# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin

# Legal aid group marks its 50,000th live chat

**BY MARY KATE MALONE**
*Law Bulletin staff writer*

When Illinois Legal Aid Online (ILAO) launched a live chat service on its website three years ago, Executive Director Lisa A. Colpoys said she felt stunned by the number of website visitors who immediately began using the service.

"We were amazed at the number of people," she said. "Right off the bat, we had 60 to 70 people each day using it."

The organization completed its 50,000th LiveHelp chat on July 16. The feature allows ILAO's website visitors to chat online with a volunteer (usually a law student) about how to navigate the site and find legal information.

"When people have a legal problem, they often don't know where to turn. They're in a crisis and they're desperate and often times they might not be sophisticated Internet users," Colpoys said. "Despite the fact that they go to our website and it's easy to use, they might have a problem finding the information they're looking for."

ILAO became one of the first legal aid groups in the country to use a live chat service when it launched the feature in 2009, she said. During the three years since, the service continues to gain popularity — both among website visitors and volunteer chat operators, she said.

The chat service remains fully staffed from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., Monday through Thursday, and until 5 p.m. on Friday.

The LiveHelp operators do not offer legal advice. They direct users toward the information they seek on the site, Colpoys said.

Justin Leigh, a second-year law student at The John Marshall Law School who volunteered as a LiveHelp operator, said the experience allowed him to learn while he taught others.

"It was good for me because I kind of had to educate myself about finding the answers to the questions," Leigh said. "Sometimes it would be straightforward and I would point the person to a page with the information. But a good amount of the time, the issues were fairly unique and required that I quickly research it and get the answer."

During his shift, several minutes might pass with no one asking a question, while other times Leigh maintained five chats simultaneously, he said.

The live chat for ILAO's Spanish website, AyudaLegalIL.org, also gets staffed Monday through Friday.



**Lisa A. Colpoys**

"This is a way for law students to interact with real people," said Katie M. Anderson, pro bono program coordinator and staff attorney at John Marshall. "It provides a good opportunity to interact with people seeking legal assistance and exposes (students) to a wide range of issues. It gives them an idea of real-life issues people face in the state of Illinois."

ILAO's website contains information on a variety of legal topics written by attorneys for a fifth- or sixth-grade reading level.

Colpoys said the most-used documents pertain to family law, specifically divorce.

"Sometimes the content a person can find online is all they really need," said Susan J. Curry, director of public interest law and policy at the University of Chicago Law School. "They just need to know what to expect when they step up for an eviction matter, a family law matter, child support or traffic violation."

Leigh said he encountered many people who needed guidance to a local courthouse.

"People would ask about how they go and file something at the Daley Center," he said. "That can be really daunting if you've never done it before, so I would walk them through that, tell them what papers they need and where to go, and what line (to stand in). It's hard to navigate, so it's nice to help them along the way."

University of Chicago Law School students found that LiveHelp remained a convenient way to volunteer without traveling to a legal aid clinic, Curry said.

"With their laptop in the lounge downstairs or between classes, students can help pro se (people) navigate the incredible number of video and document content on that website, and help the poorest clients help themselves," Curry said.

Visit ILAO at illinoislegalaid.org.