

Fairfax Public Law Library: Legal Information for the Public

by Bobbie J. Denny

The mission of the Fairfax Public Law Library (FPLL) is to promote justice by providing all citizens with access to legal information. The number of individuals representing themselves in court and in noncourt legal matters without assistance of counsel is increasing. The law library, which is located in the Fairfax County Judicial Center, serves thirty-five thousand nonattorney customers each year. Many of these individuals need legal information because they are unable to afford legal representation and do not qualify for free legal services. The FPLL staff provides a portal for individuals proceeding *pro se* to access forms and procedures—both within and beyond the walls of the law library. Other organizations who assist individuals who represent themselves include Legal Services of Northern Virginia (LSNV), the Office of the Clerk of the Circuit Court of Fairfax County, the commonwealth attorney's office and the Fairfax Bar Association (FBA). The law library links patrons to those resources and other print and online legal materials. The library staff frequently refers customers to LSNV, mediation services and the lawyer referral services of the Virginia State Bar and the FBA.

The strongest demand from citizens proceeding *pro se* is for fill-in-the-blank legal forms and pleadings. (See "LSNV Develops Public Forms Web Site," this issue.) In the past, library patrons could only copy sample legal forms and pleadings and then use them as models to draft their own documents at home. The major improvement in the law library's services is the ability to provide customers with direct access to legal forms that can be completed at five public computer workstations, printed and filed with the court. Legal forms are general and may not be suitable for an individual's particular needs. Because personnel do not give advice on which forms to select, the burden is on customers to choose or revise

forms appropriate under their own circumstances. When a customer cannot locate a suitable form to complete, other resources are available, including sample legal forms in both print and online databases. Although the law library does not offer word processing to customers, LSNV has added a blank page on its Web site where library users may draft short legal documents while they are in the law library.

The library staff closely monitors forms and instructions available to the public on the following Web sites: www.lsnv.org (Forms Master Larry Fann, LSNV staff attorney), www.fairfaxcounty.gov/courts/circuit (the Honorable John T. Frey, clerk of the Fairfax County Circuit Court), and www.courts.state.va.us (home page for the Virginia Judicial System). The LSNV Web site offers legal information and public forms; the index alone is twenty-five pages. The library staff keeps LSNV informed of forms needed by the public and makes suggestions for improvements based on customer feedback when the forms are accessed. The Fairfax County Circuit Court Web site offers subject-specific procedural information and Supreme Court-approved PDF forms for public use. The circuit court and the law library also assure that law library staff knows what is available on the circuit court Web site and how to direct library patrons to print the documents in a format acceptable to the court. The Web site for the Supreme Court of Virginia includes downloadable PDF forms used by the circuit courts, the general district courts and the juvenile and domestic relations district courts in Virginia.

Frequently requested forms are in the areas of divorce, name change and expungement. For divorce matters, the Fairfax County Circuit Court provides a *pro se* divorce brochure at <http://www.co.fairfax.va.us/courts/circuit/pdf/CCR-H-53.pdf>. LSNV pro-

vides additional information related to divorces and public forms for bills of complaint and final decrees for less complicated uncontested divorces. The library also instructs customers how to access forms (divorce and many others) using the *Fairfax County Circuit Court Manual* (print version and/or disc, which works in conjunction with the Virginia Casefinder CD-ROM database). The Model Domestic Relations Court Orders (*pendente lite*, spousal, final decree, name change, income deduction) for the Fairfax County Circuit Court are available online in the law library. The model orders were produced by the FBA Family Law Section (Chair Richard J. Byrd). For name changes, the Fairfax County Circuit Court Web site includes a brochure with a number of name change petitions and orders in PDF format; customers frequently complete a petition and order for a name change at a computer workstation while they are in the law library. The circuit court also provides an expungement brochure describing procedures applicable to the process. Those seeking expungements are often directed to the law library for expungement forms. These forms are available on the Public Forms section of the LSNV Web site. The library also has expungement forms for use in Fairfax County drafted by Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney John J. Murray. The advantage to *pro se* individuals who choose to complete forms while in the law library is that they have immediate access to explanatory legal information contained in both print and online resources.

The Fairfax Public Law Library includes publications acquired specifically for *pro se* individuals such as the Nolo Press legal self-help books, West's Nutshell Series, and legal materials written for nonattorneys. For the past several years, the Fairfax Public Law Library Committee has

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- 20 www.courtlink.com
- 21 www.virginialaw.com
- 22 Lexis and Westlaw include large databases of newspapers. Many newspapers are making their content available on the Internet, sometimes with extensive archives and for free. Good sources that identify papers with an Internet component are the US Newspaper List (www.usnpl.com) and Onlinenewspapers.com. (www.onlinenewspapers.com). Searching Google News (www.google.com/news) is another option.
- 23 thomas.loc.gov
- 24 www.uspto.gov/patft/index.html
- 25 www.clearhq.org
- 26 The availability of information on professional licenses is a function of state law. Lexis includes professional license information from twenty-seven states, Westlaw from all states and Accurint (www.accurint.com) from forty-nine states.
- 27 Resources include the case law databases (see *supra* note 19) as well as docket sheet databases such as Courtlink (see *supra* note 20).
- 28 Lien information is available through the public records databases on Westlaw, Lexis or Accurint.
- 29 A nationwide database of criminal records is not available; however Westlaw, Lexis and Accurint have a good collection of data. Additionally, some states, counties or municipalities may make criminal data available on their Web site.
- 30 See *supra* note 28
- 31 Lexis and Westlaw offer databases of voter registration information. Both are found in the "Public Records" database listing. Voter registration records for twenty-seven states are currently included. Voter registration information for twenty-one states is available through Accurint.
- 32 PACER (pacer.psc.uscourts.gov), the federal court's system for docketing provides excellent access to

bankruptcy records. An account is required, but the system is "pay per view." A nationwide debtor search can be performed in the National Party/Case Index (pacer.uspci.uscourts.gov)

- 33 The Securities and Exchange Commission's Web site (www.sec.gov) and its Electronic Data Gathering Analysis and Retrieval (EDGAR) system data provide access to information on corporate filings, including the names of boards of directors. There are a number of inexpensive commercial services that provide access to EDGAR data and offer more sophisticated search capabilities than the SEC site. The public records databases on Westlaw and Lexis also offer access to comprehensive corporate information on the state level or most states provide minimal search capabilities for their corporate data.

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made the law library more user-friendly to *pro se* individuals. The Fairfax Bar Association manages the law library through an agreement entered into by Fairfax County, the Clerk of the Circuit

Court of Fairfax County and the FBA. The Fairfax Public Law Library functions as an essential component of the county's efforts to provide the public with meaningful access to justice. ☺



Bobbie J. Denny is a law librarian at the Fairfax Public Law Library, which provides citizens with access to more than thirty-five thousand books and legal periodicals as well as Internet access to legal resources. She is a member of the Virginia State Bar, the Virginia Association of Law Libraries, and the Board of Directors of the Fairfax County Public Library Foundation.

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contribute their time and expertise to help our clients. ☺

Endnotes:

- 1 LSNV is a nonprofit public interest law firm that provides free civil legal assistance to low-income residents in Northern Virginia.

2 <http://www.lsnv.org/publicforms.htm>

- 3 Public Forms can be also be accessed by going to the LSNV main page at www.lsnv.org or by going to a search engine such as Google.com, entering a search term (e.g., garnishment or Public Forms), space, and [lsnv](http://www.lsnv.org).



Laurence E. Fann is a part time consumer attorney with Legal Services of Northern Virginia (LSNV), a non-profit public interest law firm that provides free legal assistance to low-income residents of Northern Virginia. He has been with LSNV for ten years, with four of those ten years working on Public Forms. Prior to joining LSNV, Fann worked for twenty-five years as an FBI Agent and three years as an attorney with the U.S. Department of Justice.

For confidential toll-free consultation

available to all Virginia attorneys on questions related to legal malpractice avoidance, claims repair, professional liability insurance issues and law office management, call the VSB's risk manager, McLean lawyer John J. Brandt, at

1-800-215-7854.

Virginia State Bar Publications

The Virginia State Bar publishes pamphlets and handbooks on law-related issues for Virginia's lawyers and Virginia's citizens. Please note that some are available in bulk quantities, and others only in single copies. All publications can be found on the VSB Web site at <http://www.vsb.org/publications>.