



There are 270 legal access kiosks installed at libraries, courthouses, Native American tribal centers, health centers, many nonprofit organizations and other locations throughout the state. (Submitted photo)

With internet kiosks, legal help is a few clicks away

By: Laura Brown October 25, 2021

They say that necessity is the mother of all invention. The necessity in this case was COVID-19. In 2020, the pandemic shut down courts and law offices, exacerbating legal problems, particularly for people in vulnerable communities.

The pandemic affected employment, which in turn affected people's ability to maintain housing. Domestic violence rates rose. People scrambled to file for unemployment and get health insurance. More people than ever before needed help evaluating their legal options, filling out forms, and getting to and maintaining safe living conditions.

As courts and legal aid offices were moving online, legal aid organizations struggled with how to address increased legal needs, while protecting public health concerns. And they had to do it for populations who have historically not had ideal internet access.

One initiative has been able to help bridge the divide. For some Minnesotans, going to speak to their attorney now means heading to their nearest kiosk.

The Legal Kiosk Project

Help arrived in April 2021, when the Minnesota Legal Services Coalition received \$3.5 million in federal CARES Act funding. The money financed Reach Justice Minnesota, a series of initiatives to use technology and emergency staffing to provide life-changing and life-saving services for Minnesotans. One of these initiatives is the Legal Kiosk Project, and it has permanently transformed how people receive legal services in Minnesota.

Heather Vlieger and Ann Cofell, both of Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid, are integral to the development of the legal kiosks in Minnesota. Vlieger is the grants manager and Cofell is deputy director of the St. Cloud and Willmar offices. While neither takes sole credit for the idea of the kiosk, they explained how the idea came to be.

At the beginning of the pandemic, legal aid organizations responded by continuing to provide services, albeit remotely. It immediately posed problems, which were felt more acutely in the communities that often rely on legal aid.

Individuals did not have internet access, particularly in more rural parts of the state. Some individuals had internet access, but not high enough speeds to participate in virtual hearings. Others did not have the money to get the internet. The places that they had typically relied on to connect were also shut down due to the pandemic. Or they did not have transportation to get them to convenient locations. The people who needed the services the most suddenly were at risk for not receiving them.

But the legal aid providers hardly missed a beat. Vlieger and Cofell reasoned that, if clients could not come to them, then they would come to the kiosks. Enter the kiosk.

A 'Redbox' for legal services?

Partnering with a tech consultant firm to work out the logistics, Vlieger and Cofell and others joining the project divided the state into four quadrants, two up north and two in southern Minnesota. Each kiosk was assigned to one of these organizations.

As Vlieger and Cofell joked, the kiosks are far from an experience like one would have with Redbox, but the services that one can receive from using the kiosk are far more transformative. There are two types of kiosks available. Model A, as they call it, is a kiosk available in public spaces. Here, one can apply for legal aid or get help from LawHelpMN. Users who speak English, Spanish, Hmong, or Somali can select their language. Model B does everything that Model A does, but it also connects to a printer and scanner. The Model B is also located in private spaces, meaning that clients can use these to meet with attorneys or participate in court. This has been invaluable to people, as they can print the documents that they need, get them signed and scanned back in. Attorneys can also use the kiosks to share documents with clients immediately, sending them directly to the printer.

There are 270 kiosks installed at libraries, courthouses, Native American tribal centers, health centers, many nonprofit organizations and other locations throughout the state. (A link to kiosk locations is available with this article at minnlawyer.com.) If you are interested in hosting a legal kiosk at your organization, you can fill out an interest form, also available with this article at minnlawyer.com.

A variety of folks use these kiosks to manage wide-ranging legal issues. Project CARE, an initiative of St. Cloud's Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid office which helps individuals enroll in health insurance, has used the kiosks to work directly with people seeking health care coverage.

Kiosks have also been used at domestic violence shelters across the state. Domestic violence survivors can speak about sensitive topics to attorneys in the comfort of the shelter they are housed at. Zoom capabilities on the Model B kiosks also allow survivors to “meet” face-to-face with attorneys, fostering the trust necessary to help attorneys better serve them.

Both models offer built-in tech support. A tech vendor can sign in if there is an issue. As long as one can operate a personal computer, one can use the kiosk. For those less tech savvy — for example, a senior unfamiliar with Zoom — there are people at the Model B kiosk sites who can help. And all of the kiosks are ADA compliant.

A level playing field

The kiosks have leveled the playing field. As Cofell and Vlieger noted, with the pandemic, justice went online. The only way to effectively advocate for oneself, then, was to appear at the hearings, which were online. While some hearings allow people to join by phone, that still potentially puts some at a disadvantage.

If everyone is appearing through video, or if one can best communicate their story through video, it can be inadvertently prejudicial to those only appearing via phone. For instance, in an eviction hearing, if the person being evicted is trying to tell their story but the internet keeps cutting out, it may be less compelling than it would be without the interruptions.

The kiosk helped alleviate the digital divide that stymied many people’s ability to seek justice.

When the pandemic is over, the kiosks will still be available for Minnesotans. Though the program is nascent, they have already become a critical component of the Minnesota court system. With many courts relying on remote participation, it is imperative that individuals can get online and stay online.

Staying online has been an issue with some other remedies, such as providing tablets to those participating in hearings, as the batteries have died or there have been WiFi connectivity issues. The kiosk computers are connected by Ethernet cable, meaning there are no interruptions during the court hearings. This has tremendously streamlined those hearings.

Though Cofell and Vlieger are modest about how their actions have benefited people across Minnesota, other states are now looking to Minnesota as a model and hoping to implement legal kiosks as well. They will be giving a presentation about the Minnesota kiosk success at the Equal Justice Conference, put on by the ABA. This conference brings a national audience to speak about how to deliver legal services to low-income people needing legal assistance. Cofell and Vlieger are just the people to introduce the rest of the country to the cutting-edge legal aid efforts happening in Minnesota.

ABOUT LAURA BROWN



