Reference Report

Reference statistics are reviewed annually to examine details of interactions between Library reference staff and Library patrons. The resulting information may be used to modify reference response procedures, desk staffing schedules, and other elements of the Library's reference assistance provision.

The Reference Report examines only direct interactions between reference staff members and patrons, meaning instances when a patron contacts the Library with a question related to legal information, resources, or research ("information interaction"). The Report does not touch upon other avenues of patron/library contact, such as website or database use, or educational and outreach programs offered by the Library. Nor does the Report include information about Library visitors who do not interact with staff, such as local attorneys who occupy research carrels and use Library resources, but do not consult with staff for research assistance. The Report should not, therefore, be considered a full picture of all Library staff activity and workflow.

Information on overall Library activity during the fiscal year is available in the Library's *Annual Highlights*.

Services

The Library provides reference and research assistance to Maryland Judiciary judges and staff, attorneys, librarians (public, corporate, and special), government agencies, students, and members of the general public, including self-represented litigants (SRLs), correctional facility residents, and others in search of legal information for many purposes. Patrons are mainly either Maryland residents or have a question about Maryland law.

Reference staff interact with patrons through in-person visits, telephone, email, and regular mail. Interactions with patrons range from brief directional questions to lengthy research queries. Staff assist through provision of informational materials, instructional assistance, and evaluation of resources. Reference staff adhere to Library guidelines for reference provision, including the Guidelines for Legal Information Service to the Public and the Guidelines for E-Mail Reference Services.

Statistical Summary

Patron interaction statistics are tracked through categories based on those recommended by the Conference of Maryland Court Law Library Directors (CMCLLD). These include format, location of inquiry, patron type, question type, and duration for each interaction. Pre-set tags help record additional details of interest, such as referrals to the Maryland Court Self-Help Center or requests for assistance with the MDEC system.

Reference staff recorded a total of 10,694 reference interactions during FY2020, decrease of 2% (220 interactions) from FY2019. This is notable as, due to the COVID-19 health emergency, the Library was closed to visitors between March 16, 2020 and June 8, 2020; during this time, staff managed reference interactions through email only.

Fiscal Year	% Change from Prior Year
FY2020	-2%
FY2019	31%
FY2018	-7%
FY2017	-11%
FY2016	2%
FY2015	-9%
FY2014	12%
FY2013	4%
FY2012	3%
FY2011	4%
FY2010	xx

Total Reference Interactions by Fiscal Year
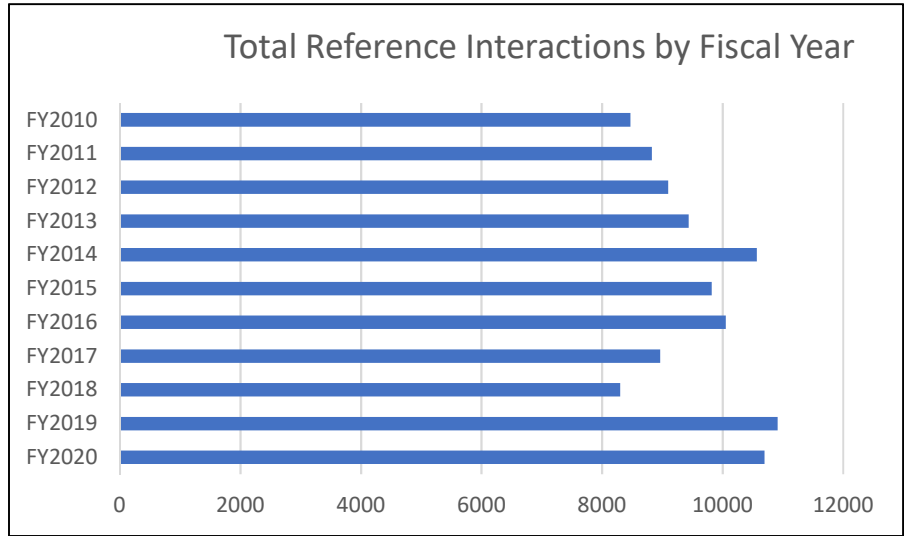
A breakout of numbers for pre-COVID months (July 2019 through February 2019) and COVID months (April and May, 2020) provides an illustration of reference staff workload. Prior to the COVID closure, the average number of interactions per month was 936; during April and May, 2020, when staff was working completely off-site, the average number of interactions per month was 694. The pre-pandemic numbers indicate the final year's count, without a pandemic, would have reached over 11,000 requests. The fact that staff were able to reply to about 75% of the usual number of requests, while only accessible by email, is quite an accomplishment.

Patron Characteristics

The Library's patrons include the Maryland Judiciary (judges, law clerks, staff), the Bar (private and pro bono attorneys, law firm staff and paralegals), government agencies, and the public (self-represented litigants, students, historians, genealogists, general legal researchers, and staff from public libraries). Patron type information is gathered for all inquiries using the Gimlet system. Prior to FY2019, detailed patron characteristics were gathered for in-person, telephone, and letter inquiries. Emails were counted as a complete number, but specific characteristics were not recorded. Statistics from the in-person, telephone, and letter inquiries, were used to extrapolate and estimate a picture of full activity. Beginning in October 2018, staff began recording all email interactions on the Gimlet system, for a more streamlined and accurate reflection of Library workload.

Patron Category	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018	FY2019	FY2020
Public	51%	58%	61%	61%	63%	66%	77%	80%
Judiciary	19%	15%	15%	14%	13%	12%	9%	7%
Bar	19%	17%	14%	13%	13%	13%	7%	5%
Student	9%	6%	5%	6%	5%	3%	2%	3%
Library	2%	3%	2%	3%	3%	3%	2%	3%
Government	n/a	2%	2%	3%	3%	3%	3%	2%

Any patron not recognizable as Judiciary, Bar, Student, Library, or Government is categorized as "Public."

The percentage of inquiries from public patrons continued its increase from prior years. From a service perspective, this is notable because Library staff often must take additional effort and time to explain concepts and processes to patrons with no legal background. The higher the proportion of "public" patrons, the more time and effort is required of staff while at the reference desk.

It is noted that, while the percentage of interactions marked Judiciary decreased, this does not mean less activity. Library materials are increasingly available remotely, through databases and the Library's digital initiatives. Many of the Library's fee-based access points (databases) are accessible via the Judiciary's network or are not limited to Judiciary staff. Connection to these resources often means Judiciary staff require less in-person interaction with staff, though extensive staff time and involvement are required to make these resources available and accessible.

Reference and Research Questions

Questions received by the Library range from quick inquiries ("ready reference") to requests for lengthy research assistance, and cover a wide range of law-related topics. Some samples of questions received in FY2020 include:

- Can my landlord charge me extra rent when I have visitors?
- I need a form to use to have alimony payments reduced.
- How can I have my brother declared incompetent?
- Can a probate court change the disposition of a Certificate of Deposit that was signed over to me before the CD's owner died?
- How to I make my ex take a DNA test to establish paternity?
- Can I have my spouse charged with fraud for lying when we wrote our prenuptial agreement?
- What are my rights to move out of my parents' house once I turn 18?
- How do I get my Section 8 rent adjusted to a percentage of my income?
- Can I sue my contractor? He owes me money.
- How to I serve my ex-spouse with a petition to change our children's names? What happens if he doesn't agree to the change?
- How do I find case law about a traffic stop that violated my 4th amendment rights?
- Does a will need to be filed anywhere?
- How do I take back a power of attorney?
- How can I establish kinship care for my nephew without going to court?
- What are the exceptions to the protection of personal assets afforded by forming a Limited Liability Company?

During the COVID-19 health emergency, the Library received questions specifically related to the pandemic, including:

- How do I get food stamps and social security benefits during the pandemic?
- Are rent increases agreed to before COVID-19 started still valid under the Governor's orders?
- Can my landlord inspect my apartment during the pandemic?
- Can my employer charge my absence to my personal leave if they're making me quarantine because of COVID-19?

- I live in Maryland, and my fiancé lives outside of the U.S. He can't come here because of the pandemic. Can we get married over the internet? Will that be legal in Maryland?

Question Duration

The Library has categorized the duration of questions (length of time required to complete) since FY2014. Over the seven years of measurement, interactions categorized as "brief" – taking only a few minutes to complete – dropped overall. The most recent fiscal year saw a slight increase in brief interactions, and a slight decrease in moderately brief interactions. The mid-level category, 16 to 30 minutes, continued its overall slight increase.

Minutes	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018	FY2019	FY2020
0 to 5	62%	60%	54%	49%	53%	39%	43%
6 to 15	26%	27%	30%	35%	32%	35%	30%
16 to 30	9%	9%	10%	11%	9%	18%	19%
31 to 60	2%	3%	4%	4%	4%	7%	7%
Over 60	1%	1%	2%	1%	2%	1%	1%

During the COVID-19 building closure, library staff responded to patrons via email only (see below, Patron Communication Methods). In the three-month span of the closure, the overall duration of time required to respond to questions dropped: questions over 30 minutes comprised about 75 per month pre-COVID, and about 60 per month during the COVID closure.

Review of the questions, generally, provides some basis for concluding that the duration drop may have been due to (1) fewer interruptions while completing a question; and (2) courthouse closures resulting in the ability to use templated language for more complex procedural inquiries.

Patron Communication Methods

The Library assists patrons through several communication methods, including in person, telephone, email, and traditional mail. Each year, the percentage of interactions completed through email has risen. In FY2020, that rise was significant, from 55% to 70%.

Question Format	FY2011	FY2012	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018	FY2019	FY2020
Telephone	33%	27%	23%	25%	23%	21%	21%	23%	21%	15%
In Person	35%	35%	35%	29%	26%	25%	25%	24%	21%	13.5%
Email	30%	34%	39%	41%	46%	47%	46%	47%	55%	70%
Letters	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%	.5%
Other	1%	3%	2%	4%	4%	6%	7%	4%	2%	1%

The impact of COVID-19 likely accounts for several significant variants from the usual percentage shifts.

During the COVID-19 building closure, the library provided reference through email only (no telephone, in-person, or letter communications, and no interlibrary loan interactions), from March 16, 2020, to June 8, 2020. As the proportion of requests reaching the library by email has seen a steady rise over ten

years, some growth was expected. A look at numbers from July 2019 through February 2020 shows that, prior to the COVID-19 closure, requests from email accounted for 63% of overall activity, reflecting the steady shift to more email reference of the past decade. On June 8, 2020, staff returned to the physical library, with a corresponding return to all other forms of reference communication. However, pandemic protocols, and likely pandemic concerns on the part of the patrons, has reduced the number of in-person library visitors. In the three weeks of June after staff return, email reference accounted for 78% of reference activity.

Conclusion

The Library continues to see growth in the workload dedicated to interactions with the public. The investment of effort in addressing questions from a segment of the population largely uninformed about legal concepts and processes contributes significantly to staff workload.

In summary, Fiscal Year 2020 saw the following notable activity:
- Library staff responded to over 10,000 interactions for the second year in a row.
- Public patron inquiries comprised 80% of library reference activity.
- Inquiries via email constituted 70% of the year's interactions.
- Library staff responded to reference inquiries via email alone through the COVID-19 courthouse closure.