

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

Summary of Input Gathered from
District Residents

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Much like Coordinated Intake and Referral will require collaborative effort, this research also relied on, and succeeded because of, partnership. This report combines the results of community focus groups done in Spring 2022 and Spring 2023. These groups were made possible by the hard work of staff members from several partner organizations who helped schedule groups, recruit members from their client populations to participate, and offer space in the community for the groups to happen.

These collaborations are essential to helping the DC Bar Foundation ensure that DC residents' voices are incorporated into the design and development of the Coordinated Intake and Referral (CIR) System so that the System can most effectively meet the needs of the community.

We extend our sincere gratitude to these partners:

- Bread for the City
- Catholic Charities
- DC Affordable Law Firm
- DC Kinship Care Alliance
- DC Rape Crisis Center
- District Alliance for Safe Housing
- Food & Friends
- Horton's Kids
- Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia
- Legal Counsel for the Elderly
- Mamatoto Village
- My Sister's Place
- The Smith Center for Healing and the Arts

INTRODUCTION

The Need

Civil legal problems, pervasive among households with low income, 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.

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 different legal aid organizations offer different levels of service, address different legal areas, use different eligibility criteria, and operate with different capacities. Many District residents never reach the door of a legal services provider to get the help they need.

The Solution: The CIR System

To address this dilemma, the DC Bar Foundation (DCBF) is leading the design and development of a user-friendly, secure, accessible Coordinated Intake and Referral (CIR) System to assist income-eligible District residents with civil legal needs in finding legal help. The CIR System will provide a single access point for eligible residents to connect with a legal services provider that can offer appropriate assistance.

The Importance of Centering Client Voice

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 residents, including clients of legal services and social services organizations. The intention is to collect this information and feed it back to the CIR project team to inform design and development of the System.

Focus groups were conducted in two phases: December 2021 to April 2022 and April to July 2023. In total, 20 focus groups were conducted (in person and virtually) and 107 people participated. Discussions followed a semi-structured protocol, with questions that elicited specific feedback and that allowed participants to raise additional topics.

To ensure that the CIR System is designed to meet the needs of all residents, focus groups intentionally included individuals from populations considered to have particular vulnerabilities with respect to navigating the legal system. Specifically, focus group participants included older adults, survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, pregnant women, single mothers of young children, cancer survivors, people who are homebound due to serious illness, and people with limited English proficiency.

This Report

This report briefly summarizes the learnings from these group discussions. A [comprehensive report](#), that was written after the first series of focus groups in 2022 and provides a more detailed description of the findings, is available on the DC Bar Foundation's website. Readers are encouraged to review both documents.

THE CIR SYSTEM INTAKE AND REFERRAL PROCESS

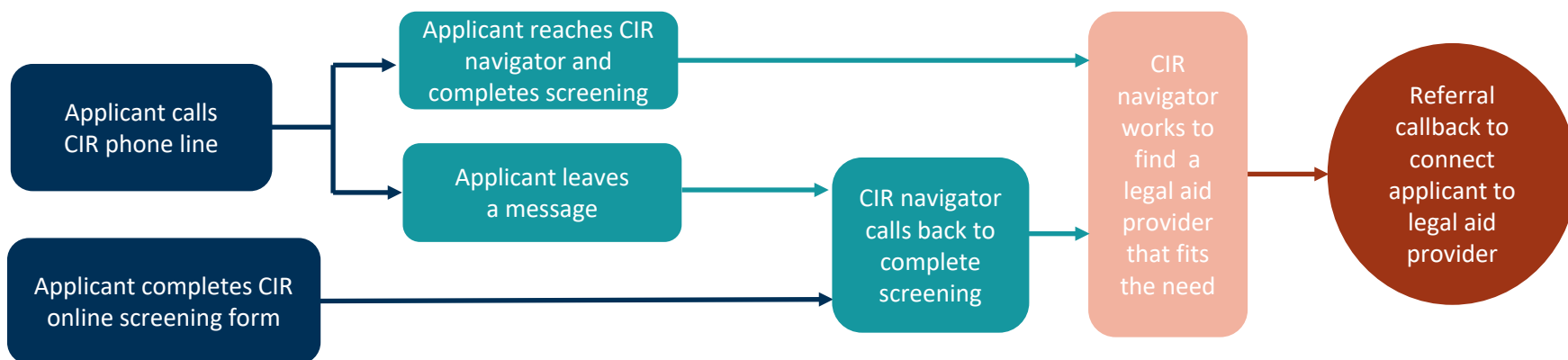
The CIR System will serve as a single access point for eligible District residents to connect with a legal services provider. (Legal services providers are typically nonprofit organizations that offer a range of legal assistance to people with low incomes who have certain types of civil legal issues.) The System will be staffed by CIR navigators who will conduct intake screenings with applicants, monitor the technology-enabled referral process, and ensure applicants are efficiently connected with an appropriate service provider. Exhibit 1 displays the steps involved in the intake and referral process.

First, an applicant either calls the CIR phone line or completes an online screening form on the CIR website. CIR navigators then call applicants back to complete the intake screening (not a full legal intake). Once the screening is complete, the CIR navigator uses the information to identify a legal services provider that handles the type of case, has capacity to take the case, and for whose services the

applicant is both eligible and not conflicted out. In some instances, this work may involve the CIR navigator contacting more than one legal services provider to find a workable referral placement. Once the referral placement is confirmed, the legal services provider contacts the applicant to do a complete legal intake and determine the level of service.

"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."

Exhibit 1: Proposed Intake and Referral Process Steps:



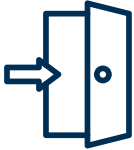
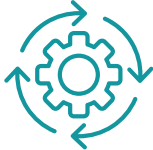


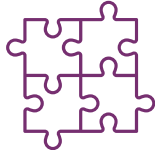
CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL CIR SYSTEM

When asked about seeking legal help in the past, many participants described challenging experiences. Some reported calling multiple 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. 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.

When asked about the CIR System concept, all participants agreed enthusiastically 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 reliable. Throughout the focus group conversations, participants’ feedback involved 5 themes. Specifically, for the CIR System to succeed, it must be:

- easy to reach and easy to use;
- effective, efficient, and communicative;
- staffed with caring and compassionate navigators;
- accountable to the people it serves; and
- integrated into the broader social service system.

Exhibit 2: Elements of a Successful CIR System

				
Accessible	Effective	Caring	Accountable	Integrated
The CIR System must be reachable and easy for them to use.	The CIR System must operate effectively, place timely referrals, and be communicative and helpful.	The CIR System must employ navigators who are knowledgeable, compassionate, and committed to helping.	The CIR System must track its progress, be transparent about its operations, and offer applicants the means to redress any issues.	The CIR System must be well integrated within the broader service system in the District and the community.



1. THE CIR SYSTEM MUST BE ACCESSIBLE.

System accessibility is essential to successful implementation. Participants highlighted two key dimensions of accessibility: (1) **reachability**, how easy it is for people to reach CIR, and (2) **ease of use**, how easy it is for applicants to use the CIR tools.

REACHABILITY

Be reachable by phone and web during convenient hours.

Participants agreed that the CIR System must be reachable by both phone and internet, as widespread use of the System depends on applicants being able to access the it in the way they are comfortable reaching out. They also noted that many people work non-traditional shifts or multiple jobs, leaving little room during typical business hours to make phone calls, and therefore recommended that the CIR incorporate regular evening and weekend hours to heighten reachability.

Prioritize live interactions. 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 designed well. Several participants expressed a preference for in-person services and suggested that the CIR System offer in-person intakes at the courthouse or a convenient public place, like the library. They explained that this personal connection makes it easier to trust and feel comfortable with the service. A few participants noted that video calls would provide a decent intermediate option.

"Going in person, you can tell if they are taking you seriously. You can ask questions. You can see who you are dealing with."

Consider barriers to access experienced by marginalized and vulnerable populations. Participants felt that the CIR System should address barriers that people face when seeking legal services. Participants pointed out that many people from historically marginalized populations, and particularly survivors of trauma, do not have faith in the legal system or that someone is available and willing to help them. Ensuring that the CIR System is accessible to all DC residents who need its services will involve considering the barriers to reachability among these populations and creating supports to surmount them.

"People don't have any help, or even any hope."

Use a recognizable phone number for the callback. 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 return calls.

Cross-reference the phone number and website. Participants acknowledged that some residents may be less inclined to engage services over the internet but thought that if the CIR website prominently displayed the CIR phone number, then people who prefer to call would have the information to do so. Likewise, for applicants who call the CIR phone line and are put on hold, a recorded message about the website would provide them with the information to do an online intake instead.

EASE OF USE

Ensure language accessibility. Participants described challenges understanding legal terms and the importance of the CIR System using plain language on all materials. Moreover, the System must provide language interpretation for applicants who do not speak English, hearing support for those who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, and accommodation for any applicants with limited literacy skills.

Make any automated functions easily navigable. Participants stated that any parts of the intake process that are automated must include clear questions and options so that applicants can progress through the steps without confusion. Options must account for applicants not fully knowing what their legal issue is, because people often do not.

Make the online intake form easy to complete. Participants wanted the online intake forms to be very clear and to use questions with specific options to choose from (not narrative responses) whenever possible. This format will help applicants provide the right information and will make completion of the forms easier.

Provide a link to live help. Participants noted that even simple and straightforward online intake forms can be confusing to complete, especially ones involving complex legal issues, and that automated phone systems can leave callers confused about how to move forward. For the CIR System, applicants having trouble with an online form or automated intake process should have a way to redirect themselves to speak with a CIR navigator (or chat with one or get called back by one in a short timeframe) and get help to complete the forms correctly.

Ensure the System is mobile friendly. Nearly all participants reported that they regularly use a smart phone; few had consistent access to a computer. They emphasized the importance of making the CIR website and intake forms mobile friendly.

“If I have to fill out a form, I would prefer to have a checkbox. Make it easy. Have drop down lists. I don’t want to write in a huge story every time.”

HIGHLIGHTED RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ Offer multiple ways to connect with the CIR System, including a **dedicated phone line and website**. Create opportunities for in-person intakes, such as:
 - ✓ **Stationing a CIR staff person at the courthouse** to introduce the CIR System to pro se litigants and assist them in completing the intake forms
 - ✓ **Scheduling regular “CIR office hours”** when CIR staff go to the library or a social services organization to conduct in-person intakes.
- ✓ Expand the hours of operation to **include regular evening and weekend hours**.
- ✓ Have CIR navigators **answer calls live**, instead of an automated system, as often as possible. Provide a way for applicants experiencing difficulty with the online intake form to speak with a CIR navigator for help.
- ✓ Ensure that all automated phone systems and online intake forms are **straightforward and easy to navigate**.
- ✓ Create all CIR materials using **plain language** and a reading level of approximately Grade 8.
- ✓ Provide **language interpretation services** for applicants who do not speak English and **hearing support** to callers who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.
- ✓ Ensure online intake forms are **mobile friendly and encrypted**.



2. THE CIR SYSTEM MUST BE EFFECTIVE.

For the CIR System to be effective, participants felt it must be:

- (1) **well-functioning**, the System must do what it purports to do;
- (2) **efficient**, the System must place referrals in a timely way;
- (3) **communicative**, the System must keep applicants informed;
- and (4) **helpful**, the System should be a helpful resource.

WELL-FUNCTIONING

Design workflows that support referral placement. Participants agreed that a single access point would make finding legal help easier for residents, but this is only true if the System actually connects applicants to attorneys who can help them. The CIR System must develop workflows that enable efficient referral placement while supporting a positive applicant experience.

Ensure phone intakes are efficient. All participants expressed concerns about long hold times. They suggested playing a recording to inform callers of the wait time and offer 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 recorded messages, played while on hold, that list the documents needed for the intake interview so that callers are prepared when the navigator answers.

"I've had bad luck when I've tried to call a hotline, like being on hold for an hour and then getting 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."

EFFICIENT

Return applicants' initial calls promptly. When applicants leave a voicemail on the CIR phone line or complete an online intake form, the CIR navigator must call them back to complete the intake screening. Participants felt strongly that this initial callback should happen **within 24 hours**—ideally, the applicant would be called back on the same day.

Connect referrals in a timely fashion. Once an applicant completes the intake screening, the CIR navigator initiates the referral placement process. When asked how long they could wait for a response before worrying that the System had failed them, participants generally agreed that they could wait **for 3 business days**. Several participants acknowledged that some legal problems are urgent and not all applicants would be able to wait for 3 days without encountering significant consequences. They felt it would be necessary for the CIR System to fast track emergency cases so that the referral is placed sooner.

COMMUNICATIVE

Be clear about when a callback will happen and follow through. CIR navigators must clearly state when they will call the applicant back and, to foster trust in the System, they must call back by that time, even if it is just to tell the applicant that the referral is still being processed. Some participants thought that the CIR System should accommodate applicants who would prefer to **schedule a time for a callback**. Following through on callbacks will be key to demonstrating to residents that the System is a reliable resource.

Send a confirmation of intake completion. Participants suggested that applicants be sent an email or text message to confirm that the intake was received. The confirmation message would include the intake information so applicants can review it for accuracy, and it would also provide CIR contact information, a reference number for the case, and the next steps and timing of process.

Maintain contact until the referral is placed. While participants felt comfortable waiting 3 days for a response, it is likely that some cases will take more than 3 days to place with a provider. *When more time is needed to place the referral, participants felt strongly that CIR navigators should stay in communication with applicants, providing assurance that their referral is still being processed and keeping them informed of their status in the queue.*

Follow up with applicants after the referral is placed. Participants expressed a desire for continuity between the CIR services and the legal services. Specifically, participants wanted the CIR navigators to follow up with applicants to confirm that 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.”

HELPFUL

Connect applicants to legal information. Participants felt that it would be valuable for the CIR website to connect people to legal information, such as explanatory materials about court processes, “Know Your Rights” information on different topics, and direct links to self-help resources. Ideally, this information would be in different formats (e.g., written guides, instructional videos) and translated into different languages.

Provide helpful information as needed. Participants noted that CIR navigators are in a position to provide helpful information to people, such as an explanation of court process or lists of other local resources. One participant said the CIR call would be helpful “if I get off the phone knowing what my next step is.”

HIGHLIGHTED RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ Describe what the **CIR System does and does not do and what applicants can expect**, using layperson’s terms
- ✓ **Provide users with legal information**, such as:
 - ✓ Explanatory materials and “Know Your Rights” information.
 - ✓ Brief videos to explain the intake and referral process and the court processes for different areas of civil law.
 - ✓ Links to effective self-help resources.
- ✓ **Keep hold times short** and, when possible, **have calls answered by a CIR navigator**. When hold times are longer, offer callers the option of a callback rather than staying on hold.
- ✓ 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**. If callbacks are delayed, provide **regular updates to applicants** about the status of their referral and **allow applicants to schedule a callback** from the CIR navigator.
- ✓ Gather enough information to **identify emergency cases** to “fast track” their referral.
- ✓ **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.



3. THE CIR SYSTEM MUST BE CARING.

Civil legal problems bear directly on people's lives, so applicants' experiences are personal and feel urgent. Court proceedings can be intimidating, and participants expressed that people may be embarrassed about their lack of knowledge or having to ask for help, which can add emotional stress to an already stressful situation. Participants understood this dynamic and underscored how important it is for the CIR System to ensure that applicants feel cared for. This involves: (1) defining the **CIR navigator role** and (2) incorporating a **trauma-informed approach**.

CIR NAVIGATORS

Participants emphasized that the CIR navigators are key to realizing the System's goal of improving the civil legal aid system by being truly centered on the needs of the people using it. As the face of the CIR System, the navigators' demeanor and interaction style will largely determine how residents experience the coordinated referral process.

Demonstrate compassion, listen deeply, and be respectful.

Participants insisted that the recipe for good service was not complicated, and that the essential ingredient was *empathy*. Many people will be contacting the CIR System while under considerable stress, and the navigators are their first step to finding much-needed help. Several participants noted that if the navigators are warm, compassionate, and respectful, and make the callers feel heard and understood, then applicants will feel more comfortable during the intake conversation and will likely have more trust that the CIR System will help them.

"You want people to treat you like an actual person. This is real life for me. This will affect me and my kids. The lawyer gets to go home tonight. I don't. This is my life."

Keep calm under pressure. Participants acknowledged that answering calls from stressed people who need help can be a challenging job. They recognized that CIR navigators will likely face 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 complicating communication), and the navigator's ability to remain calm and professional will maximize the chances of success.

Be reliable, follow through. Participants underscored that CIR 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 demonstrate to applicants that they are respected and that the navigator cares about them and is invested in finding them help. It will also provide evidence that the CIR System is a resource that can be trusted.

"[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."

TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH

Additional aspects of trauma-informed practices can be incorporated into the CIR System's standard procedures.

Embrace transparency, support informed consent. Participants indicated that the CIR System must be transparent about what it provides for people (i.e., referral for legal services, no guarantee of representation) and what applicants can expect during the intake and referral process, including what they will be asked to do. It is necessary to explain what will happen and when it will happen, so that applicants are fully informed before consenting to the intake. Also, the CIR System must be transparent about the confidentiality of applicant information, including what information is kept private and what is shared, and whenever possible, get applicants' consent to share their information.

Reduce story-telling burden. Participants recommended limiting the number of times an applicant has to tell their entire story. The "intake screening" conducted by the CIR navigators should collect the minimum amount of information necessary to place a referral. When the referral is placed, the CIR navigator can share any intake notes with the referred attorney (with client consent), and the attorney can reference these notes during the full intake to ensure continuity between the interviews and so the applicant feels heard.

Consider staffing advocates or peer navigators. 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 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.

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

HIGHLIGHTED RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ Conceptualize the CIR navigator position as **one that provides a service as important as legal representation** and develop it accordingly.
- ✓ Hire navigators who are **enthusiastic, highly motivated to serve people**, knowledgeable about the DC civil legal aid system, and trained in legal intake procedures.
- ✓ Cultivate a **workplace culture that prioritizes user experience** and supports navigators to remain steadfastly committed to ensuring that every applicant feels heard and receives some level of help
- ✓ Provide navigators **with substantive training in related areas**, such as trauma-informed practices, mental health issues, de-escalation, and compassionate listening
- ✓ **Communicate clearly and transparently** about the services provided by the CIR System (and what is not provided), and about what applicants can expect during the intake and referral process. Collect informed consent.
- ✓ Limit how often **applicants are asked to tell their story** by making initial screenings brief and sharing intake information with the referral organization, so the applicant does start from scratch with each conversation
- ✓ **Consider staffing advocates or social workers**, who could assist and support applicants who are also survivors or experience mental health issues



4. THE CIR SYSTEM MUST BE ACCOUNTABLE.

Many people, especially those from historically marginalized communities, have been repeatedly let down by “the system.” As a result, many people expect the system to fail them and, when it does, they often do not feel they have the power to advocate for a better system. To achieve its goal of being truly user-centered, the CIR System must establish standards of practice and hold itself to meeting them, and it will have to demonstrate that it is accountable to the people it serves.

Have navigators identify themselves. Participants thought the CIR navigators should identify themselves on every call, giving either their name or a reference number. They felt that this step would demonstrate that the CIR System has accountability protocols in place, which will help applicants feel that they will be treated fairly and able to redress any issues.

Show accurate, comprehensive, and up to date information on the CIR website. Participants agreed that the CIR website should provide a clear and comprehensive description of the System, so that residents can review the information before submitting an application. Participants wanted the website to have a clearly stated mission statement, an “about us” section that describes the System’s goals and values, a full list of the legal services referral partners, and a description of the services provided. They also thought that the website should list members of the CIR System leadership team and staff. A few participants noted that staff profiles, including pictures and short bios, are helpful to establish a sense of trust in the program and that seeing demographic diversity among staff can support people to feel like they will be respected.

“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 state 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.”

Collect feedback from people who have used the System.

Participants felt that the CIR System should routinely collect feedback from applicants and use this information to improve the System and make sure it is effectively serving District residents. Feedback from previous customers could be gathered via text or email surveys, or by providing a way for people to write online reviews about their experiences.

Show unedited reviews on website. Participants strongly felt that customer reviews and testimonials should be shown on the CIR website. In fact, most participants explained that reviews from previous applicants would be one of the primary sources of information they would use to determine if the CIR System was credible and trustworthy.

Conduct evaluations and share the results. Participants also recommended that the CIR System conduct periodic evaluations to assess the System’s implementation and impact and then share the results of these evaluations on the website.



5. THE CIR SYSTEM MUST BE INTEGRATED.

Participants emphasized the importance of integrating the CIR System into the **broader service system**, with providers that are familiar to DC residents. Participants also felt the CIR System will need to be integrated into **community awareness**, as word-of-mouth referrals will enable it to become a known resource.

EXISTING SERVICE SYSTEM

Ensure non-legal service providers are aware of the CIR System.

Many social and community service providers work with low-income DC residents who are facing civil legal issues, but they do not know where to refer people for legal help. Participants thought that if social services staff knew about the CIR System—specifically, that there is one number they can call to connect their clients with an attorney—that they would utilize this resource with their clients frequently.

Relate the CIR System to existing services to bolster 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. However, if the service is advertised by accountable institutions (e.g., clinics, government agencies), it 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.

"People trust their case managers, so they will trust the resources their case manager gives them."

"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'll be like, 'Okay, this is good.' "

Partner with social service providers to facilitate CIR System access. Some social services providers serve populations that have inherent legal needs, such as crisis centers for survivors of domestic violence. Participants thought that clients would benefit from having a CIR navigator come to the crisis center or shelter to conduct in-person intakes with clients.

Ask organizations to post CIR System contact information.

Participants thought that the CIR System contact information should be listed (on websites, distribution materials, etc.) by legal services providers, social services providers, community-based organizations, government offices, and local institutions (e.g., the court). Having the contact information in broad circulation will alert residents to the CIR System as a resource.

Connect the CIR System to the DC Superior Court. When participants were asked how they would search for legal help if they needed it, many said that they would go to the courthouse, and they reasoned that the CIR System should have a presence there. Ideally, CIR staff would be there to walk people through the intake process. At a minimum, there should be substantial promotional material at the courthouse and court staff should be aware of the System and refer eligible people.

COMMUNITY AWARENESS

Create awareness of the CIR System in trusted community spaces and among influential people. Participants emphasized that trusted community spaces, such as community centers and churches, serve as vital information hubs for many residents. Likewise, certain people (e.g., pastors, social workers) can have influence or the ability to reach broad audiences. Participants thought that if these people and places promoted the CIR System, it would become broadly trusted.

Understand the power of word of mouth. When asked how they would search for legal help if they needed it, many participants said that they would ask their family, friends, and neighbors. This is especially true for members of vulnerable populations and immigrant communities who may be less trusting of mainstream information sources. If clients have a positive experience with the CIR, they will be more likely to refer it to others.

Communicate clearly about what the CIR System is and does.

Participants underscored the importance of clear messaging in the community to reduce confusion or misinformation. In particular, they thought community-level messaging should clearly articulate the eligibility requirements for services, the likelihood of receiving representation from an attorney, that services are free or reduced cost, and that the System is not affiliated with a government agency.

Incorporate information about legal rights. Participants noted that many residents 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 community outreach materials. Increasing people’s awareness of their rights will increase their recognition of their need for legal services and the CIR System.

Use social media. Participants, especially young adults, insisted that promoting the CIR System on social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook) would be an effective way to reach a broader audience.

HIGHLIGHTED RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ Conduct **outreach with social services providers** and community-based organizations to familiarize them with the CIR System and its value for their clients
- ✓ Work with community partners to promote the CIR System so that residents know it is available and legitimate:
 - ✓ Promote the system in **credible and trusted locations in the community**, such as government offices, clinics/hospitals, service providers, crisis centers, and community centers
 - ✓ Connect with **important and influential people in the community**, such as pastors and neighborhood leaders
 - ✓ Ask **service providers to list the CIR number** on their websites and outreach materials
- ✓ Create a **presence in the courthouse** that involves, at a minimum, readily available information explaining the CIR System and court staff knowledgeable about it
- ✓ On outreach materials, include the CIR phone number, website address, and a clear description of the services offered and who is eligible
- ✓ Ensure that **outreach materials are accessible**, use plain language, and are translated into multiple languages
- ✓ Include a **scannable QR code on outreach materials** for seamless access to the website and intake forms
- ✓ Review the more detailed community member focus group report for a full listing of marketing outlets suggested by participants.



SUMMARY

Civil legal problems often carry serious implications for people's lives, but most people do not receive legal help to address them. This "justice gap" is partly explained by people not knowing how to find legal assistance and not knowing that free or low-cost legal services are available to them. With more than 50 civil legal services providers in the District of Columbia, finding legal help can be an especially daunting task for DC residents. The CIR System intends to change this, and to improve access to justice for DC residents, by streamlining access to legal help.

Focus group conversations highlighted 5 elements as key to the CIR System's success. Specifically, it must be (1) easy to reach and easy to use; (2) effective, efficient, and communicative; (3) staffed with caring and compassionate navigators; (4) accountable to the people it serves; and (5) integrated into the broader service ecosystem. Most importantly, to succeed, the CIR System must come through on its promise to be user-centered. The System and staff must remain steadfastly anchored to understanding applicants' experience and perspective and using this information as a guidepost to design and augment System workflows and operations over time.

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 feedback from DC residents who participated in focus groups to discuss the System provided DCBF and the CIR project team with a strong list of recommendations to accomplish this goal.