

Modernizing Law Libraries

*Expanding Access to Justice by Reimagining Law Libraries as
Interconnected Community Resource Hubs*

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NCSC



Introduction

Since the early 1800's, law libraries have served as a gateway to legal information. Traditionally, law libraries served members of the bench and bar nearly exclusively, providing access to print resources, such as statutes and case law. In recent years, the number of litigants without counsel has increased, and law libraries have seen a significant rise in demand for legal materials from non-lawyer members of the public.

Modern law libraries have become hubs for litigants without counsel. One of the most remarkable things about law libraries is that they are available to everyone, regardless of income, citizenship, language, literacy, or disability.

The significant change in user base has occurred at the same time as law libraries have undergone a rapid and complete transformation in resource delivery. Modern law libraries offer remote access to user-centered technology, online databases, electronic court forms, guided interviews, and more. Despite these major changes, the central mission of law libraries remains the same. Law librarians remain curators of legal information, connecting users with the legal materials that they seek.

This report provides an overview of law library programs that are doing exemplary work that meets the evolving needs of law library users. It showcases real-world examples of outstanding programs, and provides high level recommendations, principles, and best practices that successful programs employ to enhance access to justice and better meet the changing needs and faces of court users.

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Core Principles

The following core principles provide the foundation for this report and guide implementation of the recommendations and best practices contained within.

Holistic Services

Modern law library programs are hubs for justice. Like a supermarket, which brings together fresh produce, prepared foods, meat, and household goods in one place, law libraries are community justice hubs. They support efficiency and promote user satisfaction by saving time and reducing the need for users to visit multiple locations to the tools they need to resolve a legal problem. Legal resource hubs deliver products—statutes, court forms, videos about legal topics, and services—legal advice, forms assistance, educational programming, and wayfinding, from one central location.

Cross-Sector Collaboration

Exemplary programs actively engage with community partners that provide assistance beyond traditional legal services. Partnering with non-legal providers—such as social service agencies, colleges and universities, community organizations, and technology partners can help create a seamless network of support that benefits users. By integrating legal information access with broader community services, law libraries offer more comprehensive assistance, reduce fragmentation, and ensure that patrons receive the right resources at the right time.

User Centered Design

Successful law libraries prioritize the needs, preferences, and limitations of users. Physical and online spaces are designed around user workflows, not existing systems and processes. Physical layouts are simple and intuitive and integrate technology that focuses on clarity, automation, and reducing cognitive burden. Finally, programs are iterative. They make incremental improvements and respond to changing community needs—right away.

Equitable Access

Law libraries are centered around equitable access. Services are provided free or at a low cost. Physical spaces and technology tools are ADA-compliant. Materials are offered in multiple languages and in multiple formats. Users can get the same services remotely as they would if they visited in person. Resources for specific user groups, such as seniors or veterans, are also curated and shared. Staff are trained to provide as much assistance as they can, and to make warm referrals when a request exceeds the level of assistance that they are able to provide.

Recommendations

Transitioning an existing law library into a modern legal resource hub offers a powerful opportunity to advance civic understanding, strengthen community engagement, and expand meaningful access to justice for all. Building on the core principles listed above, this section outlines high-level recommendations that are designed to move this work forward.

Physical Space and Environment

- Spaces should be welcoming, well-lit, and comfortable for visitors to spend several hours at a time.
- Space design and décor should be trauma-informed, with special attention given to color palettes, temperature, furniture arrangements, art selection, plants, and noise levels.
- Signs should be welcoming and inclusive using people-first language, plain language, and messaging that is positive, respectful, and empowering. Signs should also be created in accordance with accessibility standards and user-centered design principles.
- Legal resource hubs should offer a variety of set-ups that accommodate the wide range of user activities that occur in these spaces. Diverse set ups help meet the unique needs of users, who may be reviewing court records, conducting research, or getting organized for a trial. Furniture options should include single desks, tables, carrells, private office space, and pods.
- Legal resource hubs should leverage modular or flexible spaces that permit easy reconfiguration that meet evolving user needs.

Legal Information and Research Support

- Legal resource hubs should offer free access to high-quality legal information. Examples include printed materials, like flyers and brochures, as well as online materials such as websites, videos, and live webinars.
- Legal resource hubs should have direct, up-to-date access to all approved court forms.
- Staff should provide free access to court forms and aid users in reading and completing them. Staff should know where to find specialty forms, such as multi-lingual and large print versions of court forms. Staff should offer resources that assist individuals with limited literacy, limited legal literacy, and limited English proficiency. Examples include free access to court interpreters, and staff who can read forms and scribe.

- Legal resource hubs should provide free access to primary and secondary sources including legal databases, case law, statutes, constitutions, administrative law, county and municipal codes, and others.
- Law libraries should offer legal research assistance and guide users to relevant materials.
- Staff should receive quality training on the distinction between legal advice and information so they can provide as much assistance to the public as possible.
- Staff should routinely audit the handouts and referral information they provide to the public to ensure they remain accurate.

Procedural Help and Court Navigation

- Law librarians should help users make a direct connection to the next step in their process. When referring to outside organization, staff should provide as much detail as possible about the organization, intake process, eligibility criteria, and timing to prepare the court user for their next step.
- Legal resource hubs should provide procedural assistance to users either directly from law library staff, through a warm handoff to a court help center, navigator program, or the court clerk's office. Case assistance includes explaining court processes and procedures, confirmation of case status, and assistance on how to move a case forward.
- Legal resource hubs should assist with wayfinding. Exemplary programs offer court escorts who accompany users as they navigate through a court complex. Some programs offer court accompaniment—trained volunteers who attend hearings and provide emotional support and logistical assistance to individuals in certain case types.

Legal Advice

- Legal resource hubs should provide in-house access to brief legal advice. Exemplary programs co-locate with self-help centers that offer free legal advice from licensed attorneys on a full or part-time basis.
- Other programs leverage “Lawyer in the Library” programs that bring lawyers from the community directly into the library. Co-locating resources can help ameliorate barriers that exist for many court users regarding time, transportation, and caregiving.
- Staff should be knowledgeable about community legal advice and full representation programs, such as clinics, pop-ups, and civil legal aid programs. Space permitting, resource hubs should host legal clinics and “know your rights” events for the public.
- Legal resource hubs should offer online calendars that publicize dates and times of upcoming programs, both internally and out in the community.

- Staff should be knowledgeable about legal advice program guidelines and connect users to the most appropriate resource for their situation. By making intentional referrals based on individual needs and circumstances rather than sharing lengthy resource lists, staff can facilitate easier access to critical resources and save court patrons and service providers from repeated cycles of application and rejection.

Community Resource Integration

- Legal resource hub staff should be knowledgeable about community programs that may benefit users. They should be trained to make warm referrals to these programs. Examples of community programs include rental assistance, alternative dispute resolution, problem solving courts, behavioral health services, treatment programs, parenting resources, financial counseling, food security programs, resources for immigrants, resources for children and families, veterans' resources, and civil legal aid programs. Warm referrals reduce barriers to accessing services. Examples of a warm referral include actively connecting a person with the new program or service, sharing relevant details about the reason for the referral, and follow-up support.
- Exemplary legal resource hubs offer on-site access to non-legal service providers, like social workers, workforce development agencies, and public benefits screeners. Depending on space, resource hubs may also consider hosting community events like job fairs, voter registration drives, and health screenings for seniors.

Technology Tools

- Legal resource hubs should provide free access to technology. Examples include free public wi-fi, public access computers with word processing software, printers, scanners, headsets for listening to court hearings and watching informational videos, access to e-filing systems, and the technology necessary to participate in remote court hearings.
- Staff should be knowledgeable about community federal and local programs that provide free access to technology, like computers, for long-term borrow or discounted internet access.
- Legal resource hubs should provide free public access to electronic court records and permit users to print copies of these records.
- Legal resource hubs should ensure that technology is accessible to individuals with disabilities, and that staff are trained to assist different kinds of users.

Staff Training and Operational Support

- Legal resource hubs should provide frequent and robust staff training. Leadership should encourage staff training by making it flexible and accessible.

- Exemplary programs provide dedicated training hours on an annual basis. Examples of training topics include legal advice v. information,¹ cultural competency, the justice gap, community resources and how to make strong referrals, language access, disability access, technology and digital skills, customer service and deescalation, and trauma-informed service delivery.
- Staff should receive regular training on making referrals to community programs and should have a plan in place for routinely checking that referral partners, primary points of contact, and program eligibility information is current.
- When making referrals, staff should provide users with written instructions to reinforce the information or use technology tools to facilitate referrals.²
- Programs should partner with court navigators or social workers who can follow up with litigants to ensure they access resources and receive additional support. Online referral platforms and text messaging reminder systems can provide additional support.
- Staff should identify social services or legal networks within their community that they can tap into for additional information about emerging community trends, needs, and resources.

¹ NCSC training, Legal Advice v. Information <https://vimeo.com/showcase/10090740?video=1008069774>

² Maryland Justice Passport, <https://www.mdjusticepassport.org/>

Exemplary Programs

Maricopa County, Arizona's Law Library Resource Center (LLRC)

Maricopa County, Arizona's Law Library Resource Center (LLRC) functions as a central access-to-justice hub that combines traditional library services with robust legal self-help support for the public.³ Over the past decade, the LLRC has shifted from primarily serving judges and attorneys to focusing almost exclusively on self-represented litigants.

With a staff of 48, the LLRC's core services include research assistance, providing access to legal databases and e-books, creating and reviewing court forms, and facilitating access to legal information and advice. There are six LLRC locations in Maricopa County, and services are provided through multiple mediums, including in-person, by phone, and online through live chat, live webinar, and on-demand video content.

As demand for physical books decreased, the LLRC took advantage of the reduction in the physical collection by repurposing space to house technology, litigant workstations, and private offices. These spaces enable library staff, volunteer attorneys, and law students to provide direct assistance to LLRC users.

Using AmeriCorps volunteers, the library provides court escort services, as well as scribing, and reading assistance. The library provides access to legal advice through legal clinics, called "Lawyer in the Library," staffed via partnerships with legal aid organizations and local law schools. The library also plays a critical operational role for the court, handling all initial orders of protection, and pitching in to answer the court's main phone line. LLRC staff also staff the court's live chat service.

The LLRC emphasizes accessibility and language access by offering many library-created materials in Spanish. The LLRC employs bilingual staff, plus an in-house translator. The LLRC uses adaptive technology such as screen readers for patrons who are blind or have low vision and works closely with the court's ADA department to ensure programs and services are available to all patrons.

Staff training is a priority at the LLRC. Staff are given clear guidance on how to distinguish legal information from legal advice through written policies provided by the court.⁴ Staff are also able to dedicate paid time to community service efforts as part of the court's ongoing commitment to community engagement. Court leadership recognizes the LLRC as an

³ <https://superiorcourt.maricopa.gov/llrc>

⁴ <https://www.azcourts.gov/Portals/0/194/Docs/2016/QRDoc.pdf> (see page 5)

essential resource and a critical piece of the court’s mission to provide access to justice for all.

Kane County Law Library Self-Help Center

Named “the most user-friendly law library,” Kane County, Illinois’ Law Library & Self-Help Center brings together law library and self-help center functions under one roof.⁵ Staffed by a team of three librarians and a bevy of attorney volunteers, the Center’s mission is to “foster open and equal access to legal and government information.”⁶

The Center offers a wide variety of programs and services. Staff assist with traditional legal research, including access to print resources and online legal databases. The Center also connects users to legal services, including a “Lawyer in the Library” program which provides free legal advice in divorce and family law matters.⁷ The Driver’s Privilege Clinic, a partnership with the Kane County Bar Association, assists with driver’s license issues, and helps users reinstate driving privileges.⁸ The Center also provides legal document review, and assistance with e-filing.⁹ Programs and resources are available in Spanish.¹⁰

The Center has partnered with Illinois JusticeCorps Fellows since 2018. The program assists people without lawyers as they navigate the civil justice system.¹¹ JusticeCorps volunteers provide legal information and procedural guidance and connect self-represented litigants with legal aid and community resources.

The Center provides technology services including free public WiFi, public access computers, printing, copying, scanning, and device charging stations.

The Jefferson County Public Law Library (JCPLL)

The Jefferson County, Kentucky Public Law Library (JCPLL) serves a diverse set of patrons including local attorneys, college students, and members of the public who need legal

⁵ <https://www.kclawlibrary.org/Pages/about.aspx>

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ <https://www.kclawlibrary.org/Pages/Divorce-and-Family-Law-Help.aspx>

⁸ <https://www.kclawlibrary.org/Pages/Drivers'-Privilege-Clinic.aspx>

⁹ <https://www.kclawlibrary.org/>

¹⁰ <https://www.kclawlibrary.org/Documents/Limited%20Representation%20Disclaimer%20Divorce%20and%20Family%20Law%20Spanish.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.kclawlibrary.org/Pages/about.aspx>

help.¹² Governed by a board of directors, the JCPLL is staffed by three employees, including a Community Outreach specialist.¹³

The JCPLL offers legal help via a legal help center, which operates on a regular basis, right in the library.¹⁴ With support from the Kentucky Access to Justice Commission, volunteer attorneys, retired judges, and law students provide one-on-one consultation with litigants in a variety of subject areas. JCPLL also collaborates with the Louisville Metro Council. Together, these entities host clinics that assist library patrons with expungement of criminal records.¹⁵

Support for JCPLL comes from a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, called the Friends of the Jefferson County Public Law Library. This entity provides financial support for library programming and helps promote the law library's civic learning initiatives, including Law Day, Give for Good Louisville, and Know Your Rights seminars.¹⁶

JCPLL's collection includes numerous legal resources including federal and state statutes, regulations, case law, treatises, and form books in both print and electronic format.¹⁷ The JCPLL offers tech tools, such as guided interviews, and provides free Wi-Fi and public-use computers.¹⁸

JCPLL opened a moot court courtroom in 2024, for simulated court proceedings. The space serves as an "immersive training and educational opportunity for attorneys, students, and all Louisvillians to further their understanding of the justice system."¹⁹

Minnesota State Law Library

Located in St. Paul, Minnesota, the Minnesota State Law Library is the state's principal legal resource center. The library serves members of the judiciary, all branches of state and local government, members of the bar, academics, and the public.²⁰ More than three-quarters of program users are members of the public.²¹

¹² <https://jcpllky.org/>

¹³ <https://jcpllky.org/about-us/>

¹⁴ <https://jcpllky.org/legal-help-center/>

¹⁵ <https://jcpllky.org/expungement/>

¹⁶ <https://jcpllky.org/friends-group/>; https://www.facebook.com/40202jcpll/photos/were-less-than-2-weeks-away-join-us-for-the-2025-jcpll-law-day-in-the-park-monda/1023053866617964/?_rd=1

¹⁷ <https://jcpllky.org/library-collection/>

¹⁸ <https://a2j.org/#Kentucky>; <https://jcpllky.org/library-collection/>

¹⁹ <https://jcpllky.org/mootcourt/>

²⁰ <https://mn.gov/law-library/>

²¹ https://mn.gov/law-library/assets/MSLL%20Annual%20Report%202024%20FINAL_tcm1041-696747.pdf

With a staff of 14, the Minnesota State Law Library provides print and remote access to court forms, rules, regulations, statutes, case law, and more.²² Services are offered in-person as well as remotely by phone, chat, email, and mail.²³

The law library offers procedural guidance, through “How do I” resources online, and monthly legal advice clinics.²⁴ Unique programs include the Appellate Self-Help Clinic, which aids litigants who are pursuing appeals to the Minnesota Court of Appeals or Supreme Court,²⁵ an Unemployment Appeals Self-Help Clinic, and a Probate Clinic.

The Minnesota State Law Library provides assistance to individuals who are incarcerated through their “Law Library Service to Prisoners (LLSP)” program, and assist individuals in state hospitals and regional treatment centers.²⁶

The Minnesota State Law Library provides tech tools, including free Wi-Fi, and public access computers, and access to court records, via dedicated computer terminals that offer access to trial and appellate court documents.²⁷

²² <https://mn.gov/library/PDF/directory.pdf>

²³ <https://mn.gov/law-library/services/>

²⁴ <https://mn.gov/law-library/services/clinics/>

²⁵ <https://mn.gov/law-library/services/clinics/appealsclinic.jsp>

²⁶ <https://mn.gov/law-library/services/services-inmates.jsp>

²⁷ <https://mn.gov/law-library/how-do-i-find/court-records.jsp>

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