

Practical Family Law Research Resources

By Lance M. Werner

The phrase “family law” is defined by Black’s Law Dictionary, 8th edition, as “[t]he body of law dealing with marriage, divorce, adoption, child custody and support, child abuse and neglect, paternity, juvenile delinquency, and other domestic-relation issues” and as “the bodies of law dealing with wills and estates, property, constitutional rights, contracts, employment, and finance as they relate to families.” Needless to say, family law is a broad area of law. This article will focus on the more traditional family law topics, such as marriage, divorce, and adoption, and is intended as a general overview of some of the electronic resources that are available for conducting basic research.

Starting Out

Generally speaking, it makes a lot of sense to begin research using broad resources and general ideas. However, if a researcher knows exactly what he or she is seeking, broad research may be unnecessary.

Several electronic resources may prove useful to those who choose to start their research using the broad-to-narrow research methodology. Perhaps the best known and most popular of these broad research resources is the Google search engine at <http://www.google.com/>. Google can be searched by entering relevant terms or phrases. Putting a phrase in quotation marks will direct the Google search engine to search for the entire phrase rather than the individual terms of the phrase.

Law-specific electronic search engines may also be of use to those conducting family law research. The Family Law Center at Megalaw.com, <http://www.megalaw.com/top/family.php>, is one of these resources. This site has links to a variety of family law

topics, including family law websites, court cases, federal statutes, and state laws. The Findlaw Family Law Practice Area at <http://www.findlaw.com/01topics/15family/index.html> is another broad resource with a variety of family law offerings, including family law news and case summaries for the U.S. Supreme Court, all 13 federal circuit courts, and some state courts.

Divorcenet, at <http://www.divorcenet.com/>, is a more specific resource that, as the name suggests, focuses on legal issues related to divorce. The Legal Information Institute (LII) is a research and electronic publishing activity of the Cornell Law School and has, among other things, articles on family law on Wex, at http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/index.php/Category:Family_Law. The Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement at www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse is another resource that may be useful for family law research.

The resources mentioned above are only a few of the more general resources that are available electronically that may be useful when researching family law issues in Michigan and other states.

Michigan-Specific Resources

Fortunately, Michigan has a variety of tremendous resources available to anyone conducting legal research on Michigan law. There are numerous electronic offerings for family law research.

The State Bar of Michigan provides the Michigan Online Legal Help Center, which has a variety of information concerning different legal areas, including family law, at <http://www.michbar.org/generalinfo/libraries/familylaw.cfm>. Information about the State Bar Family Law Section is available at <http://www.michbar.org/family/>. The State Bar Fields of Practice page at <http://www.michbar.org/publications/fields.cfm#family> provides a list of attorneys who classify themselves as family law specialists, which may be of use to attorneys or researchers who wish to consult with knowledgeable practitioners.

The Michigan Courts Self-Help Center, Domestic Relations Matters section website, available at <http://courts.michigan.gov/scao/selfhelp/intro/family/domrel.htm>, also contains a variety of Michigan family law offerings, including information pertaining to divorce, custody, and child and spousal

support. The Child Welfare Services division at the State Court Administrative Office website at <http://courts.michigan.gov/scao/services/CWS/CWS.htm> has a wealth of information about resources concerning child protection and about the Foster Care Review Program, available at <http://courts.michigan.gov/scao/services/fcrb/fcrb.htm>.

Michigan statutes addressing Michigan family law are available at the Michigan legislature website at www.legislature.mi.gov. The Michigan Department of Human Services offers information about numerous family-law-related topics, including adoption and foster care, at <http://www.michigan.gov/dhs>. Other sites that may be beneficial are the Friend of the Court Bureau website at <http://www.friendofthecourt.org>

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courts.michigan.gov/scao/services/focb/focb.htm and the Michigan State Disbursement Unit website at www.misdu.com/.

The Michigan Rules of Court are on the Michigan Courts website at <http://courtofappeals.mijud.net/rules/>. This publication has rules for divorce proceedings and service of process, among other things. Michigan court opinions about a variety of topics, including family law, are available at the One Court of Justice website at <http://courtofappeals.mijud.net/resources/ts.htm>.

Opinions from the Michigan Attorney General's Office about various legal topics, including family law, are available at <http://www.michigan.gov/ag/0,1607,7-164-20988---,00.html>. The Child Support Division of the Office of the Attorney General has informational resources at http://www.michigan.gov/ag/0,1607,7-164-17334_34799---,00.html.

Again, the resources named previously are only some of what is readily available on the Internet for researching Michigan family law, generally for free.

Conclusion

Although the resources that I have covered here may prove useful in conducting research in family law, sometimes it is necessary to seek more information than what is readily available on the Internet. A number of law libraries in the state are open to the public. Fortunately, the State Law Library has created a list of law libraries, available at http://www.michigan.gov/hal/0,1607,7-160-17449_18639_18657-52451--,00.html. Hopefully, the resources listed in this article can provide those conducting research in family law a reasonable place to begin their endeavor. ■

Lance M. Werner is the library law specialist for the Library of Michigan, Michigan Department of History, Arts, and Libraries. He is a member of the State Bar Committee on Libraries, Legal Research, and Legal Publications and the State Bar of Michigan. He earned a BA in psychology from the University of Northern Colorado, a JD from the Michigan State University College of Law, and a master's degree in library and information science from Wayne State University.