

Michigan County Law Libraries

Do Michigan county law libraries serve attorneys, as well as the general public? Are electronic services available, as well as law books? Who finances the materials and services? The State Bar Committee on Libraries, Legal Research, & Legal Publications addressed these questions to Michigan circuit court administrators in early 2002.

Thirty-five out of 57 circuit courts answered our informal survey. Here's what we found.

Resources

All respondents maintain current Michigan primary print materials: statutes, case law, and court rules. Roughly half also maintain a digest, the Michigan Administrative Code, attorney practice manuals, form books, a legal encyclopedia, and law dictionaries. Additionally, about a third also maintain federal statutes and case law.

Many respondents chose not to comment on the size of their print collection. But of those that did, nine keep a small collection of less than 5,000 volumes, three reported collections of between 5,000 and 10,000 volumes, and six maintain collections of more than 10,000 volumes.

Many county law libraries access computerized legal research. Twenty use Westlaw, and four access lexis.com. Fifteen libraries perform electronic research through CD-ROM products, and nine perform some legal research through the Internet.

Access

Once we determined the availability of resources, we asked, "Who may use the collection?" All but one circuit court permits attorneys to use their libraries. In three of these instances use is limited to materials in print. Thirty-two also permit the public to use the collection, but two do so on a by-

appointment-only basis. Three libraries not open to the public refer lay people instead to local public or college law libraries.

Thirty libraries reported weekday open hours between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 or 5:00 p.m. Very few close during the lunch hour. A handful provide extended hours, anywhere from some evening and Saturday hours to 24/7 availability.

In 17 of these facilities, someone is usually available to help people use the law collection. Three of the larger libraries are staffed with law librarians. Others are variously staffed by paralegals, law clerks, court administrators, or a research attorney. So, while it appears from the survey results that attorneys and the public may use these law libraries, in many instances no help is provided to locate materials or use the resources that are available.

Finance

Law collections are expensive to maintain. Although penal fines are directed toward financing these law collections in most of Michigan's counties, MCL 600.4851(1) (2), are penal fines sufficient to keep these collections up to date? In most cases, probably not.

All but five respondents reported additional financial support from their county's general fund. Three reported contributions from local bar associations, and one also collected fees from local college students using the law library.

With some creative funding, and perhaps an active local bar association, a handful of county libraries provide even more services to attorneys and the public. Let's take a look at a few examples:

Kalamazoo County

The Kalamazoo Public Library maintains an intergovernmental contract with Kalamazoo County to provide law library space and service to everyone. The library is housed in the county library and is open six days a

week. One librarian, a library assistant, and two paralegals staff the law library. The collection contains all federal and Michigan primary law, attorney practice manuals, and a wide array of pro per materials. Kalamazoo County Circuit Court put together packets of forms and instructions on typical family law, landlord/tenant, and estate matters. The staff maintains a long referral list for patrons needing social agency assistance.

The law library's website, www.kpl.gov/resources/law, links to pertinent law-related information available on the Internet. Within the library, patrons may access the Internet and some Westlaw databases. The main library networks other business and reference databases into the law library.

The county, the public library itself, and the bar association (through grants) all help to support the library's operations. Area legal resource providers, such as Western Michigan Legal Services, and area Dispute-Resolution services partner with the library to provide programs for both attorneys and lay people. Twice a month local bar association attorneys voluntarily staff legal clinics for pro se litigants in both English and Spanish.

Genesee County

Genesee County opened newer law library facilities in the county courthouse building in June 2001. Updated shelving, better lighting, expanded seating capacity, laptop hook-ups, and a custom-made reference desk were added. The library shares its space and staff with the Court's Alternative Dispute Resolution program. The library is funded by the Genesee County Board of Commissioners through the general fund.

Attorneys and the public may use the book collection and the electronic resources, which include Michigan cases and statutes on CD-ROM, plus Internet access. The book collection includes basic Michigan and federal materials, digests, annotated court rules,

a legal encyclopedia, Shepard's, the Restatements, treatises on major legal topics, and attorney practice manuals. A paralegal helps visitors find and use the library's materials and works closely with the Judge Bruce A. Newman Legal Information Center. The Center staff helps pro se litigants find legal resources and refers citizens to other legal and social service agencies.

Oakland County

Oakland County's General Fund supports the Adams-Pratt Oakland County Law Library, and three other library units comprising the Oakland County Library. Over the years, Oakland County Bar Association's Foundation has awarded grants for special law library projects. Recently, the Oakland County Library established its own foundation, and the law library maintains its own Gift Fund.

The library's 70,000 volumes include extensive Michigan and federal practice materials, all 50 states' statutes, case law and court rules, and almost 400 legal periodicals. The facilities include five study rooms, laptop hook ups, and seven publicly available computers. Attorneys and the public may perform legal research on selected Westlaw databases, LOISLAW, and the Internet. The law library's website, www.co.oakland.mi.us/lawlib, links to recommended legal resources on the Internet, the library's own online catalog, plus all of the law school library catalogs in Michigan.

A law librarian and four FTE staff with some paralegal education and training assist the law library's 37,000 annual visitors to find and use the library's resources.

Grand Traverse Area

Through shared sponsorship by Grand Traverse County, the Grand Traverse-Leelanau-Antrim Bar Association and the Traverse Area District Library, the county law library provides a book collection, CD-ROM access to legal materials, and staff to handle reference services. In addition, paralegal students pay a lab fee when their classes meet in the library.

Because this is the only public law library across several counties, the nearly 3,000 annual visitors come from a wide geographic

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area. All services are available to attorneys and the general public. However, attorneys may use the library after hours, with proper identification and key/punch code access. The part-time staff—a law librarian, a former court administrator, and a volunteer—handles the Traverse Attorney Referral Service from their reference desk. They also maintain the bar's website, www.traverse.com/legal/bar.html, which links to bar information and a membership directory, a list of library materials, and resources on the Internet.

Is Help on the Way?

Thus, through partnerships, it is possible for county law libraries to provide additional resources and services and extend these to everyone. But, what about county law libraries that lack partnership opportunities and simply don't have the funding or staff to provide additional resources and services like these? Can some kind of assistance be provided to legal researchers?

To help meet this need, our State Bar Committee is developing a website portal to legal research aids already on the Internet. This portal will link to tools that government agencies, libraries, and researchers have already created. The information will include how to do legal research, how to find an attorney, and topical information on getting through legal issues. In addition, the committee hopes to digitize the Legislative Service Bureau's consumer education pamphlets and add them, in full text, to this website. Topics include landlord/tenant matters, business information, victims' rights, environmental issues, veterans' benefits and services, and a guide to medical and legal decisions. Previously these booklets were only available through requests to state legislators.

By linking to all of these tools from one website, some legal research assistance will be accessible to everyone, not only in county law libraries, but also from home or office.

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