
Free, online and in your public library: delivering legal information to the community

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Abstract:

Public libraries in NSW, Australia have been successfully delivering legal information services to their communities for over 25 years, in partnership with the Legal Information Access Centre (LIAC) in the State Library of NSW in Sydney. This unique service aims to empower individuals and communities to understand their legal rights and make informed decisions.

This paper outlines the development and key elements of the LIAC service including a central coordinating body, standard collections of high quality plain language legal information in public libraries, training, and evaluation and feedback. The challenges faced in providing legal information to the community are discussed.

Over the years the LIAC service has evolved to also provide access to legal information online but the elements that have sustained the service including the LIAC vision and values, the five-step legal information framework, and the tiered service structure have remained constant.

Keywords: public libraries, legal information, State Library of New South Wales, access to justice.

Public libraries in NSW, Australia have been successfully delivering legal information services to their communities for over 25 years, in partnership with the Legal Information Access Centre (LIAC) in the State Library of NSW in Sydney.

Locating us

Australia, like the United States, is a federation with six states and 2 territories and a population of 23.8 million people. New South Wales is the largest state with a population of over 7.5 million. Sydney is the capital.

The State Library of NSW is the oldest library in Australia with extraordinary collections documenting the heritage of Australia and Oceania. It is a large reference library, open to the community, with free access to online journals, databases and learning materials including a comprehensive law collection. The State Library works in partnership with the NSW public library network to develop quality library services, build skills and expertise, and ensure library buildings, technology and facilities meet the needs of the diverse communities across NSW.¹

There are 367 public libraries in NSW, with a further 34 satellite locations and 20 mobile libraries servicing small and isolated communities. The NSW public library network has extensive reach across the state, it is a stable network open to all, with public library staff who are trusted providers of information.

Public library use statistics for 2013/14 show libraries are highly valued by their communities²:

- 34.87 million visits to NSW public libraries
- over 45 million loans
- over 7.7 million internet sessions in public libraries (including wi-fi)
- over 3 million library members
- more than 67,000 public programs and events
- more than 1.5 million people attended public programs
- more than 10 million website visits

Growth of the LIAC public library network

In April 1990, the Legal Information Access Centre (LIAC) opened in the State Library of NSW, a joint initiative between the State Library of NSW and the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW, a statutory, not-for-profit grant provider and legal research body. Broadly based on the Canadian public legal education and information (PLEI) movement, the aim was to provide access to legal information for the NSW community.

One of the ways this was achieved was through working with public libraries. The first program, which commenced in 1991, involved establishing 10 public libraries as regional centres for legal information provision. The cost of the legal collections and staff training was funded by a grant from the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW.

In 1994, to further extend state-wide access to legal information, LIAC selected a small collection of plain language books and called them the *Legal Tool Kit*. The *Legal Tool Kit*, a source of answers to many everyday legal questions, was distributed free of charge to all central libraries. To ensure currency and relevance the collection is regularly reviewed and updated. In 1996, in response to requests from public libraries, a purpose-designed stand with distinctive branding was provided to all central libraries, also at no cost. The *Legal Tool Kit* soon became the cornerstone of public library legal information delivery.

In 1998, following extensive feedback and consultation with public libraries, the program was streamlined and broadened. With the *Legal Tool Kit* becoming a well-used and highly valued part of their service, many libraries wanted to extend their legal collection, indicating that they would value advice on the selection and discarding of titles. They also wanted assistance in training their staff in legal information service delivery and help with local promotion. In response, LIAC developed a second level collection of key textbooks, called *Law Books for Libraries*, restructured the training program to include a 'train the trainer' option and developed new promotional products and programs. All public libraries were invited to participate in the revised program.

¹ http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/sl_nsw_annual_report_2014-15.pdf (29 May 2016)

² <http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/advice-best-practice/public-library-statistics> (29 May 2016)

By the end of 1999, 50% of public libraries had signed an agreement with LIAC, committing to collection, training and promotional activities. Today 89% of public libraries have signed an agreement with LIAC and work proactively to deliver useful and relevant legal information services for their communities.

The state-wide network comprises three tiers, with both LIAC and public libraries contributing to the costs.

- Tier 1 - all central public libraries have the *Legal Tool Kit*
- Tier 2 - libraries with a LIAC service agreement have a *Legal Tool Kit* in all branch libraries, a collection of recommended legal texts, trained staff and participate in activities to promote the service locally.
- Tier 3 – LIAC specialist staff manage the service by selecting and reviewing resources, developing and delivering training programs, developing promotional materials and programs and facilitating local partnerships with government agencies such as local courts.

In 2008 following an extensive marketing and research study, the public library service and the supporting online service was rebranded and named the *Find Legal Answers* service. The Legal Information Access Centre (LIAC), the central service, retained its name.

Between 1990 and 2014 LIAC received external funding. The LIAC service is now funded by the State Library of NSW and local government, through public libraries. LIAC coordinates the *Find Legal Answers* service in NSW public libraries and online via the dedicated *Find Legal Answers* website (www.legalanswers.sl.nsw.gov.au).

LIAC vision and values

The LIAC vision and belief system have sustained the service for 25 years.

LIAC's key objective is to provide equitable access to quality legal information for the community across NSW.

LIAC believes that:

- everyone has a right to know the law
- it is in everyone's interests to know the law
- informed consumers make more effective use of legal services
- access to information about the law:
 - supports the development of a legally literate society;
 - builds social capital by increasing understanding of the legal system;
 - empowers individuals and communities to make informed decisions;
 - enables active participation of citizens in a democratic society.

Key elements of the LIAC service

- A central coordinating body with legal information librarians responsible for collection management, training, development of promotional material, ideas and support for programs and events in consultation with public libraries.
- Standard collections in public libraries: reviewed regularly and selected by legal information specialists at the State Library with an emphasis on plain language information (two copies of *Legal Tool Kit* books purchased by the State Library for every central library).
- Standard training package: hands-on workshop with a focus on using resources to answer every day legal questions.
- Standard promotional material, products and events
- Evaluation and feedback mechanisms.
- Communication pathways (e-list, e-newsletter, annual forum) provide support but do not overwhelm public library staff.

- A standard agreement between LIAC and public libraries outlining the responsibilities of both parties.
- Funding for resources, training and promotion of the service.

Understanding the legal information needs of the community

Between 1990 and 2014 LIAC delivered a specialist legal information service at the State Library of NSW³. LIAC’s experience of assisting, observing and surveying clients over this period provided extensive knowledge of the legal information needs of the community. The most frequently requested areas of the law were in relation to wills and estates, neighbourhood issues (disputes over fences and trees), family law, housing, debt and criminal law. This is consistent with feedback from public library staff and website analytics.

Most clients have little understanding of the law. Legal jargon, the structure of the legal system, jurisdictional factors, court practice and procedure and the quantity of legal information online make it difficult to both navigate and make sense of the legal information available.

However, common to all is the need for information which is reliable, current and useful. Sometimes a simple printed pamphlet or online factsheet, in plain language, without legal jargon, is sufficient. Often access to a range of legal resources, including more complex information, is needed to develop a sufficient understanding of the law and make informed choices. The best outcome for clients with a legal problem is the ability to move through a range of resources, from simple to more complex, building knowledge and skills to deal with a particular legal problem.

Developing a framework for understanding the law

One of the key elements of the service was the development of a framework for developing an understanding of the law. The five-step legal information pathway (LIAC pathway) provides a framework to increase the capacity of the non-lawyer to develop an understanding of legal information, the levels of complexity and where the information can be found.

The five-step legal information framework (simplified diagram below) illustrates that not all legal information is freely available on the internet. Underpinning the five-step legal information framework is referral to free and fee based legal advice and assistance, emphasising LIAC’s belief that useful information plus advice is the best outcome for the client.

LIAC staff, as legal information specialists, are experienced librarians with high level reference and collection management skills. This skillset is essential for the development and maintenance of the legal collections and resources online, in public libraries and at the State Library.

The LIAC pathway methodology underpins the training program delivered to public library staff, informs client/staff interactions and is the core element of the Find Legal Answers website.

Step 1 Simple summaries	Step 2 Practical guides	Step 3 Legal texts	Step 4 Lawyers’ tools	Step 5 Acts, regulations and case law
Simple plain language legal information without jargon.	Plain language guides that summarise and explain the law.	Legal text books that contain detailed information about an area of	Legal research resources that provide detailed explanations and ways of	All current Australian legislation and many legal cases are freely

³ From July 2014 LIAC focused on the public library network, website and developing partnerships to sustain the service. Legal information enquiries at the State Library of NSW are managed by State Library reference librarians and back-up is provided by LIAC staff as required.

	Provide sample forms or letters or explain how to approach a problem.	the law.	identifying cases and legislation relevant to a legal subject area.	available online.
Brochures and factsheets (online and print), web pages	<i>Legal Tool Kit</i> <i>Hot Topics</i> Representing Yourself: Lawassist ⁴	<i>Law Books for Libraries</i>	Loose-leaf services Legal databases Encyclopaedias Commentary	Legislation websites Case law websites
<i>Where?</i>	<i>Where?</i>	<i>Where?</i>	<i>Where?</i>	<i>Where?</i>
Find Legal Answers website (online tab)	Find Legal Answers website In your public library	In your public library Resources listed on the Find Legal Answers website	In the State Library Key titles listed on the Find Legal Answers website	Find Legal Answers website
Referral to free and fee-based legal advice and assistance services				

Demystifying the law

The law is complex and frequently changes. The availability of plain language resources help to demystify the law. LIAC actively works with publishers to ensure plain language resources are available. But unusually for a library, LIAC is also a publisher improving access to plain language legal information for the community. Since 1994 LIAC's staff has included an editor whose key responsibility is to publish a series, *Hot Topics: legal issues in plain language*. The target audience for this series is secondary students and the community.

LIAC has also published two very popular plain language books, *Neighbours and the law* and *Rest assured: a legal guide to wills, estates and funerals in New South Wales*, available in print as part of the *Legal Tool Kit* collection and online for free.

To help demystify the sources of law, legislation and case law, LIAC produced two videos *How laws are made: parliament* and *How laws are made: the courts* with captioned versions.⁵

The Legal Tool Kit with a distinctive display stand and outward facing books increase the visibility of plain language legal information resources in public libraries and promote public libraries as places to find legal information.

Training public library staff to deliver a legal information service, with a focus on everyday questions about the law, introduces the concept that the law touches everyone.

Building the capacity of public library staff to deliver a legal information service

Initially public library staff felt cautious about providing a legal information service. To empower public library staff, as non-lawyers, to deliver a high quality, consistent legal information service LIAC developed a training package based on the five-step legal information pathway.

⁴ <http://www.lawaccess.nsw.gov.au/Pages/representing/Representing-yourself.aspx> (29 May 2016)

⁵ LIAC received a grant from the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW to produce the videos. The videos are freely available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/findlegalanswers> (29 May 2016)

The hands-on experiential learning workshop focuses on plain language information in the *Legal Tool Kit* collection and online to answer every day legal questions about the law. The questions are relevant to everyone and include neighbour disputes over a dividing fence, changing a will, power of attorney, how to get a divorce, tenancy issues, police and young people, how to write an affidavit as well as referral for legal advice and assistance. Answering these questions using sourced, authoritative information builds the confidence and ability of public library staff to deliver a legal information service.

The quality of resources coupled with hands-on practical exercises (with print and online resources) have resulted in over 95% of participants rating the quality of the training as very good/excellent and relevant to their community needs. This training can also be used by public library staff to deliver training to their colleagues locally. LIAC also regularly delivers the training package to court staff and legal community and service providers with the same positive evaluation.

Comments about the training from public library staff:

- *Informative and empowering*
- *It is good to use 'real life' searches and questions*
- *[I will] be more proactive in promoting Find Legal Answers. [The training] shows how easy it is to use – demystifies the law*
- *I have more confidence in dealing with legal inquiries knowing there is quick access to reliable information*

Liability

A central tenet of the LIAC service and reinforced through training is that public library staff provide access to sourced, authoritative information – not opinion or advice. In fact the first section of the training explores this issue. Referral to legal advice and assistance underpins the LIAC pathway. In this way concerns about liability are addressed.

Maintaining the commitment of public libraries to deliver a legal information service

Public libraries are busy places with many demands on staff resources and services. Keeping public library staff engaged and maintaining a high level of commitment to the LIAC service is addressed in a number of ways.

Training is critical to building the capacity of public library staff to deliver a legal information service. Increasing understanding and awareness of the service builds skills and increases staff confidence.

LIAC provides public libraries with a range of promotional material including branded bookmarks, pamphlets, magnets, pens and campaign packages for targeted weeks. The annual Australia-wide Law Week campaign provides an opportunity to support public libraries to promote legal information to their communities.

The annual LIAC Forum for public library staff provides an opportunity to share ideas, evaluate current strategies, workshop partnership opportunities and plan for the year ahead. Guest speakers highlight issues such as domestic violence, fines and payday loans.

The annual LIAC Centre of Excellence Award recognises innovative and creative achievement in promoting public legal information service at the local level. The successful library receives a Centre of Excellence Award trophy at the Law and Justice Foundation's Justice Awards dinner, promoting the important role public libraries play in improving community access to legal information.

LIAC has a number of effective communication pathways (e-newsletter and e-lists) to notify public library staff of updates to collections, provide information about promotional campaigns and report on events. LIAC also promotes public library activities via Tumblr blogs.⁶

Public library staff are invited to evaluate LIAC training programs and provide feedback to improve service delivery. In a recent survey of public library managers' the perception of the LIAC service was strongly positive with 80% rating the overall quality of services provided by the LIAC service as excellent/very good. A manager commented: *The staff are exceptional, always striving to find plain English resources, seeking feedback, supporting staff in public libraries and reaching out to community and community services.*⁷

Partnerships

The key partnership is with NSW public libraries who provide access to the community through a stable, distributed, extensive state-wide network.

Over many years LIAC has developed partnerships with legal service providers to improve local access and promote public libraries as places to go to find legal information.

These longstanding partnerships, with agencies such as Legal Aid NSW, LawAccess, Courts and Tribunal Services, Law and Justice Foundation and community legal centres are successful because LIAC shares a common goal, is responsive and flexible. Examples of collaborations include:

- Project between the Courts and Tribunal Services, Department of Justice and LIAC to promote public libraries and the *Find Legal Answers* website as places to access legal information. This project delivering the legal information training to local court staff. This successful strategy provides another avenue of referral for court staff to connect clients with legal information in their local communities and raises awareness of the *Find Legal Answers* service.
- Law Week partnership with Legal Aid NSW. Public libraries were invited to partner with their local Legal Aid office to host the *Law Week* (legal health) *Check Up* or a talk on *Family Life and the Law*. These partnerships not only promote the availability of legal information in public libraries, they highlight libraries as safe, inclusive places with skilled staff.
- Providing editorial assistance and feedback on plain language publications.
- Working with the Tenants' Union to distribute plain language information for tenants to targeted audiences.

Legal information on the internet: opportunity or threat?

LIAC embraced the internet and adapted the key elements of the LIAC service to the online environment. The LIAC pathway methodology provided the basis for developing the virtual pathway on the *Find Legal Answers* website⁸. LIAC worked closely with key legal service providers to develop a thesaurus (LIAC subject headings) which became part of the Justice Sector Metadata Standard. The plain language LIAC subject headings assist users to browse the pathway content on the website.

The *Find Legal Answers* website is more than a portal to legal information. LIAC staff use their knowledge of legal information needs and expertise as legal information specialists to carefully select the most appropriate online resources. All resources available through the state-wide public library network (online and in print) are indexed on the pathway. Links are provided to resources that are

⁶ <http://legalanswersnsw.tumblr.com/> and http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/blogs?blog_name=35661 (29 May 2016)

⁷ SLNSW quality of service of Public Library Service branch to NSW Public Library Network, 2016 (unpublished)

⁸ <http://www.legalanswers.sl.nsw.gov.au/> (29 May 2016)

available online and the locations provided for print resources (*Legal Tool Kit* titles, *Law books for Libraries* and select State Library law collections).

LIAC works closely with authors and publishers to reach agreement or negotiate the purchase of content to ensure *Legal Tool Kit* titles are available online with full text search functionality. The *Hot Topics* series published by LIAC is available online.

The *Find Legal Answers* website is at the core of the LIAC service. It not only provides curated legal information for the community but supports public library staff to deliver the legal information service. The pathway provides access to the most appropriate legal information for their clients – online, in public libraries (*Legal Tool Kit* and *Law Books for Libraries* books) and more in depth research resources at the State Library. The website also supports the public library service by providing information on all aspects of service management – collections, training, promotional activities and communication channels.

LIAC has developed a digital engagement framework and maintains an active online presence on Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr.

In 2014-15 the *Find Legal Answers* website had 739,492 sessions which represented a 39% increase on the previous year. Full text online content is the largest growth area and provided over 88% of site traffic. Social networks contribute a small but increasing amount of local traffic, with the most growth due to Facebook.⁹

Critical success factors

The following factors have contributed to the success of the LIAC service:

- A central coordinating body with staff who are legal information specialists and experienced librarians with high level reference and collection management skills.
- LIAC, as a part of the State Library with a comprehensive law collection, is well placed to deliver a state-wide legal information service alongside other State Library services provided in partnership with public libraries including drug and alcohol information, multicultural services and NSW.net¹⁰.
- Ongoing communication, training and regular feedback from public libraries allows LIAC to be responsive to the changing needs of public libraries and their local communities.
- A collection of high quality plain language legal information resources for the community of NSW.
- Partnerships with legal service providers to promote public libraries as local places with plain language legal information, safe spaces with skilled staff, open long hours and with internet and wi-fi connectivity.

Underpinning these success factors is the firm belief in the importance of legal information for the community. The LIAC service, with its simple and effective model, remains relevant in a changing environment.

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http://www.legalanswers.sl.nsw.gov.au/about/pdf/LIAC%20annual%20report_2014_15_website.pdf (29 May 2016)

¹⁰ NSW.net supports NSW local government and public libraries with subsidised internet connectivity services; wi-fi hotspots; infrastructure equipment; technical phone support and access to a fully subsidised suite of research databases for all NSW public libraries.

References

Find Legal Answers website: <http://www.legalanswers.sl.nsw.gov.au/>

Public Library Services, State Library of NSW: <http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services>