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It Depends: Knowing Your Limits When Helping Self-Represented Parties

I worked and volunteered in libraries for a long time, but I only just completed my second year of being a law librarian. I had experience in public, academic, and special libraries before working in a law library, and the approach to reference work I now have is refreshingly different from the approach in those other libraries. In my current role, I learned that sometimes the best answer we can give our patrons is: "It depends."

One of the things I learned since becoming a law librarian is that we can't give many "yes" or "no" answers to the kinds of reference questions patrons ask. My current workplace is a public law library located in a trial courthouse. A large percentage of my patrons are self-represented parties. When they ask a question, they often expect a "yes/no" answer, but their questions may not have a simple response. The best I'm usually able to do is tell them the answer may depend on a number of factors, and they are going to have to do some research.

This doesn't always go over well. Sometimes they ask the same question repeatedly, or they accuse me of withholding the answer. Sometimes they say no one will help them, and complain that they shouldn't have to research the law in order to represent themselves.

I understand their frustration. Self-represented parties are in stressful situations, and they have pressing responsibilities distracting them from their case. Many have challenges that make reading and understanding legal information difficult. I attempt to meet them at their level of legal knowledge by finding resources designed for self-represented parties, explaining how each resource is meant to be used, and showing them examples of motions. Ultimately, though, it's their responsibility to read the information for themselves and apply it to their case (which is a complicated task for any non-attorney).

It's not just self-represented parties who sometimes make requests that would require me to go beyond the scope of the responsibilities of a courthouse law librarian. Occasionally, lawyers will ask me to do in-depth research for them, or law students might ask me to find an answer to their

writing assignment. In those situations, I tell them I can find a few things to get them started, but then they must continue their research on their own.

I know from experience why it's good to set and enforce those limitations since, as a law librarian, I do not render legal advice or interpretation of the law. In many of my former roles in other types of libraries, the expectation placed on librarians was: when at the reference desk, do everything you possibly can for everyone. This is a great sentiment, but without boundaries, it forces librarians to operate outside their area of expertise, and it draws the librarian's attention away from reference work and away from other duties that keep the library functioning.

Boundaries exist because they help provide good service. It prevents us from giving patrons our opinion or our interpretation (instead of the actual information they need). It avoids a situation where one question monopolizes our time and resources, and it requires patrons to develop their research skills. Giving patrons a simple "yes/no" answer may seem like the easiest way to resolve a question in the short term, but in the long term, it's better to teach them that the answer depends on them to do their own research, and they can depend on the librarian for guidance.

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