

Virginia Free Legal Answers at One Year: Growing Pains and Progress

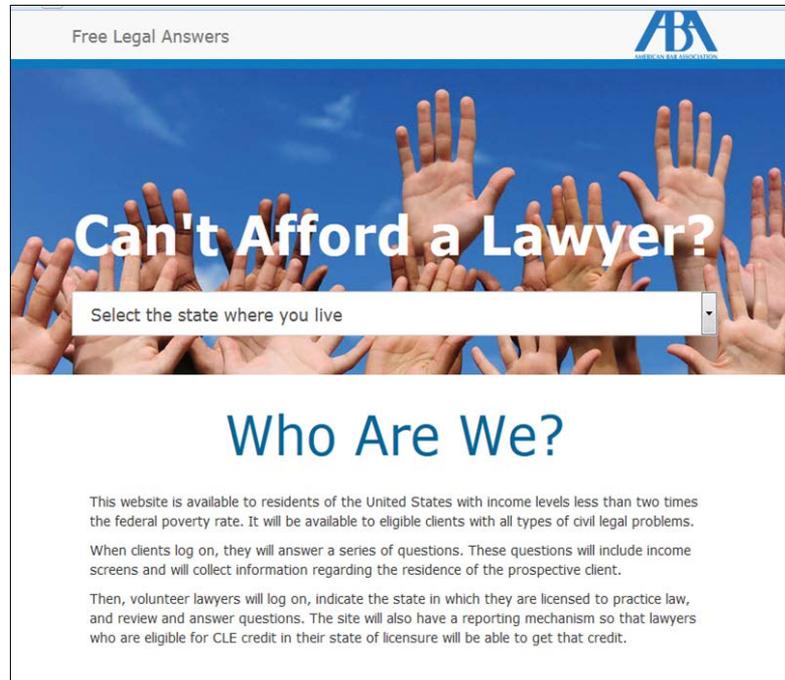
by Karl A. Doss, VSB Director of Access to Legal Services

Virginia.freelegalanswers.org, the online, interactive, pro bono question and answer website, will mark its first anniversary on August 22, 2017. The Virginia State Bar hosts the website, which is one of over thirty Free Legal Answers sites that the ABA launched since 2016. Free Legal Answers provides legal information to low- and moderate-income Virginians in civil legal matters.

To be eligible, Virginia residents must have income levels of 250 percent of the federal poverty guidelines (or a household income of just over \$29,000 per year for a single adult). This eligibility threshold is higher than that for legal assistance by legal aid offices and most nonprofit legal service organizations. Clients register for the website by logging in and answering a series of questions regarding their income, residence, and assets. Once they have been approved to use the service, they may post questions on three different civil legal issues over a twelve month period.

Attorneys who are licensed and in good standing with the Virginia State Bar may register to provide limited scope, pro bono assistance after reviewing questions in the Free Legal Answers queue, selecting a question to answer, and responding to the question based on applicable Virginia or federal law. The client and attorney may engage in an online dialogue and even share documents and photos via the website. Attorneys remain anonymous during the interaction with the client and their service on the website is covered by malpractice insurance provided by the ABA and the National Legal Aid & Defender Association.

Once the question has been answered, the attorney closes dialogue and clients are sent a customer service survey. Free Legal Answers is convenient



for the clients and volunteer attorneys as they may access the service anytime and anywhere they are able to log onto the Internet — even from their smartphones.

Rollout and Registrations

During the early months of Free Legal Answers, the Bar began a campaign to share information about the service to the public and recruit volunteer lawyers. With the assistance of the VSB Communications Department, which created a Free Legal Answers logo and marketing materials, the Special Committee on Access to Legal Services developed and distributed business cards, flyers, brochures, and pamphlets for the public on Free Legal Answers and other low cost legal resources and heavily promoted the website on social media.

Former VSB President Michael W. Robinson sent an e-mail to every

member of the Bar reminding them of the importance of pro bono legal service and appealing to them to register for Virginia.freelegalanswers.org as an easy and convenient way to help meet the justice gap. The VSB Access to Legal Services director conducted webinars on Free Legal Answers for attorneys and the public and presented information about Free Legal Answers during several conferences and CLE programs for a number of bar groups, including the Virginia Bar Association Summer Meeting, the Virginia Trial Lawyers Association Convention, the Local Government Attorney Conference, the Old Dominion Bar Association webinar, the VSB Young Lawyers Conference Immigrant Outreach Committee training, and the Metro Richmond Women's Bar Association meeting.

Almost immediately, Virginia's attorney recruitment efforts yielded

results as over 150 lawyers registered to answer questions by December and six months after launching there were 181 volunteer attorneys registered. In March 2017, the ABA's national Free Legal Answers administrator noted that Virginia had registered the most volunteer lawyers after Tennessee, which launched the first Free Legal Answers site six years earlier.

However, it took somewhat longer for Free Legal Answers to gain traction with the public. For the first four months, there were more attorneys registered than clients and the flow of questions posted was very slow. In fact, there were weeks when only one or two questions were posted. Nevertheless, the Bar continued public outreach efforts, providing materials and making presentations to advocates and case workers with social service organizations that serve low income clients. Several of the district courts requested and received Free Legal Answers information to provide to the public. Legal aid offices also played a major role in the disseminating information to the public by posting Free Legal Answers materials in their waiting areas and sharing them with individuals who were ineligible for their services.

Consequently, client registrations increased from 140 in late December to 247 in mid-March to over 500 presently. In fact, as of August 10, 2017, 1,110 users have logged onto the website*. "Users" consist of all clients, including those who were determined to be financially ineligible and whose registrations

been posted on Virginia.freelegalanswers.org. By March 13, 200 questions had been posted. The number of questions reached 300 on May 23 and presently more than 400 questions have been posted. Over one-third of the questions (37 percent) posted have involved family/divorce/custody issues, 14 percent of the questions involved housing law issues, and 8 percent were questions about debts and purchases. Approximately 40 percent of the questions have been submitted by Tidewater area clients and 20 percent from clients in Northern Virginia.

*The current data on Free Legal Answers users and questions is as follows:

- Total Attorneys *233
(224 registered attorneys, 9 moderated attorneys)
- Total Clients *877
(516 registered clients, 44 ineligible clients, 317 moderated clients)
- Total Questions Asked *432
- Total Questions Closed *415

Customer Feedback

Beginning in May 2017, the ABA began to provide monthly reports on the results of client surveys submitted during the previous month. Although only a few surveys have been submitted to date, clients seem pleased with the service overall and the ease of using the website and were generally satisfied with the assistance they received:

- **April 2017:** Four surveys returned. Three customers were satisfied with the help received; three customers responded that they received information that they "would not have been able to afford otherwise"; three

customers "received enough advice ... to help me understand my legal rights and options."

- **May 2017:** Five surveys returned. Four customers were satisfied with the help received; three customers responded that they received information that they "would not have been able to afford otherwise"; two customers "received enough advice ... to help me understand my legal rights and options"; and two more responded "not sure."
- **June 2017:** Four surveys returned. Four customers were satisfied with the help received; three customers indicated that they believe that the advice they received will help them address their legal problem; and the other client said that the response was partially helpful.

Some clients advised the Virginia administrator that they still had questions after the attorney closed the dialogue. The administrator contacted the attorneys and the dialogue was reopened so that the client could receive further guidance.

Additionally, one client commended the volunteer attorney who assisted them: "Without [attorney's] answers to my 1 of 3 questions answered, I would still be stuck trying to figure out a resolution to a legal issue I found insurmountable. I would still be in what I called legal limbo! [Their] advice and guidance has shown me that I had options, and steps I could (and have already started) make to seek resolution! ... If not for the one attorney who answered 1 of my questions, I would still be lost! I have followed up doing everything [they] advised, and at least I felt like I had some options. I think [their] advice was invaluable, and will be successful"!

Attorney Recognition

As previously noted, more than 200 attorneys have registered for Free Legal Answers; however, only 61 lawyers have answered questions with just 41 attorneys answering two or more questions. The Special Committee on Access to Legal Services wanted to recognize the volunteer lawyers who have assisted

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are pending approval or are incomplete, i.e., "moderated," and registered and moderated attorneys.

Similarly, the number of posted questions also significantly increased. On January 9, the 100th question had

Access to Legal Services

several Free Legal Answers clients and created the “Pro Bono Hero” designation. During the Legal Aid Luncheon at the 2017 VSB Annual Meeting in June, the Access Committee unveiled the “**Pro Bono Hero**” lapel pin with “ESQ” in a superhero shield and Certificate of Appreciation to recognize volunteer attorneys who answer at least 15 questions posed on Virginia.freelegalanswers.org or provide otherwise noteworthy pro bono service that the Committee believes should be celebrated.

The Access Committee hopes that recipients will display the certificate and wear the lapel pin as representations of their role in increasing equal justice in Virginia, and as reminders of how even seemingly small acts of justice can make a big difference in the life of a person in need of legal assistance. So far, eight attorneys have been recognized as “Pro Bono Heroes” for their Free Legal Answers efforts: Ann M. Callaway, Warrenton; Elaine H. Cassel, Alexandria; Donnie W. Salyers,

Abingdon; Batty E. Scott, Portsmouth; Carole M. Hirsch, Alexandria; Tammy L. Sossei, Richmond; Martin D. Wegbreit, Richmond; and John D. Williams, Williamsburg.

Looking Ahead

As Virginia.freelegalanswers.org enters its second year, the VSB hopes to continue its public outreach to encourage use of the service in Southside and Southwestern Virginia, where very few clients have registered. Additionally, because the Bar wants to also improve customer service, training will be developed and offered to attorneys on the importance of effective client communication on the website, focusing on the fact that many of their clients lack familiarity with the legal system and terminology.

During year one, thanks to the service and support of members of the VSB, Free Legal Answers has established itself as an important legal resource for low income and modest means members of our communities.

Free Seminar: Bridging the Justice Gap through Pro Bono

September 12, 2017, 1:00 pm.
Bank of America building, Richmond

Sponsored by the VSB Access to Justice Committee and the Old Dominion Bar Association

Topics include the misconceptions about pro bono, the Rules of Professional Conduct as they pertain to pro bono, and the ways lawyers may get involved with helping low income and modest means Virginians obtain access to justice.

3 MCLE hours pending

Additional information and registration materials may be found at <http://www.vsb.org/docs/ODBAVSBSeminar.pdf>.

Contact Karl Doss at doss@vsb.org or (804) 775-0522 for more information.



Wear the Pin That Says You're a Super Lawyer.

**Answer 15 questions or more on Virginia.freelegalanswers.org
and we'll send you a pin to wear with pride.**

Virginia.freelegalanswers.org — A national ABA-sponsored program bringing legal answers to people who cannot afford an attorney.

Questions? Contact Karl Doss at doss@vsb.org or (804) 775-0522.

Do Pro Bono. Do Good.