



Bar Bulletin

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Public Legal Information: Pro Bono that Keeps on Giving

By David Pantzer | May 12, 2016

[NOTE: Adapted from a forthcoming article in the National Center for State Courts publication Trends in State Courts.]

People's Law is an educational outreach of the Maryland State Law Library, providing clear, reliable summaries of Maryland law, links to primary and secondary legal sources and referrals for legal help. People's Law is made possible by the voluntary efforts of Maryland's legal community. Many of our contributors are members of the MSBA, or of local and specialty bar associations. Contributing to the People's Law Library (PLL) is a conflict-free form of pro bono service that can be performed at any time of day and from any location. Our contributors have made a lasting impact: many of the articles on the PLL are viewed thousands of time per year.

The Need for Free Public Legal Information

Why should the public have the law explained clearly to them, for free? First, because public understanding goes to the credibility of our institutions. In her February 2015 State of the Judiciary Address, Chief Judge Mary Ellen Barbera brought it home to the courts, recognizing that "people will accept judicial outcomes, even if adverse to their side of the case, if they believe that they have been treated fairly and with respect. Put simply, process counts." And a big part of that process is simply understanding the legal system.

Second, less than one quarter of Maryland's poor have access to a lawyer's help in addressing legal needs. For this reason, many simply walk into the courtroom alone.

Others manage to connect with a lawyer beforehand for brief advice. Still others benefit from Maryland's new rule-based mechanism for "limited appearances." In all of these cases, clients need access to clear information. The court system runs more smoothly when everyone (even those with lawyers) understands how it works.

People's Law: A Team Effort

PLL's single greatest strength is the diversity of its contributors. The project of explaining the law, more than most, can bring just about everyone together.

Lawyers and non-lawyers alike identify topics for which the public needs better information. Law librarians, lawyers, government employees and law students all contribute to writing PLL articles. After content is written and edited, language students and bilingual attorneys and translators provide non-English versions. The Maryland State Law Library (MSLL) has the role of organizing and maintaining the content, and coordinating its ongoing review, usually by Maryland lawyers, when the law changes.

Many institutions participate in the project, yet each maintains its individual role and perspective within the broader community. Our institutional partners across the state include:

- *Bar Associations:* The mission of the Maryland State Bar Association (MSBA) includes promoting "access to justice, service to the public and respect for the rule of law." Working with PLL to enhance public awareness and understanding of the law advances that mission.
- *Law Schools:* For several years, partnerships between PLL and law clinics in several Maryland and DC law schools have provided great new content, often with help from practicing lawyers.
- *Government lawyers and employees:* Government lawyers often have a hard time with pro bono because of actual or perceived conflicts. However, writing and editing clear, neutral explanations of the law is virtually conflict-free. Lawyers from the Maryland Office of the Attorney General have provided great support, as well as others from municipal, state, and federal government.
- *The Maryland Legal Services Community:* A key set of partners comes from the legal nonprofits that directly serve the needs of the poor – **Maryland Legal Aid**, the **Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service**, and a host of other legal services organizations.

- *The Judicial Branch:* PLL's relationship with the judiciary also provides court clerks and other court employees with a direct voice in shaping content priorities. PLL is actively promoted by court personnel, the final interface between the public and the justice system.
- *Universities:* PLL has worked as a community partner with translation classes at Towson University and the University of Maryland. These partnerships allow students to perform real-world work that will have an impact in the community, and also provide valuable professional experience.
- *The Library Community:* Libraries are understood to be neutral spaces where anyone, rich or poor, can come for information. PLL and the State Law Library provide resources to public librarians, to help them meet the challenge of responding to these patrons. Some of these tools can be found online in the **Maryland Public Library Toolkit**.

Since the beginning of 2015, we have added more than 100 new names to the PLL **contributors list**. We are deeply grateful to all of them, and hope that many more of you will join the team. You'll be in the best of company! For more information, or to get involved, please contact **Dave Pantzer**.

Dave Pantzer manages the People's Law Library at the Maryland State Law Library and serves as Vice-Chair of the MSBA Section on the Delivery of Legal Services.

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