Suffolk LIT Lab Document Assembly Line – Military Affidavit

A guided interview able to fill out a military affidavit, which is ready to be submitted to courts in Massachusetts. Developed in collaboration with the Legal Innovation and Technology Lab (LIT Lab) at Suffolk University Law School. Created by Matthew McCarthy.

Framing

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, many common court activities and processes have had to adapt in order to prevent the spread of an incredibly contagious and dangerous virus. As a result, the Suffolk Law LIT Lab undertook a massive project to help ease some of the strain the courts were facing due to this new pandemic. One solution the LIT Lab came up with was to create a way for lawyers and regular people to fill out court forms and submit them to the courts electronically. The Suffolk LIT Lab uses a small full-time staff and large group of volunteers to help create and maintain guided interviews on Docassemble that can be sent directly to courts online.

As a volunteer for this project, I took on the task of creating a guiding interview for a Military Affidavit using Docassemble and the built-in infrastructure the LIT Lab team developed to standardize the various court form guided interviews being created. My goal, was two-fold. One, to help expand the number of available court forms and guided interviews already available to residents of Massachusetts and to provide a safe way for both attorneys and active duty service members to safely and efficiently fill out a Military Affidavit. Doing some preliminary research, I realized that there were no existing free options for users to fill out a military affidavit online and wanted to provide a free service that is accessible to any resident of Massachusetts, and open source and available for others to adapt for other jurisdictions.

The users/stakeholders I wanted to target were two very different groups as I previously mentioned, lawyers and active-duty military members who have civil actions being filed against them without representation. For Lawyers, I wanted to try and create a slightly more simplified and efficient process. Ideally, I wanted to make it slightly faster for them to fill out the important information and convert it to an electronic format ready to be sent to the courts. More my focus however, was on active-duty military members that may not know how to fill out a court form. Since a military affidavit can only be submitted by or against an unrepresented defendant who may or may not be active-duty military, I wanted to make sure that it was extremely easy for an average person, without legal training, to understand how to fill out the form correctly. Additionally, I wanted to create a free electronic form for military members overseas who may be receiving a default judgement against them in a civil suit.

Research

To start my research of how I should build my guided interview and online court form, I had to scope out what the competition was. I noticed that there was one other competitor in

the space that had created a program related to filling out military affidavits. The website servicememberscivilreliefact.com (SCRA) offers a service that will verify someone's active duty military status and send you the relevant information. There were several problems with this service that I thought I could do better than. Firstly, SCRA is a paid service to find data related to someone's current active-duty military status and it is clearly marketed towards law firms and companies that are litigating against individuals who may or may not be in the army in civil actions. The SCRA service also seemed to only provide data relating to the facts supporting or disproving one's military status, which is only a small part of the military affidavit. While this information may be useful to a seasoned attorney, it would likely not be much use to a servicemember defending themselves in a civil action. While I can't create a program that searches for relevant information proving or disproving one's military status, I knew that no other programs were providing a full-service program that would fill out a court-ready form in minutes.

After figuring out what path I wanted to take with my project, I set out to really understand the law behind the military affidavit. I knew that if I understood the law well and any of the exceptions to the rules, I would be able to better explain them to an average person without legal training and dilute the form filling process to take as little steps as possible. After doing my due diligence, I felt like I had a strong understanding of the serviceman civil relief act and could condense all the relevant information required to fill out the form into one concise guided interview. This way, I could cater to both attorneys looking for an efficient way to fill out a military affidavit and servicemembers who don't have any experience filing legal forms.

Ideation & Prototyping

When coming up with ideas for my project, I had to keep several factors in mind. Firstly, I wanted to make sure that I wasn't being too ambitious with my plans. I really wanted to create a minimally viable product that was realistic given the allotted time. A few times I had to catch myself from adding features that I thought were cool or that could be more efficient but would require a significant amount of work. In my planning process, I also wanted to try and make the form as simple and straightforward as possible. My original idea for a prototype involved a lot of forking logic paths and complex conditional variables that one, probably wouldn't be possible in the allotted time, and two, needlessly complicate the guided interview. Eventually, after creating several flowcharts, I settled on one that I felt was simple, but was also able to easily gather all of the relevant information I needed. This is a picture of one of the flowcharts I drew that I felt boiled everything down into the necessary and relevant information (I am sorry for my terrible handwriting).
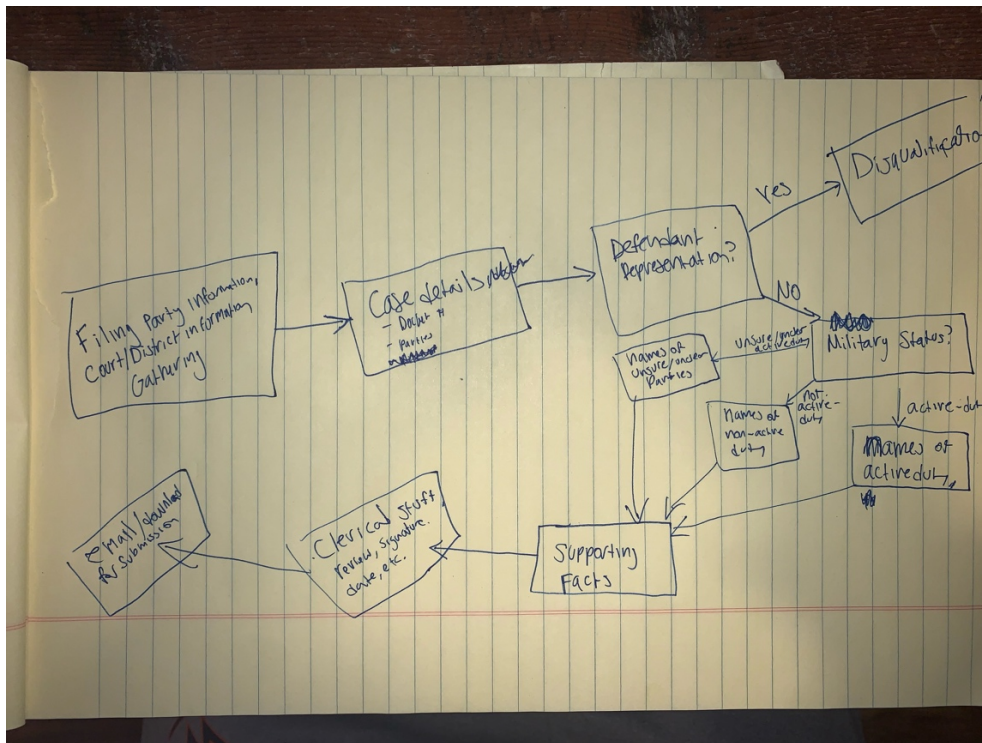
I spent a lot of time experimenting around with different formats and design configurations for my project. My first prototype was pretty much just what the weaver tool presented me after walking through the automated question creation process. At first, I was very uncomfortable with using Docassemble and I think my early prototypes reflected that. My first iterations were very lengthy, hard to read and inefficient. Most of the pages of my guided interview that weren't standard questions generated by the weaver were filled with lengthy and convoluted yes/no questions that did not make sense to the average user. As I got a bit more comfortable with using Docassemble, I think I was able to really execute my vision a lot more effectively.

User Testing

After a lengthy debugging process involving some missing dashes, I was finally able to conduct user testing to see what aspects of my interview could be improved and refined. To conduct my testing, I had three separate people look at my interview to get an idea of how my target audiences would react to my interview. Firstly, I had someone with no legal training or knowledge go through the guided interview and give her feedback. After talking to her about her experience, I realized that my interview was not quite as 'average person friendly' as I had originally thought. This tester thought that some of the sections of the interview were a bit confusing visually and that there was not enough information provided for what kind of relevant facts would play into proving or disproving someone's military status.

My second tester was a lawyer and someone that deals with filling out standard forms very often, so I could get a good idea of if my guided interview was actually useful for someone with legal training. Overall, the lawyer thought the guided interview was very interesting and

expressed wishes that he had something similar for some of the standard forms that he has to fill out on a semi-regular basis at his workplace. From him, I got some feedback on sections of the guided interview that were a bit cluttered or had weird user interface or experience interactions (which was a common theme among all three of my testers). He also was not very familiar with military affidavits and suggested that it might help to provide more context to the users about certain sections.

Finally, I had a subject matter expert look at my guided interview that was also familiar with coding and could give some feedback on some of the backend issues with the interview as well as front-end issues. Overall, the subject matter expert thought that the interview was on the right path, but gave me some feedback with some suggestions to clean up some back-end coding and rearrange some of the confusing design elements that were present in the prototype. All three testers, though from a small pool, had a lot of common criticisms and gave me a good idea of issues that I needed to work on with the interview.

Refinement

After receiving user feedback, I spent a lot of time cleaning up some of the back-end code that the subject matter expert suggested I revise. The first issue for me to fix was to make the interview more approachable and understandable for someone without legal training. To do this, I made sure to think of ways to clean up the way questions were asked, so they weren't so crowded with each other. In addition, I tried to make it clear what these questions were asking and the answers that they wanted from the user. One tactic I used to achieve that was including notes beneath questions that may be confusing to someone without legal training, or unfamiliar with filling out a military affidavit. After cleaning up my interview, I had my unexperienced user run through the interview again and she found it to be a lot clearer than the previous prototype. I also had the lawyer look through the interview for a second time and he approved of the extra bits of context I provided the user underneath the questions.

The majority of my time was spent however figuring out how to re-arrange some of my questions to make more sense to the user, be overall more efficient and user-friendly. For a while, I was kind of stuck and couldn't figure out a way to fix what was wrong, but after a few days of trying (and I think becoming more comfortable with the ins and outs of Docassemble) I came up with a solution. My main issue that I got feedback on was one section of the interview that determined whether the defendant was in the military, not in the military, or if the person filing was unsure if the defendant was in the military. The trouble I was having was that I couldn't simply have several yes/no questions in a row asking the same thing. So, I managed to figure out a way to insert an if-else snippet of code, which allowed me to use a yesnomaybe datatype question. Now, I could use only one question to figure out the defendant's military status. Thanks to this, I was also able to separate the 'name' section of my interview into separate pages so that it wasn't all condensed onto one page like it was previously. This solution and refinement were the result of probably 10-15 attempts at trying to figure out how to technically fix the problem all my users were having with the interview. It was really rewarding because I felt that I had gained a really strong grasp on Docassemble after wrestling with it for so long.

Impact/Efficiencies

While I do not have data or a dataset to be able to properly quantify any increase in efficiency that I may have provided lawyers, I think the important thing is that I was able to provide attorneys and military members the ability to submit a court form online. Additionally, my interview can be built upon to be applied to other jurisdictions that may want to adopt parts of my interview. Additionally, I think the most important part of my project is that it provides active duty military members who are involved in civil litigation the ability to file a court form while on deployment to protect themselves, for free, which is not a service that they had access to in the past.

Real World Viability

      As it is right now, I think this interview could be deployed to the public as a minimally viable product, however, I think this could benefit from a bit more work to really make sure that it is efficient and more accessible. One thought I had that was going to probably be too hard to implement in time was for the facts section having a checklist of common supporting or disproving facts of ones' military status and be able to insert them into list form onto the affidavit. To be deployed, most of the infrastructure already exists thanks to the LIT Lab team, so all it would really take is uploading it for it to be accessible for users.

Sustainability

      Barring any changes to the Serviceman Civil Relief Act, there likely isn't any need to 'upkeep' this interview, however, with the LIT Lab's staff and group of volunteers I think there are many capable people that would be able to update or improve the interview if they so wished. I also would be interested to come back and volunteer to help in any projects the LIT lab is conducting in the future. If that meant volunteering to update or improve the interview in the future, I would welcome the opportunity.