Balancing Services and Safety During the Pandemic

One Law Library's Story

By Virginia C. Thomas

Michigan lawyers have a rich and strong tradition of support for people in need of legal assistance.[1] In addition to abundant pro bono services offered by its members, the State Bar of Michigan reaches out to citizens with helpful web resources designed for individuals in need of legal services. The SBM Legal Resource and Referral Center, for example, coordinates access to services and information essential to addressing specific needs related to COVID-19.[2]

Never have these services been more important than they are today. Michigan's academic law libraries, which have provided access to their extensive collections to legal professionals and pro per patrons alike, have had to rethink how to do so in effective, but contactless, ways. In the middle of this pandemic, how can we continue to get legal information to those who need it—and *safely*?

Assessing the challenge

Michigan lawyers also have access to the wonderful collections of the Law Library of Michigan in Lansing. But access to legal resources is only part of the story. Lansing is a long way from Detroit, Grand Rapids, or Traverse City. The pandemic has caused institutional closures statewide and academic law libraries were no exception.

On March 16, the library where I serve as director, the Arthur Neef Law Library at Wayne State University, closed its doors in compliance with Governor Gretchen Whitmer's Executive Order 2020-09 and successive orders mandating closure of libraries and museums as "place[s] of public accommodation."[3] Fortunately, we live in a digital age where so many primary and secondary legal sources are reliably available online,

many of them free via official state and federal government websites and sophisticated search engines such as Google Scholar.

Almost immediately, our library system formed a restart planning committee led by new Associate Dean Alexis Macklin, who brought extensive universal design experience to the process and kept us moving toward the goal of aligning our efforts and standards with those of the law school and the university.[4] We needed to be ready to reopen the libraries without knowing when that would be.

Planning inclusively and transparently

The committee was representative of the entire library system and included individuals from every unit and staff level. Our charge was threefold: assess the overall task of reopening the libraries; identify physical and operational design challenges that lie ahead; and develop a plan recommending next steps and how to communicate and implement them.

The committee formed several working groups attentive to specific areas including on-site staff workspaces, access and refer-

ence services, personal protection equipment and cleaning, and staff training. Additional design challenge groups were formed to test proposed solutions and suggest how they might be improved. We addressed questions such as arranging seating for library patrons to achieve social distancing, responsibility for sanitizing library spaces after use, achieving contactless reference and circulation services, and sustaining library operations with staggered work schedules and significantly reduced staffing levels. Most of these deliberations were done virtually, with the aid of organizational design and video conferencing software.

As a library system, we also engaged in a series of virtual town hall meetings for all staff members in order to share new developments and foster transparency and inclusion in moving forward. For example, some of our town halls (which continue to this day) offered an open forum for updates and questions with University Libraries Dean Jon E. Cawthorne. Others had a specific focus. For example, one town hall featured a question-and-answer session with Wayne State University Law School professor and public health law expert Lance Gable.[5] Another featured a panel of librarians from

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China, who shared experiences from preparing their own facilities for reopening after COVID-19.[6]

We have a plan

After many, many weeks of hard work, we developed a staged plan geared toward reopening for the start of the fall semester on September 1. Throughout this process, we consulted with our law school administrators, and our final plan incorporated their essential feedback and helped us align with the law school's planning interests and goals.

On a personal note, I am grateful to my fellow Michigan Academic Law Library directors for their openness and willingness to engage in a series of virtual conversations in which we asked questions, shared ideas, and offered helpful and supportive suggestions for approaching issues common to all of our libraries.

Going forward

Although the library has reopened, we are operating on a reduced schedule and at reduced occupancy capacities.[7] We also have implemented strict safety protocols to provide a safe environment for research, scholarship, and learning.[8]

Per a university mandate, only Wayne State University faculty, staff, and currently enrolled students are permitted on campus. At this writing, visitors, including Wayne Law alumni and other members of the community, may not use our resources on site. Unfortunately, we don't anticipate expanding on-campus access to our libraries in the short term.

However, we are eager to serve our patrons remotely. We encourage those needing legal resources and reference services to contact us by telephone, through our LawChat instant messaging service, or by email at ask@wayne.libanswers.com.[9]

I join my colleagues across the state in looking forward to the time when we can welcome all patrons back to campus. In the meantime, please remember that we are available. We look forward to assisting you in your efforts to provide much-needed legal services during these extraordinary times. ∎

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ENDNOTES

1. An Assessment of Pro Bono in Michigan, John A. Tull & Associates (February 2013) <http://www.michbar. org/file/programs/pdfs/probonoreport2013.pdf>. All websites were accessed November 18, 2020.
2. Legal Resource and Referral Center, SBM <https:// lrs.michbar.org/>.
3. E.g., Executive Order No. 2020-09 (COVID-19)— Rescinded. This and other orders can be found at <https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/ 0,9309,7-387-90499_90705---,00.html> [https://perma.cc/TD8J-RL2K].
4. Macklin joined Wayne State University as the associate dean of the Wayne State University Library System in April 2020. Wurm, *New associate dean joins Wayne State University Library System,* Today@ Wayne (May 5, 2020) <https://today.wayne.edu/ news/2020/05/05/new-associate-dean-joins- wayne-state-university-library-system-37201> [https://perma.cc/2XC8-TKLM].
5. Remarks by Lance Gable at the WSULS Virtual Town Hall (April 14, 2020).
6. Presentation by Feiyan Huang, Priscilla Pun, and Haodong Ren at the WSULS Virtual Town Hall (May 15, 2020).
7. The Arthur Neef Law Library is currently open 42.5 hours per week, fewer than half of their open hours before the pandemic.
8. Our protocols include completing a daily campus screener survey each of two days prior to arriving on campus as well as the day we request to be present on campus. The university may grant or deny permission to be on campus based on the individual's responses to the survey.
9. For current contact information, visit the law library's home page at http://www.library.wayne.edu/neef/ and click on the "HELP" button.