Responses to Legal Reference Survey

In September, we sent ten questions to a number of law libraries and related organizations across the state. Here are some of the responses we got.

Court Service Centers

1. Who uses your services?

Patrons of the court use the Court Service Centers and Public Information Desks (known generally as “Centers”): self-represented parties, lawyers, judges and courthouse staff, and the community at large.

2. What legal reference and other services do you offer to the public?

The Centers offer assistance and information on court proceedings, procedures, and process in a friendly approachable space and manner. This includes answers to procedural questions about things like court deadlines and case information, to assistance with the completion of forms required to start or respond to a case. The Centers also assist with general information on court rules and procedures, and referrals to outside agencies and programs which might be able to assist someone in a particular context (i.e. volunteer attorney programs, victim services, veterans’ assistance groups). Additionally, translation services, staff assistance, electronic filing, notary services, public computers, work space, printers, scanners, fax machine, copier, and use of telephones are available.


3. What kinds of questions do your get regularly?

“I don’t understand this form, can you please help me?”; “How can I obtain an attorney?”; “How can I file for custody?”; “What forms do I need to fill out if other party is not following a court order?”; “I do not understand how to complete the financial affidavit, can you please help me?”; “What is my docket number?”; “Who is the plaintiff, who is the defendant?”; “Do you have a pen?”; “How can I change my child support orders?”; “What forms do I need to file for a divorce?”; “How can I serve someone if I don’t where they reside?”

4. What are some reference sources (books, databases, websites, etc.) you use often?


5. What’s a reference source you often recommend to your users?

See above.

6. What kinds of instruction do you provide (e.g., classes, instruction on how to use a resource, one-on-one)?

One-on-one instruction is provided at all Court Service Centers and Public Information Desks.

7. Do you interact with the Judicial Law Libraries? If so, how?

Yes, for informational and resource purposes, to request sample legal templates for patrons, and to refer a patron to the Law Library for research on a particular issue.

8. Could you share an unusual question you’ve been asked?
As the Centers become more well-known and popular, they continue to receive unusual questions from the community they serve. Staff members always try to help in the best way they can, often providing referrals and researching to see whether there is anything they can do.

9. Do you have any memorable stories (e.g., funny, heartwarming, rewarding)?

Too many to count! Generally, there is nothing more rewarding and meaningful than having someone just stop in to say thank you and express how grateful and appreciative they are and how they would’ve never made it through their proceedings without the Center. There is nothing more fulfilling than having someone take the time out of their day and walk right up to you and say, “thank you for all that you do.”

10. What is something about your organization that you’d like the public—and librarians in the state—to know?

That the Court Service Centers and Public Information Desks are open and available to anyone with questions about court or the legal process. The Centers act as “help desks”, providing a wide variety of informational resources and services, forms assistance, and referrals. We are excited to work with you! Please come talk to us and utilize our Center!

Quinnipiac School of Law

1. Who are your patrons?

Our primary patrons are law students and law faculty. Occasionally we assist other University students and faculty. We are open to the public, so lawyers and the average citizen are our secondary patrons.

2. What kinds of reference questions do you get regularly?

Probably the most frequent reference / research questions we get are how to utilize specific legal resources found in databases. Student questions regarding research papers and locating primary law like cases, statutes and regulations are part of the routine particularly for the first-year law student. Also, how to use basic bibliographic tools like the library catalog and locating hard copy materials. Upper level students and faculty research requests generally are more involved and can be practice area specific, for example tax law.

3. What’s a reference source you often use?

One example is the Bluebook, a Uniform System of Citation. This is the style manual used by law students, law faculty, and attorneys.

4. What’s a reference source you wish more of your patrons would use?

In general, students don’t use hard copy sources reference or otherwise that could make the research process more intelligible and efficient. The millennials don’t often include non-electronic format in their “tool box.”

5. What kinds of instruction do you provide (e.g., classes, database instruction, one-on-one)?

All of the examples you listed are provided. With regards to classes, reference librarians are requested to be guest lecturer mostly for upper level courses. We do offer some optional classes. Much of our instruction is either one-on-one or in coordination with start-up activities at the beginning of the semesters. Our law school publishes 3 student-edited scholarly journals and we assist these students as they prepare the issues of their respective journals for publication.

6. What reference services do you offer to the public, if any?

Like most law libraries, we are open to the public. We can facilitate the research process by assisting public patrons with identifying relevant sources and showing them how to use them. We do have to be careful not to crossover in what would be considered the unauthorized practice of law, which would include the process of analyzing or interpreting the law relevant to the patron’s particular facts and circumstances. We get far fewer public patrons than in years past.

7. Do you interact with staff at other libraries? If so, how? If not, do you think doing so might be useful?
Primarily we interact with other law librarians through state, regional, and national law library associations.

8. Could you share an unusual reference question you’ve been asked?

Today, nothing pops to mind that is easy to share. There are complex questions more than unusual ones.

9. Do you have any memorable stories (e.g., funny, heartwarming, rewarding)?

I have been a reference librarian for many years. There have been many rewarding interactions with public patrons mostly along the lines of helping them pierce the specialized veil of legal research, particularly when it comes to personal matters like replying to court actions, divorce, child custody, wills, and the like.

10. What is something about your library that you’d like the public—and other librarians in the state—to know?

The basic fact that we are open to the public. Also, the most well-known legal databases, like Lexis and Westlaw, are academic licenses and thus not available to public patrons. That said, there are alternatives like government sources that are available to the public patron. Also, there are some great free non-government sources, too.

Osborn Correctional Institution

1. Who are your patrons?

Inmates at the Osborn Correctional Institution, who have varying time lengths for sentences, from months to life.

2. What kinds of reference questions do you get regularly?

With regards to the law desk, they usually ask for case law that would pertain to their specific charges and how they can reduce the sentence they took in a plea deal. The majority of the inmates are looking for random information to settle bets.

3. What’s a reference source you often use?

We have 3 computers for inmates to access a Lexis database that is updated every 3-4 months via a subscription to a file they send on a zip drive. We have no internet access. With regards to random information, we use encyclopedias or the World Almanac and Book of Facts.

4. What’s a reference source you wish more of your patrons would use?

N/A

5. What kinds of instruction do you provide (e.g., classes, database instruction, one-on-one)?

I work with our school teachers on reading and classroom projects. I do instruct the inmates how to use the Lexis, as well as the typewriters, which are for legal work only.

6. What reference services do you offer to the public, if any?

None

7. Do you interact with staff at other libraries? If so, how? If not, do you think doing so might be useful?

Only with regards to donations to our library.

8. Could you share an unusual reference question you’ve been asked?

After explaining the statutes regarding sexual assault, an inmate asked if it pertained to animals as well.

9. Do you have any memorable stories (e.g., funny, heartwarming, rewarding)?
Working in the libraries of various prisons throughout my career, I can say it has been very rewarding to have inmates upon release tell me that the library helped them make their time in prison more bearable. Many took up reading for the first time.

10. What is something about your library that you’d like the public—and other librarians in the state—to know?

The library is a haven for the inmates. There are only 3 librarians (or library media specialists) left in the 15 facilities in our state and that is disgraceful, as well as the fact that we have no budget to stock our libraries and must rely on donations for our sole source of reading material.

Danbury Federal Correctional Institution, Women’s Camp

1. Who are your patrons?

Our Patrons are female inmates in a female federal prison camp of 200 inmates.

2. What kinds of reference questions do you get regularly?

Just questions related to where they can find certain types of books, such as fictional love stories.

3. What’s a reference source you often use?

None really per se.

4. What’s a reference source you wish more of your patrons would use?

Just ask the librarian clerk in our library questions.

5. What kinds of instruction do you provide (e.g., classes, database instruction, one-on-one)?

Just initial basic training for the library.

6. What reference services do you offer to the public, if any?

None

7. Do you interact with staff at other libraries? If so, how? If not, do you think doing so might be useful?

Just staff from the Danbury Library when we pick up and drop off books for inter library loan.

8. Could you share an unusual reference question you’ve been asked?

None really

9. Do you have any memorable stories (e.g., funny, heartwarming, rewarding)?

Not really, just that the ladies here love to read for sure.

10. What is something about your library that you’d like the public—and other librarians in the state—to know?

That we have a small but nice little library that the inmates here at the camp really make use of and enjoy.