

Pro Bono Law Librarians

Providing Legal Information and Research Assistance to Individuals and Organizations

By Marlene Coir

A primary goal of librarians in general is the promotion and preservation of information and knowledge resources “for the public good.” Law librarians, in particular, seek to facilitate and assure that the lay public, as well as those in the legal professions, have access to appropriate legal research materials. This has often necessitated a proactive rather than a custodial approach to the acquisition and preservation of reference and research resources and education in the use of these materials.

At the national level, the Legal Information Services to the Public (LISP) section of the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) supports the efforts of state chapters to provide pro bono legal research service to individuals, legal service organizations, and individual attorneys involved in pro bono legal representation.¹

For over two decades, LISP has collected and maintained a clearinghouse of workshop and project materials by the national AALL and local chapters, as well as research pathfinders and other instructional materials, with the goal of helping librarians serve the pro se patron.² One such ongoing project is the completion and maintenance of state-specific, online-accessible library toolkits designed to assist the lay public in conducting legal research.³

Another national organization, which was formed to address and support the pro bono

activities of law librarians, is the Joint LISP/SCCLL⁴ Committee on Pro Bono Partnerships (JCPBP). The committee was formed in 2007, and one of its first charges was to identify cooperative initiatives between law librarians and providers of pro bono legal assistance.⁵ One project to this end is the Pro Bono Partnerships Special Committee 50 State Survey, available at http://www.aallnet.org/committee/pro_bono.asp.⁶

In Michigan, the statewide Pro Bono Librarians Committee falls under the umbrella of the Michigan Association of Law Libraries (MichALL). The committee has a dual mission that mirrors that of the national organizations: (1) to produce materials that facilitate legal reference services by non-law librarians and to mentor those librarians on how to avoid the unauthorized practice of law and (2) to address the legal research needs of individual attorneys and organizations that provide pro bono legal services to the public.

In advancement of the first charge, committee members have prepared an educational program for non-law librarians that will be presented at the Michigan Library Association's November 2009 conference. The presentation will provide an overview of legal resources available at libraries throughout the state and identify additional sources useful for assisting the pro se patron. Attendees will also receive pointers for finding authoritative and reliable legal resources on the Internet and assisting library patrons without giving or appearing to give legal advice. This endeavor is our attempt to respond to the increase in pro se traffic that public libraries are experiencing and the greater complexity of legal research that librarians face.

The second charge of the Pro Bono Librarians Committee—providing research as-

sistance to those who provide pro bono legal services—is still in the discovery stage. The four current committee members have begun to review partnerships between law librarians, attorneys, and legal service organizations that already exist at both the national and local levels. We have also noted the ongoing assistance to legal aid societies and criminal defense attorneys that is being afforded by individual Michigan law librarians. Within the next year, we hope to discover what the needs are and what assistance we can provide to meet those needs. ■

Marlene Coir received her library science degree (MSLS) and JD from Wayne State University. She has been a reference librarian at the Thomas M. Cooley Law School Auburn Hills location for six years. A member of the State Bar of Michigan since 1990, she presently sits on the State Bar Committee on Libraries, Legal Research, and Legal Publications. Marlene is also serving a second year as chair of MichALL's Pro Bono Librarians Committee.

FOOTNOTES

1. AALLNET, Legal Information Services to the Public (LISP) <http://www.aallnet.org/public/sis.asp?code=COMMITTEE/SIS_LL>. All websites cited in this article were accessed October 13, 2009.
2. AALLNET, Legal Information Services to the Public (LISP): Special Interest Section, About LISP <<http://www.aallnet.org/sis/lisp/aboutlisp.html>>.
3. AALLNET, Public Library Toolkit <<http://www.aallnet.org/sis/lisp/toolkit.htm>>.
4. SCCLL refers to the State, Court, and County Special Interest Section of the American Association of Law Libraries.
5. AALL, *Joint LISP/SCCLL Committee on Pro Bono Partnerships 2007-2008* (June 2008), available at <<http://aallnet.org/sis/sccll/docs/anrepprobono.doc>>.
6. The Pro Bono Partnerships Special Committee (2006-2007) evolved into the Joint SCCLL/LISP Committee on Pro-Bono Partnerships in 2007.