

PROJECT EVALUATION

FLORIDA RURAL LEGAL SERVICES ICON PROJECT

Three people from Northwestern Legal Services in Pennsylvania (Robert A. Oakley, Executive Director; Debbie Place, Technology Co-Director; and Paul Troskosky, Managing Attorney) attended a presentation of the Inland Counties On-Line Network (hereinafter ICON) held at Florida Rural Legal Services on May 17, 2001.

ICON BACKGROUND

After approximately 5 years and more than \$620,000, Florida Rural Legal Services (hereinafter FRLS) has succeeded in connecting, via videoconference, clients living in rural Florida who could not otherwise, or only with great difficulty and/or expense, get to the office site in Lakeland, Florida. The idea behind this project along with the networking with the libraries and community centers was wonderful. It is my opinion that this was "cutting edge" when the grant was awarded. Since that time, other legal services organizations have begun using similar technology to establish connections with remote areas of their service areas.

ICON SETUP

FRLS has succeeded in connecting 23 sites (17 sites in area libraries and 6 sites in community centers) spread over a 4-county area. A carrel has been placed at each site. Clients go to the carrel at one of the sites and place a call to the main FRLS office via the phone provided. To start the videoconference, the case handler connects to the site computer and asks the client to pick up the telephone handset on the side of the computer. This takes the place of a microphone and speakers and it allows the conversation a modicum of privacy. At all times the case handler is in control of the site computer and can print, fax, e-mail and transfer documents and files as needed. The carrel has a HP All-In-One fax, scanner and printer for client use. The client needs to place papers in the HP as needed, but all other actions are remotely controlled through PcAnywhere software.

The CPU, battery and Cisco Router, extra paper, ink, etc. are all in a lock down box in the carrel. Site volunteers/employees provide technical assistance to the clients as needed. The conference coordinators indicated that such help was rarely needed.

The libraries are encouraged to allow the public to use FRLS computers with the understanding that an appointment has priority. The Internet Explorer Administration Kit was used to configure the on-site computers to prohibit program downloading, browsing local hard drives or making permanent changes to system settings.

ICON FRAME RELAY DEMONSTRATION

Attendees to the FRLS ICON Presentation first viewed a videoconference over a 384/192 Frame Relay connection which was very impressive. Very little, if any, lag-time in either audio and video were noticed. Video quality was excellent. All aspects of the conference were handled by the case handler using PcAnywhere which allowed the case handler to remotely control the site computer and provide the client with a "hands-off experience." It was remarkable and seemed like an ideal solution to reaching clients in rural areas. However, Frame Relay connections seem cost prohibitive due to the ongoing connection charge.

ICON ISDN DEMONSTRATION

The second demonstration was over the 128Kbs ISDN BRI connection. Video was extremely choppy with even a minimum amount of movement. There was so much lag time in the audio that there was more of a chance than not the audio would be overrun by the next sentence *resulting in only partially coherent conversations*. The experience was totally unacceptable. It is hard to imagine an effective attorney/client interview using this connection speed and we could not recommend using it. The conference coordinators stated they did try a 128Kbs Frame Relay connection which was somewhat better than the same speed ISDN connection.

The conclusion to the conference was a very informal talk session with both of the ICON presenters and a technical director from South Carolina. The set up costs and the ongoing monthly costs were very high. In a legal services or non profit setting, these costs would be difficult to sustain without ongoing funding.

SOFTWARE

ICON uses the following software: Windows NT Workstation or Windows 2000 Professional, Symantec PcAnywhere, Symantec Norton Antivirus, Symantec Ghost, Corel WordPerfect, Microsoft Internet Explorer, VCON Escort and Internet Explorer Administration Kit.

HARDWARE

ICON uses Pentium III 500 MHZ, 128 RAM computers, Video cards, Network Interface Card 10/100, VCON circuit board, and a HP All-In-One (printer, fax, scanner). The presenters warned of compatibility problems with certain BIOS setups and IRQ conflicts when using VCON. They recommend a thorough investigation before purchasing hardware.

ATTORNEY REVIEW

Florida Rural Legal Services has created a poster that asks, "Would you like to see a lawyer in your own hometown?" Their video conferencing program provides a means for this to happen. Previously if clients wanted to see a lawyer from the program they needed to travel to another county to the location of the central office - not a feasible choice for people without transportation.

Scheduling of appointments: Usually clients call the program to request assistance and, if appropriate, the case is referred to a law worker for the scheduling of an appointment. The law worker talks to the client on the phone to arrange a mutually convenient time for the client to go to one of the remote intake sites to a video-conference intake. Notice is also given to the remote site to expect the client at the appointed time. In those instances where a client goes to the remote site seeking assistance, they are directed to the video conferencing desk to contact the program and begin the procedures.

Help at the attorney end: This program has two technical experts who are employees of the program and available on-site. They have been involved in most if not every video conferencing interview in order to assist the attorney and to remotely assist the client. When asked how many video conferencing interviews have actually taken place they respond, "Not enough." The tech people hope that the law workers will get to a point where they can do it alone. It is the view of some that any video conferencing program should be structured so that there is a tech person available at the office which connects to the remote site.

Help at the client end: For many reasons, some of which are financial, Florida Rural Legal Services has found libraries to be excellent partners and remote sites for video conferencing. Their hours are compatible with the times clients would be conferencing with the program and they are open to the general population – not just restricted segments of the population as might be the case at a domestic violence or senior citizens program. Further, the library personnel are enthusiastic about technical innovation. They are helping people who can assist with such mechanical matters as providing a plastic sleeve for faxing an odd sized document. They are also available to help a client who can't read.

Client reactions: (Caveat: During our visit to Florida we didn't speak to any lawyers or clients. We heard about their reactions and concerns from the tech people.) Client reactions were described as, "They say they love it!" "They have been patient." "They say that they liked the experience even if initially reluctant." While no formal survey of client reaction has been conducted by FRLS, clients have been asked at the end of their interviews if they would have preferred videoconferencing or coming in to the main office. All said that they preferred the videoconference. Reportedly the clients really like to use the system "to send us stuff." We have been advised that client satisfaction will be very dependent upon the quality of the video and sound. This program has achieved a very high quality. However, they report that there was a program in Missouri where clients refused to use a lesser quality system (ISDN) because of the voice delays.

Attorney Reactions / Advantages: (Caveat: During our visit to Florida we didn't speak to any lawyers or clients. We heard about their reactions and concerns from the tech people.) We were told that one advantage for attorneys is that there is no down time for no-shows. Also there would probably be time savings for the attorney when compared to circuit riding. Attorneys still require the direct assistance of a tech person to arrange each interview, but this may change as the attorneys gain more experience with the technology.

Confidentiality: Physical confidentiality varies from site to site. Often the remote site consists of a desk in an open room, albeit at some distance from other activity in the room. The system does,

however, provide a unique feature, the ability to take a picture of the client and download to the attorney. The use of scanners and computers at a remote site does present an interesting confidentiality problem. Some systems will automatically save the scanned and transmitted documents. It is therefore necessary to disable this feature or to devise a system for erasing the saved documents.

Community Education: There has been talk about using videoconferencing for community education or pro se clinics. This has not yet been attempted by this Florida program.

Comparison to Phone and FAX: Many of the functions of videoconferencing might be accomplished by placing just a telephone and fax machine at the remote site. The Florida tech people feel that this would not provide as friendly an environment.

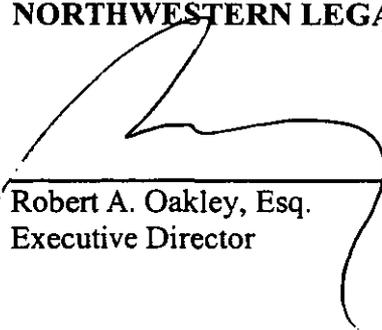
SUMMARY

It is clear that the infrastructure to fund such an endeavor is currently quite expensive both in startup costs as well as ongoing monthly costs. It is interesting to note that the Florida program states that their clients like their system. The frame relay system provides the best quality and is the most expensive system to use. The more reasonable recurring monthly cost is an ISDN connection; however, the quality is substandard as demonstrated in Florida. The technology people in Florida did suggest experimenting with a DSL or cable modem connection as they provide better quality than the ISDN connection.

It is our belief that as technology costs decrease, connectivity costs decrease and our client community becomes more adept with technology, this project could and would be replicated in more areas of the country. Further, it is our opinion that both the feasibility and the cost of implementing this technology (both startup and ongoing) would be cost effective to a program where one office covers a large geographic area which makes circuit riding or client travel impractical. Certainly, as programs close offices due to funding issues, this may indeed be a more palatable option.

Respectfully submitted,

NORTHWESTERN LEGAL SERVICES



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Executive Director

Dated: June 19, 2002