Public Access to Legal Resources on the Internet

Alice M. McCanless
Clayton College & State University Library, alicemccanless@mail.clayton.edu

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Public Access to Legal Resources on the Internet

Alice M. McCanless

Alice M. McCanless is Reference Librarian
Clayton College & State University Library,
Morrow, GA. She can be contacted at
alicemccanless@mail.clayton.edu

In the not so distant past, before the Internet,
doing legal research necessitated access to
either a substantial law collection or one of the
expensive legal databases, Lexis-Nexis or
Westlaw. That limited legal reference to law
librarians, some special librarians and reference
librarians at large university or public libraries.
The Internet has changed all of that, giving any
library with an Internet connection access to a
wealth of current law, especially at the state and
federal level.

This article is based on a presentation at the
Joint Conference of the Georgia Council of
Media Organizations and Southeastern Library
Association on October 12, 2000. The purpose
was to present free legal web sites available
online in an organized manner. It included an
annotated outline of legal primary sources
divided into three sections, with a fourth section
for miscellaneous secondary legal materials,
such as dictionaries and directories. All of the
links provided are to free web sites, usually
maintained by government agencies or law
schools. The criteria for inclusion were that the
web sites be from a reliable source, such as a
law school and easy for the non-lawyer to use.
As with all sites on the Internet, there are no
guarantees that these addresses will be valid in
the future, but the great majority of them have
been stable over the past few years.

For those who are new to legal research or need
to update skills in this area, there are several
books on the topic, including the three titles
listed in the References below, by Coco, Cohen
and Olson. Also, state and local library
associations often offer workshops on how to do
legal research. For a more indepth outline,
check out "Legal Reference: An Annotated
Outline with Internet Links" at:
http://adminservices.clayton.edu/mccanless/legal.htm

Library personnel providing legal reference
must understand the unauthorized practice of
law (UPL.) A librarian may show a patron
where the legal materials or sites are and how to
use them. Beyond that, the patron needs to
decide on his or her own whether the laws they
find pertain to their information needs. An
attempt to interpret or explain a law constitutes
the unauthorized practice of law and may result
in the librarian being sued. However, guiding
the patron to a specific legal citation, with the
title, volume, page, etc., or finding it for them is
acceptable. For more information on UPL, the
article by Arant offers some guidelines.

I. LEGISLATIVE LAW - is passed by an
elected body, such as a legislature, board of
commissioners or council.

A. Federal - available online at Thomas
(http://thomas.loc.gov) the Library of
Congress site for U.S. Congress.
Contains laws made by the U.S.
Congress with input from the U.S.
President. A bill passes the House of
Representatives, then the Senate,
before being sent to the President.
The President may sign the bill into
law; or veto the bill, requiring a 2/3
Congressional vote to override the
veto; or do nothing for ten days, in
which case the bill becomes law
automatically unless Congress
adjourns during those ten days; then
the bill is automatically vetoed
(pocket veto.) These laws are
published as:

1. Slip Laws- the first official text of a
new law (online at Thomas.). They
are numbered chronologically, in the
order passed for each two-year
congressional session. Example:
Public Law 81-1 was the first law
passed by the 81st session of Congress.
2. **Statutes at Large** - bound slip laws 
(*online at Thomas*) for each session of Congress, published by the Government Printing Office (GPO.)

3. **United States Code (U.S.C.)** - 
([http://uscode.house.gov](http://uscode.house.gov) or 
[www.nsulaw.nova.edu/library/ushouse/16.htm](http://www.nsulaw.nova.edu/library/ushouse/16.htm)) public laws codified. The statutes are arranged by subject order, into 50 titles, which are divided into chapters and subdivided into sections.

B. **State** - follows a similar process to federal statutes and codes for most states. For example, in Georgia the legislative body is called the General Assembly, a bicameral body with a Senate and a House of Representatives.

1. **Statutes** –
([www.prairienet.org/~scruffy/f.htm](http://www.prairienet.org/~scruffy/f.htm) or 
[www.washlaw.edu/uslaw/statelaw.html](http://www.washlaw.edu/uslaw/statelaw.html))

2. **Uniform Laws** - laws proposed by the National Conference of Commissioners on the Uniform State Laws, 
([http://law.upenn.edu/bll/ule/ulc.htm](http://law.upenn.edu/bll/ule/ulc.htm)) which encourages all states to adopt uniform laws to promote uniform legislation on certain topics.


C. **City and County** - check with city or county clerk.

III. **CASE LAW** is the opinion or decision of a court. The decision is the final result of the court trial. The judicial branch interprets or construes the laws made by the legislative and executive branches. To decide a case, judges abide by the decisions made by previous courts, either in their jurisdiction or a superior jurisdiction. This is called "stare decisis" and is the basis of our common, or case law.

A. **Federal**
([http://serv5.law.emory.edu/FEDCTS/](http://serv5.law.emory.edu/FEDCTS/))

   1. **U.S. Supreme Court** – “court of last” the Supreme Court is the final court of appeals in the United States. As the final arbiter of interpreting the Constitution, it decides less then 100 cases a year, leaving the final appeals of many issues to the federal and state appeal courts.

   2. **U.S. District & Circuit Courts** - have a limited jurisdiction that includes the interpretation of the U.S. Constitution and the federal statutes, or cases that involve citizens from different states.

B. **State Courts**
([http://guide.lp.findlaw.com/11stategov/](http://guide.lp.findlaw.com/11stategov/)) - interpret state law. Trial courts are the first level and depending upon the state, there are one or more levels of appellate courts. The courts go by different names in different states; for example, in New York the general trial court is called the Supreme Court. The decisions of many state appellate courts can be found online but currently it is less common to find trial court decisions online.
IV. SECONDARY ONLINE LEGAL RESOURCES - the online resources listed below are limited and cannot replace the commercial subscriptions available via Lexis-Nexis, Westlaw, etc. but, they do provide free, public access to some useful resources.

A. Legal Periodicals - law reviews and professional legal journals

http://www.usc.edu/dept/law-lib/legal/journals.html

1. Contents Pages from Law Reviews, etc. [http://tarlton.law.utexas.edu/tallons/content_search.html] updated daily, this keyword-searchable database contains the tables of contents of more than 750 law reviews and journals in the University of Texas Law School's Tarlton Law Library Collection, current three months only.

2. Legal Periodicals - [http://stu.findlaw.com/journals/] Electronic full text of a few law reviews and other scholarly or professional publications that pertain to law.

3. Basic Legal Citation, 2000-2001 - aka the "Bluebook" [http://www.law.cornell.edu/citation/citationutable.html] the standard for how to cite legal resources.

B. Dictionaries - Online legal dictionaries are country specific. For example, the legal term "voir dire" is defined differently in Canada than the United States, so it is important to verify the online legal dictionary's country of origin.


C. Lawyers.com [http://www.lawyers.com/] offers the layperson an online version of the Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory to help the consumer to find a lawyer, learn about the law and what legal options are available.

While the Internet enables the library with few legal materials to access a multitude of free legal resources, it is not a replacement for a law library. The Internet is a good starting place for legal research; there are three general sites you may want to check out. **American Law Sources Online** [www.lawsoure.com/also] describes itself as "a comprehensive, uniform, and useful compilation of links to freely accessible on-line sources of law for the United States, Canada, and Mexico." Helpful features on this site are the tutorials for first time users.

**First Gov** [http://firstgov.gov] is another, "one-stop" starting point for federal government sites, including legal. A nice feature is that it includes links to state sites as well, so that a search for "code" in the state of Georgia resulted in a link to Georgia's Official Code - Unannotated. **Findlaw** [http://findlaw.com] is probably the most known of the three, having been around for several years. At one time it was unwieldy to use, but this site has evolved to become user friendly and easy to maneuver. Findlaw is a good example of how sites on the Internet continue to evolve, with better content and newer navigation aides. As exciting as these developments are though, they cannot replace the fact that there will always be situations that require a legal professional. For times like these it is a good idea to have the phone numbers of groups, such as the local bar association, that offer a lawyer referral service.
References


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