

Accessible Law - ElderLinks Web Site Display  
(<http://www.law.wisc.edu/cwag>)  
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I. What is ElderLinks?

A. ElderLinks is an Internet-based electronic communication project that will ...

1. Create an interactive World Wide Web site to expand the availability of legal and benefits information to Wisconsin's aging community, elder law practitioners and the general public;
2. Develop new communication links between paralegals in Wisconsin's statewide Legal Assistance/Benefit Specialists Program and the back-up attorneys who help them provide information services to the elderly;
3. Provide new communication links between the general public, elder advocates and service providers who have an elderly clientele.

In Wisconsin, paralegal benefit specialists in county offices throughout the state provide advice on public benefits and other legal issues to elderly clients on a walk-in basis. Benefit specialists in 58 of those 72 counties are trained, assisted and supervised by attorneys from the Elder Law Center of the Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups (CWAG), which is headquartered in the state capital of Madison. ElderLinks will use the Internet to facilitate the long-distance interaction between Elder Law Center attorneys and the benefit specialists they supervise. At the same time, ElderLinks will also give pro bono attorneys, elder advocates and the general public greater access to legal information on topics of interest to older persons.

B. ElderLinks is a joint effort of the Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups, the Center for Public Representation (CPR) and the University of Wisconsin Law School Library. The three major components of ElderLinks are ...

1. A continuously updated web site with a wide range of materials on elder issues;
2. Mediated on-line discussion groups; and
3. Electronic mail links between benefit specialists and their supervising attorneys.

With these communication services, ElderLinks will harness modern information technology to address both budgetary and geographic limitations of the benefit specialist program by knitting together benefit specialists and their consulting Elder Law Center attorneys into a more cohesive, integrated whole, while also making legal information more widely available to the public.

## II. Why ElderLinks?

Even with the existing Legal Assistance/Benefit Specialist Program there is a pressing unmet need for legal services and law-related advice among Wisconsin's elderly, of whom an estimated 38.5 percent live below the federal poverty line or are considered economically vulnerable (i.e., at the fringe of poverty, with incomes at 100-200 percent of the federal poverty level).<sup>1</sup> This need has not been fully addressed by the Benefit Specialist Program and cannot be met by conventional legal services corporations which have experienced dramatic funding cutbacks, most recently following the November, 1994, elections.<sup>2</sup> While it can hardly substitute for cash grants, the ElderLinks initiative has the potential to both streamline and expand service delivery through the Benefit Specialist Program by enhancing communication among participants and by making some of its legal information available directly to the public.

## III. Origins and Goals of the Project

ElderLinks was stimulated by the availability of grant funding from Wisconsin Advanced Telecommunications Foundation (WATF). CWAG and CPR agreed to submit a joint proposal for ElderLinks to WATF in the foundation's first-round grant cycle, which closed at the end of March, 1996.

A CPR clinical student, Mark Doremus, was assigned to write the ElderLinks grant proposal with the assistance of CWAG Project Director Gail Schwersenska. The parties investigated potential applications of web technology to CWAG's statewide operations. CWAG has over 650 member groups which support its mission to advocate for the special needs of older persons, assure that older persons are recognized as people of dignity and worth, and affirm that older persons are partners in building the Wisconsin of tomorrow for people of all ages. Two potential applications of Internet technology were identified ...

- A. Organizational communication between Elder Law Center attorneys and benefit specialists in the field.

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<sup>1</sup> This estimate is derived from 1980 census data, provided by the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services Division of Supportive Living and on file with the author.

<sup>2</sup> State Bar of Wisconsin, Report of the Commission on the Delivery of Legal Services ("State Bar Report") 5 (May 4, 1996).

## B. Public communication

1. Marketing of CWAG memberships
2. Constituent services and advocacy
2. Elder law information for the general public and pro bono attorneys

## IV. Project Goals

In their proposal for grant funding, the ElderLinks grant recipients established two broad goals. For the elderly, the grantees promised to place legal, consumer and benefits information on line, and to encourage public discourse on these topics. For benefit specialists, the grantees promised to facilitate communication between benefit specialists and their legal back-up attorneys, and among benefit specialists themselves. More generally, the grantees promised to establish ElderLinks as a permanent, statewide information resource and a model of legal information delivery that can be replicated elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

To accomplish their first goal (provision of legal information to the elderly), the project participants will adapt existing legal, consumer and benefits publications for placement on the ElderLinks web site. Both CWAG and CPR have created a variety of readable but authoritative print materials of interest to the elderly and the professionals who serve their needs. These materials will be converted to electronic form. The initial focus of the conversion effort will be on topics which are of particular importance to the elderly and are currently in a state of flux. Paid consultants and pro bono CPR clinical interns will contribute to the overall design of the web site and the conversion of existing documents from print to electronic form.

The ElderLinks web site will also contain an embedded electronic mail facility that will allow users to send their comments and questions to a moderator, who will screen their input and then post selected messages and replies on an electronic bulletin board reachable through a hypertext link. In this way, confidentiality of potentially sensitive user information will be maintained while responses are placed in a public forum for the benefit of all.

## V. Funding and Resources

The Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups, CPR and the U.W. Law Library have

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<sup>3</sup> See Grant Application to Wisconsin Advanced Telecommunications Foundation (Grant App.) 3-4 (March 21, 1996).

received received a one-year, \$50,000 grant from WATF to implement their project. Supplemental funding for ElderLinks was provided by the State Bar of Wisconsin Accessible Law Project and Ameritech.

#### A. Budgeted Expenditures

Roughly half of the \$50,000 WATF grant will be spent on personnel costs. The remainder will be spent on hardware. The University of Wisconsin Law Library, as a co-grant recipient, has already installed an ElderLinks file server that was purchased with grant funds. The library is connected to the University of Wisconsin-Madison wide area network, which provides high-capacity, high-speed access to the Internet. Purchase of seven personal computers with Internet connectivity and web browser software has also been authorized under the WATF grant. These computers will be installed at the headquarters of CWAG and CPR, and at pilot sites in five Wisconsin counties (Brown, Grant, Portage, Waupaca and Waushara). Funding for Internet access is provided by the ElderLinks start-up grant for the five pilot sites only. End users at other locations will be responsible for obtaining their own Internet access and electronic mail services.

#### VI. Receptivity of the Elderly to Internet Communication Technologies

A commonly asked question about ElderLinks is: "Why do you think older persons are ever going to use the Internet? Aren't they scared of computers?" This question implies that elderly persons are technophobes. This is a misperception. Academic research suggests that at least some elderly persons are quite receptive to computers.<sup>4</sup> Further evidence of this receptivity comes from news accounts that chronicle the expanding popularity of SeniorNet, which offers electronic mail, computer bulletin boards and forums to seniors through America Online.<sup>5</sup> While the number of older Americans with computers in their homes is small, many users of SeniorNet gain access to the system through computers located in community centers, residential care facilities and schools. This public-access model was explicitly incorporated into the ElderLinks project proposal.

Furthermore, the ElderLinks project incorporates a process by which elderly

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Elizabeth McNeely, "Computer-Assisted Instruction and the Older-Adult Learner," 17 Educational Gerontology 229 (1991).

<sup>5</sup> See Leslie Miller, "Seniors Log on to the Computer Community," USA Today, Jan. 4, 1993; Melinda Beck & Nadine Joseph, "Never Too Old to Go On Line," Newsweek, June 15, 1992.

individuals will be introduced to the Internet and trained to use its resources. Benefit specialists, students and volunteers from existing community organizations will be trained to use ElderLinks and to convey information about the system to the elderly. This facilitator training is supported by grant funding from WATF. Easy access to ElderLinks will be made available to benefit specialists in pilot counties by funding computer equipment in their offices. Skill-level training for benefit specialists and Elder Law Center attorneys is also included in the WATF budget.

## VII. Web Site Content for the General Public (Proposed)

The following topics will be incorporated into ElderLinks as time and resources allow.

### A. About CWAG

1. History of the Organization
2. Governance
3. Organizational Units
  - a. Districts
    1. Districts by county organization
    2. District chairs
4. Who's who on the CWAG staff

### B. CWAG's Biennial Platform

### C. Membership Information

1. Individual Memberships
2. Group Memberships
3. Business Memberships

### D. Upcoming CWAG Events

1. District Meetings
  - a. Places, times, agendas
  - b. For more info - contact District chair
2. Annual Convention
  - a. Logistics - dates, times, costs, agenda, etc.

- b. Exhibitors expected there
    - c. Entertainment and featured speakers
    - d. Listing of workshops (topics, times, presenters)
    - e. On-line registration
  - 3. Training Conferences
    - a. Guardianship conference
    - b. Medical Assistance conference
    - c. Others being planned
    - d. On-line registration
- E. CWAG's Elder Law Center - Current Projects
- 1. General information
  - 2. Benefit specialist program for Dane County
  - 3. Legal back-up to benefit specialists
  - 4. Wisconsin Guardianship Support Center
  - 5. Elder abuse
- F. Other CWAG Services
- 1. PartnerCare
  - 2. Home Equity Conversion Counseling
  - 3. Consumer advocacy for policyholders of Blue Cross & Blue Shield Value Plus Medicare Supplement Policy
- G. Legislative Advocacy
- 1. State Budget
    - a. Community Options Program
    - b. Medical Assistance Reimbursement
    - c. Medical Assistance Co-payments
    - d. Medical Assistance Estate Recovery
    - e. Medical Assistance Home Care Caps
    - f. Women's Health Initiative
    - g. Supplemental Security Income
    - h. Elderly and Disabled Transportation
    - i. Long-Term Care Ombudsman
    - j. Mental Health - Right to Refuse Treatment
    - k. Long-Term Care Single Entry Point
    - l. Health Insurance Risk-Sharing Plan

- m. Long-term care re-design
- n. Prescription drug-related issues
- o. Guardianship reform
- p. Revisions to Financial Power of Attorney
- q. Nursing Home Quality of Care Bills
- r. Assisted Suicide
- 2. How to Contact Elected Officials
  - a. Listing of all state legislators
  - b. Listing of all federal legislators

G. CWAG Publications on the Web

- 1. Legislative Update
- 2. The Advocate
- 3. Spousal Impoverishment Protections Under Medical Assistance
- 4. Power of Attorney for Finances and Other Property
- 5. Family and Medical Leave Law
- 6. Roles and Responsibilities of a Wisconsin Guardian of the Person
- 7. Roles and Responsibilities of a Wisconsin Guardian of the Estate
- 8. The Guardian as Advocate
- 9. Wisconsin Guardianship Support Center News
- 10. Elder Rights and Benefits Booklet
- 11. Medical Assistance Estate Recovery and Lien Laws
- 12. Food Stamp Eligibility

H. Outlines of Relevant Elder Law Issues

- 1. Guardianship
- 2. Medical Assistance eligibility
- 3. Increasing Medical Assistance Spousal Impoverishment Income and Asset Levels
- 4. Family and Medical Leave Law
- 5. Long-Term Care Insurance
- 6. Mandated Benefits under Medicare Supplement Insurance
- 7. County Managed Services Law
- 8. Advance Directives
  - a. Living Wills
  - b. Powers of Attorney for Health Care
  - c. Do Not Resuscitate Orders
- 9. Supplemental Security Income

10. Social Security
11. Food Stamps
12. Home Equity Conversion Mortgages
13. Surrogate Medical Decision-Making
14. Advance Planning for Financial Decision-Making
15. Medical Assistance Estate Recovery and Lien Laws

I. Useful Legal Forms/Standard Letters

1. Power of Attorney for Health Care
2. Revocation of Power of Attorney for Health Care
3. Certification of Incapacity
4. Certification of Regaining of Incapacity
5. Power of Attorney for Finances and Other Property
6. Revocation of Power of Attorney for Finances and Other Property
7. Living Will
8. Do Not Resuscitate Orders
9. Requests for Administrative Hearings
10. Petitions for Review of Administrative Decisions
11. Basic Will

J. Important Addresses and Phone Numbers for Seniors

1. County aging units, including benefit specialists
2. Social Security Administration offices
3. County departments of economic support
4. County registers in probate
5. Adult protective services offices
6. Elder abuse agencies
7. Long-term support agencies

K. Listing of Other Web Sites of Interest to Seniors

VIII. Potential Uses of E-Mail to Enhance Legal Back-Up to Benefit Specialists

- A. Intake from Benefit Specialists
  - 1. Receive calls
  - 2. Respond to benefit specialist inquiries
  
- B. Services to Benefit Specialists
  - 1. Respond to questions
  - 2. Download statutory and regulatory excerpts
  - 3. Draft letters for benefit specialist practice use
  - 4. Review letters drafted by benefit specialists
  - 5. Provide sample forms
  
  
- IX. Potential Uses of ElderLinks E-Mail by the General Public
  - A. Request more information about CWAG services and benefits
  - B. Request hard copies of publications
  - C. Sign up for CWAG conferences, convention, etc.
  - D. Ask questions of the Wisconsin Guardianship Support Center

- X. Experiences/Lessons learned
  - A. Putting up web site, per se, is meaningless
    - 1. Web is one-way, like broadcasting
  - B. Key to success is developing user network
    - 1. Aware of web site
    - 2. Supportive (politically, financially)
    - 3. Willing to contribute content
    - 4. Reliant on the services you offer
  - C. Current focus, in part, is on the question: how do you popularize a web site?
    - 1. Possibilities are:
      - a. Win an award or get mentioned in an on-line "best of the web" list
      - b. Market your services to existing customers
        - 1. Example: WisBar web site
      - c. Be associated with a "big name"
      - d. Word of mouth/close ties with users
        - 1. Incorporate users into development process

## XI. Summary and Prospectus

The ElderLinks project is an effort to harness modern information technology to address some of the budgetary and geographic limitations of the Benefit Specialist Program in those counties where the Elder Law Center is the designated legal assistance provider. ElderLinks has the potential to reduce costs, bolster morale and expand the clientele of the Benefit Specialist Program. It will enhance the effectiveness of benefit specialists by: 1) providing them with electronic training services that are more accessible and easier to use than conventional print materials, 2) delivering legal updates to them more rapidly and economically than has been possible in the past, and 3) establishing communication links among Elder Law Center attorneys and benefit specialists, via electronic mail, that will allow benefit specialists to get quick answers from their back-up attorneys when difficult or unusual questions arise. Because ElderLinks is a vehicle for instantaneous electronic communication between Elder Law Center attorneys and the lay advocates they support, it promises to both improve the quality of service delivered by those advocates and reduce the possibility of errors in the

information they provide to their elderly clientele. Legal, consumer and benefits information, publicly available through the ElderLinks web site to any interested party, will also be a resource for pro bono attorneys, advocates for the elderly, social workers and health care professionals serving a variety of disadvantaged clients including, but not limited to, senior citizens. Finally, in addition to educating older persons about their entitlements and rights under law, ElderLinks will introduce an expanding number of older Wisconsin citizens to the advantages of using advanced telecommunications technologies to inform themselves and to communicate with others who have similar interests and needs.

## Speaker Biography

**Mark E. Doremus** is a third-year student at the University of Wisconsin Law School. A former journalist and instructional designer, he has been involved in the development of the ElderLinks initiative from its inception. Doremus holds a Ph.D. in Journalism and Mass Communication from the University of Wisconsin; he completed his undergraduate work at San Diego State University in 1979.

## Law-Related Publications

Doremus, M. E. "Wisconsin's ElderLinks Initiative: Using Technology to Provide Legal Services to the Elderly," *WAKE FOREST LAW REVIEW* (in press).

Doremus, M. E. "Libel Law and Tabloid News," in A. Wells & E. A. Hakanen (eds.), *MASS MEDIA AND SOCIETY* (forthcoming).