnesota residents, and it displays curated information about these organizations based on responses that users enter on their location.

The portal's intuitive design enables users to identify and access relevant information for legal topics on the portal within short periods of time. Persons who completed our user experience survey were generally satisfied with the time they spent looking for information on the site and indicated that the information they obtained was relevant to their legal problem. Key legal aid stakeholders were highly supportive of the portal and report that it provides timely and relevant resources to persons seeking legal information and assistance. Participants in our focus groups and persons who responded to our user experience survey generally felt that the information they obtained from *the portal empowered them to make informed decisions regarding their legal problems.* Key local stakeholders also reported that the LawHelpMN.org helps persons become more knowledgeable about their legal issues and options and better prepared to discuss their case with legal aid attorneys and/or pursue other avenues to resolving their problems.

Ohio. OhioLegalHelp.org is built on Drupal, an open-source content management system and enables visitors to view and download educational materials on a broad range of legal topics, search for legal aid providers, and access court documents. The portal is managed by Ohio Legal Help. During the fourth quarter of 2021, the portal received 199,396 visits, an increase of 5.2% over the previous quarter. Web traffic has increased over time.

According to materials provided by OhioLegalHelp.org, the site was built to address the needs of Ohio residents for access to legal information. The continuing vision for the site is articulated in planning documents provided by OhioLegalHelp.org:

> *"The vision for the Ohio Legal Help website is a web-based access point that uses an automated triage process to direct Ohioans in need of legal help to the most appropriate forms of assistance. Ohio Legal Help will provide sophisticated self-help assistance materials and relevant links to third-party information. Ohio Legal Help will serve as both a direct source of information in addition to a pathway for quality legal representation."*

In 2017, the Ohio Legal Assistance Foundation (now the Ohio Access to Justice Foundation) brought together the Ohio Legal Help Steering Committee (a group that included private lawyers, court staff, legal aid staff, library staff, and staff from the Ohio Legal Assistance Foundation) to put together a Project Plan.

The project plan for the site also outlines objectives (some of them measurable, some aspirational) for the site. The formative objectives for the site, as stated in the 2017 Ohio Legal Help Project Plan, are to:

- Improve access to justice for those who cannot afford an attorney.

- Increase the public's knowledge of legal options and process through a content-rich website, delivered in multiple formats including video.

- Provide all Ohioans access to understandable legal information and effective advocacy tools to help them resolve their issue.

- Increase efficiency for stakeholders, including the courts, legal aid, and local bar Associations.

- Increase collaboration among stakeholders including the courts, community-based social services organizations, legal aid, pro bono programs, public and law libraries, and private bar associations.

- Improve public opinion of the judicial system and trust in the legal system.

OhioLegalHelp.org is one of several Ohio technology platforms that help meet the legal needs of the state's low-income residents. Other legal help options available to state residents include communitylegalaid.org and ohnd.uscourts.gov/pro-bono-program, which provides resources related to requesting a pro bono attorney and other legal help, as well as various legal hotlines available for free in different parts of the state. Finally, other opportunities to speak with lawyers (for example, the Akron Bar Association's "Ask an Attorney", which enables the public to ask online legal questions that are answered by volunteer lawyers on periodic occasions) are suggested to clients using the website.

While the portal's primary focus is on civil legal topics, it also provides materials and resources for selected criminal law topics. As of April 26, 2022, the home page for the site lists the following starting points for clients who want information: Family, Housing, Consumer and Debt, Health & Public Benefits, Education, Seniors, Veterans and Servicemembers, Immigration, Crime and Traffic, and Going to Court. After the initial selection of one of these topics, site users may access documents as well as obtain referrals to legal aid providers by answering a series of screening questions or by searching through intuitively designed screens. OhioLegalHelp.org provides a guided interview, which starts with the subject of interest

(divorce, traffic tickets, eviction, etc.), and asks a series of questions about income, family size, whether the person is currently in danger and gathers other relevant information before producing relevant resources (such as indicating legal paperwork that is relevant with instructions about how to use the documents). Included as well is a decision tree to help clients think through whether they should retain an attorney or if they can continue pro se.

As an exemplar portal, visitors to OhioLegalHelp.org accessed a wide variety of topics. During the first quarter of 2021, the top pages were COVID-19 rental protections, unemployment, and the eviction moratorium declaration form. During the second quarter of 2021, the top pages were unemployment, COVID-19 rental protections, unemployment, and the eviction moratorium declaration form. During the third quarter, the top pages were COVID-19 rental protections, unemployment, and the eviction timeline. Exhibit 5 shows the most accessed pages during the fourth quarter period and how much time visitors spent on the page.

Exhibit 5: Ten most popular pages accessed on the OhioLegalHelp.org October-December 2021

Topic Page	Number of Unique Users	Page Views	Average Amount of Time Spent
1. Coronavirus-stimulus-checks	10,341	12,378	6:47
2. Paid-leave-coronavirus	8,496	10,008	14:11
3. Covid-19-renter-protections	7,354	9,555	5:37
4. Eviction-timeline	7,282	9,453	5:59
5. Divorce-process	6,313	8,062	4:05
6. Repairs (landlord)	5,046	8,032	3:10
7. Food-SNAP	6,326	7,775	7:10
8. Changing custody	4,906	7,106	3:03
9. Dissolution-process (marriage)	4,403	6,869	2:03
10. Unemployment	5,342	6,362	7:43

Source: Ohio legal assistance portal

Our nationwide assessment concluded that OhioLegalHelp.org was one of only 17 portals with features that met each of the four key features – Ask, Refine, Learn, and Connect – identified by the Pew Charitable Trusts as essential elements that help users navigate legal issues and take informed action. After accessibility and usability testing were conducted it was found that the website generally follows digital inclusiveness best practices that enable persons with low educational levels or who have disabilities to use the site, and it has robust internet security features.

While OhioLegalHelp.org provides links to the state's legal aid organizations, it is not intended to provide legal diagnoses of users' problems and does not use software applications to classify legal issues raised by users in text descriptions, such as Spot However, the website does offer a guided assist feature which curates users' search results based on answers to closed-ended screening questions about their legal needs, and it displays resources and referrals relevant to the users' selected legal topic. The portal also includes a directory of organizations that provide legal assistance to Ohio residents such as the Lorain County Bar Association, the Ohio State Bar Association, and the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland. In addition, the closest law library to the client, and Apprisen (an HUD approved credit counseling organization), and local public libraries are also examples suggested as ways of finding more information and help.

The portal's intuitive design enables users to identify and access relevant information for legal topics on the portal within short periods of time. Persons who completed our user experience survey were generally satisfied with the time they spent looking for information on the site and indicated that the information they obtained was relevant to their legal problem. Key legal aid

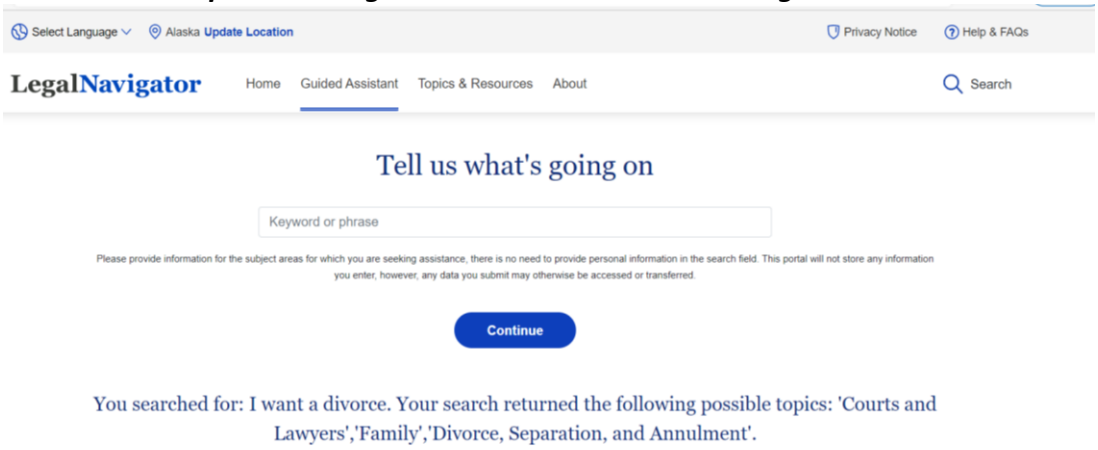
stakeholders were highly supportive of the portal and report that it provides timely and relevant resources to persons seeking legal information and assistance. Participants in our focus groups and persons who responded to our user experience survey generally felt that the information they obtained from the portal empowered them to make informed decisions regarding their legal problems. Key local stakeholders also reported that OhioLegalHelp.org helps users become more knowledgeable about their legal issues and options and better prepared to discuss their case with legal aid attorneys and/or pursue other avenues to resolving their problems. Court personnel reported in interviews that they viewed the portal as a valuable resource to help give clients a starting place to access the Ohio legal system.

Outcomes of portal users are unknown and challenging to measure. While the Minnesota and Ohio portals each have exemplar features, their impact in helping visitors resolve legal problems is unknown. None of these portals collect the data needed to follow-up with visitors to determine what actions, if any, they take to address their legal issues after reviewing the information they retrieved from the websites. In part, this reflects the portals' goals, which focus on providing high quality information to help visitors understand their legal issues and options, rather than providing direct services to help visitors resolve these problems (which is the role of legal aid providers). In addition, the website allows users to access legal information privately and anonymously. We attempted to collect follow-up information through user experience surveys placed on the Minnesota and Ohio portals. While many users participated in these surveys, very few provided contact information or completed follow-up questionnaires although we offered a $25 gift card incentive and sent them multiple reminder emails. In the absence of data on visitor outcomes, we could not estimate the return on investment that the websites achieve for users and other organizations. Later in this report, we provide a framework that can be used to evaluate legal assistance portals and conduct benefit-cost analyses.

Key Finding 3: The Legal Navigator portals being implemented in Alaska and Hawaii represent a major advance in providing highly targeted information and individualized case plans to persons seeking to address legal problems. While for the Legal Navigator software platform has experienced serious delays, it will become available to other states as an open-source system in mid-2022.

The Pew Charitable Trusts also asked us to evaluate the development of the Alaska and Hawaii legal assistance portals, which are still under development and utilize the Legal Navigator software platform. These websites, while not yet operational, offer exemplar functionalities that represent a major advance in legal assistance portals and fully meet the criteria for each of the four key feature —*Ask, Refine, Learn*, and *Connect* – that The Pew Charitable Trusts has identified as key elements that help users navigate legal issues and take informed action. The Legal Navigator software platform also has excellent accessibility and security features.
Portal users in Alaska and Hawaii may access legal information in two ways – selecting a legal area from those listed in their portals' Topics and Resources tab, or by answering questions using the portals' Guided Assistant, which uses the Spot natural language processing application and enables users to post plain-language questions and receive relevant search results. As shown in Exhibit 6, as of February 25, 2022, entering "I want a divorce" generates initial related topic areas.

Exhibit 6: The portals will generate relevant results through its Guided Assistant

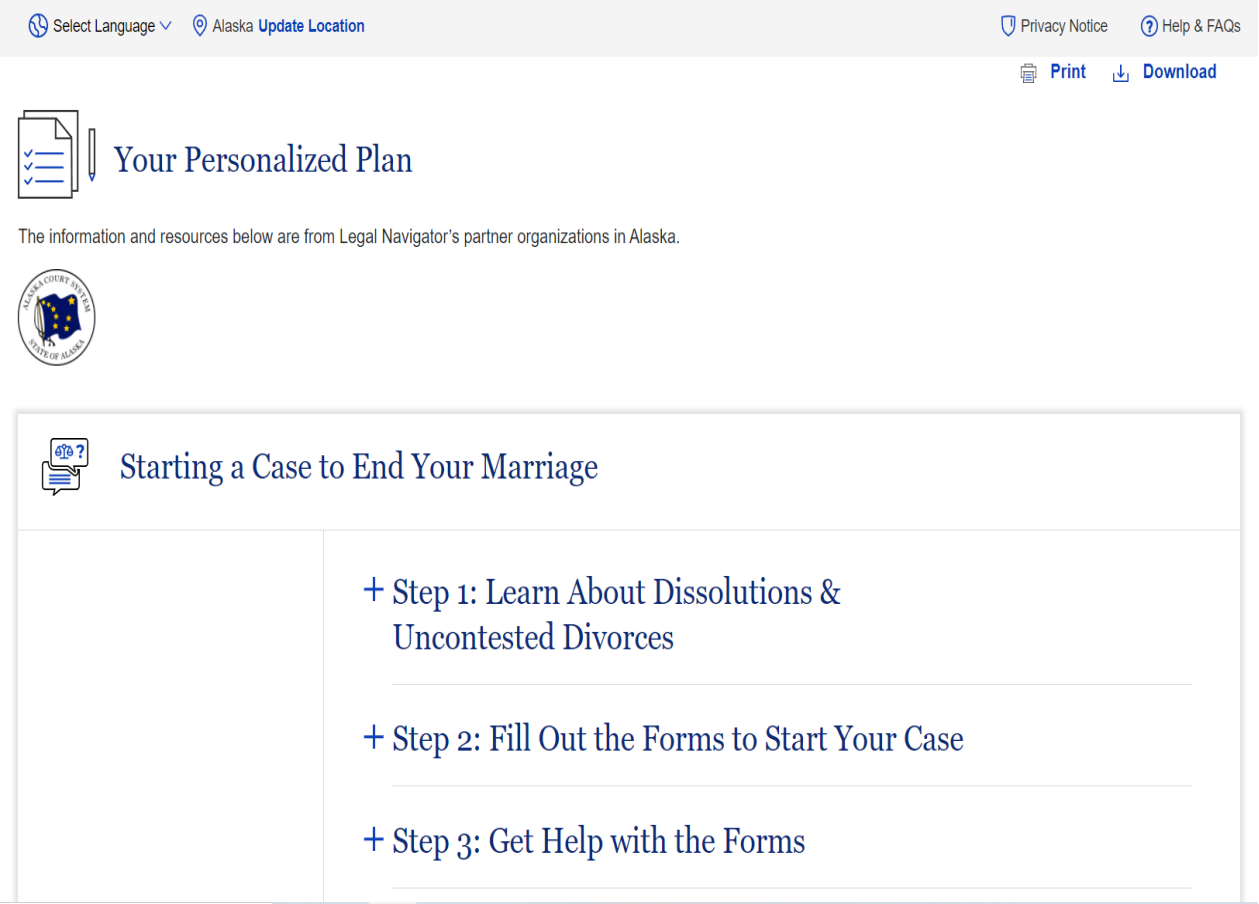


Source: Alaska Legal Navigator Guided Assistant tab, downloaded February 25, 2022.

As of February 25, 2022, the Guided Assistant asks a set of follow-up questions to diagnose the user's legal problem more precisely. For example, questions asked for persons entering "I want a divorce" include whether the divorce will be contested, involve children, allegations of spousal abuse, or require division of community property. At the conclusion of the Guided Assistant interview, the portal generates a detailed personalized action plan that identifies the

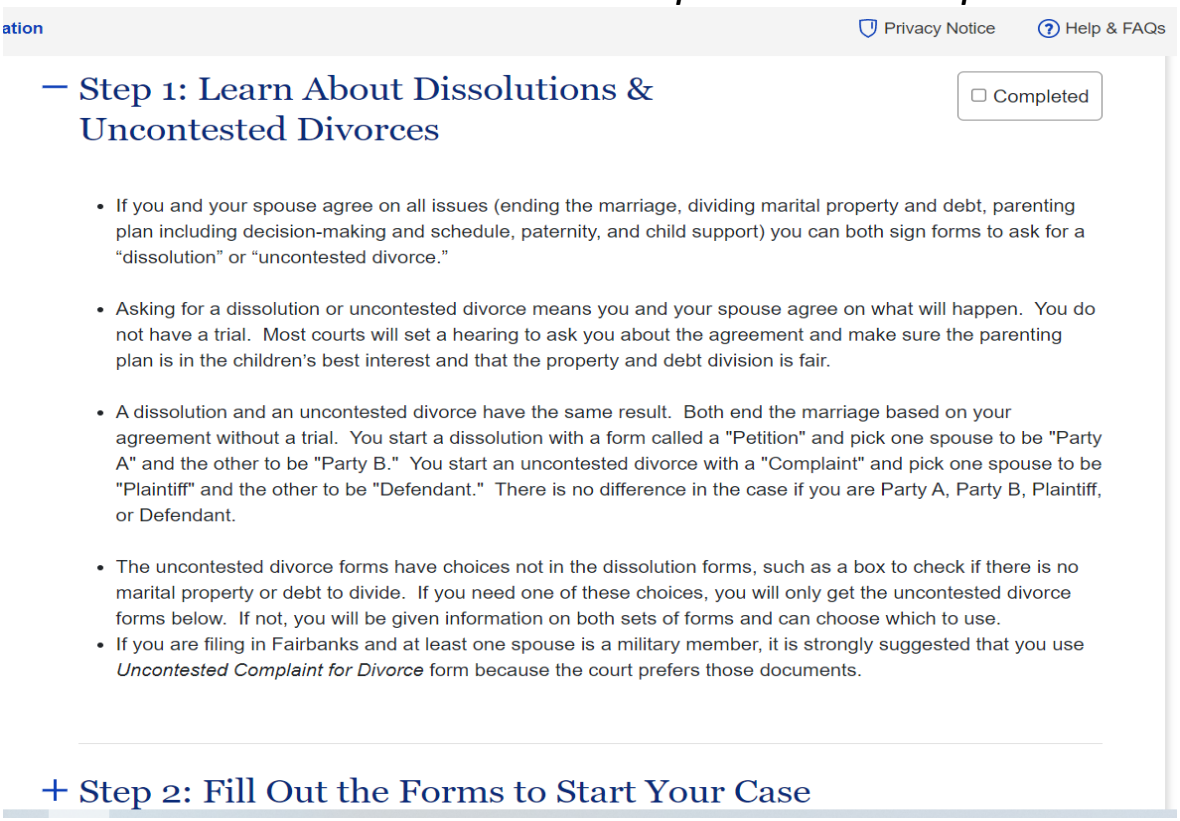
specific steps the user should take to address their legal problem. Users may either print or download the personalized action plan. Clicking on each step provides definitions of relevant legal terms and explains the actions needed to move forward with the case. The Personalized Plan provides links to legal forms required to initiate court action, as well as links to documents that explain the forms and what information is needed to complete them. The Personalized Plan also provides links to legal aid organizations that users can contact for help with their case, instructions for filing forms with the court to initiate legal action and lists of other educational resources available through Legal Navigators that are relevant to the user's legal issue. See exhibits 7 – 10.

Exhibit 7 – The Guided Assistant generates personalized case plans (example – divorce)



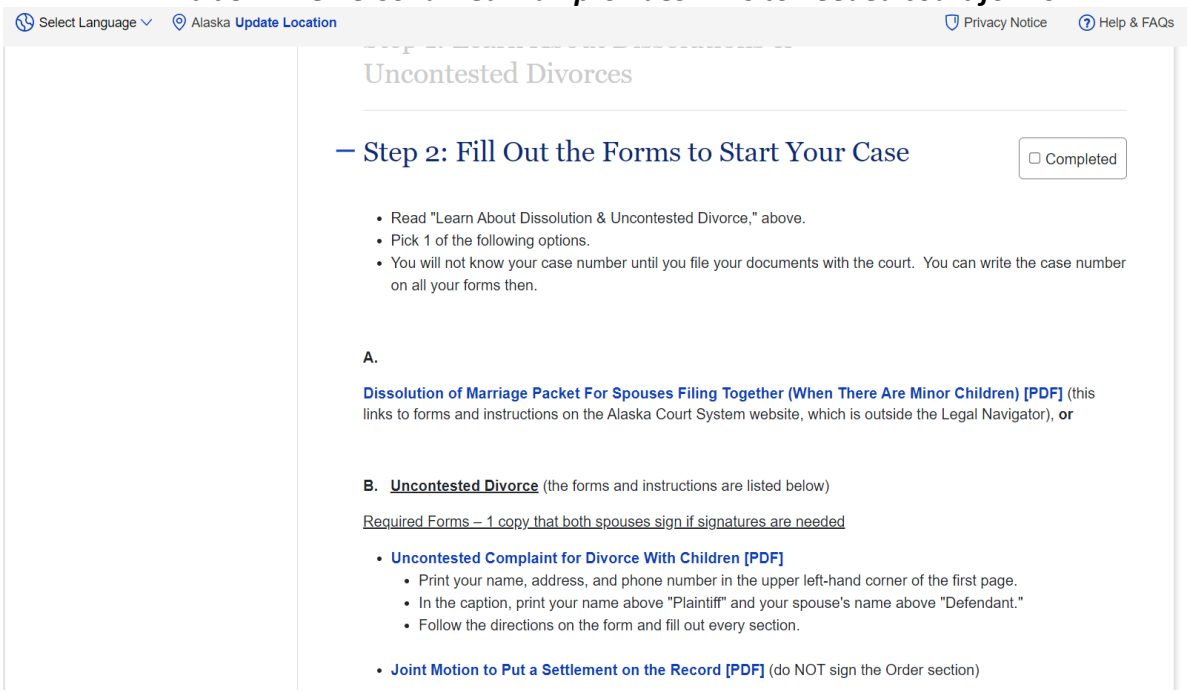
Source: Alaska legal assistance portal, downloaded February 25, 2022.

Exhibit 8 – The Personalized Plan explains each action step



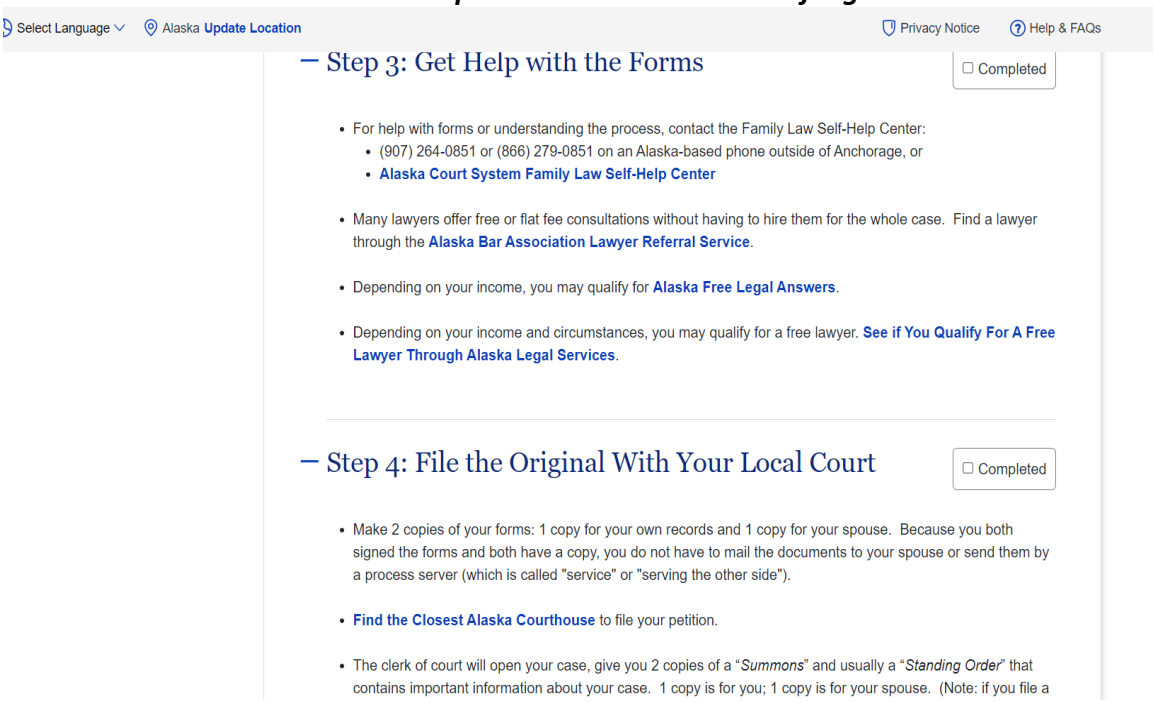
Source: Alaska legal assistance portal, downloaded February 25, 2022.

Exhibit 9 – The Personalized Plan provides links to needed court forms



Source: Alaska legal assistance portal, downloaded February 25, 2022.

Exhibit 10 – The Guided Assistant provides links to sources of legal assistance & courts



Source: Alaska legal assistance portal, downloaded February 25, 2022.

The Legal Navigator software platform has experienced a long and complex development history. The initial concept for the platform was proposed in 2011 and clarified in 2013 and 2014. Microsoft began developing the platform's software in 2016 and Alaska and Hawaii were selected as pilot sites that same year. Significant weaknesses in the software design were identified in 2018, and Microsoft exited the project in early 2019. The Legal Services Corporation hired a new development firm in 2019, but this firm was unable to complete the project. In 2019, another firm was hired to rebuild much of the Microsoft software, and system development is expected to be completed in mid-2022.

Several factors contributed to the platform's delays. The design concept for the Legal Navigator platform was ambitious in both scope and timeframe. The initial vision was to create a portal that could be adopted by multiple states, diagnose the needs of diverse users, generate personalized case management plans identifying needed action steps, and link users to both legal and social service providers. The development timeframe was extremely optimistic and assumed that system design, development, data integration, and testing could be completed within a compressed two-year period. The design also relied on a series of assumptions about data availability and business process flows, many of which were incorrect. The development process also lacked an effective governance structure that involved key stakeholders in critical design decisions to test assumptions, and the two states had limited capacity to develop the content needed to make their portals operational

This development process is nearing completion, and Hawaii and Alaska project managers plan to demonstrate their portals to stakeholders in mid-2022. As they upload more content to their sites, The Legal Navigator platform is expected to be ready for adoption by other states as an open-source system later in 2022. Hawaii staff will be available to answer questions that states may have about the platform and its implementation requirements.

Key Finding 4: Organizations seeking to develop new legal assistance portals, expand the functionality of their current websites should follow best practices in doing so.

Many organizations that offer legal assistance portals seek to expand and enhance these websites over time. Our series of evaluations identified a set of best practices that organizations should consider when taking these steps.

✓ ***Clearly define project goals, assumptions, sustainability needs, and deliverables.***

A critical initial step for any information technology project is to establish a clear vision for the initiative and the specific goals and objectives it should attain. This process should include consideration of the legal needs of the intended users of the portal and the resources that are currently available in the state to meet user needs. For example, Minnesota, when developing its LawHelpMN.org portal, identified the need to provide legal information to diverse population groups, and thus planned to translate materials on the portal into Spanish, Somali, Hmong, and English.

When identifying project goals, sponsors should consider incorporating features that meet the criteria for the four essential features that The Pew Charitable Trusts has identified that help users navigate legal issues and take informed actions – an *Ask* feature that enables users to self-identify their legal issue of interest; an interactive *Refine* feature that helps users screen search results; a Learn feature that provides individuals with relevant and current legal information, and a *Connect* feature that provides referrals to legal or other services. These goals should be agreed upon and communicated to all key project stakeholders.

This process should also include identifying the key assumptions that underlie the project vision and goals, such as the availability of needed data and the resources (both IT infrastructure and staffing) that will be needed to conduct the project. For example, future staff at Ohio Legal Help did a "road show" of the portal to help gain buy-in and articulate goals. It is important to consider sustainability in this determination -- it makes little sense to build a portal that the sponsoring organization will be unable to maintain over time. As our research showed, portals can have higher maintenance costs than initial development costs due to expansion of services and reach, hiring additional staff, and general technical maintenance.

Failure to identify and test assumptions can lead to significant project development problems. For example, Microsoft's initial design for the Legal Navigator software platform assumed that state social service providers used robust databases that could be readily accessed by the portal

to direct users to appropriate local providers, and it used an internal data structure that required many updates be made in the platform's software rather than in external databases. These assumptions were unrealistic and presumed that Alaska and Hawaii would maintain robust IT units with the resources to manage this process, work with providers to create needed databases, and regularly update the platform's source code. To resolve this problem, a new developer had to redesign the portal to simplify the update process, and social service providers were dropped from the project scope.

Finally, the vision and goal setting process should estimate the costs and development time that will be required to implement and sustain the project. The overall planning stage of portal development can be lengthy and must be adequately resourced.

- ✓ ***Identify and assess development options*.**

Once project goals are identified, organizations should identify and systematically assess the options available for conducting the project. This should include determining what content (information) will be required to support the desired functionalities, how this information will be presented (such as via written documents, instructional videos and/or links to outside resources) and selecting the most appropriate option for incorporating the functionality into the portal.

An important option that organizations should consider is whether to incorporate components of the Legal Navigator software platform into their portal. This platform offers several exemplar functionalities, including the Guided Assistant helps users diagnose their legal problems, access relevant educational materials and court forms, and provide step-by step case plans to guide them through the legal process; the Spot natural language processor which enables users to post plain-language questions and receive relevant search results; and the Legal Issues Taxonomy (LIST) catalog of client-focused topic areas that classifies legal issues. These functionalities may be incorporated into other portals individually or together.

As noted above, it is important to consider the resources that will be needed to incorporate each functionality. For example, while the Guided Assistant function provides personalized action plans to portal users, implementing it requires states to carefully map the legal process required for diverse types of cases, and this task must be performed by staff with subject matter expertise. It must also be maintained by subject matter experts, updating steps as courts change forms or practices.

✓ ***Define clear project governance.***

It is important for portal sponsors to identify the entity(ies) that will be responsible for overseeing project implementation, vetting assumptions, and making decisions about functionalities and design options. The governance structure should include a steering committee with stakeholders such as legal aid organizations, bar associations, and courts. Both the exemplar portals, LawHelpMN.org and OhioLegalHelp.org, have this. A valuable task in this process is conducting user focus groups of legal aid providers, courts staff, community partners, and intended users to review and comment upon the portal's design and interim deliverables to ensure that user needs and capabilities are fully considered throughout the development process.

✓ ***Ensure strong project management is in place before software development begins.***

It is important to ensure that staff with project management and subject matter expertise are available to oversee portal development. This workgroup should be formed at the initiation of the project and guide the definition of project goals, objectives, assumptions, and timelines; assessment and selection of development options; specification of deliverables and requirements; and acceptance of the final product. The workgroup should report regularly to the project governance steering committee.

✓ ***Build evaluation capabilities into portals.***

Sponsors should build capabilities to collect user experience data into the platform so that this information can be continuously generated to monitor the portal's operations and whether it is attaining intended outcomes. While some data can be generated using tools such as Google Analytics, portals should have the capability to track visitor progress thorough the site and identify the legal topics being researched and the materials being viewed, and the extent to which whether users are accessing materials needed completing key tasks such as completing and filing court forms. Portals should also incorporate ongoing user experience surveys to assess whether visitors are able to find the information they were seeking, whether they find the materials useful, and whether they better understood their legal issues and options after visiting the site. To keep these surveys brief, portals can set up question banks and rotate subsets of key questions over time to generate robust information on a wide range of important user experience topics. Suggested questions for user experience surveys are listed later in this report.

The Legal Services Corporation can play a vital role in assisting organizations seeking to develop or enhance legal assistance portals.

Two actions would be particularly useful:

1. **Create a learning community of legal assistance portals.** While legal assistance portals are now commonplace across the nation, they operate independently and vary widely in their functionalities and content. A learning community of portal sponsors could enable them to share experiences, successes, and challenges. It could also facilitate sharing educational materials such as fact sheets, booklets, and videos that attract wide usage; actions that have promoted portal use such as search engine optimization techniques; and new functionalities that have been incorporated into portals and the outcomes they have achieved for visitors.

2. **Assist in marketing the Legal Navigator software platform to other states.** The ultimate success of the Legal Navigator software platform is dependent on whether other entities join the initiative. While Alaska and Hawaii are poised to successfully deploy their portals in 2022, they have limited resources and capabilities to continue to develop the software and expand its functionalities. While the Legal Services Corporation has provided a grant to Hawaii to market the platform to new entities, this may be challenging given Hawaii's geographical distance from other states. The Legal Services Corporation could assist in this process by featuring the platform in its communications and conferences and helping to find funders to support the platform's expansion. Good candidates for adopting the Legal Navigator platform would include those states that have participated in the Justice For All process and identified their legal aid resources, created a governance structure, and have available funding to support the project.

Key Finding 5: ***Portal sponsors can use our recommended framework for conducting evaluations and benefit-cost studies of their legal assistance portals***

While legal assistance portals now exist in every state, few studies have evaluated their effectiveness in helping users resolve their legal problems or the return on investment that the websites generate for users and the larger legal aid system. To facilitate such studies, we have developed a framework for evaluating portals and analyzing their costs and benefits.

Protocol for evaluating legal assistance portals.

A critical consideration in any evaluation is deciding what questions the study should address. Evaluations may be focused on a wide range of issues, including whether a portal is operating as intended, whether it is serving its intended audience, and/or whether it is achieving intended outcomes such as enabling visitors to resolve their legal problems. This scope must be specified before the evaluation begins. When making this decision, organizations should reach out to key stakeholders to identify what questions and concerns they may have that should be incorporated into the research. The organizations should also identify what data are likely to be available and when the study needs to be completed.

The research methods used to conduct the study should be carefully crafted to collect the data needed to answer the specific evaluation questions. Almost all evaluations should include steps such as reviewing documents relating to the portal's design and functionalities, interviewing key stakeholders, and examining data on portal visitors and how they use the website. Recommended methodologies to examine three common portal questions are detailed below.

Is the portal and its information accessible to users? Accessibility is an important topic because a portal will generate little value if visitors have difficulty finding the information they are seeking or find the information difficult to understand. Additionally, it is important that the website be easy to use by persons with disabilities as this population is at a greater disadvantage in terms of a lower income rate, often victims of domestic violence, and facing greater accessibility barriers when utilizing government services, and must often navigate the legal system alone. Evaluations that seek to address this question should include five key tests.[8]

[8] For more information about these factors, see American Psychological Association. Abuse of women with disabilities (2014) https://www.apa.org/topics/disabilities/women-violence; Kate Lang (2020). Apply, Deny, Appeal: The Difficult Process of Claiming Disability Benefits. *Generations* https://www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/asag/gen/2020/00000043/00000004/art00004; and Disability Justice (2022). *Access to Justice System and Stereotypes*. https://disabilityjustice.org/justice-denied/elusive-and-inconsistent/.

1. The study should include technical usability and accessibility tests that assess the site's accessibility to persons using a range of device types and having varying capabilities. This assessment can include automated and manual code reviews that check for compliance with the internationally recognized World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 Web Content Accessibility Guidelines as well as Section 508 as part of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. The assessment should also examine the reading difficulty level of portal resources to determine if the materials are difficult for intended users to understand. The assessment can also examine the robustness of the portal's information security features to determine how well it protects users' identities (if any personal information is obtained by the portal) and is resistant to external hacking.

2. The evaluation should include focus groups assessments in which participants (four to eight persons) are observed completing designated tasks, utilizing both desktop and mobile devices. Ideally, the focus group should include persons with disabilities and persons experiencing legal problems with demographic characteristics like the portal's target audience. The evaluators should interview the participants about their assessments of the portal and the appropriateness and perceived utility of the materials they access.

3. The evaluation should include a user experience survey that is placed on the portal. The survey questions should use a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree) and can be posted using Survey Monkey, Qualtrics, or a similar low-cost survey platform. The questions should ask respondents to rate their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements about the portal:

    - The website was easy to use
    - It was easy to find the information I needed
    - The website used terms that were easy to understand
    - I have a better understanding of my legal options after using the website
    - The website suggested appropriate resources to help me solve my legal problem
    - The website was a good use of my time
    - I feel more confident about steps I can take to resolve my legal issue
    - I would use the website again to help resolve another legal issue

- The information I found on the website will save me time and money in handling my legal issue
- Please rate the usefulness of the materials you used on the website:
    a. Information that explained the legal issue
    b. Court forms that I could fill out and file
    c. Live chat
    d. Referrals to legal aid
    e. Videos

The survey should also ask the respondents to identify the general legal topic they were researching (using a drop-down menu) and include a statement that the survey responses will be confidential. The survey results would provide valuable insights about the portal's value to visitors and how effectively it is meeting the needs of visitors facing diverse legal issues.

4. The evaluation should analyze portal tracking data to identify potential frustration points, such as webpages where a sizable number of persons exit the site and the average length of time and number of pages viewed by visitors. If the portal offers materials in multiple languages, the evaluation should compare page views and downloads of materials written in different languages.

5. Finally, the evaluation should include semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders including legal aid organizations, court system staff, the state bar association, and others recommended by the portal sponsor. Each stakeholder should be asked to give their perspective on the accessibility of the portal to the public and persons with disabilities in addition to, when feasible, obtaining feedback from users with disabilities.

Does the portal provide timely and relevant resources? This question examines whether portal users find the information they are seeking within a reasonable period and believe that the information is relevant to their legal problem. To assess timeliness, evaluations can use Google Analytics to examine portal usage, including the average length of time users spend on the site, the average number of pages viewed, and the most frequently viewed and/or downloaded materials.

Evaluators can also conduct focus group (see above) and measure how long it takes participants to complete tasks related to test scenarios (such as "you and your spouse are seeking a divorce. Use the portal to find information on how to file a divorce and complete the court forms needed to begin this process"). Participants should be asked about their perspectives of the

relevance of the information they obtained, and whether they believed that using the portal was a waste of time.

Finally, as discussed above, a user experience survey can be placed on the site asking whether the respondents were satisfied with how long it took them to obtain the information they were seeking and the relevance of these materials. Additionally, the evaluation should include interviews with key stakeholders, who should be asked to rate the quality and relevance of resources found on the site, as well as seeking to obtain this information directly from users.

Does the portal enable users to address their legal issues? This question examines a portal's outcomes – whether persons who use the site feel more empowered to address their legal problem and are subsequently successful in doing so. Answering this question is challenging because several steps often must occur before a portal visitor resolves their legal problem – they must find the information on the portal needed to address their problem, they often must initiate or defend legal action, and they must be successful in obtaining the desired court outcome. Only one of these steps– finding needed information – is fully taken while the individual is using the portal.

Assessing whether portal visitors find the information they are seeking on the portal is straightforward. Focus groups and user experience surveys can ask portal visitors if they have found the information they were seeking and have a better understanding of their options and the action needed to address their problem.

Assessing whether portal users subsequently initiate action is more challenging as this occurs after they have left the portal. Relevant information could be obtained in multiple ways, and none are perfect. First, the researchers can attempt to follow-up with a sample of persons who have used the portal. This can be done by asking portal visitors to complete a user experience survey (see above), provide their contact information, and complete a follow-up interview or survey a month or two after they completed the initial survey. As an incentive, these persons can be offered an incentive such as a gift card for participating in this effort. Second, if the portal enables visitors to directly file applications to legal aid organizations, it may be possible to tag these referrals and ask the legal aid organizations to report the outcomes achieved in these cases. Third, if the portal enables visitors to complete and file online court forms, as does the Legal Navigator software platform's individualized case plan feature, it may be possible to work with the court system to tag these cases and identify subsequent court outcomes. However, this could raise confidentiality issues.

Protocol for conducting benefit-cost analyses.

In addition to evaluating the operation and impacts of a legal assistance portal, some organizations may be interested in estimating the return on investment that the site achieves for its visitors and the larger society. While these are challenging to conduct, they can be particularly useful in demonstrating the portal's value. To facilitate these studies, we provide a protocol based on the rubric in a leading text.[9]

Conducting benefit-cost analyses requires collecting and analyzing three types of data – costs, baseline conditions, and outcomes. Costs are the expenses incurred to operate a portal, including staffing and information technology expenditures, and are straightforward to calculate. Baseline conditions are the legal problems that portal users are seeking to resolve. Outcomes are the changes in baseline conditions that occur because the portal has given its visitors information that enables them to resolve their legal problems. Ideally, cost-benefit studies consider a wide range of short- and long-term benefits received by portal users and the larger society. These benefits could include enabling a parent to obtain a divorce, protection order, and child support from an abusive partner, which may reduce the custodial parent's medical costs and improve the educational outcomes of their children who no longer traumatized by family violence. Additionally, these outcomes could reduce public assistance costs if the parent no longer needs this aid because they are receiving child support, and law enforcement system costs could be lowered if there is no longer a need to respond to ongoing domestic violence. Benefit-cost studies estimate the economic value of these benefits, apply a discount rate (the time value of money) to calculate the present value of future outcomes, calculate net benefits by subtracting costs from the benefits, and conduct sensitivity analyses to test how these estimates are impacted by changing assumptions. The ability to conduct these studies is dependent on the availability of reliable cost, baseline, and outcome data.

Step 1: Define expected portal outcomes and the data necessary to measure these impacts. It is never feasible for a single study to measure all potential costs and benefits. Thus, it is important to begin this research by identifying what outcomes that the portal is expected to achieve, what perspectives are most important to consider, and the data that will be needed to conduct the study. In theory, portals may impact many entities, including the persons who use the sites to research legal problems, their families, organizations that serve these persons such as legal aid organizations, the courts system, and the broader society. Additionally, some benefits may be achieved in the short term (such as a custodial parent obtaining child support), while others may occur over many years, such as higher lifetime earnings for children who benefit from a safer home environment. To keep a study manageable, the research sponsors and analysts should define what potential benefits and costs will be assessed.

[9]Weimer, David L. & Aidan R. Vining. (2017). *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice, 6th ed*. New York, Routledge.

Any cost-benefit analysis is limited by the data that are available to measure costs, baseline conditions, and outcomes. Thus, it is also important to identify what information will be available on portal costs, baseline conditions (the legal problems that portal users are facing), and outcomes (the changes that occur because visitors used the portal). If inadequate data are available on baseline conditions and/or outcomes, a benefit-cost analysis should not be attempted.

Step 2: Measure portal costs. In this step, the costs to operate the portal is identified, including annual staffing, software development, hosting, and indirect expenses. It is not important to identify development expenditures incurred prior to the year of interest, as these are 'sunk costs' and do not factor into the benefit-cost analysis.

Step 3: Measure baseline conditions. The next step is to identify the legal problems that portal users are seeking to resolve and would likely continue in the future without the intervention. Prior studies of legal aid organizations, which share portals' goal of helping persons who lack the resources to hire private attorneys resolve their legal problems, have generally used caseload data to measure baseline conditions. [10] Accordingly, they have used case information to identify the legal issue facing their clients such as unpaid child support and wages, non-returned rental deposits, and unfairly denied claims for public benefits such as unemployment compensation. States using the Legal Navigator software platform could similarly use data from the Guided Assistant feature to estimate the number of portal users who are attempting to resolve specific types of legal problems. Portals can also collect baseline data through a user experience popup survey that would appear when visitors leave the site, asking these persons to identify (through a drop-down menu), the legal issues they were researching and whether they were planning to initiate legal action to resolve these issues.

Step 4: Measure relevant outcomes. This step uses the available data to estimate the changes from baseline conditions that can reasonably be attributed to the intervention (in this case, the outcomes that portal visitors achieve using the information they obtain from the website). The most reliable data sources for tracking outcomes are those that are documented in official records, and the cost benefit studies of legal aid organizations generally measure the outcomes of their services through analysis of the percentages of cases that are successful in obtaining

[10] Examples of these studies include the Minnesota Legal Services Coalition: (2014). *Legal Aid's Impact*. St. Paul: Minnesota Legal Services Coalition; Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation. (2018). *Report on the Economic Benefits of Civil Legal Aid to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and its Residents Fiscal Year 2018*. Boston: Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation; Community Services Analysis LLC.; and Louisiana Bar Foundation. (2016). *The Economic Impact and Social Return on Investment of Civil Legal Aid Services in The State of Louisiana*. New Orleans: Louisiana Bar Foundation.

court orders for child support, debt forgiveness, payment of support benefits, and collection of unpaid wages. In some cases, administrative datasets may be available to measure outcomes over time, such increased high school graduation rates of children whose custodial parents receive child support. Obtaining these data may require negotiating access from governmental entities and matching clients (portal users) across datasets, and this process can be quite time consuming.

It is also useful to consider outcomes that portals may generate for other entities such as legal aid organizations. For example, obtaining referrals through a portal may reduce the organizations' intake costs, and could reduce the amount of time needed to serve these clients because they have a greater understanding of the legal process and the information needed to initiate litigation. Accordingly, researchers should reach out to legal aid organizations and ask if they can estimate these outcomes. Additionally, the legal aid organizations may be a valuable information source about the court outcomes achieved for those clients who had been referred through the portal.

When quantitative data are not available, it may be possible to obtain reasonable estimates for some outcomes from knowledgeable stakeholders. This can be done by asking the stakeholders to estimate the costs and outcomes of key factors, such as the amount of time needed to serve clients referred through the portal or the percentage of litigants who recover unpaid wages through litigation. To provide more validity to these estimates, analysts can use a Delphi approach in which individual estimates are shared with a larger group of experts to reach a consensus on the issue. This process can be especially useful when a quantitative measure is available from another jurisdiction and the question is whether that value (such as the average amount of unpaid wages recovered) is reasonably representative of the value in the jurisdiction being analyzed.

While not as definitive as court records, benefit-cost analyses can also obtain useful information about the outcomes by surveying portal visitors and asking them whether they have been able to resolve their legal problems, how they did so, and the outcomes they attained. This can be done by following up with persons who complete a user experience survey (as discussed above) and can be facilitated by providing incentives such as gift cards to persons who complete the experience survey, provide contact information, and participate in a follow-up survey.

Step 5: Estimate the monetary value of measured outcomes. In this step, the analysis monetizes (assigns a dollar value) to the outcomes that have been measured. Benefit-cost studies of legal aid organizations have typically done so by recording the amounts of child support, support benefits, unpaid wages, etc., that are ordered by the court and indirect

benefits to society. If these data are not available, good estimates can sometimes be derived from sources such as government reports that provide data on average incomes, the percentage of divorces that involve child support, or studies that have measured the value of outcomes in other jurisdictions. For example, a 2018 report by the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation used economic estimates from several studies to place values on the educational benefits received by clients who were ordered by the courts to receive Individual Education Plan services and these client's predicted increased lifetime earnings. Some studies have also estimated the value of outcomes that are causally linked to other outcomes that have been measured. For example, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) has, through extensive meta-analyses of literature, estimated the value of long-term benefits such as increased lifetime earnings of children who are successfully diverted from juvenile crime through effective intervention and thus are more likely to complete high school.[11] As research has shown that children in families that avoid homelessness are less likely to commit crimes while juveniles, it may be appropriate to include these estimates in a benefit-cost analyses of legal assistance portals.[12]

Step 6: Apply a discount rate to calculate the present value of future costs and benefits. If the benefit-cost analysis includes estimates of the values of outcomes such as the amount of child support that would be received by a parent until their children reach 18 years of age, it is important to apply a discount rate to this amount to calculate the present value of these outcomes (what they are worth in today's dollars). Studies often use discounts rates of 3-7 percent.

Step 7: Calculate the overall value of all benefits and costs. In this step, all identified costs and benefits are aggregated (using the discounted rate for those that occur in future years). Often, this is presented as a ratio such as $5.56 in benefits for each $1 in costs.

Step 8: Perform sensitivity analysis. All benefit-studies are based on a set of assumptions, such as that future portal users will face the same legal issues and attain similar outcomes as those measured in the study. This may be a reasonable assumption if current conditions (such as the amounts of child support payments mandated by state law) are expected to remain the same in the future. However, such assumptions may not be valid if significant changes occur, such as the portal's operating cost increase because it has expanded its functionalities, national

[11] Washington State Institute for Public Policy (2019). Adolescent Diversion Project (ADP) (vs. traditional juvenile court processing). http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost/Program/21

[12] See Coalition for Juvenile Justice (2016). Youth Homelessness and Juvenile Justice: Opportunities for Collaboration and Impact. https://www.juvjustice.org/sites/default/files/resource-files/policy%20brief_FINAL.compressed.pdf.

economic conditions change, or legal procedures are modified to make it easier or harder for individuals to initiate court proceedings. Additionally, measures of portal benefits and costs are often subject to measurement error or may be based on estimates that have some level of uncertainty. To test how much such factors could affect the benefit-cost conclusion, the study could use a Monte Carlo simulation which tests how much the results would be changed under various scenarios and how likely it would be that the overall benefits of the portal will exceed its costs.

Appendix A

Description of portal stage criteria

The following analysis presents a framework for thinking about the development stages of legal assistance portals. As noted in our report, portals vary greatly in the features they offer to visitors and the extent to which they conform to the four elements that The Pew Charitable Trusts has identified as essential to helping users navigate a legal issue and take informed action.[13] Our framework recognizes that portals often provide some, but not all, of these features and that some of these elements are more technically challenging to incorporate in the websites. Exhibit A-1 depicts the features that are associated with each portal development stage and the number of portals that provided these features as of our 2020 nationwide scan.

Essential Element	Features	Portals with feature	Development Stage
Ask	Allows users to self-select issues	125	Stage I
	Utilizes keyword searches	133	Stage I
	Utilizes natural language processing	5	Stage IV
Connect	Refers users to legal services	153	Stage I
	Refers users to non-legal services	89	Stage I
	Refers users to private attorneys	74	Stage I
	Refers/offers users to court integration services	73	Stage I
	Refers/offers users to document assembly services	44	Stage I
	Offers eligibility testing for services	89	Stage II
Learn	Provides legal information	113	Stage II
	Enables users to preview information	97	Stage III
	Allows options for viewing legal information	93	Stage III
Refine	Provides interactive search functions	19	Stage III

Source: Nationwide Scan of Legal Aid Portals

Portals in Stage I offer basic search capabilities such as keywords to help visitors find relevant information, provide access to a few legal and non-legal educational materials, and have some ability to refer users to attorneys and court resources. A total of 163 portals are in this development stage. Portals in Stage II additionally offer more advanced search capabilities, access to extensive legal and non-legal educational materials, and eligibility testing for legal aid services; 147 portals are in this developmental stage. Portals in Stage III offer the additional functionalities that preview information for visitors via text boxes and/or inlaid descriptions of hyperlinked information and enable visitors to view information in multiple formats such as online views, downloaded pdfs, and videos; 108 portals are in this developmental stage. Last, Stage IV portals meet the requirements of all preceding stages and offer advanced features

[13] The Pew Charitable Trusts. (2019). *What is a Legal Assistance Portal*? Washington DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts.

such as natural language processing to interpret user questions and help them navigate to relevant resources; only four portals fall into this advanced developmental stage.