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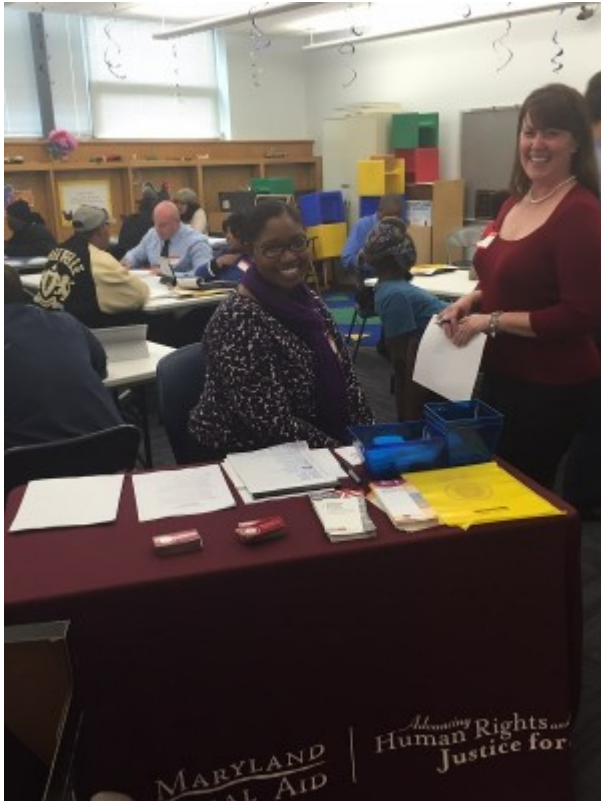


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Enoch Pratt Free Library Brings Lawyers to the Library

by [Jennifer A. Dixon](#)

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Maryland Legal Aid volunteers at Enoch Pratt Free Library

Photo credit: Melanie Townsend-Diggs

Since late summer 2015, Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library (EPFL) has offered its patrons a unique service: through the new "Lawyer in the Library" program, community members may receive free legal advice from Maryland Legal Aid (MLA) attorneys. When the city of Baltimore erupted in protests in April 2015, following the death of Freddie Gray in police custody, the Pennsylvania Avenue branch of EPFL, at the intersection of Pennsylvania and North Avenues, was at the epicenter of the unrest. In spite of the violence and destruction of the protests, the branch remained open and provided a safe space for community members. According to Benjamin Rosenberg, vice chair of the board of EPFL and former cochair of the Equal Justice Council (a private organization that raises funds for the MLA), the service provided by the library during the unrest offered a "little island of serenity and hope at the corner of North and Pennsylvania." Demonstrating the positive role that the library could play in serving its community, explained Rosenberg, set the stage for the Lawyer in the Library program. Shortly after the protests died down, Rosenberg received a phone call from Gustava Taler, chief operating officer of MLA, proposing a program through which legal aid attorneys could offer their services to

underserved patrons on site at EPFL. Rosenberg responded enthusiastically and immediately contacted Carla Hayden, chief executive officer of EPFL, who also embraced the idea. Within weeks, a task force of EPFL and MLA staffers had been assembled, and the Lawyer in the Library program was implemented shortly thereafter. “To try to get something like that started from scratch and to have it become a reality in such a short period of time will tell you everything you need to know” about the value of the program, Rosenberg told *LJ*.

ADVICE AND CONSULTATION

The program started in July and August with three presentations led by MLA attorneys about civil legal issues relevant to the local community: housing and landlord/tenant law (eviction, foreclosure, habitability); government benefits (Social Security disability, medical benefits); and family law (divorce, child custody, child and spousal support). In addition to gaining a basic overview of the law on these topics, attendees had the opportunity to ask questions of the MLA presenters. One-on-one consultation sessions began on September 1. Currently, every Tuesday from 1–3 p.m. MLA attorneys, paralegals, law students, and volunteer lawyers are present at the Pennsylvania Avenue branch. Five to six attorneys are available on a given afternoon to offer individual consultations on civil legal matters (MLA does not handle criminal matters, and patrons with criminal law questions will be referred to a legal service that can assist them). Appointments are not required, and patrons receive legal assistance on a first-come, first-served basis. MLA staffers greet and conduct an initial intake interview of each attendee to determine and document their particular needs. The patron is then directed to the attorney who can best address those needs—different volunteer attorneys have different specialties, including landlord/tenant law, family law, and tax law. According to Amy Petkovesk, MLA project manager for the Lawyer in the Library project, the most common legal concerns handled are child custody and public housing. The patron receives approximately 20 minutes of legal advice. If the patron’s issue is not the type of case that MLA would typically take—for example, a medical malpractice case—the consulting attorney will refer the patron to a legal service that can assist them. If it is a case that MLA can accept, the patron is directed to an intake station where they are assigned an attorney who will see their case through. Roughly 20 patrons receive legal assistance on an average Tuesday. In addition, on one Saturday afternoon per month approximately 15 volunteer attorneys are present at the Pennsylvania Avenue branch for clinics to help attendees expunge court and police records—a process that permanently removes criminal records from public access. A 2015 change in Maryland law expanded the types of records eligible for expungement—typically police and court records reflecting criminal charges that did not result in a guilty conviction. There is a “great need” for legal assistance in navigating the new law and determining what may be expunged, said Petkovesk. Patrons who are financially eligible for legal aid services may have their expungement petitions handled for free, and patrons over the legal aid income barrier will receive guidance on their eligibility and how to file a petition on their own. “The concept of expungement of a criminal record is extremely important to somebody who just has a minor

infraction on their record and cannot get a job because of it,” explained Rosenberg. The initiative assists people “who qualify for expungement of their records but do not know how to participate in the process,” he said. Because of the large number of volunteer attorneys present at the monthly clinics, according to Petkovesk, many patrons may be assisted in a short time period. The expungement program has “been taking off like wildfire,” said Pennsylvania Avenue branch manager Melanie Townsend-Diggs—the library has received phone calls from individuals wanting to participate from as far away as North Carolina.

COMMUNITY SERVICE

“The community has really embraced” the Lawyer in the Library program, Townsend-Diggs told *LJ*. “They come in [to the library] asking about it, wanting to know when the lawyers are going to be here. I think they appreciate being heard, [and] that they aren’t getting turned away.” In addition to the in-person clinics, legal aid publications on various topics are available in the library lobby for patrons seeking basic background information. Library staff are the “disseminators of information” on the program, said Townsend-Diggs, ensuring that patrons are aware of the services available to them. One thing that is crucial about the Lawyer in the Library program, said Townsend-Diggs, is that there are “no barriers that would deter someone from getting a legal consultation.” Because these clinics are held at a public library, she said, “anyone coming in the door is able to get assistance.” The provision of free legal services at the Pennsylvania Avenue branch also benefits patrons who might be unable to travel to the downtown Baltimore office of MLA. As Rosenberg described it, “when you’re talking about people who are poor, in many cases disabled, or dependent almost entirely on public transportation, just to get to the legal aid bureau to have an interview with a legal aid lawyer is in some cases impossible.” The Lawyer in the Library program, in effect, brings the attorneys to the clients. According to Petkovesk, “for clients...already dealing with a lot of external challenges, this makes it a lot easier for them to get the help they need.”

A HELPING TREND

The Lawyer in the Library program at the EPFL is part of a growing trend—according to a [recent report](#) in the *American Bar Association Journal*, approximately a dozen public libraries host “Law in the Library” programs to offer accessible legal aid to underserved patrons. According to Hayden the partnership between EPFL and the MLA highlights the importance of collaboration and the opportunity for libraries to provide resources “in a different way.” Libraries “don’t always have to be direct service providers,” she said, and can instead participate in social services partnerships and serve as a venue to facilitate helpful community services. Looking beyond Pennsylvania Avenue, in fall 2015 MLA hosted an evening legal clinic at the Waverly branch of EPFL. According to Petkovesk, MLA is currently “looking to do other clinics at other libraries around the state,” including one in western Maryland in April 2016. Of plans to expand the Lawyer in the Library program to additional time slots or library branches, Hayden said that the

only limitation is the number of volunteer legal professionals available to offer their time to library patrons.

Enoch Pratt Free Library
