

If you're going to court without a lawyer, this startup can help you navigate the system

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Every year in this country, millions of Americans head to court without a lawyer, even though it leaves them at a distinct disadvantage in many cases.

In some states, up to 80% to 90% of civil cases involve an unrepresented litigant—and often they are [low-income](#) or a member of a vulnerable population, a 2015 study from the George Washington University Law School found.

The same study found this was especially true in landlord-tenant matters, where it is typical for 90% of tenants to represent themselves while 90% of landlords appear with counsel.

Many people who are falling behind on debt payment or their mortgage don't have the money to pay a lawyer. And without representation, some litigants, overwhelmed by trying to navigate complicated processes, might not even show up.

The consequences are very real. In landlord-tenant matters, it can lead to someone losing their home.

A Durham startup, about to graduate from one of the largest startup accelerators in the country, thinks it can help those who can't afford expensive counsel in civil cases.

Courtroom5 was founded by professors Sonja Ebron and Debra Slone—Ebron taught electrical engineering and Slone information and library science—and operates as a management platform for people who choose to represent themselves in court. The company's platform offers a step-by-step guide to navigating civil cases, helps litigants know what paperwork or information they will need, and provides automated templates to write pleadings and motions.

"People are very intimidated when they go to see a lawyer, or when they go to see a judge. But civil procedure is just about what information they are asking," said Ebron, who previously taught [electrical engineering](#). " ... We give that information to help them answer that question and

choose from a limited set of options."

Ebron believes the platform is more needed than ever, as cases pile up waiting to be heard in court because of the coronavirus pandemic. In recent weeks, Ebron added, the company's site has seen a surge in traffic from people researching information on wrongful termination, debt collection and evictions.

With millions pushed into unemployment because of the pandemic, paying for a lawyer might be out of the question. Ebron believes that Courtroom5 can provide some recourse for people who have little knowledge of how to navigate the court house.

"Our goal is to give people a chance," she said.

Ebron noted that people of color face the brunt of these cases, especially when it comes to eviction cases and debt collections.

Courtroom5 itself—one of the few Triangle startups founded by Black women—was started because of its founders' experiences navigating foreclosure and debt collection cases.

Courtrooms are stacked with debt-collection cases against Black people, Ebron noted. Indeed, a ProPublica investigation from 2015 found that debt-collection cases are concentrated in Black neighborhoods, and companies are increasingly using the courts to pursue even small consumer debts.

That message seems to be resonating for the young startup. The company was chosen to be part of a Techstars startup accelerator in Kansas City that offers training, mentorship and access to capital.

The company raised \$120,000 from the accelerator, and Ebron said

Courtroom5 is meeting with more investors.

Before joining Techstars, the startup won a pitch competition at last year's Google-sponsored 2019 Black Founders Exchange at the American Underground. Courtroom 5 also took part in the Duke Law Tech Lab program and the LexisNexis Legal Tech Accelerator.

With help from mentors at the accelerator, Courtroom5 is relaunching its service with a new design and pricing model. It's also exploring adding new features.

In addition to its step-by-step guide, Courtroom5 offers courses and workshops on how to represent yourself in court. And while the company cannot offer advice or employ its own lawyers, it hopes to add a matchmaking service that would connect clients with lawyers on an a la carte basis.

"There are times where you want to have a phone consultation or have a lawyer go argue a motion," Ebron said. "We want to have lawyers available on a task basis. Not full representation ... but users might be happy to spend a few hundred dollars to have someone argue a motion or \$50 for a phone conversation."

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