



Demonstrating Your Library's Value

A California county law library's perspective.

BY MARK E. ESTES

County law libraries reflect their community with the services they provide. Typically, their community has more non-lawyers than lawyers and more non-lawyer users than lawyer users. Likewise, the county law library has more non-lawyers than lawyers—sometimes 80 percent non-lawyers to 20 percent lawyers. Thus, the law library acquires and maintains information useful to both lawyers and non-lawyers. The library also staffs to provide reference services, just-in-time technology, and research instruction to both groups.

However, county law libraries, such as in California, face four major problems when it comes to communicating their value:

1. People don't know county law libraries exist.
2. People think law libraries are only for attorneys.
3. People think county law libraries are funded by tax dollars.

4. There is no single or small group of individuals to whom county law libraries can turn to for additional funding.

Publicity efforts, including doing nontraditional law library activities such as hosting rotating art shows, can raise awareness of the law library and its services. Figure 1 on page 46 answers the funding challenge while also soliciting donations. The “Mission-funding relationship” infographic showcases the services and the funding sources. Unfortunately, neither explicitly connects the mission, funding, or services to how the library changes lives.

The fourth problem California county law libraries face is that there is no single stakeholder with the power to change funding—90 percent of which comes from a portion of civil filing fees. That amount hasn't increased since 2007, and can only be changed by the legislature.

For California county law libraries, the Board of Trustees, which is comprised of five

Figure 1: How Is Your Library Funded?



judges from the county and two others (usually attorneys) appointed by the county Board of Supervisors, act as the governing body. Thus, the Board acts as one stakeholder group. While the Board does approve the annual budget, it cannot change the income amount, 90 percent of which comes from a portion of civil filing fees. Therefore, the trustees influence another group of stakeholders, the legislature and the

governor, who have the authority to change the funding law or allocate money from the state's budget. The county law library statute authorizes a county's Board of Supervisors to allocate some funds for that county's law library. Historically, however, they have not done so; therefore, they are potential stakeholders. Library users can also be influencers if the law library persuades them to contact their legislators and the governor.

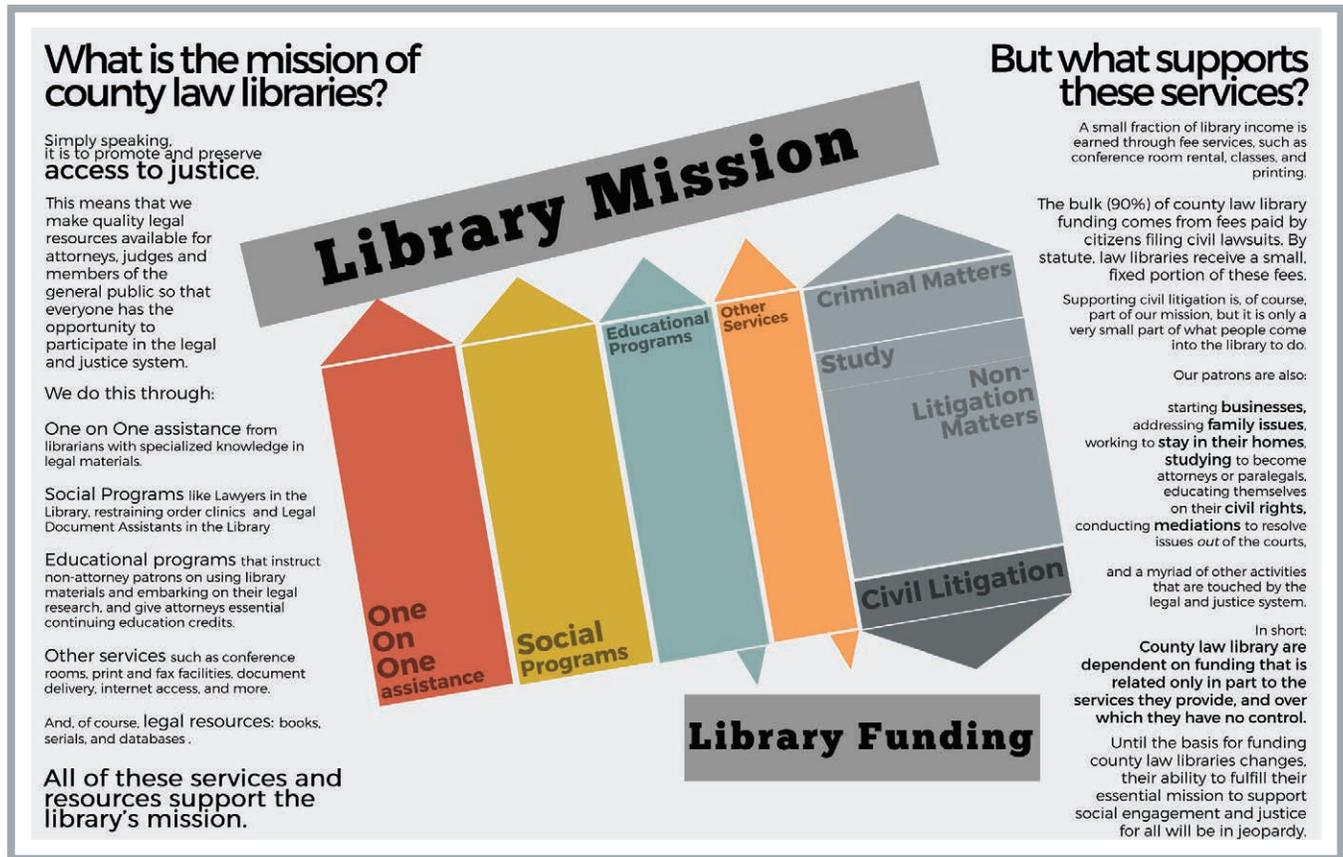
To communicate its value and services to each group, the Alameda County Law Library uses a mix of methods: informal, social media, eNewsletters, and formal reports. To stakeholders, the library staff reports on efforts that accomplish the library's mission of providing access to current legal information (see Figure 2). Those efforts include collecting user comments from surveys, suggestion "boxes," and tracking reference desk questions. The reference desk questions especially inform on decisions about a program or service as the database tracks numbers, time of day, whether the user was an attorney, non-lawyer, or unknown, as well as the subject of the question.

When the analysis of reference desk questions shows a common thread or topic, the staff develops a research guide, plans an education program, or looks for a new information resource to acquire. Next, the library staff promotes that program or resource to users. The staff then collects data related to that program or resource: quantitative data (such as attendance at the education program, database usage, or circulation statistics), and qualitative data (such as program evaluations, online catalog comments, or testimonials).

Based on information from the reports, the library staff can describe the financial impact of dollars saved and the impact on users' lives. For stakeholders, the description becomes part of an "information item" at a monthly trustees meeting and part of the formal annual report to the Board of Supervisors. For influencers and users, the description becomes a story in a blog post or a YouTube video about how lives were changed by something available at the law library.

County law libraries can combine the quantitative—counting library activities or outputs—with qualitative information describing how each service affected its users. Collecting testimonials of users provides a direct and immediate opportunity to showcase how it

Figure 2: County Law Library's Mission Infographic



changed lives. Often, however, the testimonial ends with that particular visit to the library. Namely, “The library staff was very helpful in helping me find the case or form I needed.” While the user left the library satisfied, the testimonial doesn’t indicate whether the user actually accomplished their ultimate quest—whether it was winning a lawsuit, transferring a deed, or starting a business. To gather that information, law librarians need to follow up with the individuals who included their contact information on the testimonial form.

When testimonials are not available, librarians can tease out a story based on the reference questions asked. For example, requests for books about landlord tenant law indicate that the library helped a tenant keep his or her residence and helped a landlord deal with a deadbeat tenant.

While telling the stories of how library services change lives, library staff must also address the top three metrics of stakeholders identified in *The Economic Value of Law Libraries* report.

In the report, stakeholders rated three metrics as the most useful:

- Cost of resources
- Frequency of resource used
- What resource was used



The key to communicating value involves using multiple communication styles and formats. We must convince not only stakeholders, but also influencers and users, of the law library's true value.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 There is no single or small group of individuals to whom county law libraries can turn to for additional funding.

2 Use a mix of methods: information, social media, eNewsletters, and formal reports. To stakeholders, the library staff reports on efforts that accomplish the library's mission of providing access to current legal information.

3 Collecting testimonials of users provides a direct and immediate opportunity for showcasing how the library changes lives.

4 We must convince not only stakeholders, but also influencers and users, of the law library's true value.

5 County law librarians serve everyone, which is both challenging and gratifying.

The cost of resources includes not just the cost of books and databases; it also includes the staff needed to process, interpret, and instruct in the use of those resources, as well as the costs of the physical facility. That analysis could lead to a cost-per-transaction priced hypothetically at the rate law firm librarians bill for their time. By reporting these activities in a kind of pro-forma invoice on the library blog and in monthly reports to the trustees, one can show a comparative value—"free" public service as opposed to fee-based service from a law firm.

Tracking the frequency of information resource use can be relatively straightforward—commercial database providers generate usage reports that can drill down to the database level. Online catalog systems can also track in-house use and circulation. Tracking in-house use may require user retraining—asking them not to re-shelve their books, but instead place them in some designated areas for re-shelving. As items are returned and processed, they would be logged into the catalog or a list of library titles would be created.

Reference Desk

The number of reference desk questions about a particular title, coupled with usage statistics, help determine whether or not the item meets a cost-justification rule of thumb of at least one use for every \$10 of cost each year. For example, if an item cost \$230 to update but in the prior year there were only 10 in-house uses, then updating it is not justified. Of course, some users re-shelve their books, despite being asked not to do so; therefore, we also look to the reference desk statistics to get a more complete picture of the use. It's still not perfect, of course, but it is more accurate than putting paperclips on the top of books or tape across the book edge and counting the number of clips on the floor or number of broken pieces of tape.

Library staff can analyze database usage statistics after they have completed an educational program about that database to help assess the effectiveness of publicity or training activities. Namely, in the period immediately following any publicity about an information resource or a training program, the information indicates a change in usage pattern. Ideally, evaluations collected at the end of the program include quotes such as, "Thanks! What I've learned will save me a lot of time."

The key to communicating value involves using multiple communication styles and formats. We must convince not only stakeholders, but also influencers and users, of the law library's true value. Moreover, the demographics of those three groups probably differ more than those from any other type of law library because county law librarians serve everyone—which is both challenging and gratifying.



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