

FOREWORD

In many jurisdictions today, the libraries serving the information needs of judges, lawyers and the public are in a state of disrepair and disarray. Many court and public law libraries have suffered neglect and lack of use for decades. In some county law libraries and bar association libraries in large metropolitan areas, court personnel and other patrons enjoy a full range of modern library services including computer-assisted legal research, online public access catalogs, and facsimile transmission of legal documents and information. In many libraries that serve rural courts and counties, however, collections are incomplete, out of date, and poorly organized. Information is difficult to locate because many court libraries do not have staff with sufficient time or training to maintain public catalogs and other record systems. Many local public law libraries suffer from inadequate funding and many collections are left to the care of court staff that are not familiar with the basic techniques of library management. Often a secretary, clerk, bailiff, or jury commissioner serves as a part-time library caretaker.

The perennial problems of such libraries have been exacerbated in recent years by cuts in state and local expenditures for subsidiary court services. The most severe effects of cutbacks have been on book budgets. The book budgets of many court libraries have been swallowed up by continuing costs for case reports and other serial sets, and libraries have been forced to limit new acquisitions and to discontinue multi-volume titles to minimize the costs of supplementation. Budget restraints have forced many libraries to cut personnel or to leave vacancies unfilled.

At a time of budget cutbacks, it becomes more important than ever to define the roles of court and public libraries and to determine the most advantageous allocations of their resources. The appropriate point to begin an examination of the functions of county law libraries is to determine their places in local governments and the forms of their administrative structures. As bar association and other law libraries serve similar clientele and face similar pressures, they, too, are examined here.

A. ACTIVE MANAGEMENT BY LIBRARY BOARDS OR COMMITTEES

Library administration is a task that demands the constant attention of boards of trustees or other committees, as well as the care of librarians. Efficient library management is difficult to maintain, however, when relationships between libraries and their boards are distant or when libraries are only objects of notice when things go wrong. Many court, county and other public law libraries suffer from benign neglect. As operating costs rise and services decline, however, library boards are finding that they cannot afford to let libraries function without close supervision. At the same time, law librarians are finding that they must strengthen their bonds

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with their governing bodies to enable their libraries to serve as the informational nerve centers of their legal communities.

In some states, statutes provide powerful mandates for effective supervision of public law libraries by their boards or committees. Library boards in these states have full powers to regulate law libraries and to ensure that library practices are of maximum benefit to the bench, the bar, and the general public. Solid management structures, however, are only as strong as the commitment of boards or committees to provide aggressive leadership in library management and supervision. In many cases, unfortunately, boards never meet and do not exercise their control over library policies and procedures. In actual fact, the practice of some boards is to let libraries run themselves. As long as expenditures remain constant and major problems do not rise to the surface, these boards or committees do not exercise effective control over the law libraries that are their statutory responsibility. A substantial part of space, budget, and personnel problems in libraries can often be attributed to the failure of boards or committees to demonstrate consistent, responsible stewardship of public law libraries.

B. STARTING POINT

Regardless of their size, most law libraries have similar problems. Many boards of trustees and their respective library directors have done excellent work, resolving issues that face us all. But communication of these wonderful ideas has been minimal, as librarians have shared their successes in anecdotal ways. Communication between boards of trustees is practically never done. The aim of the many contributors to this book is to give such communication a good starting point.

One measure of a free and democratic society is the availability of law to all the members of that society. Knowing one's rights, duties, and remedies empowers a citizen to enjoy life more fully and to work more productively within the community. The availability of knowledge of the law is one key component. Having better law libraries means that justice is more accessible. We hope this sourcebook contributes to that effort.

The Trustees Development Committee
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