Library Law

Attorneys partner with public libraries to reach underserved clients

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LIBRARIES HAVE EVOLVED FROM THEIR ORIGINAL FUNCTION as repositories for books into full-fledged community centers.

So it's not surprising that libraries have also become impromptu law offices where local residents can have access to legal services in a more convenient, less imposing setting than other book-lined sanctuaries.

An informal survey finds roughly a dozen locales from Cleveland to California hosting Law at the Library programs. These are separate from the once-a-year May 1 Law Day sessions, and for many residents Law at the Library is their best chance to interact with an attorney on a wide variety of topics.

Melanie Shakarian, an attorney with the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, sees its sessions on one Saturday a month as a way to reach underserved residents. The group serves about 20,000 clients annually.

"Sometimes [visitors] work hours that are different from normal business hours, and we want to make it as easy as possible for our clients to contact us," she explains. "The need is so great. In the five counties that comprise northeast Ohio, more than 30 percent of residents are eligible for legal aid, so we have to be creative about how we can help them."

Generally, the Cleveland Legal Aid Society's sessions include 10 volunteer attorneys, legal aid staff, and law students who conduct an initial interview of the client. Subjects cover a range of issues, including access to health care; domestic relations (child support, divorce, safety for victims of domestic violence); housing (foreclosure, landlord/tenant); economic security; education and employment.

VARIED ADVICE

Shakarian says this bundle of issues—often referred to as poverty law—has become a specialty unto itself, and that not all of her organization's work is adversarial. Sometimes the volunteer attorneys handle questions on how clients can represent themselves pro se, or how to handle issues that could result in an eviction, rather than wait until a proceeding is already underway.

"We try to make the legal system more understandable," she says.

In the absence of an attorney, a client's first stab at getting a legal question answered might be with a librarian.

"The partnership with the library has been wonderful because librarians get questions from the public every day, including legal questions, so the librarians wanted our help," Shakarian says. "So we've been able to increase our interaction with the neighborhood through the library, which is a location of trust for people."

Across the country in Benicia, California, attorney Scott Reep of the Gizzi & Reep law firm volunteers with other attorneys at the public library.

"Ours is a once-a-month program on the first Thursday," he says. At the Benicia program, up to 16 residents receive counseling at each session.

"We get a lot of questions regarding dissolution of marriage, foreclosure, dealing with banks," he says. "Questions normally fall within the small-claims arena, vehicle sale and purchase, landlord/tenant, estate planning questions.

"A lot of what we do is provide legal advice, but we give people a game plan to move forward with the issue they're dealing with. We might refer them to a lawyer; other times we might direct them to resources in the library, such as self-help books by Nolo Press."

Why the library? "There are resources such as computer access, it's a free place to meet, and libraries are the original legal self-help centers," Reep says, "because they have the books and reference librarians."

Reep says programs at public libraries may be more accessible than seeking information at county law libraries because they typically have longer hours. But the public uses law libraries too. According to a recent story in the *Columbus Dispatch*, of roughly 15,000 questions fielded by the staff of the Franklin County Law Library in Ohio, about 75 percent came from people representing themselves. ■

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