

PRINCIPLES & CORE VALUES CONCERNING PUBLIC INFORMATION ON GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

The American Association of Law Libraries' *2005-2010 Strategic Directions* identifies five core values for AALL. Three of these core values – the role of the law librarian in a democratic society, equitable and permanent access to legal information, and continuous improvement in the quality of justice – are reflected in the “Principles & Core Values Concerning Public Information on Government Websites,” developed by the AALL’s Access to Electronic Legal Information Committee (AELIC).

Equitable and permanent public access to legal information is the heart of law librarianship. Without equitable and permanent public access to legal information law librarians cannot continue to improve the quality of justice in our free and democratic society. Changes in the way legal information is recorded, disseminated and authenticated are significantly impacting permanent public access to official government pronouncements of current and past statutes, court decisions, administrative actions and even organic documents, such as constitutions.

Previously, a printed book was the gold standard of accurate representation of law as it was made; now law is often captured only in fragile media. Additionally, changes in technology, such as on demand book printing, make it possible for anyone to alter the “letter of the law” relatively inexpensively and easily, thereby subverting the will of the people and our governing bodies. It is more important than ever that law librarians participate actively with our governments to develop and implement necessary processes to ensure that our laws are freely and accurately made available for us all now and in the future.

Thus, AELIC sets out the following “Core Values Concerning Public Information on Government Websites”:

CORE VALUE #1: INFORMATION ON GOVERNMENT WEBSITES MUST BE ACCESSIBLE TO ALL PEOPLE.

- Information must be available without charge.
- Information must be accessible to those with disabilities.
- Government websites that provide access to primary legal information should provide guidance documents to ensure that users of primary legal information understand the context for the document and the relevance and interdependence of legal materials.
- Website navigation should be intuitive and easy to follow.
- Content on government websites should be easily searchable, and there should be clear instructions, including examples, about developing effective searches.
- Information on government websites should be available to all people within the community that they serve, and it is recommended, therefore, that government websites should provide translation services to ensure that non-English speaking residents can use the legal information posted on the website.

CORE VALUE #2: INFORMATION PUBLISHED ON GOVERNMENT WEBSITES MUST BE TRUSTWORTHY AND RELIABLE.

- Appropriate safeguards should be established to protect the integrity and authenticity of materials published in all formats – electronic and print.
- Government websites must provide users with sufficient information to make assessments about the accuracy and currency of legal information published on the website.
- Persistent URLs (PURLs) should be developed for essential information.

CORE VALUE #3: IF AN ELECTRONIC VERSION OF LEGAL INFORMATION IS OFFICIAL, IT SHOULD BE DESIGNATED AS SUCH BY STATUTE OR RULE.

- A certifying mark on each item must be used to designate official information.
- Government entities must establish and maintain a clear chain of custody for all electronic information published on its website.
- If the electronic version of legal information is not official, the government website should name the official version and tell the user how to obtain the official version.

CORE VALUE #4: INFORMATION PUBLISHED ON GOVERNMENT WEBSITES SHOULD BE COMPREHENSIVE.

- Information should be in full text, or, at a minimum, instructions should be provided on how to obtain full text.
- Information should be complete. For example, statutory and regulatory websites must include all statutes or regulations currently in force. If for some legitimate reason portions of a code cannot be made available online, such as image-based information accompanying zoning regulations, that omission must be clearly stated.

CORE VALUE #5: INFORMATION ON GOVERNMENT WEBSITES MUST BE PRESERVED BY THE ENTITY, SUCH AS A STATE LIBRARY, AN ARCHIVES DIVISION, OR OTHER AGENCY, WITHIN THE ISSUING GOVERNMENT THAT IS CHARGED WITH PRESERVATION OF GOVERNMENT INFORMATION.

- Government entities must ensure continued access to all their legal information.
- Archives of government information must be comprehensive, including all supplements.
- Snapshots of the complete underlying database content of dynamic websites should be taken regularly and archived in order to have a permanent record of all additions, changes and deletions to the underlying data.
- Governments must plan effective methods and procedures to migrate information to newer technologies.

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