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Diversity of Services to Diverse Patrons: The Bernard E. Witkin Alameda County Law Library Experience

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Alameda County is one of the most culturally diverse counties in the nation. 1990 census show that the population characteristics for Alameda County were 60% Caucasians, 18% blacks, 15% Asians, 14% Hispanics, and 1% Native Americans. Furthermore, 18% were foreign born, 25% were speaking a language at home other than English and 9% were speaking Spanish at home. By the year 2000 it is possible that no race will be a majority. To better reflect and serve its increasingly diverse population, Alameda County adopted a diversity policy in the early 1990's, stressing the need for valuing, understanding and managing diversity within the County of Alameda. Thanks to Frank Houdek, 1997 AALL President, I had the opportunity to serve as chair of the Diversity Committee to encourage a diverse membership within the professional organization. In addition to the considerable challenge of providing for our attorneys and judges, the law library provides for minorities in numerous ways: by providing reference materials and pamphlets; by developing a reference staff who welcomes every patron; by utilizing staff members who speak foreign languages, and by providing internet web sites which are available in multiple languages.

Our patron population consists of 48% attorneys and judges, and 52% non-attorneys. In addition to providing extensive, easily accessible legal material for attorneys and judges, the law library also has the considerable challenge of serving a diverse general public. For our legal professionals, we provide state of the art technological tools, and one of the most extensive practice materials. The library has been conscious of maintaining a collection of "user-friendly" reference materials, self-help books, and references to Internet web sites to serve members of the general public who usually require more assistance than attorneys.

The Alameda County has 4000 attorneys practicing law in the County. The Alameda County Bar Association (ACBA) has a membership of 2400 attorneys with diverse cultural and ethnic background. Some of them have bilingual skills. The law library's collection including print materials, CD-ROM, microfiche, Westlaw/Lexis and Internet services reflect the need of their practice areas, i.e. civil rights & discrimination, estate planning, family law, contract, real estate, immigration, labor and tax laws etc. The library's home page links to sites for additional research. Although many attorneys are members of the ACBA, a number of minority bars have been created by attorneys from different ethnic background, i.e. Black Women Lawyers Association, Charles Houston Bar Association, Asian-American Bar Association and La Raza Lawyers Association. The library offers the conference room facilities free of charge to members of the board of directors and committees representing ACBA and all minority bars.

Members of a multitude of ethnic groups use the law library. Many of them are recent immigrants and materials in their languages are not available. With the exception of a few Nolo Press titles in Spanish, California and federal legal materials are exclusively in English. It requires a reasonable working knowledge of English to use the materials effectively. While the court provides foreign language interpreters to criminal defendants, civil litigants

representing themselves are at a major disadvantage if their English language skills are limited. At the reference desk, we do the best we can to utilize our diverse staff members who speak several languages including Cantonese, Malay and Spanish. The director who is fluent in Mandarin and Taiwanese has pitched in from time to time as well.

Even without language barriers, it can be difficult for pro pers to navigate the legal system. The library acquires self-help books from Nolo Press and a variety other sources on adoption, child support, divorce, employment, name change, landlord/tenant and small claims court filing. In addition, the library also provides lists of legal self-help and low cost resources from Berkeley Public Library and the State Bar of California. The California State Library produced a pamphlet entitled "Understand the Law," also available in Armenian, Cambodian, Chinese, Hmong, Korean, Laotian, Mien, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. However, this is a merely a very broad overview and not enough to assist a patron with a specific situation. The Alameda County Bar Association has produced a flyer on local immigration resources. These are available in Chinese, Vietnamese, Spanish, Mien, Cantonese, and Laotian. The office of the San Francisco Family Law Facilitator has translated their informational materials on family law into Chinese, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

The State of California has mandated two recent programs to assist lay patrons. Most recently, the 1996 Child Support commissioner and Family Law Facilitator Program (AB 1058) initiated a program of Family Law Facilitators. These are experienced family law attorneys who are appointed by the court and are court employees. Each county is required to have a family law facilitator, although some to the less populous rural and mountain counties have hired one jointly. In 1990, the state began to require that each county have a small claims legal advisor to give basic assistance about small claims court. In July of this year, the official web site California Administrative Office of the Courts inaugurated the California Small Claims Courts Information Center. This web site has both valuable information and useful links to other consumer oriented legal sites. The address is www.courtinfo.ca.gov/smallclaims

Several state and local agencies and private organizations have recognized the need of pro pers for more accessible information sources and have produced pamphlets and guides. Many of these publications are published in languages other than English as well as English. The California Department of Consumer Affairs has issued a number of pamphlets on topics such as automobile repair, small claims court, etc. Some of these are also available in Spanish and Vietnamese, and most of them are available at no charge from the department. The California State Library produced a pamphlet entitled "Understand the Law," which is also available in Armenian, Cambodian, Chinese, Hmong, Korean, Laotian, Mien, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. However, this is merely a very broad overview and not enough detail to assist a patron with a specific situation. The Alameda County Bar Association has produced a flyer on local immigration sources, which is available in Cantonese, Chinese, Laotian, Spanish, and Vietnamese as well as English. The office of the San Francisco Family Law Facilitator has produced informational materials for pro pers which have been translated into Chinese, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Advances in technology have enabled pro pers to retrieve legal information online. This is a particular boon to people in rural areas who may not have easy access to a well-stocked county law library. In addition, some web sites are available in multiple languages. For instance, the Los Angeles county Courts have developed an information web site for pro pers, students, and other interested persons. This is available in English and Spanish. Translations into Korean, Mandarin, and Vietnamese have been completed and will be posted shortly. Their address is www.co.la.ca.us/courts/superior-auc/Lawday/main.html.

In an aging of increasing diversity and the resultant demands on law library resources coupled with shrinking library budgets, the internet and other technology may be the tools that rescue all of us. For instance, libraries are unable to have infinite collections, but the material available on such we sites as findlaw (www.findlaw.com) and hieros gamos (www.hg.org) enable researchers to access far more resources than any one library could ever contain. In addition, the availability of information over the Internet in languages other than English enables libraries to serve patrons despite a language barrier.

As we enter the twenty-first century, it is reassuring to realize that technology is emerging daily to enable law librarians meet the challenges of diversity!

With the advance in technology, some web sites are available in different languages. The Los Angeles County courts have developed an informational web site for pro pers, students, and other interested persons. This is available in English and Spanish. Translations into Korean, Mandarin, and Vietnamese have been completed and will be posted shortly. Their address is In addition, users of the automated QuickCourt kiosks in Arizona make an initial choice between proceeding in English or Spanish. Spanish speakers have the same content and convenience although all the completed forms produced by the system to file are in English. Even without language barriers, it can be difficult for pro pers to navigate the legal system.

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