LSC_Project

This project aims to address the access to justice crisis by helping users to either find attorneys in their area or find out if they qualify for legal aid. The QnA based bot asks the user several simple questions to help determine eligibility for civil legal aid. Users will be directed to the bot through the Suffolk LIT Lab's SPOT test program. Once users enter their problem into SPOT and identify the jurisdiction (U.S. state or territory they are in), the SPOT system provides them with the potential legal issues they are facing and provides them with a link to find attorneys. It is from this link that users are then directed to the appropriate survey for their jurisdiction. As this project will be linked through another system, the text files for the surveys can be found here: https://github.com/SonyaCoding/LSC_Project/tree/master/qna/civ

In all jurisdictions, individuals must meet certain financial eligibility requirements, which are typically set at 125% of the federal poverty guidelines. This project uses javascript functions to calculate eligibility levels for income. The federal poverty guidelines change every year, thus it is much simpler to have separate files with the requisite function in each file (one for the contiguous 48, another for Hawaii and another for Alaska). The poverty guidelines for Alaska and Hawaii are at a different level than for the 48 contiguous states. In order to provide ease in updating, the functions are set out in separate files, which can be found here: https://github.com/SonyaCoding/LSC_Project/tree/master/js

A CSV file containing the jurisdictions, links to the legal aid agencies provided in the surveys, and the counties those organizations serve can be found here: https://github.com/SonyaCoding/LSC_Project/blob/master/data/LSC.csv

Framing

This project aims to tackle one of the biggest issues facing both the legal community and the general public - the access to justice crisis. The stakeholders include the 50+ jurisdictions within the United States, attorneys, members of the public, the judicial system as a whole, civil legal aid agencies, and legal clinics. Prior to the creation of this bot, many clients (people in need of civil legal assistance) could either search on their own to find an attorney in their area who would possibly be able to represent them pro-bono or would not charge an exorbitant fee, or they could do nothing and hope that their legal problems fixed themselves.

Research

Initially I talked with Professor Colarusso to find out what could be done and how this issue could be addressed. Then I attempted to see if there was any way people could try to find legal aid - there was no cohesive mechanism across all the jurisdictions. I next looked at LSC page which shows all of the grantees across all U.S. jurisdictions. After some further discussion with Professor Colarusso, a possible solution was determined to be a bot, similar to an indigency calculator we had worked on in class.

Ideation & Prototyping

Once it was determined that the solution was a bot and similar to the indigency calculators used in class, it was clear that QnA was the only program that could be used to create the end product. The next step was to create a prototype. I used the base code for the indigency calculator I had created in class and created a rough prototype for one state. However, after further discussion with Professor Colarusso, it was determined that this model would not work as the code was too long and did not allow for ease in updating. I continued to work on prototyping for several weeks, eventually settling on a model with relatively few lines of code that integrated a javascript function via a reference to another file. The code had a certain amount of consistency as there were certain questions which had to be asked across most, if not all jurisdictions. But, there was still another issue - there were some jurisdictions which had only one LSC funded legal aid organization and others which had multiple. Eventually I developed a template for a jurisdiction with a single LSC funded legal aid organization and a template for a jurisdiction with multiple LSC funded legal aid organizations.

User Testing

Once I had a template that worked, I had to create files for each state. After I had completed most of the states, I started conducting user testing. I asked friends and family members to conduct testing. The first individual who I asked to conduct user testing was one of my relatives who has a culinary background and is slightly familiar with legal aid and eligibility because they had a parent who was an attorney. I provided them with a general explanation of the goal of the project, and a specific scenario for them. They tested the state of Hawaii questionnaire and provided good feedback regarding clarity on inputting answers to several questions used to determine eligibility, such as the number in household question and the household income question. Once I received this feedback, I readjusted the questionnaires I had already created and incorporated it into them. I then sent out the questionnaire for the state of Arizona to one of my law school peers. I provided him with a brief explanation of the project and a specific scenario for him to test. He tested the bot on several different devices and found it easy to use. He indicated that it would be helpful to a user to let them know that the survey was complete and there were no more questions to answer. He also said the first question should reappear after the user clicks "what is civil legal aid" and the bot provides a response. Again after receiving this feedback, I worked to incorporate it into my project.

After completing all of the jurisdictions and incorporating the prior testers' feedback, I conducted more testing. I sent out the questionnaire for the Virgin Islands to one of my peers from college who is now working on their master's in public policy. I provided them with a very simple explanation of the project and a specific scenario for them to test. They provided me with feedback indicating the product was easy to use and the explanation of civil legal aid would be helpful for those who would not know what it was. They provided a suggestion regarding flow of the questionnaire, but once I explained that the product would be integrated with SPOT and how the integration would work, they said that the product's current state was appropriate and the change they suggested would not be necessary.

User feedback for this project can be found here:
https://github.com/SonyaCoding/LSC_Project/blob/master/Final%20Project%20Feedback.xlsx?raw=true

Refinement

I created a Google Sheet in which I would compile user feedback. I assigned each user a number and a scenario and asked them to provide their feedback in the spreadsheet (or directly to me), and ask them to let me know once they had completed their testing. I would review the spreadsheet soon after the tester inputted feedback and would clarify suggestions they offered with them. Next, I would read their feedback closely to see if the changes suggested would be feasible. After I determined that the changes were feasible, I would implement them. I started with a simple bot that incorporated javascript functions and links to legal aid websites. Then with user incorporated feedback I had a better bot that was easy to use and understand. After multiple rounds of user testing and several variations, this project is ready to be incorporated with SPOT and can be updated as needed. It would be helpful if a future iteration included a function that would allow users to specify where in the jurisdiction they are, either by indicating the county they are in or the city closest to them.

Introductory Pitch

The introductory pitch for this project is located here:
https://github.com/SonyaCoding/LSC_Project/blob/master/LSC%20eligibility%20across%20the%20United%20States.pptx?raw=true

My pitch focused on why this project was both important and timely. In addition, I attempted to explain the issue and solution simply with artistic slides to keep reviewers' focus.

Complexity/Robustness

While some QnAs for this project appear to be simple, others are more complex as there are multiple legal aid agencies in the jurisdiction. Each QnA asks multiple choice and fill in the blank type questions and is linked with a javascript function. Each also provides an option for the user to simply search for attorneys in their area. Examined on a macro level, this project is complex as it involves not only simple QnAs but also javascript functions.

Impact & Efficiencies

Since this product has not been launched publicly at this time, an accurate idea of its effectiveness cannot be ascertained at this time. However, this product tackles a major issue facing the legal community and covers 50+ jurisdictions within the United States, including the District of Columbia, the territories, and all 50 states. Thus, it is very likely that this project will have an immense impact on the access to justice crisis. Further, since this project will be integrated with the SPOT test program it is likely to have wide ranging impact. As evidenced by user testing, this product is easy to use, understand, and quick - providing people an opportunity to get access to legal assistance.

Fit/Completeness

This project is complete, but can be improved. Per user feedback, the UI is intuitive and very easy to use. Test users felt comfortable with the solution and liked that the questionnaire provided a link to the appropriate legal aid agency in their jurisdiction. They believed that the product was very helpful and would greatly improve users' experience. It would be helpful if a future iteration included a function that would allow users to specify where in the jurisdiction they are, either by indicating the county they are in or the city closest to them.

Documentation

I have addressed many of the user concerns presented in user testing. I have provided clear instructions for the number of household and income questions, and had the first question reappear after the bot provides a response to "what is civil legal aid." The questionnaire now flows well and lacks ambiguity. General users who are members of the public will have an easy time navigating the questionnaire and the opportunity to determine if they may qualify for civil legal aid. The LIT lab will have an easy time updating this product because the javascript functions are linked as separate files and they only have correct one file instead of correcting several dozen.

Real World Viability

This QnA is ready to be integrated with SPOT. The QnA itself works well and provides members of the public with the opportunity to determine if they are eligible for civil legal aid and the ability to connect with an agency in their area. The only addition that may be helpful is to have the link to the outside referral service connect to the practice area that SPOT recognized in the user's problem.

Sustainability

As with any bit of code, this bot can only work if it is updated regularly. In the case of this product there are multiple points where changes may be necessary at times in the future. The federal poverty guidelines are updated every year and thus the javascript functions will need to be updated. Further, there may be changes to the legal aid organizations that are LSC funded. Fortunately, this product is designed to ensure that it works easily and can be updated simply. It may also be helpful to users if there was a question or function which allowed the user to specific their location within the jurisdiction either by indicating the county they are in or the city closest to them. This product will be kept up to date with the assistance of the LIT lab.