

Justice, Built with AI and Empathy

Presentation by Jessica Frank, Director of Justice Initiatives, Free Law Project

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I've spent more than a decade working at the intersection of law, technology, and access to justice. And I'm guessing many of you in this room have spent at least part of your careers in similar terrain—building systems, advising institutions, or pushing against legal infrastructure that wasn't designed for the reality on the ground.

When I talk about access to justice, I'm not talking about an abstract problem. I'm talking about the very real gap between how the legal system is designed to work and how people actually experience it—especially when they're navigating it without a lawyer.

I also believe deeply in the power of *story*—as in user stories. Story is how we understand where someone enters a system, what they're trying to do, what can go wrong, and what happens if it does. Until we fully think through those stories, end to end, we can't design technology that actually works for the people using it.

About a year ago, I made a deliberate leap. I joined Free Law Project to work on something that didn't exist yet: an unbuilt eFiling and open case management product. New organization, different scale, no roadmap—and no guarantee that the work would succeed.

I didn't make that move because I suddenly discovered the justice gap. I made it because I was ready to take a risk—and because I believed that infrastructure decisions are access-to-justice decisions, whether we name them that way or not.

Once inside a mission-driven nonprofit, something shifted for me. I realized that Free Law Project could do more than modernize court technology or improve workflows. It could help shape how people experience justice at scale.

That realization changed my role—and my responsibility. I helped redirect our work toward access-to-justice technology and built what's now our Justice Initiatives division, which I lead.

The question driving our work became straightforward, but not simple: *What does it mean to design legal technology for people who will never read a rulebook, but still live with the consequences of getting it wrong?*

Today, my team is building the Litigant Portal—an AI-powered platform designed for self-represented litigants. Not to replace legal advice, and not to oversimplify the law, but to make legal process navigable.

The Litigant Portal is being designed to meet people at the exact moment they're interacting with the court. It will retrieve relevant court rules and procedures, translate them into plain-language guidance, support form completion, and integrate directly with eFiling systems—so that clarity can turn into action. For someone facing a filing deadline or trying to respond to a court notice under time pressure, that difference matters.

This work has been recognized through the AWS Imagine Grant, which supports nonprofits using cloud and AI responsibly to address social challenges. But more important than the grant itself is what it has allowed us to do: invest in evaluation, governance, and safety early—before scaling technology into high-stakes environments.

And that philosophy extends beyond civil courts. We are also evaluating and helping to build tools, including potential AI-driven systems, in collaboration with Federal Public Defender offices—where the risks, constraints, and ethical stakes are different, but no less serious. That work reinforces a core principle for us: the question isn't whether AI *can* be used, but when it *should*, and under what conditions.

From a technical standpoint, we're combining generative AI with cloud-native architecture. But what matters just as much are the governance choices around it: human-in-the-loop evaluation, iterative deployment, and deep collaboration with courts, defenders, and users.

Because in this space, *mostly accurate* isn't an acceptable outcome.

Here's the leadership lesson I want to focus on.

AI doesn't fail in a vacuum. It fails at decision points—what data we rely on, what edge cases we deprioritize, what risks we accept on behalf of users who didn't consent to being test subjects. And the voices asking the hardest questions often see those risks first—not because they're hesitant, but because lived experience trains you to notice what gets overlooked.

My role isn't just product direction. It's risk ownership. It's ethical judgment. It's deciding when not to automate, and when friction is actually protective.

I lead multidisciplinary teams, work closely with courts and defenders, and stay anchored to the lived experiences of users who are under time pressure, emotional stress, and real legal consequences. That's how AI literacy becomes empowerment—when expertise turns into guidance people can actually act on.

Empathy, in this context, isn't a soft value. It's a systems design principle. It's what keeps us from building tools that technically function but practically fail the people they're meant to serve.

So the takeaway I want to leave you with is this: women already lead transformative AI work—often without being labeled as such. We do it by claiming authority, asking harder questions, centering human impact, and shaping technology instead of inheriting it.

When we build AI with empathy and intention, we don't just improve systems. We expand access, redistribute power, and make justice more actionable.

And that, to me, is what real leadership in AI looks like.