

Legal Information Sources

Introduction

Much of the information about law is contained in specialized resources – texts and databases that are written for lawyers, presume a level of knowledge, and are usually quite expensive. Law libraries dedicated to legal information contain collections of such materials.

In more recent years, there has been significant growth in lower-cost materials aimed at the non-lawyer, self-represented population. These come in a variety of print, web-based, and database formats. For staff in a general library, these materials are more attainable. And for the patron population, such materials are much more comprehensible.

A reference interaction with a member of the general public will most often rely first on these types of materials. Because they are easier for non-lawyers to understand, these provide a foundation for understanding the more complex possibilities many legal situations involve.

When dealing with information about law, it is critical to understand what a good source is and what may not be, and to know of one or two good basics where just about any question can get a start.

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Evaluating Legal Information

The vast amount of legal information available through the internet includes helpful and relevant material – but also inaccurate, biased, or just plain incorrect information. It is important to be certain of the reliability of the information you provide to your patron.

Library staff are taught to evaluate information sources in all formats for reliability. The same criteria for assessing the reliability of a general source apply to legal information sources. There are additional, perhaps more specific, criteria that should be applied in determining whether legal information is good to pass on to your patron, particularly when channeled through the internet. These detailed evaluation criteria may vary a bit in detail depending on the list you are viewing. We've highlighted the key points below.

Reliability

- ☐ Who is responsible for the content?
- ☐ Is the author/body responsible for the content clearly identified?
- ☐ Is the author/body a reliable source?

This is particularly critical for online sources. Official law comes from governmental bodies. Websites authored by the originating government body are considered a highly reliable source (though you still need to check for updates – see Currency, below). Other generally reliable sources include reputable educational (law school) or community (not-for-profit legal aid groups) organizations. Evaluate these on a case-by-case basis. Try to think about whether the source has a potential bias (see Objectivity, below). Think about how much getting the information right means to the author. For example, a law firm blog has a vested interest in posting correct information, as they would not want to misinform potential clients. On the other hand, as law is subject to interpretation based on the specific facts of a situation, they may have a particular slant to their take on a topic, so watch for Objectivity alarms.

Objectivity

- ☐ Is there a discernable slant or bias to the information that could impact the reliability or usefulness? (see Authority, above)
- ☐ Is more than one argument or side presented? Could the information be useful on either side of a dispute?

Statements that form an opinion or are not supported by citations (see Source References, below) may be evidence of bias or slant. Law information should be presented in as open a manner as possible.

Source References

- ☐ Does the source provide support for any statements about the law?
- ☐ Are the support citations clear enough for you to locate the primary law to which they are citing?

Statements about law (e.g., *the law says...*) should be backed with actual citations to the legislation, regulation, or case that supports the statement. For example, suppose a patron asked what constitutes an official will in Maryland. You find a source that states that, for a Maryland will to be official, it must be signed and witnessed. However, beyond the statement itself, the source does not point you to where the law actually says that exact information – no Maryland Code citation, no reference to a case or other primary source material. Nice though the statement is, with no actual citation to back it up you cannot verify the information as true, and so cannot rely on that source.

Currency and Timeliness

- ☐ When was the information written?
- ☐ Is there an indication of the last review and/or update of the information?

Law changes all the time, and legal situations can rise or fall on how the language read at the time of the event involved. What may be good law one year may no longer be in force the next. If someone asks for the current law on an issue and you find what looks like a great site with statutory text and explanations, but the date indicates the page was last updated in 2007, this is not reliable and accurate for the situation. Similarly, if someone asks for law as it appeared in

2019 and the page indicates the language has been updated to current, the language may not be accurate for the question asked.

Relevance

- ☐ Is the information provided relevant to your particular question – more specifically, is it about law for your area of interest?

Relevant information aligns with the question in location and topic. If you are seeking law for Maryland, a site providing law in South Carolina is not going to be helpful. If you are seeking law about residential leases, a site providing law about commercial leases is not going to be helpful.

Information Sources

For Questions about Maryland Law

There are many resources available for addressing a question about Maryland law (or any type of law, for that matter). In Maryland, we are fortunate to have access to some wonderfully helpful resources about our State's laws, in addition to access to more general, non-Maryland resources. Those we include here are intended to act as a starting point. They cover a wide range of information and are good places to check first.

Maryland People's Law Library (PLL)

The PLL, a legal information site managed by the Thurgood Marshall State Law Library, provides Marylanders with information and summaries about the law, links to primary and secondary legal sources, and provides lists of referrals to legal service organizations. The bulk of the information on the site is about Maryland civil law, though there is also some information on federal law, generally where it overlaps Maryland law. The content on PLL can be translated, using a dropdown menu, into dozens of languages. PLL is a great starting place for almost any civil topic, including procedural questions.

Maryland Court Help

The Maryland Judiciary's Access to Justice Department oversees the development and provision of additional Maryland civil law materials in the Judiciary's Maryland Court Help pages. Among the resources provided in Court Help are topical articles, reinforcing the information provided on PLL. The Court Help pages are focused on court actions – they are less general than PLL and often address specific court procedures for a particular topic. The Court Help materials also include links to court forms and brochures, helpful videos and webinars, language support, and directory information for Court Help Centers across the State where litigants can get legal assistance with many civil actions.

Between the PLL and Court Help sites, basic information is available for most civil legal questions in Maryland.

For Questions about General or Non-Maryland Law

[Cornell's Legal Information Institute: Wex](#)

The LII's Encyclopedia, Wex, is a great starting point for descriptions of legal terms and concepts. If the question posed includes unfamiliar terms and you'd like to make sure you understand what the patron is asking before digging further, start here. This can be particularly helpful if the question comes from a student assignment and the information they are seeking is more theoretical than practical.

On the LII home page, choose Legal Encyclopedia, then All Wex Articles. Or, use the search engine in the upper right and filter for Wex.

[Nolo.com](#)

Nolo is a publisher of legal information for non-lawyers. There are multiple such publishers; some have larger publication catalogs than others. Nolo has a particularly large collection of publications – and they also produce a free online encyclopedia, essentially a distilled version of their full publications. These can provide a good basic foundation for many general legal questions. Much of the information in the Nolo online encyclopedia is non-state-specific and the best use of the information is in concert with state-specific laws and information. But there are some state-specific and state-survey articles, a number about Maryland law in particular. These can help augment the information provided on PLL.

As the online materials are a briefer version of the information in Nolo's publications, identifying a brief online article can help point you and your patron to a longer publication that might be in your library's collection, available through interlibrary loan, or available for purchase by the patron.

[LawHelp.org](#)

Operated by Pro Bono Net, a national nonprofit organization and a major player in the Access to Justice movement, LawHelp provides a platform for reliable state-specific legal information, similar to what the PLL is for Maryland. In fact, when you click on Find Help By State and choose Maryland, you will be directed to the PLL site.

LawHelp is an excellent starting place if you are seeking state-specific information for a non-Maryland state. As Maryland is not only a small state but also a geographically sprawling one, many counties border other states and many public library systems therefore get questions about laws in those neighboring states. LawHelp points to useful information as well as to legal assistance referrals for these situations.

Check Local Resources!

Don't forget to check your own library's catalog and digital collection. You may have access to material of which you were not aware.

Check your system's catalog

- Look in particular for publications from Nolo or Sphinx, both publishers of legal information for non-lawyers. Your library may purchase and keep updated publications from the State Bar Association, the National Consumer Law Center, or other organizations focused on law. Review your reference collection, where you may have access to print volumes of the Maryland Code, your local county code, or law texts like Maryland Family Law. Note what is in your own branch and what may be available from other branches in your system.

Check your system's digital collection

- Public library database access may include helpful resources. Look for databases like Gale Legal Forms for sample forms; Gale eBooks, which includes a collection of law-based titles helpful for school homework and National History Day projects, or the Nolo database. Sometimes, you may have access to a limited version of Westlaw or Lexis.

See also in *Frontlines – Best Practices: Know What You Can Access*

Quick Reference Toolkits

The American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) hosts the [AALL Public Library Toolkit](#). The Toolkit includes general information to help support public library reference staff learn more about providing legal reference. The Toolkit also contains links to state-specific toolkits.

The [Maryland Public Library Toolkit](#) is hosted on the website of the Thurgood Marshall State Law Library. Maryland's Toolkit includes helpful information and links to many resources to support responding to a legal reference question.

TIP: BOOKMARK THE MARYLAND PUBLIC LIBRARY TOOLKIT FOR EASY ACCESS AT YOUR POINT OF SERVICE.

Beyond Your Library - Partnerships

Partnerships, whether formal or informal, can help extend access to resources and expertise. A partnership does not have to be formally established. They can be as simple as a connection you made at a recent conference, a contact at an organization who already calls you, or just a geographically close entity – really, any relationship in which both, or all, parties to the partnership share resources for the betterment of all.

See also in *Frontlines – Best Practices: Know What You Can Access*

Partner organizations provide information in areas the library might not have in-house:

- Informational brochures
- A great database or set of books
- Clinics or limited representation

Check out neighboring libraries.

- Share the cost of access to a legal information database
- Get access for your staff through interlibrary loan or your patrons for in-person visits to another library's collection
- Work with a local law library to design a law reference resource page for your website

Local community colleges may have paralegal or law-related courses and have corresponding collections in their libraries. Area universities similarly may have public access to their extensive collections. Use their websites to view policies and collections before reaching out or directing a patron.

Maryland has multiple law libraries open to the public. These include, in addition to the State Law Library in Annapolis, libraries in the Circuit Courts. There are twenty-four Circuit Courts in the state; many of these have at least a minimal law library that may be accessible to the public; one-third of them have library staff who can help direct and connect a visiting patron with useful information. The Universities of Maryland and of Baltimore both have law libraries. Public access may be more restricted at law school libraries, so you may wish to check policies and collections, then reach out to see what support might be available.

Review government directories.

- Obtain brochures or pamphlets with information or support resources related to legal situations.
- Agencies may have hotlines, clinics, or “ask us” contacts.
- Determine which agencies are good referrals; connect with the agency to confirm what they can do.

Federal, state, and local agencies produce material addressing many questions related to legal situations. Much government material is provided on agency websites; some will make pamphlets or flyers available in bulk (it might take some exploration of their websites).

Agencies dealing with daily life matters, such as departments for aging, education or the school board, labor, or planning & zoning, might provide contacts for hotlines or other person-to-person assistance.

Connect with the Bar.

- Get a calendar of upcoming clinics.
- Obtain brochures describing topics and services provided by the entity.
- Confirm if they have a lawyer referral service and what that service might cover and cost.
- See if they have a speaker's bureau and line up someone for a public lecture.

Lawyers are everywhere. Local bar associations are a good place to start, but investigate what non-profit legal service organizations might be nearby or handle topics of interest to your patrons. Bar associations and legal organizations might be willing to speak to library staff about their resources or a topic frequently asked by patrons. They may be willing to provide or staff lawyer-in-the-library or civil clinic programs; they might be willing to hold one in your library.

Law schools, too, often have clinics. Start small – what do your patrons ask about most often? Is it a topic you could find a speaker to address for a one-time event? Offer assistance with what they may need. This could be access to a meeting place or to public computers. Give them the chance to tell you what they know.

Real World Examples

The Frontlines project is an example of partnerships benefiting public libraries. There are many other illustrative examples of partnerships between public libraries and law-world entities.

- The Hawaii State Public Library System hosted Legal Reference Lowdown with law librarians from the Hawaii State Law Library presenting an overview of legal information and guidance on addressing legal questions from the public.
- The Anne Arundel County Public Library partners with the Anne Arundel County Public Law Library to provide evening Lawyer-in-the-Library events at local AACPL branches.
- The Brooklyn (NY) Public Library partners with the City Bar Justice Center's Neighborhood Entrepreneur Law Project (NELP) and Pace Small Business Development Center to offer a virtual small business legal clinic, an opportunity to meet with a team of pro bono attorneys to discuss legal issues related to their small businesses.
- The Memphis (TN) Public Libraries partner with the Memphis Bar Association and Memphis Area Legal Services to offer Second Saturday Legal Advice Clinic. The topic varies from month to month, and has included Elder Law Legal Clinic, Pro Se Divorce Clinic, Domestic Violence Clinic, and Rental Rights & Fair Housing Clinic.

Resources for Further Discovery

- [Evaluating Legal Websites](#), People's Law Library of Maryland.
- [Guide to Evaluating Legal Information Online](#), American Association of Law Libraries (AALL).
- Legal Reference Service: A Guide for Law Librarians and Nonlaw Librarians, Elise H. Fox (Legal Information Services, 2023).
- Legal Reference for Librarians: How and Where to Find the Answers, Paul D. Healey (ALA, 2014).
- A Layperson's Guide to Legal Research and Self-Help Law Books, Kendall F. Svengalis (Author Reputation Press, 2021).