

Reaching Untapped Networks

Partners in Knowledge: Legal Services Websites and Libraries

National Conference on Community-based Access
February 18-20, 2004
San Francisco, CA

More information at these website addresses:

Maryland's Peoples Law Library - www.peoples-law.org

Web page describing PLL outreach efforts including linked talking points, posters brochures, TV and radio ad text mentioned during the presentation - www.peoples-law.org/outreach.htm
PLL outreach sites include public and law libraries, courts and community agencies.

Additional materials available at - www.peoples-law.org/library.htm.

Who we are:

The Peoples Law Library is the public legal information, self-help website for Maryland's 28 legal services providers. It is a "distributed ownership" website managed by the Maryland Legal Assistance Network (MLAN). MLAN partners with legal services providers (Legal Aid Bureau is the major partner), law schools, courts, community agencies and libraries – both public and law.

The MLAN – librarian partnership has become a major factor in the development of the "look and feel" of the website, content development and outreach. While each state's situation differs, we have worked together in a number of ways, some of which may be fruitful approaches in your state.

Librarian partners in Maryland include:

- State law library
- County law libraries
- County public libraries
- Law school library

Discussion Points

- **Why librarians are uniquely situated to share outreach and development planning for statewide legal services websites**
- Strong interest in disseminating knowledge for its own sake
- Trained in the business of answering research queries and knowledge management
- Located in most communities with hours that differ from the courts and legal services
- Strong network of public computer access to the Internet
- Attitude - Often courts and even legal services line staff can be focused on stemming the flow of overwhelming demands of services. Librarians are looking for ways to provide *more* informational services.
- **What are librarians looking for?**
- *Answers to the issues that the public brings to them* - this includes areas that are not top priorities for legal services intake but are high areas of legal need (such as consumer issues) and the needs of moderate-income persons. (Often moderate-income persons are a key target for statewide website services since these are the people who often cycle in and out of eligibility for legal services.) In response to library patron queries, Maryland added sections on traffic violations, civil rights, job discrimination, prescription drugs, personal injury and a directory of law libraries.

- *Assurances that the information is of high quality and reliable* - Look to the ABA best practices for legal information websites. (Maryland has adopted these in a modified form and the uses them as an educational tool for the public. See the "Web Standards" button on the top nav bar on the home page or the "How Do I Find..." button on the right side of the page labeled "and evaluate legal websites".)
- **How to identify and interest librarians willing to work with legal services and the courts**
- We have found *website demonstrations at professional meetings* (both local librarian associations and for staff at individual libraries) to be effective starting points. Session members also found this to be a useful place to recruit librarians for work as partners on statewide websites.
- *Personal meetings with key librarians* to explain the vision of a statewide legal information website portal and to discuss the possibilities for linkages.
- *Ask the judges and bar associations* about who they see as proactive librarians.
- *Figure out how the public and law library network is funded* and go to the funders or the administrative offices to ask which proactive librarians might be interested in the various possible projects.
- *Ask the experts in the network, i.e. the librarians with whom you have developed a relationship*, about other counties where others may be similarly interested. Go with energy and enthusiasm rather than hierarchy. (Be mindful of the official constraints but many libraries are fairly independent in their operations.)
- *Talk to Board members and funders* about contacts they might have.
- *Read the newspapers* about de-funding or local initiatives to develop community libraries or programs. Contact those people.
- *Look to local law schools or universities*, especially for junior staff that may have professional public services goals to meet.

Joint MLAN – Library Initiatives

- **Website stakeholder committee members** - From the beginning, the stakeholders committee has included the Director of the Maryland State Law Library and representatives from the county law library and public library system.
- **Source of broad-based feedback on content ideas** - We periodically demonstrate PLL at local libraries for staff. One part of the session is to ask them about law-related issues that they commonly see where they do not currently have a good referral resource for information or assistance. Trainer notes for the sessions with librarians are linked off the PLL outreach webpage cited above.

The Maryland State Law Library provides us with quarterly summaries of the legal inquiry emails that they receive. We use these to inform our PLL worklists for content development.

- **Libraries as website outreach sites** - When we sought to set up community sites with computers for Internet access to PLL, we found that the community libraries were preferred sites over the local courthouses due to compatibility of mission, space, hours and other logistics.
- **Using librarian professional development training as an outreach tool** - Many librarians attend internally-sponsored professional development trainings that are offered once or twice each year. We have found that managers are very open to adding a demonstration of the statewide web site as a resource for librarians. We have been able to reach as many as 140 librarians in three recent presentations of this type.

- **Librarians as legal research content developers** - PLL has a section on "how to do your own legal research" as well as a section with 16 topical Research Guides. Both were written by an attorney/law librarian with the University of Maryland School of Law Library who was interested in pro bono work that would support her professional development goals.
- **State Law Library – joint content development** - We reached an agreement with the State Law Library to jointly develop materials in certain areas of mutual interest. The library uses interns to create the Research Guides and PLL creates a complementary section that includes self-help and advocacy tips, expansions and forms, where needed. Emancipation of Minors was our first project. The materials are integrated and appear on both sites. We are looking now at ways to better integrate the look and feel of the Research Guides while maintaining the separate identity of the two websites.
- **Access to library network funding for outreach** - National and local library sources may be willing to fund joint projects that support the mission of the libraries. See the materials details on contacts in the library network.

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