

# ODR SYSTEMS TO SETTLE DIVORCES: HOW CLINICAL LEGAL EDUCATION CAN PLAY A ROLE USING ONLINE TECHNOLOGIES

Christopher Gibson\*

## ABSTRACT

The access-to-justice gap in family law continues to widen, leaving thousands of self-represented parties struggling with forms, procedures, and courts that were not designed for them. Legal technology, particularly online dispute resolution (ODR) tools, offers an opportunity to simplify, guide, and democratize family matters, such as uncontested divorces moving through the family law courts. This Article explores how clinical legal education can contribute to—and benefit from—the design and implementation of such systems. Focusing on the AAA-Suffolk University Law School’s ODR Innovation Clinic, the Article analyzes the development of a platform for Massachusetts 1A uncontested divorces, which law students created in collaboration with the American Arbitration Association (and its online branch ODR.com), courts and community stakeholders. Drawing on experiential learning theory, user-centered design principles, and the legal and procedural landscape of family law, this Article proposes a model for legal education that not only prepares future lawyers for a changing profession, but also delivers meaningful access to justice. The Article concludes by identifying lessons for replication and future research at the intersection of ODR, pedagogy, and policy.

## INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN FAMILY LAW

In the United States, the justice system is increasingly failing to meet the needs of low—and middle—income individuals, especially in civil matters. Among the areas most profoundly affected is family law, where

---

\* Professor of Law, Director of ADR Program, Suffolk University Law School.

individuals face some of the most sensitive interpersonal and complex legal challenges—including divorce, child custody, spousal support, domestic relations, domestic violence, and more—often without the assistance of legal counsel. In fact, for years it has been recognized that in the majority of family law cases, at least one party appears in court without an attorney.<sup>1</sup> And in Massachusetts, which is the focal point in this article, the increasing self-representation has its “greatest impact . . . felt in the Probate and Family Court, where, depending upon the county, as many as 80% of family law cases involve at least one self-represented party.”<sup>2</sup> These individuals are expected to navigate legal systems originally designed for lawyers—systems that require fluency in legal terminology, familiarity with procedural steps, English language capability, and the ability to manage emotionally fraught experiences while completing complex paperwork and appearing at hearings. The resulting challenges are profound.

This reality burdens the courts, leading to frequent errors in court filings which, in turn, generates delays, rejected filings, and extensive case backlogs. Family courts are overwhelmed.<sup>3</sup> Judicial dockets are clogged with incomplete or incorrect filings, contributing to significant delays in case resolution. Clerks, registrars, and court service centers expend substantial resources assisting *pro se* parties with procedural questions and form completion, which distracts from other essential court functions.<sup>4</sup> The resulting bottlenecks harm both litigants and the judiciary: *pro se* parties face repeated rejections and re-filings that

---

1. See e.g., Marsha M. Mansfield, *Litigants Without Lawyers: Measuring Success in Family Court*, 67 HASTINGS L.J. 1389, 1391 (2016) (“In family law matters, at least one party appears without a lawyer in almost eighty percent of the cases.”); Bonnie Hough, *Self-Represented Litigants in Family Law: the Response of California’s Courts*, 1 CAL. L. REV. CIR. 15, 16 (2010) (“Indeed, national data indicates that 60 to 90 percent of family law cases nationally involve at least one self-represented litigant . . . .”); Paula Hannaford-Agor, *Helping the Pro Se Litigant: A Changing Landscape*, 39 CT. REV. 8 (2003).

2. See generally SUP. JUD. CT. STEERING COMM. ON SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS, ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS IN OUR COURTS: FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS (2008) [hereinafter ADDRESSING THE NEEDS], <https://www.mass.gov/doc/addressing-the-needs-of-self-represented-litigants-in-our-courts/download> [https://perma.cc/CX2J-42T2].

3. See *id.* at 4.

4. See MASS. PROBATE & FAM. CT., 2022 PATHWAYS INITIATIVE IMPLEMENTATION AND TRAINING GUIDE 4 (2022), [https://www.ncsc.org/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0026/85832/PathwaysTrainingGuideUpdatedSeptember2022.pdf](https://www.ncsc.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0026/85832/PathwaysTrainingGuideUpdatedSeptember2022.pdf) [https://perma.cc/8JNC-JJ3Y].

prolong their legal and emotional distress, while courts must process avoidable inefficiencies that strain already limited public resources.

This difficult reality imposes burdens on parties, delaying the outcome they desire while exacerbating emotional stress during the divorce process. For unrepresented litigants, even so-called ‘uncontested’ matters, like a no-fault 1A divorce<sup>5</sup> in Massachusetts, can be derailed by an inaccuracy in the required forms, or a misunderstanding of the procedures.

Courts, bar associations, and nonprofit legal organizations have long sought solutions to these problems. Traditional responses include expanding legal aid funding, increasing *pro bono* contributions, and simplifying court forms. More recently, courts have turned to self-help centers, navigator programs, and informational websites to support litigants.<sup>6</sup> These efforts, while valuable, have not been sufficient. Too many unrepresented litigants continue to fall through the cracks, particularly in high-volume areas like uncontested divorce, child support enforcement, eviction, and debt collection, due to a complex interplay of factors.<sup>7</sup>

The access-to-justice gap calls for creative interventions. One promising response lies in online dispute resolution (ODR) systems—technological platforms that guide users through the legal dispute process via structured workflows, document automation, creative dispute resolution algorithms, use of artificial intelligence (AI), and user-centered design. Already widely adopted in various consumer dispute contexts,<sup>8</sup> ODR’s application in the family law field remains underdeveloped but ripe with potential.<sup>9</sup> When thoughtfully implemented, ODR can reduce procedural

---

5. See MASS. GEN. LAWS CH. 208, § 1A (2024) (providing for uncontested no-fault divorce by joint petition).

6. See e.g., *Self-Representation Litigation*, STATE JUST. CTR., <https://www.sji.gov/priority-investment-areas/self-represented-litigation/> [<https://perma.cc/R5LC-G4ND>] (last visited Nov. 28, 2025).

7. See e.g., Nora Freeman Engstrom & David Freeman Engstrom, *The Making of the A2J Crisis*, 75 STAN. L. REV. ONLINE 146 (2024).

8. See Colin Rule, *Online Dispute Resolution and the Future of Justice*, 16 ANN. REV. L. & SOC. SCI. 277, 280–85 (2020) (discussing eBay and PayPal ODR systems resolving millions of disputes per year). See generally Amy J. Schmitz & Jan Martinez, *ODR and Innovation in the United States*, in ONLINE DISPUTE RESOLUTION: THEORY AND PRACTICE: A TREATISE ON TECHNOLOGY AND DISPUTE RESOLUTION (Mohamed S. Abdel Wahab et al. eds., 2021).

9. Private legal startups have begun to enter the divorce field. Companies like Hello Divorce, Divorce.com, and Wevorce offer flat-fee online divorce services that combine legal forms, instructional videos, and in some cases, attorney review. See e.g., HELLO DIVORCE, [www.hellodivorce.com](http://www.hellodivorce.com)

confusion, streamline out-of-court and in-court filings, and offer parties a more accessible and less intimidating path to resolution. ODR innovations are part of the greater impact that technology is having on the practice of law. As one commentator put it, a “legal climate change” is underway where alternative legal service providers and technology companies are beginning to offer services both to lawyers and consumers that provide less expensive and more innovative solutions.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, generative AI, in just a short period, has brought powerful technology-supported changes and is expected to have a profoundly transformative impact on the practice of law.<sup>11</sup> As this Article contends, these changes in technology and their impact on the practice of law should also be brought to bear on the access-to-justice gap.<sup>12</sup>

This Article explores an innovative response to the crisis in the family law space: the use of ODR, powered by technology and implemented through clinical legal education programs, focusing on the case study of the AAA-Suffolk ODR Innovation Clinic. ODR tools can guide users in steps to complete required forms and meet procedures, and, in certain cases, allow them to negotiate or mediate disputes entirely online, leaving a court (in the case of divorce) the task of merely approving the final resolution. The Article argues that law school clinics can serve as a useful focal point for incubating and piloting ODR systems for uncontested divorces, offering both access to justice for underserved communities and transformative educational opportunities for law students while using technology-driven solutions. Specifically, the

---

[<https://perma.cc/796L-RTAT>] (last visited Nov. 8, 2025); DIVORCE.COM, [www.divorce.com](http://www.divorce.com) [<https://perma.cc/VA6V-M7CH>] (last visited Nov. 8, 2025); WEVORCE, [www.wevorce.com](http://www.wevorce.com) [<https://perma.cc/WEH9-RZP2>] (last visited Nov. 8, 2025). These platforms target middle-income consumers who may not qualify for legal aid but also cannot afford full-scope legal representation. While these services offer convenience and transparency, they may lack integration with court systems and may vary in quality. Moreover, because they operate as private businesses, access is limited to those who can afford the fees. This creates potential equity issues, especially if public courts rely on or endorse such tools that are not universally accessible.

10. Bree Langemo, *Transforming the Legal Profession Through Technology and Entrepreneurship*, A.B.A. L. TECH. TODAY (May 23, 2024), [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/law\\_practice/resources/law-technology-today/2024/transforming-the-legal-profession-through-technology-and-entrepreneurship/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/law_practice/resources/law-technology-today/2024/transforming-the-legal-profession-through-technology-and-entrepreneurship/) [<https://perma.cc/466Y-7ZAQ>].

11. See John Villasenor, *Generative Artificial Intelligence and the Practice of Law: Impact, Opportunities, and Risks*, 25 MINN. J.L. SCI. & TECH. 25, 25 (2024).

12. See e.g., James E. Cabral et al., *Using Technology to Enhance Access to Justice*, 26 HARV. J.L. & TECH. 241 (2012).

Article examines how Suffolk University Law School's ODR Innovation Clinic, in collaboration with the American Arbitration Association, is developing a model, online platform to guide users through the Massachusetts 1A Joint Petition for Divorce process. The project provides a compelling model for how legal education can both improve outcomes for *pro se* litigants and prepare students for the practice of law in a digital age.

Part I describes the Massachusetts legal uncontested 1A divorce framework and related access to justice concerns. Part II describes the founding, goals, and pedagogical background for the AAA-Suffolk ODR Innovation Clinic. Part III presents insights gained from initial community outreach to relevant stakeholders concerning the planned ODR system for simple divorces. Part IV details some of the initial legal and technological design elements for the clinic's 1A divorce ODR platform, based on Suffolk Law students' input developed during their ODR Design Lab course. Part V suggests that practitioners can replicate the AAA-Suffolk ODR model in other law schools and jurisdictions. Finally, this article concludes with broader reflections on the future of family law justice and legal education, and ODR.

By placing law students at the center of access-to-justice innovation, the ODR Innovation Clinic demonstrates that legal education can do more than teach doctrine—it can build systems, solve real-world problems, and empower future lawyers to rethink the delivery of justice.

## I. THE MASSACHUSETTS 1A DIVORCE FRAMEWORK AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE

The AAA-Suffolk ODR Innovation Clinic's work is situated within the unique legal and historical context of Massachusetts, where divorce was recognized as early as 1639, while the state being an early adopter of no-fault divorce in 1976.<sup>13</sup> In Massachusetts, all divorces require mandatory judicial approval—necessitating that any ODR system align with court filing requirements and procedures, and meet the ultimate goal of a reasonable and fair outcome for a family law judge to approve.<sup>14</sup>

---

13. See Susan Martin, *Divorce, Colonial Style*, MASS. HIST. SOC'Y (July 13, 2012), <https://www.masshist.org/beeiveblog/2012/07/divorce-colonial-style/> [https://perma.cc/DJ7J-SQC5]; Denese Ashbaugh Vlosky & Pamela A. Monroe, *The Effective Dates of No-Fault Divorce Laws in the 50 States*, 51 FAM. RELS. 317, 320 (2002).

14. Because MASS. GEN. LAWS CH 208, § 21 requires a court-entered "judgment nisi," and court

Massachusetts law provides two primary pathways for divorce: uncontested and contested.<sup>15</sup> The uncontested, no-fault 1A process, designed for couples who have reached a full agreement on all relevant matters—including property division, child custody, child support, and alimony—is intended to be more efficient and less adversarial than its contested counterpart. However, despite its streamlined legal requirements, the 1A divorce process is still daunting for many individuals. The procedural complexity, technical language of court forms, required detailed information, and obligatory courtroom appearance can all act as significant barriers, especially for those proceeding without counsel.

Under the 1A framework, the first step is to meet the court's jurisdictional requirements. The parties (spouses) must establish that (i) they have lived in the Massachusetts for one year, or (ii) the reason that the marriage ended occurred in Massachusetts.<sup>16</sup> Next, the spouses must jointly file a Joint Petition for Divorce form<sup>17</sup> along with other required documents, including an Affidavit of Irretrievable Breakdown, a Separation Agreement, Financial Statements for the parties, and if applicable, a Child Care or Custody Disclosure Affidavit and Child Support Worksheet.<sup>18</sup> The joint petition requires both parties to agree on all terms relating to child custody, support, property division, and alimony, if relevant. Each document requires detailed (and sometimes complex) information, which carries legal and factual significance in the divorce process, and errors or omissions can result in confusion and

---

rules require the court to “prepare, sign and enter” the judgment, it is not possible under Massachusetts law for a divorce to become final without judicial (court) action. Even in an 1A uncontested divorce (i.e. one based on mutual petition/agreement), the statute mandates that the court review the agreement, approve it, and then enter the divorce judgment. § 1A. *See also Finalizing a Divorce*, COMMONWEALTH OF MASS. [hereinafter *Finalizing a Divorce*], <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/finalizing-a-divorce> [<https://perma.cc/UA2J-KBD3>] (last visited Nov. 28, 2025).

15. MASS. GEN. LAWS CH. 208, §§ 1A, 1B (2024).

16. *See Finalizing a Divorce*, *supra* note 14; *see also How to File a No-Fault 1A Joint Petition for Divorce*, MASS. LEGAL ASSISTANCE CORP., <https://www.masslegalhelp.org/children-families-divorce/divorce-separation/how-file-no-fault-1a-joint-petition-divorce> [<https://perma.cc/5GFX-G658>] (last visited Nov. 8, 2025). In addition, for venue purposes, the 1A joint petition would be filed in the county where one of the spouses still lives, in the county where they last lived together, in the county where a spouse lives now, or in the county where your spouse lives now.

17. Form CJD-101A, Probate and Family Court Joint Petition For Divorce Pursuant To G.L.c.208, § 1A (Mass. Prob. & Fam. Ct.).

18. *See Finalizing a Divorce*, *supra* note 14.

delays.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the parties at the end of the process must attend a hearing (either in-person or virtual) where a judge will review their agreement and ensure that it is fair and reasonable. These requirements, while essential to protect litigants' rights and interests, pose challenges for self-represented parties. For many couples, the difficulty lies not in resolving disputes, but in understanding how to properly complete the forms and interact with the court system.

The State of Massachusetts has made efforts to simplify the divorce process, such as publishing instructional booklets, maintaining an online form library, and offering limited assistance through court service centers.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, these supports are often insufficient for users with limited literacy, English proficiency, or digital fluency. Even filling out the Joint Petition for Divorce form correctly requires a level of legal understanding and familiarity with court terminology that many people lack. For example, distinguishing between 'marital property' and 'separate property,' or accurately calculating child support in compliance with the state's guidelines, requires detailed attention and understanding.

While the absence of active and aggravating disputes between parties may render these divorces 'simple' in a legal sense, the burden of compliance remains significant. Furthermore, when forms are completed incorrectly, the consequences can result in rejected filings, lengthy delays, and repeated trips to the courthouse.<sup>21</sup> For the judiciary, high rates of self-representation raise concerns about docket congestion and administrative inefficiency. Judges and clerks often experience the uncomfortable role of explaining procedure from the courthouse or bench, or rejecting petitions that are substantively or procedurally deficient. These scenarios slow down court operations and frustrate the parties. While legal aid organizations

---

19. For example, the "financial statement" is just one of the documents to be completed. It alone can require more than two hundred pieces of information to be researched and filled in. If the divorcing couple has minor children, this raises the complexity and stakes—and, consequently, the time and knowledge required to navigate the process. Predictably, emotions can be high at the beginning of a divorce, so procedural errors and frustrations may very well squander the goodwill among the parties which need to reach a mutually agreeable resolution.

20. The Trial Court's Office of Access to Justice and Court User Experience, established in 2009, supports the Trial Court by acting as a court wide information resource for access to justice related needs and exploring ways to use technology to increase accessibility. See *Massachusetts Access to Justice Resources*, COMMONWEALTH OF MASS., <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-access-to-justice-resources> [<https://perma.cc/8RBE-YYF5>] (last visited Nov. 28, 2025).

21. See generally ADDRESSING THE NEEDS, *supra* note 2.

attempt to fill the gap, their resources are already stretched thin. Many low and moderate-income individuals in Massachusetts do not qualify for free legal assistance, and private counsel remains out of reach.<sup>22</sup>

As summarized by Chief Justice Ralph Gants in his October 2017 State of the Judiciary address for Massachusetts:

In no other court do we have so many self-represented parties being asked to litigate disputes as complex, as emotional, as enduring, and as life-changing, as in the Probate and Family Court [sic] ... The burdens we place on our Probate and Family Court judges are simply not sustainable; we need to reimagine how we do justice in our Probate and Family Court.<sup>23</sup>

In 2022, the Massachusetts Probate and Family Court initiated the Pathways Initiative in several counties, with the hope that the program will expand across the state.<sup>24</sup> As stated in its training guide, “[t]he goal of the Pathways Case Management Initiative is to have Court intervention earlier in the process, provide information on appropriate resources and tools for the parties to use to assist them with resolving their cases quickly and efficiently and to provide the parties with information about court procedure.”<sup>25</sup> As further stated in the training guide:

Pathways takes a problem-solving approach to assist the parties in resolving their case rather than proceed in an adversarial process. Parties should be provided information

---

22. For example, legal aid programs that receive funding from the federally-funded Legal Services Corporation (LSC) typically face strict income guidelines, serving clients who are at or below 125% of the federal poverty level. In addition, legal aid programs that do not receive funding from LSC also often restrict service to clients who meet financial eligibility guidelines. These guidelines may mirror the LSC guidelines, or may be more or less restrictive. These limits may work to exclude individuals who still cannot afford to hire a private lawyer. *See e.g.*, ALAN W. HOUSEMAN, LEGAL AID IN THE UNITED STATES: AN UPDATE FOR 2023, 14 (2023), <https://clp.law.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/USA-National-Report-ILAG-Conference-2023.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/VB3N-RQGJ>].

23. MASS. PROBATE & FAM. CT., 2022 PATHWAYS INITIATIVE IMPLEMENTATION AND TRAINING GUIDE 2 (2022), <https://cdm16501.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/famct/id/1826> [<https://perma.cc/JR52-4YYQ>] (quoting Chief Justice Ralph Gants’ Massachusetts State of the Judiciary address).

24. *Id.*

25. *Id.* at 6.

and empowered to play a proactive role in their case. The Pathways Case Management process is designed to be fluid to allow a case to be scheduled between the different paths and allows for flexibility to triage a case so that the needs are being met and can be handled in a manner that makes the most sense for that particular case.<sup>26</sup>

While the Pathways Program, even with the court's limited funding, reflects a new and promising initiative by the Massachusetts courts, it is not centered on using technology to provide solutions in the divorce process. Against this backdrop, ODR tools present an alternative and promising solution. If designed thoughtfully, digital systems can work to reduce the burden for litigants, provide clear stepwise guidance, and generate complete, legible, and accurate filings for the family law courts. Moreover, they can alleviate pressure on clerks and judges by improving the overall quality of the initial submissions. Such solutions must be grounded in an understanding of not only legal requirements, but also system design principles—and importantly, user needs. This is where law schools—and clinical legal education in particular—can play a vital role.

By focusing on the 1A divorce process, the AAA-Suffolk ODR Innovation Clinic is trying to situate itself at the confluence of need and opportunity. On one hand, uncontested divorces are a frequent and emotionally significant legal (and personal) matter for low—and moderate-income people. On the other hand, uncontested divorces are sufficiently standardized to allow for automation of forms, procedural components, and system design. This combination makes the 1A context a promising one for the development of a scalable, user-facing legal technology platform—one that could improve court efficiency, reduce errors, and empower the parties.

The next Section explores how the AAA-Suffolk ODR Innovation Clinic is working to operationalize these goals through student-developed platform design, supported by legal research and outreach to stakeholders, as well as input from Suffolk Law faculty with relevant expertise and collaboration with the AAA (and its online platform, ODR.com). In doing so, it demonstrates a model of legal education that does not merely teach students to practice law—but to redesign the systems through which law is delivered.

---

26. *Id.*

## II. THE AAA-SUFFOLK ODR INNOVATION CLINIC: A DUAL MISSION OF SERVICE AND PEDAGOGY

This Article explores how clinical legal education—specifically, the law school clinic model—can serve as a powerful incubator for the development and deployment of ODR systems that address the family law needs for simple uncontested divorces.

With a collaboration announced in July 2024, the AAA-ICDR Foundation<sup>27</sup> provided Suffolk University Law School with a substantial three-year grant. The grant is being used to launch the AAA-Suffolk ODR Innovation Clinic.<sup>28</sup> In particular, the clinic is launched through a partnership between Suffolk’s Legal Innovation and Technology (LIT) Center,<sup>29</sup> along with its Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and Clinical programs on the one hand, and the AAA-ICDR Institute, on the other. The ODR Innovation Clinic seeks to bring new resources to the family law landscape for low and moderate-income individuals confronting the procedurally complex and emotionally difficult challenges raised by divorce.

One can view the clinic’s mission as twofold:

1. To develop and implement an ODR system that enables self-represented parties to complete successfully the Massachusetts uncontested divorce process (under § 1A) in an accessible, clear, streamlined, and supported manner; and

---

27. See AM. ARB. ASS’N-INT’L CTR. FOR DISP. RESOL. FOUND., <https://www.aaaicdrfoundation.org> [<https://perma.cc/K9E3-XB2C>] (last visited Nov. 8, 2025). In 2015, the American Arbitration Association-International Centre for Dispute Resolution Foundation (AAA-ICDR Foundation) was established by the AAA to fund projects that promote conflict resolution and prevention in communities across the country and around the world. The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization with primary funding from the AAA® and its Roster of Arbitrators and Mediators. See *id.*

28. Caitlin Saint-Jean, *Building Future ADR Leaders Through AAA Law School Partnerships*, AM. ARB. ASS’N-INT’L. CTR. FOR DISP. RESOL. FOUND. (Oct. 9, 2024), <https://www.adr.org/news-and-insights/building-the-future-of-adr-how-the-aaa-strengthens-law-school-partnerships-for-tomorrow-s-legal-leaders/> [<https://perma.cc/K5LK-G9QP>].

29. Suffolk Law’s Legal Innovation and Technology Lab is a nationally recognized hub for applied legal technology in legal education. See *About the LIT Lab*, SUFFOLK UNIV. L. SCH.: LEGAL INNOVATION & TECH. LAB, <https://suffolklitlab.org/> [<https://perma.cc/6W9J-HU6F>] (last visited Nov. 8, 2025).

2. To provide law students with immersive training in family law, dispute resolution, legal technology, and client-centered service—fostering a generation of practice-ready law graduates equipped to innovate in a rapidly evolving legal profession.

The ODR Innovation Clinic serves as an example of expanding the concept of legal education and lawyering, where clinical legal education is not limited only to direct representation, but instead embraces the co-design of legal tools, workflows, and technologies that can serve individuals at greater scale. This fits with Suffolk's goal of training law students to become creative problem-solvers capable of operating at the intersection of law, technology, and justice.<sup>30</sup>

More broadly, this mission reflects the evolution of legal education from its traditional doctrinal focus by marking a shift toward experiential and interdisciplinary approaches. As the Carnegie Report on legal education famously observed, law schools have historically emphasized analytical reasoning while under emphasizing the needed practical skills and professional identity development.<sup>31</sup> Clinical legal education emerged in response to this gap, providing students with opportunities to learn by doing: representing clients, appearing in court, and working under supervision of experienced attorneys. The ODR Innovation Clinic advances this pedagogical model by placing students in the role of system designers and technology users for legal online processes, as well as continuing their role as legal advisers to the users of the system in practice, and in required hearings before family court judges.

---

30. See generally Maya Markovich, *Scaling Justice: How law schools are reimagining access to justice through technology*, REUTERS (July 25, 2025), <https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en-us/posts/ai-in-courts/scaling-justice-law-schools-reimagining-access-to-justice/> [<https://perma.cc/J439-2B4M>]. See also *Legal Innovation & Technology Center*, SUFFOLK UNIV. L. SCH., <https://www.suffolk.edu/law/academics-clinics/what-can-i-study/legal-innovation-technology> [<https://perma.cc/S95F-7NMZ>] (last visited Dec. 4, 2025).

31. WILLIAM M. SULLIVAN ET AL., THE CARNEGIE FOUNDATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF TEACHING, EDUCATING LAWYERS: PREPARATION FOR THE PROFESSION OF LAW 8 (2007), [http://archive.carnegiefoundation.org/publications/pdfs/elibrary/elibrary\\_pdf\\_632.pdf](http://archive.carnegiefoundation.org/publications/pdfs/elibrary/elibrary_pdf_632.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/UMZ4-KLYD>].

### *A. Three Year Project Development*

The AAA-ICDR grant to Suffolk Law for the ODR Innovation Clinic was provided with a three-year timeline. During the first year (2024-2025), Suffolk launched an ODR Innovation Lab course which provided a vehicle for student education and involvement in all core stages of the project. The focus of the course was for students—while grounded in the essential basics of ADR and divorce law—to create the first blueprints for process and workflow for an ODR system adapted to the legal context of uncontested 1A divorces in Massachusetts. Student teams researched their projects all semester and participated with guest lecturers who brought various relevant expertise, and students presented their team projects to a panel of experts at the end of the semester. The students' work is provided to the AAA (and to ODR.com and its Australian technology partner, Portable/)<sup>32</sup> so that the detailed legal and procedural requirements of Massachusetts divorce law could be understood, and the students' workflow designs can be incorporated into the ODR platform. At the conclusion of the legal design process, a final blueprint for the project's ODR processes and workflows will be implemented, including the customization of the platform to the Massachusetts divorce context and integration of relevant open source 'smart forms' that will be available for individuals using the system. As part of the ongoing collaboration, the AAA, ODR.com and Portable/ are providing design process expertise, input, and technical support during the first phase of the project.

Also, during the project's first year, Suffolk launched an information gathering process to gain input from and identify needs of relevant community stakeholders, including not only users, but Massachusetts family law courts and relevant legal services providers.<sup>33</sup> Suffolk hired a community liaison in 2025 for this role, and she began her work immediately.<sup>34</sup> Finally, at the end of the project's first year,

---

32. See ODR.COM, <https://odr.com/> [<https://perma.cc/TE4V-RXXY>] (last visited Nov. 8, 2025); PORTABLE, <https://portable.com.au/work/settle-online-dispute-resolution> [<https://perma.cc/JQ4Y-7VQC>] (last visited Nov. 8, 2025).

33. See *infra* Section III.

34. Jackie Harvey was hired as a Clinical Fellow to be the community liaison contact with a focus on family advocacy. She also participated in the ODR Innovation Lab course offered during the Spring 2025 semester. See generally *Clinical Faculty & Staff*, SUFFOLK UNIV. L. SCH.,

Suffolk also hired its first director for its ODR Innovation Clinic, Chief Justice John D. Casey, former Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Family and Probate Court, who has pioneered case management innovations to increase court access. His work with the AAA-Suffolk ODR Innovation Clinic began in July 2025.<sup>35</sup>

During the project's second year, commencing in August 2025, Suffolk formally launched the ODR Innovation Clinic, which will serve as the basis for student involvement in all core stages of the project going forward. Using the ODR.com platform provided and licensed by AAA, Suffolk students will continue to work with in-house and external technology partners to design and configure an ODR interface that meets the needs of the community, advances best practices in dispute resolution, and uses open-source technology where possible. Suffolk students will build a suite of open-source 'smart forms' supported by Suffolk's Legal Innovation & Technology Lab (LIT Lab), which allows users to enter into the low-conflict divorce ODR.com workflow. Suffolk will endeavor to design this interface in coordination with Massachusetts courts, so that it can be integrated into their existing processes and filing systems. Suffolk will also beta-test the interface, smart forms, and any supporting software and make corresponding adjustments to the ODR.com tools and workflows.

In year three the ODR Innovation Clinic will become operational. Suffolk will work closely with courts and community organizations to introduce users to the platform and workflows created through the project. Students enrolled in the clinic will not only continue to improve the system, but will also work with the live client users of it, including assisting them with using the platform and ODR tools, reviewing their submissions, possibly mediating disputes (for example, division of property disputes, under the supervision of clinical professors) if parties need that assistance, and attending the eventual hearing before the family court. The clinic will

---

<https://www.suffolk.edu/law/academics-clinics/clinics-experiential-opportunities/clinics/clinical-faculty-staff> [https://perma.cc/HL6P-S998] (last visited Nov. 28, 2025).

35. Judge Casey served in the Massachusetts Probate and Family Court for 19 years, becoming Chief Justice in 2018. His experience across fourteen divisions of the family court has given him unique insights into the systemic challenges the clinic aims to address, and the initiative will benefit enormously from his involvement. See *Suffolk Law Names Former Chief Justice of Family Court to Lead Cutting-Edge Clinic*, SUFFOLK UNIV. BOSTON (Jul. 27, 2025), <https://www.suffolk.edu/news-features/news/2025/07/28/16/36/suffolk-law-names-former-chief-justice-of-family-court-to-lead-cutting-edge-clinic> [https://perma.cc/MF69-8NPT].

continue to refine the workflows, tools, and process developed based on user experience.

In addition, the clinic will begin to capture and analyze data from the pilot project to measure outcomes and identify areas for future improvement and growth. Suffolk faculty and students will produce and disseminate a white paper or other forms of scholarly reports detailing processes and outcomes and sharing best practices. Finally, Suffolk and the AAA will work collaboratively to reach out to other courts, ODR professionals, and constituencies within and outside of Massachusetts, as well as media outlets, to lay foundation for replication and expansion to other law schools, jurisdictions, and eventually other areas of law.

### *B. The Role of Students: From Theory to Practice*

At the initial stages, rather than representing individual clients, clinic students will work in interdisciplinary teams, with the support of LIT Lab<sup>36</sup> and AAA's ODR.com designers and technologists, to conceptualize and design an appropriate ODR system for the 1A divorce process. At this early stage, their hypothetical clients are, in effect, the public—the thousands of unrepresented individuals who will need help navigating legal processes for an uncontested divorce in Massachusetts. This shift in orientation, from advocacy for one to access for many, expands the scope and ambition of clinical legal education.

Students, under the supervision of resident clinical faculty, are performing three core functions: (1) designing an ODR process and workflow, as well as the legal tech tools to support the 1A uncontested divorce service in Massachusetts; (2) eventually assisting clients in utilizing the divorce platform's ODR tools and services, including mediating (and possibly arbitrating, if the parties elect to do so) disputes that arise in the process, and appearing at the eventual required court

---

36. In building this tool, the ODR Innovation clinic will draw heavily on the technical expertise and pedagogical models developed within Suffolk's LIT Lab, which has previously designed smartforms and data tools used by courts across multiple states, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. *See Select Projects*, SUFFOLK LIT LAB, <https://www.suffolk.edu/litlab> [<https://perma.cc/5DQE-SQJY>] (last visited Nov. 8, 2025). This capacity for rapid, impactful legal tech development—when integrated into a clinical setting—places Suffolk's ODR clinic at the intersection of innovation, experiential learning, and service.

hearing; and (3) collaborating with judges, clerks, and court personnel to refine the services and foster a stream of intake for the clinic.

The goal for the ODR system is to develop a user-centered platform that guides parties through every step of the uncontested 1A divorce process using interactive modules, plain-language explanations, document automation, and when appropriate, integrated human support. Clinicians are designing the system to:

- Determine upfront eligibility and jurisdictional requirements;
- Facilitate step-by-step data collection (akin to TurboTax-style guided interviews);
- Generate all necessary court documents (including the Joint Petition, Separation Agreement, Financial Statements, Affidavits, and Child Support Worksheets) in a format that complies with court forms and e-filing requirements;
- Connect directly to the courts to permit e-filing of all required documents;
- Eventually provide greater language access (e.g., Spanish and Portuguese, among other languages spoken in Massachusetts);
- Incorporate important data privacy and system security protections;
- For appropriate divorce cases, provide mediation (and possibly arbitration) services; and
- Offer asynchronous and live support from law students working under faculty supervision.

Students in the ODR Innovation Clinic are not passive observers but active co-creators and legal designers. Their work spans legal research, platform testing, workflow mapping, community engagement, and client support. Some of the tasks on which clinic students will assist include:

- Drafting plain-language prompts and videos for the ODR system;
- Conducting user testing and refining features, with a focus on ease of use and accessibility;
- Serving on virtual help desks to answer users' questions by guiding them through interviews and form preparation. User will be able to message, phone or video conference with students during designated hours to request assistance. These features are intended to reintroduce human contact into the ODR process and reinforce user understanding and trust;
- Reviewing forms for completeness, accuracy, and procedural compliance before submission;
- Participating virtual mediation or supporting parties through dispute resolution modules when disputes arise (e.g., over property allocation); and
- Representing clients in final uncontested divorce hearings in Probate and Family Court under Massachusetts SJC Rule 3:03, which authorizes student practice under faculty supervision.<sup>37</sup>

This immersive model provides a unique blend of doctrinal, procedural, technological, and practical lawyering skills, positioning students to be skilled in both client service and legal innovation. The goal is for the experience at Suffolk Law to demonstrate that law schools can, and should, function as incubators for court-integrated ODR systems that are human-centered, trustworthy, and accessible.

This model allows students to work at the intersection of law, technology, and social justice. In the words of one student, "I had not really considered how technology could be integrated into [the dispute resolution] space or just how far legal innovation could go. . . . But this course challenged that assumption and showed me just how powerful

---

37. See S.J.C. Rule 3:03, as amended, 418 Mass. 1302 (1994) (Student Practice Rule authorizing supervised student representation in courts and administrative agencies).

technology can be in the legal field.”<sup>38</sup>

The clinic also benefits from a cross-disciplinary sensibility. Many students bring to the clinic not only their legal training, but also lived experiences with divorce, language barriers, and digital tools. Some students come from backgrounds similar to those of the users they will serve—first-generation college students, immigrant families, or individuals with lived experience in the court system. Their contributions are informed by a personal commitment to justice. Their perspectives enrich the clinic’s design approach and affirm the pedagogical value of giving students real-world problems with tangible stakes. The AAA-ODR Innovation Clinic thus modeled a pedagogical approach that is at once deeply practical and intellectually rigorous. With the first phases’ ODR Design Lab course, it already challenged students to engage with the law not only as rules to be applied, but as systems to be questioned, redesigned, and made more humane. As one student put it:

This project undoubtedly reshaped the way I think about legal innovation. It is not just about making processes faster or more efficient, it is also about centering the needs of those who are set to benefit the most from the proposed idea. One of my biggest takeaways from the course is that design can support access to justice in very real ways. ODR is not just useful, it is necessary and crucial in today’s modern legal landscape.<sup>39</sup>

In sum, the AAA-ODR Innovation Clinic exemplifies a new dimension for the model of legal education: one that is experiential, interdisciplinary, user-focused, technology and justice-driven. By giving students the tools to build systems—and not just navigate them—it cultivates a generation of lawyers who are not only competent practitioners but also reform-minded innovators. The Suffolk AAA-ODR Innovation Clinic is not only a platform for system-building—it is a laboratory for teaching law students how to engage with legal practice in new ways. In contrast to doctrinal courses focused on appellate cases or litigation strategies, the clinic will immerse students in problem-solving that requires empathy, creativity, collaboration,

---

38. See Alessandra T. Pena, *Designing Justice: Reflections on Building an ODR Workflow for 1A Divorces 1* (May 8, 2025) (unpublished manuscript) (on file with author).

39. *Id.* at 5.

and technological fluency.

### III. LESSONS FROM INITIAL COMMUNITY OUTREACH

A distinguishing feature of the Suffolk AAA-ODR Innovation Clinic's methodology is its iterative, community-informed approach. Designing a successful ODR system for family law requires more than coding legal workflows or automating forms. If the technology is to serve the communities most impacted by access-to-justice barriers, it must involve the users and relevant institutions. To that end, the AAA-ODR Innovation Clinic has begun to conduct extensive community outreach and will continue to do so (including usability testing) throughout the development of its 1A divorce platform.

The clinic's outreach efforts, led in part by a designated community liaison, Jackie Harvey, has already conducted direct interviews and consultations with a diverse group of stakeholders:<sup>40</sup>

- Judges and magistrates from the Massachusetts Probate and Family Court
- Judicial case managers and assistant registrars
- Staff from the Court Service Centers and Trial Court IT Department
- Legal aid attorneys, volunteer lawyers, and family service organizations
- Local mediators and community dispute resolution centers

Jackie Harvey has also consulted with nonprofit legal organizations, including the Volunteer Lawyers Project of the Boston Bar Association, Greater Brockton Center for Dispute Resolution, and the Council on Family Mediation. Additional meetings were scheduled with Greater Boston Legal Services, South Coastal Legal, and staff from the Judicial Institute at the Executive Office of the Trial Court.<sup>41</sup>

---

40. See Jackie Harvey, Online Dispute Resolution Innovation Clinic (ODR Clinic) Community Outreach Summary 1 (2025) (unpublished manuscript) (on file with author).

41. *Id.*

As the clinic gets up-and-running, law students will also become more involved in these consultations.

As stated by Jackie Harvey:

Community members confirmed that there is a lack of affordable and readily available alternative dispute resolution resources for *pro se* litigants, and that the ODR platform can be at the forefront of filling that significant need in the community. In fact, many community resources face conflicts that inhibit effective conflict resolution participation with both parties.<sup>42</sup>

On an encouraging note, Jackie Harvey also reported that “Members of the community have expressed strong enthusiasm for the ODR Clinic, viewing it as a meaningful step toward bridging the gap between problems and accessible solutions that can span across the Commonwealth.”<sup>43</sup>

Jackie Harvey summarized her initial findings focusing on four areas of improvement: (1) litigants’ general lack of understanding procedural intricacies and required disclosures; (2) language barriers; (3) access to technology; and (4) identified challenges with online platforms and direct court filings.<sup>44</sup> Jackie Harvey suggests that, to help address these needs:

[T]he ODR platform could provide assistance by preparing supplemental information guiding litigants on the intricacies of the divorce process, including a simplistic explanation of the court process and its expectations, explanations of legal terminology, and guided prompts for consideration when preparing separation agreements. Additionally, the ODR platform should prepare these resources in various formats to ensure accessibility, such as audio-visual and text-based, in as many languages as possible.<sup>45</sup>

---

42. *Id.* at 1.

43. *Id.* at 3.

44. *Id.* at 1.

45. *Id.*

### *A. Lack of Understanding*

Jackie Harvey reports that “*pro se* litigants often enter the divorce process with little to no understanding of what to expect, what is required of them, or how the outcome may impact their lives following entry of the divorce judgment.”<sup>46</sup> There is a lack of publicly available resources that provide step by step instructions tailored to the intricacies of the Massachusetts divorce process. Further, Jackie Harvey finds:

It has been reported that many *pro se* litigants choose not to disclose certain information out of lack of trust or understanding of the process, particularly when it is unclear to *pro se* litigants why the court requires specific information pertaining to their personal life. For example, financial statements and joint petitions are frequently completed incorrectly or inaccurately, with individuals either failing to respond directly to the question or withholding information based on the belief that it is not relevant to the divorce.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, Jackie Harvey states that existing court forms are reportedly difficult to interpret due, in part, to the use of ‘legalese.’ Many individuals struggle to grasp the legal implications of complex terms, selecting options without understanding their legal significance or leaving entire sections blank.<sup>48</sup>

Through her community outreach, Jackie Harvey reported that “a recurring theme in community feedback was the lack of accessible resources to guide individuals through the intricacies of the divorce process.”<sup>49</sup> Her findings emphasized that:<sup>50</sup>

- The ODR platform should provide a simplistic overview of the Probate and Family Court, its expectations regarding documentation, and an

---

46. *Id.* at 2.

47. *Id.*

48. *Id.*; *see also* Pena, *supra* note 38, at 3–4 (noting frequent confusion with form terminology and legal disclosures).

49. Harvey, *supra* note 40, at 3.

50. *Id.* at 3–4.

explanation regarding legalese that are riddled throughout the court forms.

- The ODR platform should provide information in various formats such as audio-visual and text-based, and in as many languages as possible, that can provide a clear overview of the process and that can explain why specific information is required.
- The ODR platform should use guided prompts. As previously noted, many court documents are completed inaccurately. By incorporating specific guided prompts that could be followed as the required forms are completed, it will facilitate more accurate and complete responses, reducing the likelihood of delays and rejections by the court.
- The ODR platform could offer an option for parties to submit inquiries directly to the platform. This will allow users to gain confidence in the platform and pose inquiries prior to submission that will assist in alleviating errors that would otherwise be filed with the court.

### *B. Language Barriers*

Massachusetts has a diverse population with different language needs. The top six languages spoken at home in Massachusetts among limited English proficiency speakers are: Spanish (52.4%), Portuguese (18.7%), Chinese including Mandarin and Cantonese (14.9%), Haitian Creole (6.5%), Vietnamese (4.5%), and Russian (3.0%).<sup>51</sup>

Individuals going through a divorce may not be English-first-language speakers, and therefore struggle to comprehend the full scope of the rights and obligations at issue in divorce proceedings.<sup>52</sup> A consistent theme from community outreach is the inadequacy of multilingual support. Court forms

---

51. MASS. IMMIGR. & REFUGEE ADVOC. COAL., LANGUAGE ACCESS AND INCLUSION IN MASSACHUSETTS, (2023), <https://miracoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Language-Access-Factsheet-MIRA-Coalition-2023.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/R4MQ-3HSD>].

52. *Id.* at 2.

are often available only in English, and notices (e.g., deficiency letters or hearing orders) are rarely translated, and users require interpreter services for hearings.<sup>53</sup>

This gap exacerbates mistrust, incomplete filings, and inaccessibility for the limited-English proficient populations. As one student reflected, “[a] language barrier does more than create confusion for *pro se* litigants, it may also convey to them that the system is not meant for them. The lack of language options may even lead users to question if the platform will serve their needs in a fair way.”<sup>54</sup>

Jackie Harvey reports that, with regard to languages, personnel in the IT Department of the Trial Court expressed known challenges regarding online platforms that are designed to e-file court documents.<sup>55</sup>

Specifically, it was noted that while online platforms can be offered in multiple languages, one of the challenges is that court forms need to be submitted to the court in English. If the forms are translated to English, the Trial Court looks for a certificate of translation for each document that has been translated. A second challenge that was highlighted is the notary requirement on the Long Form Financial Statement and separation agreements. As such, the ODR platform will need to address how to best translate documents into an acceptable format for the court and how to offer online notary services.<sup>56</sup>

### *C. Access to Technology (and Choice of Technology)*

Access to technology is an obvious potential barrier, not only for existing court forms, but also to be considered in the development of an ODR platform. Jackie Harvey reports:

In today’s virtually driven society, it’s often assumed that community members have access to online resources to obtain the necessary documents required to file for divorce. For community members who do not have computer access, their court forms are often handwritten, and any effort to access court documents via their cellphones is

---

53. Harvey, *supra* note 40, at 2.

54. Pena, *supra* note 38, at 4 (discussing language access barriers and their emotional impact).

55. Harvey, *supra* note 40, at 3.

56. *Id.*

hindered by the unavailability of mobile device compatible forms. As such, many court forms are not compatible for mobile use, making it difficult to view, complete and submit the forms accurately.<sup>57</sup>

Mobile accessibility is proving to be critical. It is becoming clear that for any litigant—especially those from lower-income households—there is an expectation to access legal resources primarily through smartphones, with limited access to desktop computers or printers. For example, users may expect that they will be able to use smart phones to engage in the online processes, only to discover that court PDFs are not mobile-compatible. Users may also struggle with saving partially completed forms, uploading attachments, or accessing in-progress filings.<sup>58</sup>

These issues reflect a broader digital divide: one shaped not only by income but by device type, digital literacy, and platform usability. If a system is not designed for mobile-compatible use and fails to preserve user progress, *pro se* litigants are more likely to abandon the process or seek expensive help.

#### *D. Trust, Legitimacy, Advertising and Partnerships*

Another major insight concerns user trust in digital platforms. Several student teams in the ODR Design Lab focused on this issue in particular. Concerns were raised whether users would express skepticism about whether the tool was “really from the court” or whether it was ‘safe’ to submit sensitive financial or family information online without understanding how it will be used, stored, and protected. This hesitation aligns with research in public interest technology showing that trust is a key variable in uptake and usage.<sup>59</sup> To address this, the platform must, among other things, clearly state its affiliation with Suffolk University Law School and court partners and include links to official Massachusetts court websites.

---

57. *Id.*

58. See Caitlin Pianka, Final Reflection 2–3 (May 8, 2025) (unpublished manuscript) (on file with author) (highlighting mobile device challenges and form compatibility issues).

59. See Memorandum from Maloney et al. on Designing and Implementing an Automated Workflow for a Mass. § 1A Divorce 4–5 (May 8, 2025) (on file with author) (discussing FIPPs and user concerns over data sharing and platform legitimacy).

The ODR Design Lab students presented potential user questions such as:

- “Is this platform part of the court?”
- “Who can see what I enter?”
- “Can my spouse access everything I say?”
- “What if I change my mind—can I delete my information?”

These questions demonstrate that legal information systems must center on transparency and consent, particularly when built for unsophisticated and marginalized users.

As part of the trust question, and to promote the ODR platform, family law judges have expressed interest in the development of a QR code that would direct court users to the ODR platform. “This QR code could be displayed in courtrooms, registries, and probation departments to ensure easier and widespread access to the platform and its resources.”<sup>60</sup>

Additionally, it was suggested that the AAA-ODR Innovation Clinic partner with a number of established (and trusted) organizations, such as “add[ing] itself to the Eastern Region Legal Intake [sic] (“ERLI”), a project of the Volunteer Lawyers Project.”<sup>61</sup> Finally, Harvey reports the Court Service Center (CSC)<sup>62</sup> expressed an interest in partnering with the ODR Innovation Clinic. She states in her report:

The CSC is typically unable to assist community members with preparing the necessary documents to file for an uncontested divorce. As a result, they have expressed an interest in establishing a referral line, which may include the possibility of pre-screening cases for the

---

60. Harvey, *supra* note 40, at 3.

61. *Id.* (“Each month ERLI publishes an intake update of available legal resources in the community, including their practice area and whether they are open for referrals.”).

62. *Id.* at 3 n.2.

CSC is located in each county throughout the Commonwealth [of Massachusetts]. They also have a virtual line that can be accessed by telephone or Zoom. It was reported that they receive multiple inquires each day regarding 1A divorces, but that they do not have the available resources to assist throughout the process.

*Id.*

clinic. Additionally, they are interested in hosting Suffolk's student attorneys at the Suffolk County CSC to assist users in accessing and navigating the ODR platform.<sup>63</sup>

These initial community outreach findings illustrate that legal design is not a technical problem alone; instead, it should be a human-centered practice, taking into account the users and other stakeholders in the system. By embedding community engagement into every stage of development, the ODR Innovation Clinic hopes to not only improve its product for users and the courts, but also empower students to practice law as a responsive, collaborative discipline.

#### IV. DESIGNING THE ODR PLATFORM FOR MASSACHUSETTS 1A DIVORCES

The centerpiece of the Suffolk AAA-ODR Innovation Clinic's first-year effort has been the design of a guided digital platform to assist self-represented litigants in completing and filing the documents required for a Massachusetts 1A Joint Petition for Divorce. In the ODR Design Lab, four student teams were requested to provide a final project deliverable:

[T]o provide a detailed workflow (e.g., process journey map) of the legal and practical steps that an online DR system must include to facilitate a petition for 1A divorce, (i.e., Joint Petition for Divorce 1A) with the final system capability that any output can be e-Filed with the relevant probate court in Massachusetts.<sup>64</sup>

---

63. *Id.* at 3.

64. Christopher Gibson, Instructions for Team Projects 1 (Mar. 2025) (unpublished manuscript) (on file with author).

(i) The workflow should start at the beginning of any divorce process, include all realistically possible steps and permutations, use terminology that is appropriate for Massachusetts, and end with a set of relevant and vetted documents (e.g., Joint Petition and Separation Agreement) that can be e-filed with a court (or the process otherwise terminated); (ii) The workflow should be developed to address (a) asset allocation (and any alimony), (b) child custody, and (c) child support, (d) e-Filing (and if necessary, affidavit of indigency); and (iii) Each team will provide a set of deliverables that include a pictorial representation of the workflow (using relevant technology applications such as PowerPoint or otherwise), along with detailed supporting memorandum that describes the team's approach.

One student team, given their expressed interest, was also requested “to focus in detail on opportunities for human assistance at relevant places in the DR process, and addressing related legal and practical issues that could arise if Suffolk ODR clinic students are involved at these points.”<sup>65</sup>

The following is a summary based on the student teams’ final reports and workflow requirements:<sup>66</sup>

### 1. Legal and Procedural Context: The Structure of a § 1A Divorce

Under § 1A, spouses may jointly petition for divorce if they both affirm that their marriage has suffered an “irretrievable breakdown” and that they have reached full agreement on all necessary terms, including:

- Division of assets and debts
- Alimony or waiver thereof
- Custody, parenting time, and child support (if minor children are involved)

Even in uncontested cases, judicial approval remains mandatory. The Probate and Family Court requires submission of a comprehensive Separation Agreement, multiple financial disclosures, affidavits, and a final in-person or virtual hearing before the divorce is granted. These requirements—while sensible from a due process standpoint—can frustrate *pro se* litigants who are unfamiliar with legal procedures or are overwhelmed by paperwork.

To ensure compliance with these statutory and court-imposed requirements, the ODR platform developed should incorporate:

- Eligibility filters (residency and mutual agreement);
- Jurisdictional screening;

---

*Id.*

65. *Id.*

66. See Team One et al., ODR Final Presentation (Apr. 2025) (on file with author) (workflow visualization and accompanying memoranda). See generally Team Two et al., Student Glossary of Terms (unpublished manuscript) (on file with author) (defining complex court terminology in user-centered language).

- Guided interviews (similar to Turbo Tax, unless AI provides a more advanced approach), that address required disclosures, child support calculations, and financial statements; and
- Automated document generation aligned with court forms and e-filing rules.

## 2. Workflow Design and Technology Features

The ODR platform should build upon Suffolk’s experience with smart form design and introduce a fully structured end-to-end workflow, drawing inspiration from consumer-facing tools like TurboTax. The process is divided into distinct stages:

### (a) Eligibility and Account Creation

The system begins by screening for basic eligibility:

- Has either party lived in Massachusetts for at least one year, or did the events for why the marriage ended occur in the Massachusetts?
- Are both parties willing to file jointly and affirm an irretrievable breakdown?
- Have they reached agreement on all required issues?

If eligible, each party creates a secure account, selects a preferred language, agrees to terms of service, and is introduced to the overall process via short, accessible videos. The interface will be designed for both smartphone and desktop computer use, recognizing that many low-income users lack desktop access.

### (b) Smart Questionnaires and Data Collection

The parties are guided through interactive modules, each collecting information needed to populate court forms. Topics include:

- Personal data and address history
- Marriage details and jurisdictional facts
- Minor children and any prior custody proceedings

- Financial disclosures (income, expenses, assets, debts)
- Parenting plans and custody preferences
- Alimony decisions and support calculations

Each question must be written in plain English (or translated into other languages), with explanations and optional videos available at relevant steps. The system should automatically populate forms such as the Joint Petition for Divorce (CJD-101A), the Affidavit of Irretrievable Breakdown, the Child Support Worksheet (CJD-304), and the Record of Absolute Divorce (R-408).

(c) Guided Negotiation and Dispute Resolution

If the parties disagree on a particular issue (e.g., weekend parenting schedules or property division), the platform can invoke a negotiation module. Here, the users can:

- Submit preferences privately
- Review each other's positions
- Accept proposed compromises
- Request real-time or asynchronous mediation with a law student mediator under supervision of clinical law faculty

The negotiation tools are designed to preserve the joint filing status of the case by encouraging low-friction dispute resolution before submission.

(d) Document Review and Finalization

Once all modules are complete, the platform should:

- Generate and assemble all required court forms
- Flag any missing information or inconsistencies
- Offer optional review by a clinic student or attorney
- Prompt individual review and electronic signature

- Provide instructions for notarization (including options for remote notarization where allowed)

If both parties approve, the platform generates a filing packet and guides users through the steps to e-file or submit documents in person, including instructions on how to schedule the required 1A hearing.

(e) Accessibility and Language Inclusion

The students prioritized accessibility throughout the ODR platform:

- Language selection should appear at the outset
- All forms and prompts are provided in plain language, with translation tools available
- Videos and visual aids help users understand legal terms
- The platform should be mobile-first, ADA compliant, and designed for low bandwidth environments

(f) Data Privacy, Trust, and User Empowerment

Trust is a critical component of legal technology—particularly in family law, where parties must disclose sensitive financial and personal information. To address these concerns, student teams proposed that the clinic embed both Fair Information Practice Principles (FIPPs) and Privacy by Design into the platform architecture.<sup>67</sup> Key features would include:

- Plain-language privacy statements outlining data use, storage, and third-party access
- Granular consent tools, wherein users can control when and what data is shared, particularly when inviting the other party

---

67. See *Fair Information Practice Principles (FIPPs)*, FED. PRIV. COUNCIL, <https://www.fpc.gov/resources/fipps/> [<https://perma.cc/JAA3-NK5W>] (last visited Nov. 8, 2025); Ann Cavoukian, *Privacy by Design: The 7 Foundational Principles*, PRIV. BY DESIGN <https://www.ipc.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/Resources/pbd-principles.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/J23L-B89B>] (last visited Nov. 8, 2025).

- Encryption for all transmissions, with secure storage compliant with Massachusetts privacy regulations (201 CMR 17.00)
- Clear instructions about how users can access, amend, or delete their data
- Audit trails and accountability logs for all document access and sharing

Student designers were also trained to consider cultural, linguistic, and emotional factors that shape user experience and trust. For example, one design element would include copies of the court seals (under permission from the courts) and welcome videos from judges, helping legitimize the platform in the eyes of skeptical users. The result is not just a tool for document assembly, but a trusted digital companion that walks *pro se* litigants through a difficult moment with dignity, support, and legal accuracy.

In sum, the students emphasized not only a legally valid ODR process, but accessibility and usability. That distinction—between what is legally valid and what is practically helpful—proved crucial to delivering justice in digital form.

## V. BROADER IMPLICATIONS AND REPLICABILITY

The AAA-Suffolk ODR Innovation Clinic's work on Massachusetts 1A divorces is best understood not as an isolated innovation, but hopefully as a scalable, adaptable model for legal education and justice system reform. Its core components—student-involved design, collaboration with ODR and technology partners, courts and community stakeholders, and the use of open-source technology—can build upon existing clinical models for legal education and be replicated in other jurisdictions. AAA and Suffolk Law have made an express commitment in their collaboration to develop an ODR system and tools that can be suitable for adaptation and replication by other law schools across the country.

One of the clinic's key strategic decisions was to focus on a high-volume, standardized process with low levels of factual or legal dispute. This made uncontested 1A divorce an ideal use case. Other states, for

example, California, New York, and Illinois, have similar uncontested divorce tracks that could be mapped and digitized with similar tools.<sup>68</sup> Further, other similar domains have potential as future candidates, including eviction diversion, name changes, small claims, consumer debt actions, and certain probate processes. Each of these areas reflects high self-representation and low legal complexity, making them ripe for process simplification and digital navigation tools. Suffolk's LIT Lab has already extended similar tools for housing in eviction defense, public benefit, and other forms.<sup>69</sup>

However, successful replication requires more than technology. It demands attention to institutional culture, regulatory context, and stakeholder relationships. For example, gaining buy-in from court administrators is essential to ensuring that Suffolk's ODR divorce forms will be capable of being e-filed with the courts and accepted at hearings. Likewise, collaboration with legal aid providers will help align the ODR platform with live client needs and mitigate concerns about digital exclusion.

Other law schools can adapt the Suffolk model by embedding access-to-justice technology within existing clinical or experiential courses. This may include family law clinics, technology and innovation practicums, or capstone projects. Law faculty do not need to be programmers—the author of this article certainly is not. Partnerships with technologists, instructional designers, or university IT staff can help supply the necessary expertise. Moreover, students will often bring surprising levels of digital expertise and/or fluency, and especially motivation, particularly when projects align with their goals.

Replication must also account for digital equity. Any technology-based reform must address disparities in access to devices, Internet connectivity, digital literacy, and language. Suffolk's model will respond by combining digital self-help with live support from students and incorporating user feedback loops. This hybrid approach is essential to building inclusive systems that serve all users—not just the digitally privileged.

Finally, scalability requires rigorous evaluation. Suffolk's AAA-ODR

---

68. See e.g., N.Y. DOM. REL. LAW § 170(7) (McKinney 2024); CAL. FAM. CODE § 2330 (West 2025); 750 ILL. COMP. STAT. 5/401(a-5) (2025).

69. See *About the LIT Lab*, SUFFOLK LIT LAB, <https://suffolklitlab.org> [<https://perma.cc/A4F8-CG2H>] (last visited Nov. 8, 2025).

Innovation Clinic will collect usage metrics, error rates, and outcome data to assess impact. Clinical legal education programs are well-positioned to lead such evaluations, as they blend service delivery with academic rigor and reflection. In sum, the Suffolk ODR Innovation Clinic hopefully presents a replicable framework for integrating legal technology into clinical education while advancing access to justice. Its success reflects the power of interdisciplinary collaboration, student leadership, and user-centered design. By embracing this model, law schools across the country—and beyond—can reimagine their role in a justice system struggling to meet the needs of the people it serves.

#### CONCLUSION: TECHNOLOGY WITH HUMANITY AT THE CORE

The AAA-Suffolk ODR Innovation Clinic illustrates what is possible when legal education, public service, and technological innovation converge. Within the first phase of the project, students have not only mastered complex legal doctrine and procedure, they have begun to design a digital platform that will help thousands of people obtain life-altering relief through an uncontested divorce ODR process. They have started with empathy, creativity, and rigor—conceptualizing how the tools of the digital age can be brought to bear on one of the most persistent challenges in American family law.

In the past, legal reform efforts too frequently framed technology and tradition as oppositional. But the ODR Innovation Clinic's work shows that the values of the profession—professionalism, clarity, equity, fairness—can be advanced, not undermined, by technology when it is developed with purpose. The ODR platform students have envisaged is not a substitute for legal advice; it is a bridge to justice for those who might otherwise be excluded from it.

The project also offers a new vision of what law students can—and should—be learning. In an era of automation, AI tools, and growing demand for accessible services, legal education must move beyond doctrinal mastery and sole reliance on human-based interventions and advice. It must prepare students to think like designers, act like translators, and lead like reformers. The future of law will belong to those who can navigate complexity while keeping users at the center of their work.

The AAA-ODR Innovation Clinic offers a working model of public interest technology in legal education. It shows how law schools can be engines of social good, producing not only knowledge but usable tools. This civic mission is particularly urgent in family law, where court systems too often fail those without lawyers, and where modest technological gains can have disproportionate impacts. The lesson of this project is not that technology will solve all problems; many users still need in-person help, and many systems remain exclusionary. But the clinic hopes to demonstrate that legal technology, when built by those closest to its users, can close gaps, reduce burdens, and restore a measure of dignity to legal processes. As one student in Suffolk's ODR Design Lab reflected, "I leave the course with a greater understanding of the opportunities and responsibilities that come with designing legal technology, and a renewed commitment to advancing access to justice in my future career."<sup>70</sup> That sentiment may be the clinic's greatest success.

In a world of rising caseloads, shrinking budgets, and urgent demands for justice, we cannot afford to ignore technology tools that can present new opportunities for bridging the access to justice gap. The AAA-Suffolk ODR Innovation Clinic is one such tool. Its impact, and its example, deserve attention—not only from legal educators and technologists, but from the profession as a whole. The Suffolk experience hopes to demonstrate that, with thoughtful design and interdisciplinary collaboration, ODR systems can be human-centered, trusted, accessible, and educationally enriching—reshaping both the practice of family law and the landscape of legal education.

---

70. Devin Webster, Final Reflection Paper 4 (May 8, 2025) (unpublished manuscript) (on file with author).

