

*Evaluating Library Services to Self-Represented  
Litigants: A Story of Two Surveys*

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SRLN Report (March 2021)

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# *Evaluating Library Services to Self-Represented Litigants: A Story of Two Surveys*

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As access to justice advocates, law librarians provide critical legal resources that are helpful to self-represented litigants (SRLs). The past decade (2010-2020) gave rise to the evaluation of self-help resources in law libraries, and, importantly, the identification of best practices for assisting SRLs. The Self Represented Litigation Network (SRLN) and American Association of Law Libraries Government Law Libraries Special Interest Section (AALL GLL-SIS - formerly SCCLL-SIS) deployed surveys in 2013 and in 2019 that measured law library services to SRLs. Each survey gleaned responses from about 150 law libraries around the country. While the 2013 survey helped librarians identify elements of best practices, the 2019 survey included these best practices as criteria for measurement. This discussion describes law library best practices, the categorization of best practices into levels of service, and displays the numbers of survey respondents that have implemented best practices. It also describes aspects of the surveys not previously published.

Although the 2013 and 2019 surveys were not identical, there were some similarities. This discussion attempts to compare results on a variety of factors that were included in both surveys and assesses changes as depicted by the data. Some of the criteria that are compared in the two surveys indicate trends toward increased achievement of best practices in law library services to self-represented litigants. Previous reports excluded any comparison between the two surveys.

In addition to best practices, this discussion explains the following:

- the survey background
- how to access the information in the previously published reports
- the StoryMap graphical format
- the short video highlighting the major themes of the 2019 survey
- opportunities for marketing law library services.

See accompanying Appendix for detailed results and graphs.

## Background

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### The 2013 Survey—

SRLN law librarians collaborated with SCCLL, and results from the survey were reported by SRLN. Approximately 150 law libraries responded to the survey. The SRLN website includes an executive summary, full survey results, and a list of libraries surveyed in “Survey: SRLN Working Group National Self-Help in Libraries Survey (SRLN 2013), see <https://www.srln.org/node/551>. The collection also includes an accompanying report published in 2014 by the SRLN Law Librarians Working Group entitled “Library Self-Help Programs and Services: A Survey of Law Library Programs for Self-Represented Litigants, including Self-Help Centers.” Criteria in the 2013 survey reflected resources and services that many libraries already provided to assist self-represented litigants, including support for self-help centers in libraries. The 2013 survey data provided a foundation for defining law library services to SRLs.

### The 2019 Survey—

In 2018, SRLN approached the SRLN Law Librarians Working Group and recommended that another survey be deployed to update results from the 2013 survey. The goal was not to duplicate the 2013 survey—although some criteria were the same in both surveys. Rather, a major goal of the 2019 survey was to study best practices criteria at the basic, intermediate,

and advanced levels of service and determine the number of libraries at each level. The 2019 survey project assessed these law library services to SRLs across the country. Survey analysis also described library collections, partnerships, staffing, and self-help centers in libraries. As with the 2013 survey, almost 150 law libraries responded to the survey. There was no attempt to survey the same respondents or deliver the same questions as in the 2013 survey.

The 2019 survey tool was developed by the SRLN Law Libraries Working Group. The target audience was AALL membership as well as the members of the SRLN Law Librarians Working Group. The 2019 survey project was expertly assisted by SRLN consultants. Alison Davis-Holland was a geospatial consultant and GIS/Data Manager for SRLN. Suzanne Wade, GIS Analyst and Cartographer also worked on the project. Consultant costs were covered by an AALL LexisNexis Research Fund Grant that was awarded in April 2019. The survey was distributed in March-April 2019 and received about 150 responses. The results were published by mid-June in the StoryMap format, with inviting, interactive graphical displays and accompanying text that summarize and promote law library self-help services.

For the StoryMap-- See “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>

From the StoryMap, SRLN consultants produced a video—See “Open to the Public. Law Libraries Across the Country Are Building Stronger Communities by Serving Self-Represented Litigants.” (1.26 minutes; see <https://spark.adobe.com/video/L2eo5ukn344Jv> --case sensitive).

## Levels of Services to SRLs—Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced Best Practices

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In July 2014, an AALL Special Committee appointed by then president Steve Anderson published a white paper entitled “Law Libraries and Access to Justice: A Report of the American Association of Law Libraries Special Committee on Access to Justice,” (see <https://www.aallnet.org/resources-publications/white-papers/>). Relying on the 2013 survey and other information regarding self-help services in law libraries, the special committee formulated best practices at basic, intermediate, and advanced levels of self-help services in public, government law libraries. White paper findings were promoted in 2016 in a GLL-SIS Resource Guide for wide distribution among government law librarians. Entitled “Access to Justice: Best Practices for Public Law Libraries: GLL Resource Guide No. 5,” (see <https://www.aallnet.org/gllsis/resources-publications/resource-guides/>), the Resource Guide included a checklist of criteria for basic and intermediate levels of service (page 8). An article in the resource guide described law library self-help services at the advanced level (page 3). One of the distinguishing characteristics of services at the advanced level is to have an attorney employed at the library. In 2016, only three law libraries were known to have an attorney on staff; all three libraries are described in the resource guide.

## 2019 Survey Results—Best Practices

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An analysis of the 2019 survey of law libraries revealed which services were offered at each library. By sharing information on these offerings and formally publicizing best practices, law librarians help promote a high standard of service to self-represented litigants at multiple levels.

The following results are copied from the StoryMap. Based on best practices, law libraries surveyed were categorized into levels of service. Note that both the intermediate and advanced levels also met most of the best practices criteria included in the previous level(s) of service. Below is a selected list of criteria, with results.

### **BASIC LEVEL: 28 law libraries fit most of the following criteria:**

- Publicly Accessible Space
- Professional Law Librarian
- Reference, Research Assistance and Instruction, and Referrals
- Basic Legal Collection (Non-lawyer resources, Print/Online, Westlaw/Lexis)
- Court Forms
- Public Computers
- Internet Access
- Public Fax, Copier, Scanner, Phone

### **INTERMEDIATE LEVEL: 96 law libraries fit most of the following criteria:**

- Basic level
- Guides and Pathfinders
- Law Library Website
- Email (Ask-Law-Librarian)
- Interpreter Services
- Referral Systems/Triage
- E-Filing
- Limited English Language Resources
- More Court Forms (Online forms with document assembly and guided interviews)

- Public Librarian Partnerships (training opportunities for public librarians)
- Partnerships with Others in the Legal Community
- Self-Help Center in the Law Library or Lawyer in the Library Program
- Support for External Self-Help Centers as Available

**ADVANCED LEVEL:** 7 law libraries fit most of the following criteria:

- Basic and intermediate levels
- Self-help center more comprehensively integrated into the law library program
- Attorney(s) on staff (not a law librarian with a dual degree—library science and law—or a librarian with a law degree acting as a reference librarian)

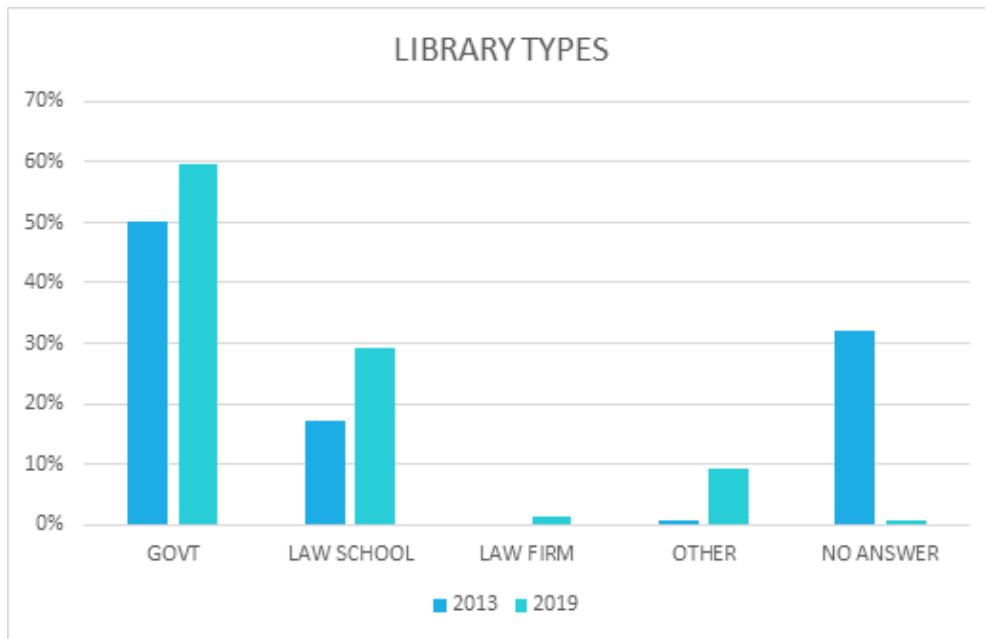
## 2013 and 2019 Data Comparison

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As noted, aside from the best practices data above, it's not the intent of this report to reiterate the results of the 2019 survey. The StoryMap (using Survey 123 data and graphical displays) captures these results and was published in 2019. However, one assessment of the 2013 and 2019 surveys that is included here is a comparison of results on matching criteria in both surveys. The comparison has not been reported on previously.

The tables below show the specified SRL services reported in both 2013 and 2019. About 150 libraries responded in 2013 and 2019. Incomplete and duplicate responses were not used.

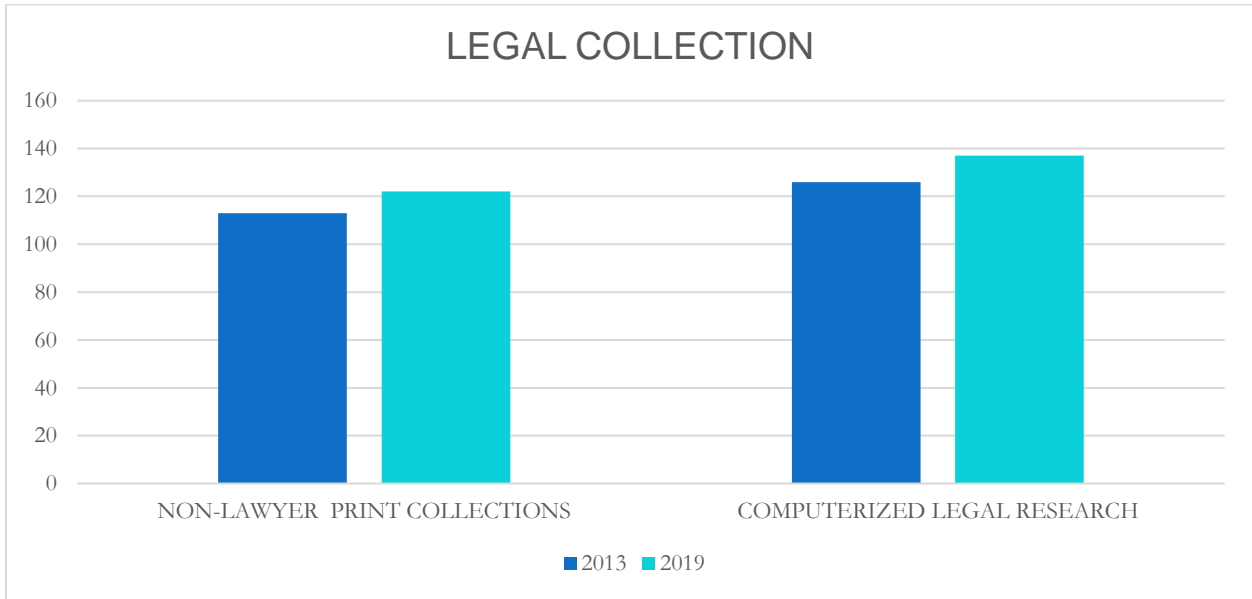
LIBRARY TYPE	2013	2019
GOVT	70	84
LAW SCHOOL	24	41
LAW FIRM	0	2
OTHER	1	13
NO ANSWER	45	1



The difference in the types of law libraries responding could account for some differences in services reported in the 2013 and 2019 surveys.

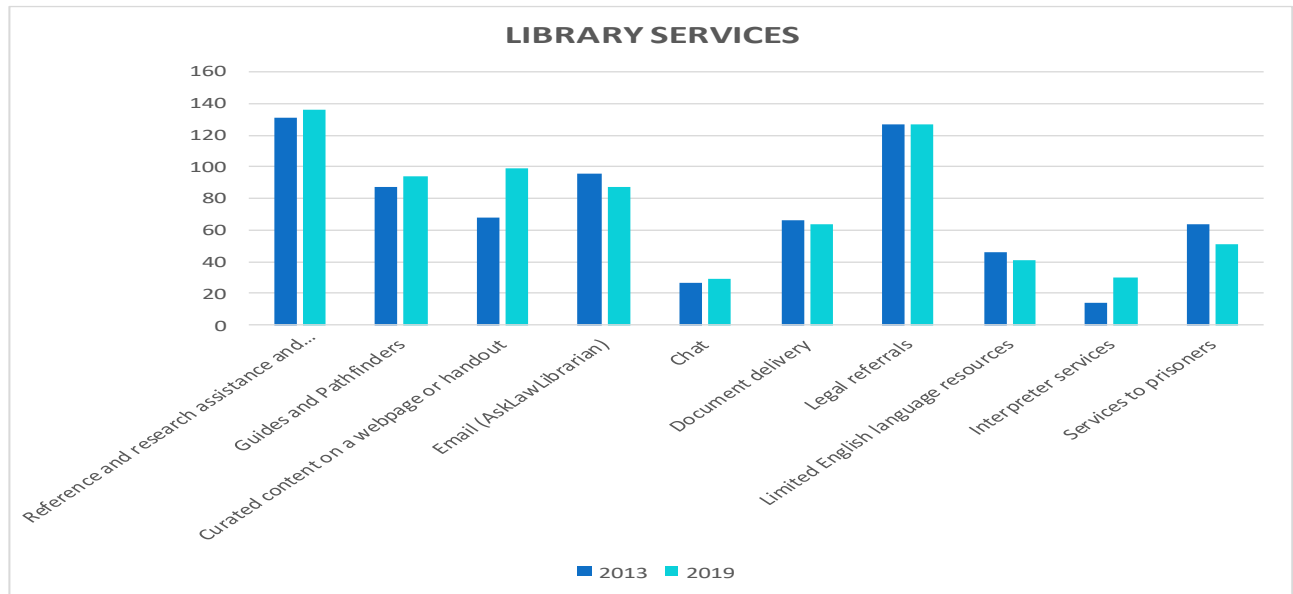


<b>BASIC LEGAL COLLECTION</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2019</b>
NON-LAWYER PRINT COLLECTIONS	113	122
COMPUTERIZED LEGAL RESEARCH	126	137



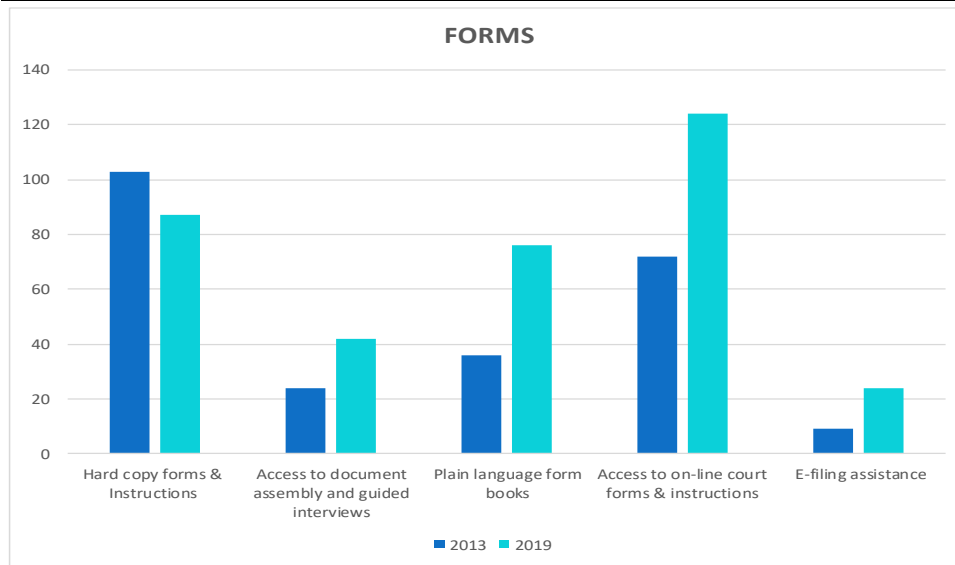
There was a slight increase (10% or less) from 2013 to 2019 for numbers of libraries offering non-lawyer print resources and computerized legal research.

<b>LIBRARY SERVICES</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2019</b>
Reference and research assistance and instruction	131	136
Guides and Pathfinders	87	94
Curated content on a webpage or handout	68	99
Email (Ask-Law-Librarian)	96	87
Chat	27	29
Document delivery	66	64
Legal referrals	127	127
Limited English language resources	46	41
Interpreter services	14	30
Services to prisoners	64	51



Most library services either increased or remained the same. However, the number of libraries offering email reference and service to prisoners decreased.

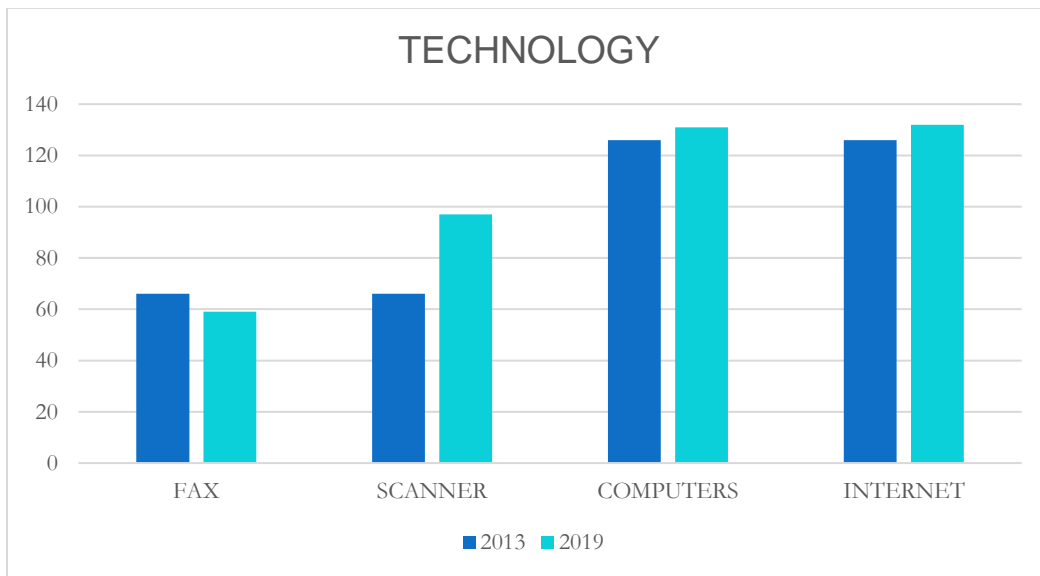
<b>FORMS</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2019</b>
Hard copy forms & Instructions	103	87
Access to document assembly and guided interviews	24	42
Plain language form books	36	76
Access to on-line court forms & instructions	72	124
E-filing assistance	9	24



While access to hard copy forms and instructions decreased, access to document assembly, plain language forms, online forms and e-filing assistance increased.

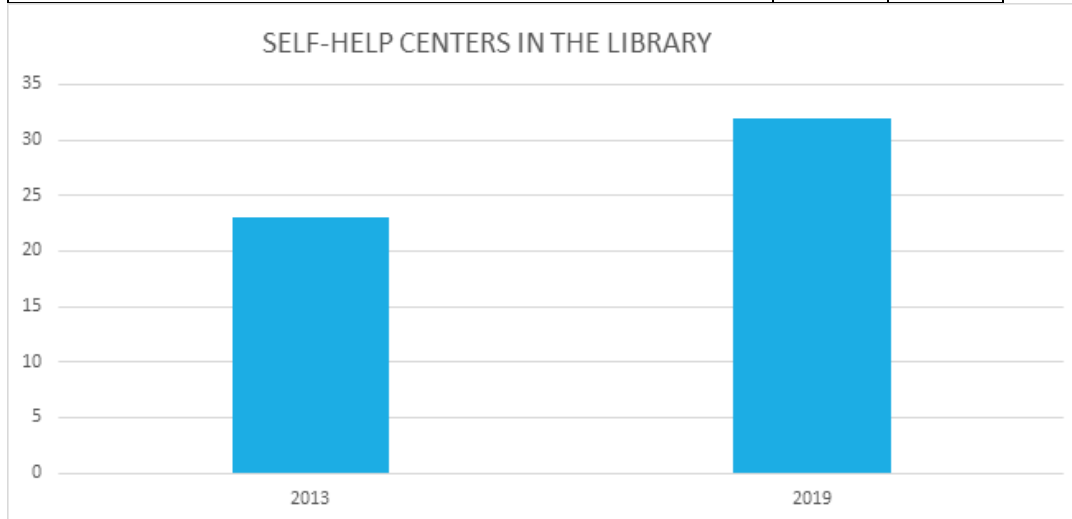
TECHNOLOGY	2013	2019	*FEE
FAX	66	59	50
SCANNER	66	97	26
COMPUTERS	126	131	2
INTERNET	126	132	0

\*Data only collected in 2019 survey



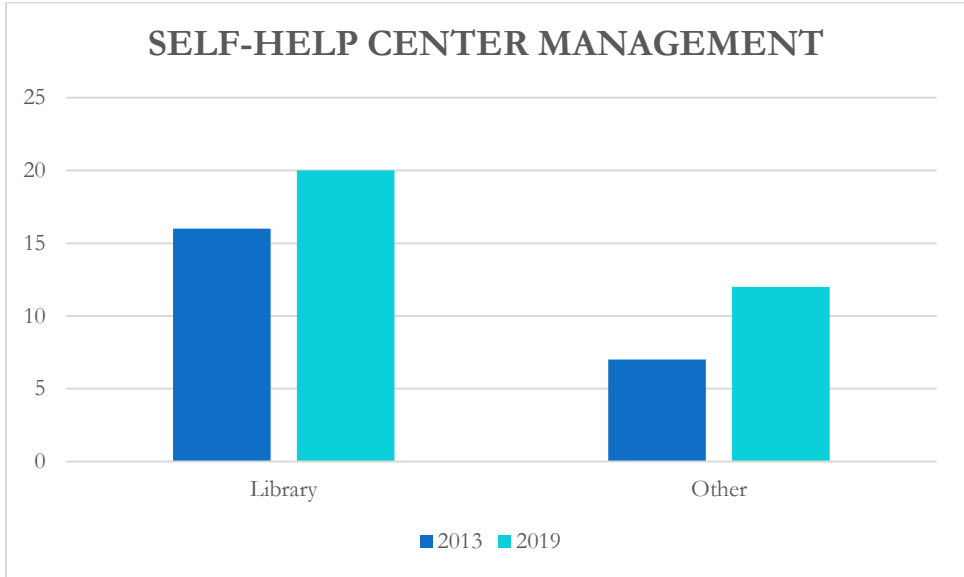
There was slight increase in technology offered (computers and Internet) in 2019. There was a decrease of 8% of numbers of libraries offering fax machines in 2019, but there was a 45% increase in the number of libraries offering scanners in 2019.

<b>SELF-HELP CENTERS IN THE LIBRARY</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2019</b>
	23	32



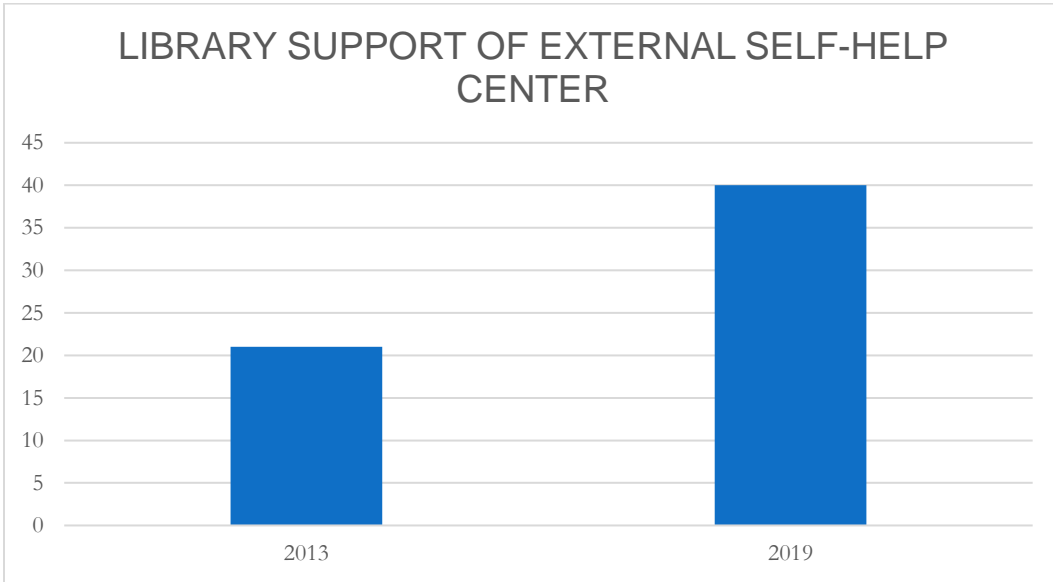
There was a 39% increase in the number of libraries with self-help centers in the library reported in 2019

<b>SELF-HELP CENTER MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2019</b>
LIBRARY	16	20
OTHER	7	12



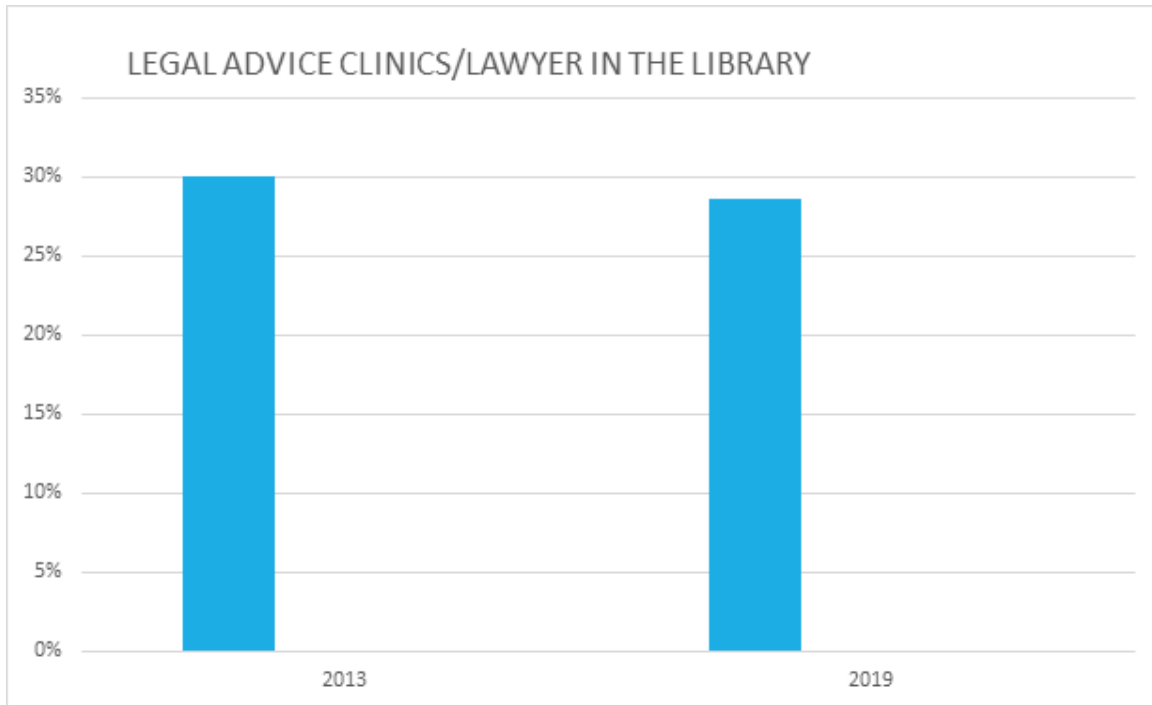
There was a slight increase (from 16 to 20) in the library management of the center. The number of libraries whose self-help centers are managed by other organizations increased from 7 to 12.

<b>LIBRARY SUPPORT OF EXTERNAL SELF-HELP CENTER</b>	
<b>2013</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>2019</b>	<b>40</b>



There was almost a 100% increase in the number of libraries reporting that they supported an external self-help center.

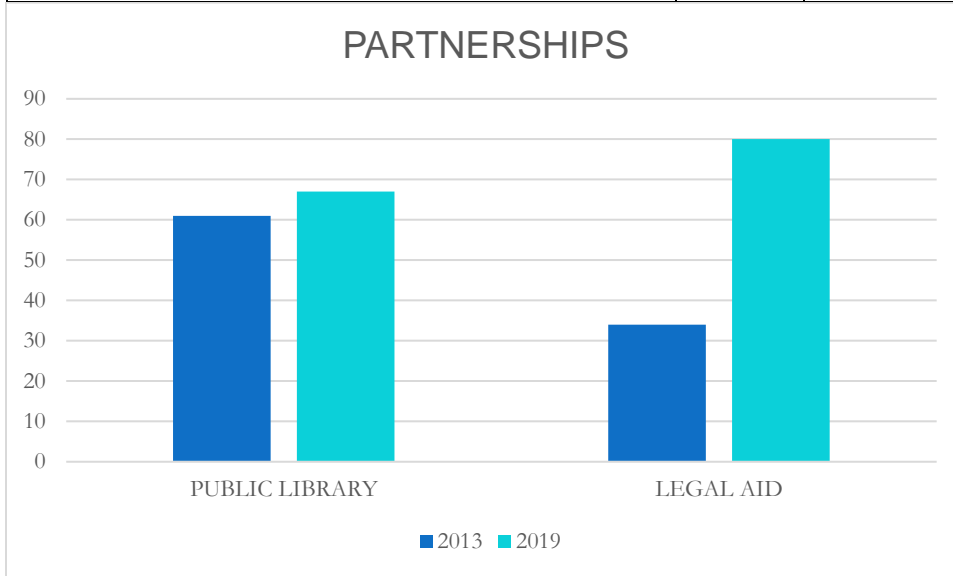
<b>LIMITED LEGAL ADVICE/LAWYER IN THE LIBRARY PROGRAMS</b>	
2013	42
2019	39



Between 2013 and 2019, the number of limited legal advice/lawyer in the library programs decreased by 7%.



<b>PARTNERSHIPS</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2019</b>
<b>PUBLIC LIBRARY</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>LEGAL AID</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>80</b>



Library partnerships with public libraries increased by 10% and by 140% with legal aid organizations.

## Data Comparison/Conclusions

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The number and types of respondents differed in 2013 and 2019.

Nonetheless, some general conclusions can be made:

- Libraries continue to provide non-lawyer resources to their users.
- While libraries have decreased use of fax machines, the number of libraries offering scanners has increased. This could be due to a shift in the technologies used by courts.
- Libraries offering self-help centers within the law library continue to increase.
- Libraries have greatly increased their support for external self-help centers.
- Law libraries have seen a slight decline in the number of limited legal advice/lawyer in the library programs offered.
- While libraries continue to increase partnerships with public libraries, the numbers of law libraries forming partnerships with legal aid organizations has increased greatly—140%.

## New Best Practice—Attorney on Staff

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The 2019 survey yielded information about one service aspect that wasn't reflected in the 2013 survey. This regarded an attorney on staff. One of the criteria for the advanced level model is that the library has an attorney on staff. This non-traditional position is distinguished from the dual degreed librarian or the non-MLS lawyer serving as a librarian. The attorney on staff may be more akin to a legal aid attorney. Attorneys on staff are performing such tasks as drafting documents, helping people complete forms, and appearing with a party in the courtroom. These functions enhance the services of the law library by providing a higher level of legal guidance than is ethically permissible for librarians.

In the 2019 survey, seven libraries indicated they had an attorney on staff. The duties of the attorneys were reported as follows:

<b>DUTY</b>	<b># of libraries</b>
DRAFT DOCUMENTS	2
FIND FORMS	5
HELP PEOPLE COMPLETE FORMS	5
FIND LEGAL INFORMATION	5
GIVE GUIDANCE TO PATRONS REGARDING THEIR CASE	5
GIVE LEGAL ADVICE TO PATRONS REGARDING THEIR CASE	0
HELP DEVELOP INSTRUCTIONAL GUIDES FOR SRLs	3
APPEAR WITH A PARTY IN A COURTROOM	1
THE LIBRARY PROVIDES MALPRACTICE INUSRANCE FOR THE ATTORNEY	1
OTHER - Review content of instructional materials	1

The various titles for the attorney on staff were listed as: assistant librarian; self-help attorney; reference attorney (2 responses); director of self-help center; executive director; and family law facilitator.

## Graphic Display

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The display of results between the 2013 survey and the 2019 survey was significantly different. The 2013 survey included a written report, many graphs depicting results, and a spreadsheet with raw data. The 2019 results were displayed in a dramatically different format. The SRLN consultants who assisted with the survey data insisted that a geographic display would be much superior to a written report limited to graphs and findings. Described as a “StoryMap” that offers user interaction, results were displayed in geographic maps of the United States using the cloud-based system ArcGIS. The Esri ArcGIS Online Story Map format allows integration of maps, narrative, charts, and other media.

The 2019 survey was deployed by importing Survey Monkey questions into Survey 123 using an XLS.Data analysis. This included graphical and geographical summaries that display survey results efficiently.

Interactive online maps concisely interpret and visualize key aspects of law library services. The maps compare various components of law library services to SRLs across the United States. Contact information is easily accessible, so libraries can reach out and communicate with each other to identify and share best practices and various characteristics of a service or program.

In the 2019 survey, “geoenabled” data enhanced survey results, not only by providing results that could be used interactively, but by integrating census data. (Sources for the census data that were integrated with the survey data were U.S. Census Bureau 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates, Table B01003 and Table S1701.)

The “Community Served” map illustrates the total number of people who live within a 30-minute drive time of a library. The aggregated findings show that 86 million people live within a 30-minute drive of a law library.

The map also allows a user to drill down to a specific library to determine its 30-minute drive time population and potential user base.

The “Low Income Community Served” interactive map allows the user to drill down to a specific library to show the number of low-income people within a 30-minute drive time of the library. A conclusion from this data is that nationwide, 17 million people with incomes below 125% of the federal poverty levels live within 30 minutes of the libraries surveyed.

The StoryMap project could not have been completed without the assistance of the SRLN consultants who created the StoryMap from the survey data gathered by the law librarians involved in the study. The costs for the consultants was covered by a \$5000.00 grant that the project received; the grant was funded by the AALL LexisNexis Research Fund Grant in April 2019. This type of display is greatly beneficial for information delivery, access, and assessment.

SRLN consultants used the knowledge they gained in creating the StoryMap to produce a short (under two minutes) video that highlights information about law library services to SRLs.

## Marketing and Advocacy

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The StoryMap and the video offer effective marketing tools, especially for people who are unfamiliar with law library services. By storing the StoryMap and video on the GLL-SIS website, law librarians can retrieve it as needed for marketing or advocacy purposes.

See “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>

and “Open to the Public. Law Libraries Across the Country Are Building Stronger Communities by Serving Self-Represented Litigants.” (1.26 minutes; see <https://spark.adobe.com/video/L2eo5ukn344Jv> --case sensitive).

Suggested areas for promotion include:

- Local and state legal aid providers
- Local and state bar associations
- State and local library associations
- Public library partners
- Websites – law library and parent organizations
- Social media – such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram
- Library and local government newsletters
- Public service announcements on local media outlets such as local cable TV (video)

## Conclusion

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This report consolidates survey information about law library services to self-represented litigants. The surveys give a picture of services as measured in 2013 and 2019. The data help define best practices that provide guidance for libraries to assess their own services. Survey information also demonstrates how law libraries, on a national scale, are serving self-represented litigants, and the 2019 survey identifies peers who can share information about ways to implement new services.

With the 2020 pandemic, many law libraries curtailed services, making best practices difficult to attain at any level. However, the pandemic forced some law libraries to develop additional services to assist SRLs. These include support for remote court hearings, remote clinics, pro bono consultation by phone, curbside delivery of print materials, emailing

resources, remote access to computerized legal research (though time-limited), and other pandemic fostered services.

In addition to restoring best practices for library services to SRLs, post pandemic library services may include newly developed ways to reach SRLs. Whether or not these services become best practices remains to be seen. As law library services emerge after the pandemic is over, the ability to define, measure, and assess new services will prove valuable in identifying new best practices. The ability to capture the impact of new services will, hopefully, demonstrate the important role of law libraries in providing valuable resources and services to self-represented litigants.

## REFERENCES

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“Survey: SRLN Working Group National Self-Help in Libraries Survey (SRLN 2013), see <https://www.srln.org/node/551>.

StoryMap: “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>

Video: “Open to the Public. Law Libraries Across the Country Are Building Stronger Communities by Serving Self-Represented Litigants.” (1.26 minutes; see <https://spark.adobe.com/video/L2eo5ukn344Jv> --case sensitive).

“Law Libraries and Access to Justice: A Report of the American Association of Law Libraries Special Committee on Access to Justice,” (see <https://www.aallnet.org/resources-publications/white-papers/>).

“Access to Justice: Best Practices for Public Law Libraries: GLL Resource Guide No. 5,” (see <https://www.aallnet.org/gllsis/resources-publications/resource-guides/>)



## ITEMS OF INTERESTS

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**Contact Information**— Librarians can reach out to their peers for guidance. The StoryMap section “Level of Services to Self-Represented Litigants” includes a map that displays libraries and their various levels; by clicking on the location symbol, information about the library can be obtained including contact information.

<https://srln.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=5983e5775fbc4dca9443457ad12559ca>

**Listing of Websites**— identified as being helpful at Q15a in the APPENDIX “Results and Graphs 2019 Survey”

Please contact SRLN for more information on the raw data found in the spreadsheet results and survey questions.

## APPENDIX

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Results and Graphs 2019 Survey