

Element 3: Descriptive and Foundation Resources

Much of the information about law is contained in specialized resources – texts and databases that are written for lawyers, presume a level of knowledge, and are usually quite expensive. Law libraries dedicated to legal information contains collections of such materials.

Over the last decade or so, there has been significant growth in lower cost materials aimed at the non-lawyer, self-represented population. These come in a variety of print, web-based, and database formats. For staff in a general library, such materials are more attainable; and for the patron population, such materials are eminently more comprehensible.

A reference interaction with a member of the general public will most often rely first upon these types of materials. These provide a foundation for understanding the more complex possibilities many legal situations involve – particularly because they are easier for non-lawyers to understand.

When dealing with information about law, it is critical to understand what is a good source, and what may not be; and to know of one or two good basics where just about any question can get its start.

- Evaluating Legal Information
- General Sources
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- Forms

Evaluating Legal Information

The vast amount of legal information widely available, particularly through the internet, includes helpful and relevant material, but also inaccurate, biased, or just plain incorrect information. It is important to be certain of the reliability of the information you provide to your patron.

Librarians are taught to evaluate information sources, in many formats, for reliability. The same criteria for assessing the reliability of a general source apply to legal information sources. There are additional, perhaps more specific, criteria that should be applied in determining whether legal information is good to pass on to your patron.

Authority

- Who is responsible for the content?
- Is the author and/or body responsible for the content clearly identified?
- Is the author and/or body a reliable source?

This is particularly critical for online resources. Official law comes from governmental bodies (see: [Maryland Public Library Toolkit](#) under government structure and sources of law). Websites authored by the originating government body are a highly reliable source. There are other reliable sources, including reputable educational (law school) or community (not-for-profit legal aid groups) organizations. Evaluate these on a case-by-case basis. Try to think about whether the source has a potential bias (see Objectivity, below). Think about how much getting the information right means to the author. For example, a law firm blog has a vested interest in posting correct information, as they would not want to misinform potential clients.

Objectivity

- Is there a bias present that could impact the reliability or usefulness? (see Authority, above)
- Is more than one argument or side presented?

Suppose your patron is a landlord with a question about a situation with a tenant. Much of the information about landlord-tenant law is written from the tenant's viewpoint. This might make the information less helpful to your landlord patron. On the other hand, do not discount information because it is coming from the opposite direction. If the source is reliable source it may still help inform someone of the general area of law.

Accuracy

- Does the source provide citations so you can verify the information?

Suppose a patron asks what constitutes an official will in the state of Maryland. You find a source that states that, for a Maryland will to be official, it must be signed and witnessed. However, beyond the statement itself, the source does not point you to where the law actually says that exact information - no Maryland Code citation, no reference to any cases or regulations. Nice though the statement is, with no citation backup you cannot verify the information as true, and so cannot rely on that source.

Coverage

- Does the source include the appropriate material for your need? Keep in mind there are different kinds of law (statutes, regulations, cases, etc.), resources (official or unofficial), and multiple jurisdictions.

If your patron asks for statutory law, and the fabulous resource you found talks about the State Department of Education's regulations on the issue, you may not be finding coverage of what the patron wants. Similarly, if your patron asks for Maryland law on an issue, and the resource you found discusses Delaware law, you are not finding the proper coverage.

Timeliness

- When was the information written?
- Is there an indication of the last update or review of the information?

Laws change all the time, and legal situations can rise or fall on how the language read at the time of the event. If someone asks for the current law on an issue, and you find what looks like a wonderful site with statutory text and explanations, but the date indicates the page was last updated in 2007, clearly this is not reliable and accurate for the situation.

Read Further:

- American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) [Guide to Evaluating Legal Information Online](#) (2016)
- Maryland People's Law Library, [Evaluating Legal Websites](#)

General Sources

At the start of a reference request, rather than attempt a comprehensive review of resources, it is often best to check one or two well-known, reliable, and general sources that cover a wide range of topics, particularly if you are still learning about law and how topics might be organized and sub-divided.

Remember to review with a critical mind any sources, even those considered reliable. Review Evaluating Legal Information (above) periodically to refresh your memory about important criteria.

For Maryland Questions

[People's Law Library of Maryland](#)

The Maryland People's Law Library (PLL), a legal information site managed by the Thurgood Marshall State Law Library, provides Marylanders with information and summaries about the law, links to primary and secondary legal sources, and referrals to legal services. PLL covers many topics and is a good starting place for almost any topic, including procedural questions.

[Gateway to Maryland Law](#)

For primary sources – the text of actual statutory language (Code), regulatory language (COMAR), court Rules, and cases, start at the one-source-for-all page. The Gateway provides reliable links to online primary law sources, and includes a collected list of county and municipal codes in addition to state materials.

[Maryland Courts](#)

The Maryland Judiciary's website contains a vast amount of helpful material. In addition to standard court-related information such as court structure, jurisdiction, contact phone numbers, and court forms, Maryland's courts also make available extensive [resources for self-help persons](#). These include, but are not limited to:

- [Court Help Videos](#)
- [Court Help Centers](#)
- [Free Online Classes \(Webinars\)](#) on many helpful topics (some are on-demand, some are scheduled live). These can be helpful to your patron, and also to you for furthering your understanding of frequently-asked-about areas of law.

The Maryland District Court has [Information Brochures](#) on common topics including landlord/tenant, garnishing wages, collecting a judgment, expungement and more. Brochures are available in several languages, usually Spanish, French, Russian, Korean and Chinese.

In addition to printable information brochures, the District Court also has helpful information pages on a number of other topics, linked right in the center of their [welcome page](#).

The Maryland Court of Special Appeals' publication, [A Guide for Self-Representation](#), is helpful for those pursuing an appeal in Maryland's Court of Special Appeals.

[Maryland Public Library Toolkit](#)

Many further resources to help guide you through a legal information reference request are grouped in the Toolkit.

For General and Non-Maryland Questions

[Cornell's Legal Information Institute \(LII\)](#)

The [LII's encyclopedia, Wex](#), is a great starting point for descriptions of legal terms and concepts. If the question posed includes terms that are unfamiliar, and you'd like to get a good footing before digging further, start here. This can be particularly helpful if the question comes from a student assignment, and the information they are seeking is more theoretical than practical.

On the LII home page, choose Legal Encyclopedia, then All Wex Articles. Or, use the search engine in the upper right, and filter for Wex.

[Nolo.com](#)

Nolo is a publisher of legal information for non-lawyers. There are several excellent options for print publishers of legal resources for non-lawyers, but Nolo also produces a [free online encyclopedia](#) – essentially, a brief, distilled version of their full publications – that can provide a good basic foundation for further research. Much of the information in the Nolo online encyclopedia is non-state-specific, and use of the information must be accompanied by a look at state-specific laws and information. But there are some state-specific articles, and some state survey articles, and a number on Maryland law in particular. These can help augment the information provided on PLL.

As the online materials are a briefer version of the information in Nolo's publications, identifying a brief online article can help point you and your patron to a longer publication that might be in your library's collection, available through interlibrary loan, or available for purchase by the patron at a bookstore.

[LawHelp.org](#)

Operated by [Pro Bono Net](#), a national nonprofit organization and a major player in the Access to Justice movement, LawHelp provides a platform for reliable state-specific legal information, similar to what the People's Law Library is for Maryland. In fact, if you click on Find Help by State and choose Maryland, you will be directed to the PLL site.

LawHelp is an excellent starting place if you are looking for state-specific information for a non-Maryland state. As Maryland not just a small state, but a rather sprawled one, many counties

border other states, and many public library systems therefore get questions about laws in those neighboring states. LawHelp helps point you to useful resources.

For topic-specific resources, see the Topic Articles

Partnerships

You might think your library has limited or no resources at all for law-related questions. Before you move forward with other resources, check in your own system. Most public libraries have access to information about law, either right there in the library, or a short distance down the road.

In Your Own Library

- **Check your system's catalog.**
Look in particular for publications by Nolo or Sphinx, both publishers of legal information for non-lawyers (see Online Sources for Getting Started for a description of Nolo's free online encyclopedia). Your library may even purchase and keep updated publications from the [State Bar Association](#), the [National Consumer Law Center](#) or other organizations focused on law. Note what is in your own branch, and what may be available from other branches in your system.
- **Check your system's database collection.**
Public library database access may include helpful resources. Look for databases like Gale Legal Forms, for sample forms, or Gale eBooks, which includes a collection of law-based titles helpful for school homework and National History Day projects. Sometimes, there may be a subscription to a limited version of Westlaw or Lexis.

Beyond Your Library - Partnerships

Partnerships with other organizations are a great resource. Partner organizations provide information in areas the library might not have in-house:

- informational brochures
- a great database or set of books
- clinics or limited representation

They also add readily accessible levels of expertise on whom you and your staff can rely.

Partnerships do not have to be formally established, they can be as simple as a connection you made at a recent conference, a contact at an organization who already calls you, or just a geographically close entity.

- **Check out any neighboring libraries.**
Local community colleges often have paralegal or law-related courses and have corresponding collections in their libraries. Area universities similarly may have public access to their extensive collections. Use their websites to view policies and collections before reaching out or directing a patron.

- **Look for your nearest public law library.**

Maryland has [multiple law libraries](#) open to the public. These include, in addition to the State Law Library in Annapolis, libraries in the Circuit Courts: 21 of the 24 Circuit Courts have a law library, and of those, eight have librarians who can help connect you to further resources. And the Universities of Maryland and of Baltimore both have law libraries generally open to the public. If one is close to you, arrange for a visit so you can familiarize yourself with their collections and services.

- **Review your local government directory.**

Look for an office with a focus related to the query (and note this method for identifying referrals, as well). For example, if your library is getting a growing number of questions about assessing assets for Medicaid eligibility, reach out to your county's Office of Aging. They likely get similar questions. Perhaps they have brochures or publications you can make readily available to your patrons.

- **Connect with your local bar association.**

Bar associations make great partners for information related to law. They have a vested interest in the public being correctly informed about law matters. They often have work groups or committees specializing in particular areas of the law, like family law, or elder law. They may publish a newsletter or journal, with information about local court processes, new legislation, and other matters of concern. And they may publish more in-depth topical introductions to law. These are all great resources for assistance and information, both for your staff and for your patrons.

The more you work with other organizations, the better the understanding of who does what. This makes future referrals more accurate, which is always a good goal.