Minnesota Statewide Law Library/Self-Help Center Project

Update on the MN project, by Holly, February 10, 2011

(Note from Laura: MN county law libraries are similar to Oregon and share the same problem, i.e., how to provide self-help/law library services equally and efficiently across the state, especially in rural areas.)

The MN Statewide Law Library Project started in 2008 as an extension of a pilot project, begun in 2001, in the 5th Judicial District.

The State Law Library took over the project in 2008 and made the project statewide following a workgroup’s recommendations. The workgroup, composed of Judges, District Administrators, state and county law librarians, lawyers, public librarians, and other interested parties, worked for 18 months. Currently, 25 out of 87 counties are members of the project.

The project has gone very well; there is a great sense of cooperation between the county and public libraries. Some counties have even lowered their filing fees as a result of the resource sharing. Now patrons who live outside the metro areas have the ability to access Westlaw both in their county law libraries and at their public libraries.

The counties pay a tiered fee to be a member of the network, based on their annual income. Currently, the State Law Library negotiates the 3-year Westlaw contract, and they are considering inviting Lexis to offer a 3 year bid this summer.

County law libraries were (and remain) independent entities with varying filing fees providing their funding. Some counties might charge a $5 law library fee for a traffic violation, while others might charge $18. So, the county law libraries often duplicated materials, served different populations, and had diverse funding amounts.

So, each county law library paid for Westlaw for both itself and its corresponding public library. There were 30 total participating libraries. The project also included a half-time, circuit riding librarian to travel to the libraries and ensure Westlaw was working and to train the public librarians on using Westlaw and providing legal reference services.

The public libraries did need to allocate space and staff time to the project, but they are able to create their own rules about Westlaw computer usage and are able to offer a valuable resource to their communities.

The 5th Judicial District Project traced its inception to an academic librarian. The Library Director from Southwest Minnesota State University was a prolific grant writer. He noticed how cooperative the public libraries were and thought perhaps that cooperation could extend to law libraries. Southwest Minnesota does not have fully-realized, staffed law libraries, unlike the metro areas, which do.

The 5th District project started with a $100,000 grant that mostly went to a negotiated Westlaw contract for all county law libraries and public libraries in the District, one dedicated computer for each library, and the technical support to set up the computers. The law libraries paid for the Westlaw subscriptions for all of the libraries.