Project Biography

Online Guided Interview: Voluntary Administration of Estate Form
(MCP-170)

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This document is my final Project Biography for the Fall 2020 Coding the Law course. This document describes the work done in each of the process and product categories. It is accompanied by an overview summary video of the MCP-170 form as well as a walk through of my completed interview.

Framing

The lack of 'Access to Justice' is a well recognized problem existing in our society today, whereby our justice system is so complex and time consuming to figure out that many people without the time or resources are left out of it entirely, without access to legal solutions. Even resolving issues on the simpler end of the spectrum, those which don't require a trial or a legal battle, can prove insurmountable, because the knowledge of how to navigate the legal steps required is not widespread. Many legal aid nonprofits address the issue of getting legal services for those who may not be able to afford a costly attorney, but those organizations are frequently over stretched and the less essential problems can fall to the bottom of the priorities.
Probate is one common area of legal services that many people need, but not many people have sufficient knowledge about. Probate is the legal process of administering a person's estate after their death. The Voluntary Administration of Estate Form is one way to gain access to a small estate without having to go through the more costly formal probate process. Petitioners can petition the court to become a Voluntary Personal Representative (VPR) for a decedent's estate. This gives them access to the decedent's assets, so they can be distributed to the devisees or heirs.

Problem
The Voluntary Administration of Estate form is a complex form to fill out, with multiple support documents required to understand the information required.

Goal of Project
Provide an easy to understand interview that will fill in the MCP-170 form for the user, and provide simple and easy to follow next steps for submission to the court, so the user can be appointed VPR.

Users for the Voluntary Administration of Estate Interview:
- Individuals filing on behalf of themselves (filer becomes VPR)
- Attorneys filing on behalf of a client (client becomes VPR)

Stakeholders:
- Probate Courts
- Other heirs or devisees
- Creditors or debtors
- Asset holders (banks, financial institutions, etc.)

Research

Extensive research was conducted prior to beginning coding of the Voluntary Administration form.

I began with the **court's websites** that post the form itself and existing instructions for completing it:
- https://www.mass.gov/guides/file-a-voluntary-administration-for-an-estate

Mass.gov also has **a page for all Probate and Family Court forms** for wills, estates, and trusts:
- https://www.mass.gov/lists/probate-and-family-court-forms-for-wills-estates-and-trusts

There are two relevant how-to documents and a checklist now saved to GitHub:
- MPC-961 Instructions For Voluntary Administration
- MUPC Estate Administration Procedural Guide –Second Edition
- MPC-965 Voluntary Administration Checklist

The Plymouth County Probate Court has a helpful how-to page.
- https://www.plymouthcountyprobate.com/self-help-center/voluntary-administration-statement/

Additionally, I searched the internet for **Massachusetts firms and practitioners** who post information about this form and their own advice on how to complete it, as well as contact information for anyone who wishes to hire a lawyer for assistance.
- https://www.curleylawfirm.com/blog/2018/08/becoming-the-voluntary-administrator-of-your-loved-ones-estate/
- https://www.levinepirolaw.com/small-estate-no-problem/
- https://jrmccarthy-law.com/2018/03/29/poor-mans-probate-voluntary-administration/
- https://www.attorneyhoyle.com/probate_law.html

Early on in the process I reached out to my Suffolk mentor who is an elder care attorney practicing in Massachusetts. He and I reviewed the form, and he gave me some tips and explained what the court was looking for and why.
- Notes from Initial Conversation with Ron Kearns

Ideation and Prototyping

Because this project is part of the Mass Access Document Assembly Line Project, technical solutions other than DocAssemble were not considered.

User Testing

User testing has begun, but will need to be completed before this interview can be released to the public. Testing was done with multiple edge cases, with multiple end users, as an attorney and as an end user, with between 0-5 assets and 0-4 interested parties.

- 11/30 - David Colorruso and team (potential real world users) ([feedback session recorded](#) and on Youtube)
- 12/3 - Kellie Beaudoin (probate paralegal, A-B user) (feedback form [on Github](#))
- 12/4 - Caroline Robinson (potential real world user) (feedback form [on Github](#))
- 12/5 - Phil Christianson (potential real world user) (feedback forms [on Github](#))
- 12/8 - Anastashia Kamberidis (probate attorney, A-B user) (feedback form [on Github](#))
- 12/14 - Kelly Guarino (estate planning attorney, potential real world user) ([feedback session recorded](#) and on Youtube)

I received comments from testers such as:
- Interesting project that will help the public. - Ron Kearns
- Wonderful initiative by your mentee Ron! This is a great project! - Anastashia Kamberidis

Issues have been created in the [GitHub Repo](#) for the feedback that has been suggested that I have not yet been able to implement. Most of the feedback I have been able to incorporate in the solution.

Refinement

Multiple iterations of refinement happened both on the PDF field labels between October 13 - November 2, and to the DocAssemble project between running the wizard and the initial commit on November 2 and December 16.

PDF and Field Labels Iterations
- October 13, 2020 - Initial draft
- October 21, 2020 - Review Session with Aubrie Souza
- October 25, 2020 - Quentin added Decedent and Interested Party to Basic Questions Wizard
- November 2, 2020 - [Final draft](#) was run through Wizard

Docassemble Project Iterations
- November 2, 2020 - Initial code created by Wizard

- November 7, 2020 - Session with Caroline Robinson on question order and code
- November 7 to December 3 - Multiple (15+) commits with updates from self testing, help from channel, etc.
- December 3, 2020 - Session with Michelle to merge branches and create dev project
- December 14, 2020 - Session with Kelly Guarino on usability. Multiple commits implementing her feedback.

Introduction Pitch

Introduction Pitch - Given to Professor Colarruso and class on October 19th.

Complexity/Robustness

This project involves non-trivial use of document automation. It guides the user through over 20 screens of questions with complicated branching logic and draws on code from other modules (docassemble.income:financial_statement.yml).

Impact & Efficiencies

This project has the prospect of greatly increasing the use of the relatively simple probate process of Voluntary Administration of Estate.

Anecdotally, my father lost his son, my step brother, a few years ago. My brother died unexpectedly at 44, and rather than probate the estate during that difficult time, my father walked away from his son's last paychecks, and small checking account. This was not a great deal of money, but it could have lessened the debt that his son now carries after college. Had my father had access to this simple process it would have made a difference in the life of his grandson, and I hope that this project can keep families in need from walking away from decedent's assets in the future.

The factor by which this expands the reach of a practitioner or decreases the time spent on the task of petitioning to become a VPR depends on the use of the interview. If knowledge of and access to this were widespread, it could reach thousands of users. Close to 60,000 residents of Massachusetts died in 2017. An MIT study determined that 46 percent of senior citizens in the United States have less than $10,000 in financial assets when they die. Very loosely extrapolating this data, we can estimate that at least half of the deaths of MA residents, or 30,000 people, die with less than $25,000 in assets. It is likely that thousands more people could be using this form. Getting the word out through funeral homes would be a possible avenue for increasing use of this guided interview.

Documentation

The code follows comments conventions that will allow another coder to pick it up and make further changes before releasing the form. In addition to the code standards and the Github library I have prepared the following additional documentation to assist the next people to work on this project:

- The [Trello](#) card has been created and utilized and kept up to date. (Card is titled Voluntary Administration of Estate [Probate])
- There are [29 issues](#) that are fixes that the Document Assembly Line team can utilize as next steps.

Real World Viability

This project is a minimum viable product (MVP). It takes user input, and produces a PDF that can be submitted to the court. Not all of the functionality has been added that I would like to, but issues are created for the enhancements, and as-is this interview could be useful to the general public.

Sustainability

There is an incredibly talented Document Assembly Line team working on other forms and interviews who will take over ownership of this form. The set-up of the project centralized the code and documentation on [Github](#) so there is no complicated hand-off procedure that needs to be finalized. I will also be available to share progress and next steps if there is someone available to take the next steps. I would also like to continue to develop this interview if that is the best option and my schedule allows.

My partner, David Colarusso, has indicated that he will be providing a letter to himself that will summarize his level of satisfaction with the project and plans for its continued upkeep. :)