Diane M. Rodriguez’s interest in libraries began at an early age. "I had asthma, and the school librarian took me under her wing during PE class at certain times and showed me the ropes," recalls Rodriguez. "From there I kind of gravitated toward the profession." She became a member of the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) in 1995, and has been active on committees, special interest sections (SIS), and in her local chapter. As the 2021-2022 AALL President, one of Rodriguez’s goals is to advocate for access to legal information, supporting access to justice. "Law librarians play a critical role within their organizations by providing legal reference services, conducting legal research trainings for attorneys and students, evaluating electronic resources, and more," said Rodriguez. She further plans to grow AALL’s membership, as well as encourage wider diversity within the legal information profession.
Diane M. Rodriguez received her BA from San Francisco State University and earned her master of library and information science (MLIS) degree from San Jose State University. She is a proud first generation professional, and is a founding member of AALL’s First-Gen Professional Caucus.

She worked part-time in public libraries while in high school and in college, and when she moved to San Francisco to start at San Francisco State University, she received her first part-time job in a law library at the Bank of America legal department (Bank of America used to be headquartered in San Francisco). “That was my introduction to law libraries. I had no idea they existed before that,” said Rodriguez.

Rodriguez began her career at the San Francisco Law Library as a reference librarian, a position that blended two of her main career interests: law librarianship and working with the public. After five years at the San Francisco Law Library, she transitioned to private law libraries. She worked as a reference librarian at Carroll Burdick & McDonough before becoming director for Hassard Bonnington LLP. After a 15-year hiatus, she returned to the San Francisco Law Library as the assistant director.

Having been an AALL member for 26 years, Rodriguez served as chair of the Appointments Committee and Executive Board Strategic Directions Committee, and as a member of the Executive Board Finance & Budget Committee. In addition, Rodriguez is a former president of the Northern California Association of Law Libraries (NOCALL), was a member of the AALL Body of Knowledge Development Special Committee, and is a member of the AALL Government Law Libraries Special Interest Section (GLL-SIS).

Here, she discusses her goals for the coming year, the importance of access to justice, and what she finds most rewarding about the job.

Now that your term as president has officially begun, what is first on your agenda?

To start, I am looking at appointing a few special committees. The Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity Awareness (IDEA) Special Committee is going to continue, with a few new members being appointed to serve. I’m looking at ways to continue to diversify the pipeline into the legal information profession and to expand membership options, both of which are hot topics with members. We want to bring more diversity not only to the profession but into the Association.
I will also be creating an Access to Justice Special Committee that will work on updating important A2J resources, as well sharing our legal information expertise with the public.

What goals or initiatives has the AALL Executive Board set for the coming year? What will be their areas of focus?

A major focus is strategic planning. The Board will create a new strategic plan for 2022-2025. We will work with a facilitator to evaluate priorities, survey the membership, and determine new pillars and objectives for the strategic plan; we will also evaluate post-pandemic needs and practices. How our members work, learn, network, and even volunteer has changed. The Association has done a great job of adapting to these changes, and in some ways, we have more participation than ever. I think we are all eager to get together again in person. We keep hoping that we will return to in-person meetings. We will continue to monitor and adapt in order to continue supporting our members and get through this together.

How did COVID-19 affect your library? In response, did your library come up with any new initiatives that you plan to keep around?

The pandemic impacted my library in many ways. Because we’re a public law library, we have a robust in-person patron base. We had to go completely remote because in San Francisco, we have some of the strictest COVID orders in the nation. We closed to patrons in March 2020 and are hoping to reopen in September 2021. Things are slowly reopening in San Francisco.

We went from helping people in person, circulating materials, and providing public access to legal research databases to responding electronically to patron reference questions through email and over the phone. We had to work with legal publishers to allow remote access to proprietary legal databases that are usually only available in-house due to licensing restrictions. It was an interesting time of shifting how we do just about everything.

We are going to continue doing more virtual reference work, as that seems to be a win-win for everyone—the public and our legal community. We have successfully moved our Minimum Continuing Legal Education (MCLE) and community legal education programs to a virtual environment and I think we will keep that up. Our virtual programs are really popular, and we can reach a lot more people.

Now that places are opening back up after being more remote due to the pandemic, what new challenges are law libraries facing?

We have all been hit by the legal issues that are resulting from the pandemic, especially in public libraries. Hot topics include landlord-tenant issues, employment, bankruptcy, consumer credit issues, and civil rights too. Thankfully, we are coordinating with the courts, legal services organizations, and with other public libraries to get patrons what they need. We are being hit hard by budget issues in the government sector, putting restrictions on what we can offer. We are constantly retooling the way we do things.

Academic and private law libraries are also finding a new balance between in-person and virtual services. I think institutions are having to consider a new normal...
of post-pandemic workplaces as well with remote staff and patrons. Many private law librarians are looking at completely retooling their collections to find a new balance between print and electronic resources. There’s also a technological shift as we utilize new tools to adapt to our new settings.

**What role do law librarians play in access to justice?**
Public law librarians provide free authentic access to legal information, resources, and services. We provide a friendly and reliable source to know your rights and how to protect them. The legal system is really intimidating and scary to many people. It’s our mission to make this information available to all. I am both proud of and impressed by the amazing guides, programs, and outreach our members have developed during the pandemic and social justice movements we have experienced, to inform the public of their rights and resources. Many resources are already available on AALLNET, but one of the tasks of the new Access to Justice Special Committee will be to pull these resources together and make them freely available.

**How do you stay engaged and passionate about your work?**
I love my job. I enjoy learning new things and pushing the envelope into what may be uncomfortable territory, which seems to happen a lot when you’re advocating for government dollars and trying to do more with less in your public library. I enjoy a new challenge, and working with my library team to offer new services and coordinating programs for the community is very exciting.

**What is one of the most valuable lessons you’ve learned in the professional leadership positions you’ve held?**
Listen to all ideas and sides and respond thoughtfully. It’s OK to take a meaningful pause. Not everyone is going to agree, but there are ways to move forward together by taking time to evaluate.

**What do you find most rewarding about your job?**
I find fulfillment in giving back to others, and my role as a public law librarian has that built in, so I’m lucky. I provide a necessary piece to a healthy San Francisco by providing access to justice. I enjoy collaborating with my colleagues and legal partners. And did I mention that I really love San Francisco?

**What do you wish everyone knew about law librarianship?**
I wish more people knew what a fantastic career this is; it’s so full of opportunities. I want people to know that not all positions require a JD to be successful. It offers a wonderful network of colleagues who are incredibly passionate and dedicated to help you succeed. This is really an excellent time to consider the profession.

“I’m looking at ways to continue to diversify the pipeline into the legal information profession and to expand membership options, both of which are hot topics with members. We want to bring more diversity not only to the profession but into the Association.”

– Diane M. Rodriquez

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**Your theme for the 2022 AALL Annual Meeting is “Advancing Justice for All,” what does this theme mean to you?**
Being a public law librarian is really in my heart and soul. AALL has always inspired me through our advocacy and our collegiality. Everyone plays such an important role in access to justice, it’s not just public libraries. Our academic colleagues are teaching new generations of legal professionals by providing students and faculty with the right tools and skills they need to practice law. They also contribute scholarly work to foster legal information and advocacy.

Our private colleagues are providing access to justice by delivering authentic information, implementing new technologies, and enhancing the practice of law through specialty research and attorney and client support. Some law firms also participate in supporting pro bono work. I want to highlight how our profession works together, through advocacy and professionalism, to provide a crucial role in our healthy communities by advancing access to justice.

**What leadership skills are essential for positive change?**
I believe the ability to listen to new ideas and adapt to change is vital. Collaboration is also essential; it’s important to bring people together to work on new ideas. Along those same lines, the courage to innovate. It’s risky to try something new, but you have to accept new challenges to learn and grow.