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Court and Spark

Travis County Law Library: Two New Partnership and One Big Project

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For most of its 25-year existence the Travis County Law Library was a bit of an island unto itself: It served its patrons quietly and competently, but did not stretch its boundaries.

This has changed. Big Time.

The summer of 2006 saw the law library, located in Austin, Texas, form two new partnerships, and complete a project that can benefit every library in Texas.

Two Partnerships

1. The Legal Aid Clinic Comes to the Library

Until this summer, the library's only connection with the legal aid providers for Central Texas was to refer around 25 patrons a day to its legal aid clinics. As of August 1, an attorney from Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid has an office in the courthouse branch of the Travis County Law Library. (The courthouse branch is now formally known as the 'Self-Help Center.)

Librarians refer patrons to the legal aid attorney as they normally would to the legal clinic, only the legal aid attorney is 10 feet away. The legal aid attorney gives 20 minutes of free legal advice in contested civil matters and provides intake to locate a volunteer attorney for patrons meeting legal aid's income guidelines.

2. Serving the 'Almost-Agreeds'

Litigation of a civil case costs the Travis County courts \$5,000 a day. It is no wonder, then, that Travis County judges have supported and encouraged mediation for years. The problem was, though, that few pro se family law litigants knew about using mediation to reduce or eliminate their contested issues.

The local Dispute Resolution Center (DRC) offered low-cost mediation services, but located away from the courthouse complex, and it was not very visible to pro se litigants.

Travis County Law Library (TCLL) provides the free service of a reference attorney to review family law court forms in uncontested case. Daily, TCLL would have to turned patrons away from the service if both parties did not agree on all of the issues of the divorce or modification. These "almost-agreeds" could not qualify for the help of the reference attorney

until they reached agreement on all of their contested issues.

In August, TCLL and the DRC partnered to offer free mediation services to the family law patrons in a library office and conference room. The non-profit Dispute Resolution Center gets a free office close to courthouse, and direct referrals from the library. The library improves its services to its almost-agreed and contested family law patrons by offering a new service.

The librarians give patrons a voucher for free mediation services. The patrons schedule and attend mediation. If an agreement is reached, then the patron will qualify for the free help of the library reference attorney. If, after mediation, the parties still do not agree on all the issues, they will still have the benefit of having aired or resolved some of their issues before proceeding to litigation.

The Big Project

TCLL just completed an 18-month grant to develop family law forms for the statewide website www.TexasLawHelp.org and to teach public reference librarians how to use the site.

The \$362,114 grant allowed the law library to pay an attorney/tech writer to create 120 family law forms and brochures that can be used throughout Texas.

The topics range from unsealing adoption records to contested Suits Affecting Parent Child Relationships. The forms were then sent to a vendor to be translated into Spanish. The bilingual forms will be posted by the end of September 2006.

The grant also paid for the salary and equipment of a web librarian to maintain the site and updated it with over 400 resources, including non-family legal information and videos.

The library used much of the grant money to contract with the Texas Equal Access to Justice Foundation (TEAJF) to launch an outreach campaign to publicize the site. In addition to promoting the site in the media, TEAJF taught reference librarians in 21 Texas cities to use the site, do basic online legal research, and to connect their patrons with their local legal aid providers.

In the first month of the outreach campaign, 5,431 users visited the site. By the end of the grant, over 23,000 visitors a month used www.TexasLawHelp.org.

Editor's Note: Court and Spark Wilson is a place where "our court and county librarians are motivated to contribute musings on, experiences with, or real life accomplishments in, strengthening the recognition of their library as a full and honored partner in the process of self representation, where the Court staff, the librarians and the library user overlap, and where expectations are met or exceeded."