

Fortifying the Front Lines

Providing Legal Research Training to Public Librarians

By Michael Whiteman

Public libraries often serve as the front line of information for non-lawyers seeking legal information. The jack-of-all-trade librarians who sit at information desks across the nation always do their best to help these patrons, but with an ever growing glut of online sources available, how can they guide these patrons to the best information?



Author Michael Whiteman and law student Kristen Walker chat at the reference desk.

This very question drove our law library's outreach project this past year. As frequent users of the excellent public libraries in our community, we thought we should give something back to help these librarians as they tackle often difficult legal research questions.

Library staff at Northern Kentucky University's Chase College of law offer legal research training to local libraries with great results. Pictured from left to right: author Michael Whiteman, professor of law; Emily Janoski-Haelen, assistant director of research and online services; and Carol Furnish, assistant director of instruction and the outreach services department.

Our experience might be used as a model for how law librarians can reach out to our public library colleagues and provide them with some valuable legal research triage for those who come knocking on their library doors.

Community-Driven

This project grew out of the law library's desire to participate in the vision that our university president has for Northern Kentucky University (NKU). The slogan that is branded all over NKU's website, brochures, advertisements, and other marketing materials proudly proclaims "Quality-Made, Community-Driven." Many units on campus routinely reach out to the community to provide leadership and training so that the greater Cincinnati metro region can continue to grow and strengthen. This outreach includes bringing elementary and high school students onto campus for math and science camps, providing arts education and entertainment for the community, and partnering with local small businesses to provide them with guidance and support to help them grow (through the Small Business Development Center, as well as the law school's own Small Business and Nonprofit Clinic). Given this wide range of outreach, how could we not get involved?

In a brainstorming session with the law librarians we came up with the idea of reaching out to the public libraries to see if they had any desire or need for training in online legal research sources. A number of us expressed an interest in participating, and so we were off and running. I sent a letter to the heads of the five closest counties (Kentucky is blessed with 120 counties, so you are never far from an adjacent county). With four library systems responding

positively, I contacted them and set up the dates and times that were mutually convenient.

Talking Points

The next step was deciding what topics and sources we wanted to use to train the public librarians. At this point, confident that we were the experts, the law librarians who were to provide the training—Carol Furnish, assistant director for instruction and outreach; Emily Janoski-Haelen, assistant director for research and online services; and myself—met and came up with a lesson plan.

In retrospect I do not think we thought this through as well as we should have. What we should have done was to poll the public librarians at the institutions we were going to visit and find out from them what topics they needed us to cover. After all, they know best what types of questions they regularly receive. This was a lesson learned for us and for anyone contemplating offering these types of trainings in their area.

In the end we decided that there were three types of patrons likely to arrive at a public library reference desk: (1) Johnny or Susie Q. Public, a patron who simply wants some general information such as a copy of a tax form or the address of the local court; (2) students from either high school or college who need to do a report on a legal topic, such as the Second Amendment, a recent Supreme Court opinion, or the newest health care law; and finally (3) the crazy patron—the one who comes in convinced that the U.S. government does not have the authority to collect income taxes (you know who I am talking about). Based on feedback we received from the public librarians after the program, another popular patron seeking legal

research are parents looking for child support guidelines.

With this in mind we divided the workload into three distinct sections—one for each presenter—and chose the topics we would be covering. We thought about the three patron groups and decided that federal and Kentucky materials needed to be covered, as well as some more general legal websites that could be catch-alls for the librarians. I took on federal materials, Janoski-Haelen tackled the general legal web sources, and Furnish closed out the



Emily Janoski-Haelen assists law student Raymond Bullucks with a research question.

training with perhaps the most important session on Kentucky materials.

Once again, I wish we had discussed with the public librarians what they would have liked to see covered before putting this all together because it became clear as we conducted the trainings that they really didn't get many legitimate questions on federal statutory or administrative sources.

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(I am discounting, as did the public librarians, the crazy questions about the constitutionality of the federal income tax.) So our 90-minute training could have been cut down a bit had I shortened the federal section. Janoski-Haehlen's general legal web sources presentation was well received, as was Furnish's overview of Kentucky legal materials online (although this was no surprise given where these libraries are located).

Positive Results

Overall the trainings were a success. We met and trained almost 30 librarians at the four public libraries we visited, and we have already gotten some positive feedback from these sessions. One of the main points we reiterated time and again with the groups was that, like them, the NKU Chase College of Law Library is part of a public institution. As such, the public librarians should feel free to either send patrons our way or to call us themselves and ask for help. We have already had calls from our new acquaintances, and we have been thrilled to make these connections.

The feedback we received from the public librarians has been quite positive. Not only have the librarians expressed their appreciation for taking the time to come out to their libraries, the experience also left them with a favorable impression

of the university as a whole. One of the librarians commented on how much she appreciated that the publicly funded "local" law school was willing to lend its expertise to the area which in turn supports the law school. "That means a lot when the public reads about public universities in the newspaper or hears about university library budgets being slashed," writes Wynita Worley, public services librarian at the Grant County Public Library. "Those libraries aren't only for students."

As a side benefit to our training, the public librarians who attended our training received one and a half credit hours in certification, which is required of all public librarians in Kentucky who are responsible for staffing the reference desk. While I did not know this when we decided to offer these trainings, it certainly was seen as a great benefit for the public librarians we met. If you plan to create a program like this at your own library, I would encourage you to see if your state has such a requirement. If so, it can be highlighted as just one of the benefits of having the law librarians provide this type of training.

New Opportunities

While our initial plan was to simply offer this training to the public librarians, an unexpected new opportunity arose from these interactions. The librarians asked us

if we would consider offering a training session on basic online legal research to the public as part of the public library's adult programming schedule. Of course, we jumped on this opportunity as it fit quite neatly into our university's mission. Additionally this allowed some of the other librarians at our school to get involved. We have already set up two such trainings titled "Intro to Legal Research," which we will conduct this fall. (We were very careful to explain that these trainings would be informational only and not constitute us giving legal advice or answering legal questions, as Kentucky has some fairly strict rules dealing with the unauthorized practice of law.)

Overall this was a great experience for us here at the NKU law library. It was an opportunity to meet our colleagues in the public library world, promote the mission of our school, and spread the good name of the law school to the community. Our goal is to repeat these presentations every few years so that we can retain the connection we have forged with our colleagues on the front lines. ■

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