

Finding Maryland Referrals

For legal reference questions, providing information about the topic or process is helpful in most situations. As much of the law is complex, though, it is helpful, even critical, to also provide referrals to local organizations or agencies specializing in the issue at hand. Most legal reference responses, therefore, including one or two – or more – referrals.

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Purpose of Referrals

The most effective help we can provide is connecting patrons to a resource that best fits their needs, whether it's in our library or elsewhere. This can happen when:

- 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.

We provide referrals because most legal questions lead to follow-up questions. Fully answering a question often requires reviewing the specific facts and application of the law, which only an attorney can do. By offering referrals, we help connect patrons with the right resources to move closer to a solution. For example:

- **How do I file for divorce?**
 - *Information sources provided:* People's Law Library article on divorce
 - *Referral provided:* local Circuit Court family law help center
- **I am the administrator of my parent's estate. What are my responsibilities?**
 - *Information provided:* People's Law Library article on administration of an estate
 - *Referral provided:* county Register of Wills office

Scope and Complexity of Referrals

There are many kinds of legal assistance: clinics, help centers, private attorneys, and more. Maryland has a wide network of organizations offering help. As many of them offer narrow or specialized services, identifying an appropriate referral for someone can be challenging for reference staff.

Our introductory *Frontlines* classes (*Best Practices for Legal Reference; Foundations of Law*) highlight general referral options for a broad range of civil legal issues. Topic-specific *Frontlines* sessions offer more targeted referral suggestions. Of course, there are many excellent resources beyond those mentioned in *Frontlines*.

Categories of Referral

Generally, referral types fall into six broad categories that tend to overlap:

- Law libraries
- Government agencies
- Social services
- Self-help centers
- Legal clinics
- Lawyers

Law Libraries

Law library staff are experienced in handling legal information requests and have access to specialized materials not typically found in public libraries. Collections include both general and specific (topically and geographically) legal materials, plus often free public access to databases like Lexis and Westlaw. Maryland law libraries generally have the *Maryland Law Encyclopedia* and extensive forms books (see Finding Legal Forms for more information).

Some public law libraries host Lawyer in the Library programs where patrons can receive brief, free consultations with an attorney. Maryland has public law libraries in many locations across the state. Find one near you using the [Directory of Maryland Public Law Libraries](#).

If you are outside of Maryland or need information about another state's law, the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) [Online Legal Information Resources](#) lists public law libraries and primary legal sources for all 50 states. Scroll to the bottom of each state's section for library locations. In addition (or alternatively), the Legal Information Services to the Public Special Interest Section (LISP-SIS) of [AALL provides a Fifty State Toolkit](#) with state-by-state helpful information and links. The contents vary from state to state.

In addition, [LawHelp.org](#) (powered by [probono.net](#)) connects to information and legal assistance in other states.

Government Agencies

Often, questions that may look like legal information queries are really about handling a matter involving a government agency. When possible, identifying the appropriate agency and providing contact information can connect the patron directly with the best source for answers.

Illustrations:

- Tax questions (state or federal): the Maryland Comptroller and the IRS both have extensive information and contacts on their websites. Their resources can help with:
 - How do I know if I'm eligible for an Earned Income Tax Credit?
 - Does my adult child who lives with me qualify as a dependent?
 - 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?
 - I'm over eighteen but just got my license. How long do I have to have a restricted license?
- Professional licensing: start with the Maryland Department of Labor, Division of Occupational and Professional Licensing. They don't cover every profession but do 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, offers a centralized, easy-to-navigate directory of Maryland state, local, and select federal government agencies. While it assumes a basic understanding of government structure, a built-in search bar makes it easy to find specific offices or officials.

For federal agencies, the [*U.S. Government Manual*](#) remains the go-to resource for comprehensive information about the structure and functions of the federal government.

Social Services

Social services, which can be government agencies or not-for profits, often support individuals facing challenges that may seem legal in nature but don't require a court process. These organizations can help resolve underlying issues such as housing, healthcare, or financial assistance. In addition, social services groups are generally familiar with accompanying legal processes and may be able to provide a bit of guidance related to the law.

Connecting a patron with the right social service provider not only addresses their immediate question but can also offer ongoing support for related services.

Examples of Social Services Resources:

- Child Support
 - The [Child Support Enforcement Administration \(CSEA\)](#) connects individuals to local offices that assist with establishing, modifying, and enforcing child support orders.
- Living Assistance
 - The [Maryland Department of Human Services](#) provides access to programs that help with food assistance (SNAP, WIC), energy bills, medical coverage (Medicaid), and more. Services are available through their website or by calling their toll-free hotline.
- Other Areas
 - Topics such as immigration, disability benefits, and many others also fall under the scope of social services. For a broader list of nonprofit organizations and agencies, consult the [PLL Legal Services Directory](#).

Self-Help Centers

Self-help centers are designed for people representing themselves in legal matters. They may be staffed by law librarians, legal professionals, or both, or they may be unstaffed but provide resources like signage, forms, computer access, and printed guides. These centers are best suited to motivated individuals who are able to manage their own cases with limited guidance.

Self-help centers typically offer:

- Brief, one-time assistance (generally, they do allow individuals to recontact the center when they reach the next step in their matter).
- Explanations of legal process and next steps.
- Access to forms and legal materials.

Some centers, like the [Maryland Court Help Centers](#), offer more in-depth help, including legal advice. However, they still expect patrons to do most of the work: drafting documents, researching, and representing themselves in court.

For questions about civil court procedures (e.g., family law, landlord-tenant, consumer issues), the Maryland Court Help Centers are a strong starting point. [District Court centers](#) focus on landlord-tenant and small claims, while [family help centers](#) address domestic matters.

Legal Clinics

Legal clinics are staffed by attorneys and legal professionals (paralegals, law students, both supervised by attorneys) who can assess a patron's legal situation and offer hands-on help. Clinics may provide short- or long-term assistance and often focus on specific areas like housing, family law, or disability.

Clinics typically assist with:

- Drafting motions or legal documents.
- Legal strategy and advice.

- Ongoing support in certain cases.

Some clinics are income-restricted while others are open to all. Clinics may be offered by not-for-profit organizations, law schools, or through a partnership with public or law libraries.

Good questions to refer to a clinic:

- How do I write a motion?
- How do I set up a guardianship for my parent?
- What are my options if my landlord won't address a roach infestation?

To find clinics, check with your local public or law library or explore the [PLL Legal Clinic Calendar](#) to find local or subject-specific legal clinics.

TIP: SELF-HELP CENTERS AND CLINICS OVERLAP IN MANY WAYS. IT'S NOT CRITICAL TO PARSE THE DIFFERENCE — IN MANY INSTANCES, EITHER WILL BE HELPFUL IN PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR YOUR PATRON.

Lawyers

Lawyers are trained to analyze legal situations, identify available options, and offer informed opinions based on the facts and the law. While it might feel like you're stepping back by referring a patron to an attorney, in many situations, it's the most helpful thing you can do.

Many resources can help patrons find legal representation, including options tailored to their financial situation such as limited scope representation (legal help for just part of a case). [The Public Library Toolkit](#) is a good place to start for lawyer referral resources.

Examples of questions that require a lawyer's expertise:

- Tort Claims (e.g., personal injury, product liability)
These cases involve claims for damages and are governed by complex case law. Legal analysis is usually necessary.
See: LII on Torts; PLL on Personal Injury
- Contract Disputes
Whether the situation is about enforcement, breach, or interpretation, contract law is nuanced, fact-specific, and often involves complex case law.
See: PLL on Contracts
- Wills and Estates
Although self-help materials exist, due to the potential legal and tax complications and consequences, it's strongly advised that patrons consult with an attorney for estate planning or probate matters.
See: PLL on Wills and Estates

Identifying a Referral

Making an effective referral means understanding what the patron needs and matching it with the right type of organization that can help. This is an extension of the reference interview. The same identification and understanding of the patron's question leads you to information resources AND to referral resources.

As discussed in the *Frontlines: Best Practices* unit, this starts with clarifying the patron's request – what they are truly seeking – and recognizing what you, as an information provider, can (and cannot) offer.

Information	Law	Legal Assistance	Services	Forms
descriptive discussion about law	statute, regulation, or rule text	help from a legal professional	assistance from a government agency with a process	fill-in-the-blank forms or sample filings

Once you know what you are providing, you can align the resources you are seeking to provide with the kind of organization that likely provides the resources.

Information	Law	Legal Assistance	Services	Forms
Law libraries Government agencies Social services	Law libraries Self-help centers Legal clinics Lawyers	Self-help centers Legal clinics Lawyers	Government agencies Social services Self-help centers Legal clinics	Law libraries Government agencies Social services Self-help clinics Legal clinics

Another path to identify a good referral is understanding the level of help a patron needs. You can use the arrow descriptors from the *Frontlines: Access to Justice and Public Libraries* unit, where we discuss the range of legal assistance.

- ☐ **Information about Law:** If they are seeking general information or descriptive discussion, refer them to a law library with legal texts, practice guides, and forms collections.
- ☐ **Self-Help Services:** If they are unsure of their next steps, suggest a court help center, legal hotline, or clinic where they can speak briefly with a legal professional.
- ☐ **Limited Scope Representation:** If they want to handle most of the issue themselves but need help drafting legal documents, inform them about limited-scope services and provide resources to identify attorneys who offer this service. This is often more affordable and still gives access to legal expertise. (Note: availability varies by state; Maryland permits limited scope but is more restrictive in practice than other states).

- ❑ **Full Representation:** If their situation is complex or serious, like criminal issues or civil matters based heavily on interpretation and case law, let them know why an attorney is strongly suggested and point them toward resources to help them locate an attorney.

Information about law	Self-help services	Limited scope representation	Full legal representation
Law libraries Government agencies Social services	Government agencies Social services Self-help centers	Legal clinics Legal service organizations Lawyers	Legal service organizations Lawyers

A thoughtful referral not only answers the immediate question but also connects the patron to ongoing support from the most appropriate resources.

Illustration: Bob and the Tree

Bob comes to the library after a tree branch from his neighbor Fred's yard damages his garage.

- *Legal Information:* You find a helpful article on neighbor disputes from the People's Law Library. Bob learns his options and decides to talk to Fred.
- *Self-Help:* Bob returns—Fred won't cooperate. Bob wants to sue. You refer him to the Court Help Center for guidance on filing a complaint.
- *Limited Scope Help:* Bob and Fred reach a compromise and want a written agreement. You suggest a limited-scope attorney to draft the document legally.
- *Full Representation:* The situation escalates into a major dispute. Bob now needs a lawyer to take the case from start to finish.

TIP: KNOW YOUR LOCAL LANDSCAPE. CHECK WHAT SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE THROUGH LOCAL LAW LIBRARIES, BAR ASSOCIATIONS, LEGAL AID ORGANIZATIONS, AND COURT SELF-HELP RESOURCES IN YOUR STATE, COUNTY, OR CITY.

Comprehensive Referral Resources

Often your best starting place is a reliable directory or resource hub. A centralized collection can save you time and connect to a wider range of possibilities.

Key Maryland Resources

- [People's Law Library – Legal Services Directory](#)
A statewide directory of legal organizations with descriptions of services offered.
- [People's Law Library – Legal Clinic Calendar](#)
A listing of upcoming legal clinics—both recurring and one-time events—with info on the types of help available.
- [Maryland Court Help Centers](#)
Offers walk-in assistance, phone/chat help, and support for civil legal issues in both Circuit and District Courts.
- [Maryland Court Law Libraries Directory](#)
Find and connect with Maryland's court law libraries.

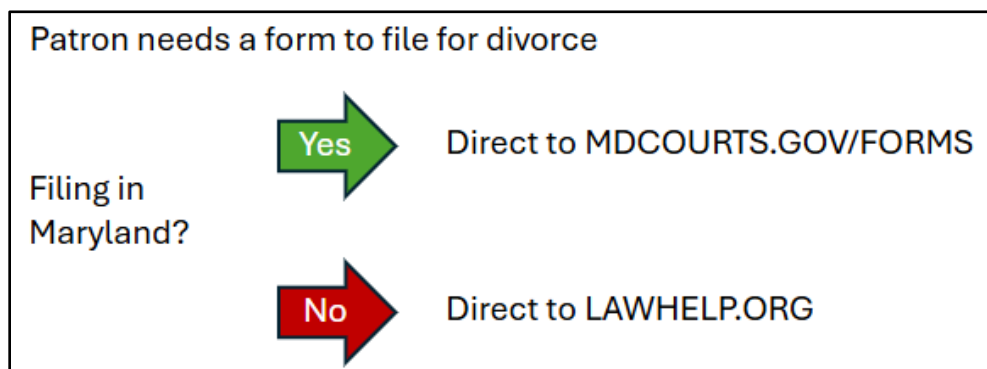
- [Maryland Public Library Toolkit](#)
Resources and guidance for library staff handling legal questions.
- [Maryland Manual Online](#)
A comprehensive guide to Maryland government agencies and officials.

Key National Resources

- [LawHelp.org](#)
Use the “Find Help by State” feature to locate legal services across the U.S.
- [AALL’s Online Legal Information Resources \(OLIR\)](#)
A helpful resource for information about primary source law in all fifty states, the OLIR also includes, where available, information about public law libraries in each state. Where available, contact information is provided in the last row of each state’s spreadsheet.
- [Public Library Toolkit](#)
The Maryland Public Library Toolkit referenced above is part of a larger Fifty-State Public Library Toolkit. Managed and provided by the Legal Information Services to the Public Special Interest Section (LISP-SIS) of AALL, the information and updates for each state vary. The Maryland section and many others include information about public law libraries, self-help services, clinics, lawyer referral, and more.

Practice Tips

- Keep a Go-To List: Maintain a list of your most-used referrals, ordered for speed and usefulness.
- Partner with Law Libraries: If you’re unsure where to refer someone, law libraries are a great all-purpose resource. Reach out and build informal relationships. If your county does not have one, reach to a neighboring county’s law library.
- Create a Referral Roadmap: Mapping your most common referral paths can make the process faster and more intuitive. A (very) small example is below.



A yes or no decision chart to guide choices.

Resources for Further Discovery

- The A2JC Dispatch, [Maryland Access to Justice Commission](#). Sign up on the Commission's website to receive their monthly newsletter. The newsletter often makes reference to legal referral organizations and activities.