

Element 5: Understanding and Finding Referrals

There is an underlying belief among those who use libraries, and often those who staff them, that library staff can provide “answers.” As discussed in [**distinguishing advice?**], where legal information is concerned, most often, library staff provides *responses*, not answers. A critical, sometimes undervalued, component of resources are *referrals* - where the person can go to get further information and often, legal assistance.

The range of referrals for legal information and services is wide and tangled, and can present a challenge to a generalist unfamiliar with the intricacies of the relationships between non-profits, government entities, and the private sector. Element 5, therefore, focuses on describing, delineating, differentiating between and among the range. The goal is to help you identify where in the spectrum of options your patron might most likely get the next step of assistance needed, whether it’s a deeper dive into a legal topic, assistance in drafting a motion to the court, or an evaluation of options to address a critical situation.

Purpose of Referrals

We do our best service when we link a patron to the resource that best fits their need. Sometimes the best resource is something in our library. Sometimes, the best resource is elsewhere. Our best service, in that instance, is connecting the patron to “elsewhere.” There are several reasons why “elsewhere” may be best:

- library staff has hit a roadblock in knowledge or resources
- the required time investment to make progress is too burdensome
- the patron refuses to accept the information provided
- the patron really does need advice or representation

Comprehensive Referral Resources

There are many compiled lists and directories of resources for referring someone elsewhere for assistance. As with descriptive and foundational resources, your best bet is to know a few good comprehensive resources that will provide referrals for a range of topics.

- The [People’s Law Library’s Legal Services Directory](#) includes many referrals, local and statewide, for general to topical assistance. The Directory can be filtered by category (subject) and by county, enabling library staff to provide an on-point resource list to the patron.
- [Maryland Court Help Centers](#) are available in several formats. There is a statewide telephone and chat service, as well as walk-in, face-to-face assistance for family law matters at Circuit Courts, and for District Court matters at some District Court locations.
- Maryland has many organizations providing legal assistance for a wide range of areas (see the PLL directory). The “big three” are often a good starting place:
 - [Maryland Legal Aid](#) provides direct legal assistance for many civil matters, for those who income-qualify.
 - [Civil Justice, Inc.](#), can help connect people to information and legal services.
 - [Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service](#) (MVLS) also helps connect people to information and legal services.

To find legal assistance for matters outside of Maryland, [LawHelp.org](#) helps connect to assistance across the country. Use the link at the top to Find Help by State.

The topics in Element 6 provide referrals for more specific topics – organizations or clinics that specialize in a single area of law.

A Deeper Roadmap for Referrals

There is considerable overlap in what different types of legal assistance entities do to help. Generally speaking, they fall into six broad (and often overlapping) categories. In no particular order, these are: government agencies; social services; law libraries; self-help centers; legal clinics; lawyers.

Practice Tips

- Make and keep at hand a list of frequent referrals, organized in the order you find the quickest and most useful.
- If you are not sure what referral to use, law libraries make a quick and excellent contact. If you don't have a public law library near you, reach out to the next closest one. Create an informal partnership and lean as needed.

Government Agencies

Often, questions that sound like they are about law are really about handling a matter with a government agency. If you can identify the government agency and locate contact information, you have connected your patron with the resource best able to answer not only the question asked but also any follow-up questions.

Illustrations:

Tax questions - state or federal: both the [Maryland Comptroller](#) and the [IRS](#) have extensive information and contacts on their websites.

- How do I know if I'm eligible for an Earned Income Tax Credit?
- Do I need to pay employment tax for my nanny?

Motor vehicle registration and driver licensing: the [Maryland MVA's website](#) is very helpful.

- I have a license from another country, how do I get a driver's license in the United States?
- How long do I have after moving to Maryland before I need to re-title my vehicle?

License requirements for professions: start with the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing & Regulation's [Division of Occupational and Professional Licensing](#). Their Quick Links provide access to numerous business and professional licensing requirements.

- What kind of license do I need to open a sporting goods store?
- Who do I call about my construction license?

The [Maryland Manual](#), published online by the Maryland State Archives, arranges Maryland state, local, and even federal government agencies into an accessible one-stop location. The configuration of the site presumes a level of knowledge of how government is organized (see Element 4 About Law: Civics and Government Organization), but there is also a handy search bar.

For federal agencies, the [U.S. Government Manual](#) has long been the standard resource for identifying federal government entities.

Social Services

Social services can be government agencies or not-for-profits. Social can help with questions that may sound like legal questions but are actually about solving a particular problem. And like agencies, if you can connect the patron with an appropriate social services entity, you have provided not just assistance for the question asked but also with assistance for related matters going forward.

Illustrations:

- Child support enforcement: the [Child Support Enforcement Agency](#) connects people to local CSEA offices for assistance.
- Living benefits like help buying food or paying energy bills, or obtaining medical assistance: the [Maryland Department of Human Resources](#) connects to these services through its website, and offers an 800-number for questions.
- Questions related to homelessness, which can span a wide range, including expungement, public benefits, subsidized housing and more: the [Homeless Persons Representation Project](#) provides legal help, as well as connections to other assistive services.

Immigration, disability claims, and innumerable other topics fall into this category, too: there are many more agencies that can be listed here. An excellent way to locate an assistance group is through the Maryland People's Law Library [Legal Services Directory](#).

Law Libraries

Because law library staff handle law questions regularly, they have the experience to address questions about legal matters with targeted materials and referrals. Law library collections contain a broad range of resources on the law, general and specific, many of which cannot be found in a public library. For example, most public law libraries have free public access to legal databases (Lexis, Westlaw, and others), as well as print materials like the Maryland Law Encyclopedia and extensive forms books to help patrons locate appropriate forms (see Finding Legal Forms for more information). Law librarians are happy to work with generalist colleagues in getting the patron's needs addressed. Maryland is fortunate to have public law libraries in several locations around the state.

Examples include questions that ask about the law in an area, in a more descriptive fashion, such as:

- What is the law governing taking photographs in a public place?
- What does the law say about searching student lockers?
- What is the law about discharging a firearm on private property?
- What laws regulate cemeteries?

[Maryland Law Libraries](#), a directory of all Maryland public law libraries, is on the Courts' website.

If you need to reach beyond Maryland, the Law Library for San Bernardino County (CA) includes on their website a handy [map for locating public law libraries](#) all over the United States. Or simply Google "public law library" and the state name.

Self-Help Centers

Self-Help Centers come in many forms. They may or may not be staffed. Some are staffed by librarians, others by legal professionals, or both. Help centers are organized to address the needs of the self-represented patron (whether litigant or not). There may be extensive signage, print finding aids, computer interfaces and other aids to help point the untrained patron to helpful legal materials. They often have forms collections. Self-help centers are especially good referrals for motivated and independent patrons. They are most often intended to provide short-term assistance - a brief discussion of processes and next steps, and references to information materials and/or forms to help the patron/litigant move forward.

Illustrations:

- For procedural questions of all sorts for court actions, start with the [Maryland Court Help Centers](#). If you know the patron's action is in District Court, start with the [District Court walk-in centers](#). Not sure if it's a District Court action? Review the [Maryland Court System](#).
- For family law questions like modification of child support, or complications in a divorce action, direct people to the courts' [family services programs and help centers](#).

Legal Clinics

Legal clinics are staffed by legal professionals who are able to offer analysis of a patron's legal situation. Clinics may have short-term or sometimes longer-term relationships with patrons (clients). Generally, they have more hands-on assistance than Help Centers. Many specialize in an area of the law, like criminal, or landlord-tenant, or disability. Some are restricted to low-income persons, some are open to all.

Examples of good questions to send to a legal clinic include:

- I need help figuring out what to write in my motion.
- Family law questions, again like the Self-Help Centers
- How can I set up a guardianship for my aging parent?
- My landlord isn't doing anything about the roach problem in my apartment, what are my options?

Legal clinics may be operated as Lawyer in the Library programs. These are available in many locations, run in partnership with law libraries, public libraries, and legal services organizations. Check with your local public law library or public library system, or review the [PLL Legal Services Organization](#) for local or topical organization who might hold clinics.

Lawyers

Lawyers are trained to analyze legal situations for possibilities and to identify options within the specific circumstances, as well as offer an opinion as to the merits of each option. It may feel like you are excusing yourself from assisting, but in many situations a lawyer is the best possible option for your patron. There are many resources available to help you help a patron locate an attorney, and many options within those resources to accommodate expenses (note below in the Resources for Referring, the option for limited scope assistance). The [Public Library Toolkit](#) can point you to the best starting resources.

Examples of questions that need an attorney's input:

- [Tort](#) questions, like personal or product liability (think "damages"). Issues in tort claims are complicated, often governed by case law, and require interpretive assistance. For a better understanding of the range, see the Cornell Legal Information Institute's entry on Torts. See also the Maryland People's Law Library on [Maryland Personal Injury Law](#).
- Contract questions. Like torts, contract law is quite complicated. For descriptive information on why, see the Maryland People's Law Library on [Contracts](#).
- [Estates and Wills](#). Though there is plenty of information about drafting wills and settling estates, because the potential complications involved it is generally recommended that an attorney be consulted for situations in this area.