

A hand holding a silver compass is the central focus. The compass face shows cardinal directions (N, S, E, W) and intermediate directions (NE, SE, SW, NW). The background is a dark blue field with a grid of small white dots. Overlaid on this are several circular icons: a cloud with a building, a classical building, a location pin, a shopping cart, a gear, and a laptop. Swirling lines in blue, orange, purple, and green flow across the scene. In the top left corner, there is a map of Louisiana with a grid overlay. The title "From Collaboration to Code:" is written in large, white, sans-serif font across the middle of the image.

From Collaboration to Code:

Building Louisiana's Civil Justice Infrastructure

By Amanda Leigh Brown

Louisiana has never lacked commitment to expanding access to justice. For decades, civil legal aid organizations, pro bono programs, courts, libraries, and community partners have worked to help people facing civil legal problems. Bar leaders and members of the judiciary have convened commissions and task forces to understand the justice gap and test new approaches. Yet for many Louisianans navigating the civil justice system without a lawyer, the experience has remained fragmented, confusing, and uncertain.

This fragmentation persists even in a system filled with committed people and effective programs. The problem lies in how those efforts are organized. A person may find legal information in one place, a referral list in another, and an intake process somewhere else entirely. Each step introduces new terminology, new decisions, and new effort at precisely the moment when capacity is already lowest.

Consider a tenant who receives a notice to vacate. They do not identify their problem as a “housing law” issue. Instead, they describe it as: “My landlord says I have to be out in five days.” They search online and find scattered information, some of it accurate and some of it outdated. They might even ask ChatGPT for guidance and receive a confident but incomplete answer, unaware of the complexities of Louisiana housing law. As they continue their journey, they might download a list of attorneys from one website, or be directed to an intake form on another, with no clarity on whether they even qualify for help. They encounter a referral list, then an intake form they do not understand, with no clear indication of whether they qualify for help.

From the help seeker’s perspective, the system does not feel coordinated.

One of the most important insights from building the Navigator is that access to justice does not begin at a legal aid office. It begins wherever people are when they realize they have a problem.

It feels like a sequence of disconnected tasks, each requiring interpretation and persistence. At the moment they most need clarity, the system asks them to navigate complexity alone.

This is the experience many people encounter. Even when individual programs are effective, the overall system feels unpredictable and exhausting. What exists is a collection of services, not yet a system.

The Louisiana Legal Navigator (“Navigator”) was developed to address this gap—at first as a standalone resource, but now as shared civil justice infrastructure. Funded by the Louisiana Bar Foundation and built for partnership with legal aid organizations, courts, community stakeholders, and the LSBA’s Access to Justice Department, the Navigator serves as a statewide front door for access to Louisiana’s civil justice system. Its purpose has remained consistent: to help people understand what is happening to them, recognize when a problem may be legal, and take a meaningful next step toward resolution.

Better Together: Governance and Technology in Practice

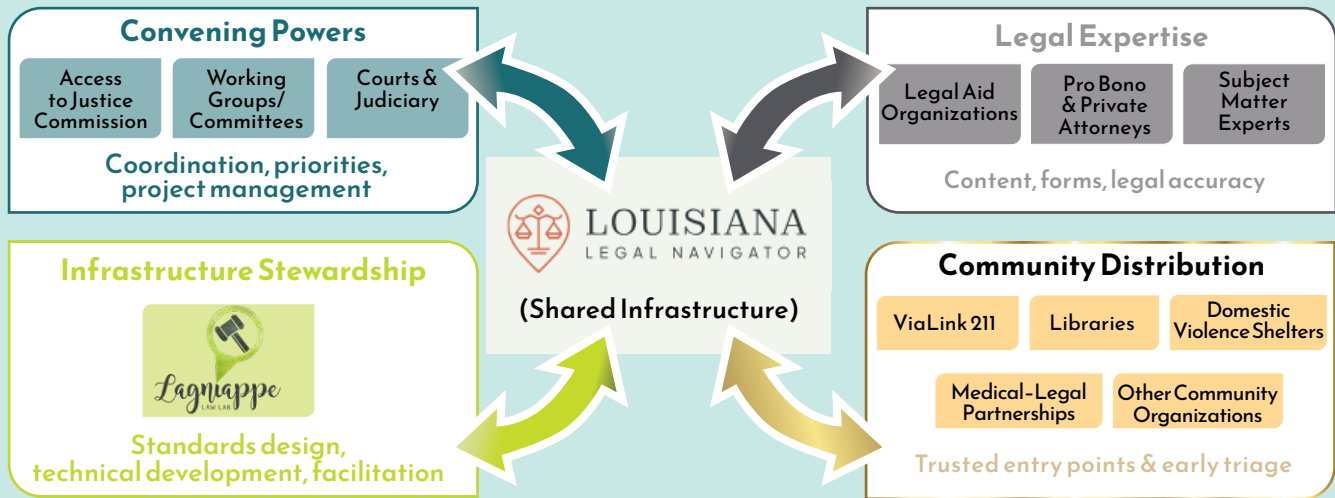
Over the years, building the Navigator revealed that technology and governance do not operate in sequence. They push on each other, and neither functions effectively without the other.

Louisiana’s civil justice ecosystem already had substantial human infrastructure in place. The Access to Justice Commission and its working groups convened subject matter experts, coordinated priorities, and supported access to justice work across organizations. But without shared technical infrastructure, that coordination often remained informal. Resources like brochures, videos, and forms were developed but without a consistent strategy for how they fit together or how the public could reliably find and use them.

As Lagniappe Law Lab began building the Navigator, a reciprocal loop emerged. The technology forced concrete questions that committees often

The Human Layer:

Shared Stewardship of Civil Justice Infrastructure



Technology evolves through human feedback

struggle to resolve in the abstract. What content do people actually need? In what format? At what reading level? Who approves it, and how is it maintained? In turn, the governance structure provided the answers that allowed the technology to reflect real institutional knowledge.

To organize this work, the Navigator adopted a framework centered on three operational pillars:

- **Inform:** Helping people recognize a potential legal issue and understand the law through accessible, plain-language explanations.
- **Empower:** Enabling action through self-help tools and forms designed for usability, accessibility, and real-world constraints.
- **Connect:** Reducing fragmentation by creating clear pathways to the right service provider at the right time, with fewer dead ends.

This framework functions as more than a slogan. It provides a shared language and set of goals that guide coordination

across the ecosystem. By anchoring work in Inform, Empower, and Connect, and pairing those pillars with shared standards—such as a common issue taxonomy, content design principles, and accessibility guidelines—the system can define what needs to be built, how it should function, and where gaps remain. This clarity turns collaboration into concrete work. Working groups are no longer asked to generate ideas in the abstract; they are able to focus on discrete contributions that advance the platform as a whole. The technology acts as connective tissue by encoding what collaborators already knew and enabling a consistent response and contributions across institutional players.

A System, Not a Scavenger Hunt

The most recent and significant evolution of the Navigator has been the development of a screening and triage tool

in partnership with Southeast Louisiana Legal Services and with funding from the Legal Services Corporation's Technology Initiatives Grant program.

Early versions of the Navigator focused primarily on education and static referrals. These resources were valuable but limited. People could learn about their legal issues and then encounter a familiar drop-off point: uncertainty about eligibility, where to apply, or whether help was available. Many never took the next step and fell through the cracks.

The screening tool bridges this gap by creating an integrated pathway from issue recognition to eligibility matching to intake. It presents plain-language scenarios that allow people to identify their issues without needing legal terminology. It also includes an AI-assisted feature that accepts a person's plain-language description, tags it against a shared issue taxonomy, and surfaces relevant resources.

The tool performs preliminary eligibility screening using criteria provided and maintained by legal service organizations across the state. Those likely to qualify for participating providers can then apply directly online for legal help.

At a systems level, this matters because it is consistent and predictable. Instead of navigating dozens of disconnected entry points with varying requirements, the ecosystem gains a shared triage layer that reduces duplication and uncertainty for both help seekers and providers.

And importantly, the tool is designed to operate within a hybrid reality where help seekers might complete the screening independently through a link or QR code or with assistance from a community partner. In this case, Southeast Louisiana Legal Services is piloting this referral process with the generous support of ViaLink 211, enabling those on the front lines of supporting Louisianans through all sorts of needs to better connect to legal services. As the program expands, additional partners like libraries, domestic violence shelters, and medical clinics can use the tool while assisting people they already serve.

This approach is about giving trusted intermediaries a structured, reliable way to facilitate connection to legal services without requiring legal expertise or duplicating intake work.

Distribution Through Trust: Partnerships as Entry Points

One of the most important insights from building the Navigator is that access to justice does not begin at a legal aid office. It begins wherever people are when they realize they have a problem.

People facing civil legal issues often turn first to trusted intermediaries, such as a helpline, a public library, a health-care provider, or a social service agency. The partnership model treats these touchpoints not as peripheral, but as essential components of the system.

Through customized screening links, community partners can help people identify legal issues and initiate intake within the context of services they are already providing. This creates an “affiliate effect,” meaning distribution through trusted human nodes rather than through isolated websites.

Customization within this partnership model is not just a branding feature. It is a trust and usability feature. People are more likely to engage when legal pathways are introduced through institutions they already trust and when the first questions reflect the context they are in. Prioritizing relevant scenarios, such as housing and family issues in a domestic violence shelter or estate planning needs in a medical-legal setting, reduces cognitive burden at moments of stress.

Operationally, this structure supports a “warm handoff” model. Community partners can assist with early triage and issue identification and then pass the pathway to the individual to complete asynchronously. This preserves continuity without requiring partners to duplicate intake or assume legal expertise.

In this way, distribution itself becomes part of the infrastructure. The system becomes discoverable by anyone whether through deliberate legal research or by seeking help wherever they can.

Shared Infrastructure, Shared Responsibility

For Louisiana lawyers, the Navigator offers both immediate practical value and an invitation to stewardship.

The Navigator reduces the friction lawyers often experience when they must decline representation due to conflicts, capacity, financial constraints, or practice-area limitations. Rather than offering a generic referral list or an apologetic explanation, lawyers can direct people to a system designed to assess their issue and connect them to appropriate resources.

More broadly, the Navigator represents a shift in how access to justice infrastructure is conceived. In its ideal form, it is not owned or controlled by a single organization. Instead, it is a shared system that depends on distributed stewardship across the legal community. Lawyers contribute by serving on governance bodies, providing subject-matter expertise, and aligning pro bono efforts with documented system needs.

That stewardship can take several concrete forms. Lawyers with subject-matter expertise can help ensure that legal information and self-help resources remain accurate, current, and practically grounded. Those familiar with local procedure can support the development of usable forms and guided tools that reflect how courts actually operate. Others may choose to contribute through governance, joining working groups that define standards for accessibility, consistency, and quality across the system. And perhaps most importantly, lawyers encountering the system in practice can close the feedback loop — including points of confusion, subject matter needs, or referral dead ends, so the infrastructure can adapt.

Like any infrastructure, this work is never finished. It requires maintenance, calibration, and adaptation. As the Navigator technologically matures to support a truly contributory model, we recognize that sustainability depends on shared responsibility, not centralized control.

Building Systems that Can Respond

This type of civil justice infrastructure cannot emerge from a single innovation or technical breakthrough. It emerges after years of collaboration, observation, and a deliberate effort to formalize what is already working, and thoughtfully redesigning what is not.

The Louisiana Legal Navigator is an expression of that type of work.

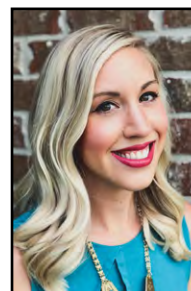
It reflects a shared commitment to three outcomes for people seeking help: that they are informed about the law and their legal issues in plain language, empowered to take meaningful steps through usable tools and resources, and connected to the right services at the right time.

The core focus moving forward is keeping content current, expanding partnerships, and making sure that however someone enters the system, they find their way forward. We're building a contributory content management system that will allow subject matter experts across the network to maintain and update resources more easily and reliably as it scales. We're also exploring branded mini portals — specialized entry points where domestic violence organizations, for example, can offer their communi-

ties access to all relevant civil legal resources within a focused, curated experience tailored to their needs.

As the ecosystem matures, the Navigator will continue to evolve on the principle that access to justice improves when people can understand their situation, act on it, and reach help without unnecessary friction—and when the legal community shares responsibility for the infrastructure that makes those outcomes possible. For Louisiana lawyers, this perhaps is an opportunity to participate in a system that functions more predictably for the public and more efficiently for the institutions that serve them.

Amanda Leigh Brown is the founder and executive director of Lagniappe Law Lab, an organization focused on advancing access to justice through legal technology and innovation. She earned her JD from Loyola University New Orleans College of Law and was admitted to the Louisiana State Bar in 2016. She serves as chair of the Louisiana Access to Justice Commission's Technology Subcommittee and is a member of the Legal Services Corporation's Emerging Leaders Council. Brown is also active in the American Bar Association, where she serves on the Governing Council of the Center for Innovation and as a special advisor to the Young Lawyers Division's Disaster Legal Services Program. Before founding Lagniappe Law Lab in 2019, she served as a legal technology consultant for the Louisiana Bar Foundation, supporting development of the statewide triage portal, the Louisiana Civil Legal Navigator. (amanda@lagniapplawlab.org; New Orleans)



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