

HotDocs Fact Sheet

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HotDocs is a document assembly program that enables court and legal aid agency staff to assist self-represented litigants in preparing court filing documents. Depending on the service model, staff or litigants interact with the program. HotDocs is similar to TurboTax in that users answer interview questions, while Judicial Council and local forms and documents are completed “behind the scenes.” Business logic is built into the programs to customize the interview based on a litigant’s responses and to determine which forms to insert in the form set and how to populate each item on the form. For example, repetitive information on forms is completed based on only one entry of the data and mathematical computations are automated.

HotDocs Use in the Courts and Legal Aid Agencies

- Seventeen superior courts and legal aid agencies in California are currently using over 50 HotDocs programs or have programs in development.
- HotDocs programs have been developed to complete form sets in the areas of family law, domestic violence, civil harassment, probate conservatorship and guardianship, small claims, unlawful detainers, and fee waivers. HotDocs is also used by a family court services office to prepare mediation agreements and recommendations regarding parenting time and to automate many aspects of triage for limited conservatorships.
- In 2013, HotDocs was used in assembling nearly 66,000 formsets at superior courts, legal aid agencies, and off-site via the Internet.

Start Up Costs

There are no start-up costs for courts that wish to work with the AOC to develop or modify existing programs. The AOC covers the cost of posting programs on LawHelpInteractive.org hosted by ProBono.net (\$36,000 annually) and has six HotDocs Developer licenses, which has been sufficient. If additional courts are interested in developing their own programs, the AOC can increase the number of developer licenses. The cost is estimated at about \$500.00/license.

Savings

Court Self-Help Centers and legal aid agencies report that HotDocs programs save them staff time. Form sets for dissolution with children, probate, conservatorship and others are long and complex. Simply entering basic caption information can be a time consuming process. HotDocs enables litigants to log on to a computer, answer interview questions, and complete the Judicial Council forms behind the scenes. When a litigant enters his or her name, address, and phone number, the data can populate up to 50 times depending on the form set. Some courts use Justicecorps members or staff to enter information. One legal aid program reports that their volunteers can prepare pleadings that formerly took 4 hours to prepare in 15 minutes using the Hotdocs program. Automating these repetitive tasks and conserving attorney and other staff time for the more complex aspects of assisting self-represented litigants saves a great deal of time.

HotDocs also produces documents that are far less likely to be rejected for errors. They are easy to read and accurate. Mathematical computations are done for litigants, removing the possibility of error.

Declarations are typed, instead of hand written. Some programs include prompts for declarations, which assist litigants in writing their statements. Others are completely free text. This is a decision left to the courts and legal aid agencies, depending upon local practice.

Technology Requirements

As mentioned above, the AOC contracts with ProBono.net to post HotDocs programs created by California judicial branch developers. Thus, a high speed Internet connection is the only technology requirement for courts using HotDocs.

Implementation

Implementation times vary depending on the complexity of the program and the need for customization to address local forms and other local business needs. Most programs can be completed in a few months or less, once a programming resource is allocated to the project.

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