

DESIGNING A COORDINATED INTAKE AND REFERRAL (CIR) SYSTEM FOR CIVIL LEGAL AID IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Client and Community Member Input

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INTRODUCTION

Civil legal problems are pervasive in the United States, especially among low-income households.¹ These problems are often entwined with critical livelihood issues, like housing stability, family relationships, and income, and they have the potential to seriously impact people’s lives. While many people experience civil legal problems, few receive legal help to address them. One reason for this discrepancy is the often insurmountable challenge of finding an appropriate legal services provider. Establishing a single point of entry for legal services—a coordinated intake and referral (CIR) system in which multiple legal services providers participate—can streamline people’s access to legal help.



CONTEXT AND PURPOSE OF CIR SYSTEM

With more than 50 civil legal services providers in the District of Columbia, finding legal help can be a daunting task. It is a complex system in which legal aid organizations offer different levels of assistance, address different legal areas, use different eligibility criteria, and operate with different capacities. Many community members never reach the door of a legal services provider to get the help they need. Even lawyers and other professionals can experience challenges referring clients to the appropriate assistance. Because of this lack of clarity, legal services organizations receive many calls from people whom they cannot assist, either because the legal problem is not in an area they serve, the caller is not eligible for their services, or the problem is not a legal one. The complexity of the system makes it very difficult for District residents to find the right assistance to address their civil legal problem and puts additional strain on legal aid intake staff.

To address this dilemma, the DC Bar Foundation (DCBF) is spearheading the design and development of a user-friendly, secure, accessible Coordinated Intake and Referral (CIR) System for people with civil legal needs in DC. The CIR System will serve as a single point of entry to connect District residents with a legal services provider that can offer appropriate assistance. The System will entail a dedicated phone line and website that can be used by people seeking legal help (“applicants”). A customized web application will handle the collection and storage of intake information, routing cases to appropriate legal services organizations, sending automated notifications that a referral has been initiated, and placing cases with appropriate legal services organizations. The System will be staffed by trained CIR

¹ Legal Services Corporation 2022 Justice Gap Report: <https://justicegap.lsc.gov/the-report/>

navigators who will conduct intake screenings with applicants, monitor the technology-enabled process, and ensure applicants are connected with an appropriate service provider.

Process for Developing the CIR System

DCBF has created a multidisciplinary team to design and develop the CIR System, including a technology partner to build the customized system and a research partner to integrate evaluation throughout the process. Building the CIR System involves 4 general phases:²

- 1) *Design*—Determination of the System’s parameters and functionality, including key staff roles, workflows and protocols, user-center approaches, and specifications of the automated systems and technology components
- 2) *Development*—Establishment of key infrastructure and partnerships, building of the automated systems and technology components, and hiring of staff
- 3) *Pilot testing and refinement*—Rollout of the System to limited sites to test the workflow and the technology components, and to adjust and refine as necessary
- 4) *Rollout*—Rollout of the CIR System broadly across all participating organizations within the District’s civil legal aid community

Each phase includes an associated evaluation protocol to collect data to inform the work of that stage. As of this report, the initiative was in the *Design* phase, and the evaluation work focused on gathering information from key stakeholders to inform the CIR’s design. This work involved gathering input from legal service providers, allied organizations, and community members and clients.

IMPORTANCE OF CLIENT AND COMMUNITY MEMBER INPUT

The foremost goal of the CIR System is to create a *user-centered system* that meets the needs of District residents in need of legal help. To center users’ voice in the process, DCBF allocated resources to gather input from legal aid clients and community members at different points in the initiative and to feed this information back to the CIR team to inform design and development. This effort involves an emphasis on equity, prioritizing input from members of historically marginalized and otherwise vulnerable populations for whom access to justice is often tenuous.

This Study

The current effort included conducting focus groups with individuals who are from populations considered to have particular vulnerabilities with respect to navigating the legal system. Specifically, focus group participants included older adults, domestic violence and sexual assault survivors, and

² <https://www.dcbfoundation.org/coordinated-intake>

people with limited proficiency with English. Some were current/former legal aid clients and others were not (although many of the non-clients had tried to find legal help in the past without success).

In total, 13 focus groups were conducted and 72 people participated. The sample included older adults (13 participants), non-English speaking people (Spanish and Mandarin; 6 participants), survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault (37 participants), and general legal aid clients (16 participants). Focus groups were conducted between December 2021 and April 2022. Eight groups were held virtually and 5 were in-person. Discussions followed a semi-structured protocol, with question prompts that elicited specific feedback and also allowed for participants to raise additional topics.

This Report

This report presents the results of these 13 focus group discussions and offers key learnings that can translate into actionable items for the design and development of the CIR System. The report is organized in thematic sections, although there is conceptual overlap between some sections. Sections include:

- Concept of coordinated intake and referral
- Accessibility of the system
- Intake and referral process
- CIR website
- Guidance for CIR navigators
- Trauma-informed approach
- Marketing and outreach

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Results are presented for 7 general themes: the CIR System concept, System accessibility, the intake and referral process, the website, the CIR navigator position, a trauma-informed approach, and marketing the CIR to the community. Specific recommendations are listed for each topic.

CONCEPT OF THE CIR SYSTEM

The CIR represents a significant improvement to the current system.

All focus group participants were enthusiastic about the CIR concept. They thought that having a single phone number and website as an access point for legal services would benefit many District residents. However, they acknowledged that the CIR System will be only as beneficial as it is functional, and they underscored responsiveness—*specifically, timely response by knowledgeable and compassionate staff*—as key to its success.

Many participants described challenging experiences seeking legal help in the past. Some reported calling multiple legal services organizations but never receiving return calls, while others were called back weeks later. Some participants reached legal aid staff only to learn, after a lengthy intake process, that they were not eligible for services. One participant recalled being “denied, denied, denied” by multiple organizations and feeling discouraged and anxious as a result. Recounting these experiences, participants explained that, in the current system, it is “easy to feel hopeless.” This sentiment was echoed by those participants who had not sought legal help because they did not know that free legal services were available or where to look for them. Overall, there was a sense of being unsupported by the system and left to navigate a stressful legal case and the confusing court system on their own.

"I think that it might help a lot if they had one number because [in my case] I didn't have any knowledge of any help that I could have received before I had to go back to court. I was just blindsided. I had to go in there and represent myself and I was so ignorant to the system and what was going on. I didn't have a clue. So, if that number was posted, and I could have called that one number, that definitely would have helped me a lot. And I think it would help a lot of people."

On the other side of the spectrum were focus group participants who were current or previous clients of legal services organizations. While a few of them relayed similar stories of unsuccessfully seeking legal help, they had all landed with an organization that helped them—and they uniformly expressed sincere relief in their good fortune and appreciation for their attorneys. The positive impact of having legal representation was clear.

Altogether, participants strongly agreed that a well-advertised, efficient, and responsive CIR System would constitute a significant improvement to the current system.

Participants raised several general considerations for the CIR System.

Participants underscored that:

- Many people, especially people of color and those from historically marginalized communities, have been repeatedly let down by the government and “the system.” As a result, many people do not expect the system to work for them—in fact, they expect to be dropped and neglected. The CIR will have to communicate, through marketing and staff performance, that it is different and truly committed to doing better.
- Civil legal problems often bear directly on people’s lives, so applicants’ experiences will be personal and urgent—even if the circumstances do not seem urgent to CIR staff. Moreover, some people may be embarrassed to be in a position to have to ask for help, which adds a layer of emotional stress to an already stressful situation. Having CIR staff treat applicants with respect and empathy will be key.
- Court is an intimidating place for most people, which adds a layer of fear to an already stressful situation. The legal system is complex and essentially incomprehensible to many people who do not have legal training. Not understanding how the court system works can be a source of anxiety and, to some extent, shame for some community members. As one participant stated, “It makes us feel like we are dumb.” Having CIR staff be knowledgeable about the legal system and able to provide callers with easy-to-understand information will be important.
- Engaging with the legal system can be especially overwhelming for people with histories of trauma, particularly for victims of domestic violence or sexual assault whose cases can be especially sensitive. The same is true for community members without proficient English skills (both verbal and written), who experience considerable challenges understanding the legal process and their rights. Cultural differences can also complicate participation in the American legal system and its expectation for self-advocacy (for example, being able to articulate one’s side of a legal case, however meritorious, can be challenging for women from cultures with strong gender roles related to women’s submission to male perspectives). Supporting the CIR System to employ a trauma-informed and culturally sensitive approach will be key.
- Many people will assume that they cannot afford legal help and will not even begin to look. Advertising the CIR System widely and clearly will be important.

"I'm not familiar with the system....and it is very difficult. And they treat you like you are beneath the bus, that you have no understanding, that you have no self-respect or education. They want you to bend over backwards and give them your life history. And everything that you give them, it still doesn't make a difference because at this point they do nothing....It's something that needs to change. It really does."

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CIR SYSTEM:

- ✓ **Center the applicants.** The CIR, and its staff, must remain steadfastly anchored to the applicant's experience and perspective.
- ✓ Ensure CIR navigators are both **empathetic** and **knowledgeable**. (See later section on CIR Navigators.)
- ✓ Uncomplicate the legal process by making the intake and referral process straightforward and **easy for applicants to understand** and navigate. Use laypeople's terms to describe steps.
- ✓ Be clear that the CIR System is not affiliated with the government, is local, and is **trustworthy**.
 - Use a phone number with a **202 area code**.
 - Include detailed information about the process and legal service partners on the website.
 - Ensure that the CIR contact information is listed by many local service organizations and that social services staff are aware of it and can vouch for it. This will let community members know that the CIR System is legitimate, valuable, and trustworthy.
- ✓ Employ a **trauma-informed approach** (see later section of Trauma-Informed Approach).
- ✓ Make it clear to community members that the CIR System may be able to connect people with **legal help that is free or low cost**.

ACCESSIBILITY OF THE CIR SYSTEM

The CIR System should be accessible by phone and web, during convenient hours.

Participants agreed that, to meet the needs of the community, the CIR must be accessible by both phone and internet. While some applicants might prefer online access, others who are less comfortable with technology or lack access to a computer might prefer to speak with someone over the phone. Indeed, during the focus groups, younger adults reported being inclined to submit online intake forms, while older adults expressed a clear preference for the phone. Offering both avenues is paramount, as widespread use of the CIR largely depends on applicants being able to access the System in the way they are comfortable reaching out.

Participants thought that the CIR System should operate a 24-hour phone line to accommodate people with schedules that do not align with typical business hours. They noted that many low-income people work non-traditional shifts or work multiple jobs, leaving little room during the day to make phone calls. If a 24-hour phone line was not possible, participants requested that the CIR incorporate regular evening and weekend hours of availability to meet this need.

The CIR System should prioritize live interactions, and any automated system components must be straightforward.

All participants agreed that having phone calls answered by live people is vastly better than having calls fielded by an automated system, although they conceded that automated systems are the norm and are generally workable if done well. A good automated system employs very clear options so that applicants can progress through the steps efficiently and without confusion. The automated options also must account for callers not fully knowing what their legal issue is and how this confusion can complicate self-categorization. Callers should have a way to redirect themselves to speak to a CIR staff person. Also, the automated system must allow the caller to select options by inputting numeric choices, as some participants explained the limitations of voice recognition technology for people with linguistic accents, speech problems, or dentures.

Participants appreciated that the CIR website would also be available and would enable people to submit online intakes at any time of the day. However, they acknowledged that intake forms can be confusing to complete, especially ones involving complex legal issues, and they predicted that many applicants might experience difficulty and be unable to complete the forms accurately without help. Participants recommended that online applicants have the ability to access real-time help with forms, either by calling the CIR call center or chatting with CIR staff online. Participants who were comfortable with technology suggested that the CIR System might benefit from having an app or a scannable QR code that would step applicants through the intake process.

The CIR System must accommodate accessibility needs of the community.

Participants provided input about how the CIR System would best work for them, and they also noted ways in which the CIR could meet the needs of their friends, family members, and neighbors. This included providing language interpretation for non-English speakers and hearing support for applicants who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. The need for language interpretation applies to all aspects of the intake and referral process—for example, people who speak character-based languages (e.g., Mandarin) can struggle with Arabic numerals, which can make it difficult to leave phone numbers in a voicemail. CIR materials must also be accessible for people with various levels of education and supports must be in place for applicants who cannot read or write.

"In terms of things that would help me feel comfortable and like I could trust the service, if I see that there is a social worker on staff, ... knowing what type of evaluation happens, if there are surveys done to get feedback about how people are receiving the services and how they feel about it, and knowing that [the CIR is] actually serving the population that I am a part of and how people who are part of that population feel about the service. That will be important to me."

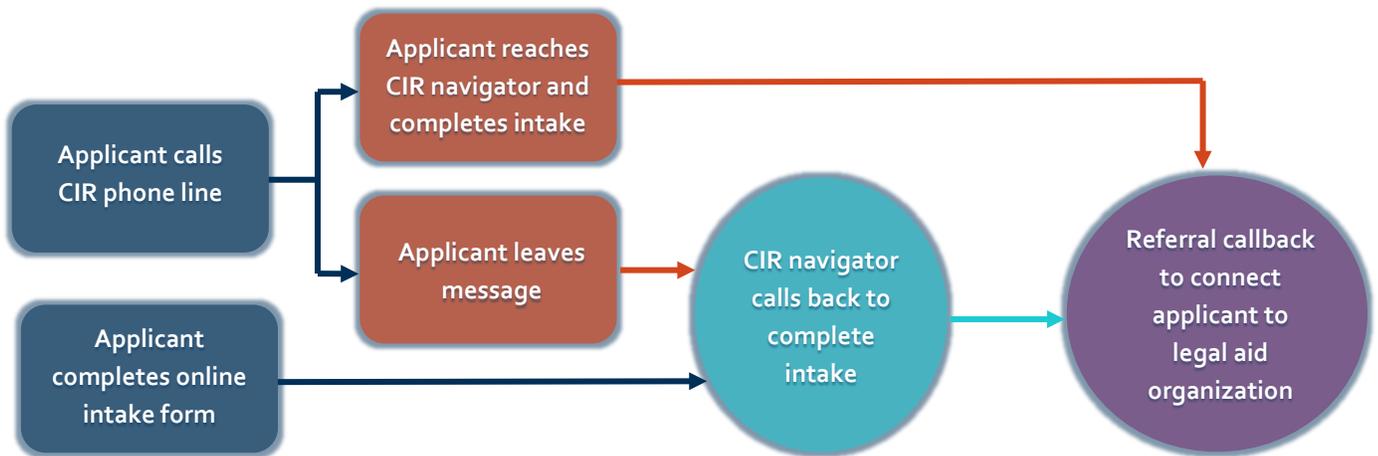
Participants who were less comfortable with technology requested that, when virtual services or meetings are necessary, the CIR staff call the applicant beforehand to provide them with instructions on how to use the virtual platform. This level of assistance would help them successfully meet the requirements of the referral process.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACCESSIBILITY:

- ✓ Create a **single phone line** for community members to call the CIR System. Whenever possible, have **calls answered by a live CIR navigator**.
 - Staff a sufficient number of navigators to handle the call volume.
- ✓ If calls must be answered by an **automated system**, ensure that the system:
 - Provides simple and straightforward prompts that are easily navigable by someone who may not know what their legal problem is.
 - Does not rely exclusively on voice recognition (allows the caller to push numeric options).
 - Enables the caller to press a button and speak with a live person.
- ✓ Expand **hours of operation** to include regular evening and weekend hours for applicants who are not able to call during typical business hours.
- ✓ Provide adequate **hearing support** to callers who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.
- ✓ Provide **language interpretation services** for applicants who do not speak English, or staff CIR navigators who are multilingual.
- ✓ Provide access to **real-time assistance with form completion** for applicants submitting intake forms online. This might include asking questions via chat on the website or having a direct number to reach CIR navigators.
- ✓ Ensure that the **CIR website** and all forms are **viewable and downloadable in multiple languages**.
- ✓ Create a **scannable QR code** for smart phone users to easily access the CIR website and intake forms.
- ✓ Consider holding **“CIR office hours”** when CIR staff go to the library or a social services organization to conduct in-person intakes. This approach would alleviate the need for community members to navigate the intake process alone.
- ✓ Consider the accessibility needs of **community members who do not have the means** to contact the CIR by phone or web (e.g., homeless individuals, survivors of sex trafficking) and work with social services organizations that serve these populations to ensure they can access the CIR.

INTAKE AND REFERRAL PROCESS

The proposed intake and referral process would involve the following steps:



When asked about the logistics of the intake and referral process, focus group participants continued to underscore issues of accessibility, including having both phone and online intake portals and having a process that is manageable for people with no legal background and for vulnerable populations, such as older adults, trauma survivors, and non-English speakers (see Accessibility section).

Several participants relayed previous experiences of calling legal aid organizations, providing personal information, and then waiting for someone to call them back—sometimes for weeks—with no further information. This process was stressful and left callers feeling powerless. As one participant put it, “You leave a message and wait for a long time. You don’t know what’s happening. If you need help quickly, it’s worrisome.” With this experience as the backdrop, participants offered various suggestions for how the CIR System could conduct intakes and connect referrals, all the while keeping applicants engaged in the process and updated on the status of their case.

Phone intake should be efficient.

Participants expressed a strong preference for the CIR phone line to be answered by a person. However, they also understood that this level of staffing might not be feasible and felt that a well-built automated system could also work. For the automated system to be well-built, it would offer very clear options that would make it easy for people to navigate. These options must account for callers not knowing what their legal issue is and must offer good, clear prompts for them to answer the questions correctly and easily.

All participants expressed concerns about long hold times. They suggested having a recording that informed people of the length of the wait and offered them the option to hang up and have a CIR navigator call them back (keeping their place in line) or schedule an appointment to talk with a navigator. They also suggested, while people are on hold, to include recorded messages that list the documents needed for the intake interview so that callers are prepared when the navigator answers. They underscored that the intake should gather enough information to assess if someone needs immediate help and then triage those emergency cases accordingly. There was general agreement that some cases, with urgent needs like an imminent eviction, would require a “fast track” to services.

“I’ve had bad luck when I’ve tried to call a hotline, like being on hold for an hour and then get disconnected. I know this is a simple thing to say, but if there is any type of hotline, it’s really, really important that it be functional and that it not just be a barrier in terms of having to wait lengthy times and not actually get answered.”

Participants suggested that the CIR System provide a confirmation message as a bridge while the applicant waits for the referral connection. After a caller completes a phone intake, they should be sent an email or text message to confirm the receipt of the intake and the basic information provided, especially the caller’s contact information so that they can identify any potential errors that would make the callback difficult. The confirmation message should also provide a reference number for the case to aid in any follow-ups, list the next steps and timing of the process, and direct the applicant to the CIR website for additional resources.

Online intake should be structured, easy to complete, and mobile-friendly.

Participants shared stories of having had official paperwork discarded, and their process thwarted, because they had completed a form incorrectly. They recognized that this risk is inherent whenever people are completing formal paperwork by themselves, especially in circumstances that require technical content knowledge, and that this risk directly applies to people completing the online intake form for the CIR System. As one participant noted, “Sometimes it’s hard to know exactly what your legal problem is. It can be easier to have someone asking you questions. You don’t always know how to summarize it and keep all of the important information [in the summary].”

Because of this risk, participants stated that the online intake forms would need to be very clear and to use questions with specific options to choose from (not narrative) wherever possible. This format will help the applicant provide the right information needed to assess eligibility and will make completion of the forms easier. Even with well-scripted questions, participants thought it would be necessary to include a way for applicants who are struggling with the online forms to ask questions of CIR staff in real-time. This could be done through a direct phone line to reach someone for quick guidance or through a chat function on the website.

Participants mentioned many people rely on smart phones (not computers) to connect to the internet, so the online intake forms would need to be mobile friendly. They also reiterated the importance of

having all content on the website, including all intake forms, and all related materials translated into other languages. Lastly, they noted that encryption of the fillable intake forms was necessary to keep applicants' personal information secure; this element (including the "https:" and lock icon in the search bar) would also relay the credibility of the CIR and the sophistication of the technology behind it.

As with the phone intake, applicants who complete an online intake should be sent an email or text message to confirm that the intake was received and review the basic information provided, especially the contact information for callback. The confirmation message should also provide a reference number for the case, list the next steps and timing of process, and list the documents and information that the applicant should have ready for when the navigator calls back to complete the intake process.

In-person intake, if offered, should be conveniently located.

The CIR System might consider having in-person options for intakes. For example, participants suggested locating staff (perhaps an intern or law student) at the courthouse to talk with pro se litigants before their hearings, help them complete a CIR intake form, and if necessary, help them request a continuance. Participants did not have other specific places in mind, although they recommended that other locations be in the neighborhoods where potential applicants live (most especially Wards 7 and 8) or close to bus stops or metro lines for easy access.

Callback process should be timely and communicative.

Participants strongly emphasized the need for the CIR System to be reliable, and the callback process was the most critical aspect of this. Participants reported that the CIR navigators must be clear about when they will call the applicant back and *they must call back by that time*. Remember that people from marginalized communities have been repeatedly let down by the systems around them, which often takes the form of receiving no response after requesting help. The CIR System's intention to be user-centered relies on its ability to follow through on its promises and to call back applicants by the appointed time.

Participants expressed concern about missing a callback and then having to restart the process from the beginning. They considered ways to increase the chances that the callback would successfully connect the applicant with the CIR navigator and avoid drawn out games of phone tag. One potential strategy would be to allow applicants to schedule a time for a callback. This approach would enable applicants to schedule the callback at a time they can be available, and it would increase the chances that the navigator will reach the applicant on the first try. If scheduling callback appointments is not possible, the CIR navigators should call applicants back at least twice and leave a voicemail on the first call stating the time that the second call will happen.

"We don't want hit and miss. We don't want to ask through the telephone and get a recording. We don't want to be in the position of [hearing] 'We'll call you back in 24 hours' and then it may be 48 hours, 3 days, a week later, a month later. And by that time, anything can transpire."

Participants noted that, given the proliferation of scam calls, many people do not answer calls from unknown numbers. As a result, it will be important for the CIR System to have an obvious number and to have this number/name show up on caller ID so that applicants can recognize it and answer it.

In the currently proposed design for the CIR System, there would be two times for callbacks:

- 1) When an applicant calls the CIR phone line and leaves a message or completes an online intake form, a CIR navigator will call the person back to complete and confirm the intake paperwork,
- 2) After an applicant completes the intake paperwork and the CIR navigator is working on referring the case to a legal services organization, someone from the legal services organization will call the applicant back to further assess the case.

1. Callback to Complete Intake Paperwork

Callbacks to complete intake paperwork should occur on the same day as the applicant began the intake process or, at the latest, on the following day. Applicants who leave a voicemail on the phone line should hear a recorded message indicated when they can expect a callback (“within __ hours” or “by 5 p.m. today”), and those who begin the intake process online should receive this information in their confirmation email or text message. Offering applicants the opportunity to schedule a callback time would accelerate CIR navigators’ ability to connect with them.

2. Callback to Connect Referral

Callbacks to connect the applicant with a legal services organization should happen within 3 business days. If more time is needed, the CIR navigators must communicate that to the applicant. This process would involve sending email or text messages to update the applicant, confirm that their case is still being worked on, and provide a revised time estimate for the callback. Keeping applicants updated on the status of their referral will help them know that they have not been lost in the system and that they are still in line to receive assistance.

While applicants are waiting for the referral connection, the CIR System can provide legal information that might be useful, such as “Know Your Rights” information for different legal areas and guidance on requesting a continuance if the applicant has an imminent hearing. The dissemination of this information can be driven through the CIR website. CIR navigators could also assess for underlying needs (e.g., housing, food) and provide applicants with referrals to local services.

CIR staff should follow up with applicants after the referral is made.

Participants wanted CIR navigators to follow up to see if the referral actually connected. As one person said, “There should be somebody following up to see if you got to where you needed to go.” This support will show applicants that CIR staff are invested in finding them legal help. Participants also noted that a follow-up email or letter explaining the referral placement and thanking them for using the CIR System would be positively received by the community members using the service.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTAKE AND REFERRAL PROCESS:

- ✓ Have the CIR System **phone line answered by people** whenever possible.
- ✓ If the line is answered by an automated system, ensure that the **automated options are clear** and that the caller can press a **button to speak to a person** at any point.
- ✓ **Keep hold times short.** When they are longer, offer callers the option of a callback rather than staying on hold.
- ✓ Allow applicants to sign up for a **scheduled callback time** to complete the intake.
- ✓ Gather enough information to **identify emergency cases** to “fast track” their referral.
- ✓ Use **questions with specific, clearly defined options** on the online intake form.
- ✓ Enable applicants completing **online intakes to ask real-time questions** about forms, either through a chat function on the website or a direct phone line to CIR staff.
- ✓ Ensure online intake forms are **mobile friendly** and **encrypted**.
- ✓ Station a **CIR intern at the courthouse** to introduce the CIR System to pro se litigants and assist them in completing the intake forms.
- ✓ Send an **email or text message to confirm** the receipt of the intake form, basic information provided, a reference number for the case, and next steps.
- ✓ Keep **callback times short:** same-day for intake completion and 3 days for referral connection.
- ✓ Be clear about when the callback will happen or allow applicants to **schedule a time for the callback** from the CIR navigator.
- ✓ If callbacks are delayed, provide **regular updates to applicants** about the status of their referral.
- ✓ Secure a **recognizable phone number** for the CIR System and have the CIR name show up on caller ID so that applicants know it is not a scam number.
- ✓ Connect applicants to **legal information** and **relevant social services** while waiting for a callback.
- ✓ **Follow up** to make sure that referred applicants connected with the legal aid organization.

CIR SYSTEM WEBSITE

Participants emphasized the importance of a CIR website that provides comprehensive information and is easy to navigate. They estimated that most community members would be inclined to search online for legal assistance and to review the CIR System's website before deciding whether to initiate an intake. They acknowledged that some community members (e.g., older adults) may be less inclined to engage services over the internet, but thought that if the website prominently displayed the CIR phone number, then it would still be a good reference point for those applicants, too.

The website must communicate clearly what CIR System does.

The website must clearly communicate what the CIR System is, including an explanation of the CIR's purpose, its goals, and a clear explanation of the intake and referral process. The website should also transparently describe what the CIR System does and does not do. For example, it should clearly state that the CIR cannot guarantee that an applicant will receive representation by an attorney. It will be important to use layperson's terms to explain the process and helpful to include definitions of criminal cases and civil cases, list different areas of civil law, and identify the types of cases that are appropriate for CIR intake and referral.

The website will be reviewed by potential users to assess credibility.

Many participants stated that they would look at the CIR website to assess the System's legitimacy before initiating an intake. They agreed that the website should be thorough, offering a lot of information for potential applicants to review. Importantly, this information should include a full, updated list of partnering legal services organizations and areas of law they serve. Ideally, the description of each partner organization would include a hyperlink to that organization's website so that potential applicants can investigate further. Participants stated that they would feel more comfortable with the CIR System if they could assess the quality of the organizations to which they might be referred for legal help.

"I would call [the CIR phone line], but first I would look at [the website] and the particular agency to see if it's credible....I would look at how long the organization has been in practice, success stories or testimonials, and....where the individuals graduated from school and their field of expertise."

Another important indicator of credibility is testimonials from community members who have used the CIR System. Participants agreed that reading testimonials from previous clients—especially clients with similar demographic and cultural backgrounds and comparable legal needs—would greatly increase their confidence to reach out to the CIR. A couple of participants also suggested that the website display the results of any evaluations conducted of the CIR System.

The website should provide, or connect applicants to, legal information.

Participants highlighted that many community members are unaware of their legal rights and have limited knowledge about the court system—both of which can be barriers to seeking legal help. They felt that it would be valuable for the CIR website to provide this type of information. The site could include direct links to legal information and self-help resources on other websites (e.g., DC Law Help), explanatory materials posted on the CIR website, and “Know Your Rights” information so that people can identify when their circumstances qualify for legal intervention. Participants suggested having this information organized by area of law so that people can easily find their way to the information that is relevant to them and applicants can access this information while they are waiting for a callback from the CIR navigator.

"If there is information on the website about specifically what you're doing for people of these marginalized communities and a feedback form, because anyone can take the stats on their website, but if it's coming from the people in the community, I will trust it and believe they are more secure, and I will know that you're actually about what you're saying you're about."

Participants thought short explanatory videos would be especially helpful. They recommended creating and posting a 2-minute video that explains the intake and referral process, what happens when, and how long the different steps take. They also suggested posting short videos for each area of law that explain the court process for that type of case, including timelines, events, and outcomes, so that people are better informed and prepared.

The website must be mobile friendly.

Participants noted that most people have smartphones, but many low-income households do not have computers (or the ability to download forms), so the CIR website must be mobile friendly. They wondered whether a link in a text message could take an applicant directly to the intake form.

The website must appear in generic internet searches.

Participants mentioned the importance of search engine optimization (SEO) to ensure that the CIR website pops up in internet searches using a variety of internet browsers and a range of search terms. Some participants noted that current internet searches tend to return only paid attorneys, so having a free or low-cost service high in the search list would be beneficial.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIR WEBSITE:

- ✓ Display, on the landing page, the **CIR phone number** for those who wish to call instead of fill out an online take form.
- ✓ Describe **what the CIR System does and does not do** and what applicants can expect, using layperson's terms.
- ✓ List all of the **partner legal services organizations** that accept referrals, including basic information (especially legal areas of practice) and hyperlinks to each organization's website.
 - Include reasoning for why an applicant will benefit from calling the CIR phone line and not the legal services organizations directly.
- ✓ Show **testimonials from previous clients**, especially clients of color and those from marginalized populations.
- ✓ Present **results from any evaluations** of the System.
- ✓ Include **legal information** and links to effective **self-help resources**.
- ✓ Post **brief videos** to explain the intake and referral process and the court processes for different areas of civil law.
- ✓ Ensure website and all forms are **mobile friendly**.
- ✓ Use **search engine optimization** (SEO).

GUIDANCE FOR CIR NAVIGATORS

CIR navigators must be empathetic.

Participants emphasized that the CIR System can be an innovation that improves the civil legal aid system *only* if it is truly and sustainably centered on the needs of the people using it. Without this as the anchor point priority, it will just be another piece added to the existing inequitable structure. The CIR navigators are key to realizing this goal. As the face of the CIR System, the navigators' demeanor and interaction style will largely determine how community members experience the coordinated referral process, beyond placement with an attorney. Participants shared various experiences of interacting with system personnel that left them feeling discouraged, disrespected, confused, frustrated, anxious, or alone. However, they insisted that the recipe for good service was not complicated and that the essential ingredient was *empathy*.

Their guidance for CIR navigators was, first and foremost, to be compassionate. Many people will be contacting the CIR System while under considerable stress, and the navigators are their first step to finding much-needed help. As such, navigators must listen to the callers so that they feel heard and understood, and they must be respectful, kind, and always stay calm. Navigators would do well to remember that, to the applicant, their legal issue is a priority and potentially life-changing event and to treat their issue with a respect that matches this recognition. Navigators should not be judgmental or talk down to applicants. Several participants noted that if the navigators are warm and compassionate, then applicants will feel more comfortable during the intake conversation, will give better information as a result, and will likely have more trust that the CIR System will help them.

Navigators must be reliable and good under pressure.

Participants also underscored that navigators must be reliable—they have to do what they say they are going to do when they say they are going to do it. This dependability will send the message to applicants that the navigator cares and is invested in finding them services, and it will help the applicant trust that the CIR System is trustworthy and will come through for them. As one participant put it, a navigator should be “someone who is interested and someone who will follow through.”

Participants also acknowledged that answering calls from stressed people who need help can be a challenging job. They recognized that navigators will likely be faced with interactions that are intense (e.g., an applicant's high level of emotionality and urgency regarding the legal problem) or strained (e.g., poor cell phone connection or strong language accents complicating communication), and the navigator's ability to remain calm and respectful will maximize the chances of success.

"[The navigators] should remember the responsibility and nobility of the position. The mission should be about uniting and helping. They should be bringing help and hope and they have to remember that people are under a lot of stress with their legal issues."

Navigators should be accountable.

Participants also had logistical suggestions. They thought navigators should identify themselves on every call, giving either their full name or a reference number. This step would demonstrate that the CIR System has accountability protocols, which will help applicants feel that they will be treated fairly. A few participants thought that it would work best if applicants could reconnect with the same navigator each time they called back with questions, to maintain service continuity.

One participant thought that navigators should strive to provide at least some guidance (not legal advice) every time, even if it is just telling the applicants what will happen next or directing them to another resource. If the caller gets off the phone with a direction or a next step, it will feel successful.

Navigators should be well paid.

Lastly, participants agreed that the role of the navigator was critical to the success of the CIR System and that it needed to be staffed with high-quality professionals. As such, they recommended that the CIR navigator positions have good salaries and good benefit packages, to entice strong job applicants and limit turnover. They also recognized that, given the stress of the role, navigators might need additional supports to stay in the position over the long term.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIR NAVIGATORS POSITIONS:

- ✓ Conceptualize the CIR navigator position as one that provides **a service as important as legal representation** and develop it accordingly. Ensure salaries and benefit packages are sufficient to attract and retain high-quality and well-trained professionals.
- ✓ Hire navigators who are **enthusiastic and highly motivated** to serve people.
- ✓ Ensure navigators are **knowledgeable about the civil legal system** in the District and well trained with regard to legal intake procedures.
- ✓ Provide navigators with substantive training in related areas, such as **trauma-informed practices, mental health issues, de-escalation, and compassionate listening**.
- ✓ Cultivate a workplace **culture that prioritizes user experience** and supports navigators to remain steadfastly committed to ensuring that every caller feels heard and receives some level of help.
- ✓ Establish call center schedules so that individual navigators **are not conducting intakes all day every day**, as doing so can lead to burnout. For example, rotate staff between active client interaction and less intensive administrative work, or allow navigators to work part-time.
- ✓ Institute **accountability protocols**, such as having navigators identify themselves at the beginning of each call, providing ticket numbers for the applicant to use if they call back, and sending follow-up text surveys after calls to assess caller satisfaction.

TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH TO INTAKE AND REFERRAL

By establishing a single point of entry, and thereby relieving people of the need to call multiple organizations and undergo multiple intake processes without support, the basic structure of the CIR System employs an important element of a trauma-informed approach. However, there are more ways that the CIR can enhance applicant experience and reduce potential retraumatization.

The intake and referral process should be straightforward and easy for people without a legal background.

Participants emphasized that, for a system to be user-centered and trauma-informed, it has to be clear, supportive, and easy to use. It is important to remember that people who call the CIR System may be worried about their legal problem and anxious about interacting with the court system, which can be both confusing and intimidating. Making the intake and referral process easy and user-friendly will help alleviate stress and prevent inadvertent retraumatization.

CIR System and staff must be transparent and communicate clearly.

An essential element of trauma-informed practice is to ensure that people are fully informed about the parameters of their participation—what will happen, what they will be asked to do—so that they are able to provide informed consent. This approach respects a person’s agency, as they make their own decision about participation based on full information, and gives them control over their choices.

The CIR System can embrace this approach by being transparent about the intake and referral process so that applicants know what to expect. Navigators must be clear about what the CIR System can provide for applicants (e.g., referral for legal services, no guarantee of representation) and what applicants can expect in the process (e.g., steps of process, what will happen when), including what the applicant will be asked to do (e.g., types of information to provide, time to wait). It is important to explain what will happen and *when* it will happen, so that applicants are not surprised or left feeling abandoned by the CIR. Some participants also thought it would be helpful to tell applicants what to expect if they go to court (i.e., what the court hearing will entail).

In addition, participants indicated that the CIR System must be transparent about the confidentiality of information that is provided by applicants. It would be best to be clear about what information is kept private and what information is shared with whom and for what purpose, and whenever possible, getting applicants’ consent to share their information.

"Some of my barriers were perceived costs. Could I afford legal representation? Making it clear what is covered [by the CIR System] and what is not--knowing whether I am eligible for this service or not--will be helpful. I know that is hard to do without actually having the conversation, but I felt so ashamed by my lack of understanding of what was illegal in terms of what was done to me that that alone made me not want to pursue legal representation."

CIR staff should stay in contact with applicants throughout the process.

While applicants are waiting for a response from the CIR System (either the initial callback to complete the intake or the callback for a referral connection), CIR staff should communicate with the applicant about the status of their case. Sending emails or text messages to confirm that the CIR navigators are working on the case will let the applicant know that their case is still in process, that they are still in line for assistance, and that they have not been lost in the system.

The intake and referral process should limit storytelling burden.

Participants agreed that having to tell a sensitive personal story repeatedly to different organizations makes the process of seeking help that much more stressful and difficult. They strongly recommended that the CIR System limit the number of times a person is asked to tell their full story. To do this, they suggested making the initial intake screening questions less detailed, focusing on just the information that is necessary for the referral. This way, the applicant does not have to tell their entire story to the

"Just make the process easy. That's all... Because the individual who's been victimized, they're just not in a good headspace, so just making sure that everything syncs up [for them]. The process needs to be seamless."

CIR navigator. Participants also suggested that the legal services organization to which applicants are referred determine basic eligibility first, before doing the full intake, so that the applicant is not forced to tell their story, and rehash difficult experiences, unnecessarily.

Participants thought that some of the trauma of retelling the story multiple times could be avoided if staff made it a practice to review the information that was provided previously. To this end, CIR navigators should review the case (e.g., online intake form, case notes in CIR data system)

before calling the applicant, so they are briefed and the applicant does not have to repeat themselves. When follow-up conversations are necessary, participants suggested that staff refer to earlier conversations and acknowledge the information that the applicant has already provided, such as, "Here is what I know so far. Can you please add some more information?" This approach will prevent applicants from feeling like they are starting from scratch with each new interaction. For this reason, participants also felt that the CIR System should share the intake information with the legal services organization to which the case is referred, so that staff can build on, rather than recreating, the case notes. This process will offer the applicant a sense of service continuity.

CIR staff must relate to applicants using a trauma-informed lens.

Participants underscored how important it is for CIR navigators to be empathetic and kind, to listen without judgment, and to respect applicants' experience and emotions. Applicants must know that the navigator cares, is listening, and is invested in finding them help. (For specific suggestions regarding the CIR navigators, see the CIR Navigator section.)

Participants thought that the CIR System would benefit from staffing specialized positions beyond navigators, because the navigators will need to be focused on connecting referrals and may not have the skills or bandwidth to provide emotional support. They suggested staffing a social worker to handle situations involving mental health issues and an advocate to provide support to survivors of domestic violence or sexual assault.

Special consideration should be afforded to survivors of domestic violence or sexual assault. While the CIR navigators should attend to every call with a trauma-informed approach, this is especially important for survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and other direct traumas. These applicants may be in a traumatized state, which can make it difficult for them to process information quickly or clearly and may complicate their ability to work through the intake process easily. Navigators should be kind and patient, recognizing people who may be having a trauma response and who could benefit from some additional time to process the information and some extra support. One participant underscored the amount of “bravery and courage it takes to just take the next step” and how daunting it can be to try to find help.

“There is so much we go through as victims, just trying to find help.”

Some participants thought that survivors would be best served if advocates were staffed as part of the CIR team. Trained in trauma principles, these advocates could attend directly to the needs of survivors as they worked their way through the legal intake and referral process. They could monitor to make sure that each case progressed in a timely manner, that referrals connected, and that no survivors were lost in the system. Participants also thought that it would benefit survivors to tell their story once to the advocate, and then the advocate could relate the story to the CIR intake staff. This would ease the story-telling burden because survivors would find it easier to talk with an advocate than with a navigator and it would avoid the need for survivors to tell their story multiple times. Likewise, ensuring that program staff in local domestic violence shelters and sexual assault crisis centers are familiar with the CIR System and the intake process would also benefit survivors, because the crisis center staff could assist the survivors with the initial intake paperwork and conversations, which would ease the burden and make for a less stressful “warm handoff.”

Finally, some focus group participants who were also survivors of domestic violence or sexual assault mentioned their need for legal help often encompassed both civil issues (e.g., restraining orders, child custody orders) and criminal cases. They lamented that the current system does not offer a more holistic approach to legal services. While they understood that the CIR System focused on civil legal aid, they expressed hope that the System would at least be able to refer survivors for legal assistance in criminal cases if that was needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR USING A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH:

- ✓ **Train CIR navigators in the impacts of trauma** and elements of trauma-informed practice.
- ✓ **Communicate clearly about the process**, what will happen when, and what information will be kept confidential.
- ✓ **Maintain contact with applicants** while they are waiting.
 - Provide **text or email confirmation** *after applicants submit an online intake form* and before they have spoken to a CIR navigator to complete the full intake. Ensure the message indicates either (1) what the applicant needs to do next or (2) when the CIR System will contact them again.
 - Provide **text or email confirmation** *after applicants complete a full intake* with a CIR navigator. Ensure the message indicates either (1) what the applicant needs to do next or (2) when the CIR System will contact them again.
 - Provide **text or email messages** *while applicants are waiting for a referral placement*. These messages should reassure the applicant that their case is still being worked on and when they can expect to hear back.
- ✓ Limit the number of time applicants are asked **to tell their entire story**.
 - Make **initial screening questions less detailed**, so people do not have to tell their entire story in order to be put into the referral queue.
 - Acknowledge the information that applicants have **supplied in previous conversations**.
 - Share intake **information with the referral organization**, so the applicant does not have to start from scratch with each conversation.
- ✓ Consider **staffing advocates**, who could assist and support applicants who are also survivors, and **social workers** who could assist applicants who have mental health issues.

MARKETING AND OUTREACH

Connecting the CIR System to existing services will foster credibility.

Participants explained that, due to systemic disenfranchisement and the proliferation of scams, they are not generally inclined to trust an unknown service that purports to be free. When asked how the CIR System—which is both free and, at this point, unknown—could most effectively reach people who need legal help and make them feel comfortable enough to call, participants underscored the importance of credibility. Having accountable institutions (e.g., government agencies, hospitals) advertise the CIR System would confer legitimacy. Having trusted social services providers and community-based organizations (e.g., case managers, crisis centers, food pantries) vouch for the CIR would engender confidence in the System’s integrity. As one participant stated, “People trust their case managers, so they will trust the resources their case manager gives them.”

Developing this level of trust will likely require a multi-faceted approach, as different people will need different types of information to feel secure. Several participants thought it was important to clarify that the CIR System is not affiliated with a government agency. Others felt that transparency about eligibility requirements and the likelihood of receiving representation would be important up front. Moreover, certain client populations may be more challenging to reach. For example, a few participants noted that undocumented people may be particularly at risk for legal issues but also especially reticent to seek legal help, out of a general fear of the court system. Reaching these people via other safe spaces (e.g., medical clinics) and trusted people (e.g., social workers) would likely yield better results, as would bringing the service to the people by having on-site legal intakes occur at service organizations and offices around the District.

"If I go to events that are catered to [people like me] and someone from the organization is there and tells me about [the CIR System], then I will trust it more. If it is listed in various other places that you trusted, you will see it and you'd be like, 'Okay, this is good.' "

Outreach materials should include education about legal rights.

Participants also noted that many community members do not know that their problem is a legal one, largely because they do not know their rights. They suggested incorporating “Know Your Rights” information into outreach materials, such as “Has this happened to you? It’s a legal issue and there is help.” Doing so would increase people’s awareness of their rights, recognition that legal services could help resolve their problem, and the likelihood that they would contact the CIR System.

"So, can you have a [phone] number or a flyer in these trusted places that say 'Has this happened to you?' Maybe you don't even know that this is a thing that can be legally accounted for."

Timing was also mentioned as a factor to be considered as part of the outreach plan. In particular, some participants felt that it is important to send the message that “early is better” and that people should not wait until the day of their court hearing to seek legal help. They thought the advertising materials should highlight that community members can contact the CIR System before going to court and the benefits of speaking to an attorney ahead of time.

Marketing strategies must consider barriers to accessibility.

Barriers to accessibility were also raised with regard to marketing and outreach strategies. For example, participants noted that it will be necessary to have materials in multiple languages and, for materials directed toward older adults, to have materials printed in large, easily readable fonts.

Lastly, participants indicated that the CIR System needed a descriptive and friendly name that would be easy to remember and recognize. They insisted that attention to this type of branding would yield other benefits.

The CIR System should be advertised broadly in the community.

Participants suggested several places for marketing:

- DC Superior Court
 - CIR flyer included with the court summons
 - CIR flyers posted in the courthouse
 - Clerks know about the CIR and refer people to it
 - Staff at self-help desks and other litigant-facing desks (e.g., Family Law Facilitator’s Office) know about the CIR and refer unrepresented people to it
 - Staff who take reports from domestic violence survivors to petition the court for a civil protection order direct survivors without attorneys to contact the CIR
 - Judges refer unrepresented litigants to the CIR phone line
 - CIR intern located at the courthouse talks with unrepresented litigants before their hearings and connects them to the CIR System. If the litigant cannot connect with a lawyer right away, the intern can inform them of their right to request a continuance while they seek to retain counsel.
- Government buildings, including Department of Human Services, Department of Housing, Department of Motor Vehicles, Department of Employment Services, Social Security Office, Child and Family Services Agency, Food Stamps Office, Immigration Services Office, and others.
- Mayor’s Office, including Constituent Services Office, Senior Citizen’s Office, Latino Community Office, Office of Aging
- Office of the Tenant Advocate
- Police officers responding to domestic violence calls (when someone files a police report for domestic violence, they receive the CIR System info for help with the civil protection order)

- Public transportation stops and routes, including bus stops, metro stations, along the metro line, and on the sides of buses
- DC 311 (can there be an option for legal aid?)
- Department of Behavioral Health help access line
- DC Public Library, all branches
- Municipal Centers, such as the Reeves Building
- Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANC) and other neighborhood collaboratives
- Wellness Center for Seniors (one in each Ward)
- Housing Counseling Services
- Social services organizations across a range of areas, including family, housing, employment, food pantries, and local crisis centers
- Hospitals, medical clinics, and doctor's offices
- Schools and school clinics (for parent information)
- Childcare centers, Head Start programs
- University and college campuses and Offices of Student Services
- Recreation centers, YMCA, YWCA, Boys and Girls Club
- Grocery stores and convenience stores
- Churches, mosques, and synagogues
- Shelters for the homeless and for domestic violence survivors
- Hair salons and barber shops
- Large housing complexes
- Social media, including Facebook, Instagram, and hashtags
- Flyers under doors in lower-income neighborhoods

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MARKETING AND OUTREACH:

- ✓ List the CIR System information in **credible locations in the community**, such as the courthouse, hospitals, and crisis centers, so that community members know it is legitimate.
- ✓ Ask **legal services providers** to list the number on their websites and other outreach materials.
- ✓ Educate **social services providers** about the CIR System so that they can spot legal issues among their client populations, assist their clients with CIR intake forms, and vouch for the CIR as a viable service.
- ✓ Connect with **important and influential people in the community** (e.g., pastors, neighborhood leaders) and make them aware of the CIR System and the services available.
- ✓ On marketing materials, include the CIR phone number, website address, and a **clear description** of the services offered and who is eligible. Include **testimonials** from previous CIR customers.
- ✓ Incorporate **“Know Your Rights” information** into marketing materials whenever possible.
- ✓ Produce marketing materials in a **variety of languages**.
- ✓ Use **large, readable font** for printed marketing materials intended for older adults.
- ✓ Include a **scannable QR code** on marketing materials for seamless access to the website and intake forms.
- ✓ Consider initiating **text message access** by implementing a “Text HELP to [number]” campaign.
- ✓ Give the CIR System a **descriptive, friendly, and memorable name** so that community members will recognize and remember it.

SUMMARY

The CIR System should be considered on par with a high-quality legal services program, as its implementation has the potential to fundamentally change the civil legal aid system in Washington, DC, and to radically improve residents' access to legal services and, ultimately, to justice. The System's viability will depend on its ability to produce timely and appropriate referrals and to meet the demand for services among District residents, its technical sophistication and ease of access, the breadth of participation by local legal services organizations and areas of law addressed, and importantly, its ability to develop and maintain a reputation in the community for being accessible, reliable, trustworthy, and effective. How the CIR System is marketed to the public, how applicants are treated during the intake and referral process, and how efficiently referrals are made will be the cornerstones of its reputation for being truly user-centered. The current focus group results provide DCBF and the CIR team with a strong list of recommendations to accomplish this goal.



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