

IX. LEGAL REFERENCE AND LEGAL ADVICE

Legal research can be difficult and time-consuming. In addition, librarians must be aware of the gray area that divides reference assistance from the unauthorized practice of law. When helping library users with legal research questions, librarians may need to inform the patron that the librarian cannot make judgments on the relevance of facts, nor provide explanation, interpretation or analysis of the legal research results. To do so would be to engage in the unauthorized practice of law, which is illegal.

This does not mean, however, that a librarian cannot provide the usual level of assistance to a patron simply because the patron's question is of a legal nature. Here are some suggestions for working with the "pro se" library user:

- Demonstrate how to use the legal tools with general topically-relevant examples, rather than asking for the specific facts of the patron's personal situation to conduct the search.
- Include self-help books on legal topics in your library collection.
- Draw up a written policy statement on the provision of legal reference services.
- Always feel free to contact a law librarian for assistance with your legal research questions.
- When appropriate, encourage users to seek professional advice from an attorney.
- Keep a file of local legal services organizations for those who cannot afford the expense of retaining a lawyer.

For Legal Information Assistance/Sources in Wisconsin, see Appendix E.