



Tips for Remote Pro Bono Work

By Eliza Messinger, Criminal Expungement Program Manager

Remote work started out as an emergency health and safety measure during the early days of the pandemic. Over two years later, many of these changes are permanent and have impacted almost every area of life, including how pro bono work is practiced. One of the hurdles to providing remote pro bono services is making sure both clients and attorneys have the technological capabilities to make these services work. As a program manager, I've worked with clients and volunteers with varying technological skill levels to facilitate successful attorney-client relationships. I compiled a short list of my favorite tricks to overcome practical hurdles when providing remote pro bono services.

The Basics of Volunteering Remotely

- Remote work can mean work-from-home, or it can mean work-from-Utah or Aruba. Communicate with the VLN Program Manager in the area you volunteer about whether working out of the state long-term will be an issue. This is especially true for hearings. Most civil court hearings are now on Zoom. If there is a chance a hearing could be in person, ask the Program Manager how such a situation could be handled if it would be difficult for you to return to Minnesota for that hearing.
- Some VLN programs and case types allow for fully remote volunteering, which impacts what type of technology capabilities your client needs to have. Many clients are very tech savvy and have iPhones, while others do not have email addresses. If you will not be in the state when volunteering or your client lives hours away in outstate Minnesota, make sure your communication needs match.
- VLN has some clients who struggle with accessing or using technology and need in-person meetings to achieve their legal goals. This is an important access to justice issue, so if you can serve clients who need in-person pro bono services please consider taking these cases.

Getting Signatures Remotely

Remote Signature Requirements:

- E-signatures are accepted in court for some case and document types. Minn. Gen. R. Prac. 14.04(b). If they are accepted for the document type you e-filing, the requirements are:

Minn. Gen. R. Prac. 14.04(b)(1): For the signatures of registered users of the E-filing system (I.E, attorneys):

- Typed e-signature in this format: */s/ Pat L. Smith*

- In a signature block below, include the typed name, address, telephone number, designated e-mail address, and, if applicable, attorney registration number of a signing attorney.

Minn. Gen. R. Prac. 14.04(b)(2): For the signature of anyone who isn't a registered user of the e-filing system:

- Typed e-signature in this format: */s/ Pat L. Smith*

- The typed name of the signee.

How to Get Remote Signatures:

- If you have the client e-sign a document that will be e-filed, they need to type out their name on the document.

- E-signing software that creates a digital signature shouldn't be used on documents you e-file, according to the Minnesota District Court's Registered User's Guide for Electronic Filing (pg. 12). Digital Signatures are created through software like HelloSign and DocuSign.

- You may be able to use digital signature software for documents the client needs to sign that won't be e-filed. Any client with email can use this system. HelloSign allows for three free PDFs signed per month.

- Have the client print the document out, sign it, and email it back to you.

Zoom Hearings

I was recently 15 minutes into a phone call painstakingly explaining to a client how to connect to a Zoom court hearing when they said, "Skype won't open." This client agreed to come down to the VLN offices so we could attend the Zoom hearing together.

- The VLN office conference rooms have been retrofitted for Zoom Court hearings and meetings. If either you or the client wants to attend a Zoom court hearing together, either because you prefer it, the client cannot reliably connect to Zoom on their own, or the client doesn't have an appropriate, quiet place to attend a Zoom hearing, please contact your program manager to reserve one of these rooms. They are very easy to use.

- These rooms work for any Zoom meeting you need to attend while working on your client's behalf, not just court.

Scanning Documents

-Some clients will try to send photos of documents to VLN. These photos are usually hard to read and have large files which make them difficult to download. It is preferable to have clients scan documents to you.

-Many clients have smartphones with document scanning capabilities. Some Smartphones have scanners in the apps that come with the phone.

-iPhones: The “notes” app has a scanning function. Access it by creating a new note. Then, click on the camera. Pick “Scan Documents.” Once the client scans the document, they can email it to you within the app.

-Android phones: The easiest way to scan with an Android phone is through the Google Drive app. Some clients have also found free scanning apps in the Android app store.

-Most libraries have printers, scanners, and faxes clients can use.