

Public Legal Services after Digital Transformation

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Abstract: Public legal services are an essential component of government public services and form the foundation for enhancing the level of social governance. With the deepening of the construction of a legal society, the public's demand for legal services has gradually increased. Under the three consultation supply channels of physical, hotline, and online platforms, the public now has a broader and more convenient choice of channels for obtaining public legal services. In the context of current digital governance, this article considers the digital transformation of "legal service platforms" as an innovation in the territorial balance of public legal services, differentiated acceptance modes, and the optimization of service personnel. The government, by strengthening the investment in grassroots legal resources, offering digital courses, and increasing public interaction, can improve the quantity and quality of legal services.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of technology, digital transformation has become an indispensable trend in various industries. In the field of legal services, grassroots legal services, as an essential part directly facing the public, play a crucial role in digital transformation, which is significant for improving service efficiency, enhancing service quality, and expanding the scope of services. In reality, how to obtain legal advice remains a blind spot for some citizens. The country has established three legal service supply methods: physical, telephone, and online. However, some citizens still don't know what to do when they encounter problems. Digital legal platforms dispel the public's doubts, encourage them to seek advice boldly, and obtain corresponding legal assistance, reflecting the tangible improvement of public legal services in our country. This article will explore the challenges and opportunities faced by grassroots legal services after digital transformation, aiming to provide reference for the digital transformation of the legal services industry.

2. Literature Review on Public Legal Services in China

In previous literature, scholars have approached the discussion of public legal services from various perspectives. Guo Dongxu suggests that the construction of the concept of public legal services involves two research paths: the "public service path" and the "legal service path." The prevailing view is that one should start with the "public service path" to define the connotation of public legal services. This has deepened the Ministry of Justice's definition of public legal services, identifying its essential attribute as public, its instrumental attribute as legal, and its goal attribute as governance [1]. Yang Kai summarized the General Secretary's theoretical and practical contributions

to public legal services at different times, illustrating the developmental process of public legal services in China. Xia Wuning and others argue for continuous innovation and improvement in the operation mechanism and community service talent cultivation mechanism, emphasizing the need to enhance urban and rural community governance, increase residents' satisfaction with community public services, and improve overall happiness [3]. Dai Kang sees public legal services as innovative projects for social governance and the optimization of public services. He suggests that by building hierarchical integration mechanisms, market brokerage mechanisms, and technological governance mechanisms, societal governance capabilities can be enhanced [4]. Yang Kai discusses the construction of a diversified regulatory system for modern public legal services [5]. Huang Mengsu emphasizes the importance of strengthening guarantees in terms of personnel, funds, and supervision, enhancing the construction of public legal services, innovating the management system and working mechanisms, and improving the public satisfaction with legal services [6]. Authors such as Yu Shaoru, Huang Weidong [7], Li Ci [8], Yi Haiping [9], Pan Yue [10], approaching from the rural perspective, point out the challenges faced by rural public legal services, including relatively weak work foundations, prominent contradictions on the supply side, and difficulties in the transformation of service systems. They propose optimizing the allocation of resources for rural public legal services, deepening structural reforms on the supply side, and constructing a diversified co-building model for rural public legal services. Liu Guozhen, Tang Yanqin [11], analyze the evolving areas of public legal services from an urban perspective. Yu Shaoru and others, in conjunction with the current digital transformation, analyze the relationship and promotional role between the Internet and public legal services [12]. Mo Yunmei [13] argues that widespread issues such as the prevalent "reluctance to litigate" among grassroots people, scarce legal resources, tight legal service funds, and uneven quality of legal workers make the development of the grassroots public legal service system challenging. From the literature, it is evident that most authors discuss public legal services from the supply side.

3. The Significance of Public Legal Services

Public legal services constitute a vital component of government public functions, representing a significant measure to safeguard and improve people's livelihoods. It serves as a foundational, service-oriented, and protective undertaking for comprehensively governing the country according to law. From the perspective of national governance, providing public legal services is one of the functions of a service-oriented government, holding substantial importance for the construction of a country governed by law, a government governed by law, and a society governed by law [14]. Public legal services typically encompass grassroots legal education, legal aid, legal consultation, mediation, lawyers, notaries, judicial appraisal, among others. These services are general legal services necessary to safeguard citizens' legitimate rights and interests and achieve social fairness and justice [15]. China's public legal services aim to guarantee citizens' basic rights, safeguard their legitimate rights and interests, and realize fairness and justice. It is the concrete manifestation and legalization of the modern government's public service functions in the legal field. Essentially, it is an organic component of the socialist legal system with Chinese characteristics [16].

In August 2017, the Ministry of Justice issued the "Opinions on Promoting the Construction of Public Legal Service Platforms." Currently, all 32 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly under the central government have established physical platforms. Each province (autonomous region, municipality) has established hotline platforms. China's legal service network and all provincial legal networks have achieved interconnection. Building on the foundation of the original physical, hotline, and online platforms, innovative and optimized methods of supplying public legal services have been constructed. This has better served the public by providing convenient and precise legal services, promoting and enhancing the level of social governance. In September

2019, the Ministry of Justice formulated the "List of Public Legal Service Matters," urging local judicial administrative organs to accelerate the construction of the public legal service system. Using "awareness rate, first-choice rate, satisfaction rate" as evaluation indicators, the directive emphasizes strengthening the construction of physical platforms, hotline platforms, online platforms, and other three major platforms. It also calls for the integration of legal service resources and the rapid construction of a legal service network covering all businesses, times, and spaces.

General Secretary proposed "to deepen the construction of the public legal service system, accelerate the integration of legal services such as lawyers, notaries, judicial appraisal, arbitration, judicial offices, and people's mediation, and build a legal service network covering all businesses, times, and spaces as soon as possible" [2]. In December 2021, the Ministry of Justice issued the "National Public Legal Service System Construction Plan (2021-2025)," outlining the development of a balanced, all-encompassing, and technologically advanced legal service. The plan emphasizes the integration of the three major platforms and the promotion of intelligent legal services.

4. Digital Transformation of Public Legal Services

Public legal services possess basic characteristics of publicness, legality, and service orientation, representing a concrete manifestation of the modern government's public service functions in the field of public legal services. With the advent of the digital era, an increasing number of services have transitioned to online platforms, forming a comprehensive service model that includes offline, online, and telephone services. Building upon the extensive use of the "Internet+" modern information technology, a diversified and inclusive online platform, the "China Legal Service Network," has been established by leveraging platforms, integrating resources, and providing accessible judicial administrative public legal services to citizens. Within the "China Legal Service Network," citizens can input keywords in the dialogue box to obtain the required information. Additionally, through the buttons below, they can directly access relevant business modules. Besides, "China Legal Service" has introduced both WeChat mini-programs and mobile app installation programs for Apple and Android versions.

The "China Legal Service Network" also connects various provincial websites. Taking Zhejiang Province as an example, the "12348 Zhejiang Legal Network" is primarily a network service supported by telephone and window services. In addition to the existing legal service platform, it has opened up services such as legal publicity, legal services, notary services, judicial appraisal, arbitration, legal aid, people's mediation, administrative reconsideration, and remote prison visits. As of May 20, 2023, the "12348 Zhejiang Legal Network" has provided legal services to nearly 5.98 million people. The section on legal service institutions and personnel details specific service institutions and personnel in the region, and users can find specific information by clicking on icons.

5. Three Innovations in the Digital Transformation of Public Legal Services

5.1. Innovation in Territorial Balance of Acceptance

Before the digital transformation of public legal services, there was uneven legal service construction, especially in rural areas facing issues such as insufficient supply, imbalanced development, and an imperfect public legal service system, hindering the process of legalizing rural social governance [17]. In the past, the public mainly accessed public legal services through two channels: on-site consultation and telephone consultation. However, on-site consultation often required citizens to invest time and energy, incurring multiple visits due to the complexity of legal issues. Telephone consultation, although avoiding the hassle of travel, sometimes failed to clarify issues relying solely on verbal communication. Internet remote legal services not only provide

professional public legal services but also offer convenience in terms of geographical space and time for the public. This addresses the problem of uneven quantity and quality of legal service provision caused by geographical factors.

5.2. Innovation in Differentiated Acceptance Modes

By browsing legal service websites, we can observe that the page is divided into several modules. Compared to on-site consultation queues, the clear classification of business modules meets different types of business needs, significantly reducing the time spent on offline consultations. It also caters to populations with limited mobility or hearing impairments. The Zhejiang Legal Network website also features a dedicated video consultation function, helping eliminate the tension and distance created by telephone consultations, achieving personalized and precise legal services. The legal service platform has also opened an "Case Database" module to help business consultants pre-understand the handling methods of legal issues. By sharing case studies, it alleviates public anxiety, provides pre-answers to subsequent legal questions, reduces the workload pressure on staff, and offers learning opportunities to the public, enhancing legal literacy.

5.3. Innovation in High-Quality Personnel in Acceptance

Due to differences in regional development levels, acceptance personnel have varying levels of expertise. Generally, developed regions find it easier to obtain high-quality legal service resources. If legal workers work in a single environment for an extended period, they may experience professional fatigue and fail to stimulate work motivation, leading to fixed thinking. In the legal service network, users can also choose high-quality legal service institutions and personnel from other regions for online consultations. This is a resource integration approach that mobilizes the work enthusiasm of legal practitioners through incentive mechanisms such as selecting the "Public Welfare Legal Service Star," improving the business level of legal personnel, and instilling a sense of honor in lawyers engaged in public legal work. It further enhances the level of legal services.

6. Recommendations for Digital Public Legal Services

6.1. Increase Resource Investment

Utilize grassroots resources to promote public legal services through various forms of business publicity, such as distributing information booklets, conducting legal education classes, using social media, online communities, audio-visual media, and community activities. Provide clear explanations of services, encourage the public to use devices for public legal consultation services, and eliminate public concerns. "Bringing legal services into the network" has become an essential part of deepening the concept of judicial administrative services. As service forces such as people's mediation and legal aid extend to communities and grids, legal publicity should also establish various working mechanisms and supporting systems to present itself in various forms or penetrate relevant legal activities, enhancing the overall social impact of legal services[18].

6.2. Offer Digital Courses

"Internet+ public legal services" has unleashed significant dividends in the construction of the public legal service system[19]. However, digital transformation has overlooked other social groups with digital disadvantages[20]. "Due to unequal access to digital devices, mastery of digital skills, possession of digital literacy, and availability of digital resources by different regional and social

groups," "information gaps leading to digital divides will deepen with information technology as the leader of digital exclusion. The unequal social participation caused by information gaps exacerbates social class tearing and solidification in a more concealed manner, constructing social exclusion at the societal level." "Ensuring that everyone can freely and equally enter the digital age, hoping to eliminate the digital divide with digital inclusion, strengthen the moral and ethical care that the government and society should have, reduce the risks of 'social exclusion' caused by 'digital divides' and 'digital exclusion,' and achieve the goal of social inclusion vision"[21].

6.3. Strengthen Community Interaction, Actively Guide and Assist the Public in Using Legal Services

"In recent years, Jiangsu Province has promoted village (community) legal advisers to actively integrate into grassroots social governance and has achieved significant results. Village (community) legal advisers promote active service in village (community) self-governance management, actively participate in conflict resolution, innovate the 'online + offline' service model, establish 'Law Nourishing Livelihood' WeChat groups for each linked village (community), guide village (community) committee members and villagers to voluntarily join the group, answer legal questions online, timely push legal information, actively integrate legal propaganda and education into grassroots social governance, and village (community) legal advisers throughout the province have achieved significant results in participating in grassroots social governance"[22].

7. Conclusion and Outlook

Public legal services, led by the government, aim to safeguard the basic rights of citizens, protect the legitimate rights and interests of the people, achieve social fairness and justice, and ensure the well-being of the people [23]. The digital transformation has made access to public legal services simpler, more balanced, and of higher quality. Faced with public concerns and technological barriers after the transformation, effectively utilizing grassroots resources, helping vulnerable groups bridge the digital divide, actively identifying the legal needs of the public, and guiding the public to use legal consultation services can help enhance the level of public legal services, creating a more convenient, intelligent, and effective public legal service system.

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