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PANDEMIC SPURS INNOVATION FROM COURTS AND LEGAL SERVICE PROVIDERS

A new report from IAALS showcases the innovative adaptations made around the country to best help those who cannot afford an attorney during COVID-19.

DENVER, CO (November 12, 2020)— IAALS, the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System, released a new report, *Pandemic Positives: Extending the Reach of Court and Legal Services*. This report showcases the innovation occurring in courts, self-help centers, legal aid centers, and law/public libraries throughout the country to address the needs of self-represented litigants in the midst of a global pandemic.

COVID-19 has upended every aspect of our society, including our justice system. Courts and legal service providers had to quickly develop new processes for providing both in-person and virtual services, ensuring access to information and assistance to those who cannot afford an attorney.

“It is clearer than ever that courts must provide both in-person and virtual self-help services, with an emphasis on increasing access to information in order for self-represented litigants to receive the help they need,” says Janet Drobinske, senior legal assistant at IAALS. “Consider that in a normal year, more than 70 percent of civil and family cases involve at least one self-represented party. Many of these litigants encounter great difficulty in understanding what to do and when to do it, global pandemic notwithstanding.”

Through detailed case studies of 11 courts and legal service providers around the country, *Pandemic Positives* explores how a number of organizations made the transition to remote services, including: messaging service changes to customers; balancing remote services with in-person needs; deploying existing and new technologies; navigating challenges; and leveraging partnerships.

“Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a call for courts to use the readily available technology that so many other major industries are using to reach and serve their customers. While courts were slowly beginning to move in that direction, the pandemic forced some to make that transition a priority,” says Michael Houlberg, manager at IAALS. “We wanted to explore in detail how these organizations accomplished it. The lessons learned from one organization can be helpful to others that are still amending their existing services or are exploring adding virtual services.”

Pandemic Positives: Extending the Reach of Court and Legal Services is part of IAALS' contribution to the Family Justice Initiative (FJI) project, which is a partnership between IAALS, the National Center for State Courts, and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, with support from the State Justice Institute. FJI was established in the fall of 2017 to provide courts across the country with validated, data-informed strategies for improving the way they process domestic relations cases. IAALS has developed a number of other supplemental resources to this project that focus on the needs of those who cannot afford an attorney.

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About IAALS

IAALS, the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System at the University of Denver, is a national, independent research center dedicated to facilitating continuous improvement and advancing excellence in the American legal system. Our mission is to forge innovative and practical solutions to problems within the American legal system.