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Building a Public Law Library Support System

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In this day and age, when public law librarians face many of the same budget constraints other government agencies do, effective "marketing" efforts can build a support system to get them through the difficult times. This column is offered in hopes that the steps taken at Washoe County Law Library and outlined below may be used by public law libraries everywhere.

For almost 90 years, the Washoe County Law Library (WCLL) has been providing legal professionals and other Reno, Nevada residents with the resources they need to find answers to myriad law-related questions. Having worked at WCLL for the last 24 years, I believe that several factors have enabled us to build a support system: bar association links, media links, library links, outside and inside expertise.

Bar Association Links. From its inception in 1915, WCLL has been closely linked to the Washoe County Bar Association. The Bar Association gave WCLL its first law resources. The Association purchased all the law books from the estate of the late Nevada State Supreme Court Justice and U.S. Senator, William Massey, and then donated the collection *gratis* to WCLL.

Another important Bar Association contribution is the gift fund established for WCLL. A certain amount of all Bar Association dues goes into the gift fund, and this, combined with other financial donations, gives WCLL a steady income source for supplementing the budget for purchasing books and other materials.

Bar Association members avidly participate in our "Lawyer in the Library" program. Each week, a local attorney fields questions from area residents, assesses their situations and then points them in the right direction to get the answers they need.

Bar Association members also offer monthly seminars on a variety of topics. For example, Justice of the Peace Barbara Finley will explain the small claims court process in this month's presentation. In the past, other distinguished Bar Association members have discussed bankruptcy, child custody, credit repair, elder law, estate planning and a dozen other topics. Feedback from WCLL patrons indicates that this is one of our most popular -- and useful -- outreach endeavors.

Media Links. Evidence of the popularity of WCLL seminars is seen in public demand for them beyond the confines of the library itself. Sierra Nevada Community Access T.V. -- known locally as "SNCAT" -- films the seminars and replays them on the local government cable channel. Because SNCAT cablecasts essentially are "free advertising" for WCLL, library management is always looking for ways to make use of this resource to draw attention to the full range of WCLL reference services.

Library Links. Geographical proximity and a close working relationship with the Washoe County Library (WCL) system is also a key to WCLL's ability to provide legal reference

services. First, because the main county public library building is just two blocks away, it is easy for WCL reference librarians to direct patrons with legal questions to WCLL. Also, the WCLL's automated card catalogue is shared with the WCL system so that public library patrons with legal questions can find the resources they need.

Links to Outside Expertise. WCLL benefits from the involvement of several outside persons with pertinent expertise. First, on the Board of Trustees, three judges and two attorneys are joined by a retired school librarian and a certified public accountant. Also, WCLL recently created the website, L.E.A.N. (www.nvlawdirectory.org) in conjunction with a federal grant administered by the state library, the Cord Foundation, the WCBA and many librarians throughout the state. L.E.A.N., Legal Electronic Assistance for Nevadans, gathers in one place information about agencies that provide legal information or services to Nevadans.

Inside Expertise. "Marketing" efforts identified above would be to little avail without a highly-qualified staff to conduct reference interviews, provide legal research instruction and ensure that the in-house mix of hard-bound and on-line resources matches patrons' needs. Fortunately, the WCLL staff includes three employees with an M.L.S., one with a law degree, one with an M.B.A. -- in all, six full-time and four part-time employees with 95 years of combined experience. To make them more effective reference librarians -- by enabling them to use their time more efficiently -- WCLL has a website (www.co.washoe.nv.us/lawlib) with research guides, pathfinders and library location maps to provide guidance to those patrons with on-line competence.

Final Thoughts. Since the days of the Comstock Lode and the Gold Rush, there has been constant contact between residents of Western Nevada and Eastern California. That exchange increases every year as folks from both states work together on common projects like Lake Tahoe, gaming, public health, economic development, etc. For that reason, WCLL not only has Nevada legal information resources for its patrons -- it also ensures that California legal forms, court reporters and legislative updates are on our shelves. In fact, with both Nevadans and Californians using WCLL, it has carved out a niche as a meeting place. This gives WCLL one more link in the support system because there's interest in the library's operation from outside the county as well as from within.

Note: The Washoe County Law Library is in Room 101 of the Old Courthouse at 75 Court Street, Reno, Nevada 89501. The telephone number is: 1.775.328.3250.

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