

Ms.freelegalanswers.org marks first year of service

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The free legal information website ms.freelegalanswers.org recently marked one year of operation, and its creators are working to spread the word about the service for low-income people.

Since the service began, 71 people have received answers to questions dealing with family law subjects including divorce and custody, consumer law regarding debts and purchases, school discipline, disability rights and housing. A total of 194 people are registered to use the site, and 42 attorneys are signed up to answer questions.

Attorney Seth Shannon of Jackson answers questions at home in the evenings. He's one of two lawyers who have fielded 10 or more questions from the ms.freelegalanswers.org website.

"There are needs to be met. To leave those needs unmet when we have the ability to do something is an incredibly sad thing to think about," Shannon said. "It's not very difficult. The questions are not very lengthy and are simple enough that I can give an answer without doing much research. It doesn't take much time, and it is very fulfilling to be able to help. When I have a few minutes at home some nights, I do it from my phone."

Shannon is chief of staff for the Department of Child Protection Services. He helps the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project on his personal time. Shannon said he avoids any questions related to Child Protection Services to avoid any conflict of interest.

Volunteer attorneys do not see or speak directly to the people seeking assistance via ms.freelegalanswers.org. Communications are anonymous through a website. Nevertheless, being able to help is "an incredibly gratifying experience," Shannon said. "I really want to be able to serve people. This is a simple way to do that, and I appreciate the work that has gone into it."

The Mississippi Access to Justice Commission and the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project launched the website ms.freelegalanswers.org on Aug. 22, 2016, to provide free civil legal assistance to people who cannot afford to pay for an attorney. Topics may include family law matters such as divorce, custody, child support, visitation, guardianship, emancipation, adoption, name change and birth certificate correction as well as domestic violence, bankruptcy, consumer issues, education, employment, housing, workers compensation, wills and estate planning. The website does not deal with criminal law.

The site works like this: People who qualify for assistance will sign up for an account, then post a question privately to the website. Attorneys can quickly review questions and answer only the ones they want to answer. A volunteer attorney will anonymously answer the question through the website. The user will receive an e-mail when the question receives a response. The user may ask follow-up questions through the website.

Ms.freelegalanswers.org is intended to give brief, basic legal advice. Volunteer attorneys will not write letters, make phone calls or file documents for the users, and will not represent them in court. The service is intended to help people determine whether they have a legal issue, and give them advice on how to proceed.

"Most of the questions are 'Where do I start?' 'What do I do?' " said Gulfport attorney Jonathan Hilbun, who started fielding questions from the website shortly after it opened. "It's getting the ball rolling for them.

"They are just everyday people who need answers to questions like custody, divorce, things that people encounter in everyday life. We are a really poor state. There are a lot of people who can't afford to get answers by paying an attorney. That's where this program steps in," Hilbun said.

“I have always felt like we as lawyers have an obligation to help the general public,” Hilbun said. “I love Mississippi and I love our people. I enjoy giving back. It feels good to think that you have helped someone in some small way.”

People seeking assistance are screened by income. Qualifications include:

- annual household income below 200 percent of Federal Poverty Guidelines — for example, an individual income of less than \$23,760, income of \$32,040 for two-person household and \$48,600 for a family of four.
- having less than \$5,000 in total assets;
- at least 18 years old;
- not incarcerated.

[Ms.freelegalanswers.org](https://ms.freelegalanswers.org) is a cooperative effort of the Access to Justice Commission and the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project. The American Bar Association’s Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service worked to expand the program nationwide, utilizing a model developed in Tennessee. “Freelegalanswers” websites currently operate in about 30 states.

The website is at this link: <https://ms.freelegalanswers.org/>.