Chapter 2
Patron Base

ABSTRACT

How does the public law library successfully meet its very challenging mandate to provide legal resources to all who enter its doors? The quick answer is "with difficulty." The more in-depth answer is: By understanding the needs of each patron group the library is obligated to serve, and by establishing policies, procedures, and an atmosphere that allows the library's staff the most flexibility possible to meet the conflicting missions, multiple goals, and varying objectives. Before tackling the practicalities of the public law library's organizational and supervisory options, this chapter examines the library's patron base, the expectations of the various groups, the types of resources most appropriate to their needs, the diverse library types filling the public law library role, and how a multiple mission is likely to affect a public law library's ability to provide adequate services to its assorted service populations.

OVERVIEW

Expected to meet service demands from numerous communities including the general public and the government, the public law library is a combination of public, academic and special library. Patron needs can range from civil and criminal pro se requests for forms to students and homeschoolers working on homework or research assignments, local ordinances, answers resolving friendly bets, or help in accessing and evaluating internet content. Other members of this group may include a teacher drafting a lesson plan on government or the legal system, an irate parent, the new charter school principal, a newly elected but not yet sworn in elected official, or a school board member. The reasons those people not a part of the legal, judicial or criminal justice systems have to use the public law library are endless.

The legal professional may ask or expect the public law librarian to verify an attorney's search strategy, provide training in the idiosyncrasies of Boolean searching, perform research, Sherpardize a case or statute for a judge or immediate supervisor (e. g. a prosecutor or a bar association member), perform research for the local criminal justice system (prosecutors, judges, juvenile services, sheriff's department staff, jail staff), retrieve database documents, or provide resources for local jail inmates. If the library is part of the local government, the librarian may be responsible for overseeing the county or municipal records retention program, providing organized access to local ordinances, supporting the research needs of the county's commissioners or supervisors, archiving old records prior to destruction of the hard copies, handling the electronic delivery of case discovery between the prosecutor's office and the area's criminal defense attorneys, or training new government employees and elected officials in how to access digitized records.

As with other types of libraries, the ALA (American Library Association) Code of Ethics, AALL Ethical Principles statement, and the ALA Bill of Rights apply to all patron encounters. Most importantly, all patrons are entitled to equal levels of confidentiality. Patron status, educational level, or social standing does not justify varying levels of service or confidentiality. Just because one patron is a judge, politician, attorney, or the boss's spouse while another is a homeless woman with a young child, a teenager seeking emancipation forms, an alleged criminal out on bond, or a jail inmate does not entitle one person to a higher level of service, confidentiality, attention or assistance than another person. Maintaining confidentiality with some of these patron groups (e.g. jail inmates) can be much more challenging and somewhat discriminatory due to the parent organization's policies and procedures. The public law librarian's goal should always be to provide the level of service most appropriate to the individual patron's needs, abilities and skills.

The library's patron base should dictate the library's mission, collection and services. In a public law library, all library patrons are "the public." Anyone and everyone can and will walk in, telephone, snail-mail, text, chat (electronic), email and initiate contact via Twitter® or Face-book®. Each community has a different constituency – some older, some younger, some highly educated, some with a G.E.D., some non-English speaking or speaking English poorly as a second or third language. They may all be looking for legal information but the requests are diverse and at times, far reaching. Each individual has his own needs and level of knowledge—from the uneducated homeless single parent to the federal judge—so assumptions based upon appearance or rumor should be avoided. The person wearing shorts, t-shirt, and fishing hat may be a district judge on his day off; an uneducated appearing and sounding patron may actually be a political science Ph.D. candidate or a third year law student; and that polished, very professionally dressed woman may be a homeless single parent in need of divorce, child custody and child support forms as well as contact information for the local homeless shelter or Crisis Center. The prudent policy is to provide each patron with the same level of customer service, respect and confidentiality. This may be easier said than done as legal professionals are just as human and nosey as the library's less proficient patrons. For example, if the public law library is part of the prosecutor's office and a prosecutor notices a defendant in the library, the prosecutor may push the library's staff to reveal what the defendant was researching. Another example is the private attorney who notices his pro se opponent in the law library and tries to pry similar information from the staff. If opposing attorneys notice each other, they may each pressure the library's staff to break confidentiality, sometimes referred to as "privilege," in an attempt to one-up the opposition. These are just some examples of the potential conflict of interest quagmire the public law librarian walks through

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