

# A Powerful Resource in Plain Sight: How the Free Library Can Promote Access to Justice



Photo by Michael M Stokes

Stephen and Sandra  
**SHELLER**

  
**CENTER** *for* **SOCIAL JUSTICE**  
 Temple University Beasley School of Law

This report presents the work of three students in the Access to Justice Clinic of the Sheller Center for Social Justice: Alex Burns, David Frias, and Basmah Raja. The research and writing for this report were conducted during the 2019-20 academic year, under the supervision of Professor Len Rieser.

We appreciate the help received from the librarians at Free Library branches with whom we talked, as well as librarians from other libraries, including the Jenkins Law Library, the Maryland State Library System, the Hawaii State Public Library System, and the Los Angeles Public Library. We also received valuable advice from Pennsylvanians for Modern Courts and from the Law Firm *Pro Bono* Committee of the Philadelphia Bar Association. Finally, we are grateful for the help provided by fellow students Alice Elmer, Kevin Kulesza, and Ranjani Sarode.

## Contents

I.	Introduction and executive summary .....	1
II.	The civil justice gap in America and Philadelphia: causes and solutions .....	3
A.	Nature and scope of the gap.....	3
B.	Solutions.....	6
III.	Roles for libraries: lessons from other jurisdictions .....	7
A.	Sources of information.....	8
B.	Librarians as navigators.....	9
C.	Online resources .....	11
D.	Legal workshops .....	13
IV.	Possibilities for Philadelphia’s Free Library system .....	13
A.	A powerful resource .....	14
B.	Legal information currently available at the Free Library .....	15
C.	Development of an online portal .....	16
D.	Librarian training .....	17
E.	“Lawyer in the library” programs .....	18
F.	Coordination and cost saving .....	18
V.	Next steps .....	19

## I. Introduction and executive summary

### *Imagine ...*

*A Philadelphia resident wonders whether she should get a power of attorney in order to help her aging parent. She doesn't know how a power of attorney works, or whether she needs a lawyer to set one up, or whether, if so, she could afford the fee. She knows there are free legal services in Philadelphia, but she has no idea which, if any, deal with powers of attorney. She checks the internet for do-it-yourself information, but gives up, confused, when her search produces several hundred thousand results.*

*Just as she's about to conclude that it's just too much to deal with, she decides to stop by one of Philadelphia's neighborhood libraries. When she asks to see legal books, the librarian tells her they don't have many. But, the librarian says, they have some services that might be more helpful. From the new "Legal Help" section of the library's web site, he downloads an up-to-date, plain-language pamphlet on powers of attorney in Pennsylvania, as well as contact information for a local non-profit that works with seniors and their families.*



*Other patrons come in with other legal issues. The librarian helps one patron download information and forms from Family Court on how to modify a child-support order. Another patron gets directions to the "help desk" in landlord-tenant court; a third leaves with information on a program that mediates consumer disputes. And, the librarian tells everyone, there's also an upcoming "lawyer in the library" program, where volunteer lawyers offer brief consultations.*

*After the patrons leave, a visitor asks the librarian how he feels about providing these services. "Before we improved our legal resources," he tells you, "the most we*



*could do was hand the patron a list of non-profits and send her on her way. Now, we can connect her to the information and services that are likely to be most helpful to her. For the patron, that's a giant step forward."*

---

Hundreds of thousands of Philadelphians with incomes below the poverty line, and many others with slightly higher incomes, are unable to get the help that they need in order to deal with civil legal problems that arise in their lives.<sup>1</sup> And because, like most Americans, these individuals cannot navigate the legal system on their own, their legal needs – involving family stability, housing, finances, and much more – go unaddressed.

This report suggests that Philadelphia's Free Library system could play a significant role in addressing this "justice gap." By collaborating with the many organizations and individuals involved in Philadelphia's "access to justice" movement, while also making available some skills and resources that only it can provide, the Free Library could dramatically increase its capacity to connect Philadelphians with the information and services that they need.

This does not have to be a massive or expensive undertaking. Providing legal help to library patrons does not require buying expensive law books or internet subscriptions. Nor does it involve asking librarians to work through the details of patrons' legal problems, much less offer them legal advice. Rather, the type of help that we discuss here is simply an extension



---

<sup>1</sup> This report focuses on *civil* legal issues because the types of help that people need in dealing with those issues is somewhat different in kind from the help needed in *criminal* matters. Also, because there is a right to counsel in most criminal matters, criminal defendants are less likely to be unrepresented. None of this is to say that the "justice gap" for criminal defendants is any less significant than that affecting low-income individuals with civil problems, or to suggest that all legal issues fall cleanly into one category or the other (immigration issues, for example, straddle both worlds).

of what librarians already do in many other subject areas: connecting patrons to useful, up-to-date information that matches their needs.

In this report, we look first at the nature of the civil justice gap, nationally and in Philadelphia. We then look at the steps that libraries in other localities are taking to help people gain access to legal information, and we suggest ways in which the Free Library might take similar steps. Our goal is not to prescribe detailed strategies; rather, we seek to spur conversation on ways in which the Library, with help from partners, could provide more and better legal information to Philadelphia residents.

## II. The civil justice gap in America and Philadelphia: causes and solutions

### A. Nature and scope of the gap

Americans face a wide range of civil legal issues. These issues, while “routine” in the eyes of the legal profession, involve basic human rights and needs, and are of crucial importance to the individuals involved. But affordable legal help with these problems is in short supply, especially for people with low to medium incomes. Thus, a 2017 study by the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) found that although 71% of low-income households had experienced at least one civil legal problem in the past year, 86% of the civil legal problems reported had received inadequate or no legal help.<sup>2</sup> The unavailability of help to those without the funds to pay is often described as America’s “civil justice gap.”<sup>3</sup>

What are the reasons for the gap? One is that the complicated and sometimes archaic rules of the legal system often make it difficult or impossible for people to navigate legal issues without the help of an attorney. Yet – contrary to what is often

---

<sup>2</sup> Legal Services Corporation, *Justice Gap Report: Measuring the Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans*, <https://www.lsc.gov/sites/default/files/images/TheJusticeGap-FullReport.pdf>, at 6 (2017).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 9.

assumed – there is no right to free legal representation for most civil legal matters, and attorney services are expensive. Accordingly, lower-income Americans typically rely either on free legal aid services or on self-help.

Legal aid, however, is inadequate to meet the need. For example, the Legal Services Corporation found that, “In 2017, low-income Americans will approach LSC-funded legal aid organizations for support with an estimated 1.7 million problems. They will receive only limited or no legal help [from those organizations] for more than half of these problems because of a lack of resources.”<sup>4</sup> But as the chart below shows, these organizations were able to help with fewer than half of these problems.<sup>5</sup>

	<b>Percent of total eligible problems</b>
<b>Total eligible problems</b>	100%
<b>Total served to some extent</b>	59%
Served fully	28%
Served, but not fully	21%
Served, but extent of service is pending	10%
<b>Not served</b>	41%
<b>Total problems not served or not served fully (excluding pending)</b>	62%
<b>Total problems not served or not served fully (including pending)</b>	72%

*Distribution of eligible legal problems by extent of service provided, by Legal Services Corporation*

Those who cannot get professional assistance with civil legal problems either give up on dealing with them or resort to self-help – by searching the internet, trying to figure out what to write on legal forms, and “going it alone” in court hearings. But these approaches are highly problematic. A lay person who tries to find legal answers via a Google search, for example, will encounter an avalanche of information, including

---

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 6.

<sup>5</sup> Legal Services Corporation, “Justice Gap Report: Measuring the Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans,” at 7 (2017).

statutes, regulations, court decisions, document templates, “how to” material, media articles and advertisements for attorneys. Besides being hard to understand, much of this material will be irrelevant – because it applies to a different jurisdiction or to different factual circumstances or is out of date or incomplete. Indeed, following some of the “advice” available on the internet will likely make the situation worse rather than better.

Self-representation in court is also perilous. The rules and procedures that apply even in routine matters, as well as the stress and tension of court proceedings, put unrepresented people at a severe disadvantage – and more so if the other side has legal representation, which it often does. While figures vary, a typical finding concerning the proportion of civil cases in which at least one party is unrepresented is 76%.<sup>6</sup>

Philadelphia’s civil justice gap is consistent with this national picture. Nearly 400,000 residents, about 26 percent of the city’s population, live in poverty.<sup>7</sup> These people, as well as many others who are in only slightly higher income brackets, do not have the funds to hire lawyers. As a result, according to a 2014 statewide study, a “longstanding and growing crisis exists in the unmet critical legal needs of low-income litigants who are unable to access legal services in Pennsylvania.”<sup>8</sup> Much of the information that formed the basis for the report came from Philadelphia.

In addition, a 2018 study of landlord-tenant cases in Philadelphia found that landlords were represented in approximately 80% percent of cases, while tenants were represented in only about 7%.<sup>9</sup> And any visitor to the Philadelphia Municipal Court,

---

<sup>6</sup> National Center for State Courts, *Call to Action: Achieving Civil Justice for All*, at 9 (2016), [https://www.ncsc.org/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0021/25581/ncsc-cji-report-web.pdf](https://www.ncsc.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/25581/ncsc-cji-report-web.pdf).]

<sup>7</sup> Pew Charitable Trusts, *The State of Philadelphians Living in Poverty* (fact sheet), <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2019/04/the-state-of-philadelphians-living-in-poverty-2019> (2019).

<sup>8</sup> *Toward Equal Justice for All: Report of the Civil Legal Justice Coalition to the Pennsylvania State Senate Judiciary Committee*, <http://www.philadelphiabar.org/WebObjects/PBA.woa/Contents/WebServerResources/CMSResources/ReportoftheCivilLegalJusticeCoalition.pdf>, at 4 (2014).

<sup>9</sup> Stout Risius Ross, *Economic Return on Investment of Providing Counsel in Philadelphia Eviction Cases for Low-Income Tenants*,



Family Court, or the Court of Common Pleas will routinely observe large numbers of litigants “representing” themselves, often with little information (or success). It is clear, therefore, that access to civil justice is a significant problem for Philadelphians.

## B. Solutions

The civil justice gap has begun to receive the attention of policy-makers, and solutions are emerging.<sup>10</sup> Some of these involve providing more attorney help, through legal aid organizations as well as through the creation of new “rights to counsel;” exploring lower-cost ways of providing attorney services; increased funding for legal aid; and expanding *pro bono* services.

Another set of solutions reflects the idea that not all legal issues should require engaging a lawyer, or at least should not require the traditional “soup to nuts” model of full legal representation. These solutions include simplifying legal procedures, developing plain-language information, creating apps that can help people fill out legal forms, setting up court-based “help desks,” using remote technologies to make it easier for people to do business with agencies and courts, providing guidance from non-lawyer “navigators,” expanding alternative dispute resolution systems, and other innovative approaches. The use of public libraries as sources of legal information is another such solution.

Some of these approaches are being implemented here. Philadelphia already has a well-established and, as compared with many other cities, an unusually rich array of

---

<http://www.philadelphiabar.org/WebObjects/PBA.woa/Contents/WebServerResources/CMSResources/PhiladelphiaEvictionsReport.pdf>, at 7.

<sup>10</sup> There are now many compilations of information on efforts to address the civil justice gap. See, for example, the “Justice for All” page of the National Center for State Courts, <https://www.ncsc.org/jfa>; the Resource Center for Access to Justice Initiatives of the American Bar Association, [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal\\_aid\\_indigent\\_defendants/resource\\_center\\_for\\_access\\_to\\_justice/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_aid_indigent_defendants/resource_center_for_access_to_justice/); the web site of the Self-Represented Litigation Network, <https://www.srln.org/>; and the web site of the National Coalition for a Civil Right to Counsel, <http://civilrighttocounsel.org/>.

legal aid organizations.<sup>11</sup> These organizations, while underfunded in relation to the need, help thousands of low-income clients each year with problems including housing, family law, consumer rights, employment, and more.

Philadelphia also has a strong tradition of *pro bono* legal service by members of the private bar. These services are supported by (among others) *pro bono* coordinators in the major law firms, a Law Firm *Pro Bono* Committee of the Philadelphia Bar Association, and by Philadelphia VIP, which matches clients with *pro bono* volunteers in a wide range of subject areas.

Philadelphia is also home to a number of recent, innovative efforts. Just last year, housing and legal advocates succeeded in obtaining a city ordinance that will, over time, provide a right to counsel for indigent tenants in eviction proceedings. Advocates and courts have collaborated in the creation of three court-based “help centers,” one in Family Court, another in landlord-tenant court, and a third in the Court of Common Pleas. Legal aid organizations in the city, of which there are many, are finding innovative ways to expand their services, including the use of new technologies. Philadelphia’s network of *pro bono* services continues to grow and innovate as well.

However, the role that Philadelphia’s public libraries could play in helping people gain access to justice appears not to have been extensively explored. In the following section, we describe some steps taken by public libraries in other localities, and then suggest ways in which Philadelphia might begin to explore similar possibilities.

### III. Roles for libraries: lessons from other jurisdictions

There are an estimated 16,568 public libraries in the United States, nearly all of which offer free public access to computers, internet, and trained staff equipped to help library patrons to access information.<sup>12</sup> Libraries are trusted and secure places within

---

<sup>11</sup> A directory of these organizations is found at <https://philabar.org/page/PIDirectory?appNum=4>.

<sup>12</sup> American Library Association, *ALA Library Fact Sheet 1*, <https://libguides.ala.org/numberoflibraries>.

communities.<sup>13</sup> Libraries have massive collections of information online and offline; they also hold community events, workshops, and are gathering places for those looking to learn. Housed within public libraries, therefore, is the potential to help people gain access to information about laws, legal procedure, and – most importantly – sources of assistance.

Law libraries are also important resources. These specialized libraries exist at both state and local levels, as well as in law schools. These libraries are not always as accessible as public libraries and were typically designed primarily to support legal professionals. However, law libraries are proving to be valuable partners to public libraries seeking to expand their legal-information services.<sup>14</sup>

## A. Sources of information

In preparing this report, we looked at examples of library services in Maryland,<sup>15</sup> Los Angeles,<sup>16</sup> and Hawaii.<sup>17</sup> The librarians involved in these efforts were enthusiastic about their work and repeatedly offered to share their experiences and ideas with anyone from Philadelphia who might be interested.

We also reviewed:

---

<sup>13</sup> Pew Charitable Trusts, “Most Americans – especially millennials – say libraries can help them find reliable, trustworthy information,” <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/30/> (2017).

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Self-Represented Litigation Network (SRLN) Law Librarians’ Working Group “Open to the Public: How Law Libraries Are Serving Self-Represented Litigants Across the Country,” <https://srln.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=5983e5775fbc4dca9443457ad12559ca#>.

<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.peoples-law.org>.

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/web-resources/legal-information>.

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.librarieshawaii.org/database/legal-information-reference-center/?wpvdbasetopic=legal-aid>.

- The “Libraries and Access to Justice Webinar Series,” a set of webinars conducted by probono.net;<sup>18</sup>
- “Improving Access to Civil Legal Justice through Public Libraries,” a project of the Legal Services Corporation and WebJunction;<sup>19</sup>
- The Legal Services Corporation’s “Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Library Initiative White Paper;”<sup>20</sup>
- A 2015 Canadian report on “Libraries as Legal Access Points,” compiling information about public-library initiatives in Canada, Australia, and the United States;<sup>21</sup> and
- Reports from Courthouse Libraries BC [British Columbia] about public libraries as sources of legal information.<sup>22</sup>

These sources provide a wealth of practical information for those interested in expanding legal information services in public libraries. In the following sections, we briefly describe some key points that emerged from our research.

## B. Librarians as navigators

“Librarians [are] very natural navigators. That’s what they do, they help people figure out what resources they need to use, what medium they may need in order to

---

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.probono.net/librarywebinars>.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.webjunction.org/explore-topics/access-civil-legal-justice.html>.

<sup>20</sup> <https://lsc-live.app.box.com/s/e0zb3lew5c8023mkdqix6xzzv0mo4d3x>.

<sup>21</sup> Community Legal Education Ontario, “Libraries as Legal Information Access Points: An Online Scan of Initiatives (2015),” <http://www.plelearningexchange.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Libraries-and-Legal-Infomration-Scan.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> See <https://www.courthouselibrary.ca/our-programs/lawmatters/lawmatters-research-reports..>

move forward.”<sup>23</sup> Librarians who provide legal information have been trained to recognize the main areas in which patrons tend to need help, such as landlord/tenant law, family law, and consumer law. This is necessary because patrons themselves do not always know what category of help they need, and sometimes do not even realize that their problem has a legal aspect. Librarians are also knowledgeable about the branches of government and legal systems in their areas, which typically include a mix of local, state, and federal courts and administrative agencies.

Most importantly, librarians are familiar with the most useful and up-to-date sources of legal help – information, guides, templates, contact information for legal organizations – that pertain to their geographical areas. These sources are typically accessed, at least initially, online rather than in hard copy. We address the issue of online resources in more detail in the next section.

Librarians are also trained in the difference between legal information and legal advice, and in how to avoid the unauthorized practice of law.<sup>24</sup> Training clarifies that librarians who recommend books and other sources, teach research techniques, and suggest external sources of help are providing legal information and references, while those who interpret and offer conclusions about the legal problem may cross the line into unauthorized practice. Models for this training are readily available, since it is already provided to court clerks, non-lawyer librarians in law libraries, and other non-lawyer personnel who interact with people seeking legal help.<sup>25</sup> And the concepts should come readily to public librarians, who already know the difference between

---

<sup>23</sup> See probono.net, “Legal Aid/Library Collaborations – Lessons Learned” (2012), <https://www.connectingjusticecommunities.com/legal-aidlibrary-collaborations-lessons-learned/2012/11/>

<sup>24</sup> Black's Law Dictionary defines unauthorized practice of law as “The practice of law by a person, typically a nonlawyer, who has not been licensed or admitted to practice law in a given jurisdiction.”

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Southern California Association of Law Libraries, *Locating the Law: A Handbook for Non-Law Librarians*, Ch. 4, [https://scallnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/complete\\_5th\\_edition.pdf](https://scallnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/complete_5th_edition.pdf) (2018); Judicial Council of California, “May I help you? A Resource Guide for Court Clerks – Legal Advice vs. Legal Information,” <https://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/mayihelpyou.pdf>.



helping patrons find information – an activity that falls within librarians’ role as “navigators” -- and helping patrons make decisions about their lives, which does not.<sup>26</sup>

Training in these and other relevant areas has often been provided by law librarians, *i.e.*, specialized librarians associated with law schools, bar associations, and courts. As noted above, Maryland, Hawaii, and Los Angeles are locations in which law librarians are performing exactly this service. Attorneys from legal aid organizations and *pro bono* attorneys may also be available to offer training to public librarians.

### C. Online resources

Libraries in other jurisdictions have also expanded their online collections and services to include information on commonly encountered legal topics such as family law, consumer debt, health law, and eviction.

Accomplishing this goal has not typically involved creating exhaustive collections of legal sites, since that is likely to lead only to confusion and misinformation.<sup>27</sup> Nor do libraries necessarily need to subscribe to expensive publications or legal-research software, which tends to be useable only by professionals. More useful to patrons is a carefully selected group of resources that are useful and user-friendly in each of the major areas in which patrons are likely to seek answers. Once identified, these sites can be compiled on a page, or set of pages, that the Library itself maintains and updates. An example of a navigable and user-friendly collection of useful legal information can be found at The Maryland People’s Library web site.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> When a patron seeks information about a financial question, for example, librarians suggest reliable books, web sites, and other sources of help – but refrain from offering their own opinion about how much he should save for retirement. For a patron looking for information on a medical issue, similarly, librarians do not recommend treatment options; instead, they direct the patron to information from which she can come up with her own answers to her questions. The legal information-advice distinction is not fundamentally different.

<sup>27</sup> LSC research found 142 websites that provide information on subjects ranging from family law to veteran’s issues. Legal Services Corporation, *Library Initiative White Paper*, 21 (May 2016).

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.peoples-law.org>.

Online resources provided by libraries include:

- *Links to plain language, multilingual court forms for common legal issues.* Many legal issues require filling out court forms. Some court systems have worked hard to develop “plain language” forms that unrepresented individuals can complete on their own. Web sites of courts, government agencies and legal advocacy organizations now increasingly offer “document assembly” programs, which essentially conduct an on-line interview and then generate a paper that meets court or agency requirements for filing (the so-called “TurboTax approach”). Including links on library websites to these forms and programs can dramatically increase access to justice for low literacy populations and library patrons with low English proficiency.
- *Directories of legal aid organizations and services.* Legal aid organizations can be effective only if the people who need them most can connect with them. Featuring links on library websites to local legal aid contact information is a simple, yet powerful step libraries can take to better serve their patrons and promote access to justice.
- *Online “Ask a Law Librarian” services.* Public libraries such as those in California and Maryland operate real-time online chat services to help people find the legal information they need.
- *Videoconferencing services that connect patrons with legal aid attorneys.* Hawaiian public libraries use video conferencing technology to provide patrons with opportunities to receive individualized legal aid.
- *Online calendars for legal help events and webinars.* Including, on the library web site, a calendar of legal aid events taking place in locations other than the library itself is a powerful and cost-effective step libraries can take to better connect patrons with the legal information they need.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> An example of such a calendar can be found on the Maryland People’s Library website, <https://www.peoples-law.org/calendar>.

## D. Legal workshops

Hosting legal workshops, classes and community events is another way in which libraries promote access to justice for the communities they serve. In Maryland's "Lawyer in the library program," volunteer attorneys are available to provide free legal assistance to public library patrons. In Los Angeles, volunteer attorneys who teach mini classes at public libraries on common legal issues. And in Hawaii, a legal aid society has conducted "Know Your Rights" seminars at public libraries across the state on topics including senior issues, child custody, divorce, Medicare, and landlord-tenant law.



## IV. Possibilities for Philadelphia's Free Library system

In this section, we summarize our research concerning the Free Library and our suggestions for ways in which it could provide more effective help to patrons with civil legal issues.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> The information that we present here is based on anecdotal evidence and interviews conducted with librarians in a cross-section of the Philadelphia Public Library System. While this in no way offers a complete picture of Philadelphia libraries, we think it gives a good approximation of what is missing and what can be done to bridge the gap. The following branches were visited: Chestnut Hill, Fumo, Marrero (North Philadelphia), Northeast Regional, Northwest Regional, Parkway Central, South Philadelphia, West Philadelphia Regional and Widener.

## A. A powerful resource

With over \$50 million in annual support and revenue, the Free Library system is an impressive resource.<sup>31</sup> The system provides essential internet access, as well as millions of books, audiobooks, CDs, publications, music, and movies in multiple formats.<sup>32</sup> A total of 4.9 million in-person library visits were recorded in FY 2019.<sup>33</sup> This figure included attendance at many on-site educational programs: 237,920 adults and seniors attended 15,815 adult programs.<sup>34</sup> The libraries provide resources to support economic mobility, such as online job training and services to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated citizens; access, through partnerships with community organizations, to social and other services; support for business development; and much more.<sup>35</sup>



The Free Library is hyper-local, with 53 branches located in almost every neighborhood, in addition to the Central Library. In this respect, the system is more accessible to its patrons than systems in some other cities, which have fewer branches relative to those cities' overall population.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, *Annual Report – Fiscal Year 2019*, <https://libwww.freelibrary.org/assets/pdf/about/annualreport/annualreport2019.pdf>, at 26.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 7.

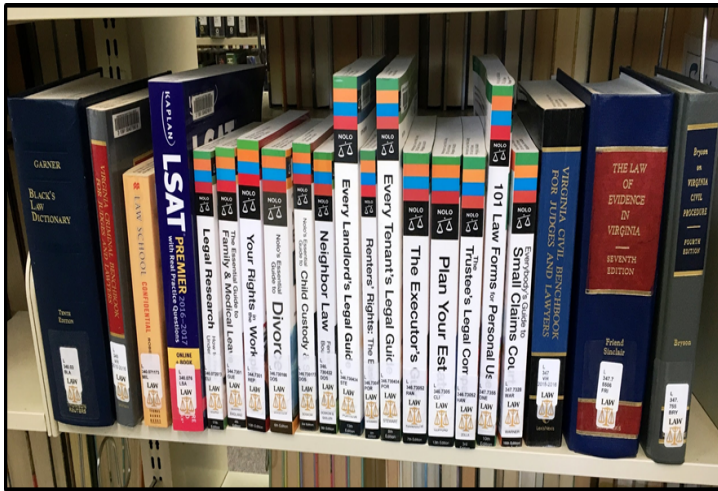
<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*

<sup>35</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, *Annual Report – Fiscal Year 2019*, *passim*.

<sup>36</sup> Philadelphia has a branch library for (roughly) every 30,000 city residents. The figure for New York City is approximately 1:94,000 residents; the figure for Los Angeles is about 1:57,000.

## B. Legal information currently available at the Free Library



With respect to Philadelphians' civil legal needs, the offerings of the library system are currently limited. Neighborhood libraries, in particular, have few resources available. A patron may be fortunate enough to obtain a general resource book published by Nolo, which provides a series of do-it-yourself guides to various

legal areas; however, these books do not address the specific laws or procedures of Pennsylvania or of any specific state.

More likely than not, a patron seeking more detailed legal information will be directed to visit the regional libraries and Parkway Central Library. But the materials available in these libraries are unlikely to be helpful to most patrons. The bulk of the materials appear to consist of volumes of Pennsylvania statutes (not necessarily updated), Black's Law Dictionary, and additional Nolo resource books. Only one library, Parkway Central, has access to the Federal Depository of the most updated United States Codes and Pennsylvania's Dunlap-Hanna forms and templates.<sup>37</sup>

In an effort to fill the gap, librarians may offer pamphlets provided by the Philadelphia and/or Pennsylvania Bar Associations if they are available. Volunteers working with the Bar Association also make limited appearances, typically once per year, at the branches throughout the city to offer free legal advice and information.

Librarians may also refer patrons to Philadelphia's law library, the Jenkins Law Library. Jenkins maintains a comprehensive collection of legal materials, including information designed for unrepresented individuals. In order to use materials at Jenkins, however, one must pay an annual membership fee, or (in the case of members of the public) a fee of \$5 per day. These requirements, coupled with the fact that Jenkins has a

---

<sup>37</sup> Parkway Central's law books for other states were deaccessioned years ago.



single, Center City location, mean that Jenkins is less widely known and less readily accessible to the public than are the Free Library branches.

Given this backdrop, we turn to some suggestions for steps that the Free Library could take to improve its services to patrons seeking legal information.

### C. Development of an online portal

We suggest developing a web site, for use across the Free Library system, somewhat like the ones provided by the public library systems in Los Angeles County and the State of Hawaii.<sup>38</sup> The site would serve as a portal to locally relevant self-help forms, court information, information on laws and procedures, and the names of organizations that can provide additional help.

The development of such a site for Philadelphia might be especially useful for those patrons who access the internet at the library but would benefit patrons logging on from home as well. Moreover, the provision of digital information – which is now the norm in the legal profession anyway -- would reduce or eliminate the need for expensive and quickly outdated reference books.

The value of such a site depends, of course, on the care with which it is constructed, curated, and kept up to date. Again, the goal should not be to provide all possible references, but to select those likely to be most helpful to people seeking help in each of the areas in which people are most likely to have legal issues.

For example, the developers of the site might conclude that, for tenants in housing matters, the most helpful referrals would be to the information provided by the Philadelphia Eviction Prevention Project at [www.phillytenant.org](http://www.phillytenant.org) and to Community Legal Services, the Senior Law Center, the Lawyer Referral Service of the Philadelphia Bar Association, and a mediation program. To be sure, many other references *could* be provided – such as the court rules and extensive



---

<sup>38</sup> See <https://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/web-resources/legal-information> (Los Angeles); <https://www.librarieshawaii.org/database/access-to-justice-legal-self-help-interactive-forms/> (Hawaii).

organizational information available on the Municipal Court site, the text of the Pennsylvania Landlord-Tenant Act, and much more. But it may be a greater service to the unrepresented client *not* to link to (or at least not to highlight) this other information. As new services and information come online, of course, the choice of what to include, and what to leave out, must be updated.

Developing such a site could be most efficiently accomplished, we believe, through partnerships between the Free Library and other knowledgeable partners – such as legal nonprofits, the Bar Association, the Jenkins Law Library, and the *pro bono* coordinators at Philadelphia law firms. Many of these partners have already developed resources that, appropriately selected and organized, could form the basic content of a Free Library site.<sup>39</sup> It is easy to picture a team of *pro bono* volunteers, with help from

local legal organizations and perhaps the Jenkins Law Library, making the selections and creating such a portal -- and then periodically revisiting and revising its content.



#### D. Librarian training

Training of librarians in how to use the site is an obvious next step. As we noted in the preceding section, models and materials for this sort of training exist in other jurisdictions. We believe that the same sorts of partnerships that could develop the site content would be

useful in designing training to fit the particular circumstances of Philadelphia communities and the needs of Philadelphia librarians. Collaboration with the Jenkins Law Library is an obvious possibility. In addition, many legal aid attorneys are experienced in developing and implementing community education programs, in which they educate both



PENNSYLVANIANS  
FOR MODERN COURTS



---

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., Jenkins Law Library site for court forms, <https://www.jenkinslaw.org/research/guides/self-help/forms>; the Bar Association page listing public interest legal organizations in Philadelphia, <http://www.philadelphiabar.org/App/WebObjects/PBAReadOnly.woa/wa/publicInterestDirectory>; and the websites of most of those organizations.

professionals and laypersons in how to navigate legal systems. Similarly, while *pro bono* attorneys employed in the for-profit sector may be more accustomed to training other lawyers, many of these attorneys would likely also be enthusiastic about sharing their expertise with non-lawyer professionals.

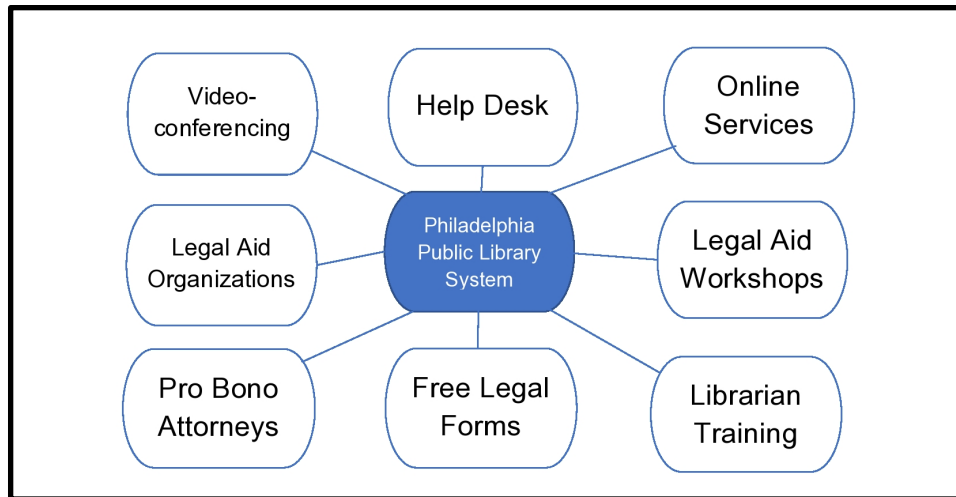
Our conversations with those who organize *pro bono* efforts in Philadelphia have indicated that these sorts of projects would, in fact, appeal to the attorneys with whom they work. Law schools in the Philadelphia area, all of which operate “experiential” clinics supervised by faculty, as well as other organized *pro bono* opportunities for students, might also be able to help.

#### E. “Lawyer in the library” programs

*Pro bono* attorneys could also play a role in expanding the currently limited lawyer-in-the-library program offered by the Philadelphia Bar Association. Legal questions emerge year-round; having *pro bono* attorneys more continuously available would help many Philadelphians, especially when the legal issues in question can be readily addressed. And here again, those leading *pro bono* efforts in Philadelphia firms and corporations have indicated to us that their attorneys would likely be interested in these sorts of roles.

#### F. Coordination and cost saving

All of these efforts – including the development of working relationships with partners -- should be coordinated by a central person or team within the Free Library. This will help ensure that the various components of the project support each other, and that all of the libraries have equal access to up-to-date, accurate and user-friendly information.



*Above: A sketch of possible elements of a legal information program.*

Finally, it is worth repeating that the steps proposed here do not require expensive investments. Through partnerships with legal nonprofits and the local law library, and working with *pro bono* attorneys, volunteers, and law students, the Free Library should be able to get most of the help it needs at little or no cost. As for training librarians and coordinating the effort, it appears that management and training systems already in place at the Library could take on these tasks. Finally, should additional funding be needed, there may be local philanthropies interested in providing support.

## V. Next steps

Further exploration of how the Free Library could provide legal information is needed. Immediate next steps could include:

- A review, by the Library, of information on similar efforts around the country survey; we have provided links to such information in Section III-A, above, and can also provide contact information for some of the individuals involved.
- A survey of libraries in the Free Library system to get a better understanding of specific needs, concerns and possibilities.

- Discussions with stakeholders (patrons, librarians, Free Library administration and board, Jenkins Law Library, city officials, *pro bono* volunteers, legal organizations), with the goal of developing a workplan.

We believe that, with thoughtful discussion and research, the Free Library could easily join other library systems that are leading the way to promote access to justice. The Sheller Center for Justice at Temple University Beasley School of Law would be eager to help the Library with any of the steps noted above.





---

James E. Beasley School of Law | Sheller Center for Social Justice  
1719 North Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122