

**Public Libraries and Access to Justice:**  
**9. Workshop on Customizing the FAQ**



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## Editorial Panel

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- Judy Meadows, Montana Law Library  
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- Vince Morris, Arkansas Legal Aid
- Tina Sibbitt, New Mexico Access to Justice  
Commission

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## Customization Process

- Idea
- Deciding version
- Use of partners
- Dividing the task
- Setting up feedback systems

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The FAQ was developed as a template for public librarians and library systems to develop state or local resources to help patrons access the legal system and related institutions. It is not intended to duplicate resources on the statewide legal aid, law library or court site, but to create a tailored set of responses that can be used in real-life situations, in training scenarios, or to develop a specialized link collection on your library's website. By working with your conference team and other partners, you can gather input about common legal questions and the best self-help and referral resources. You will also want to set up a process to review and update the FAQ over time. Note that it is informational, and does not substitute for legal advice.

## Customization Idea

- Templates general
- Local version used to train public librarians
- Local version used by public librarians
- Must be up to date

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Your local version can be used to train public librarians on how to respond to legal questions and making referrals that are as appropriate as possible. The FAQ can also be used as a guide or directory in real-life situations. The first section provides a primer about legal aid, court and self-help services. The remaining sections focus in on common legal topics. As with other reference resources, it must be up to date to be useful and accurate.

## Customization Versions

- Can be used in different ways

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The long version can serve as the basis for a detailed training program or reference guide. Libraries may also want to develop a shorter version that can serve as the basis for materials or education programs for patrons.

## Customization Partner Process

- Important to build long term relationship

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Early on, it is a good idea to establish a working group of partners that will take the lead on customizing the FAQ and updating it over time. The group should consist of partners that bring different perspectives to the project, an awareness of patron/community needs, and the ability to commit time to the project.

Types of services and intake requirements of both legal service providers and community support services can change often due to funding or policy changes. It is imperative to maintain open communication for updates to ensure accuracy and to prevent improper referrals, which can anger both the patron and the service provider

## Dividing Task

- Substantive area division
- Someone must be responsible
- Timelines critical
- Often knowledge exists and current materials can be pasted in

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Dividing the FAQ by substantive area is a good idea. You will need someone to take the lead on each section and a team leader to establish a timeline. Often you can draw on existing web resources like your statewide legal aid, law library or court site and paste the information in.

## Feedback and Updating

- Critical that up-to-date
- Someone must be responsible for seeing that this is the case
- Date everything
- Caution everything

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Include review dates and disclaimers up front in each version. See the cover page on the sample FAQ as an example.



## Resources

- Your state's law library
- [www.lawhelp.org](http://www.lawhelp.org)
- Local law library, bar, etc
- NCSC Site for Courts
- Google (with care)
- State government sites
- Federal government sites

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Here's an example of a state law library: [www.courts.mt.gov/library](http://www.courts.mt.gov/library). A state bar association might have a section devoted to the public's questions, such as this one from the Montana Bar Association: <http://www.montanabar.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=7>. Here is a statewide website from Montana Legal Services Association: <http://www.montanalawhelp.org/MT/index.cfm/index.cfm>

## Court Resources

- Vary hugely
- *May* include forms
- State and local
- Include things that only courts can do (calendar, decision, etc)
- Sometimes can use info from another jurisdiction
- Includes how to navigate court

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Not all states have created online forms. Indeed, not all states have standardized forms.

## Your State Law Library

- A good place to start
- Website usually include well-selected links.
- Make a contact of the reference librarian.
- Don't hesitate to call.

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Many law libraries have either live chat, or an “Ask the Librarian” feature on their websites. Here is an example from a California county law library:

<http://lalaw.lib.ca.us/services/qpoint/>

## Lawhelp

- National system on two main platforms
- Vary as to content and range
- Usually run by a committee (open to new input)
- Coordinators can access national content
- Includes forms (LSC-SJI initiative)
- Strong on referral
- Structure allows for flexible court/library partnering

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LSC TIG funding has supported the development of statewide legal aid websites in all 50 states. The content is developed and managed by legal aid, pro bono and court programs locally, and posted on two main platforms. LawHelp.org is the national gateway to all of these sites. They contain resources that help low and moderate-income people find free legal aid programs in their communities, answers to questions about their legal rights, court information, legal forms and instructions, links to social service agencies, and more. Many statewide websites have advisory committees with public library involvement, or partner with their local libraries on outreach.

## Bar/Library/etc

- Know local partners and content
- Usually part of LawHelp consortium
- Bar sites strong on referral to attorneys for money
- Coordinators can access national content
- Includes forms (LSC-SJI initiative)

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Even if a Bar is not yet a LawHelp partner, Bar website often contain at least some similar resources: FAQs, basic legal information in topic areas such as Landlord-Tenant, simple definitions of legal terms, etc., in addition to the standard lawyer referral programs. Some bars offer low-income workshops/clinics conducted by volunteer attorneys in such areas as bankruptcy, foreclosure, and probate; information about these programs is often on the Bar's website under a tab such as "Public Resources."

## Google and the Web

- Much content is commercial, unreliable, and commercial
- Problem of commercial repositioning of non-profit/government content (particularly with forms)
- Criteria for what to trust/refer to
- Value of including information on local resources in FAQ

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It is obviously a huge resource, but important to be careful.

Public libraries can be the ones who vet for reliability, particularly when they have court and legal aid partners.

## State sites

- Often central gateway
- Good to identify particularly helpful for FAQ
- Maybe be government perspective, rather than advocacy – offer both when possible

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There are good federal and state sites for different type of problems. Libraries should try to link to the federal sites and if possible to the state and county sites. Sometimes the federal site will allow people to search by state/county/

## Federal sites

- Use central gateways ([www.usa.gov](http://www.usa.gov))
- Good to identify particularly helpful for FAQ
- Maybe be government perspective, rather than advocacy – offer both when possible

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The federal government creates a lot of ready to use brochures targetting consumers. The brochures are general in that they only describe the federal law, but are a great starting point for anyone trying to learn more about an issue. There are federal websites for Medicaid, Medicare, Public Housing, Identity Theft, taxes, victims of crimes, etc. Try to book mark the ones in the most common areas of law as a good place to start. Supplement with your local legal statewide website and your court websites (if a court issue) or county websites (for public benefits, child support, etc).



## Evaluation and Feedback

- Set up listserv to get ideas, solve problems
- When you can not find what is needed, communicate to relevant person
- Ask library users for ideas on what needed

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To help guide evaluation, create a listserv for ongoing communication about needs and solutions. If you detect emerging needs in your community that are not being served, communicate that to your local lead aid partners. Gather feedback from patrons about what resources and help they need, and feed this back into overall program and service design.

Train library staff to track questions/subjects not currently covered in the FAQ that patrons bring to them