

How Library Partnerships Can Help Close the Gap in Rural Access to Legal Services

By Stephanie M. Beaugh,
LSBA Access to Justice Department



Louisiana State Bar Association President Stephen I. Dwyer with the Louisiana Pro Bono Week proclamation.



Attorney Sheral C. Kellar and Ashley Clark, branch manager of the Zachary Branch Library.



Attorney C. Sherburne Sentell, Jr. and Hon. C. Sherburne Sentell III at Webster Parish Library.



Attorney Herman L. Bastian, Jr. and Shannon Kitchens, north Kenner Library staff, in Jefferson Parish.

New developments in projects from the Louisiana State Bar Association's (LSBA) Access to Justice Department are helping to both close the gap in access to civil legal services in rural parts of the state through partnerships with local libraries and address the lack of attorneys in areas where there are few in number. While the newest project of the LIFT Legal Incubator program — the Rural Justice Project¹ — supports new solo attorneys with offices in rural parts of the state to increase access to legal services, the LSBA's Lawyers in Libraries and Justice For All projects focus on bringing legal services and resources to those in need through their local libraries.²

Libraries are the perfect partners for the delivery of legal resources in rural areas for several reasons — most individuals have access to a community library, even individuals in smaller, more remote communities; library staff are often trusted members of the community who can promote awareness of the legal resources; and community members will often turn to their local libraries first for help when they have a legal issue that they don't know how to resolve.

Recognizing these qualities as opportunities, the LSBA Lawyers in Libraries program first held its annual week of service in October 2014 and has organized events with libraries every year since. Held

in conjunction with the American Bar Association's annual Celebrate Pro Bono Week, the program connects attorney volunteers with libraries across the state to provide brief Ask-a-Lawyer consultations and legal presentations to library patrons. Though the hope is for events to occur in all parishes in the state, this year, program organizers focused efforts in rural parishes to ensure that individuals with significant needs had the opportunity to meet with attorneys in their communities. As a result, 105 attorneys volunteered at more than 140 events across the state, 16 of which were located in rural communities, during Pro Bono Week (Oct. 24-29, 2022).

The 2022 Lawyers in Libraries program also featured two virtual-event types. The first, virtual Ask-a-Lawyer consultations — which match attorneys and patrons by phone — was a pandemic-era innovation that proved to be useful beyond the threat of the virus. The second online option was comprised of legal presentations livestreamed on Facebook by attorney volunteers, focusing on common legal issues such as tenants' rights, divorce and custody, estate planning, disability rights and successions. During this week, nearly 400 patrons were served by phone, and the Facebook webinars reached more than 650 viewers.

Leveraging the community integration driven by attorney-library partnerships, the LSBA Access to Justice Commission

also situated two Justice For All project solutions in libraries. Following the 2020 study which revealed the contours of Louisiana's civil legal resource deserts,³ the Commission researched nontraditional methods for bringing legal aid and resources to rural areas. The Commission elected to install "access points," conceived as a physical kiosk-like point located in a well-recognized community space, like a library, where community members could connect with legal aid offices and legal resources via phone and Internet. The placement of these access points in community spaces is important logistically. Internet access in rural areas historically has been unreliable or inaccessible for residents to get online resources in their homes. Also, librarians and staff can be trusted intermediaries, particularly in rural communities that may be tight-knit or internally self-reliant. They can help community members navigate a wide array of topics and questions. By developing relationships with libraries and working with staff to install access points, the project ensures that local champions can promote and support the resources to see that they actually get used.

In August 2022, the first two access points were unveiled — one at East Carroll Parish Lake Providence Branch Library and the other at the Concordia Parish Vidalia Branch Library. Adaptive to the needs and resources of each space, the Lake Providence access point takes



Kayla DiCarlo, Breanna Pearce and attorney Shereba Diaz at the Ouachita Parish Main Library in Monroe.



Attorney Sharita L. Spears at Audubon Regional Library in East Feliciana Parish.



Attorney Jonathan R. Hirsch in Vernon Parish Library.

the shape of a telephone booth-like pod, while a specially-designated library meeting room provides privacy for the Vidalia access point. In both cases, users have access to a computer where they can learn about their legal issue, see what legal aid programs they qualify for, complete forms, join a virtual meeting with an attorney, and in East Carroll, join a scheduled court hearing. A third access point opened on Jan. 25, 2023 in the LaSalle Community Action Association in Catahoula Parish.

To help promote the access points, the Justice For All project is working in partnership with the Lawyers in Libraries program by coordinating legal presentations in the libraries and online. Attorneys from Acadiana Legal Service Corp., the largest nonprofit provider of free civil legal aid in central and north Louisiana, have and will continue to give presentations via Zoom to patrons in libraries and online through Facebook Live events. These presentations, called “Law Talks,” cover popular legal topics as well as how to use the access points, and are livestreamed on the Lawyers in Libraries Facebook page. In this way, the Lawyers in Libraries program and the Justice For All project are working together to ensure that all Louisianans have access to civil legal resources.

The task of ensuring that rural citizens have the same access to legal help as their urban counterparts is a complex one that cannot be solved by Lawyers in Libraries or the Justice For All Project alone. Yet

the project stakeholders believe that by partnering with and building on existing, trusted community networks, including libraries and legal aid organizations, the work can begin to bring adequate services to this underreached population.

The LSBA would like to acknowledge and thank the people and organizations who have made these programs possible, including the LSBA members who volunteered in their communities; the pro bono agencies, local bar associations, private practitioners and legal service providers who helped to coordinate Lawyers in Libraries events in their parishes; the State Library of Louisiana, Louisiana Library Association, Law Library of Louisiana and countless dedicated staff of libraries across Louisiana who helped to coordinate and promote events throughout the state; Amanda Taylor, Concordia Parish Library director; Krishanda Sanders, East Carroll Parish Library director; and all supporters of the Justice For All Project, including the National Center for State Courts, Lagniappe Law Lab and the Louisiana Bar Foundation.

2022 Lawyers in Libraries Attorney Volunteers

Janeane G. Abbott
Lauren J. Anderson
Jason D. Asbill
Hailey A. Barnett
Herman L. Bastian, Jr.
Stephanie M. Beaugh

Jane L. Beebe
Troy N. Bell
Elena P. Branzaru
Andy Brister
Sophia D. Brown
Douglas L. Bryan
Lakethia B. Bryant
Qiana W. Bynum
Christopher T. Castro
Jules R. Cattie III
Alex D. Chapman, Jr.
Eugene P. Cicardo
Yasha L. Clark
Janet Madison Clemons
Danta L. Cobb
Amy Colby
Gwendolyn Collins-Greenup
Mariarenee Contreras
Jasmine C. Cooper
Keith M. Couture
Adolph B. Curet III
Jovontee J. Curlee
Monique I. Davis
Rachel M. Dayries
Carolyn D. Deal
April T. Duhe
Alan P. Dussouy
Chris Edmonds
Monique M. Edwards
Reed K. Ellis
Daniel L. Farris
Adele P. Faust
Michael C. Ginart, Jr.
Lewis M. Gladney
Eugene G. Gouaux, Jr.
Alycia Grace-Obear



Attorney Estefania L. Reichard and Andrea Alexander, head of public services at Ascension River Parishes Community College Library.



Attorney Colleen C. Jarrott and Sharon Kohl, branch manager of Rosa Keller Branch in Orleans Parish.



Attorney Ashley Johnson at West Baton Rouge Parish Library.

GeFranya M. Graham
Brad A. Guillory
Chareese D. Haile
Pamela D. Hall
Erin F. Hargrave
Kristina C. Harrison
Markita S. Hawkins
Jonathan R. Hirsch
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Walter P. McClatchey, Jr.
Rossanna R. McIlwain
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Daniel W. Nodurft
David C. Peltier
Cynthia M. Petry
Leah C. Poole
Ewell (Corky) Potts
Jessica L. Pulliam
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Megan M. Richardson
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Amber C. Sheppard
Maggie T. Simar
Matt Smith
Sharita L. Spears
Joshua L. Strickland
Matt Tillery
A. Scott Tillery
Adam J. Triplett
Peggy G. Vallejo
Allison R. Vidrine
Rachel T. Vogeltanz
Laurel I. White
Kathryn A. Wiley
Elizabeth Williams
Emily Wood

2022 Participating Libraries

Ascension Parish
Assumption Parish
Avoyelles Parish
Bossier Parish
Caddo Parish
Calcasieu Parish
Caldwell Parish
Catahoula Parish
Concordia Parish
East Baton Rouge Parish
East Carroll Parish
East Feliciana Parish
Evangeline Parish
Iberia Parish
Iberville Parish
Jackson Parish
Jefferson Parish

Lafayette Parish
Lafourche Parish
LaSalle Parish
Orleans Parish
Rapides Parish
St. Bernard Parish
St. Charles Parish
St. James Parish
St. Martin Parish
St. Mary Parish
St. Tammany Parish
Terrebonne Parish
Vermilion Parish
Vernon Parish
Webster Parish
West Baton Rouge Parish
West Carroll Parish

Anyone interested in learning more or getting involved in these projects should contact Stephanie M. Beaugh at stephanie.beaugh@lsba.org or (504)619-0106. To view the findings of the 2020 Justice For All study, visit: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/45fb46ed32854ab2b88a7e459f022068>.



Attorneys Daniel W. Nodurft, Keith M. Couture, Adele P. Faust, J. Van Robichaux and Ewell Potts III in St. Bernard Parish Library.

FOOTNOTES

1. The LSBA's LIFT Legal Incubator program supports new attorneys seeking to increase access to legal services to people with unmet legal needs. The Rural Justice Project, operated in partnership with Acadiana Legal Service Corp., focuses on increasing access to civil legal services in underserved, rural communities across the state by supporting the participating attorneys in going solo and providing them with free resources, training, mentorship and business development tools. www.lsba.org/LIFT.

2. For more information on the LSBA Access to Justice Commission's Justice for All Project, see "Mapping the Future of Justice for All" by Alainna R. Mire and Judge Lisa M. Woodruff-White, www.lsba.org/documents/publications/BarJournal/Journal-April0May-2021.pdf; and "On the Road to Justice for All: One Year Later" by Alainna R. Mire, www.lsba.org/documents/publications/BarJournal/Journal-April-May-2022.pdf.

3. *Id.*