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## **Book Review: Helping Library Users with Legal Questions: Practical Advice for Research, Programming, and Outreach**

By Deborah A. Hamilton. Santa Barbara, California: Libraries Unlimited, 2021. ix + 193 pp. ISBN: 9781440872006. \$55.00

Reviewed by Agnes Gambill West, Assistant Professor and Head of Scholarly Communications, Appalachian State University

Deborah A. Hamilton's new book sheds light on the access to justice crisis in the American legal system and illustrates valuable strategies for how libraries can help. Hamilton's passion for assisting the public with research and discovery of legal information makes her well-suited to share practical advice for research, programming, and outreach related to legal information literacy. Hamilton's message to readers is clear: libraries can play a significant role in making the justice system more accessible and equitable by providing access to laws and legal information.

Hamilton's law librarian career began in 2014 at Pikes Peak Library District in Colorado. She has served as the president of the Colorado Association of Law Libraries and is currently a board director for a state nonprofit that provides pro bono and low-cost legal services and a member of the Access to Justice Committee for Colorado's Fourth Judicial District. Throughout the book, Hamilton emphasizes to readers the importance of not letting the subject area of law intimidate them. She also provides practical tips on how to best serve patrons, including how to interact with patrons who are under a great deal of stress because of their legal problems.

The book is split into two broad sections: the first half discusses how libraries can assist patrons with legal questions and the second half presents reliable legal resources to which librarians can guide patrons. Chapter One introduces the reader to the "justice gap" - the problem in the United States where the vast majority of low-income Americans who face legal problems receive inadequate or no legal help. This chapter lays the foundation for the thematic questions that the rest of the book addresses: namely, who are libraries serving, and why do patrons and the justice system need libraries?



Chapters Two and Three focus on practical strategies that libraries can employ when developing legal reference services. Chapter Two discusses staff training and explains why having a basic understanding of how the government is structured and how laws are created is an imperative first step in order to effectively explain the range of legal resources that are available during a legal reference interview. Because the scope of the law is so broad, staff training classes should focus on the specific topics of law on which a particular library receives the most questions. Chapter Three highlights the importance of partnering with organizations that may be already providing legal information and services to pro se (self-represented) litigants. The author goes into detail about how to identify and develop potential partnerships and how to design legal programming with partners. The author also provides helpful strategies to draw large crowds to library events.

In Chapter Four, the author describes the purpose and process of the legal reference interview. Legal reference interviews are different from typical reference interviews because they focus on helping the patron understand the process of locating and navigating resources, rather than finding a specific answer. The reason why legal reference interviews rely heavily on process rather than answering a patron's questions is that this helps librarians avoid the unauthorized practice of law, which is crucial, as individuals who are not licensed attorneys are prohibited from giving legal advice. Throughout the book, the author provides consistent reminders and clarifications about the distinction between legal information, which non-attorneys may provide, and legal advice. Hamilton also encourages libraries to adopt a legal reference service policy to protect their institution, employees, and patrons from any legal liability. A clear policy can also help set expectations with patrons as to limitations on the assistance that libraries can provide.

The remainder of the book consists of a comprehensive overview of the types of legal sources that are typically consulted for legal research questions. An array of secondary sources and primary sources that have been produced by the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government are outlined, including treatises, American Law Reports (ALR), executive orders, statutes, uniform laws, court rules, and court forms. The author also explains the difference between sources that are only persuasive and those that are binding. She also explains how to efficiently research commercial databases and both the print and digital versions of the Code

of Federal Regulations, which can prove to be complicated when determining whether a regulation is up-to-date.

Keeping in line with the book's practical approach, almost every chapter ends with a reference scenario involving dialogue between a patron and a librarian. Not only do these staged interactions prepare librarians how to answer difficult legal research questions, but the commentary also outlines what not to say, which can be even more important. Modeling these interactions will enable librarians to confidently and adequately address legal questions without giving legal advice. Many of the chapters also contain helpful tables of information, such as a step-by-step guide of the federal legislative process. The book is only ten chapters in length, is a quick read, and contains a 75 page Appendix of links to online resources. The electronic version of this book would be useful for quickly accessing these links.

Access to justice is also addressed with respect to collection development and library budgets. Because published legal resources can be expensive, the author offers strategies on how public libraries can address the challenge of obtaining access to credible materials and resources on a public library's budget. In particular, she recommends investing in law dictionaries, subscribing to Gale Legal Forms, and purchasing an affordable series of books that covers a wide range of legal topics, such as the Nutshell Series from West Academic. She also recommends purchasing and maintaining a copy of a library's state statutes if there is room in the budget. When possible, the author also details where patrons can find free and open access sources. More information on the emerging technology innovations in the legal tech industry, some of which are opening up access to legal information, would be a welcome addition to the book.

*Helping Library Users with Legal Questions* is particularly recommended for any public library that struggles to meet the needs of patrons who have legal questions, and is also recommended for law libraries and academic libraries at universities with undergraduate political science and criminal justice departments. Access to Justice commissions may be particularly interested in learning about the vital role that libraries play in local communities by providing pro se litigants and low-income Americans with understandable and accessible legal information. The practical nature of Hamilton's book stands out in the literature as being particularly useful for training staff and developing legal research programming and services. The book is

geared heavily towards Colorado law and Colorado-based legal initiatives, and for practical reasons, the book does not go into specifics about the law of other states. However, the Appendix does provide useful online legal resources that are categorized on a state-by-state basis. For those who are unfamiliar with legal collections or how to answer legal reference questions, it is recommended that these readers gain a basic primer on the different laws and government structure outlined in the second half of the book before diving into the earlier reference scenarios. Overall, Hamilton's book is an excellent and much-needed contribution to the practical literature on access to justice.