

L-2:

Internet Reference and the Non-Law Patron:

Dangers,
Policies,
and
Solutions

by *Karlye Pillai*

While Program E-2 ("It's All In the Books, Right?"—reviewed on page 30) concentrated on electronic resources and an emerging professional ethical standard to research in multiple formats, the Internet Reference program brought the attendee full circle back to the patron—the offsite patron using the electronic medium to pose questions. What strategies can modern law libraries adopt to address Internet reference?

In noting that librarians often feel a moral imperative to provide information to a requestor, moderator **Pat Court** (Cornell Law Library) gave some observations of

her own and shared thoughts from **Laura Orr-Waters** (Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Library). In using staff time to respond to free form e-mail reference or more structured Web forms, might the "outside" patron begin to receive better service than the primary patron? Perhaps staff energy is better spent working locally rather than globally? For this reason, some reference units limit responses to referrals to other institutions or to Web sources when addressing electronic requests.

By building skills within and offering support to public libraries, **Marsha Thomas** (University of Utah, S.J. Quinney Law Library) suggested several concrete steps that law librarians could take to curtail electronic reference. Among her suggestions: visit the libraries to develop a personal relationship; offer to analyze their collections and make some collection development suggestions (possibly a two-way street); create a legal referral list of sites, agencies, and services; direct them to the Library Toolkit, developed as a LIS/SIS project (www.aallnet.org/sis/lisp/toolkit.htm); give a presentation on legal research during a brown bag; and offer to do a presentation at a meeting of the state library association.

Having concluded that costs in initiating a formal e-mail reference service would largely be in staff time, **Debby Norwood** (Washington State Law Library) reported on a pilot (translation:

easy to stop if it doesn't work) project at the Washington State Law Library in which the form design offers staff both limited protection and control. The form (designed by the staff) displays a copyright warning, Internet security limitations warning, and a caveat on provision of legal advice to the patron before a request is made. In addition, the forms request the patron's e-mail address as well as city and state information; date by which information is needed; and an indication of any resources already consulted. The response is also structured and typically includes: a request restatement; some suggested reference steps; and direction to the law library's Web reader guides, with hyperlinks to sources.

All presenters kept the attendees' attention, and both well-prepared handouts freed attendees to listen and absorb rather than frantically take notes. This is the kind of program that should make employers willing to sponsor attendance. If the subject seemed appropriate to emulate, the presenters provided enough concrete information to have a blueprint to implement.

Karlye Pillai (kpillai@pppmail.appliedtheory.com) is Senior Law Librarian at the Supreme Court Library in Troy, New York.



photo credits on page 21