Public Libraries and Access to Justice: #2. The Role of Public Libraries

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Editorial Panel

- Melissa Barr, Ohio
- Judy Helms, Travis County Law Library
- Bonnie Hough, California AOC
- Liz Keith, Pro Bono Net
- Marcia Koslov, LA Law Library
Public librarians are the front line for access to justice, but in the role of navigator, not legal experts. Public librarians who have not been trained on legal reference want to hide under the desk when legal patrons appear. As reference librarians, we are used to being able to find answers, but in the legal field this can be difficult. This conference will showcase various programs for training public librarians in legal reference.
Materials include stories from California, Montana, Texas, Ohio and New York. We will discuss benefits to public libraries, the courts, law libraries, Legal Aid, and your communities. We will show you websites and software already being used to help SRLs – jargon for self-represented litigants, NOT summer reading lists! SRLs are also called *pro se* patrons – that’s *pro se*, two words, not prose. You should pick up some of the legal jargon as we continue. Please remember that we are not trying to turn you into lawyers or paralegals or legal assistants. This program is intended to enhance your reference skills so you may climb out from under the reference desk and face your legal patrons with confidence.
II-A. LA Law Library

- 8 Branch Locations in Courthouses
  - Open 4 hours per day
  - Paraprofessional Staff
  - Lack Technology
  - Older collection / Not maintained
LA Law Library: Pasadena

- Pasadena Public Library
  - New leadership
  - Mid-size public library
  - Government document collection
  - General public legal materials
LA Law Library – Pasadena Partnership

- LA Law Library
  - Moved law practice materials
  - Maintain the collection
  - Provide training to staff
  - Provide training to public
  - Provide online service
LA Law Library – Pasadena Partnership

- Pasadena
  - Provided shelf space
  - Reclassified all legal materials together
  - File and shelve materials in timely manner
  - Provided technology
  - 9 – 9 and weekends
  - Professional Staff
LA Law Library: Compton

- Compton Courthouse
  - Needed Library Space
  - Presiding Judge Request

- Los Angeles County Public Library
  - Compton Library undergoing renovation
LA Law Library – LACPL Partnership

• LA Law Library
  – Moved law practice materials
  – Maintain the collection
  – Provide training to staff
  – Provide online service
**LA Law Library – LACPL Partnership**

- Compton
  - Totally Renovated Library
  - Provided shelf space
  - Left LA Law materials together
  - Agreed to update Nolo Press materials
  - Provided technology
  - Evening and Weekend Hours
  - Professional Staff
II-B. Stories and Examples -- Montana
One public law library: [www.court.mt.gov/library](http://www.court.mt.gov/library). They partner with public libraries in many ways, through connections at the State Library, through the Federation coordinators, directly with the larger, urban public libraries, and with the Montana Library Association.

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**Early Identification of Public Libraries’ Potential**

- In Montana, there is only one public law library.

- But there are wonderful public libraries, who are critical community partners.
Here is a list of the Federations: [http://msl.mt.gov/For_Librarians/For_All_Librarians/Federations/Federation_Notebook/default.asp](http://msl.mt.gov/For_Librarians/For_All_Librarians/Federations/Federation_Notebook/default.asp)

**Training Analysis**

- Previously law library trained at state library conferences, which only touched a few.

- Next law library trained at the library federation meetings, which bring in the directors at regional events. Still not always the right people.
Training Expansion

• The entire reference staff is the target of the new training. Law librarian goes to them.

• The training takes about 90 minutes, and is timed so that no one has to be at the reference desk.

• The following shows how many libraries have been involved through 2009. Remember that Montana is physically as large as California!
Public Libraries and Access to Justice: #2. The Role of Public Libraries
Contents of Training

• Why the public library is so important

• What is legal information?
  – How is it different from legal advice?
  – Who produces it?
  – How is it organized?
  – Where can you find it?
Montana Training Contents

• State and community resources for referrals.

• Reliable websites; caution about forms

• Sample questions: how would you answer this?........
Remember the Nature of SRLs

- Foreign land; foreign language
- Frequently have not chosen to be in court
- Scarcity of legal aid attorneys available

- Invitation to be our partners in providing access to justice
II-C. Stories and Examples -- Texas
The sessions were very informal. Each librarian was at a computer. The librarians were seated at a group of computers in close proximity. We navigated through the websites, stopping along the way to browse articles of interest. The librarians spoke up about what they were seeing, making comments, asking questions and interacting with me and the other librarians. It was like showing a group of friends a website that was focused on a shared interest.

**Austin public librarian trained by Travis County Law Librarian**

- Training was informal, flexible, personalized.
- Law librarian asked public librarians to list the questions they had been asked and their most frequently asked questions.
- In 90 minutes she showed them how to find the answers to those plus additional resources.
Because they use the internet every day to help patrons find legal information, teaching the sessions was very easy. The public librarians were very interested and enthusiastic about what they were finding on the main legal self help website for Texas. The website contains information in simple English without legal jargon.
They set up sessions both at branches and at the county law library, which is located within two blocks of the Austin Public Library’s central location.
At the sessions most of the questions received by the public librarians were very similar to the questions asked at the county law library. As they worked through the lawhelp website, more questions came to mind that the public librarians had been asked.
The Texas government portal has been completely revised to be user friendly and from the citizen’s perspective. Instead of choosing government departments, the website is constructed around the kinds of questions citizens have. For finding the law, the county law library has a portal for finding the law itself. So, for example, if someone is trying to find out what the law is on divorce, they can find the statutes that cover divorce. Cases can be found, but that is more difficult without access to the legal databases, which are either pay websites or available at the county law library.
They encouraged the librarians to have the handouts on hand to give to patrons needing assistance with legal matters in the Austin area. The mouse pads with the Texas Law Help logo serve as reminders of the website. I encouraged the librarians to give out my card, if patrons had questions about the Travis County courts.
The in depth navigation of the websites and the interaction with the websites helps to reinforce the existence of the websites in the minds of the librarians. When a legal question comes up in the future, the librarians know where to look even if they don’t remember the exact place in the websites where the answer can be found.
It was a great opportunity for the law library to get to know the Austin Public Library librarians. They realized how much they do to help their patrons. And the public librarians got the chance to know how much they, and the other county law librarians do for patrons, too. Public and law libraries have so much in common and can help all patrons by working with each other.
Preservation of County Law Libraries. Each of Ohio’s 88 counties had law libraries that consisted of anything from a couple of shelves of law books in a judge’s office to full-sized law libraries with professional staffs, with funding spelled out in state statutes. In March 2005 House Bill 66 changed the statutes in such a way that the law libraries would basically be defunded in increments over several years. Law librarians in Ohio, supported by fellow law librarians in other states and in the American Association of Law Libraries, mobilized to save the law libraries. After prolonged lobbying and negotiations the county law libraries were preserved, albeit in new configurations that are currently still being worked out. 2010 is the “reinvention” year for Ohio’s law libraries.

Ohio Bar Association Website. The Bar Association’s site provides an excellent public resource covering many aspects of Ohio law in a question and answer format with printable pamphlets, articles, and an online book. This free website is kept current through the vigilance and continuing support of the Ohio Bar. The site managers are happy to accept suggestions for new articles in areas not already covered. For example, we submitted requests for articles on expungement of criminal records and for emancipation of minors after repeated inquiries on those topics from patrons, and urged the Bar Association to post articles about the changing bankruptcy laws back in 2005. The website address is included in the handouts. ([www.ohiobar.org](http://www.ohiobar.org))
II-E Stories: LawHelp.org/NY
www.LawHelp.org/NY

Access to Justice = Language Access

They have a Spanish url so they can be found by Spanish speakers on Spanish search engines:
www.ayudalegalny.org
Bienvenidos a Law Help de Nueva York

Este corto video le enseñará cómo:
• encontrar información sobre su problema legal
• sobre ayuda legal disponible en el área donde usted vive
• encontrar información de los tribunales y otras organizaciones que pueden ayudarlo
There are Know Your Rights resources in 34 languages in addition to English and Spanish. This is the list:
For example, with the help of law student interns, they we translated the navigation and resource titles into Chinese.
For some legal listings, they were able to add information in Spanish and Russian.
Sanctuary for Families’ Center for Battered Women’s Legal Services

WHO WE ARE
Sanctuary for Families is dedicated to meeting the needs of victims of domestic violence, while advocating for societal change and raising public awareness to and violence against all women and children. To protect and empower battered women, Sanctuary for Families provides crisis intervention, emergency and transitional housing, individual and group counseling, job readiness and mentoring programs. Through the Center for Battered Women’s Legal Services, representation is provided to women in divorce, child custody, and violation of court orders.

In Spanish
Sanctuary para las familias se dedica a satisfacer las necesidades de las víctimas de la violencia en el hogar, mientras que aboga por el cambio social y la sensibilización de la opinión pública para poner fin a la violencia contra las mujeres y los niños. Para proteger y potenciar las mujeres maltratadas, Santuario para Familias proporciona intervención de crisis, emergencias y vivienda de transición, consejería individual y en grupo, preparación para el trabajo y programas de mentoría. A través del Centro de Mujeres Maltratadas de Servicios Jurídicos, la representación se ofrece a las mujeres en el divorcio, cuestiones de la custodia de los hijos y violaciones de orden, acciones legales y penales.

HOW TO GET HELP
- To contact the group, CALL (212) 349-6009

and Chinese

Public Libraries and Access to Justice: The Role of Public Libraries
Throughout the site, they added Language Access Rights resources.
Using pro bono lawyers, they rewrote the new NYC language access rights rules into plain language and had them translated into the five official NYC languages other than English.
Multilingual LiveHelp

- Thanks to a grant from LSC, they just brought online LiveHelp in English and Spanish.
- It’s a real time “chat” facility to lead low-income users to the legal help they need.
- It will be staffed by pro bono law students, pro bono lawyers and other volunteers
Search Engine Optimization and Marketing

- With a TIG grant beginning January 2010, NY LawHelp are developing search engine optimization and marketing strategies.
- This will combine natural search strategies (eg key word, linking, etc.) with paid marketing.
- They will pilot SEOM in Spanish language search engines for: [www.ayudalegalny.org](http://www.ayudalegalny.org)
- They are developing models for replication and lessons learned for statewide website community.
Representatives from the state and local court self-help website and document assembly programs made presentations to local librarians so that they learned about free, credible and up-to-date legal resources available for their patrons. They also provided bookmarks with links to the resources. The program was well-received and California is working to duplicate it throughout the state. It won an award for innovative programs from the Judicial Council of California. A video describing the program is available on the AOC’s website. (PLEASE VERIFY THE ADDRESS SINCE ALL WEB ADDRESSES ARE CHANGING FOR THE CALIFORNIA COURTS BY JUNE, 2010.)
Service to customers is the premier goal of public libraries, and could result in that 92% approval rating.

Increased comfort level for staff means reference librarians will no longer be whimpering under the desk when a legal patron shows up with all those complicated questions.

Sharing resources can be a budget saver for libraries, courts, legal services, and other partners. By complementing services instead of duplicating them, everyone wins, especially the pro se patron.

Community outreach to other agencies like courts, pro bono programs, and legal aid raises everyone’s profile, in a positive way, with the community at large. People like to see their tax dollars working for them, helping them out in a very personal and positive fashion.

Superlibrarians – you become heroes to your patrons.
This is obvious to public librarians.

As you know, your library may be the only comfortable place for many of those most in need and crisis to access the system. Libraries are important gateways.
Libraries are a great resource for the court in serving the public by being available at hours when courts are generally closed, for people who don’t know what resources are available at the courts, and for those who are intimidated by the court. It also allows people to get more information to find out if a court case is the right solution for their problem.

III-C. Benefits -- Courts

- Opportunity to serve public
  - When courts are closed
  - When public isn’t sure of where to go
  - When courts are intimidating
  - When people need time to understand options
    - Court may not be the best way
    - There’s lots to know before you file a case
III-D. Benefits – Law Library

- Helps patrons
- Additional role for libraries
- Gateway into system
- Helpful at budget time

Public library partnerships leverage law libraries work. A common mission.
Libraries provide a critical point of contact for legal aid clients, as well as people who are need help but do not make it the doors of a legal aid program, or are not able to be served. As such, library partnerships help legal aid programs extend the reach and impact of their services. Public libraries are also important sources of feedback and guidance on emerging needs, and bring training and outreach experience that can benefit awareness of legal aid programs and services.
IV. The Key Content
Here is the national gateway to legal aid sites in all 50 states – lawhelp.org. Some of them are on a different software platform, but all websites are under a mandate to involve and partner with non-legal aid programs such as libraries and courts. These websites are intended to be statewide, collaborative projects with involvement from many access to justice entities.
Here is an example of a statewide legal aid website, MontanaLawHelp.org. Users are presented with topic-based browsing options and a search engine, among other tools. Each topic contains attorney-reviewed, know your rights resources as well as detailed referral information for legal aid programs that provide services in that area.
The LawHelp software is built fully to support multi-lingual content. Here is Russian content. The system supports multiple languages. Menu items, navigation and the underlying content can all appear in non-English.
Legal aid programs in all states are required to have statewide websites, and LSC strongly encourages their programs to collaborate with state and local courts in creating integrated access to justice gateways.

LSC programs are required to have legal information on the most common problems of low-income persons, which coincidently are often the most common for the SRL. Since this information is there already, courts should take advantage of this resource and not recreate information on court sites that can be found on the legal services sites.

Or the courts can become more active partners. The LawHelp.org platform is used by 28 of the states. This platform has been specially engineered to facilitate an integrated approach. The software, shown on this slide, allows the creation of a “Court Channel” in which court information, accessed, like the other information by county or zip code, is both integrated with, and distinguished from, other information.

The user moves from tab to tab to access information from different sources. They do not need to re-enter their zip code or the problem with which they need help.
The California court system provides a very comprehensive self-help website. [www.courtinfo.ca.gov/selfhelp](http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/selfhelp)

It has over 1,400 page of content and has over 7 million viewers per year. It has high visibility within the court system, and for the public.

Many California counties operate their own court sites – you will see some of them later in this session – but they rely on this common site for much of their general legal information.

Other California technology-related innovative programs for SRL's can be found at: [www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/innovations/allprograms.htm](http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/innovations/allprograms.htm).

Additional information on this project is in the program profile titled 13-CA-Website.pdf.

NOTE – THE LOOK AND FEEL OF THIS WEBSITE AND ALL LINKS ARE SCHEDULED TO CHANGE IN MAY OR JUNE OF 2010. IT WILL ALSO BE SIGNIFICANTLY EXPANDED.
The entire site has been translated into Spanish, not just selected parts. It is a mirror of the English site so that users can click back and forth between English and Spanish. Thus, if you can find information in English, you can click on a button for the Spanish version of the page.

This slide shows the range of court self-help services available to the litigants with links to all 58 counties. The site is not just a legal encyclopedia, but an access gateway into the actual services that are needed to resolve an issue. It links to websites for lawyers, governmental agencies providing legal help, non-profit groups, libraries, and other governmental or non-profit websites with information.

Again, this website is changing in the summer of 2010.
Here an illustrative video has been integrated into the description of the probate guardianship process.

See particularly the Contra Costa Program Profile for its virtual self-help center, 13-Contra-Costa-Virtual-SHC.doc.

The URL is http://www.cc-courthelp.org/
Highlighting Local Self Help Services

Here the services available from a country are highlighted. Note how the site serves a broad range of income levels.
Automated forms that use document assembly software are a major component of the access solution.

Unlike informational websites, the document assembly software produces an actual legal product – the document needed for filing – based on answers the self-represented litigant has provided online.

The software branches, based on the answers to questions, and ultimately generates a fully customized pleading or form.

This allows has computers to do what they’re good at: repetitive data entry, calculations, filling in forms, saving data, prompting and answering simple questions, while leaving for humans, what they do best: asking and answering more complex questions and providing emotional support. This can be done through the phone, in person, or by chat (discussed later.)

As a result of collaboration between LSC and SJI, there is now available for courts a low-cost national document assembly server using HotDoc technology and an associated access and document management interface. States or courts can generate the templates – the questions, the forms, and the language that is to be loaded into the forms depending on the answers the litigant gives. These services can then be delivered to the self-represented over the Internet. The project is managed by Pro Bono Net, the nonprofit group that also operates the LawHelp network of state access to justice websites.
Part of the package available is what is called “authoring software” that generates simple screens like this. They are un-intimidating. Some collect data, but usually ask for only a little on each screen, making is easier for the less tech-savy user to work through the steps of providing the data needed for a form.

This software is completely free for the courts and can be used not only for document automation but for e-filing front ends and self-assessment tools. It is upgraded every year and is available in Spanish, and allows embedding audio, video and help screens. www.a2jauthor.org.
That A2J software has been used successfully in Idaho. This is the screen that helps users decide what forms they need. Note multi-lingual forms.
Here is an example of a front end with a diagnostic process that helps litigants find the right form. The State Law Library of Montana provides a self-assessment for SRL’s to determine which kind of divorce they should seek, thus freeing support staff from having to make an interpretive decision for the client.

http://www.montanacourts.org/library/topics/end_marriage.asp
Many statewide websites offer LiveHelp, a real-time chat-based service to help visitors find resources and referral information on the underlying site and partner sites. Pro Bono Net supports the LiveHelp program nationally.

Here you see the process started. Note how the specialist asks the user to affirmatively consent to the terms of use – that there is no legal attorney-client relationship.

The assistance can not start till this is given.

Then the user to asked to state what they need help with.

The specialists are carefully trained to provide access to information – not legal advice.
Here you see a very specific question being answered very quickly and easily. The specialist has available canned responses that can quickly be pasted in and sent.

Links to other LiveHelp services in the legal aid context:

- LawHelpMN.org
- IowaLegalAid.org
- LawHelp.org/LA
- ARLegalServices.org
- GeorgiaAdvocates.org
- LawHelp.org/NY
- TexasLawHelp.org
Over the rest of the Conference we will expand on these themes and ideas of partnership, training, support, providing content for websites and training, and how to engage in marketing and outreach.
We will ask for your input and expect some mutual brain-picking and idea-sharing while we are here. You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t already interested, intrigued, and involved in making access to justice happen, to making your staff more knowledgeable, your patrons more comfortable, and your courts more accessible. Libraries are all about sharing, and libraries are places where answers are found. We hope you will find, and share, answers here as well.

VII. Conclusion

- We hope that you’ll learn some skills – and where to find the answers to your questions so that you can be a key part of the movement for ACCESS TO JUSTICE.