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“Help, I need somebody, Help not just anybody, Help!” Public Law Libraries Partner With Their Patrons

By Marcia R. Bell, Director, San Francisco Law Library

These are times in which county law libraries must ask the attorneys and firms that use them for help. The San Francisco Law Library's experience is both an example of a county law library's urgent need for assistance and the positive effect collaboration can make on services. In the not-so-distant past, law libraries maintained a quiet presence in the background of a lawyer's life: a place of calm and near solitude to contemplate a new issue or case, research or prepare to litigate it; a haven in the courthouse madness while waiting for a calendar call or a jury to come in. In those days, books and librarians were the resources, on call, ready to assist, but never asking their patrons for help. Their presence was a given; the how, not a question.

These days, public law libraries are no longer hushed zones primarily used by spiffy-suited lawyers or judges. Now they are filled with ordinary citizens as well - your neighbor or your father, your Muni operator or your landlord, and yes, the homeless man from on the corner. They are hives of activity with a low buzz from computers, copiers, laptops, and the steady sotto voce reference consultations with librarians. Solo and small-firm practitioners come in to consult resources, both print and electronic, that are too costly to maintain in their law offices. Larger firms rely on county law libraries for resources beyond the scope of their in-house collections, and to archive materials they need but cannot house. But their presence, their viability, and their ability to help users are no longer a given. They are being strangled by a combination of factors: Their funding source - civil filing fees - has steadily declined; legal publishing inflation is excessive; expensive new reference products are continually developed; and local political and economic support has faltered in the wake of the difficult economy. County law libraries can no longer exist quietly in the background waiting to be called on when needed. They must reach out and ask their users - the attorneys and their clients, solos and large firms - to help them, to ensure that they can continue to serve.

The San Francisco Law Library, established in 1870, was the first county law library in California, the prototype for the state system, and a venerable presence in City Hall until the building closed in 1995 for a retrofit. The library moved into a small "temporary" space in the Veterans Building where staff work in the lobby and patron tables are squeezed in amidst stacks beneath a damaging unfiltered skylight. Most of the collection would not fit in the space, so the City stashed it in basements. Boxes of books are piled by the thousands, one on top of another, tipping and being crushed by their own weight; filling closets, aisles, and unfortunately, even unused bathrooms - inaccessible to staff or patrons.

The two years the library was to remain in the Veterans Building during the retrofit have become nine long years. The library did not return to City Hall when it reopened in 1997, nor was it moved to adequate quarters. Patrons, staff, and the collection suffer. Books can no longer be archived for lack of space, and a portion of the stored materials have been ruined by persistent leaks in the storage area. Despite a Charter obligation to provide proper space for the library, the City has no funds to create a permanent library or to move

the stored collection. Despite years in these conditions, no solution was proffered or in sight.

Law library trustees turned to the bar and the judiciary for help. Officials from the Bar Association of San Francisco and others responded by successfully appealing to former Mayor Brown to find a solution to the library's space crisis. A task force of library, bar, judicial, and city members was established to identify a site for the law library and a justice center. It quickly determined that rehab of 525 Golden Gate Avenue was the most feasible solution for the law library, and, combined with a justice center, would provide a groundbreaking legal resource center for all San Franciscans.

Political and community cooperation is essential for the project's success. The task force sought the help of Supervisor Matt Gonzalez and Mayor Brown and a resolution in support of the San Francisco Law Library Justice Center project was unanimously approved by the full board on January 13, 2004. Now, a coalition of private and public funding sources will be needed – the City alone does not have the funds to rehab the building, nor does the law library from its declining filing fee revenues. The law library must ask the bar, the public and the community – for support in putting together that coalition.

Without the help of the bar and the courts, the law library had no hope for a spontaneous solution to its space and service crisis. Like San Francisco, all county law libraries need financial and political support from their constituents from time to time. They need support for periodic filing fee increases; they need support in Sacramento; and they need support from their local county and bar. They need the advocacy, the support, the energy and partnership of their patrons to get the job done. No longer can it be assumed that county law libraries will always be there, in the background, able to respond to legal information needs. The times they have a-changed.

Visit the San Francisco Law Library at www.sfgov.org/sfl.

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