

Maine State Law and Legislative Reference Library

By John Barden

The Law and Legislative Reference Library in Augusta is one of the nonpartisan offices of the Maine State Legislature. Its primary mission is to ensure that Maine's legislators have access to the resources they need to make informed decisions on the matters before them. Beyond that, it serves the legal information needs of the Judicial Branch, Executive Branch agencies, and the citizens of Maine.

Maine's state collection of legal materials dates back to 1839 when the legislature established the Maine State Library to build a comprehensive law library and collect books about the state's history and people. The State Library was housed in various rooms of the State House until 1971, when it moved to a newly constructed cultural building. At the same time, the Law Department of the State Library was reconstituted as the Law and Legislative Reference Library and remained in the State Library's old quarters on the second floor of the State House, its present home.

The Law and Legislative Reference Library ("Law Library," for short—the full name is a tongue-twister) is the official state law library, and the director serves as state law librarian. There are presently 13 staff members: six professional and seven paraprofessional/administrative. Several of the staff have been here more than 20 years, and their experience is a major reason for the Law Library's success in meeting its mission.

There are approximately 109,000 volumes in the collection, including many rare and unique items from the early history of the state, as well as the usual array of treatises, law journals, and codes. We are the only federal depository library in Maine's capital region. We maintain comprehensive files of Maine's session laws, revised statutes (i.e., codes), legislative documents (i.e., bills), journals of proceedings, and debates. Our collection of committee files, including copies of committee testimony, dates back to the early 1980s. One of the hallmark collections is the clippings file, going back to the 1960s, containing newspaper articles on legislation, legislators, and matters affecting the legislative process.

Our website has been a major vehicle for reaching out to the public across the state. We feature a "What Is Maine's Law On..." section that enables people to bypass the reference desk for frequently asked questions. Even more popular are the pages that we add on hot topics such as Maine's evolving medical marijuana law, the statewide building code, and of course, the state budget.¹

We are regularly called upon to provide legislative and statutory histories, which we do not only for legislators and legislative offices but for the courts, members of the Bar, and indeed, for any citizen who requests it. In line with our mission to serve the public, we field reference calls and emails from many citizens and try to connect them with primary legal information that will answer their needs. Many patrons contact us through the "Ask a Law Librarian" reference request form on our web site. We respond to approximately 500 reference requests per month.

The biggest change in our operations in the past few years has been greater intentionality with respect to digitized resources. In the past, we routinely scanned bills, laws, debate, committee files and discarded the files once the materials had been delivered to the persons who requested them. We were frequently scanning the same materials over and over again. About three years ago we developed scanning standards for various resources and started "banking" our scans for reuse. We are also scanning entire runs of heavily requested materials in anticipation of need. The result is a higher-quality electronic product that is often already available when the request is received. We now have more than 1.3 million pages scanned. Recently we

finished digitizing the entire Laws of Maine back to 1820. We are now scanning the Legislative Record, containing legislative debate back to 1897.

We are currently preparing an interface to make many of these scanned materials available to the public on the Internet. At the same time we are preserving and protecting our unique collection of Maine legislative materials. Feedback on our modest efforts thus far has been tremendous, and we have noted with pleasure the enthusiasm with which the legislature and our other patrons are receiving the results. 🐟

ENDNOTES

1. More information about the Law and Legislative Reference Library may be found at www.maine.gov/legis/lawlib/ or by calling the library at (207) 287-1600 and asking for the reference desk.



John Barden has been director of the Maine State Law and Legislative Reference Library and state law librarian since January 2008. He was formerly head of reference at the William Taylor Muse Law Library, University of Richmond School of Law.