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Live Chat Program Connects Underserved Communities To Legal Help

For immediate release

February 17, 2010 - New York – As the need for free legal services continues to grow, LawHelp.org/NY, the one-stop legal information portal for low-income New Yorkers, announced this morning that it has launched LiveHelp, a real-time, online chat service, in English and Spanish, that helps guide visitors to relevant legal information and free legal services. Designed to help unrepresented New Yorkers with civil legal problems, particularly the rising number facing unemployment, foreclosure, eviction and other problems brought on by the economic crisis, LiveHelp connects those in need with the many legal programs helping underserved communities in New York. Following a successful part-time trial period, LiveHelp is available full-time starting today.

"LiveHelp is an important addition to the programs serving the record number of unrepresented litigants in New York's courts," said Hon. Fern A. Fisher, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for New York City Courts. "As courts and legal service organizations create new programs to address their needs, LawHelp/NY is helping people find them."

LawHelp.org/NY provides free, user-friendly resources that supply critical legal information in fifteen areas of law (such as family, housing and immigration), and referral information to free legal aid programs. With a Spanish mirror site (www.ayudalegalny.org) and resources in 35 languages, it is the first line of defense for vulnerable New Yorkers, especially immigrants, Hispanics and limited English proficient residents facing legal problems. LawHelp/NY has seen a dramatic upsurge in usage during the recession: in 2009, the site was visited 377,343 times, an increase of 33% over the previous year. But while most visitors are successful at finding what they need, some have difficulty finding answers to their particular legal challenge. "Legal problems are hard for anyone to understand or manage on their own," said Nate Treadwell, LiveHelp Program Coordinator at LawHelp/NY. "Getting to the right place at the right time can have a profound effect on the outcome of a potentially life-altering problem such as eviction or foreclosure."

LiveHelp provides individual, online assistance via live chat with a volunteer trained to navigate the legal resources available. The chat directs people to the legal information they need, including answers to questions about legal rights, tools for those going to court without a lawyer such as a do-it-yourself answer for housing court, and referrals to legal aid organizations. Volunteers who spoke with clients during the program's trial period found that their assistance

could have a major impact. "One of my first conversations was with an unemployed woman staying with a friend in a rural county," said Helen Poitra-Chalmers, a LiveHelp volunteer. "She needed food stamps to get by, but she didn't know where to go and she thought she might be turned down because of her friend's income. Within a few minutes, she had enough information to show the agency that she was eligible."

LiveHelp is staffed in part by trained volunteers, including law students from Columbia, CUNY and Touro, as well as customer service staff from LexisNexis. To implement LiveHelp, LawHelp/NY drew on its relationship with Pro Bono Net, a national organization dedicated to increasing access to justice through technology. Pro Bono Net has assisted other state programs in launching LiveHelp, and its research shows that LiveHelp makes a significant impact in helping visitors find tools and referrals to protect their rights. LiveHelp New York will be the first project to be bilingual from the outset: Spanish-speaking operators will be available during business hours.

The LiveHelp project is supported by the Legal Services Corporation, the IOLA Fund of the State of New York, and Equal Justice Works AmeriCorps Legal Fellowship Program.

About LawHelp.org/NY

The New York LawHelp Consortium, which oversees the project, consists of organizations serving low-income people throughout New York State: Legal Assistance of Western New York, the City Bar Justice Center, Legal Services NYC, The Legal Aid Society of New York, Pro Bono Net, Volunteers of Legal Service, Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York, Empire Justice Center, New York State Bar Association, Legal Services of the Hudson Valley and Nassau/Suffolk Law Services. LawHelp.org/NY provides visitors with expert-written information on their legal rights, a directory of nearly every free legal service provider throughout the state, and information on navigating New York's court system.

About Pro Bono Net

Pro Bono Net is a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing access to justice through increased volunteer lawyer participation and innovative use of technology. Founded in 1998, Pro Bono Net has created a powerful network of nonprofit legal aid providers, courts and bar associations across the United States and Canada. This network uses two Web-based platforms—www.probono.net and www.lawhelp.org—to recruit and manage volunteers, and to provide legal information and tools for low-income communities and the organizations that serve them.