

*San Francisco Daily Journal, 5/15/03.
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24/7 Reference Update: Legal Reference Services to the Public

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"This was a lot of help. I had a simple question no one seemed to be able to answer." "I'm a business owner and this site helped me resolve an important question." These are compliments public law librarians love to hear. Of course we also know that simple questions don't always have simple answers when one must look to the law for the answers. And there lies the dilemma for the sixty librarians from fifteen California public law libraries and one academic law library who are using their expertise to answer questions posed over the Internet. How to effectively answer the "simple question" for a increasingly number of people who are not going to lawyers and who are expecting that all they need to know can be found somewhere for free on the Internet.

In September 2001 the Council of California County Law Librarians agreed to provide legal reference expertise to the southern California based Metropolitan Cooperative Library System's 24/7 Reference service. Anyone could click on a participating public library website "ask a librarian" link and be connected via live chat software to a librarian. The librarian could send the caller a website, look at the information together with the caller and lead the person to the appropriate page. The entire transcript would be sent to the caller's e-mail.

To start the pilot, ten public law libraries each agreed to provide at least two hours per week of law reference expertise. The service started out slowly, but as organizations added links to the project, they began getting more and more questions. Joint e-mail box software was added so when the live service was not available, the caller could send an e-mail question to the group. Q&A Café, a northern California public libraries live chat service, and the 24/7 reference merged, adding questions from public library customers thorough the state. By December 2002, the law librarians were answering 100 questions per month, live and e-mailed.

Then on January 2, 2003 the service exploded with questions. In January the law librarians fielded 921 live questions, and received 1124 e-mail questions. What changed? The Judicial Council's new improved self-help website made its debut on January 2. Included in the change, the law librarians 24/7 reference portal became an icon on the navigator bar of every page of the site.

The added visibility brings new challenges. The e-mail box has been closed to all but transferred questions from live chat sessions until 24/7 can catch up. 24/7 has been actively soliciting and gaining more volunteers both to double staff the busiest live chat hours and to work on the e-mail backlog. Using a questions and answers base, they have been writing and sharing scripts to use for recurring questions. They have worked with the 24/7 reference staff and the Judicial Council staff to reword web pages in hopes non-lawyers will better understand what law librarians can and cannot provide them.

The e-mail box is still overflowing with unanswered questions. Live chat librarians cannot spend as much time online navigating websites with callers as they would like. More

individuals are representing themselves in legal actions rather than going to attorneys and they expect the librarians to provide free legal advice. (Librarians can direct patrons to resources, but can't give legal advice.)

The public law librarians working on the project are hoping to recruit academic and firm law librarians to share their knowledge outside their primary clientele base, and in doing so raise the legal literacy rate of our state's residents. Volunteers who can give a couple of hours per week, to answer questions in the joint e-mail box should contact Shirley David at sdavid@saclaw.lib.ca.us. It's a noble and much needed pro-bono activity that any legal institution can support.

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