

Request for Proposals: Court Partner Cohort

Free Law Project's Litigant Portal

Issued: April 2026 **Response Deadline:** May 1, 2026 **Contact:** Jessica@free.law

Introduction

Free Law Project is seeking court partners to join the inaugural cohort of the Litigant Portal—a public-interest legal technology platform designed to help self-represented litigants navigate the legal system with greater confidence and accuracy.

This work is supported by an [AWS Imagine Grant awarded to Free Law Project](#) in December 2025. The AWS Imagine Grant program funds nonprofit organizations using technology to drive meaningful change. This grant supports the development and pilot deployment of the Litigant Portal, including the founding partner courts described in this RFP.

The Litigant Portal provides self-represented litigants with jurisdiction-specific legal information, guided workflows, and document preparation tools. It is built for institutional deployment: courts and legal aid organizations configure the platform for their jurisdiction, and it operates under their authority. The platform is currently at the working prototype stage and available for demonstration. Please reach out to our Director of Justice Initiatives, Jessica Frank, for a demo.

We are not looking for passive adopters. We are looking for court partners who want to shape what this platform becomes.

The Problem

Self-represented litigants make up a significant portion of civil court dockets across the country. They arrive at courthouses and court websites without counsel, often in crisis, and frequently without any prior experience with legal processes. They miss deadlines. They file the wrong forms. They misunderstand their rights and their obligations. These are not failures of intelligence, they are failures of infrastructure.

Courts bear the downstream costs: increased continuances, deficient filings, longer dockets, and staff time spent answering questions.

Legal aid organizations cannot absorb the volume and paying a lawyer is not a realistic option for most people facing a legal problem.

The Litigant Portal is designed to fill that gap—not to replace lawyers, legal aid organizations, or courts, but to make the path through the legal system navigable for the people who have no other guide.

What the Litigant Portal Does

The Litigant Portal provides self-represented litigants with:

Guided workflows that walk users through their specific legal situation step-by-step, surfacing what matters now and what comes next, without requiring them to understand the legal system in full.

Jurisdiction-specific legal information grounded in actual statutes, court rules, and local procedures with citations and links to source materials. The system does not fabricate authority. Where information is uncertain or unavailable, it says so.

Document preparation tools that help users complete court forms accurately, with contextual explanations of what it required and why it matters.

Court integration and electronic filing, in jurisdictions that support it, litigants can file completed documents directly from the Litigant Portal without navigating a separate eFiling system. For courts with case management system integration, the platform can surface case-specific information to guide litigants through their next steps.

Automated reminders that are sent to the litigants via text or email to remind them about upcoming court dates, filing deadlines, and required next steps. For many self-represented litigants, a timely reminder is the difference between showing up and defaulting.

Deadline flagging and consequence notice at key decision points, so users understand what is at stake before they act, or fail to act.

Legal aid and court resource referrals are integrated throughout, so users who need human help can find it without leaving the workflow.

The Litigant Portal is AI-enhanced but not AI-dependent. Guided interviews, rule-based workflows, and curated legal content function independently of AI. AI improves responsiveness and context-awareness; it does not gate access.

The Litigant Portal is mobile-first, written in plain language, designed to meet WCAG AA accessibility standards, and engineered to allow for multiple languages.

What Litigants Experience

The Litigant Portal is built around real user stories, not theoretical workflows. Jane represents one of the many people whose specific circumstances, barriers, and needs are shaping every design and deployment decision we make.

Imagine:

Jane is a 32-year-old working mother in the suburbs of a large city. She makes \$50,000 a year; too much to qualify for legal aid, not enough to hire an attorney. She has just been served with eviction papers and has no idea what they mean or what to do next.

She finds the Litigant Portal through her court's website and opens it on her phone, after her kids are in bed. She uploads her eviction papers. The platform explains what she has been served with, what the court date means, and what her options are, in plain language, not legalese. It identifies potential defenses she did not know she had.

She answers a series of questions about her situation. The platform walks her through completing the right forms, files them electronically with the court, and sends her text reminders about her hearing date and what to bring.

She still has to face a hard situation. What changes is that she does not have to face it alone, without any idea of where to start.

Deployment Model

Court partners configure the Litigant Portal for their jurisdiction. Free Law Project provides the platform architecture, technical infrastructure, AI capability, and access to CourtListener and RECAP legal archives. Court partners provide:

- Local court forms
- Jurisdiction-specific procedural rules and deadlines
- Case management system access or data feeds, where applicable, to support eFiling and case-specific guidance
- Local legal aid and court resource directories
- Feedback on workflows and legal accuracy

The Litigant Portal is white-labeled for court deployment. When a litigant uses the Litigant Portal through a court, it carries that court's institutional authority. That is by design.

Free Law Project is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. The Litigant Portal is public-interest infrastructure, not a commercial product.

What We Are Looking For

This is a founding cohort. Partners in this cohort are not simply adopting a finished product. They are co-designers of the Litigant Portal alongside Free Law Project. That means the courts we select will have direct influence over features, workflows, and the long-term direction of the platform.

We are looking for courts that:

- Have a defined population of self-represented litigants that they are trying to serve better
- Have at least one staff member or administrator committed to the project with authority to act on it.
- Are willing to share jurisdiction-specific content, including forms, rules, and procedural information, in a structured way.
- Can participate in co-design sessions and provide substantive feedback during the build-out process.
- Have leadership buy-in. Not just the enthusiasm at the staff level, but executive or judicial support sufficient to sustain the project through implementation.

The founding cohort will be responsible for defining the legal subject areas most important to their target self-represented litigant population and prioritizing their inclusion in the Litigant Portal. These may vary amongst the cohort participants.

Partner Commitments

Courts selected for the founding cohort will be asked to:

1. **Provide jurisdiction-specific content:** local court forms, procedural rules, deadlines, and a directory of legal aid and court-based resources, delivered in a format agreed upon during onboarding.
2. **Participate in co-design:** join structured feedback sessions at key development milestones throughout the cohort period. We anticipate approximately 10 hours/month of staff time during the active build phase, declining after launch.
3. **Support technical integration:** work with Free Law Project's technical team to configure the platform for your jurisdiction. Depending on your court's infrastructure, this may include integration with existing court websites, self-help resources, eFiling systems, or case management systems. These features are not a pre-requisite. Specific technical requirements will be scoped during onboarding.
4. **Designate a project lead:** identify a single point of contact with authority to make decisions about jurisdiction-specific content and court participation. This person is the

project's internal champion and would be responsible for internal documentation and handoffs if necessary.

5. **Participate in site visits and user research:** make your court and, where appropriate, access to your litigants, available for user research, usability testing, and at least one in-person site visit during the pilot period.
6. **Provide post-launch feedback:** share anonymized usage data, staff observations, and litigant feedback to support ongoing improvement and Free Law Project's end-of-cohort reporting. Data governance and privacy terms will be specified in the partnership agreement.

Free Law Project will provide: the platform, technical support, onboarding, and a partnership agreement that clearly defines each party's obligations.

What We Are Not Asking For

- Funding. There are no fees associated with this pilot phase.
- Large IT projects. Integration is designed to be lightweight.
- Finished content. We will work with partners to develop and structure jurisdictional content. You do not need a complete content library to apply.
- Perfection. Courts at varying stages of their self-help and technology journeys are welcome. We will meet you where you are.

Future Costs and Licensing

The founding cohort period has no cost to partner courts. Free Law Project anticipates that post-pilot deployment will involve ongoing infrastructure, compute, and hosting costs, which will be passed through at cost as part of a maintenance and hosting arrangement. The specifics — including pricing structure, support tiers, and governance — will be worked out collaboratively with cohort partners as the platform matures and actual usage patterns become clear. Founding cohort partners will have direct input into how that model is structured.

The Litigant Portal will be released under the GNU Affero General Public License (AGPL-3.0). If a court chooses to bring the platform in-house or transition to a different support arrangement after the pilot, the code is yours to take — with the obligation that any modifications or derivative works remain open-source under the same license.

Selection Criteria

Applications will be evaluated on:

- **Clarity of need:** how well the court has defined the population it serves and the problem it is trying to solve.
- **Organizational readiness:** evidence of internal support, a designated project leader, and realistic capacity to participate through the full cohort timeline.
- **Content availability:** the court’s ability to provide or develop jurisdiction-specific content within the onboarding window.
- **Geographic diversity:** we are building a cohort, not selecting a single partner. Diversity of court size and jurisdictions strengthens the platform for everyone.
- **Commitment to the co-design process:** willingness to engage substantively through building, testing, and pilot phases, not just at launch.

Timeline

This cohort operates on a defined timeline tied to the AWS Imagine Grant. All dates are targets; the exact schedule will be confirmed with selected partners during onboarding

Phase	Timeline	Description
RFP opens	Through midnight CDT May 1, 2026	Courts submit letters of interest (ideally no more than 2 pages long) via email to Jessica@free.law
Selection	May 2026	Interviews, follow up emails, cohort selection
Announcement	June 1, 2026	FLP announces cohorts
Kickoff	Early-mid June 2026	Virtual cohort meeting; introductions, scope confirmation, content onboarding begins
Build & Test	June-August 2026	Collaborative development, user research, design sessions, QA; court partners actively engaged
Pilot Launch	September 2026	Platform goes live in partner courts
Pilot Period	September-December 2026	Live pilots with site visits, bug fixes, QA meetings, and regular cohort check-ins
Wrap-Up	December 2026	Results analysis, cohort report, planning for post-pilot period with interested partners and full production launch for 2027

Application Process

The application process is intentionally lightweight. We do not expect courts to have a fully scoped project plan before applying. We expect the strongest proposals to emerge through conversations with the FLP team.

Stage 1: Letter of Intent (deadline midnight CDT May 1, 2026)

Submit a brief letter of interest (ideally no more than 2 pages long) that addresses:

- The court or organization applying, and the department or office that would host the project
- The population of self-represented litigants you are trying to serve and the specific problem you want to address
- The legal topic areas you are proposing to start with and why you have selected those areas
- The name and title of the proposed project lead and a brief description of their role
- A statement of executive or judicial support

Stage 2: Structured Conversations (May 2026)

Applicants on the short list will be invited to a structured conversation with the Free Law Project team to discuss scope, content availability, technical fit, and timeline. This is a collaborative process, not an evaluation panel.

Stage 3: Partnership Agreement (late May 2026)

Selected courts will finalize a partnership agreement with Free Law Project that defines deliverables, timelines, data governance, and each party's obligations.

Governance and Safety

The Litigant Portal is designed for institutional trust. The platform includes:

- Human review of jurisdiction-specific legal content before publication
- Version control of all legal content
- Audit-logs of AI-generated outputs
- Clear escalation pathways to legal aid and court resources

Courts retain authority over content deployment under their name. Free Law Project retains responsibility for the platform architecture and AI systems. Roles and responsibilities are specified in the partnership agreement.

The Litigant Portal is designed to provide legal information, not legal advice. Compliance with unauthorized practice of law rules is a design requirement, not an afterthought.

About Free Law Project

Free Law Project is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to making the legal system more open, accessible, and equitable. We are the organization behind CourtListener, RECAP, and the largest open archive of American legal documents. The Litigant Portal extends that mission from open data to direct public access.

This work is funded in part by an AWS Imagine Grant awarded in recognition of Free Law Project's commitment to using technology in service of the public interest.

We are building the Litigant Portal because we believe the access to justice gap is, in part, an infrastructure problem, and infrastructure problems can be solved.

Questions

Questions about this RFP may be directed to Jessica Frank, Director of Justice Initiatives at Free Law Project, at jessica@free.law.

Courts that are uncertain whether they are a good fit are encouraged to reach out before submitting. We would rather have that conversation early.