

Domestic Violence Online Petition Program

“Orders of protection are vital to the safety of litigants who come before Family Court. The Domestic Violence Online Petition speeds up the process for petitioners at this critical stage in the proceedings.”

*—Judge Judy Harris Kluger, Chief of Policy and Planning,
New York State Unified Court System*

The Challenge

Protection orders are a critical tool for ensuring the safety and security of survivors of domestic violence. But because of limited court resources, litigants in New York often experience waits for a clerk’s assistance to file a petition. And advocates—also facing high volume—are all too often unable to accompany litigants through the process.

The Response

Aided by Federal STOP funding, a team of programmers and court system planners in New York State developed the Domestic Violence Online Petition Program. They piloted the system in Bronx County Family Court in February 2013 and two months later expanded it to Brooklyn Family Court. Along with staff from the New York City Family Court and the Center for Court Innovation, this collaborative effort included representatives from the New York State Unified Court System—specifically, the Office of Access to Justice, Division of Technology, and Office of Policy and Planning—as well as the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office on Violence Against Women and the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services.

“The online petition program is successful because it creates a direct link from the online application to the court,” said Liberty Aldrich, the director of Domestic Violence Programs at the Center for Court Innovation. By creating a

direct link, the Domestic Violence Online Petition Program facilitates access to justice for domestic violence victims.

How It Works

The Domestic Violence Online Petition Program allows a petitioner—with help from a trained domestic violence advocate—to use the Internet to file the application for an order of protection. Whether in the advocate’s office at a Family Justice Center or in another comfortable, private setting, the advocate guides the petitioner through the secure online process and ensures that all essential information is included. With just a few questions appearing on the screen at one time, the new system is simple to use.

“The website collects the required data in the proper format,” Christine Sisario, the director of technology at the Center for Court Innovation, explained. “Questions are worded in plain language but in a way that still gets the legally required information.” The system cuts back on time and error. In the past, when the form was filled out by hand, “people had to wade through many questions, some of which may not apply to them, and they could miss a required question. But the online system skips sections that aren’t applicable based on the petitioner’s particular circumstances and also won’t let them proceed without answering each required question,” Sisario said.

The New York City Family Justice Center in Brooklyn, a partnership between the Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence and the Kings County District Attorney's Office, uses the online application as part of its effort to offer comprehensive services to victims of intimate partner violence. Case managers and civil legal attorneys, who come from numerous community-based organizations, help petitioners make the application as accurate and thorough as possible.

"The civil legal attorneys on-site from our partner agencies can review a petition for an order of protection and offer immediate feedback to the case manager who drafted the petition with the client," said Jennifer DeCarli, the Justice Center's executive director.

Only advocates working at registered agencies are permitted to enter the information, and the data sent to the secure court system is encrypted. This means that victims of domestic violence are assured that only appropriate parties have access to their online petitions and their privacy will not be violated during the process, Sisario said.

After the advocate helps the petitioner fill out the online form, the petitioner receives a print-out of the draft of the application to take to court. Meanwhile, the data collected online is sent electronically so that when the petitioner arrives in Family Court, the information is already in the court's confidential database.

When the petitioner arrives in court, he or she verifies the information with the court clerk and provides any updates. The final petition is then docketed and a court appearance is scheduled for that day so an order of protection can be issued.

The Impact

The system has improved efficiency all around. "It now takes only about five to 10 minutes to docket

and schedule a petition, so a litigant is saving several hours a day," Mike Williams, clerk of court for Bronx County Family Court, said. This time savings also helps the court serve other litigants more efficiently.

An added benefit of this program is faster, accurate communication with state and national databases, which improves victim safety. As soon as an order of protection is issued, the information is sent to the domestic violence registries of the New York State Police Information Network and the FBI. This means that law enforcement officials have improved access to background information about people who have orders of protection against them when, for instance, they are pulled over for speeding or they attempt to purchase firearms.

Kimberlina Kavern, director of the Bronx Family Court Program at Safe Horizon, where the first online petition was filed, called the automated system life-changing. "We used to get a lot of victims who came at the end of the day when it was too late to file and we had to tell them to come back in the morning. Now, we can complete the online form any time, even at the end of the day. When they return the next day, they can go straight to the petition room and then right to the intake judge," she said.

The Domestic Violence Online Petition Program will be rolled out statewide by the end of 2013.

For More Information

To learn more about the Domestic Violence Online Petition Program, contact Domestic Violence and Family Court Programs at the Center for Court Innovation at info@courttinnovation.org.

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