

Law on the Frontlines

Legal Reference for Public Libraries



Best Practices for Legal Reference

Introductions

The Frontlines Workgroup includes representatives from the Thurgood Marshall State Law Library, Maryland Court and County Law Libraries, the Maryland Access to Justice Commission, and the Access to Justice Department of the Administrative Office of the Courts.

Instructors for each course will vary but the information provided is based on the core curriculum of the ongoing Frontlines Project.

Today's instructors are...

Catherine McGuire
Thurgood Marshall
State Law Library

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Thurgood Marshall
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Learning Outcomes

After this session, you should be able to...



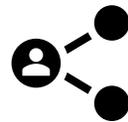
Describe Access to Justice and why it matters to public libraries



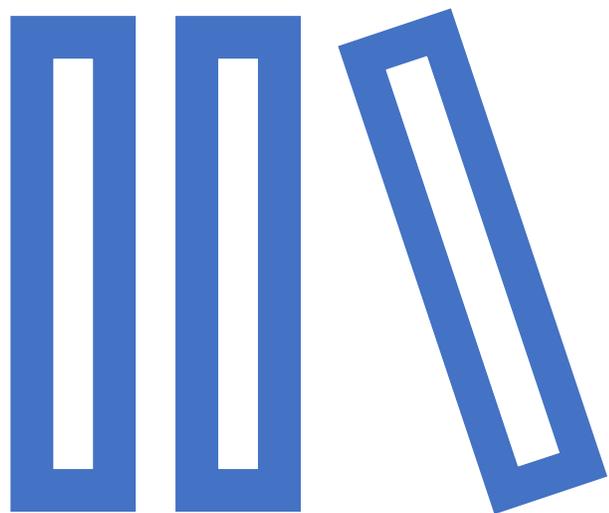
Identify a legal reference question and employ best practices to manage the reference interview



Choose and employ top resources for legal information



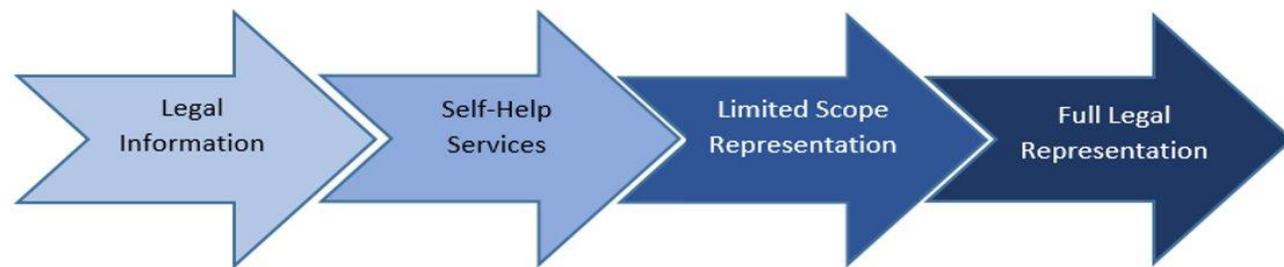
Assess referral choices and select appropriate options



What is Access to Justice ?

Our justice system

Legal assistance comes in many forms



Public libraries are perfect partners!

Your experience

What kind of questions about law does
your library get?

Share in the chat box!

What do I need to know about legal reference?

How do I
know the
question is
about law?

- Listen to the words they use to describe the situation.
 - *Fair / rights / allowed or permitted*
 - *Is it allowed for my landlord to enter my apartment when I'm not there?*
 - *It's not fair that my ex isn't paying support.*
 - *My mom is disabled and can't drive. Does my brother have a right to use her car?*
- Does the situation include a conflict of some kind, that may need resolution?
- Did the situation arise from a law-related process?
- Honestly, sometimes it's hard to tell – experience is the best teacher.

Practice

Legal Question?

QUESTION 1: What is the difference between a nonprofit organization and a tax-exempt organization?

QUESTION 2: I have a power of attorney for my mother. Can I write a check from her bank account?

QUESTION 3: How much do I have to pay my babysitter?

QUESTION 4: My landlord was in my apartment while I was at work. Can he just come in when he wants?

Interpersonal Dynamics

- Emotions impact the interaction – both patron and provider
- Focus on "can" rather than "cannot" - use positive language
- Set and respect limits
- Develop and practice scripted language

Information not Advice

- The difference is...
 - Are you *broadening* or *narrowing*?
 - Who has the power?
- Rephrase – look for the information nugget
- Trust your instincts
- Ask a colleague



Practice

My ex got a new job and I think he's earning more money now. Can I make him pay more child support?

1. Of course you can demand more! There's probably a form you can fill out.
2. I can't give you legal advice. You should ask an attorney.
3. So, you're looking for information about modifying your child support? I can help you find information on that topic.

Rely on your strengths

- Help find information
- Demonstrate how to use resources
- Educate about the content and structure
- Suggest other sources of assistance
- Direct to other providers

Ask
for more
information

- Where is this happening?
- What are you trying to accomplish?
- What have you looked at so far?
Who have you talked to?
Where did you hear about...?
- Are you in court or aiming to be in court? Do you know which one?
- Do you have any paperwork I could see?

Determine the need

- Information
- Law
- Legal Assistance
- Services
- Forms



Practice

Match the Question to the Type of Question

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| 1. Information | A. Do you have a motion form? |
| 2. Law | B. I need advice about my landlord. |
| 3. Legal Assistance | C. How do I get unemployment benefits? |
| 4. Services | D. What is the law on cannabis use? |
| 5. Forms | E. How do I get information about a peace order? |

What can you access?

Which of the following can you access from your library?

1. Legal texts in your library's collection, like publications from Nolo or the Maryland State Bar Association.
2. Gale Legal Forms database.
3. Westlaw, Lexis, or another legal database.
4. Access to the local community college's paralegal or legal studies program resources and library collection.

Do you find helpful resources on the basic internet? What are your favorite internet-based legal information sources?

Where
should you
start?

RESOURCES FOR YOUR PATRON

- [People's Law Library of Maryland](#)
- [Maryland Court Help](#)
- [Nolo.com](#), Legal Articles
- Cornell Legal Information Institute's [Wex](#)
- Check your library catalog or database collection

RESOURCES FOR YOURSELF

- [Thurgood Marshall State Law Library Website](#)
 - MD Public Library Toolkit
 - *Law on the Frontlines*

Practice!

1. How do I add a name to my property deed?
2. My neighbor's tree just dropped a huge branch across our shared fence. Who pays to have the branch removed and fix the fence?
3. I just turned sixteen. I want to get a job delivering newspapers. Do I need a work permit?

Where can I
send people
for more?

- Local resources – county law library!
- People’s Law Library Legal Services Directory and Clinic Calendar
- Maryland Court Help Centers
- Government agencies

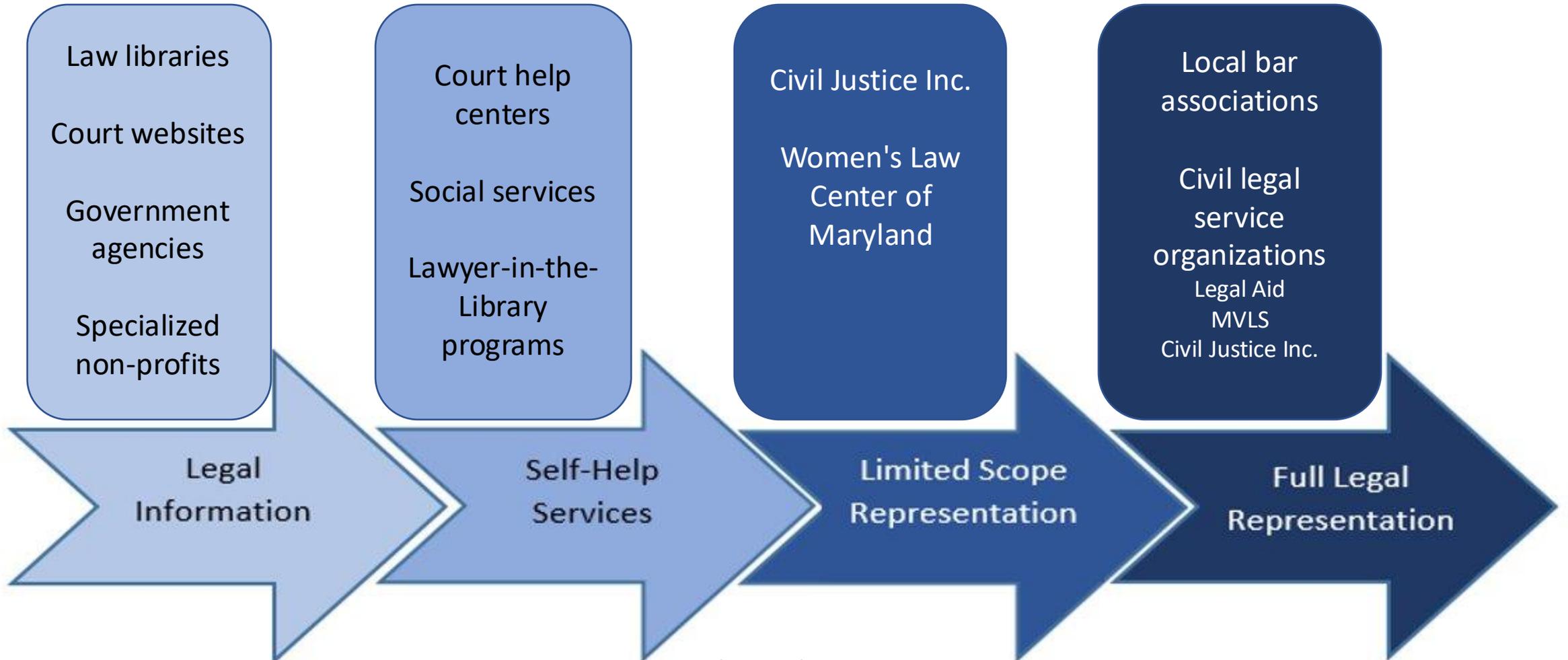
Local resources

Does your county have a local county law library?

1. Yes
2. No
3. I don't know

<https://mdcourts.gov/lawlib/using-library/for-librarians/maryland-law-libraries>

Sorting out referrals



Practice!

1. Find an organization or clinic that can help someone file for a modification of child custody.
2. Find your local bar association's lawyer referral number.

Join us for
more
Frontlines
this Spring!



Foundations of Law for Public Library Reference
March 18, 2026

[Link here](#)

Navigating the Law: Life & Health Planning
April 22, 2026

[Link here](#)





Questions?



Law on the Frontlines

A cooperative project advancing access to justice

mdcourts.gov/lawlib/using-library/for-librarians/legal-reference-training

Thurgood Marshall State Law Library

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Maryland Court & County Law Libraries

www.mdcourts.gov/ccll

Maryland Access to Justice Commission

www.mdaccesstojustice.org

Access to Justice Department,
Administrative Office of the Courts

www.mdcourts.gov/accesstojustice

Thank you for joining us today!