



Going Public

How law libraries of all types and sizes serve the general population

Law librarians provide a wide array of services to the legal community, including reference help, collection development, and technical services.

However, one of the most important, albeit one of the most challenging, aspects of our profession is assisting those who may be the true end-users of the information we provide—the public at large. This type of patron, who is typically untrained in the law or legal research, stands to benefit the most from our expertise.

Concern and Compliance

There are a variety of reasons and ways in which law librarians serve the public. Many academic, court, and federal agency law libraries are federal depository libraries and are thus mandated to be open to the public. As Federal Reserve Board Law Librarian Rick McKinney points out, any Internet sites that these and other law libraries develop, such as Cornell's Legal Information Institute, Washlaw, LLSDC's Legislative Source Book, or AALLNET, are also available to the general public. Legal research information and assistance developed by law librarians is disseminated and circulated in the public domain either directly or indirectly.

Some law libraries are further obligated under state law to be available to the public. According to Maureen Well, director of law libraries for the Connecticut Judicial Branch Law Library System in Hartford, the county law libraries or state trial court libraries are

administered as a system through the judicial branch. There are 15 public law libraries in the system. By statute these libraries serve the courts and citizens of the state.

As part of that statute, they continually strive to improve public services. A Services Coordination Workgroup recently completed its charge of identifying and implementing methods for coordinating, complementing, and sharing information about services and resources. The various chief clerks and deputy chief clerks meet quarterly with law librarians and court service center managers. The purpose of these meetings is to share ideas and to coordinate the efforts of the various offices.

Connecting in the Library

Most commonly, the public comes into contact with law librarians at a public law library, such as a state or county law library. Service is a guiding principle of these law librarians' work, and the public at large usually makes up the largest contingent of its users. This often means striving to educate users while they are in the library.

It may be as simple as putting together information on a particular topic. Maria Sosnowski, librarian at the Clark County Law Library in Vancouver, Washington, describes how a local attorney drew up an eviction kit. The librarians sell this kit in the law library, she says. They inform interested members of the public about the kit, including the local landlord association, local libraries, the sheriff's office, and the

police. Many law libraries use similar approaches, making information on particular topics available in print at their reference or circulation desks or electronically on their Web sites.

At the King County Law Library in Washington State, librarians offer a Legal Research and Training Center with training classes on subjects ranging from civil procedure to searching legal information databases. They also answer questions via e-mail and chats. They have asked patrons to submit stories about how the law library has helped them and soon expect to post the results to a Web site.

In Maine, the state law library and the legislative reference library are a single library, according to Lynn Randall, state law librarian. The collection and services are completely integrated, providing one-stop shopping for information to all citizens about the work of the government, especially the work of the legislature, both current and historical. The library maintains an extensive collection of biographical resources on Maine legislators, judges, and attorneys. Some public patrons use this to help in genealogical research. The collection also includes materials written for people without legal training, broken down by area of interest. For example, people who own crafts businesses, people who publish newsletters, and people who manage bands can all find help here. As many legislative reference libraries do, the library clips newspaper articles on topics of statewide



by James Kelly

interest, but it tries to make these more broadly available. The library also conducts classes for students to learn about government and research legislation.

Other libraries, though not truly fitting in the definition of traditional public law libraries, nonetheless find themselves called upon to serve the public. For instance, Mary Ann Parker is the senior librarian for the Sacramento Department of Water Resources (DWR) law library. Though DWR is a state agency, the library most closely resembles a corporate law library. As a public agency, however, members of the public can call the main number for DWR with questions about water and water service. Sometimes these questions do relate to the law, and the call may be forwarded to the law library. Often it is simply a matter of accessing the state code or regulations online and directing the person to the correct site, but if the person requires more involved legal research, Parker directs them to the county law library where they can find more publicly available information.

While they may not be as visible to the public, firm librarians often provide service indirectly to the public. For example, a firm librarian may assist an attorney with pro bono cases. Vija Doks, assistant librarian at Baker McKenzie LLP in New York, formerly worked for Coudert Brothers. There, the librarians helped the lawyers on a couple of death row cases, including the Don Paradis case in Idaho, which received national television coverage.

Outreach

Many county law librarians point out that they work closely with the local public library, serving to educate the public library's staff and patrons. For example, Sosnowski has worked toward reaching out to patrons who might not go to a law library, whether because they do not know about it or have difficulty coming in. The librarians strive to get information out to the public through the general public library and other channels. They recently invited reference librarians from the local public

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library to see the collection, ask questions, and learn about services the library provides. The library made collection development suggestions for those law-related questions the public reference librarians most frequently hear from their patrons. They are planning future presentations for public reference librarians about legal information available online. Other county law librarians recognize that working with the public library is a great opportunity to let libraries of all types know that law libraries are

available to support their legal reference questions and their patrons.

The Kane County Law Library in St. Charles, Illinois, is very active in assisting and reaching out to the general public. It holds an annual “Family Reading Night with the Judges,” in conjunction with the Illinois State Library Family Reading Night, where three judges read bedtime stories to children in second grade and younger, followed by a courtroom tour. The program promotes quality family time and literacy. Positive interaction between the public and the judiciary, says Library Director Halle Mikyska, will make people more comfortable with the judicial system and break down any preconceived negative ideas.

The Kane County Law Library also hosts an annual Boy Scout Law Merit Badge Day where people from the various courthouse departments, such as the sheriff, public defenders, private attorneys, jury commissioners, and court reporters, talk to the scouts about their jobs and roles in the legal system. In the afternoon, local attorneys and judges volunteer their time to conduct mock trials, with the Boy Scouts acting as jurors.

Local high schools and community colleges are important areas of outreach. The Kane County Law Library assists area high schools mock trial teams and a local community college paralegal program. Currently it is in the process of applying for a grant to develop a self-help legal center where information will be available to all via the Internet, with terminals and publications available in the law library.

How to Reach out to the Public

Examples from fellow law libraries

- Make information useful to the public available in print at reference or circulation desks or electronically on your Web site.
- Offer classes to the public on subjects such as civil procedure, government, or searching legal information databases.
- Answer questions from the public via e-mail and/or online chat.
- Include in your collection materials written for people without legal training, broken down by area of interest. For example, provide information for people who own their own business.
- Invite reference librarians from the local public library to see the collection, ask questions, and learn about services the library provides. Make collection development suggestions for those law-related questions that public reference librarians most frequently hear from their patrons.
- Hold annual public outreach events, such as “Family Reading Night with the Judges,” where judges read stories to children, or Boy Scout Law Merit Badge Day, where various courthouse departments talk to the scouts about their jobs and roles in the legal system.
- Assist area high school mock trial teams and local community college paralegal programs.

Lisa Mecklenberg Jackson, legislative librarian at the Montana Legislative Reference Center in Helena, refers to a resource guide titled, “The Value of a Public Law Library” (available at www.aallnet.org/sis/sccll/pdfs/Sccllguide2.pdf). Published by the AALL State, Court, and County Law Library (SCCLL) Special Interest Section, the guide details more examples of public law library outreach and describes several marketing opportunities.

In addition to individual law libraries, area law librarian associations often have outreach programs. For instance, Andrea Battel, branch librarian at the U.S. Court of Appeals Branch Library in Newark, serves on the New Jersey Law Librarians Association Outreach Education Committee. Among the committee’s objectives are promoting the value of law libraries and fostering the availability of legal information to the general public. One of the ways the committee accomplishes its objectives is by offering educational programs to public librarians, teaching them how to assist their patrons with finding the law, including providing information about county law libraries for purposes of referral. The program covers, in both print and electronic versions, case law, statutes and legislation, administrative law, and secondary sources. In addition, the committee presents a segment on how to help patrons who are unfamiliar with the legal process and/or court system.

Similarly, from June 2004 through April 2005, the Minnesota Association of Law Libraries (MALL) trained public library staff to use legal resources on the Internet. Volunteers from MALL visited nearly 14 libraries throughout the state to provide a one-day class on resources that could be used with public library patrons. Aimee Blatz, managing librarian with Thomson West, says the workshops were funded by a Gates Grant.

Challenging, yet Satisfying

For law librarians of all types, working with the general public can be trying, but also incredibly satisfying. Often the people who come in do not expect to do their own research; they want someone to give them direct answers to specific problems. This, as several of my colleagues suggest, has led to some disgruntled patrons. Many are low income; some may have emotional or mental problems. More than a few seem to suspect that we hold back answers.

One of the other difficulties in dealing with the public patron, Randall points out, is that many use the law library only once, when they have a specific information need. They recognize the importance of the law library, but they do not see it as an integral part of their lives or community. This can be especially frustrating to public law librarians, where public patrons constitute the largest percentage of users.

On the other hand, unlike lawyers, professors, and students, public patrons are the ones who most need, and ultimately will most benefit from, the information we can help them locate.

This article describes only a handful of the many ways law librarians help the public. Programs, such as those described here, help educate the public about the law library and librarians’ existence and abilities.



photo by Craig Burgess

The public usually comes into contact with law librarians at a public law library, such as a state or county law library. Service is a guiding principle of these law librarians’ work, which often means striving to educate users while they are in the library.

Outreach programs serve to take this education beyond the physical walls of the library. As indicated in a couple of the stories, grants may be available for this type of work.

It is important, in this era of instantaneous information that law librarians continue to reach out to the public who do not know about the services law libraries provide. ■

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