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Catching the 24/7 Reference Wave

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"Where can I find the three strikes law?" "What are the laws relating to sex offenses?" "How do I contest a will?" "Are frequent flyer miles taxable?" "Where do I find biographical information about a judge that Governor Davis appointed today?" The answers to these and many other law related questions are being sought on the Internet and public law librarians are directing the questioners to sources in real time using software originally used to show Lands End customers clothing choices via the company's Internet catalog.

"Reference 24/7" was the topic of a NOCALL a program during the American Association of Law Libraries Chapter's "Catch the Wave: Managing Change" Institute on April 27, 2002. Susan McGlamery Reference Coordinator at the Metropolitan Cooperative Library System, Shirley David, Director of the Sacramento County Public Law Library, and Kerry Prindiville, reference librarian at the Fresno County Law Library shared how librarians are becoming virtual reference librarians.

Several public libraries have 24/7 reference programs and when they realized they were getting legal questions they couldn't always answer, this pilot project was developed. Eleven public law libraries throughout California are participating in this project to provide real time legal reference service via the Internet. Reference librarians are collaborating to escort researchers to free Internet sites that may answer their legal reference questions. The service uses software that combines chat and the ability to collaboratively view and search sites. The real time service is available forty-three hours per week primarily during standard business hours. The questions are received via "Ask the Librarian" Icons on public library websites provided by the 24/7 Reference project. Susan McGlamery and Shirley David are coordinating the law specialists project. Funding for the software is provided by a federal Library Services and Technology Act grant.

Each participating public law library has agreed to staff the reference service at least two hours per week and the current schedule includes more than 40 hours of real time reference assistance. Law Librarians are scheduled primarily from Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. through 5:00 p.m. On Monday's from 7:00-8:00 p.m. and Wednesday from 5:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. By spreading out the reference responsibilities among so many libraries, no one library has the burden of funding additional staff to put librarians out on the Internet where former and potential customers are searching for free legal information. Kerry Prindiville, reference librarian at Fresno County stated at the NOCALL program, "People are using the Internet for legal research. Librarians need to be there with them using their research skills to make sure they find the information they are seeking whether if be on the Internet or at a public law library."

Participants are fielding law related reference questions received through the website icons of participating libraries of the 24/7 Reference Service of the Metropolitan Cooperative Library System in Southern California. In July many of the participating libraries will be adding direct links from their own websites to the service. From the 24/7 reference

webpage, questioners may also have the choice of leaving an e-mail request if there is no law librarian on duty, or link to the CCCLL website.

Participating law libraries are: Bernard E. Witkin California State Law Library, Butte County Public Law Library, Fresno County Law Library, Kern County Law Library, Los Angeles County Law Library, Orange County Public Law Library, Placer County Law Library, Riverside County Law Library, Sacramento County Public Law Library, San Diego County Public Law Library, San Francisco Law Library.

Lu Nguyen of the Orange County Law Librarian sums up why individual public law libraries are participating in the program and why they how it will continue. " We are participating in the 24/7 reference project because of the potential ability that the software can help to expand our service to a larger scale of the population than we are currently serving, and to those persons who may be unable to visit us. The type of questions that we have been receiving is mostly about where one can find information on certain topics of the laws, for example, the most recent rulings of the Ninth Circuit on intellectual property law." Mora Prestinary, as from Orange County Law Library adds, " We want the public to know that the law is available to everyone, everywhere, and that they are welcome to come in and use the library resources."

Currently, the best way to access the program is at public libraries participating in the program, but if you have the right browser, you can try it at home or work. Direct your browser at www.247ref.org/asklib/law.html. Ask us a question. You may find a new resource and we need the practice!

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