

Law on the Frontlines: Legal Reference for Public Libraries

Legal reference is a specialized area that requires a unique set of skills and knowledge. For public library staff—especially generalists—it’s not always easy to build confidence in this area without regular exposure. Fortunately, with training and practice, anyone can become more comfortable assisting patrons with legal questions.

A Practical Approach to Legal Reference

Traditional legal research training has focused on foundational materials - statutes, cases, regulations, and legal treatises. While these remain important, this guide takes a more practical approach. It’s designed to help public library staff:

- Recognize when a question has a legal dimension
- Respond with appropriate information and resources
- Navigate complex topics without providing legal advice

Rather than focusing solely on in-depth legal research, this training prepares you to assist with the real-life legal questions that patrons bring to your desk every day.

Statewide Training and Support

The content on this page supports and complements a larger training effort across Maryland. In 2016, the Thurgood Marshall State Law Library, the Maryland Access to Justice Commission, and the Conference of Maryland Court Law Library Directors launched the first statewide legal reference curriculum for public libraries. This partnership continues to support librarians through:

- [Scheduled training sessions - View upcoming sessions »](#)
- [On-demand training videos - Watch now »](#)
- [Local sessions available by request - Request a local session »](#)
- [Have questions or feedback? - Send us a message »](#)

Build Your Legal Reference Skills

With the right tools, you can feel confident and prepared to support patrons navigating the legal system. Whether you’re answering a question about court forms or helping someone understand how to start a custody process, your role is critical in promoting access to justice.

Frontlines Contents

Introduction to Frontlines (this page)
+ What is Access to Justice – and Why Are We Talking About It?
+ Best Practices for Legal Reference
+ Legal Information Sources (Secondary Sources)
+ Foundations of Law for Public Library Reference (Primary Sources)
+ Finding Maryland Legal Forms
+ Finding Maryland Referrals
+ Working with Law Topics

Resources for Further Discovery

- [Law on the Frontlines: Legal Reference for Public Libraries – Five Year Report.](#) Maryland Access to Justice Commission, Thurgood Marshall State Law Library, & Conference of Maryland Court Law Library Directors (2023)
- [Access to Quality, Legal Information = Access to Justice: Legal Reference at the Public Libraries.](#) Catherine McGuire. Maryland Bar Journal (Winter 2019)
- [Improving Access to Civil Legal Justice through Libraries.](#) WebJunction (2020-)
- [Law on the Frontlines: Ongoing Legal Reference Training for Public Libraries.](#) Audrey Dingler. The Crab, the Digital Magazine of the Maryland Library Association, Volume 56 (Fall 2025)