



Submitted on: 28.06.2018

Florida A&M University College of Law – The Special Access to Justice Mission of an HBCU

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Abstract:

Library mediation is critical to access to justice, or access to legal information for those who cannot afford an attorney. This paper considers one example of how one US law library provides access to justice services to the public as part of this vital service mission, the Florida A&M University College of Law Library, located in Orlando, Florida.

Keywords: Law Libraries, Legal Information, Access to Justice

Library mediation is critical to access to justice, or access to legal information for those who cannot afford an attorney.¹ Some have urged law libraries to undergo a transformation into a new type of library which accepts access to justice as a core feature of the library mission.² However, while Access to Justice (A2J) services are provided by many law libraries, they can be seen by law library managers as a costly, unfunded mandate. One way of approaching the issue is to consider library access to justice services as a continuum within the broader range of legal services.³ Within this continuum, librarians can select access to justice services consistent with their mission, budget, and general library resources.

One example of how a US law library provides access to justice services is the Florida A&M University College of Law Library⁴ (hereinafter FAMU Law Library), located in Orlando, Florida. Florida A&M University⁵ is a Land Grant institution⁶ which is a member of a network of HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities).⁷ As an HBCU, the FAMU College of Law has a special mission with respect to members of underserved communities.⁸ Access to Justice is included as part of the FAMU Law Library mission. While the primary mission of the FAMU Law Library is to support the teaching, learning, research, and service to the community conducted at the College of Law, another important mission of the Law Library is to promote access to justice by providing access to collections and services for the local legal community and for the general public.

About 50% of FAMU's reference desk traffic comes from members of the public and local attorneys. Members of the public who are representing themselves in the court system (known as Self-Represented Litigants or SRLs) have common questions such as:

- Can I get you to send me copies of these forms? (usually probate, family law, property law, or bankruptcy)
- Can you help me get a copy of these (Florida cases or statutes?)
- Can you help me get the phone number for legal aid?
- Do you have the rules for small claims court? Can you help me find case law on Social Security?
- Where are these sources? (such Florida Jurisprudence and American Jurisprudence)⁹
- Do you have information on (_____ court procedural issue), and
- Can you help me find out about this case?

In many instances, the law library is not the patron's first stop. They may have been referred to us by a court or other entity which has provided them with some general information about what they need to find. Or, they may have previously searched for legal information on the web. The FAMU Law Library is the official law library for Orange County, Florida, which includes the City of Orlando. The FAMU Law Library receives funding from Orange County to provide access to legal information resources for members of the public such as public access legal databases. General academic library database access is provided by our main campus library. Anyone who comes into the law library can use our public access computer terminals.

The law library has engaged in community outreach. Law Librarians partnered with students who worked at the library circulation desk and who had contacts in the local community.

Outreach to the community has included a library sponsored program for victims of domestic violence, a field trip to the Law Library by local school children, and a program on Florida wills and probate law by a member of the law faculty. In addition, there has been outreach to the Orange County Public Library, where the public library invited the law librarians for a tour of their facilities and a law librarian did a session for the public librarians on the legal resources available at the law library.

Online access to legal information varies from state to state. Online legal forms can be found at state “Law Help” websites.¹⁰ These include interactive forms which compile completed documents to be filed at the courthouse based upon answers to questions posed to the user.¹¹ The Florida Commission on Access to Civil Justice¹² has made Florida legal forms available online for members of the public.¹³ Self-help centers are also being implemented such as the Orange County Clerk’s Legal Self-Help Center in Orlando.¹⁴ In addition to directly supporting the public, academic law libraries can support access to justice by supporting the lawyers and law students who will go on to serve their communities. Many FAMU alumni have returned to the law library to use the public access databases as they are beginning their legal careers.

The FAMU Law Library does not provide the most wide-ranging access to justice services. Nor does it provide the most basic. If I were to characterize our library in terms of levels I would say that we are a mid-level (level two out of three) library access to justice (LIBA2J) service provider. Not every library has to provide advanced services, such as helping patrons to fill out legal forms, as opposed to providing access to forms. A continuum perspective can help librarians to think back to services that they have provided in the past and consider how they may want to build upon those services in the future.

Acknowledgments

Yolanda Patrice Jones is Law Library Director and Associate Professor of Law at Florida A&M University College of Law. The author thanks everyone at the Florida A&M College of Law, the Boulder Conference on Legal Information, and the participants of LATCRIT XXI Biennial Conference in Orlando, Florida who helped with their invaluable feedback. The author also thanks the Law Libraries Section of IFLA, whose mission to provide “...leadership in the field of legal information policy, recognizing that equitable and permanent public access to authentic legal information is a necessary requirement for a just and democratic society worldwide,” was one of the inspirations for this paper.

References

¹ See Yolanda Patrice Jones, Bringing the Law to the Library: The Importance of Librarian Mediation in Access to Justice Services, ___ LEGAL REFERENCE SERVICES QUARTERLY ___ (forthcoming).

² Richard Zorza. *The Sustainable 21st Century Law Library: Vision, Deployment and Assessment for Access to Justice* 1 (2012), <http://www.zorza.net/LawLibrary.pdf>.

³ See Jones, *supra* note 1.

⁴ See the Law Library webpage at <http://library.famu.edu/lawlibrary>.

⁵ The FAMU main campus is located in Tallahassee, the capital of the state of Florida. See <http://www.famu.edu/>.

⁶ Most Land Grant institutions in the US are public universities which are funded by the individual state in which the university is located. See Land Grant University, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land-grant_university. Law libraries which are funded by the state or federal government have been said to have a particular mission to provide access to legal information to the public. See Connie Lenz, *The Public Mission of the Public Law School Library*, 105 LAW LIBRARY JOURNAL 33 (2013).

⁷ Historically Black Colleges and Universities are schools that were created during times when African-Americans were required to attend separate educational institutions. While many African-Americans still attend HBCUs, these schools now have an increasingly diverse student body.

⁸ Many HBCU mission statements have a social justice focus. The Florida A&M College of Law mission states that it "... reaffirms our historical legacy of excellence and responsibility to serve as a transformative force for the public good. Our mission is to serve as a beacon of hope and catalyst for change by providing access to excellent educational training and opportunities to generations of students seeking to serve the needs of traditionally underserved people and communities locally, nationally and internationally." See Mission – Historical Legacy of Excellence, <http://law.famu.edu/about-us/mission/>.

⁹ *American Jurisprudence*, and *Florida Jurisprudence*, are the titles of commonly used legal encyclopedias in the United States. *American Jurisprudence* is applicable to the United States generally and provides overviews of wide variety of legal topics. *Florida Jurisprudence* is a state specific legal encyclopedia which provides overviews of a wide variety of legal topics applicable specifically to the state of Florida. A free open-access US legal encyclopedia with contributions by legal experts is the WEX project at the Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute. See <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex>.

¹⁰ A good resource for online access to justice information for the various states is the Law Help website at <https://www.lawhelp.org>.

¹¹ Interactive forms software includes A2J Author (<http://www.a2jauthor.org>), which is sponsored by CALI, the Center for Computer-Assisted Legal Instruction (<https://www.cali.org>) and the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) Chicago-Kent College of Law (<https://www.kentlaw.iit.edu/about>). They state that "A2J Author is available free to interested court, legal services organizations, and other non-profits for non-commercial use." They also state that "We are Not Your Lawyer," see <https://www.a2jauthor.org/content/terms-use>.

¹² See FLORIDA COMMISSION ON ACCESS TO CIVIL JUSTICE, <http://www.flaccessjustice.org>.

¹³ Commission has released an app with access to online legal forms. The forms can also be found on the web at <https://help.flcourts.org/>.

¹⁴ See ORANGE COUNTY CLERK'S SELF-HELP CENTER, <https://www.myorangeclerk.com/Divisions/Self-Help-Center>. "The Clerk's Self Help Center provides low-cost legal assistance in family law, small claims and residential eviction cases."