

# ACCESS TO JUSTICE CHAMPIONS

THE WSBA LOW BONO SECTION'S NEWSLETTER



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## 2021 NEW HOUSING LAWS

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# 2021 NEW HOUSING LAWS

BY CLAY WILSON, JD

This was a historic year in Washington state for housing legislation. The largest housing related bill, SB 5160, provides a number of new protections for tenants and a few protections for landlords, and makes a number of changes to existing housing law. In addition to that bill—described in more detail below—numerous other bills which will affect tenants and landlords in Washington state were passed by the Legislature and signed into law. Below are brief descriptions of new housing-related laws.

## **ESHB 1070: Affordable Housing**

Allows more local tax revenues to go towards affordable housing and related services.

## **E2SHB 1083: Relocation Assistance**

Increases the money available under the Mobile Home Relocation Assistance Program to help tenants move out of mobile home parks being closed or converted to other uses. The law also provides a fund for park owners who have to move or demolish mobile homes left abandoned in parks that are closing or converting.



"Novato Mobile Home Park Street" by Lynn Friedman licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

## **ESHB 1108: Foreclosure Assistance**

Extends the mediation and other pre-foreclosure requirements under the Deeds of Trust Act and the Foreclosure Fairness Act to residential properties up to four units, and removes the requirement the property be owner-occupied.

Modifies the mediation exemption under the FFA for the 2021 and 2022 calendar years so that whether or not a beneficiary must participate in mediation is determined by the number of their trustee sales in 2019.

## **ESHB 1368: Federal COVID-19 Funds**

Provides \$365 million for housing-related items, including two million dollars in grant relief to eligible landlords.

## **E2SB 5160: Landlord-Tenant Relations**

Changes landlord-tenant relations in a number of different ways. It offers new tenant protections both during the COVID-19 public health emergency and after it. It also sets June 30, 2021 as the state eviction moratorium end date. Some tenant protections in the new law apply for the period when the public health emergency began on March 1, 2020 until six months after the moratorium ends, which will be December 31, 2021. These protections include prohibitions on late rent fees, reporting non-payment of rent to prospective landlords, and taking

adverse actions against prospective tenants for non-payment of rent. The new bill also states landlords may not refuse to rent to tenants based on their medical history, including exposure to or infection with COVID-19, and cannot inquire about a prospective tenant's medical history unless related to a reasonable accommodation.



"Payments Key" by Got Credit licensed under CC BY 2.0

Further, landlords must offer payment plans to tenants behind in rent for this period of time. Payment schedules must be reasonable, and not exceed one third of the regular monthly rent. These plans may only cover rent and must allow payment from any source, including nonprofits and governmental entities. Payment plans cannot require a tenant to comply with a lease, pay attorney fees or court costs, apply for public benefits, or waive their right to a notice under RCW 59.12.030 prior to an unlawful detainer action. It is a defense to an eviction if the landlord does not offer a payment plan to a tenant behind on rent in conformance with the above

requirements. If the landlord offers a payment plan and the tenant does not accept it within 14 days, the landlord may then proceed with an eviction, but is still subject to the requirements of the new Eviction Resolution Program if one is set up in their county.

Other tenant protections in the new law are permanent changes to existing landlord/tenant statutes. This law creates a new limited right to counsel for indigent tenants facing evictions. "Indigent" is defined as being below 200 percent of the federal poverty level or receiving certain public benefits. The new law repeals the optional notice available in RCW 59.18.375 that required tenants to pay the amount of disputed rent into the court registry. It also amends the statutory 14-day notice to pay or vacate to include information about rental assistance programs and the right to representation for indigent tenants. The pilot Eviction Resolution Program (ERP) is expanded from

its current six counties to the entire state of Washington. This program requires landlords to engage in mediation with tenants in non-payment eviction cases, and extra notice about the program from the landlord to both the tenant and the local Dispute Resolution Center. Participation by the tenant is voluntary, and if the tenant does not participate, the landlord can move forward with the unlawful detainer action. The ERP also provides funding to county housing justice projects to represent tenants in non-payment cases.

For landlords, E2SSB 5160 reenacts and amends the Landlord Mitigation Program under the Department of Commerce. The law adds money to cover landlord losses from unpaid rent during the public health emergency time frame described above. The money is only available where the tenant was not evicted, and landlords are prohibited from trying to collect unpaid rent not covered by the program.

### **ESSB 5408: Homestead Exemption.**

Changes the exemption from just \$125,000 to the greater of that amount or the median single-family home sale price in that county for the previous calendar year.

### **E2SHB 1277: Housing/Revenue source.**

Provides an additional revenue source for eviction prevention and housing stability services.

### **ESHB 1236: Residential Tenants.**

Requires good cause for most evictions with some exceptions. The bill lists 16 different good causes. The bill also protects tenants by penalizing the inclusion of unlawful lease provisions and limiting the reasons a landlord may refuse to continue a lease.



*Clay Wilson is the Moderate Means Program Staff Attorney and an adjunct professor at the Seattle University School of Law.*



"the crowd near san marco" by mararie is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

## **WHY SHOULD FUTURE ATTORNEYS EMBRACE LOW BONO?**

### **BY CHELSA EDANO, LAW STUDENT**

I, like many of my colleagues, decided to attend law school to give back to my community and provide marginalized individuals access to justice. But what does access to justice look like? Many of us imagined working on mountains of pro bono cases, resolutely helping those in need when they needed us.

However, over the years, attorneys have told me there are only so many pro bono cases you can take on and still making a living for yourself. As a first-generation law student coming from modest means myself, I know some students do not have the privilege of establishing a non-profit practice.

While pro bono practices are well established around the nation, around 86 percent of reported civil legal problems still do not receive adequate or any legal help.<sup>1</sup> Legal services are out of reach for the millions of households that cannot qualify for free services. Thus, one of the greatest tools in the fight



## WHY SHOULD FUTURE ATTORNEYS EMBRACE LOW BONO? - cont'd

against this “justice gap” is low bono. Low bono enriches not only the clients who receive the services, but also the legal representatives who provide them.

### Working with Underserved Communities

Entering the low bono field opens you up to the lived experiences, hardships, and perspectives of those who are underserved and mistreated. The institutions that propagate income inequality are the same institutions that continue to inundate Black, Indigenous, people of color and other marginalized communities with legal issues they do not have the resources to resolve on their own.<sup>2</sup> By opening up your practice to low-income individuals, you directly contribute to the improvement of our justice system and the reputation of the legal profession.

### Gaining Awareness of Your Work

By focusing on ways to make your practice more affordable, you also become aware of the quality of the work you are providing. You learn

how to become more efficient for the interests of your client. It is our ethical duty to ensure that the quality of our services is at its best, regardless of how much we are compensated.

Balancing quality with efficiency is an indispensable skill that can only better our development as attorneys and douse the fears that potential clients may have about firms with below market rates. I have seen many families in my community take out large loans simply to cover the cost of legal fees because they believe they are receiving higher quality of services. We must defeat this stigma if we are to truly provide affordable access to justice.

### Become Part of a Wonderful Community

While exploring the many different ways you can practice low bono can be daunting, the Washington low bono community has been extremely helpful and inviting. As I continue my law school studies, I am relieved that I can lean on the dedicated individuals in the Low



“Group of friends hanging out” by Stacey\_jayyy licensed under CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0)

Bono Section. It is essential to find a community of people with the same drive to provide quality legal services to those who need it the most.

Future attorneys should look to low bono to mitigate the injustice that prevents low-income communities from receiving quality legal help. We should also look to low bono as an opportunity to improve our work and ourselves.

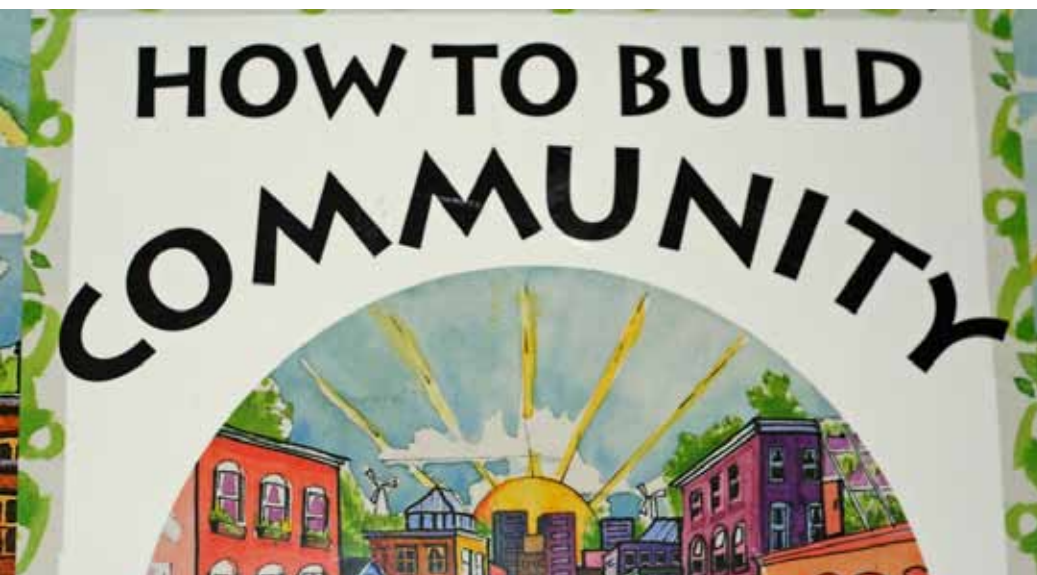
<sup>1</sup> Legal Services Corporation.

*Documenting the Justice Gap In America: The Current Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-Income Americans.* <https://www.lsc.gov/sites/default/files/images/TheJusticeGapFullReport.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Greene, Sara Sternberg, “Race, Class, and Access to Civil Justice.” *Iowa Law Review*, vol. 101, no. 4, May 2016, pp. 1263–1321.



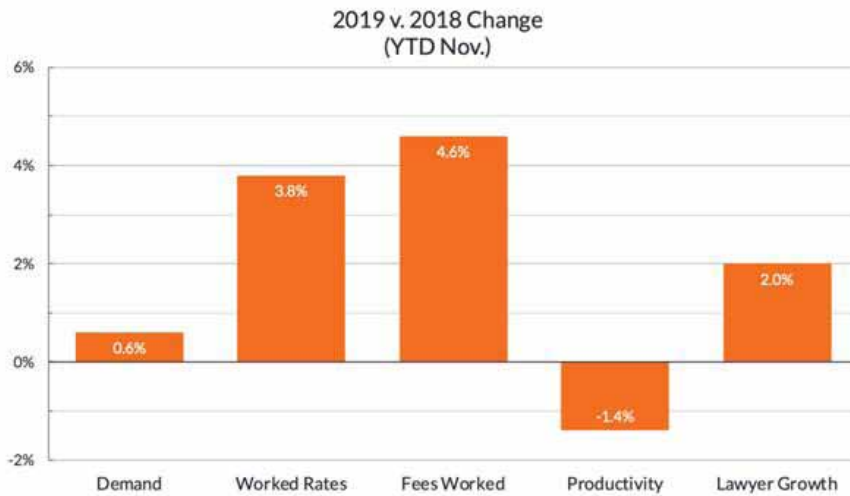
Chelsea Edano is a JD student at University of Washington School of Law and the Diversity Chair of UW’s Public Interest Law Association. Chelsea seeks to support the BIPOC and immigrant communities through community lawyering and policy advocacy.



“Community” by niallkennedy is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

# BAUMOL'S COST DISEASE

BY JORDAN COUCH, JD Reprinted with author's permission; originally published on LegalEvolution.com, July 2020



Source: Thomson Reuters, 2020 REPORT ON THE STATE OF THE LEGAL MARKET at 3, Fig. 1

## Fortunately, there are treatments.

If you work in the legal industry, the above graph from Thomson Reuters' 2020 Report on the State of the Legal Market<sup>1</sup> should terrify you. What it shows is an industry steadily sliding towards obsolescence, not because the need for legal services is declining but because hiring a lawyer is becoming more expensive, thus making it less affordable to those paying the bill.

This affliction, which we also see in the "meds and eds" sectors, is called Baumol's cost disease or sometimes just cost disease. It was first identified and described by William Baumol, a famous economist who was trying to understand the wage structure of workers in the performing arts, a sector that is fundamentally immune to increases in productivity.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the performing arts, productivity gains in law are not impossible,

albeit the biggest constraints have less to do with capital or technology than how lawyers' minds have been conditioned and socialized. In this post, I'll describe the problem and then offer three examples of proven "treatments" for cost disease in the legal sector.

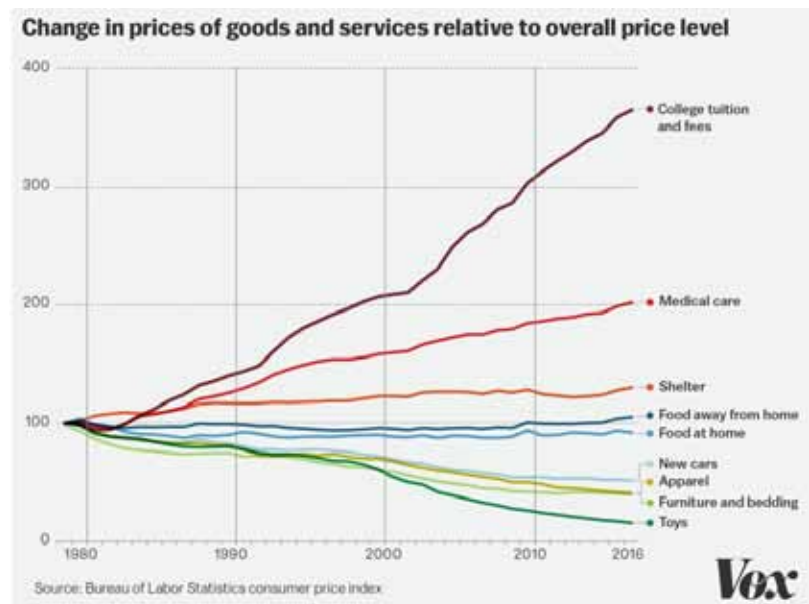
## What's Baumol's cost disease?

In classical economics, wage growth is presumed to be the outcome

of increased productivity. A new widget machine or process is invented, which enables workers to make twice as many widgets in half the time. A portion of the time savings is passed along to consumers in the form of lower prices, typically increasing consumer demand. Another portion is passed along to workers in the form of higher wages.

The same is not true, however, in sectors with little or no productivity growth. As Baumol observed, "no one has succeeded in decreasing the human effort expended at a live performance of a 45-minute Schubert quartet much below a total of 3-man hours."<sup>3</sup> Yet, despite their lack of productivity gains, wages of performing artists go up, as does the income of lawyers, doctors, and college professors.

Baumol and other economists subsequently refined the theory, observing that large productivity



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics consumer price index



## BAUMOL'S COST DISEASE - continued

gains in some sectors (e.g., manufacturing, technology, agriculture) can have the effect of increasing the relative prices in other less productive sectors, particularly those that rely on highly educated knowledge workers. The chart above, from Vox, illustrates the phenomenon.

On the one hand, this is a sign of a richer society. On the other hand, a continuous increase in relative price will eventually have the effect of reducing consumer demand—and that's the dilemma currently affecting the legal sector.

### Cost disease in law

Returning to the Thomson Reuters data in the lead graphic, in 2019, lawyer fees increased by 4.6 percent. Meanwhile, demand for legal services stayed almost flat (+0.6 percent) and “productivity” actually decreased (-1.4 percent). I put productivity in quotes because our industry uses it in a rather strange and rather specific way—each timekeeper is presumed to have an inventory of hours. Productivity

is up if more hours are being sold. Productivity is down if available lawyer hours remain on the shelves. Overall, however, we know that lawyers are increasing hourly rates above the consumer price index.<sup>4</sup> At least for ordinary consumers, we are seeing a diminution in demand.

Between 2007 and 2012, while spending on legal services in the business and government sectors increased by 17 percent and 20 percent respectively, spending by individuals decreased by 10 percent, dropping from \$65.5 billion to \$58.8 billion.

The problem has been building for decades now, exacerbated by the business model created and popularized by “white shoe” firms at the turn of the twentieth century. Lawyers sell hours of time, with the price going up each year. But at the end of the day, there are no more hours to bill. A day in court still takes a day. A good deposition, like Beethoven's Opus, is not improved by being shorter.

Lawyers serving individuals—and I am such a lawyer, focusing on workers' compensation in the state of Washington—are more vulnerable than our corporate law counterparts. If we are only selling time, our higher hourly rate reduces the demand for our services. This vicious cycle is why the real incomes of “PeopleLaw” lawyers decreased by nearly 50 percent over a 20-year period.<sup>5</sup>

### No one likes this model

What's really remarkable about this problematic business model is that neither lawyers nor their clients like it and yet it persists. For the past several years, Clio, a cloud-based practice management software company, has published a Legal Trends Report, part of which is devoted to studying legal consumers. In 2018, the top three reasons consumers with legal needs chose not to hire a lawyer all revolved around costs, with 35 percent saying the “benefits are not worth the money” and 28 percent of consumers saying that they avoided hiring a lawyer because “the overall/final cost isn't clear.”<sup>6</sup>

In 2019, 76 percent of consumers said that when they contacted an attorney they wanted to get a clear sense of how much their legal issue could cost, with 64 percent reporting that they failed to get satisfactory answers.<sup>7</sup> The billable-hour model is driving demand away from lawyers.

Although lawyers report their highest priority is increasing revenues, they also acknowledge



"Money" by free pictures of money licensed under CC BY 2.0



## BAUMOL'S COST DISEASE - continued

higher rates tend to result in fewer hours sold and higher write-offs.<sup>8</sup> Even as lawyers complain about their work/life balance (made worse by the need to prospect for work) and some experiment with value-based billing structures, the billable-hour model persists at about 86 percent of legal revenue.

The reasons for this persistence are deeply rooted but well expressed by an anecdote from Mike Whelan in his book, *Lawyer Forward* (2019). Mike was explaining to some ethics experts his flat-fee billing model that charged clients a set amount for each stage of the case when he was asked this question.

“But you return some of the funds if the case settles early, right?”

“Why would I do that? The clients only pay for what they want: an agreed resolution that they can live with. If I get there quickly, they’re even happier. Most want to pay me a bonus, not get money back.”

“But that would violate Rule 1.04 [Texas’s Fee Rule]. It would count as an unreasonable fee.”

This mindset is what Mike refers to as the “Churn,” an unhappy cycle lawyers find themselves in, building businesses with no assets in a career only as valuable as their next hour. The Churn is nothing more than a symptom of cost disease and it has so infected our profession ethics experts believe profiting off increased efficiency is a violation of our rules of professional conduct. It doesn’t even matter it’s in the

client’s best interests. An analogy throws our dilemma into sharper relief. We’re locked out of our car. One locksmith charges \$100 an hour and it will take him one hour; his rival charges \$600 an hour but will have the car opened in just ten minutes. The price is the same, so who do you hire? The one that makes our lives better sooner!

Another angle on these ethics concerns shows itself in the way lawyers treat each case. Though we like to talk about “legal services,” there is in truth only one legal service offered by the vast majority of lawyers—full-scale representation to the absolute best of the lawyer’s ability. We are required to be diligent in our representation of our clients, which many argue prohibits us from giving anything less than our all to every case. The best-selling car in America is the Toyota Camry, yet lawyers presume we are ethically bound to only sell Bentleys.



"Bentley" by roadoversl licensed under CC BY 2.0

The service lawyers offer is not the product most clients want, and they are proving it with their wallets. But it doesn’t have to be that way.

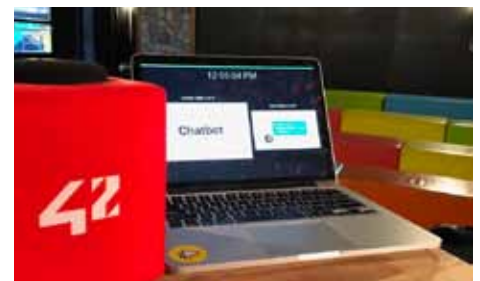
### Three treatments for cost disease

Cost disease need not be fatal. Indeed, there is a bright future available to those who are willing to pursue it. There are new types of legal products that are changing the way individuals consume legal services. And so far, the results are striking. I refer to the most popular new legal products as Freemium Services, Subscriptions, and Commoditized Legal Products.

#### (1) Freemium services

Freemium Services tackle simple and well-defined elements of a legal issue and they do it for free. While you may wonder how freemium services can help lawyers overcome cost disease, these services are extremely effective at triaging cases. Freemium services divert low-value work away from lawyers so they can focus on clients looking for specific, well-defined, high-value legal work.

For example, at Palace Law, the front page of our website has chatbots that assess Washington workers’ compensation claims and provide strategic plans for users to pursue their claim as well as an estimated value of the claim. Every year, approximately 500 users take advantage of these highly specialized freemium services.



"Conf sur les chatbots à 42" by new-york-city licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

## BAUMOL'S COST DISEASE - continued

If you estimate just 15 minutes for every call from a potential client, that's 125 lawyer hours saved annually. Best of all, about 5 percent of those users have high-value claims and end up becoming paid clients of our firm.

Another example is Forrest Carlson of Assemble Law Group, an estate planning attorney in Washington who created wa-wills.com, a website where users can create a will for free by themselves. The website regularly sees about 5,000 new visitors a month. When users come to a stumbling point, they contact Forrest in order to get the specific help they need—so many in fact, that Forrest has had to pass off a lot of the middle-value work to another attorney.

On a larger scale, Joshua Browder's DoNotPay is a legal app that has, among other things, helped consumers save over \$4 million in parking tickets for free, albeit some of these users are opting into paid services that are also AI-enabled.<sup>9</sup>

### (2) Subscriptions

Subscriptions are an old idea gaining incredible market share in consumer markets, from Amazon Prime (access to a large bundle of goods, services, and discounts) to highly specific products like Quip toothbrushes.

In law, subscription services won't necessarily work for every practice area, but innovative lawyers are finding more and more applications for it. Clients love it because they get a fixed price (usually on a monthly or quarterly basis) for legal assistance they are likely to need. In exchange, lawyers get a steady income, loyal clients, and often the opportunity to solve problems earlier and more efficiently before they get out of hand.

The most common use of subscription services is in business law. Smaller companies that can't justify the time and cost of their own in-house counsel can benefit from essentially sharing in-house counsel with other companies for a monthly

fee. For example, Nimbus Legal has built a phenomenal firm by offering to small companies to be “your general counsel.”

Similarly, trademark and business strategy attorney Kimberly Bennett of K Bennett Law has specified her practice even further, offering subscription-based brand protection and growth support for companies on the rise.

But subscription models can extend beyond just representing businesses. Melissa Hall built her law firm Smol Law around subscription services to individuals and families.<sup>10</sup>

Much like a general practice physician, Melissa is your general practice attorney. For a low monthly fee, she is available to help her clients with any of the various legal issues people face on a daily basis and she can meet with you or your family annually for a “check-up.” These subscription models are exactly what Mike Whelan was building for himself as he tried to break free from the Churn of cost disease.

### (3) Commoditized products

Commoditized products are my favorite solution to cost disease because it comes closest to making the legal industry look like every other consumer industry. Commoditization is about offering clients a wholly defined and clearly priced legal product. This can be hard for a profession that loves answering every question with “it depends,” but it is our best chance at saving the legal industry. Every



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## BAUMOL'S COST DISEASE - continued

**COMMODITIES**   
The magazine for the traded commodity markets  
**NOW**



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law firm has the potential to offer some kind of commoditized product. And as the popularity of this service grows, clients will demand it.

Commoditized products can be as simple as flat-rate services like Navigate Law Group's uncontested divorce with children for \$1,800 or as complex as inventing products to help clients guide themselves through the legal process like Megan Zavieh's multifaceted State Bar Playbook, which sells for \$1,500 and enables attorneys to defend themselves in the State Bar of California discipline system (talk about a niche market getting productized!).

One of the most impressive examples in the commoditized products space is Hello Divorce, created by lawyer Erin Levine.

Launched in January of 2017, Erin was trying to reach out to consumers who had been left behind as a result of cost disease. In a customer success story on the Clio blog, Erin commented, "We were being pushed by our community to provide more cost-effective, human-centered services. I wasn't able to do that with the firm in a way that made financial sense for us. So, I had to figure out a way to automate most of the process and be innovative."

What resulted was an online platform where consumers in search of divorce help can pay a monthly subscription (cancelable at any time) for varying levels of legal assistance. If consumers get stuck or want help, they can also pay a fixed fee for a legal coaching session or assistance with specific documents. The results are every lawyer's dream—a business

generation machine throwing off work ideally suited for the lawyer's skill set. Even though gross receipts were down in the first years of Hello Divorce, net income was up during that same period while Erin's attorneys were able to work fewer hours.

### Survival through change

If our industry is to survive, we have to make a change. Cost disease is a very real threat. Colleges have student loans to protect their industry, medicine has insurance, and musicians have concert halls, but no outside forces are coming to save the lawyers.



"Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles" by szeke licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

## BAUMOL'S COST DISEASE - continued

It is up to us to inoculate the legal industry against cost disease. We do this by finding efficiencies and accepting that most consumers don't want, don't need, and can't afford top-shelf legal services. For them, some limited help is better than none. We have to charge consumers based on value delivered, not hours spent. If not, the state of the legal profession will only get worse. How long can you survive?

For additional information on the emerging world of legal products and other alternative legal service models, see Jordan L. Couch, "New Legal Products With Up-Front Costs Benefit Clients and Firms," *Wa. St. Bar News* (Nov. 2019).

<sup>1</sup>[https://images.thomsonreuters.com/Web/TRlegalUS/%7B169f0d36-6fcd-4cc1-bd84-878b713055cb%7D\\_2020\\_Report\\_on\\_the\\_State\\_of\\_the\\_Legal\\_Market-191231.pdf](https://images.thomsonreuters.com/Web/TRlegalUS/%7B169f0d36-6fcd-4cc1-bd84-878b713055cb%7D_2020_Report_on_the_State_of_the_Legal_Market-191231.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> William J. Baumol & William G. Bowen, *Performing Arts, the Economic Dilemma* (1968).

<sup>3</sup> Baumol & Bowen at 164.

<sup>4</sup> Clio Legal Trends Report 2019 at 45-46.

<sup>5</sup> John P. Heinz et al., *Urban Lawyers: The New Social Structure Of The Bar* 6-7 (2005) (comparing Chicago lawyers serving people in 1975 versus 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Clio Legal Trends Report 2018 at 22.

<sup>7</sup> Clio Legal Trends Report 2019 at 26-29.

<sup>8</sup> Clio Legal Trends Report 2019 at 49-51.

<sup>9</sup> Jeff John Roberts, "For \$3, a 'robot lawyer' will sue data brokers that don't delete your personal and location info," *Fortune*, Mar. 5, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Smol Law Business Model.



Jordan Couch is a partner at Palace Law, a personal injury firm. He is committed to helping real people get justice, no matter how long it takes. Jordan is heavily involved in various legal associations including the Washington Supreme Court's Access to Justice Board and the Washington State Association for Justice.



"Khongoryn Els-Gobi Desert-Mongolia" by PnP! licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

## CHAIR'S NOTE

BY JENNIFER ORTEGA, LLLT

Last April, Margeaux Green, the WSBA Practice Management Advisor, attended our Executive Committee Meeting and discussed some of the resources available to legal practitioners through her office.

Some particularly helpful publications discussed that are available at no cost are guides in the WSBA's law firm guide series, including "The Law Firm Guide to Hanging Your Own Shingle," "The Law Firm Guide to Disaster Planning & Recovery," "The Law Firm Guide to Document Retention," and "The Law Firm

Guide to Cybersecurity." These guides include templates, forms and checklists, and are available at [wsba.org/guides](http://wsba.org/guides).

Another service offered is a free, 30-minute consultation for WSBA members. Topics include starting, running, and selling a practice; basic considerations for trust accounts and IOLTA; business development; client relationship management; and using legal technology. Schedule a free confidential consultation at [wsba.org/consult](http://wsba.org/consult).





"File:Entrance to Makuhari Event Hall, Chiba.jpg" by Stck w is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### Executive Committee Monthly Meeting

Section members are encouraged to attend any Executive Committee meeting! Click on or dial in and learn more about what's happening with our Section.

June 15, 2021

Regular meeting: 4:00 - 5:30 p.m., virtual happy hour: 5:30 - 6:30 p.m.

July 20, 2021

Regular meeting: 4:00 - 5:30 p.m., happy hour (possibly in-person!): 5:30 - 6:30 p.m.

August 17, 2021

Regular meeting: 4:00 - 5:30 p.m., happy hour (possibly in-person!): 5:30 - 6:30 p.m.

*The Low Bono Section is committed to justice for all and invites participation by everyone involved in serving moderate-income individuals.*

**Join our section!**  
Visit <https://wsba.org/legal-community/sections/low-bono-section>.

### Hopefully coming soon - in-person meeting and social!

We are keeping our eye on guidelines for in-person Section meetings, and once it becomes clear an in-person meeting will be possible, we will announce it on our list serve. Join our list serve by going to groups.io, search for LowBonoWA, then follow the instructions to request access to the list serve. Hope to see you soon!