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Online Legal Help-Seeking for Victims of Intimate Partner Violence During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Legal, court, and criminal justice professionals regularly navigate court procedures and processes through online portals. They know where to locate applicable court rules, such as a specific section on a court website or a departmental contact. However, these tasks can be extremely daunting for laypersons seeking court assistance, especially for victims of violence who have limited time away from the abuser. To determine how state judicial branches make information available about protective order procedures and general information to a layperson, especially to victims of intimate partner violence, this study assessed court websites of five states where intimate partner violence (IPV) increased by 20 percent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study assessed how protective order procedures were communicated and evaluated the accessibility of new or amended information on protective order procedures in response to COVID-19. The author found that online communication was appropriate only for professional audiences and lacked accommodations for non-English speaking and disabled victims. The placement of online content was not suitable for laypersons. The implications of these ineffective communicative strategies and their effect on legal help-seeking for layperson victims are discussed.

Keywords

intimate partner violence, help-seeking, COVID-19, protective orders, online portals, pandemic

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ONLINE LEGAL HELP-SEEKING FOR VICTIMS OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Legal, court, and criminal justice professionals regularly navigate court procedures and processes through online portals. They know where to locate applicable court rules, such as a specific section on a court website or a departmental contact. However, these tasks can be extremely daunting for laypersons seeking court assistance, especially for victims of violence who have limited time away from the abuser. To determine how state judicial branches make information available about protective order procedures and general information to a layperson, especially to victims of intimate partner violence, this study assessed court websites of five states where intimate partner violence (IPV) increased by 20 percent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study assessed how protective order procedures were communicated and evaluated the accessibility of new or amended information on protective order procedures in response to COVID-19. The author found that online communication was appropriate only for professional audiences and lacked accommodations for non-English speaking and disabled victims. The placement of online content was not suitable for laypersons. The implications of these ineffective communicative strategies and their effect on legal help-seeking for layperson victims are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Intimate partner violence, help-seeking, COVID-19 protective orders, online portals, pandemic

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is violence perpetrated by an existing or previous intimate partner within a romantic or intimate relationship (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021; Fitzgerald & Chi, 2020). An abusive partner uses physical violence, aggression, abuse, and threats “to intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure or wound the other” (CDC, 2021, Sneeringer, 2015, p. 1158). Abuse may include mental and psychological abuse, economic abuse, stalking, and sexual abuse (CDC, 2021; Fitzgerald & Chi, 2020; Sneeringer, 2015; World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Women are more likely to be victims of intimate partner violence at statistically significantly greater rates than men, although men are victims as well. Annually, one in four women are victims of intimate partner violence compared to one in ten men (CDC, 2021). The Centers for Disease Control report that “43 million women and 38 million men are victims of psychological aggression by an intimate partner in their lifetime” (CDC,

2021, Section 2). Moreover, based on data collected by the CDC (2021), “about 11 million women and 5 million men report contact sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime said that they first experienced these forms of violence before the age of 18” (CDC, 2021, Section 2).

Intimate partner violence increases substantially during times of crisis, such as the death of a significant person, economic hardship, poor health, job loss, natural disasters, and other challenging life events that increase levels of stress (First et al., 2017; Jarnecke & Flanagan, 2020; Thurston et al., 2021). This increase in stress is especially true when there are few opportunities available to alleviate this stress and when resources diminish (First et al., 2017; Jarnecke & Flanagan, 2020). For example, amidst major natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, there were spikes of intimate partner violence against women due to increased stressors, financial instability, and lack of basic needs (First et al., 2017; Thurston et al., 2021). Such disasters hinder access to support and services, such as police, shelters, and the criminal justice system (First et al., 2017). The COVID-19 (or Coronavirus) pandemic resulted in unprecedented social, economic, and health-related challenges. In response, reports of intimate partner violence have increased globally and by as much as 20 percent within cities across the United States (Boserup et al., 2020; Jarnecke & Flanagan, 2020; Kingkade, 2020; Sullivan, 2021; Tolan, 2020). Some courts have made special accommodations to assist intimate partner violence victims with continued access to legal protection by adjusting court operations and procedures even though many courts have restricted judicial access during COVID-19 and, in some instances, have even periodically discontinued a large majority of operations (Divine, 2020; Emezue, 2020).

Victims of intimate partner violence must be able to quickly find information about court updates and adjustments to seek legal protection amid stay-at-home orders, limited-in-person services, limited time away from their abusers, and limited opportunities to seek out help. Problems with inconvenience, use of online searches, communication tools, and social networks related to help-seeking for intimate partner violence victims have magnified (Berniell & Facchini, 2020; Lyons & Brewer, 2021). Additionally, aside from COVID-19, laypeople are using online searches, self-help materials, and free legal information to learn about specific legal topics and how to resolve legal issues without seeking paid legal help. Or they are looking for assistance to obtain basic help and gather information before determining if a lawyer is warranted (Hagan, 2016).

With this in mind, it is vital to assess whether courts are making COVID-19-related adjustments known and easily identifiable as part of their online content. Likewise, as a general consideration, it is equally vital to explore how courts use online content to routinely communicate information about legal protection to address incidents of intimate partner violence. Notwithstanding COVID-19, heightened stress, which varies from relationship to relationship, may cause fluctuating onsets of intimate partner violence (Jarnecke & Flanagan, 2020; Lyons & Brewer, 2021). In this study, the author focuses on help-seeking by layperson intimate partner violence victims by analyzing the content of state court websites to determine how information about protective order procedures and processes are being communicated and made accessible in general and amid COVID-19.

BACKGROUND

The shocking and unexpected COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 led to the shut-down of private and public businesses and organizations and the discontinuation of recreational and leisure activities, leaving victims and their abusers with nowhere to go but

home. The impacts were evident, as indicated by police reports and records (Piquero et al., 2021). During this time, 17 states reported significant increases in intimate partner violence in one or more cities (Boserup et al., 2020; Kingkade, 2020; Sullivan, 2021; Tolan, 2020). Likewise, intimate partner violence victims voiced fears and concerns about the lack of access to legal help, such as court services and pro bono representation (Lyons & Brewer, 2021).

LEGAL HELP AVAILABLE TO INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE VICTIMS

Informal services and support available to intimate partner violence victims include personal support networks such as family and friends (Robinson et al., 2021). Formal services and supports, such as agencies and organizations that provide housing and shelter; police, medical, and mental health professionals, are available from outside/third party providers (Robinson et al., 2021). Formal services and support available to intimate partner violence victims also include legal and judicial recourse sources. Legal aid and self-help legal services benefit intimate partner violence victims who lack access to lawyers or have little knowledge of how to navigate court processes and procedures needed to obtain legal protection from their abusers (Hagan, 2016; MacDowell, 2015; MacDowell, 2016).

Legal aid is legal assistance provided to economically disadvantaged persons who are unable to pay for this assistance (Hossaini & Hossain, 2017). Legal aid may be provided by lawyers independently for specified limited periods (e.g., during a one-day legal clinic, during a set amount of pro bono hours, etc.) or as the sole service of an agency (Hossaini & Hossain, 2017). Examples include a legal aid clinic, community center, or other legal agency dedicated to providing this service. Legal aid can come in the form of legal advice, consultation, or more involved action, such as hands-on assistance with filing paperwork for benefits or an uncontested divorce (Hossaini & Hossain, 2017). Legal aid limited to simple legal matters, such as landlord-tenant matters, interpretation of contracts and additional legal documents, taxes, eligibility for benefits, and intimate partner violence issues can often be resolved relatively quickly. In contrast, some legal assistance is needed over an extended period, such as in cases involving dependent children, neglect, and abuse (DNA) matters (Haney Keith, 2016; Hossaini & Hossain, 2017).

Self-help legal services are legal resources provided to people who can themselves find resolutions to legal problems without hiring a lawyer or engaging other legal or court professionals. They include legal information on topics written for the layperson, contract templates and additional legal forms, videos and presentations that explain the law in simple language, and seminars and trainings (Haney Keith, 2016; Robertson & Giddings, 2014). These resources are frequently published online and may be obtained at legal self-help centers (Haney Keith, 2016; Robertson & Giddings, 2014). Likewise, minimal in-person assistance may help with self-representation, such as answering basic questions about how to correctly complete forms or which court is appropriate to file a legal action (Haney Keith, 2016).

Self-help legal services are essential because eligibility for legal aid services is generally determined by income level (Hossaini & Hossain, 2017). However, many people at low-income levels are unable to afford a lawyer, making justice inaccessible to many who are above the poverty line yet still struggle to make ends meet, as well as for people who are often ineligible for legal aid, such as undocumented immigrants (Haney Keith, 2016).

“An Order of Protection [or protective order] is a written court order, signed by a judge, which requires an abusive household or family member to do or not to do certain things” (Quinn & Landis, 1995, p.2). A protective order requires the abuser to stay away from the victim, refrain from any contact for a period, and prohibit various types of violence and abuse. For example, protective orders may “prohibit the abuser from taking, transferring or destroying the victim's property or jointly owned property” (Quinn & Landis, 1995, p. 2) or other resources or possessions. Protective orders can require the abuser to pay support to the victim or pay for the victim's attorney's fees or court costs (Quinn & Landis, 1995). Also, protective orders can “award temporary child custody [to the victim] and establish visitation rights for minor child (ren)” (Quinn & Landis, 1995, p. 2).

Protective orders can be temporary or permanent and applied swiftly in emergencies. Depending on the jurisdiction, they can be a sexual assault protective order (SAPO), a restraining or stay-away order, or an ex-parte (kick-out) protective order, which is used to remove the abuser from a shared residence (Harris County District Court Attorney's Office, 2015; TexasLawHelp, n.d.b.). In matters related to intimate partner violence, legal aid and self-help can be beneficial in assisting victims in obtaining protective orders and seek recourse if these orders are violated (MacDowell, 2016). Most beneficially, these orders are an umbrella of protection for victims who want to be shielded from the violent acts of an abusive partner yet may be hesitant to talk to the police or pursue serious criminal charges (MacDowell, 2016).

BARRIERS TO HELP-SEEKING FOR LEGAL SERVICES

Previous research examining help-seeking amongst intimate partner violence victims reveals several common barriers that deter victims from seeking legal help to escape violence from their abusers (Fitzgerald & Chi, 2020; Nieves, 2018; Robinson et al., 2021; Saxton et al., 2021). Broadly, these barriers can be grouped into three categories. These include a lack of education and experience, a lack of awareness of legal processes, and a lack of access to information (Fitzgerald & Chi, 2020; Nieves, 2018; Robinson et al., 2021; Saxton et al., 2021).

Lack of education and experience often creates a barrier to help-seeking for intimate partner violence victims. Legal services and resources are often presented in legal and confusing jargon and language familiar to primarily specialized audiences. This specialized vocabulary causes layperson intimate partner violence victims to be intimidated and hesitant regarding seeking such services and resources, as they feel ill-equipped to navigate these supports (Fitzgerald & Chi, 2020; Nieves, 2018; Saxton et al., 2021). These feelings are valid even when intimate partner violence victims are educated but have no formal education or experience with law or court-related procedures (Fitzgerald & Chi, 2020; Nieves, 2018; Saxton et al., 2021).

A lack of awareness of legal processes often acts as a barrier to help-seeking for intimate partner violence victims because many victims are uncertain whether the encounters they have experienced constitute legally actionable abuse (Robinson et al., 2021). Specifically, victims do not understand what acts of violence are IPV, what can lawfully be done to counter these acts, and what available legal processes entail. Therefore, intimate partner violence victims do not seek legal help (Robinson et al., 2021).

Last, a lack of access to information is a barrier to legal help-seeking for intimate partner violence victims. The most prominent barriers include situations in which there is a lack of accessible legal services and resources available in languages other

than English or for non-abled-bodied victims (i.e., those that are disabled) (Robinson et al., 2021). Many legal services and resources are limited in these ways, limiting access disproportionately to intimate partner violence victims of historically marginalized populations (Robinson et al., 2021).

LOCATING ASSAULT-RELATED RESOURCES AND USING COURTS WEBSITES TO LOOK FOR HELP

The aforementioned barriers to legal help-seeking are made even more problematic as the availability of published resources becomes more and more difficult for layperson victims to locate and court and government websites appear to be intended for legal, court, and criminal justice professionals.

College campuses are spaces where, historically, incidents of sexual assault and intimate partner violence are prevalent (Moylan et al., 2019; Wood, 2017). Hayes-Smith and Levett (2009) conducted a study investigating the availability of assault resources across college campuses and their effectiveness in changing attitudes toward intimate partner violence. The Hayes-Smith and Levett (2009) study revealed four factors of effectiveness for student education about sexual assault resources. First, readers/targeted audiences should know about these resources and materials and where they can be located. Second, these resources and materials should educate and be relevant and comprehensible to the campus audiences. Third, the resources and materials should be “created to raise visibility and awareness” (Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2009, p. 348). Fourth, most readers prefer that resources and materials are available online and easily accessible (Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2009). Because intimate partner violence can manifest in various forms, including mental, physical, and sexual violence (Fitzgerald & Chi, 2020; Sneeringer, 2015), these forms of abuse should be defined and discussed in legal help resources for victims of sexual assault and or IPV.

Court websites have numerous problems that hinder users from locating information Hagan (2016). Hagan's research aimed to recommend best practices for improving the website user experience for laypersons seeking self-help legal services. Hagan (2016) gathered feedback from layperson users about the factors that impeded their access to justice when they attempted to find legal resolution without having specialized legal/court experience or education. He found that initially, the users approached their search for legal resolution without a lawyer. The recurrent impediments identified were lack of clarity, comprehensiveness, and modern design (Hagan, 2016).

Hagan (2016) recommended that court and government websites ensure clarity of all content, which includes “easy navigation” and the ability to find “the right information” (Hagan, 2016, p. 408). Hagan also recommends that these websites are comprehensive. This means that users should be able to “find all relevant information in one place and go from understanding to action” (Hagan, 2016, p. 408). Next, he recommends that these websites have a modern design, which means the websites have “visual layouts and interactive features that demonstrate the site is up-to-date . . . and that give rich tools for customization and filtering of information” (Hagan, 2016, p. 408). For example, search bars, menus, and headings should be labeled to facilitate ease of navigation and access to information. Last, Hagan recommends that court and government websites present content and information in a conversation style. For instance, “question-and-answer format with personal narratives and anecdotes to illustrate scenarios” (Hagan, 2016, p. 408).

METHODS

STUDY SAMPLE

Between March 2020 to March 2021, 17 states reported significant increases in intimate partner violence in one or more cities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Boserup et al., 2020; Kingkade, 2020; Sullivan, 2021; Tolan, 2020). This study analyzed five states, particularly those that reported a 20 percent or more increase in intimate partner violence reports and/or confirmed incidents (Table 1).

Table 1

States Reporting Intimate Partner Violence Increases During COVID-19
(Highlighted states were selected for this study)

State	Reported 20% or more increase in Intimate Partner Violence
Alabama	Y
Arizona	N
California	Y
Illinois	N
Louisiana	N
Massachusetts	N
Nebraska	N
New York	N
North Carolina	N
Oklahoma	N
Oregon	Y
Pennsylvania	N
South Carolina	Y
Texas	Y
Utah	N
Washington	Y
Wisconsin	N

Note: This table lists the 17 states that reported intimate partner violence increases in one or more cities during COVID-19 while identifying those that reported a 20 percent or more increase in intimate partner violence reports and or confirmed incidents (Boserup et al., 2020; Kingkade, 2020; Sullivan, 2021; Tolan, 2020).

The specific months of increases in intimate partner violence were not always mentioned in the report; instead, the increases were discussed by comparisons to reported incidents in years preceding COVID-19. However, March 2020 was identified several times as one of the specific months in which intimate partner violence reported incidents increased (Boserup et al., 2020; Kingkade, 2020; Sullivan, 2021;

Tolan, 2020). The final five states included in the sample were Alabama, California, Oregon, South Carolina, and Texas. Each state court website was evaluated in preparation for answering the two proposed research questions.

PROCEDURE

Because previous research relied on feedback from laypersons and guidance from help-seeking service providers and educators, which may have introduced bias, to eliminate this bias and subjectivity as much as possible, this research developed specific criteria and coding categories to analyze each site. Specifically, this study used the previous literature discussing barriers to legal help-seeking as a framework to assist with analyzing each website. The study also used the previous literature on problems encountered by users accessing court websites (Hagan, 2016) and the availability of sexual assault resources for women (Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2009) to help elucidate those barriers. Accordingly, the website content analysis consisted of an examination of the following criteria and coding categories.

- Education and experience. Is the website suitable for a layperson audience focusing on ease of navigation, website comprehensiveness, and modern design?
- Awareness. Is the content clear to layperson victims with a particular focus on precise definitions, conversational content, and information dissection?
- Access. Is the content accessible to everyone with a particular focus on the availability of content in multiple languages and availability of accommodations?

The research procedure used four steps. First, before reviewing state court websites, a detailed checklist including specific features and characteristics was created using the above criteria to guide the website content analysis (Figure 1). Second, this study used the National Center for State Courts Data Visualizations (2020) public tableau database to locate and assess the state court websites. The database offers a public directory of court resources, including direct links to court websites. Third, for each website, an in-depth review of all COVID-19-related content was analyzed, with a specific focus on locating protective order procedures and processes in response to the pandemic. Criteria were checked off the checklist, and detailed notes were taken for each category. Fourth, using the criteria checklist and notetaking, each website was analyzed to locate general information rather than information that was COVID-19 specific.

For clarity, the types of changes courts have implemented to procedures for obtaining protective orders include adjustments that might enable IPV victims to seek protection during restricted court access and, at times, court closures (Divine, 2020; Emezue, 2020). Examples include lessening certain requirements to obtain protective orders; adjusting hearing times; offering limited in-person protective order hearings despite discontinuing other court hearings and proceedings; and offering virtual or telephonic hearing forums (Divine, 2020; Emezue, 2020). To get the best protection, IPV victims must know about these court responses to COVID-19 or be able to quickly learn about these responses (Fitzgerald & Chi, 2020; Hagan, 2016; Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2009). Hence, this offers further context and justification for the third step of this study (i.e., locating such COVID-19-specific adjustments).

Figure 1
Website Content Analysis Checklist

WEBSITE CONTENT ANALYSIS CHECKLIST

1. EDUCATION & EXPERIENCE

- Navigation*: clearly labeled menus, sections, headers, etc. with naming conventions that assist with ease of navigation and ability to find information
- Website Comprehensiveness*: one central location to find relevant information applicable statewide and or that directs users to further information varying by court, county, etc.
- Modern design*: up-to-date tools for customization and filtering of information (search bar, drop-down menus, tabs, etc.)

2. AWARENESS

- Definitions*: use of clear and simple language to identify and define IPV and other relevant terms
- Conversational tone*: question-and-answer format and examples
- Dissection of information*: step-by-step guide to legal action, court processes and procedures

3. ACCESS

- Language*: content is available in languages other than English and or informs users that accommodations can be made for non-English speaking victims
- Accommodations*: there is an Americans with Disability Act (ADA) statement/statement about accommodations informing users that accommodations can be made for non-abled bodied victims

Note: As an objective guide to the website content analysis, this checklist was created using specific criteria identified in the research (education and experience, awareness and access) that may influence legal help-seeking and access to justice for intimate partner violence victims.

RESULTS

Across the five states studied (5 of 5, 100%), a range of problems were found with general communication about protective order procedures and communication about the procedures in response to COVID-19. Of the five states studied, only two, Texas and California, (2 of 5, or 40%) adequately communicated information that met all criteria used to conduct the website content analysis, except the criteria associated with access. For this reason, the results for these states are discussed together. Of the states studied, Alabama (1 of 5, or 20%) was the only state to communicate this information in a manner that failed to meet any of the criteria. Accordingly, the results for Alabama are discussed exclusively. Last, communication by the two remaining states (40%), Oregon and South Carolina, ranged in problems, with South Carolina having the worst problems and failures to meet criteria and Oregon failing when it came to communication in response to COVID-19. For this reason, the results for Oregon and South Carolina are presented together.

TEXAS AND CALIFORNIA

Education and Experience

Texas and California Courts' websites were likely to be perceived as suitable for a layperson audience, according to the criteria used. Both states had comprehensive websites, meaning there was one site containing information that applied across all courts while also providing users with direct links to specific types of courts (i.e., county courts, appeals courts, specialty courts) for more detailed and court-specific information.

Both states had websites that are likely to be perceived as having modern designs (e.g., customizing and filtering tools, search bar, menus, and tabs with naming conventions that assisted with finding information).

For instance, the Texas Courts' website included a program and services section with a "Domestic Violence Resource Program" page (Texas Judicial Branch, n.d.a., header 1). A self-help section included a direct link to another Texas website, TexasLawHelp, which provided clearly labeled information to assist in self-representation, including "Protection from Abuse and Violence" (TexasLawHelp, n.d.a., menu 3). There was a section on protective orders with clearly labeled headers and small overviews under each header to help with navigation. For example, a header was labeled "I need a protective order" (TexasLawHelp, n.d.b., section 1). There was also a section on emergency protective orders (EPO) and sexual assault protective orders (SAPO). When applicable, section labels were made clear when information included was directly in response to COVID-19. For example, "COVID-19 family violence" (TexasLawHelp, n.d.b., section 17).

The California Courts website had a self-help tab with a drop-down menu that included short and clearly labeled titles, such as "Abuse & Harassment" (California Courts, n.d.a., header 1). This link led to a page with headers with 1-2 sentence summaries to help with navigation. For example, "Basics—how to protect yourself," "Domestic Violence—how to create a safety plan," and how to obtain a restraining order" (California Courts, n.d.a., headers). For protective order processes and procedures in response to COVID-19, a banner appeared across the top of all pages entitled "Emergency Court Actions and COVID-19 (Coronavirus)" (California Courts, n.d.b., header 1). Clicking on the banner opened a page that included content separated by clearly labeled sections, including a section for restraining orders.

Awareness

The Texas and California Courts' websites fulfilled the checklist criteria for clear content for layperson audiences. While the "Domestic Violence Resource Program" page on Texas Courts' website was aimed at attorneys and court professionals and used acronyms while discussing training and mandates (Texas Judicial Branch, n.d.a., header 1), the Texas site included information specific to a layperson audience. The site linked to the TexasLawHelp website, which made the law clear. Website sections on general communication and COVID-19-related responses included definitions, question-and-answer formats, examples, steps to obtain a protective order, contact information for additional help resources, and even videos (TexasLawHelp, n.d.a.).

The California Courts' website fulfilled the criteria for general communication about protective order procedures by including clear definitions in conversational formats. A domestic violence section defined domestic violence using a question-and-answer format and gave examples. It had a step-by-step process to obtain a protective

order in California with direct links for each step and to each court, including the forms needed. Other information included an explanation of restraining order types, the protective order's purpose and effect, and resources for obtaining help and navigating the court system. Definitions and conversational formats were provided for protective order processes and procedures in response to COVID-19. The COVID-19 restraining order section linked back to the self-help page, which succinctly described emergency rules during COVID-19 using bullet points. A link to the COVID-19 emergency order and individual county court websites was included (California Courts, n.d.c.)

Access

Based on the research criteria, the Texas and California Courts' websites do not have content that is accessible to everyone. Although both websites included an accessibility policy/ADA statement, contact information, and resources for accommodations, the content was only in English, including menus, headers, and even the tabs intended to point the user toward the accessibility page.

ALABAMA

Education and Experience

The Alabama Courts' website was analyzed according to the research criteria and found to be not accessible for a layperson audience. Alabama had a comprehensive website with information for both general communication and COVID-19 responses applicable statewide and direct links to different county courts. Also, it had a modern design, including labeled drop-down menus and tabs. However, Alabama Courts' website had no tools for customizing and filtering information or a search bar. Also, although family court and child support tabs were clearly labeled, courts were categorized as municipal, specialty, and appellate courts required users to know the court that processes protective orders. Other labels were unclear. Moreover, before locating the area for general information about protective order processes and procedures, users had to sift through different types of forms listed on a menu (e.g., criminal forms, do-it-yourself forms, juvenile forms). Ultimately, the appropriate forms (i.e., application for an order of protection, protection from abuse) could be found under 'local county forms' and 'civil forms' (Alabama Administrative Office of the Courts, n.d.a.).

For COVID-19 responses, protective order processes and procedures were addressed solely in court administrative orders. Thus, these procedures and processes were embedded in these orders, requiring each order to be opened individually and browsed. Moreover, because the orders were not clearly labeled by an easily identifiable name, such as "protective orders proceedings," users were required to use a process of elimination to find the procedure (Alabama Administrative Office of the Courts, 2020).

Awareness

Based on the research criteria, the Alabama Courts' website did not have clear content for a layperson audience. No page was dedicated to explaining protective orders and the associated procedures to obtain them. Also, neither the protective order processes and procedures in response to COVID-19 nor the general protective order forms and applications included definitions or conversationally formatted content. Last, many menus were separated by the type of court and did not explain the purpose of each court.

Access

Based on the research criteria, the Alabama Courts' website does not have content that is accessible to everyone. The website included a link to an American with Disabilities Act (ADA) application, but nothing more was provided. Also, the content was solely in English. This included a link that pointed the user to the ADA application.

OREGON AND SOUTH CAROLINA

Education and Experience.

Both Oregon and South Carolina Courts' websites failed to meet the research criteria. The Oregon Courts' website is unsuitable for a layperson about COVID-19-related communication. The South Carolina courts' website failed to be suitable for layperson audiences in both general and COVID-19 communication. Both states had comprehensive websites with information applicable across all courts with direct links to specific county courts. However, Oregon Courts' website included tabs and drop-down menus with short and clearly labeled titles; however, COVID-19 protective order procedures were addressed only in court administrative orders. In contrast, the South Carolina Courts' website required a keyword search to locate information about protective order procedures. COVID-19-related communication was not found.

The Oregon Courts' website included a self-help page with a "Domestic Violence Resources" (Oregon Judicial Department, n.d.b., title) section and clear headers to help with navigation. For example, headers included "Finding a Lawyer/Legal Help," "Information on Protective Restraining Orders," and "Crisis Help and Information About Local Programs" (Oregon Judicial Department, n.d.b., headers), and a sexual assault protective order (SAPO) option. There was a quick escape button for victims to quickly exit the page, if needed. For COVID-19 responses, protective order procedures could only be retrieved by thoroughly examining the text of court orders, requiring each order to be opened individually and browsed. In Oregon, users could engage in the process of elimination much easier than Alabama, as some orders were clearly labeled (e.g., eviction orders, orders on mask mandates).

The South Carolina Courts' website required a keyword search for "protection order" to locate information about protective order procedures. Even then, the search resulted in administrative court orders which had to be opened and read. The first order in the search results discussed the types of courts that handled protective orders and included a link to a page that included forms. Once on this page, users could select a specific court from a drop-down menu. Each court had multiple forms, related and unrelated to protective orders. Finally, the website included a combination of clearly and unclearly labeled menus and headers. Furthermore, many menus were separated by court, meaning that users had to know the right court that handles protective orders to seek help (South Carolina Judicial Branch, 2020b).

For COVID-19 responses, the disclaimer used to help users navigate to COVID-19 updates was not clearly labeled or easily associated with the pandemic; instead, it was titled "Court Information" (South Carolina Judicial Branch, 2020b, title). Additionally, protective order procedures were addressed only in court administrative orders. Users could employ the process of elimination to sort through the orders without opening each. For example, labels used phrases to address evictions, juries, arrests, jail time, and warrants.; yet protective order procedures were not clearly identified by browsing the titles (South Carolina Judicial Branch, 2020a).

Awareness

Based on the research criteria, for general communication, the Oregon Courts' website has content that is clear to layperson victims but lacks COVID-19-related communication. In contrast, the South Carolina Courts' website does not have clear content.

The Oregon Courts' website had clear definitions of protective order procedures in conversational formats, a self-help page including a legal terms section with a glossary of basic definitions, and an "Information on Protective Restraining Orders" (Oregon Judicial Department, n.d.a., header 6; Oregon Judicial Department, n.d.b.) section with content separated by clearly summarized headers, explanations in question-and-answer format and examples. Additionally, there was a step-by-step explanation of the procedures for obtaining a restraining order in Oregon with direct links to forms and organizations that provide assistance and information for finding a lawyer. However, protective order procedures in response to COVID-19 were embedded in court administrative orders. These orders included legal and professional jargon without definitions and lacked a conversational tone.

The South Carolina Courts' website had menus by court type, and each court section included an overview of what each court did. However, the overview had few definitions, was not conversational, or included a question-and-answer format or examples. Moreover, nothing about protection orders was mentioned in an overview. No page was dedicated to explaining protective orders and the procedures to obtain them. Similarly, the administrative orders did not identify protection order procedures in response to COVID-19. These orders did not include definitions and were not conversational (South Carolina Judicial Branch, 2020b).

Access

Based on the research criteria, both Oregon and South Carolina Courts' websites have content that is accessible to everyone. Oregon used a large and clearly labeled header for the "Accessibility and Language Access" section and statement, and South Carolina had a page dedicated to accessibility. Both states included information about obtaining accommodations for an interpreter. Oregon made its entire website available in five non-English languages. Upon selecting the native language desired, the website changed to the appropriate language. South Carolina included statements written in Spanish and information about accessing justice for individuals of a lower socioeconomic status (Oregon Judicial Department, n.d.a.; South Carolina Judicial Branch, n.d.a.).

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Intimate partner violence incidents increase substantially during stress-inducing events and life occurrences (e.g., financial hardship, natural disaster, job loss, and poor health). They increased further during the COVID-19 pandemic (Boserup et al., 2020; Jarnecke & Flanagan, 2020; Kingkade, 2020; Sullivan, 2021; Tolan, 2020). In light of this, the author formulated two research questions to study how state courts use their websites to communicate any COVID-19-specific changes to protective order procedures and examine how state courts use websites to communicate procedures of legal help-seeking for intimate partner violence victims pre and post COVID-19.

The author conducted a website content analysis of five states that reported a 20 percent or more increase in intimate partner violence and/or confirmed incidents during COVID-19, particularly between March 2020 and March 2021. The results of

this study demonstrate the numerous problems with state courts' websites and online content in providing information about protective orders to layperson victims, both generally and in response to COVID-19. Findings suggest that although some of the states studied have mastered certain areas of communication, more often, problems exist.

In particular, communication is geared toward professional audiences or those with some legal or court-related background or experience. The unclear content also underscores the tendency to focus on communicating to this audience, and the placement is frequently unsuitable for laypersons. For instance, many court judicial branches studied used confusing, legalized jargon and placed online content in areas most familiar to legal and court professionals. Historically privileged, majority populations (i.e., those who are English speaking and abled-bodied) were prioritized, and there was a lack of accommodations for non-abled-bodied victims and a lack of resources in languages other than English.

These findings support the previous studies conducted by Fitzgerald & Chi (2020) and other scholars (Nieves, 2018; Robinson et al., 2021; Saxton et al., 2021), who asserted that three types of impediments present significant barriers to legal help-seeking for intimate partner violence victims. First, there was a lack of legal education and experience navigating the legal environment or court system (Fitzgerald & Chi, 2020; Nieves, 2018; Saxton et al., 2021). Second, there was a lack of awareness regarding which acts are legally recognized as intimate partner violence and what can be done to counter or address these acts (Robinson et al., 2021). Third, there was a lack of accessible legal services and resources for non-English speaking victims (or English learners) and victims with disabilities (Robinson et al., 2021).

Though the limitation of this study is the small number of states sampled, the communicative shortcomings identified were all distinguished in the previous literature as barriers and or impediments that can hinder legal help-seeking and access to justice for intimate partner violence victims (Fitzgerald & Chi, 2020; Nieves, 2018; Robinson et al., 2021; Saxton et al., 2021). Therefore, future research should increase the sample to conduct a statistical analysis to determine statistical significance. Additionally, although previous literature focused on the level of education achieved (secondary to higher education), it did not focus on literacy level. Also, this study did not investigate or interpret findings relevant to literacy or reading level. The author relied on the previous literature to develop specific criteria when searching court websites and coding categories to analyze each site.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings imply that depending on the communication strategy or approach employed, state courts can potentially complicate and even impede access to legal protection for intimate partner violence victims. Thus, this study should bring awareness to how state courts can improve communication to public-facing versus internal and specialized communicative campaigns and strategies. Furthermore, by raising awareness, this study can serve as a precursor to implementing strategic efforts to mitigate such barriers. Specifically, instead of focusing solely on the problems with court websites that may impede legal help-seeking for intimate partner violence victims, future research could rely on exemplar court websites for guidance to implement necessary changes and improvements. Ultimately, the results of this study help provide insight into the challenges of obtaining legal protection for intimate partner violence victims, especially as violence increases and victims have limited time away from their abusers to seek help, as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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