

Tips for Researching Current State Legislation

Got legislative research? Researching legislative history or the preenactment of a statute and its intent is often addressed in how-to guides, but what if you're interested in determining whether pending legislation exists as well as its current status? In other words, you don't even know if there's preenactment going on. Where do you start? You use the same legislative process materials sources and then some. The "and then some" may include traditional commercial services such as LexisNexis® or Westlaw®, or a legislative specialty tracking service as well as news articles, blogs, association or lobbying websites. With a nod to the current traffic advisory campaign "Know Before You Go"—because researchers and travelers both benefit from avoiding backups and time-consuming delays, some practical tips on researching pending legislation as well as a look at Michigan-specific sources follow.

Know Before You Go #1

Determine or identify what you want. This sounds simple, but it's a basic research tenet and the key to where you'll look and what you'll find. Finding state legislature websites or contact information is fairly straightforward. Legislative materials vary from state to state and although these materials may be found on the web, easy access doesn't equal easy answers. Multistate Associates provides a chart of the 50 states' legislative presence on the Internet (<http://www.multistate.com/site.nsf/state?OpenPage>) noting the availability of full-text bills and status content as well as providing comments on each site. The Law Librarian's Society of Washington, D.C. provides its own *LLSDC's Legislative Source Book*, a wealth of information, including *State Legislatures, State Laws, and State Regulations Web Site Links and Telephone Numbers* (<http://www.llsdc.org/sourcebook/state-leg.htm>). If you're uncertain or unfamiliar with another

state's legislative materials, the Indiana University School of Law Library has compiled links to state legislative research guides and sources in its *State Legislative History Research Guides on the Web* (http://www.law.indiana.edu/library/services/sta_leg.shtml). Evaluate what you find and be sure to note the state's legislative timetable or calendar. While we in Michigan are accustomed to a two-year legislative session, some state legislatures meet every other year for limited periods. Familiarity with a particular state's legislative calendar can ease your mind and your workload—you can't expect to find pending or amendatory legislation during a nonexistent session.

Know Before You Go #2

A do-it-yourself approach may involve a state legislature website or traditional commercial service such as LexisNexis® or Westlaw®. Several state websites offer an alert or tracking service, including Michigan. LexisNexis® Eclipse and Westlaw®'s West Clip both offer the capability to save and run searches at specified intervals—you can search their bill tracking or legislative materials and have search results sent to your e-mail in-box. You may also identify pending legislation with West's citator service, KeyCite, as of March 2004. Kathy Biehl's *Federal, State and Commercial Bill Tracking Resources* (<http://www.llrx.com/columns/roundup28.htm>), LLRX, published September 16, 2002, offers detailed descriptions of online bill tracking services.

Know Before You Go #3

Is it really worth it to do it yourself? Legislative research can often be a painstaking and time-consuming process, especially if you're working with unfamiliar materials. There are several commercial services that offer state legislative tracking and monitoring for a fee. The best known are State Net (<http://www.statenet.com/>) and NETSCAN iPublishing's LegAlert (<http://www.legalert.com/>).

Brief descriptions of these and other bill tracking services as well as a comparison table may be found in *Internet and Online Sources of U.S. Legislative and Regulatory Information* (<http://www.llsdc.org/sourcebook/docs/internet.pdf>). More detailed descriptions may be found in Kathy Biehl's *Federal, State and Commercial Bill Tracking Resources* (<http://www.llrx.com/columns/roundup28.htm>), LLRX, published September 16, 2002. While these specialized services provide the same information that can often be found at a state's legislative website or on LexisNexis® or Westlaw®, searching capabilities are more sophisticated and conducive to multiple state and subject searching of pending legislation.

Know Before You Go #4

Don't reinvent the wheel. Research involves looking at several sources. Figure out if what you want may be found or identified in another source. For example, if you want to monitor several states' legislation on a particular issue—ask yourself who else may be interested. Trade associations and lobbying groups often provide current status of pending legislation on their websites. LLRX's State & Federal Legislation Resource Center (<http://www.llrx.com/resources7.htm>) provides helpful links to sources on legislative policy and issues. If you're trying to identify legislation and are unsuccessful—the legislation may not yet have been introduced. Set up and save a news search to alert you to reports of newly introduced legislation. Both Yahoo! (<http://alerts.yahoo.com/>) and Google (<http://www.google.com/newsalerts?hl=en>) offer such services free of charge, although registration is required. Check to see if there's a blog on the particular issue—often mention of legislation may be included in the entries.

Know Before You Go #5

Electronic sources of pending Michigan legislation range from free to fee on the web.

The Michigan Legislature website (<http://www.michiganlegislature.org>), a free service of the Michigan Legislative Council, Michigan House of Representatives and the Michigan Senate, provides access to legislative and public acts text from current and past sessions [1997–present] as well as journals, analyses, MCL and public act tables, and other legislative publications. Current session bill materials reflect floor activity within minutes of its occurrence, while other legislative activity is usually updated within 24 hours. Registering at the site provides access to a notification service that will e-mail you changes to specified legislative documents as well as changes in the Michigan Compiled Laws. You can select to be notified of bill activity by specified category or subcategory, legislator, number or changes to an identified chapter of the Michigan Compiled Laws, or statute [Act xx of year xxxx]. LexisNexis® and Westlaw® both provide Michigan bill tracking mat-

erials from Information for Public Affairs [StateNet] updated daily with materials available within 48 hours of the legislative activity.

Two other popular commercial services are Gongwer News Service Michigan Report (<http://www.gongwer.com>) and Michigan Information & Research Service Inc. (MIRS). Both Gongwer and MIRS are subscription-based services providing information on the activities of the Michigan legislature and government in the form of daily (weekday) newsletters. General-interest law publications such as Michigan Lawyers Weekly, ICLE's "This Week in Michigan Law" as well as various State Bar of Michigan section publications may alert you to pending or recently passed legislation.

State legislative websites as well as fee-based services provide electronic access to pending legislation. Keep in mind that coverage and full text availability as well as status information may vary from state to state.

Check out the state legislative FAQ or site contact for more information. Also note that most states provide some type of legislative status information by phone and a call to their law or legislative library may provide further guidance. In Michigan, the State Law Library (http://www.michigan.gov/hal/0,1607,7-160-17449_18639---,00.html) reference staff is available to answer your questions about the Michigan Legislative website weekdays from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Electronic access to state legislative information helps a researcher to readily identify pending legislation. Tracking and monitoring that legislation may require the use of a fee-based specialized service depending upon your interests and the depth of your request. ♦

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