



# Creative Model: Live Chat for Service Seekers or Pro Bono Volunteers

The [Texas Legal Services Center](#) (TLSC) vision is for all Texans to have access to the civil justice system regardless of income. TLSC began its live chat program in May 2010 to provide an accessible tool for individuals to have a place to start with their legal questions. In the past ten years, TLSC has answered more than 100,000 questions from the public, providing free legal advice, information, and referrals to attorneys and/or TLSC's own programs like the Virtual Self-Help Center. For many Texans facing a potential legal problem, their first stop is a google search. Luckily, [Texas Law Help](#) coordinated by TLSC is often one of the first search results on Google for different legal terms. Once on the site, [the Live Chat tool](#) is easily accessible during its hours of operation. CILA spoke with Chanita Chantaplin-McLelland, Practice Area Manager of the Client Empowerment Group and Managing Attorney at TLSC about the Live Chat model.

**How the Live Chat Model Works:** Live Chat is a model for connecting with service seekers by meeting them where they are at: typically on a laptop or computer typing their legal issue into the search box. When the Live Chat is online (currently Monday through Thursday from 10 am to 2 pm), service seekers will see the chat icon on the bottom right hand side of their screen. Once an individual clicks on the icon, they will be prompted to answer a series of questions, including an open-ended text box requesting them to describe their situation. Once the questions are answered, the Live Chat tool will categorize the inquiry and a volunteer or TLSC staff person who is staffing the Live Chat will answer it. Once the interaction is complete, the individual can request a transcript of the conversation including any phone numbers or websites that were shared. If the individual qualifies for other TLSC services, they can often connect with a TLSC staff person at that time. The Live Chat tool can be staffed by multiple people at the same time, and volunteers can often talk to more than one individual at a time reducing wait times for service seekers. In a 4-hour shift, TLSC staff or volunteers can answer about 20-40 chats per person. Typically, there are chats coming in continuously throughout a session. One feature that Chantaplin-McLelland really values is the ability to tag chats so that volunteers can tag each chat and TLSC can then track trends using the tags. TLSC receives the largest number of chats about family law and landlord tenant issues; they also receive many immigration questions and typically connect those individuals with legal aid organizations who specialize in immigration law. If they do not have a staff person available to answer the chat in the language the service seeker speaks, they will arrange a call using language line to follow up.

**How does TLSC engage pro bono volunteers in the Live Chat model?** TLSC engages pro bono attorneys and law students regularly to staff the Legal Chat tool. Legal Chat is staffed with TLSC volunteers remotely who can log into the back end of the program from their own office or computer. This feature has been helpful during the pandemic. 13% of chats coming into the Legal Chat tool in today's times are related to Covid-19.

**Advice for pro bono programs looking to use a Legal Chat tool:** Pro bono coordinators who want to utilize a chat tool should know that there are several different technology platforms that offer chat functions. TLSC uses [Live Chat](#) which Chantaplin-McLelland reports allows a good amount of customization on the back end of the tool and is easy to embed into their website. Other legal aid programs around the country use other tools such as [Live Help](#). Either tool may be right for your program depending on your program's needs. Some considerations to think about are limitations to the number of people who can log in at the same time versus the number of unique logins you can share for volunteers.

Additionally, it is very helpful to accompany the legal chat tool with a guide for answering common questions, along with a guided interview tool to standardize and speed up volunteer answers. Luckily, TLSC has a staff person who had already created this guide for their assisted pro se forms, and it was easy to adapt to the Live Chat Tool. Chantaplin-McLelland also shares that 4 hours is the longest stretch of time that her staff (pictured below at the Texas State Capitol) or volunteers will staff the chat at one time. She shares it can be quite exhausting especially when answering multiple questions simultaneously. TLSC's goal is to make the Legal Chat tool available 24/7 but that will require a lot of volunteer support. They are exploring other options such as chat bots to answer questions after hours. Another available option is to use the chat tool to create "tickets" when the chat is not live.

**The Benefits to TLSC and its clients:** Live Chat has created an opportunity for TLSC to reach more people and provide more valuable information to individuals looking for a solution to legal problems. Chantaplin-McLelland also noted that Live Chat has allowed TLSC to reach areas of Texas that otherwise may not have easy access to legal advice and information. Many people may not realize that they have a problem that is legal. Their first stop is a Google search. Live Chat allows individuals to quickly connect with TLSC's team to understand their issue and be sent in the right direction for help regardless of their ability to pay for an attorney.



**How this tool could be used in the child immigration space:** TLSC uses this tool in conjunction with the [Texas Law Help](#) webpage where individuals with a variety of legal needs visit. Pro bono coordinators in the child immigration space may use the tool in a similar way to help provide legal information to service seekers or as a screening tool. We also discussed the possibility of using the Legal Chat tool as a mechanism for answering questions from pro bono attorneys and volunteers who are representing a child pro bono. Chantaplin-McLelland thought the idea would work even though TLSC uses the tool in a different way. By scheduling "office hours," a pro bono coordinator can use their mentoring capacity efficiently by answering questions from pro bono attorneys working on cases at your organization or pointing them to more resources. Better yet, the "office hours" could be staffed by volunteers similar to TLSC but by recruiting experienced immigration attorneys to answer pro bono questions.

CILA is grateful to Chantaplin-McLelland and TLSC for sharing their experience working with pro bono volunteers using the Legal Chat tool. We hope this creative model helps spark some ideas for your organization.