



Legal Interventions for Transforming Dane County

Goal: Legal Interventions for Transforming Dane County (LIFT Dane) will disrupt the antiquated legal system that has become a barrier to economic prosperity. This will transform the lives of tens of thousands of Dane County, Wisconsin, residents and create lasting change by scaling nationwide.

LIFT Dane will leverage technology to empower workers to identify and quickly resolve the civil legal problems holding them back. At the same time, the LIFT Dane team will work with stakeholders to optimize the court system, streamlining legal processes and ensuring that every person has equal access to justice. The result will be a system where civil legal problems do not derail economic stability.

Problem: Technology makes it possible to auto-populate confusing legal forms using public data. Although state and local court systems are finally adopting online systems, they are replicating old, confusing, and inaccessible processes when they should be harnessing technology to redesign the way Americans access justice. LIFT Dane will allow anyone to conveniently identify and clear multiple legal barriers to their economic prosperity.

Idea: Civil legal justice reforms across America are experimenting with solutions to modernize legal service delivery methods to profoundly improve the economic stability of families.¹ LIFT Dane combines four strategies in an innovative model:

- 1) **Holistic Services:** LIFT Dane's Legal Tune-Up will enable people to access multiple sources of legal records in one convenient place. Then, they can identify and solve legal barriers, connect to community-based resources, and get back on track. When people have multiple, often interconnected issues, the LIFT Dane Legal Tune-Up will remove the barriers holding people back.
- 2) **Technology Solutions:** LIFT Dane will build a legal system platform that streamlines legal services by identifying workers with legal issues, auto-populating forms and court filings, and modernizing the negotiation process, all with a user-friendly, multi-lingual, mobile app. Technology will save time and reduce complexity, making the process more efficient and accessible for workers, lawyers, and courts. LIFT Dane's first module will streamline reinstatement of driver's licenses. Approximately 14,000 people in Dane County have had their driver's licenses suspended for failure to pay a forfeiture,² and these suspensions perpetuate a cycle of debt that disproportionately burdens people of color.³ Reinstating driver's licenses allows people to get back to work and boosts income.⁴ As LIFT Dane grows, we will address child support arrears, the removal of old criminal and eviction records, medical collections and debt, judgments, and unpaid fines.
- 3) **Effectiveness Research:** In partnership with the University of Wisconsin Institute for Research on Poverty, LIFT Dane will produce interdisciplinary-informed evidence of what works about LIFT Dane's approach to address economic stability and disseminate it widely. As the research base evolves, we will incorporate evidence-based learning to address unmet legal needs.
- 4) **Transforming Systems:** LIFT Dane will work with stakeholders to design court systems that are efficient and accessible for all people. From Online Dispute Resolution tools,⁵ to text messaging reminders for court dates, court systems must embrace technology.⁶ Similarly, policies that dampen economic opportunity—such as suspending driver's licenses for unpaid parking tickets—

create a cascade of problems for families. Recognizing this, some states are now changing driver's license suspension policies. LIFT Dane will work with lawmakers in Wisconsin and beyond to change laws to prevent these legal problems in the first place.⁷

Measures of Success: LIFT Dane's research team will track outcomes using administrative data including earnings, child support orders and payments, debt collections, and housing. We will compare these outcomes for program participants to outcomes for matched nonparticipants both within and outside of Dane County over time. This research will be supported by a \$100,000 award from the University of Wisconsin, and we anticipate securing additional research funding from the National Science Foundation and the Department of Justice, among others.

Scale Potential: There is a civil legal justice crisis in our country. The need for holistic, technology-driven solutions is palpable and urgent. It is time for technology to disrupt inefficient court systems, and LIFT Dane is positioned to lead this transformation. Our technology will be built with an open source backbone so that other jurisdictions can seamlessly link or add to our platform and adapt it to differences in their state and local court systems, allowing the LIFT model to spread across the nation.

People and Partners: LIFT Dane, a partnership between Legal Action of Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Law School, and Employment and Training Association Inc. of Dane County, is fueled by people with extensive experience in technology solutions, legal services delivery, economic mobility, policy and systems change, and human resources and employment opportunities. We have amassed champions in the government, nonprofit, and business sectors. For example, Dane County leaders are poised to transform the court system and advocate for capital and operating funds. The Department of Transportation will share public data to identify workers. Anchor employers such as UW Health, with 17,000 employees, has pledged matching funds and will connect us to workers and host services on-site. We even have a partnership with the Library system, including a mobile unit to go to neighborhoods, to offer LIFT Dane services. We are also embedding community engagement in the fabric of our project; users' input and evaluation will continuously inform application improvements.

Schmidt Futures' influential investment will make LIFT Dane a reality—transforming the justice system so it no longer holds many thousands of middle-class and potentially middle-class families back.

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¹ For example: [Justice Innovation with Law School Design Labs](#); [Access to Justice Lab](#); [Upsolve](#); [Code for America](#); [Fines and Fees Justice Center](#); [Matterhorn](#); and [Medical Legal Partnerships](#).

² 60% of suspensions are based upon unpaid court fines, not to regulate unsafe driving. See L. Quinn and J. Pawasarat, [Second Year Evaluation of the Center for Driver's License Recovery & Employability](#).

³ See [Opportunity Suspended: How New York's Traffic Debt Suspension Laws Disproportionately Harm Low-Income Communities and Communities of Color](#).

⁴ [Research](#) on the earnings of clients completing case management services found gains of \$253 a month.

⁵ [Matterhorn ODR Solutions](#).

⁶ See B. Cooke et al., [Text message reminders decreased failure to appear in court in New York City](#), ALJ Poverty Action Lab.

⁷ For example [Tennessee](#). Efforts in [Illinois](#), [Florida](#) and [New York](#). [The Marshall Project](#).