



American Association of Law Libraries

State, Court &  
County Law  
Libraries

Public law libraries are no longer passive repositories of legal information. Changing information technology has forever altered the research strategies used by courts, lawyers and the public for resolving a legal dispute. As a result, public law libraries and our nation's courts are now inextricably linked, relying on one another for support in addressing their separate, but blended, missions.

This second in a series of Resource Guides, prepared by members of the State, Court and County Law Libraries Special Interest Section of the American Association of Law Libraries, discusses the value of the public law library. Incorporating the experience and knowledge of law library experts serving all types of users and regions, it includes:

- The role of the public law library
- The diverse and far-reaching benefits of public law libraries for users
- How public law libraries can raise awareness of their services
- Innovative programs for public law libraries interested in sharing resources and consortium-building

# The Value of a Public Law Library

*A Guide for Government and Court Decision-Makers*

## What is the Role of the Public Law Library?

Public law libraries provide the legal information necessary for the effective functioning of the justice system. In most states, public law libraries are statutory entities supporting either the trial court system, state or county government, or an independent local government agency managed by a board of trustees. Regardless of their organization, these public law libraries share a common mission of making legal information available to the following user groups:

- judicial officers and their support staff
- government attorneys
- attorneys in private practice
- corporate attorneys
- the general public

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*“The public law library is the access point for equal justice under the law. The free and open availability of materials and resources to the public, as well as the legal profession, is essential to a free society.”*

Jeffrey L. Gunther  
Judge, Sacramento Superior Court  
Sacramento, Calif.

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## The Role of the Public Law Library continued from pg. 1

The use of the Internet for obtaining legal information has increased dramatically. This trend, however, can lead to the misconception that most legal information is freely available via common search engines. While many states do have their current statutes and some appellate decisions on official Web sites, a vast amount of legal information is only available in print, microform or within commercial databases — all available at most public law libraries. In addition, public law libraries continue to be the best resource for older case law, legal periodicals, and texts, as well as annotated statutes and continuing legal education seminar materials. Through research assistance, training and other services, public law librarians play a vital role in making these collections and databases accessible to all user groups.



### ■ Services to judicial officers

- Training in the use of subscription databases, such as Westlaw, Lexis, Loislaw and VersusLaw
- Research assistance
- Management of Web page content
- Indexing of briefs and memoranda
- Preservation and management of older print materials and those not available online
- Assistance to self-represented litigants
- Current awareness of new developments, including routing of journals and newspapers
- Contract negotiations with subscription database vendors

### ■ Services to government attorneys

- Training in the use of subscription databases
- Research assistance
- Compilation of legislative histories
- Current awareness services
- Contract negotiations

### ■ Services to private attorneys

- Public access to subscription databases
- Training in the use of subscription databases
- Circulation of texts and treatises
- Remote access to online catalogs and periodical indexes

- Links to relevant legal Web sites
- Research assistance
- Faxing and photocopying

### ■ Services to the general public

- Public access to subscription databases
- Assistance in locating necessary legal forms and self-help resources
- Orientation in court procedures
- Links to relevant Web sites
- E-mail reference service
- Training in basic legal research

By providing ready access to legal information, public law libraries play a fundamental role in preserving access to justice and promoting trust and confidence in the judicial system.

## Access to the Law for a Broad Spectrum of Users

*“Access to the courts, and thus justice, is denied if the public cannot avail itself of legal information. Only public law libraries can provide the public with free, accurate and up-to-date legal information, which is essential in a society such as ours with its complex laws and systems.”*

Gill S. Freeman  
Circuit Judge  
11th Judicial Circuit of Florida

Public law libraries are continually developing new ways to make information more readily available, thus providing equal access to the law and keeping our centuries-old adversarial system alive. As the nature and functions of our court systems continue to experience a dramatic evolution, law libraries play a key role in helping our user base keep pace. The traditional notions of “library,” “informational professional,” “collection” and “customer” have changed and

continue to do so. What has remained constant, however, is that the United States, through its constitutionally designed,

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## Law Librarians Integral to the Success of the Public Law Library

Public law librarians are information managers, resource evaluators, access facilitators, expert researchers, teachers and trainers, to name a few. They possess the knowledge and finely tuned skills necessary to efficiently procure legal information in a changing environment, saving organizations countless research hours.

### Law librarians add value to your organization as they:

- Identify, select and acquire the best information sources as economically as possible
- Offer professional advice on how to effectively obtain and use information and technology
- Stay abreast of cutting-edge information resources and technology and share that knowledge with others
- Eliminate repetition in research and development by distributing information throughout the organization

### As information managers, law librarians:

- Make information resources accessible and user-friendly for both print and electronic applications
- Organize internal records and data for easy access and preservation
- Sort through data in order to provide timely and relevant information to researchers

- Gather and structure information for speakers, presenters and others in the public eye

### As expert researchers, law librarians:

- Conduct research and retrieve information quickly
- Gather data — both research and user-data — about new products and services.

*“Public law libraries provide an invaluable service. Access to justice requires the ability to find the law. Without ready access to books and electronic resources to research the law, judges, prosecutors, public defenders and lawyers cannot apply the law and justice of even greater importance is the fact that public law libraries make the law directly accessible to members of the general public.”*

Terry Lukens  
Judge, King County Superior Court  
Seattle, Wash.

- Collect, maintain and deliver information necessary to achieve a competitive edge
- Guide researchers with search strategies and information sources, saving time and reducing frustration
- Investigate, recommend and manage new technologies to enhance productivity

### As teachers and trainers, law librarians:

- Educate others about how to choose and use information resources and technology for maximum benefits
- Teach others to conduct online and print research effectively
- Train and develop efficient researchers, saving time and money

*Excerpted from the American Association of Law Libraries Web site, Committee on Public Relations: [www.aallnet.org/committee/pr/resources/valuestmt.htm](http://www.aallnet.org/committee/pr/resources/valuestmt.htm).*

## Access to the Law continued from pg. 2

*“Public law libraries are a mainstay within the nation’s state court systems. Not only do they provide essential research and reference services to trial and appellate court judges and their support staff, they are an increasingly critical resource for self-represented litigants engaged in the judicial process. The role of the public courthouse library must not be overlooked as a legitimate gateway to an individual’s access to justice.”*

—Frank Broccolina, Maryland State Court Administrator, President, National Association of Court Management (2001-02)

### New and Expanded Service Strategies

Inspired by the leadership of law librarians and their proactive governing boards, many public law libraries have begun offering new and expanded service strategies to customers — in some cases, to fulfill recently stated goals for improving court performance: access and equality, fairness, courtesy and judicial leadership. Increasingly, judicial management leaders have begun to acknowledge these libraries as stakeholders and essential contributors.

Some value-added law library services that benefit the administration of justice, either directly or indirectly, include:

democratic form of government and law-making, has amassed a body of written law unrivalled in mankind’s history.

The mission of most public law libraries is to provide access to timely, reliable and accurate legal information in a format that can be understood and used by the greatest number of people. Every user — court, bar and public — is a primary stakeholder in law library services. This mission is critical to the expectations of the judiciary in order to be able to rule promptly, accurately and with justice on the variety of issues brought before the courts.



■ **Harnessing technology** to expand access to law library resources:

- Online databases
- Remotely accessible indexes to law publications
- Content-rich Web sites
- Digital preservation of historically significant local legal materials
- E-mail and live reference/research, often available 24 hours a day
- Selective dissemination of needed information
- Current awareness of important new topics

■ **Providing access to both current and historical legal information resources** that are easy-to-use in print or electronic media. Almost any document can be delivered to court customers at a minimal cost, or even free of charge, through inter-library networking and resource-sharing.

■ **Offering expert reference and research services** for information not found in commercial legal databases or on the free Web, including:

- Leading users through complicated mazes surrounding the hunt for legislative intent
- Uncovering codified text of an old criminal statute
- Identifying and delivering the latest information on trends in state courts
- Creating annotated reading lists for judicial education seminars
- Recommending often-cited treatises for a complicated legal topic

■ **Furnishing both on-demand and organized training** for educational programming — from use of new electronic library resources to honing general legal research skills.

■ **Managing system-wide, computer-assisted legal research services** for court users, encompassing contract negotiation, password supervision, training and communication of vendor updates.

■ **Answering inquiries** concerning proper legal citation format for less frequently used sources of authority.

■ **Developing outreach educational initiatives** to the growing number of self-help litigants. As one of the most reliable resources for the pro se attempting to “get his day in court,” these law libraries have become proactive advocates in on-site, as well as remote, educational offerings, covering the basics of the court system, the importance of understanding court procedure and building the research skills necessary to navigate primary and secondary sources of legal authority. Begun nearly 20 years ago, these outreach efforts were recognized as “the first rung on the ladder of justice” for the self-help generation.

## REAL WORLD: San Diego County Offers Classes for Self-Represented Litigants

Increasingly, members of the general public are representing themselves in court, often because they cannot afford an attorney and do not qualify for legal assistance. In fact, in one-half of the cases heard in family court last year in San Diego County, neither side was represented by an attorney.

The pro se litigant's major problem is the lack of basic knowledge of the court system. Moreover, techniques for conducting legal research are not taught in high school or college, and although paralegal courses exist throughout the country, many people cannot afford the time and expense of a six-month class.

To meet this need, the San Diego County Public Law Library (SDCPLL) reference librarians have been offering a two-hour course to the public about the workings of the court system and how to conduct basic legal research. Entitled "Law Made Public: An Introductory Course in Legal Research," the class is held monthly on a Saturday and periodically at branches during the week. Patrons learn how to conduct legal research — both in print and online — as well as how to determine what information is available free of charge and what is not. The class also teaches them how to verify the accuracy of their information and sources. See [www.sdcll.org/classes.htm](http://www.sdcll.org/classes.htm).



The basic class has been so successful that SDCPLL has added two other classes:

- **Pre-Trial Procedures:** How to file a lawsuit or respond to one when you have been sued
- **Appeals:** How to handle an appeal in state court

Recently, SDCPLL staff began offering these educational programs to another important group, public librarians, many of whom are not trained in researching legal information online or in print. SDCPLL provides them with printed guides and face-to-face instruction on how to access legal information effectively.

In the future, the San Diego County Public Law Library plans to expand the program even further using a \$55,000 LSTA grant received for community outreach.

## Consortiums Complement High-Tech Services

The explosion of legal information resources on the Web has created opportunities for public law libraries to expand their traditional roles and share resources. With the growth of low cost and free Web resources, it has become increasingly difficult for individuals not trained in legal research to find and understand applicable law. The availability of legal information on the Internet can actually cause more confusion — not less — because an untrained researcher is unable to evaluate the reliability of the information he/she finds. Public law libraries have a variety of options for addressing this situation.

Traditional tools for directing researchers to authoritative Web sources, such as pathfinders and course offerings, continue to be useful and affordable ways for law library staff to respond to their users' needs for guidance. Many public law libraries are also putting teaching and training tools on their libraries' Web sites, providing virtual reference services. Increasingly, however, public law libraries are turning to collaborative efforts to overcome financial barriers, while reaching out to the greatest number of users.

Academic, public and special libraries are building consortiums across institutional and geographic boundaries for leveraging resources and making virtual reference services available to the widest possible customer base. These partnerships have been so successful that many law libraries are now looking for ways to expand their educational offerings.

### King County Law Library Offers Live Help

Statewide library organizations have been at the forefront of the collaborative movement to help inexperienced users negotiate the maze of legal information available on the

*"We live in a society where learning is not confined to the classroom, but is ubiquitous. We can best extend the learning process through innovative collaboration, which is emerging as the strategy of the 21st century. And collaboration is another way to build public value."*

Bob Martin  
Director, Institute of Museum  
and Library Services  
Washington, D.C.

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## REAL WORLD: Minnesota Family Court Self-Help Center Assists Customers in Tangible Ways

In Dakota County, Minn., more litigants are going pro se. They are also visiting the county's law library in greater numbers than ever before.

To meet increased demands from pro se litigants, the Dakota County Law Library has stepped up its role in providing self-help resources and services. By partnering with public libraries in Dakota County, self-help resources are now distributed throughout the county and available beyond "courthouse hours."

A Family Court Self-Help Center was Dakota County's most recent initiative — a collaboration with the district courts and the Dakota County Bar Association. The center, although limited to family matters, is similar to programs offered in two larger Minnesota counties (Hennepin and Ramsey), where Self-Help Centers are also underway. The Family Court Self-Help Center provides legal resources for pro se litigants — including forms, books and videos — and distributes user-friendly, commonly used forms to nine public libraries in Dakota County. In addition, 36 educa-



tional sessions are offered throughout the year at both the law library and two public libraries in Dakota County. The Dakota County Law Library has reported outstanding support from public library staff who welcome the ability to expose users to legal information resources right in their own facility.

These new services have taken a significant burden off the court system in Dakota County and have fostered a climate of ongoing cooperation between the law library and court staff. The Self-Help Center program has scored high marks with pro se litigants as well. More than 200 individuals used the center from July 2002 to December 2003. Most of the users (73 percent) needed help with child-related matters, including child custody, parenting time and child support. Many users reported that the Self-Help Center had enabled them to pursue their cases without the help of an attorney. Just as importantly, some users realized that they did need an attorney and avoided wasting court time by trying to pursue a difficult legal action on their own. For more information on Dakota County's program, see [www.co.dakota.mn.us/law\\_lib/services.htm](http://www.co.dakota.mn.us/law_lib/services.htm).

### King County Law Library Offers Live Help continued from pg. 5

Web. In Washington state, leadership for developing collaborative, virtual reference service has come from the Washington State Library's LSTA funded Statewide Virtual Reference Project (SVRP). The project goal is to combine the power of libraries, librarians and technology to assist users in getting the information they need.

One public law library, the King County Law Library in Seattle (KCLL), received a LSTA grant through Washington's SVRP program for a demonstration project with Seattle Public Library and the University of Washington's Health

Science Library. Its objective: to provide real time, Web-based chat service assistance for legal, medical and general reference information. The three libraries have worked together to design a common Web presence known as Live Help — with live links to each other's chat and Web reference sites (see [www.kcll.org/letushelp/referenceoptions/index.html](http://www.kcll.org/letushelp/referenceoptions/index.html)). The skills acquired during training made it possible for KCLL to establish virtual reference guidelines, chat script templates and internal training materials for staff. A portion of the LSTA grant will also be used for marketing the new service.

### Tooting Your Own Horn: It's All in the Marketing

Marketing is essential for communicating the value of a public law library. Without it, many users will not know the scope and breadth of the products and services available in the library. Well-executed marketing programs also improve the image of the parent organization.

The following is a list of ways that public law libraries can elevate awareness of their services:

- **Publishing electronic newsletters** on the Web
- **Sponsoring social gatherings** in the law library
- **Authoring quarterly columns** in the local or state bar association journal 
- **Offering training sessions**, either organized or on-demand
- **Providing quick response time** and never saying "never"
- **Furnishing assistance with research projects** and also following up to see if the information provided was helpful
- **Sufficiently orienting new users and staff** to library space and services
- **Networking and staying involved professionally**, in order to provide the most current services available
- **Ensuring that each member of the staff is courteous**, efficient and knowledgeable
- **Creating and distributing** brochures, flyers and guides concerning legal research techniques

When creating marketing materials to educate potential users, be attuned to the benefits they will receive and incorporate concrete examples. The following are some ideas for enticing potential users to take advantage of the services your law library offers.

#### Users of the public law library will:

- **Obtain valuable information** that may not be easy to access, so that they can make informed decisions.
- **Save money** by using the free services of the public law library, in comparison to other fee-based services.
- **Be more productive** by taking advantage of the library's services. Users will be able to devote more time to their primary job, instead of wasting time trying to gather and verify the accuracy of legal information on their own.
- **Enhance their potential for legal success.** One study found that, on average, high achievers used their library more frequently than did their non-achieving peers.
- **Receive more accurate information.** Many studies have shown that a large amount of information made available through free Internet sites originates from sources lacking credibility. Public law libraries exist to eliminate questions of inaccuracy.
- **Learn about the past and precedent.** Public law libraries preserve the legal record with the meticulous sorting, storing, indexing and preservation that continues to characterize library work.

### Orange County Public Law Library Wins Best Newsletter Award

The American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) selected the Orange County Public Law Library (OCPLL) as the winner of the 2002 AALL/Findlaw Excellence in Marketing Award for Best Newsletter. The award was presented at the 95th annual AALL Annual Meeting in Orlando, Fla., in July 2002.

The OCPLL's publication, *Transcript: Newsletter of the Orange County Public Law Library*, educates and informs patrons about the library's collection and services, announces new classes, and promotes the use of the library to a variety of potential users – attorneys, judges, students and the general public.

*The Transcript* is created by law library staff and reproduced in color. Copies are distributed to patrons and the library board, mailed to a select group of libraries and posted on special displays outside the library. *The Transcript* is also available on OCPLL's Web site at [www.oc.ca.gov/lawlib](http://www.oc.ca.gov/lawlib).

*"We have had many favorable responses to the newsletter from librarians, judges and members of our board. Our Web site statistics have shown an increase in the Transcript page use. There has also been an increase in the use of certain services promoted in the Transcript, such as the 'Ask a Librarian' service on our Web site."*

Maryruth Storer, Director  
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## The Value of a Public Law Library

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