

# Equal Access

Volume 5, Issue 1, 2011

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## Lawyer In The Library At Contra Costa County

Two biproducts of our downturned economy are an increase in the number of self-represented litigants (SRL's) in California courts, and a decrease in the services available to assist such individuals. This has been extremely apparent in the bay area communities in Contra Costa County. Armed with a commitment to expanding services and striving to meet the needs of our users, especially the underserved, the Contra Costa County Public Law Library decided to offer a Lawyer in the Library clinic for unrepresented persons.

In researching this subject we learned that some law libraries and some general public libraries are offering such services. The first step was to contact libraries offering Lawyer in the Library and ask them to share information. We found our colleagues in both law libraries and general libraries to be quite generous in providing information, tips, handouts, etc. Contra Costa County Public Law Library has the good fortune to be governed by a very progressive board comprised of members who share staff's passion for expanding services as well as a strong commitment to assisting SRL's.

The most difficult aspect of setting up the program involved locating attorneys who were willing to volunteer their time. One problem is that attorneys who are inclined to volunteer their services are already involved in pro bono activities and are unable to take on additional responsibilities.

In January of 2010 the law library held its first Lawyer in the Library clinic. The clinic has now run for a full year, with a total of 182 attendees for the twelve months of 2010. This is an average of 15-16 attendees per month. We normally have 2-3 volunteer attorneys who spend an average of 15-20 minutes with each person, depending on the nature of the person's needs and the number of people waiting.

Lawyer in the Library meets the second Tuesday of every month in the law library's conference room. The only restriction is that attendees must be self-represented. If the person has an attorney, he or she is ineligible to be seen. There are no restrictions on the types of questions. The attorneys try to offer some type of response, regardless of the nature of the question.

Clinic attendees are told that the attorney will not become their lawyer, and that the clinic is intended to help them help themselves. They are also told that lawyer-client confidentiality does not apply. The attorneys work with library staff to assist the person in the best possible manner. Instead the attorney refers the individual to library staff to locate the book in question and find the information the person needs. Referrals are also made to the county bar association and to other sources of help. Staff compiled a looseleaf binder containing information about sources of legal information and help in the area. The attorneys have this resource at their fingertips while staffing the clinic.

The clinic works on a first come, first served basis. Participants are asked to sign a sign-in sheet as well as a Hold-Harmless Agreement. We also request that they complete a form indicating their zip code, the nature of their legal problem(s) or question(s), and an indication as to how the person learned about Lawyer in the Library.

Lawyer in the Library has been deemed a success by everyone connected to the program: library staff and trustees, the volunteer attorneys, and, most important of all, the patrons we serve. Clearly there was a serious need for such a clinic. We owe a very large and very special debt of gratitude to the Congress of Neutrals for helping make Lawyer in the Library both a reality and a success.

Newsletter of the Council  
of California County  
Law Librarians



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County Law  
Libraries

Open to the  
Public

Established in  
1891

Governed by a  
Board of  
Trustees

Funded by a  
Portion of Court  
Filing Fees

## Upcoming Workshops

### Kern

Guardianship Self Help Clinic-Getting Started, Objections, Fix Notes, Visitation, and Termination: Mondays (9:30-11:00 a.m.) & Tuesdays (10:30 a.m.- 12:00 p.m.)

Divorce Default Self Help Clinic-Getting Started, Objections, Checking Papers, & Fixing Pinks: Tuesdays & Thursdays (1:30 p.m.-3:00 p.m.)

Bankruptcy: 2nd Monday of each month (12:15 p.m.-1:15 p.m.)

How To Probate A Small Estate: 2nd Tuesday of each month (12:15 p.m. -1:15 p.m.)

Planning To Avoid Probate: 3rd Tuesday of each month (12:15 p.m. - 1:15 p.m.)

Family Law Workshop (Topics Vary): 2nd Wednesday of each month (12:15 p.m.-1:15 p.m.)

Employment Law Basics: 3rd Thursday of each month (11:30 a.m.-12:20 p.m.)

### Riverside

Family Law Workshop at Night: 1st Monday (Petition and Response Workshop) and Wednesday of each month (Default Judgment Workshop) (5:30 - 8:30 p.m.). Space is limited to 10 people

Sacramento *All workshops are held at the Sacramento County Public Law Library, 813 Sixth Street, Second Floor. Go to [www.saclaw.org](http://www.saclaw.org) to register using Visa or Master Card online.*

Unraveling the "Ribbon" In Microsoft Word 2007 for Legal Professionals: February 18 (1:30 p.m.-4:00 p.m.) \$75

Lexis II: February 22 (2:00-4:00p.m.)\$30

Microsoft Word 2007 for Legal Professionals:Advanced: February 25 (1:30 -4:00p.m.)\$75

Legal Research: Part A: California Statutes: February 26 (9:30 a.m.-12:00 Noon) \$15

San Mateo *(Noontime Lectures Series)*( All lectures begin at 12 noon and are free)

February 17: Income Tax of California Registered Domestic Partners

March 10: Consumer Rights

April 14: Planning For Loved Ones-Avoiding Probate & Minimizing Estate Taxes

May 19: Guardianship

June 9: Divorce Process: Filing to Final Judgment

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