

Could This Simple Idea Solve the Justice Gap?

By **Susan Beck**

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On Friday morning last week, a dozen lawyers sitting in cubicles took calls in a downtown Chicago office. A video screen on the wall tracked the activity: 34 people had called in the first hour asking for free legal help. Six callers were waiting in the queue, and the longest waiting time in the queue was 12 minutes and 46 seconds.

“Friday usually starts off slow,” said Allen Schwartz, the executive director of CARPLS, which stands for Coordinated Advice and Referral Program for Legal Services. This pioneering legal aid hotline, now in its 23rd year, handled roughly 50,000 free consultations for 28,000 clients last year. Schwartz, 52, has been with CARPLS from the start, and took the very first hotline call. (He doesn’t remember what it was about.) He’s talked to 15,000 low- and moderate-income clients over the years about everything from divorces, to landlord disputes, to questions about whether a homeowner can cut down an overhanging limb from a neighbor’s tree.

What’s remarkable about CARPLS is its efficiency. It handles a high volume of clients by offering them relatively simple solutions that keep most out of court. “We resolve about 85 percent of cases in-house through advice and brief services,” Schwartz said. “If they need a higher level of service, we can refer them to the most effective legal aid provider.”

At a time when the legal community is increasingly concerned about access to justice for all, and is searching for innovations to make that possible, a viable solution may be found in CARPLS’ modest offices on North State Street. Operating on a lean \$2 million budget and a staff of 25 lawyers, CARPLS may be the most effective program yet devised to provide access to legal services for the millions of Americans who can’t afford a lawyer.

“The reality is, most people don’t need an attorney to go to court,” said Schwartz. Instead, borrowing concepts from the medical field, CARPLS performs on-the-spot legal triage, assessing who can be helped quickly, and who needs more extensive attention. The group relies heavily on technology to operate efficiently: Using a customized version of



Allen Schwartz, the executive director of CARPLS, in his Chicago office.

Salesforce software to generate quick, standardized answers and forms, it spends just \$33 on average per consultation. Schwartz believes that improvements in technology and other processes could drive the cost down to \$25.

CARPLS also keeps its expenses low by paying modest salaries. Schwartz makes \$98,000 a year, although his perks include unlimited nachos from the office’s nacho machine, he pointed out.

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Robert Glaves, the executive director of The Chicago Bar Foundation, which is the charitable arm of the Chicago Bar Association, wants CARPLS to be a model for others. “My No. 1 recommendation [for improving access to legal services] is that everybody have access to that kind of hotline at the early stage of an issue,” he said. “It won’t solve

every problem, but they're solving 85 percent of calls by brief advice. That would take a lot of people out of the system."

A handful of other communities have legal hotlines, including Hawaii and Washington state, but CARPLS serves the most people using the most sophisticated knowledge management technology. In other cities, individual legal aid groups may run their own hotlines, but it can be hard for a person with a legal problem to find the right provider amid a range of options. Unlike most legal aid groups, CARPLS will field questions on criminal matters, as well as every civil topic under the sun.

One major obstacle to replicating this system is that it's so reliant on CARPLS' customized software. "In many ways, this is a software solution," said Schwartz about their process. The group plans to eventually share this software when it's better developed. "That's the big elephant in the room," Schwartz said. "The software is not quite ready for distribution, but we plan to do that."

"What CARPLS achieves on a modest budget is pretty extraordinary," said Sean Gallagher, a partner at Bartlit Beck Herman Palenchar & Scott who sits on the group's board. Sidley Austin partner Bruce Braun, a longtime CARPLS board member, agrees. "CARPLS is an amazing organization," he said. "Al is a visionary and very dedicated. There's almost an unlimited demand for legal services, and CARPLS fills that void."

CARPLS' success is based on a premise that might seem counterintuitive: Lawyers provide the first line of intake, screening all the calls, while paralegals and other trained staff handle some of the follow-up. Many other hotlines reverse that process and use nonlawyers for screening.

"We put the attorney at the most critical point," said Schwartz. "You have to accurately diagnose the legal issue. You have to get that right, or everything else fails."

CARPLS also operates four legal help desks at the local courts. Family law is the biggest source of questions, with 40 percent of callers asking about divorces, child custody and domestic violence. The group helps anyone whose income is below 350 percent of the poverty level, which is \$85,000 for

a family of four. (It uses an honor system, and doesn't require proof of income.)

It also doesn't turn away people whose questions aren't deemed good enough. "We don't screen for merit," said Pat Wrona, the director of legal services. "If you say your brother owes you \$50 and you want to sue him, I'll talk to you. We don't filter at all in that way." She may, however, recommend that you not sue.

To track which approaches work best, the group sends out outcome surveys roughly two months after a consultation. "We have a 98 percent success rate for divorce self-help materials," said Wrona, explaining that success means getting the divorce. The self-help materials are only used for uncontested divorces.

Schwartz wants to double CARPLS' capacity and provide 100,000 consultations a year. That would require another \$1 million in funding. Last year, the group raised \$520,000 from private sources, including law firms. The rest of its budget comes from legal aid foundations and government grants, but the government component is precarious, especially with cuts in Illinois's budget.

"There's a real uncertainty about whether we can rely on state and government funding," said board member Gallagher. "So we're increasingly having to make the case to private donors." The group's annual Golden Gavel Celebration fundraiser is May 3, with lawyer and author Scott Turow as the featured speaker.

The nonprofit also needs more volunteers, who handle about 9 percent of the center's calls. Volunteer time from lawyers has dropped off in recent years, as most Chicago firms have been busier. In 2011 volunteers provided 8,300 consultations; last year the number fell to 4,400. "It's gotten a lot more difficult to recruit volunteers," Schwartz said. "People are more fully employed than they used to be."

Expanding on the medical model, Schwartz is now hoping to create personalized Web pages for clients, where CARPLS staff can take their legal "vitals" and monitor for potential legal problems.

"The cheapest way to solve a legal problem is to prevent it from happening," he said.

