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A Novel Response

How Law Libraries Adapted to the Pandemic

BY AAMIR S. ABDULLAH

Law libraries are considered by many to be temples of legal knowledge. Housed within their hallowed halls are volumes of books (statutes, treatises, etc.), and stored within their computers and servers are applications and software providing access to legal research databases, digital books, and so much more. Colorado has just a handful of public, private, and specialized law libraries to support its attorneys across the state. Among the most prominent are the Colorado Supreme Court Law Library, Tenth Circuit Law Library, Westminster Law Library at the University of Denver, William A. Wise Law Library at the University of Colorado, and National Indian Law

Library. When the novel coronavirus emerged in March 2020, these libraries had to quickly develop new ways to make legal resources available to attorneys. The pandemic ushered in new modalities of work and human interaction that have changed the way reference support is being provided in law libraries today, and likely for many years to come.

With Time, All Things Change

Thanks to the proliferation of information on the internet, attorneys have instant access to just about any legal resource—provided they can pay for it. Fortunately, law libraries have become the great equalizer in this world of pay-to-play

legal research, offering countless resources from diverse vendors in one convenient location and at no cost to the public. Of course, some services surrounding the resources, such as printing, copying, and the like, still cost money. Regardless, public and specialized law libraries provide access to legal resources and scholarship that would otherwise be too expensive for many to purchase. This access may be provided to everyone from attorneys at large firms to pro se litigants.¹

However, 2020 presented a novel problem for law libraries: how to provide basic institutional functions during a time when most people were not allowed to gather in public places. In response to various shelter-in-place orders, guidelines, and government directions, law libraries had to develop methods to continue assisting patrons who could no longer enter the physical brick and mortar building.

Change Takes Time

Just like any other business, law libraries need time to implement change within their organizations. In this instance, change needed to be fast and effective. Thankfully, law libraries were poised for new modalities of patron interaction.

Historically, law libraries were quiet places with rows and rows of books. However, for a long while now, law libraries have embraced the enhancements that came along with the digital revolution. When statutes and legal drafting tools came on CD-ROMs, law libraries purchased them for their patrons. When legal research transitioned to online, web-access software, law libraries paid the subscription cost to allow their patrons access to these resources. Rather than rest on their laurels, law libraries sought to be a beacon of technological change within the legal profession.

Examples of Change in 2020

In 2020, COVID-19 presented law libraries with an opportunity to demonstrate their nimbleness. By leveraging resources, partnering with vendors, and putting in some elbow grease, most law libraries quickly found ways to provide attorneys who were working from home with access to reference assistance and legal resources.

Access to Remote Reference Assistance

When the stay-at-home orders first went into effect, law libraries continued to assist patrons via email. Although not a novel idea, it was the quickest way to implement remote reference assistance, so the Colorado Supreme Court Law Library,² Westminster Law Library,³ William A. Wise Law Library,⁴ and National Indian Law Library⁵ offered email reference assistance during normal business hours.

In addition, a few law libraries implemented remote reference assistance by Zoom and live chat. At the William A. Wise Law Library and Westminster Law Library, patrons could schedule Zoom appointments with law librarians for help with reference questions,⁶ while live chat assistance was generally available from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday.⁷

These three remote reference assistance methodologies allowed law libraries to offer patrons quick, efficient, and effective reference assistance while still adhering to social distancing guidelines. And in some ways, these methods were an improvement. Rather than drive, park, and pay a meter to inquire about a legal research question, an attorney could simply log on, sign up, and engage via chat or Zoom to get answers immediately. Additionally, law librarians could educate patrons about how to find their desired resources instead of just giving them an answer.

Access to Remote Law Library Resources

While law librarians were frantically trying to stay up to date on CDC and other government guidelines concerning how COVID-19 spreads to others, they were also scrambling to determine the best way to provide remote access to the vast array of legal resources available within the library walls. However, with great constraint comes great innovation.

As librarians researched the various quarantine periods for analog resources, many libraries, including the William A. Wise Law Library⁸ and the Westminster Law Library,⁹ began offering curbside pickup for some of their analog resources. This, of course, was in addition to providing digital and scanned copies of various resources through email, chat, and Zoom.

Law libraries also began leveraging relationships with vendors to offer remote access to the two leading legal research engines—Westlaw and LexisNexis. Notably, the Colorado Supreme Court Law Library offered new LexisNexis users limited 30-days access to Lexis Advance.¹⁰ And the William A. Wise Law Library and the Westminster Law Library offered new Westlaw users limited 14-day access to Westlaw.¹¹


Several law libraries worked out agreements with legal publishers to extend access to digital versions of analog resources. For example, the Westminster Law Library and the William A. Wise Law Library began offering extensive direct access to previously unavailable digital legal scholarship to students, faculty, and staff through VPN and proxy servers.

The William A. Wise Law Library also implemented remote access to one of its research terminals via Zoom. Before the pandemic, the library purchased access to electronic resources—Westlaw and Bloomberg—for terminal use. The library then made those resources available to attorneys and other patrons via this terminal when an attorney or patron was in the library, a requirement imposed by the publishers. But during the pandemic, those resources could not be provided in the same way. So, the library developed a methodology, via Zoom, to provide remote access to the terminal while respecting the rights of the publishers.

Let the Good Times Roll into 2021 and Beyond

Although not a great year by any stretch of the imagination, 2020 was a time of great innovation. Now that the height of the pandemic has seemingly passed, it will be imperative for attorneys to visit the law library websites to learn about the various services being offered. Fortunately, several law libraries have implemented remote access strategies that continue to this day. The William A. Wise Law Library continues to (1) provide support to its patrons via reference chat, email, and Zoom; (2) offer remote access to the on-premises terminal; and (3) grow its trend of purchasing digital and online materials. These offerings are in addition to answering phone requests and in-person reference questions, as the

William A. Wise Law Library opened to the public in May 2021.

As law libraries continue to expand digital resources, negotiate with vendors over distribution of access to digital resources, and maintain both remote and in-person reference, practitioners can rest assured that support will be there. All-in-all, it appears that gaining new ways to provide reference support and access to law library resources is a net positive outcome from a net negative year. 



Aamir S. Abdullah is the newest student services and outreach law librarian at the University of Colorado William A. Wise Law Library. Previously, Professor Abdullah practiced law for five years in Texas, where he handled both state and federal cases. He is passionate about access to justice and the intersection of law and technology.

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NOTES

1. The services and access provided is heavily dependent on the type of law library; for example, the Tenth Circuit does not offer database access to pro se litigants.
2. Email requests to library@judicial.state.co.us.
3. Email requests to help@law-du.libanswers.com.
4. Email requests to lawref@colorado.edu.
5. Visit <https://narf.org/nill/asknill.html> to access the email request form.
6. Visit <https://coloradolaw.libcal.com/appointments?lid=5344&g=11274> to make Zoom appointments for the William A. Wise Law Library. Email help@law-du.libanswers.com to make Zoom appointments for the Westminster Law Library.
7. Visit <http://lawlibrary.colorado.edu/help> for live chat reference at the William A. Wise Law Library. Visit <https://www.law.du.edu/library> for live chat reference at the Westminster Law Library.
8. Visit <https://guides-lawlibrary.colorado.edu/c.php?g=1013587&p=7912202> for information about curbside pickup at the William A. Wise Law Library.
9. Visit <https://law-du.libwizard.com/f/curbside> to learn about curbside pickup at the Westminster Law Library.
10. Visit <https://csl.colibraries.org/services-supreme-court-library> for more information.
11. Visit <https://guides-lawlibrary.colorado.edu/remotearchive/westlaw> for more information.