

IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY OF LEGAL INFORMATION TO NON-LAWYERS

When I was in library school, the only law library open to non-lawyers in DC (based on the internet searches I made at that time) was the Law Library of Congress (LLOC). The good news is that in the intervening years, both the DC Superior Court Library and the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) Law Library have expanded their access to members of the public. The bad news is that none of these three libraries is really designed to serve non-attorneys.

Several barriers make these libraries a poor resource in the pursuit of access to justice, beginning with limited hours and continuing with security concerns and “[library anxiety](#).”

As the libraries move closer to pre-pandemic service levels, their hours are expanding to include Saturday hours (LLOC) and Sunday hours (UDC Law Library) as well as limited evening hours. Nevertheless, the hours remain a barrier for individuals who have long commutes, children that need to be picked up from daycare, or multiple jobs.

Other barriers are more significant. Using the DC Superior Court Library requires submission to the court’s building rules, which include searches of belongings by uniformed security officers and prohibition of certain items. Individuals experiencing homelessness may have prohibited items among their belongings and need to choose between leaving their belongings unattended or not using the library. Moreover, the Superior Court does not make it easy for potential users to know about the library. The library does not even have its own page on the Superior Court website.

The LLOC is open to the public, including full Saturday hours, but if any library in DC is going to inspire library anxiety, it is the Library of Congress. Research requires obtaining a reader card, going through security, and navigating the imposing, three-building Library of Congress complex.

To counter these barriers, I have established a nonprofit organization, JusticeAccess, with a mission to provide access to legal information to non-lawyers in the District of Columbia. JusticeAccess will be a law library housed in a bookmobile, based primarily in a single location but with the ability to move throughout the District for special events. The physical library is important; AALL members have written in the past about the benefit of print materials for self-represented litigants. Equally important is the engagement of the librarian with the library user. Having a physical location helps with engagement, certainly, especially when we consider that one of the conditions that makes a physical library critical is technology barriers. Nevertheless, response to the pandemic has led to greater comfort with video conferencing tools for many people, as well as the development of new tools. As of this writing, I am exploring options for providing synchronous virtual reference service.

It is important to me that I not be the White outsider coming into a primarily BIPOC community and telling the people in that community that I know better than them. To address this, one of my early activities will be focus groups with a range of sub-communities. My intent is to hear directly from potential users of the library as well as professionals in partner organizations. What legal issues are going without representation? What have non-lawyers in the community experienced when trying to use existing libraries? What barriers exist in library use that JusticeAccess could address by providing ancillary services?

JusticeAccess welcomes your enthusiasm and ideas. I hope you will reach out to [me](#).

Rebecca Katz, Founder, JusticeAccess.



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