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## **COUNTY LAW LIBRARIES – CHANGE ON THE HORIZON**

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Librarians Are Innovative People. They learn about the latest technology before most everyone else, can locate the most obscure resource and seem to pull off every laborious task with a smile. But acquiring the resources and know-how to maintain that level of service takes revenue, and decreasing funds have recently turned many a librarian's smile into a frown. Librarians are feeling the strain of serving a public whose demands have increased yet the availability of staff and material has diminished.

Civil filing fee revenue for county law libraries has been drying up in recent years and without change their very existence is in question. Revenue for the libraries comes from a fee collected whenever a civil case is filed and a fee is paid (Cal. B & P §§ 6321 et. seq.). In a report published by the Administrative Office of the Courts it is noted, despite an increase in California's population, general civil case filings and the revenue associated with those filings dropped in the 1990's. Among the possible reasons contributing to the revenue decline are statutory changes and poverty rates (*Exploring the Work of the California Trial Courts: A Twenty-Year Retrospective*).

**A Good Day to Be a Librarian.** Historically, county law libraries have experienced minimal success with legislative change seeking programs or avenues of more secure law library funding. That changed on September 16, 2003 as Governor Davis signed A.B. 1095 (Stats. c. 394), a bill authored by Assembly Member Ellen Corbett (D San Leandro). Assembly Member Corbett offered to carry the bill after library director Cossette Sun, of the Bernard E. Witkin Alameda County Law Library, brought to her attention the current plight of county law libraries in California.

The bill seeks to remedy the difficulties of providing public law libraries by identifying the current status of our libraries and recommending improvements. As the bill moved through the legislature with bi-partisan support and without outside opposition, a clear message resonated through the capitol - People like their county law librarians and libraries and want to ensure their survival.

Annette Heath, legislative chair for the Council of California County Law Librarians, worked closely with legislative advocate Michael Corbett to keep librarians well informed of the bill's status. It was not uncommon to arrive at work to discover email or voicemail with Ms. Heath's request for letters or phone calls. And librarians throughout the State did just that. The road to Sacramento was well worn by the trek of many seeking support and ultimately the success of the bill.

CCCLL president, Anne Bernardo, marveled at the collaboration and teamwork demonstrated by all those involved. Without pause to celebrate the legislative victory, she enthusiastically addresses her role as leader and continues to foster collaboration beyond librarians. Ms. Bernardo efforts include working with county government and court

administration to achieve improved public law library services for all people of California. She exudes a confidence that the county law libraries are on the brink of major improvement

**A Little Elbow Grease.** What exactly can Californian's expect from A.B. 1095? The State has now charged the Judicial Council to establish a taskforce on county law libraries. The taskforce will identify the needs related to the operations and facilities of county law libraries. The legislature has already found, as provided in the text of the new law, that county law libraries are a vital adjunct to the state judicial system, providing individuals with opportunity to readily access essential legal documents and publications. But they also note the declining fiscal health and difficulties of public law libraries.

Names of the nine members of the taskforce have yet to be announced. There will be representatives from the judicial branch as appointed by the Administrative Director of the Courts, county representatives selected by the California State Association of Counties, and three county law library administrators. The appointing organizations are thoughtfully considering their appointments. Every effort will be made to ensure broad representation – both in size of library and geographical diversity.

Once assembled, the taskforce will review the state of existing county law libraries and examine standards for operations. The funding mechanisms currently available will be documented as recommendations for new funding are formulated. The results of the study must be completed by January 1, 2005.

**Follow-up Required.** Can we relax? NO! The findings and recommendations of the taskforce will be presented to the Judicial Council and legislature. During our turbulent economical and political climate it may be a challenge to see legislative implementation of the taskforce recommendations. It remains essential that librarians, students and library users champion the efforts of CCCLL and request the continued support of their legislative representatives.

Preserving and enhancing our county law libraries ensures the self-represented litigant has access to codes, cases and sample forms. County law libraries can help contain the cost of legal representation by making a complete library available to attorneys and thereby reducing their need to acquire every publication. Government agencies may find cost savings by relying on the county law library rather than placing complete libraries in every office. But most importantly, our efforts ensure access to justice for all - a basic element of a free society. Need another, more grandioso reason? How about to put a smile back on this librarian's face!

The Council of California County Law Librarians is a non-profit, mutual benefit corporation. Additional information about CCCLL and your local county law library is available at <http://www.cccll.org>.

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