Increasing access to justice for people without lawyers

With a focus on improving the service experience in the Cook County Court System

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a project by:

IIT Institute of Design

Client: Danielle Elyce Hirsch
Team members: Jin Shaun Ang  Joe Fleischhacker  Amir Arabkheradmand
Executive summary

Pro bono and legal aid organizations serving the Cook County Court system have recently achieved amazing results, effectively doubling the number of pro se litigants served between 2003 and 2009. Unfortunately, demand for civil legal services continues to outstrip available resources. According to one report, less than 1/3 of those needing services are able to receive them. There is a tremendous need to expand available services for pro se litigants and increase overall access to justice. The project summarized in this report is an attempt to address that need.

What follows in this report can be considered continuation of the Access to Justice project completed by the IIT Institute of Design and the Chicago-Kent Law School in 2001 entitled “Access to Justice: Meeting the Needs of Self-Represented Litigants.” However, whereas that project focused on the future of the American civil justice system as a whole, this project focuses on The Chicago Bar Foundation’s vision of a central start center for pro se litigants to be physically located in or very near the Richard J. Daley Center, 50 W. Washington Blvd., Chicago (“Pro Se Resource Center” or “Resource Center”). The CBF enlisted the help of the Institute of Design to research the behaviors and needs of pro se litigants in order to inform a more detailed proposal of the potential offerings of a Pro Se Resource Center.

At a broad level, the project consisted of three stages: research, analysis and concept development. The methods of research and results of analysis are detailed in the following pages. The majority of this report, however, focuses on the specific concept recommendations for some of the features and service that the Resource Center should offer. These recommendations vary in both scale and ease of implementation, but they are all based on two guiding principles:

1. The Resource Center must take charge of the pro se litigants’ experience beyond just physically navigating the court house. Litigants need more than help just finding their courtroom. Some need help filling out forms or speaking in court. The emotional toll that a case such as divorce, child custody, or foreclosure takes on an individual can be extreme. Many litigants give up or breakdown because of the stress involved. Additionally, their needs start before they even enter the court building and extend beyond the final judgment in their case.

2. The complex interactions between the various stakeholders in the system are key to the efficiency and efficacy of the courts. Therefore, the Resource Center must bridge the existing gaps between the various stakeholders.
organizations and offices of the court system. In addition, problems and inefficiencies in the system will continue to be identified, so the Resource Center must act as a space for innovation, where solutions to these newly identified issues can be addressed, tested and ultimately deployed to the system.

The recommendations contained herein are presented with the understanding that building the Resource Center will take enormous resources and effort and will not happen over night. The hope is that, over time, the Resource Center can greatly increase the number of pro se litigants it serves while also increasing the quality of its service. Ultimately, the Resource Center can become a key component of a model court system that offers fair and equal access to justice for all.
History

In 2001, the Institute of Design, along with the Chicago-Kent College of Law, devoted a semester’s worth of effort towards the issue of improving the self represented litigant’s experience in the American civil court system. The result was an extensive report titled “Access to Justice: Meeting the Needs of Self-Represented Litigants.” The project used the Cook County Court system as the primary source of research, and extrapolated the findings from that system as representative of the American Judicial system (or at least the civil portion of it).

That report might be best described as a report on the “future of the judicial system” as it focused on how technology could improve the experience of pro se litigants. While the report is useful in exploring how technology could be used to greatly improve the efficiency and equality of the justice system, it perhaps fell short of addressing real-world issues of budget (and other resource) limitations.

This report, however, is primarily concerned with the Cook County Court system and takes a decidedly less technology focused approach. In addition, because of the partnership with the Chicago Bar Foundation, this report focuses on how the CBF’s proposed “Resource Center for People Without Lawyers” might approach the issue of improving the pro se experience in the Cook County Court system.

Since the time of the Access to Justice report from 2001, not much has changed in the Cook County Court system. Many of the findings described in the previous report were (re)discovered during the research phase of the current project.

The previous report was predicated on the notion that the court system is not, and never was, designed for the layperson; that those without a legal background were at a severe disadvantage when representing themselves in civil legal matters. This report could be seen as testament to the idea that little has changed in the 10 or so years. Self represented litigants continue to face tremendous -- indeed, at times, insurmountable -- challenges in dealing with the legal system.
Framing the problem

In the period from 2003 and 2009, Cook County’s civil pro bono and legal aid system served more than twice as many people, buoyed by significant growth in overall funding. Despite this progress, demand for civil legal services continues to outstrip available resources. CARPLS, Cook County’s legal aid hotline, was able to respond to only 1/3 of the 120,000 calls received in 2009. A total of 179,000 cases were handled in total by legal aid organizations in 2009, compared to the estimated 600,000 persons who require legal aid.

This is a large group who cannot afford lawyers but who were unable to access legal aid services. They are left to fend for themselves in a system designed for lawyers, which even lawyers themselves require some time to familiarize with the various procedures required. Even worse, an untold number of these people without lawyers may ignore the issue or otherwise fail to turn up in court, resulting in unfavorable judgments by default.

Short of having more lawyers to staff pro bono and legal aid services, people without lawyers can better make their own way through the legal system with the provision of some combination of education, guidance and advice. While this falls short of the ideal of full representation, it is better than going in unprepared and allows for more people to be helped. To this end, there has been a remarkable growth in new and innovative online services such as Illinois Legal Aid Online and the A2J self-help forms.

However, there is only so much that a digital, online tool can assist with. It is incompatible with people who are not tech-savvy, or have issues with language or literacy. Much of the litigation process still requires in-person effort and representation at physical touchpoints such as counters, cashiers, and the courts, during which people face the risk of getting lost, both physically and procedurally. The solutions of this project are designed for these unaddressed issues, in complement with existing efforts to improve Access to Justice for people without lawyers.

(For more details, refer to “Legal Aid in Cook County: A Report on Basic Trends in Need, Service and Funding”, Nov. 2010)
Methods used

The project consisted of three stages: Research, Analysis and Concept Development.

During the research phase, by far the longest of this project, the team engaged in a number of activities, including:

- Observing various environments in the Daley Center, including various Clerks Offices, Courtrooms, the hallways, the lobby, and many of the help desks run by the various legal aid organizations.

- Interviewing help desk attorneys and volunteers.

- Interviewing visitors of help desks.

- In-depth interviews with “experienced” pro se litigants.

- Starting the process for name change, filing for divorce, and responding to a foreclosure summons.

- Graphically mapping processes of pro se litigants in cases of expungement, foreclosure, and collections.

- Secondary research on analogous industries; large, complex systems in which individuals with no prior knowledge are expected to navigate on their own, for example healthcare/health insurance.
Research findings

The findings from the research can be grouped into three general categories.

1. **At each step, pro se litigants face difficulties understanding what to do next.**
   - They have difficulty deciphering legalese.
   - They don’t know where to go when and what to do where.
   - They don’t know what to do after the judgment.
   - The information to help pro se litigants with these problems exists, but it is not necessarily easy to find, and the message is often lost.

2. **Beyond their case type (foreclosure, collections, divorce, etc.), pro se litigants differ in other, perhaps more significant ways.**
   - They differ in their degree of preparedness and understanding of their case.
   - They differ in the courses of action towards their case (for example, acquiesce or fight).
   - They differ in their ability to participate in the system due to problems of literacy or language proficiency, for example.
   - Ultimately, though, pro se litigants don’t know what help they need for their case, or where to get it.

3. **The pro se litigant’s experience is affected by many other factors.**
   - Each part of the system (the clerk's office, each employee in every courtroom, etc.) has its own way of doing things.
   - Emotional stress of the litigants is recognized but not always addressed.
   - Volunteers are key for many litigants' success but current volunteers don’t have it easy.
Proposal for a Resource Center

The proposed Resource Center for people without lawyers is a great opportunity to address the three key research findings. To do so, there are two primary areas of focus for the resource center.

1. Take charge of the pro se litigants’ experience beyond navigating the physical space.

Offer case-specific information, process direction and emotional support to achieve this. In addition, it must be recognized that litigants need support not only during their time in the court, but before they enter and after the final judgment. With these elements in place, we can provide litigants:

1. a good start to their case
2. services to match their needs
3. a comfortable space in which to help them
4. a good send off at the end of their case

2. Create an operating procedure for the Resource Center that best addresses the goal of number one.

We can use the resources of information, the physical space and amenities and the staff and volunteers of the Resource Center to accomplish 4 goals:

1. Foster open communication between various elements and offices of the court system.
2. Develop, house, test and deploy new solutions to problems facing pro se litigants
3. Gather and act on feedback from litigants and staff members about problems they encounter in the court system
4. As proposed, the Resource Center will require attracting and retaining an army of dedicated, top-notch volunteers.
Framing the concepts

Improving access to justice is a systemic problem.

The remainder of this report describes a variety of interconnected concepts, based on research insights, that make up a holistic solution to the problem. The various recommendations are grouped into two large categories: service offerings and operational elements. Within the description of each concept, related concepts are highlighted.

Many of these concepts have been created with the physical space of the Resource Center – the keystone of the customer experience – in mind. This is because the Resource Center provides for the court system a clear starting point, one which is ideally situated within or near the Daley Center.

In the face of overwhelming demand for legal information and services, the prime responsibility of the Resource Center is to effectively deploy and manage its scarce resources, such as help desk lawyers’ time. It is thus crucial to differentiate customers by their needs and match them with the appropriate level and type of service – in other words, triage.

From the point of view of customer convenience, the Resource Center should house all the various legal advice and information services that the Daley Center provides. Some concepts implicitly assume or recommend that a degree of centralization has occurred. The feasibility of centralization is, however, not the focus of this project and has not been studied in-depth.

By providing great customer service, the Resource Center ultimately works to reduce unnecessary burden on the court system by:

1. Helping people without lawyers prepare well for their court appearance.
2. Ensuring that staff are not burdened by incessant questions – outside of their primary responsibilities – on directions and procedures.
3. Addressing issues of accessibility up front: language, disabilities, literacy.
4. Routing appropriate cases to alternative methods of resolution.
5. Being a resource hub for information, space and manpower that other departments / organizations can tap into.
Sample Resource Center layout

- Individual sessions and Private activities
- Shared sessions and Flex spaces
- Administration and support
- Decompression room
- Mediation rooms
- Advising rooms
- Cafe
- Day care
- Open spaces classroom
- Reception and In-take area
- Lounge: forms, netbooks and computer terminals for CARPLS and ILAO
## Concepts

The following pages provides details on specific conceptual solutions that the Resource Center could offer. Each concept addresses at least one observed shortcoming in the current court system. However, they should be considered conversation starters and not prescriptions. Furthermore, concept solutions should be prototyped, continually tested, and refined.

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Plain language translator

*A collection of documents that presents the information in a court summons and other legal documents in more accessible and "every day" language so as to be understood by non-lawyers.*

**detailed features**

- Created and branded by CBF to lend legitimacy
- Available in both printed and online forms.
- Available at neighborhood libraries so as to be easily accessed by more people.
- Organizes the information in a hierarchy so as to make the flow of information logical.
- Available in several languages.
- "Self-published" production and presentation reduces cost and allows for easy swapping with improved and updated forms.
- Easy swapping also means easy photocopying for user.

**options and alternatives**

1. **Court Case decoder**

An online database that would provide direct and specific translation of individual summonses (and other documents) accessible through case number. This would be a much more robust system that would require additional resources up front and ongoing, including buy-in and participation from other court system offices such as the Clerks’ office.

**what observations informed this concept?**

Summons often takes 7-8 reads to be fully understood.

Legal documents are written for the legal community, not the general population.

Visitors to help desk often need attorneys to clarify what the summons says.
Case primer

*A legal area-specific document mailed, emailed, or otherwise given to the pro se litigant that he can use to begin to prepare for his case.*

**detailed features**

- Created and branded by CBF to lend legitimacy.
- Sets expectations for litigants by providing a description of what the entire process will entail and approximately how long it will take.
- Breaks down the process depending on litigant’s chosen path of action (i.e., fight or settle) in order to help him set goals.
- Where appropriate, provides information about alternative dispute resolution methods, such as mediation.
- Lists type of documents and evidence litigant should bring with him for both Resource Center visits and court.
- Details processes for additional courses of action such as filing for fee waivers.
- Organized so as to provide most important information first.

**options and alternatives**

1 Information Packets

Collection of court filing documents necessary for a given type of case. For example, all forms for divorce in one packet along with instructions for how to fill them out and what to do with them once filled out.

**what observations informed this concept?**

Litigants come to help desks with wrong or insufficient paperwork, or otherwise unprepared.

Litigants have unrealistic or skewed expectations as to how their case may proceed.

Litigants do not realize how much time they will be spending in the court building.
what observations informed this concept?

Litigants overwhelmed by number of legal resources and don’t know which would be most appropriate for their case. Litigants question legitimacy of various legal organizations, and are unsure if they will get the help they need.

Inventory of resources

A "Yellow Pages" of other legal resources that litigants may choose to seek depending on their case and unique circumstances.

detailed features

• Created and branded by CBF to lend legitimacy.
• Redundancy of information organized in several ways for multiple search modes (ex: by case type, by language, by location, etc.).
• Physical and searchable online forms.
• Included with Plain language translator or case primer.
Court classrooms

*Dedicated space within the confines of the Resource Center where litigants can learn about the court system and the process of their case type.*

**detailed features**

- Provides court-based educational info to more litigants with fewer resources due to high student-to-teacher ratio.
- Welcoming environment of familiar classroom setting.
- Classes taught by attorneys, retired judges and other legal professionals.
- Provides litigants with more information on how to prepare and proceed with case.
- Familiarizes litigants with court processes in low stakes environment so they are less intimidated in real court.
- Answers questions litigants may have about general procedure.

**options and alternatives**

1 Court Theater

Like the court classrooms, but these presentations can be pre-recorded. These can be available online and shown more frequently than traditional teacher-in-the-classroom model. However, they do not allow for litigants to ask questions.

2 Meet a judge

Litigants are often intimidated by and afraid of judges. They may over-stress when speaking to a judge in court, which causes them to freeze or mis-speak. By meeting a volunteer or retired judge in a neutral area, litigants can see that judges are people too and are primarily interested in justice, not punishment.

**what observations informed this concept?**

Litigants often arrive unprepared and with skewed expectations.
Help desk attorneys spend a lot of time repeating the same information to each visitor.
Education about the legal system is not easy to find.
Entrance Sign

An impossible-to-miss sign in the lobby of the Daley Center that directs pro se litigants to the Resource Center.

detailed features

- Large sign that is conspicuous and legible from a distance.
- Captures people when they first enter the building.
- Non-permanent/removable so as not to upset the building management.
- Provides information in 4-5 most common languages.

options and alternatives

1 Resource Center in Lobby

Placement in the lobby would maximize the number of people who visit the Resource Center. Signage in the lobby may be a logistical challenge, but maybe ideal.

what observations informed this concept?

Litigants do not know there is help available, or if they do, where to find it. The lobby is currently devoid of navigational tools. Deputies have better things to do than direct people.
Centralized self-help

*An area of the Resource Center where litigants can take advantage of tools and resources to help prepare for their case. Includes court forms and bank of netbooks with access to ILAO and other online resources.*

**detailed features**

- Includes collection of court forms and documents along with translations and instructions for filling them out.
- Organized in logical manner to remove guess work.
- Labeled by language independent signs (simple numbers, colors, shapes, etc.)
- Netbooks limited in capabilities, limiting abuse and illegitimate use.
- Staffed by volunteers to provide direction and clarification.
- Forms can be filled out in the Resource Center workspaces or lounge.

**options and alternatives**

1 Wait line worksheet

Materials designed to help litigants prepare for case while they wait to be seen. Forms are case type specific, and may include features like checklists for proper preparation and guidelines for behaving in court.

**what observations informed this concept?**

Litigants often come un- or under-prepared for their case.

SHWC is successful and should be expanded.

Litigants spend a lot of time waiting to speak to an attorney. That time can be captured and put to good use.
Litigant organizer

An all-in-one tool that coordinates a litigant’s case for him.

detailed features

• Organizes documents according to when and where litigant needs them.
• Includes instructions for various forms and procedures, and specific sentences to speak in court, as appropriate.
• Calendar provides place for litigant to note important dates.
• Contacts list ensures litigant has access to Resource Center once he leaves it.
• Includes pen for writing notes.
• May be available for nominal fee to cover costs.
• CBF Resource Center branded.
• Integrates with Activity Map.

what observations informed this concept?

Litigants often come un- or under-prepared for their case.
The number of steps in pursuing a case can be overwhelming and cause litigants to drop out.
Litigants often show up with a pile of paper that is unorganized and may include irrelevant information, which results in wasted time and effort.

options and alternatives

1 Interactive Case App

Tablet-based app that helps litigants organize and navigate their case. Litigants check off steps as they go and the application tells them what to do next, thus eliminating the guesswork for the litigant.
what observations informed this concept?

People waiting in lines or riding in elevators will ask anyone who even appears to know something.

People waiting in lines use each other to reassure each other they are waiting in the right line.

Ask me anything

A volunteer-staffed general information desk within the Resource Center for both litigants and anyone who may just want information.

detailed features

- Ideally, situated in the lobby of the building at the currently un-staffed info desk.
- Provides very base level of help and direction.
- Non-case specific help for general questions.
- Staffed by volunteer who does not necessarily have legal background or interest.
- Gives friendly face to the Resource Center.

options and alternatives

1 Roving volunteers

An army of volunteers deployed around the court building wearing "Ask me!" shirts in order to, at the very least, point individuals in the right direction.
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what observations informed this concept?

There aren’t always enough translators on hand to handle all the help desk visitors who need translation services.

Video chat translators

Translators available on video chat to aid litigant and help desk attorney interactions for litigants who cannot speak English.

detailed features

- Quick connection to on-call translators
- Reduces number of translators that need to physically be in the Resource Center.
- Increases the number of languages in which Resource Center can offer help.
- Increase number of individuals with language issues Resource Center can help.
- Connects and creates relationship between Resource Center and other legal aid and social services organizations.

options and alternatives

1 Volunteer translators

Part of the army of volunteers, they would not necessarily need to have interest in law, but an interest in helping people and the ability to fluently speak a language other than English.
what observations informed this concept?

Litigants spend a lot of time waiting to speak to help desk attorneys. They spend a lot of this time just sitting rather than being productive. Waiting areas, such that they are at the Daley Center, are poorly appointed, uncomfortable, loud, and very public.

Resource Center lounge

A comfortable, nicely appointed waiting area in the Resource Center where visitors can relax or work on their cases.

detailed features

• Large, informal area to hold many litigants.
• Allows litigants to relax and de-stress.
• Limited refreshments to keep litigants happy (perhaps at a nominal cost).
• Comfortable furniture with a variety of seating options (chairs, sofas, etc.).
• Staffed by volunteers to help litigants fill out forms.
• Managed by supervising attorney who can offer small amounts of legal advice.

options and alternatives

1 Workstations

Clean, sturdy, spacious tables intended for litigants to make progress with their case (ex: filling out the fee waiver form) while they wait to speak to help desk staff.

2 Reception Bistro

A café space in the Resource Center where litigants can enjoy a beverage, snack and a chat with another litigant. They can also spend the time waiting to speak to a help desk staff person by preparing for their case. Creates a comfortable no stress environment for the litigants.
Counselors

On-site therapists and similarly trained professionals to help the most distraught of visitors to the Resource Center.

detailed features

- Certified, accredited professionals for the most stressed out, despondent and distraught litigants.
- May be an environment for therapist/counselor training.
- Private spaces in which to speak to litigants.
- Equipped with relaxing beverages such as tea.

options and alternatives

1 Pro Se support group
Similar to other support groups for individuals facing trials in life, this is a scheduled meeting of pro se litigants who speak with each as a form of therapy, and lead by a qualified professional.

2 Decompression Room
A separated room where litigants can let loose on their frustrations. Staffed by a trained professional who can deal with distraught individuals. Litigants come out feeling better for having vented.

what observations informed this concept?

Some litigants are emotionally distraught and over-stressed in the face of court processes. Help desk staff are not necessarily equipped to deal with overly emotional visitors.
Activity Map

*A pre-printed template on which a help desk attorney can lay out the steps a litigant must take in order to complete his case.*

**what observations informed this concept?**

Litigants become overwhelmed by the number of steps it takes to accomplish any given process or task in the court building.

Overwhelmed litigants occasionally drop out of their case due to emotions, confusion and stress.

**detailed features**

- Numbered, step-by-step instructions for the litigant to pursue his case.
- Fields for date, floor, room number, what to do there, what to bring and additional comments.
- Floor plan of building for visual indication of where to go.
- Complete customization allows specific, customized instructions for each litigant.

**options and alternatives**

1 Reverse Map

A timeline of where a litigant has been in the building or process so that each court staff (clerk, volunteer, help desk attorney, etc.) knows where the litigant has been previously. Such knowledge can help said staff person help the litigant more quickly.

2 Navigation stickers

Litigants pick up specialized stickers from each location they go to which serve as an indication to various court employees, help desk staffs, volunteers, etc. of where the litigant has already been. The staff member can help the litigant much more quickly if she knows where the litigant has already been.
what observations informed this concept?

Each courtroom functions in its own way, with strange rules and procedures that don't necessarily apply to other courtrooms. The "rules" of the courtroom are usually unknown to the pro se litigant who is usually unfamiliar with the courts to begin with, and which only adds to his or her stress about the judicial system.

Guidelines for outfitting courtrooms

A small pamphlet that lays out a standard for courtroom layout and procedures.

detailed features

- Instructions on how to effectively process court calls.
- Guidelines for where to lay out forms such as orders and what litigants should do with them.
- Standardizes courtroom procedure across entire court system.
- Encourages predictability among judges.

options and alternatives

1 Courtroom tour book
A collection of the various rules and procedures for each judge's courtroom. Multiple copies available at the Resource Center for staff to reference, make copies, etc. for litigants.
Day guide

A volunteer who acts as a tour guide to the court system for litigants most in need of help.

detailed features

- Staffed by dedicated "special-forces" volunteers — the best of the best volunteers for the neediest of the needy litigants.
- Offers volunteers direct, one-on-one contact with clients.
- Limited in number — only those who need the most help will receive a day guide.

what observations informed this concept?

Some litigants are simply unable to navigate the building and system themselves. They admit defeat before even starting.

Clerks react more positively to staff and volunteers that they see more regularly.

options and alternatives

1 Check-in guides

Part of the roaming info squad, litigants are told at the Resource Center to "check-in" with these volunteers at various places. These check-in guides will ensure the litigant is on the right track and redirect if necessary.
what observations informed this concept?

Some litigants are simply unable to navigate the building and system themselves. They admit defeat before even starting.

Clerks react more positively to staff and volunteers that they see more regularly.

Roaming info squad

An army of volunteers roaming the court building, looking for people to help.

detailed features

• Provides some amount of support and re-direction to litigants who have slipped through and not visited the Resource Center.
• Assures litigants who have visited the Resource Center that they are on the right track and re-directs if necessary.
• Volunteers need not have extensive legal background.
• Volunteers get direct, one-on-one contact with the individuals they are helping.
• Volunteers act as liaisons between Resource Center and clerks and sheriff’s offices.
• Volunteers act as the eyes and ears of Resource Center in the building, gathering information and data and bringing it back to Resource Center for analysis which can eventually be used for service improvements or developments as necessary.

options and alternatives

1 Court kiosk guides

Computer kiosks with interactive navigator placed throughout the court building. Litigants can use it to be sure they are following their case process properly.
Exit reminder

A large sign outside the courtrooms or near the elevator banks suggesting that litigants re-visit the Resource Center if they are unclear of their judgment or what to do next in their cases.

**detailed features**

- Communicates in multiple languages.
- Easily removed, not permanent.
- Sets up Resource Center as team-player, letting people know that the Center is a helpful resource.
- Part of the "Good good-bye" package of services.

**options and alternatives**

1 Reminder guides

Part of the roaming info squad, they catch litigants coming out of the courtroom and suggest they go back to the Resource Center if they are unclear about what they are to do next.
Exit primer

Similar to the case primer, the exit primer provides the litigant with instructions on how to fulfill his obligation to the judgment handed down in his case.

**detailed features**

- Part of the "Good good-bye" package of services.
- Ensures litigants understand what and why the judgment occurred.
- Promotes proper follow through from litigants on their obligations to the judgment.
- Gives litigants better impression of court system when they leave it.

**options and alternatives**

1 Exit advising

The "exit" half of the current services offered by the help desks, exit counseling ensures that litigants understand the judgement and what to do next. Includes opportunity for attorney (or other staff member) to collect feedback.

2 Confessional

A mixture of venting and exit interview. It allows litigants the opportunity to vent about what happened to them while also receiving information on how to finish their case. Meanwhile, the Resource Center can perform an exit interview and collect the information from the litigant to help improve services in the future.

**what observations informed this concept?**

Many litigants leave a courtroom unsure of what the judgment is, without an order, and unsure what to do next, or why the judge decided what she did. Many litigants do not follow through on their obligations which only leads to them going back to court.
what observations informed this concept?

Once litigants leave a help desk, staff often don’t know what happens to them, but they may want to have additional follow-up.

Volunteers are not necessarily recognized or appreciated for their efforts.

Few data collection and feedback mechanisms to improve services are currently in place.

Compliments/feedback board

A simple whiteboard or cork board where visitors to the help desk can express their gratitude or dissatisfaction with the Resource Center.

detailed features

• Allows litigants to express their gratitude to those that helped them.
• Provides a venue to “blow off steam” if litigants need to.
• Data and feedback collection mechanism to be fed back into the Resource Center back end in order to improve services and create new solutions.
• Allows staff and volunteers to see the satisfaction of the individuals they are trying to help.

options and alternatives

1 Exit survey

A simple, but telling survey in order to collect qualitative data from Resource Center visitors. The data are used to improve services and create new solutions.
Exit advising

The "exit" half of the current services offered by the help desks, exit counseling ensures that litigants understand the judgement and what to do next. Includes opportunity for attorney (or other staff member) to collect feedback and better evaluate services.

detailed features

- Provides closure of services for litigants.
- Ensures a "Good good-bye."
- Gives litigant somewhat better impression of the court system upon departure.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>before entry</th>
<th>in the court system</th>
<th>after exit</th>
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options and alternatives

1 Exit survey

A simple, but telling survey in order to collect qualitative data from Resource Center visitors. The data are used to improve services and create new solutions.
what observations informed this concept?

What litigants do know about the courts comes from their own social network (or Law and Order and other cultural/TV & movie programming).

Litigant social network

*Online platform for "experienced" litigants to share their experiences with others who may be facing similar situations in the court.*

**detailed features**

- Provides one more level of preparedness for litigants.
- Provides "experienced" litigants with another venue to blow off steam and tell their story.
- Accessible to anyone
- Heavily disclaimed as "not legal advice."

**options and alternatives**

1 Facebook

Resource Center Facebook page in order to promote services, tell stories of success, recognize staff and volunteers, etc.
what observations informed this concept?

Counters and help desks occasionally get overwhelmed by sudden influxes of visitors, resulting in long lines that extend into the hallways.

People arrive with various degrees of preparedness. For example, some came to collections court not knowing what debt they owed.

Appointments system

Allows people without lawyers to make an appointment to visit the Resource Center by phone. This is optional; the proposed Resource Center will cater to drop-ins as well.

details and features

• This enables a forecast of the daily volume of visitors and types of cases. The Resource Center, and the rest of the services in the Daley Center, can use this information to decide how much resources to deploy. The security checkpoints could open more lines if they predict more visitors, for example.

• Early morning appointment slots could be reserved for urgent cases before court calls, while spreading less urgent ones throughout the rest of the day. This alleviates the typical early morning crush of visitors, and would also reduce the proportion of drop-ins.

• The customer’s basic information, such as case type and name, can be taken down over the phone. This allows the resource center to prepare for the electronic intake process before the customer shows up.

• This is different from and complementary to CARPLS. The persons staffing the phones are not attorneys, and the system also serves people who were unable to access CARPLS’s services.

• While no legal advice is offered, customers can receive answers to basic questions and be directed to existing sources of information, such as the case primer, to help them better prepare for their case ahead of time.

options and alternatives

1 Automated reservations system

Reduces manpower requirements, but the system may be unable to decide how to allocate the appointment times by case type (urgency, complexity etc), a capability which becomes more difficult to achieve without human operators.
Electronic intake system

The intake process is streamlined by recording customer information directly in electronic form. Access to online information helps staff better address customer queries promptly.

Details and features

- Intake information is keyed directly into netbooks.
- Simple templates are used (in the form of a word document, pdf).
- Templates can be pre-filled with information received over the phone at point of appointment reservation. This also allows staff to conduct checks into the customer’s history, if any, with the resource center and help desks.
- Netbooks are low cost and their portability allows staff to have closer and friendlier interactions with customers.
- Internet access over the resource center wifi network allows staff to pull up legal and other helpful information to help answer any questions.
- Volunteers are trained to handle the most common case types, and will probe for common issues such as potential eligibility for a fee waiver. A supervising attorney makes the call on complex cases and decides which customers are allocated scarce resources like the day guides.
- Staff, such as help desk attorneys, who will be receiving these customers can receive completed intake forms ahead of time via email to help them quickly get up to speed.

Options and alternatives

1 Intake cubicles
If greater privacy is desired, the intake process can be conducted in a semi-enclosed area. There could be a mix of open and semi-closed spaces.

2 Integrate with existing electronic systems
The template/email concept for the intake process is proposed with speed and ease of implementation in mind. A better-integrated solution gives intake staff direct access to key systems required for their job, such as CARPLS’s database.

3 Court check-ins
If the customer has a court appointment later in the day, he can check in at the Resource Center itself and be advised of the time he should appear in court.
Volunteer redeployment

Volunteers are temporarily called away from their regular duties and deployed at places - courts, help desks, counters - that are facing an unusually high volume of visitors, to help answer simple questions and manage the crowd.

Details and features

- Volunteers can be trained to answer simple questions like: "Am I at the right place?", "Who do I check in with?" and "How long more do I need to wait?" They can also help to translate instructions and announcements into different languages. They provide not just information, but also reassurance.
- The volunteers are able to help people without lawyers who missed out on a visit to the Resource Center. They can be trained to spot and direct cases that might benefit from some help at the Center.
- The Resource Center coordinates with the court clerks to anticipate days when there is a high volume of court calls. This helps the Resource Center with rostering and gives them lead time to call up more (part-time) volunteers if necessary.
- The Resource Center functions as a resource – not just for people without lawyers – but also for the rest of the justice system. While its primary responsibilities are to its own operations, it should also support the customer’s experience outside of the Center.

Options and alternatives

1. Temporary information signs
These are large, eye-catching posters that describe procedures in simple English, other common languages and in pictorial form. They provide answers to frequently asked questions and advertise the Resource Center’s services. Since fixtures in the Daley Center common areas are discouraged, these can be set up and taken down as necessary.

2. Hotline assistance
People who are lost in the Daley Center can dial this number for help. This is most useful for people who have a poorer understanding of English.
what observations informed this concept?

Mediation resources are under-utilized. There is a common belief that going through the litigation process is the preferred choice. Awareness of the advantages of mediation — in certain circumstances — is low.

Mediation corner

A dedicated space set aside in the Resource Center for conducting mediation sessions and promoting awareness of mediation as a viable alternative to litigation.

details and features

• Mediation can be raised as a possible option at the triage and intake process, especially in cases where maintaining the relationship between the parties is important. People can be educated through posters in the Resource Center explaining key concerns such as the enforceability of mediation agreements, and the success rates of mediation.

• Promoting people's awareness of mediation as an alternative to litigation (in some circumstances) will help to reduce the burden on touchpoints in the litigation process, including: the courts, clerk's office and legal aid help desks. This will also enable the Resource Center, as a whole, to help more people without lawyers who might have otherwise gone unserved.

• The process of mediation often helps both parties gain a better understanding of the requirements and potential outcomes of litigation. Volunteers / staff trained in mediation could contribute these skills to the intake process, where necessary.

• Setting the mediation corner in the same space as the legal aid help desks and other services in the Resource Center will raise the profile of mediation. It will help reassure visitors that mediation is a legitimate course of action.

options and alternatives

1 Other methods of resolution
The Resource Center could house or redirect people to other avenues of dispute resolution, where appropriate.

2 Connect with social services
Parties in mediation, for example in debt-related or family cases, often face other difficulties. The Resource Center can connect them with external sources of assistance.
what observations informed this concept?

Defendants are unsure if it is a good idea to speak directly with opposing counsel. Some defendants expressed relief that they could settle and bring closure to their cases without needing to wait to speak to a judge. Defendants were accosted by opposing counsel in hallways, not knowing who they were and being pressured into agreements they didn’t fully understand.

Settlement hot desks

*Working spaces in the Resource Center that can be reserved by plaintiff’s attorneys to work out settlements with defendants.*

**details and features**

- This gives defendants a proper space to engage the plaintiffs’ attorneys, and all steps from intake to advising and settlement can be carried out conveniently in the Resource Center without needing to go to court.
- While at the Resource Center, the defendant’s experience can be better controlled. They can be coached on what are reasonable terms and what they should not agree to. The defendants are also assured that they are speaking to the right persons.
- The plaintiff’s attorneys receive a copy of the appointment schedule from the Resource Center so they can anticipate the number of visitors and the order in which they arrive.
- This relieves the crowds within and outside the courtrooms.
- This space need not be permanently set aside for this purpose, and should be flexibly configured for other uses at different times.
what observations informed this concept?

The lack of space in the Daley Center and the difficulty in getting approval for its use was repeatedly raised as a stumbling block to the implementation of new ideas.

Solution space

* A public space in the Resource Center to test and gather feedback on prototypes of service solutions.

details and features

- Actual customers visiting the Resource Center can be invited or encouraged to use these prototypes and to give their opinions thereafter.
- This is a showcase of innovation in a high-traffic location. It fosters understanding among staff from various departments / organizations and helps to shape public impressions of the justice system.
- The prototypes can come from the proposed Innovation Challenge.
- This space need not be permanently set aside for this purpose, and should be flexibly configured for other uses at different times.

options and alternatives

1 Lab space

If it is too early for a prototype to be made accessible to the public, it can still be built and tested privately in the Backstage area, which is a space set aside for staff and volunteers to mingle and rest. This encourages critique from colleagues in a less risky environment.
what observations informed this concept?

Volunteers are often emotionally exhausted from dealing with customers and reported high rates of burnout. The lack of communication between various parts of the justice system make litigants feel like messengers: who are shunted from location to location.

Backstage + Internal message board

A common refuge for staff and volunteers to decompress. An internal board for staff and volunteers to write down anecdotes of difficult situations they faced, to elicit solutions and encouragement from the community.

details and features

• Create an environment of camaraderie and mutual support that fosters informal communication among volunteers and staff.
• It is hoped that people who work in different roles and different areas of practice at the Resource Center will mingle, creating the conditions for greater collaboration and diffusion of good practices.
• The internal message board also serves as a way of encouraging the collection of qualitative feedback on customer experiences.

options and alternatives

1 Café
This supports the goal of the backstage as a welcoming environment to decompress. The beverages from the café could even be made accessible to customers as well, in a way that does not affect the privacy of the backstage.

2 Instant messaging system
The internal message board could take the form of a virtual Twitter-like feed where staff or volunteers send in various updates or respond to others through their mobile phones. The feed acts as a record of the qualitative feedback that is posted, and the mobile capability is especially useful for volunteers who are redeployed outside the Resource Center.
Feedback

The Resource Center takes on the role of coordinating and carrying out the collection of qualitative and quantitative feedback – on the effectiveness, efficiency and overall experience of the justice system, as seen through the eyes of the customers.

details and features

- This feedback will be used to iteratively improve on the service experience, and could be used to identify issues for the Innovation Challenge to solve.
- Motivate staff and volunteers by celebrating positive feedback.
- A range of methods can be explored including surveys, intercept interviews, silent observations etc, depending on the purpose.
- The Exit Reminders encourage people to return to the Resource Center after completing their tasks for Exit Advising, and also creates the opportunity to gather feedback.
- Beyond the customer experience, it will be useful to quantify the impact of the assistance provided by the Resource Center. Is there a measurable improvement for the customer: perhaps in terms of time spent at the Daley Center, or the proportion of favorable judgments?
- Information thus gathered on the customer experience should be shared with the rest of the departments and organizations in the justice system.
- Customers who are impressed by their experience or demonstrate a keen interest in providing constructive feedback could in turn be convinced to become volunteers or advocates for the system.

options and alternatives

1 Café

Can we encourage people to return to the Resource Center (and create the opportunity for gathering feedback) for more than just strictly practical reasons? Perhaps – a welcoming environment for customer to de-stress and even bond after the anxiety of dealing with the justice system. This is similar to the Backstage, but for customers and publicly accessible.

what observations informed this concept?

Customers are unclear of the ways to raise complaints or give compliments. Detailed customer statistics are either not kept or are not readily available. Help desk volunteers/staff rarely receive feedback because customers have little reason to make a return visit.
Innovation challenge

*An opportunity for teams of volunteers to apply their skills and energy to solve various problems in the justice system.*

**details and features**

- Volunteers form teams and put together proposals for solving issues in the justice system that they have identified or have been identified for them.
- Approved projects are set up for success by assigning them with mentors who are experienced with the workings of the Daley Center. Small grants are given to help teams prototype their solutions, which will ultimately be presented to a high-level audience with executive power.
- This makes use of the various skills that volunteers, who do not all necessarily have a legal background, bring with them.
- The *Solution Space* or the *Backstage* in the Resource Center can be used for testing their prototypes and to get plenty of feedback from various parties.
- The Challenge will enhance the attractiveness and learning value of the Resource Center volunteer program, and has the flexibility of creating solutions that span across current departmental and organizational silos.

**options and alternatives**

1 **External entries**

   While existing volunteers with some experience working in the justice system appear to be the most qualified to tackle these challenges, it may make sense to cast a wider net for solutions and accept proposal entries from external persons. This will help to further drive awareness of the Resource Center as a volunteering opportunity of choice.

2 **Prestigious sponsor**

   To elevate the status and perception of the Challenge and help drive awareness.
what observations informed this concept?

Information on volunteer opportunities is not well publicized. Much of it is buried in the Cook County website without much attempt to attract and reach out to volunteers, and to positively shape perceptions of these opportunities.

Volunteer website

*Communicate and promote the Resource Center as a volunteering opportunity of choice.*

details and features

- The website is targeted at potential volunteers, illustrating through testimonials, stories and visuals how volunteering at the Resource Center will benefit them. It makes a case for why the Resource Center is a unique and meaningful opportunity.
- By listing the specific skills required of volunteers, it reaches out to people of different talents, and not just those with predominantly legal backgrounds. The volunteer opportunities are cross-posted on various job search engines and boards, bringing the Resource Center into consideration for people who may not have previously been aware of it.
- Volunteer applications can be made directly through the website.

options and alternatives

1 Tours and talks for prospective volunteers

This provides a firsthand experience to prospective volunteers of the experience of working in the Resource Center and the Daley Center in general. These can be run by Volunteer Alumni.

2 Volunteer for a day

These volunteers are assigned simple tasks that can be completed without much training.

On one hand, it accommodates different levels of commitment – working from home (see Video Chat Translator), part-time, on call – to grow the resource pool.

On a broader level, having more people experience the justice system builds awareness and trust, and helps turn the public into advocates.
Volunteer uniforms

Standard uniforms to help people without lawyers recognize who they can seek help from.

what observations informed this concept?

Visitors in the Daley Center are commonly seen asking other visitors for help with directions and procedures. The environment and messaging in the Daley Center portrays it as a place for lawyers with complicated rules and less so as a service center that welcomes customers. People seeking help are more willing to focus on their issues rather than complaining about the system if they know they are speaking to volunteers and not staff.

details and features

• This promotes a sense of professionalism and duty, and helps to project a friendlier, more reassuring image to customers. It may make sense to have something more casual, like a vest that can be worn over regular clothes, or a polo t-shirt.

• An easily identifiable uniform demonstrates that the justice system is serious about making itself more accessible to customers. It is not just about waiting for customers to come to a counter, but it is also about reaching out to them. Badges or name tags proactively indicate details about volunteers that are useful to the customer, such as language capability, role and seniority.
Volunteer commendations

A system of officially recognizing volunteers for their efforts.

details and features

• This is a resumé-worthy commendation that motivates volunteers and enhances the prestige of the volunteer program.

• There are different levels of commendations, depending on the length of service and the impact. For example, a team that successfully works on an Innovation Challenge can get a special commendation.
Volunteer alumni

A program that helps past volunteers stay in touch with the Resource Center and draws upon their expertise in times of need.

**details and features**

- Alumni have the skills and experience to continue contributing even after the volunteering opportunity ends. Some roles that are suited for them could include: speaking to prospective or new volunteers on their past experiences, or acting as guest critics for *Innovation Challenge* teams.
- This helps to grow a professional network which could be useful to both the alumni as well as the Resource Center.

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**what observations informed this concept?**

Volunteers gain a great deal of inside knowledge and experience while working at the Daley Center. To have many of them leave after their volunteering opportunities and not return seems to be a waste.
Conclusion

We have introduced a wide range of recommendations. The primary intent is not necessarily to implement them all, but to use these as a catalyst for further discussion and decision-making: which concepts work better together, are more likely to have a greater impact, or are more easily implementable in light of the current constraints. Beyond concepts, our recommendations can also be understood at the level of principles – that, for example, it is important to cater to the emotional needs of customers and also to take care of the customer before and after he leaves the Daley Center. In this sense, our concepts can be used as starting points to be further developed and tested.

The majority of these recommendations have been conceived with a physical space in mind – a centralized resource center providing a range of services catering to the different needs of people without lawyers. It is hoped that these recommendations will serve as one of the justifications for the allocation of such a physical space. Nonetheless we recognize that the approval for the physical and human resources required is likely to take some time, and there may be good reasons for existing services to remain at their current locations. In the absence of a clean start, we have proposed a number of alternatives that could be adopted.

Without being allocated any significant resources, the resource center can start off as a coordinating body that helps to route and direct customers through the existing services in the Daley Center. It can also play the role of disseminating new customer service procedures and guidelines.

With funding and volunteers on board but without a physical space, resources and solutions can be distributed throughout the Daley Center at each of the touchpoints that customers visit, such as the help desks, elevator lobbies and courtrooms.

\[
\text{Short-term} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Long-term} \quad \rightarrow
\]

\[
\text{Coordinating body} \quad + \text{distributed services} \quad + \text{physical space}
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