Reference Report

Reference statistics are reviewed annually to examine details of interactions between Library reference staff and Library patrons. The resulting information may be used to modify reference response procedures, desk staffing schedules, and other elements of the Library's reference assistance provision.

The Reference Report examines only direct interactions between reference staff members and patrons, meaning instances when a patron contacts the Library with a question related to legal information, resources, or research ("information interaction"). The Report does not touch upon other avenues of patron/library contact, such as website or database use, or educational programs offered by the Library. Nor does the Report include information about Library visitors who do not interact with staff. The Report should not, therefore, be considered a full picture of all Library staff activity and workflow.

Information on overall Library activity during the fiscal year is available in the Library's *Annual Highlights*.

Services

The Library provides reference and research assistance to Maryland Judiciary judges and staff, attorneys, librarians, government agencies, students, and members of the general public, including self-represented litigants (SRLs), correctional facility residents, and others in search of legal information for many purposes. Patrons are mainly either Maryland residents or have a question about Maryland law.

Reference staff communicate with patrons through in-person visits, telephone, email, regular mail, and chat follow-up through the Library's partnership with the Maryland AskUsNow! 24/7 chat reference cooperative.
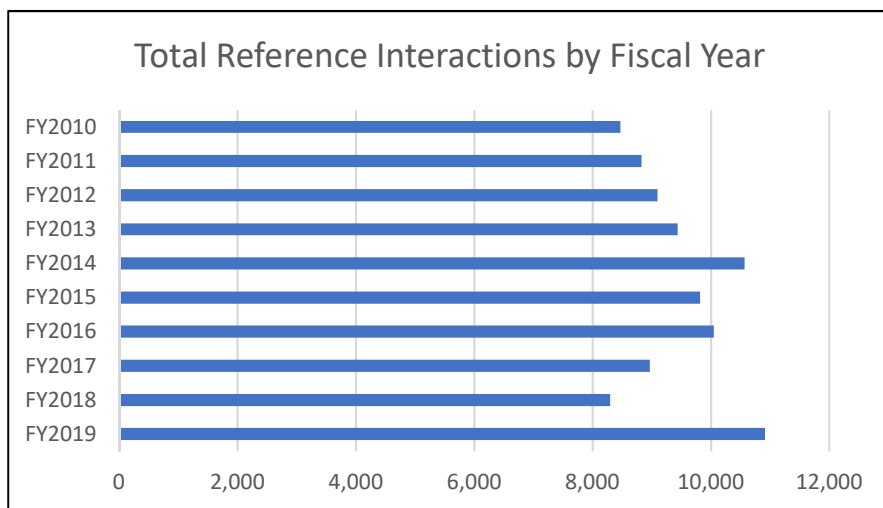
Interactions with patrons range from brief directional questions to lengthy research queries. Staff assist through provision of informational materials, instructional assistance, and evaluation of resources. Reference staff adhere to Library guidelines for reference provision, including the *Guidelines for Legal Information Service to the Public* and the *Guidelines for E-Mail Reference Services*.

Statistical Summary

Patron query statistics are tracked through categories based on those recommended by the Conference of Maryland Court Law Library Directors (CMCLLD). These include format, location of inquiry, patron category, question type, and duration for each interaction. Pre-set tags help record additional details of interest, such as referrals to the Maryland Courts Self-Help Center or usage by pro bono service providers.

Reference staff recorded a total of 10,914 reference interactions during FY2019, an increase of 31% from FY2018.

Fiscal Year	% Change from Prior Year
FY2019	31%
FY2018	-7%
FY2017	-11%
FY2016	2%
FY2015	-9%
FY2014	12%
FY2013	4%
FY2012	3%
FY2011	4%
FY2010	xx

Total Reference Interactions by Fiscal Year

The rise in the number of interactions may be due in large part to the addition, at the end of August 2018, of an "Ask a Maryland Law Librarian" button to the website of the People's Law Library of Maryland.

ASK A MARYLAND LAW LIBRARIAN

Submit a legal information question to the Thurgood Marshall State Law Library

CLICK HERE

Patron Characteristics

The Library's patrons include the Maryland Judiciary (judges, law clerks, staff), the Bar (private and pro bono attorneys, law firm staff and paralegals), government agencies, and the public (self-represented litigants, students, historians, genealogists, general legal researchers, and staff from public libraries). Patron type information is gathered for all inquiries using the Gimlet system. Prior to FY2019, detailed patron characteristics were gathered for in-person, telephone, and letter inquiries. Emails were counted as completed number, but specific characteristics were not recorded. Statistics from the in-person, telephone, and letter inquiries, were used to extrapolate and estimate a picture of full activity. Beginning in October 2018, staff began recording all email interactions on the Gimlet system, for a more streamlined and accurate reflection of Library workload.

Patron Category	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018	FY2019
Public	51%	58%	61%	61%	63%	66%	77%
Judiciary	19%	15%	15%	14%	13%	12%	9%
Bar	19%	17%	14%	13%	13%	13%	7%
Student	9%	6%	5%	6%	5%	3%	2%
Library	2%	3%	2%	3%	3%	3%	2%
Government	n/a	2%	2%	3%	3%	3%	3%

Any patron not recognizable as Judiciary, Bar, Student, Library, or Government is categorized as "Public."

The percentage of inquiries from public patrons increased, continuing the rise from prior fiscal years. From a service perspective, this is notable because Library staff often need to take additional effort and

time to explain concepts and processes to patrons with no legal background. The higher the proportion of "public" patrons, the more time and effort is required of staff while at the reference desk.

The percentage of interactions from the Judiciary, reflected in a 9% of overall interactions, which on the surface looks like a decrease in library-related activity, does not in fact mean less activity. As patron category was not recorded for emails received prior to October 1, 2018, it is not possible to judge what change there might be. In addition, Judiciary staff use library resources through other avenues, including the intranet, where they can access databases and other support materials. Information on such usage is not collected in the statistics reported here.

Reference and Research Questions

Questions received by the Library run from quick inquires ("ready reference") to requests for lengthy research assistance, and cover a wide range of law-related topics. Some samples of questions received in FY2019 include:

- What is the state policy for housing the homeless when temperatures are below 32F?
- Is there a maximum percentage increase for rent in assisted units under Section 8 or the Shelter Plus Care Housing Program?
- What form do I need to file to correct a clerical error in a court order?
- What is the law concerning publication of a death in a local paper?
- Can a homeowners association enter an empty, foreclosed house in the community to mitigate water and mold damage?
- What is the statute of limitations for unauthorized use of a vehicle?
- How and where do I research decisions on alimony for high net-worth couples?
- What is the law on using security cameras in rental unit of an apartment building?
- Do I have a cause of action against someone who has posted false information about me on social media?
- What is the process for changing a name and updating the gender marker on a Maryland birth certificate?
- What is the process to remove an HOA board member?
- What is the law about pet deposits for emotional support animals?
- What is the law on ownership rights of burial plots?
- Can a landlord assess late fees for housing in a HUD subsidized program?
- How do I correct an erroneous report of eviction on my credit report?
- What is the process to change the personal representative following the death of the testator?
- What options are there for managing damage from a falling tree?
- Will my child, who has autism and will be attending high school until age 21, continue to receive child support from the father?
- What is Maryland law pertaining to keeping chickens?
- How long do I have to file a false advertisement complaint in Maryland?
- I need information about the discovery process.
- Where can I get a form for a separation agreement?
- Is my neighbor responsible for removal of bamboo overgrowth from his property onto mine?
- How do I file for absolute divorce?
- How do I get my bank account released from garnishment?

- What are the circumstances under which I can return a purchased car under the Maryland Lemon Law?
- How do I handle service of process for someone who is out of the country?

Statistics on received questions help to identify staff time and numbers needed to handle inquiries, as well as the type of assistance required to address the inquiries.

Question Duration

The Library has categorized the duration of questions (length of time required to complete) since FY2014. Over the six years of measurement, interactions categories as "brief", taking only a few minutes to complete, have dropped 23%. The drop in "brief" question between FY2014 to FY2018 was almost 10%; and from FY2018 to FY2019, 13%.

In contrast, interactions in the 16- to 30-minute category, which remained essentially static (9%-11%) between FY2014 and FY2018, jumped 18% over the last fiscal year. These numbers are even more significant when translated into work impact on reference desk staff. A ten-percent rise in brief questions over a year of 10,000 questions is 83 hours of workload; a ten-percent rise in 30-minute questions over a year of 10,000 questions is 500 hours of workload.

Minutes	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018	FY2019
0 to 5	62%	60%	54%	49%	53%	39%
6 to 15	26%	27%	30%	35%	32%	35%
16 to 30	9%	9%	10%	11%	9%	18%
31 to 60	2%	3%	4%	4%	4%	7%
60+	1%	1%	2%	1%	2%	1%

Comparing FY2019 to five years ago (FY2014), numbers have clearly shifted to longer timeframes. Questions are, on average, taking longer to complete. Common understanding of the reference staff is that questions are becoming more complex, most likely due to wide availability of free legal information, particularly from websites like the People's Law Library and the Maryland Judiciary website, and legal assistance clinics, like Lawyer in the Library programs and Self-Help Centers. People are able to find basic information on their own, and turn to the library when they have more complicated questions This results in lengthier (on average) interactions with Library staff.

Patron Communication Methods

The Library makes its reference services available via several communication methods. Of significance in FY2019, email interactions, which annually increase both overall and as a percentage of the overall numbers, continued the upward trend, comprising 55% in FY2019 of all incoming interactions (up from 47% of incoming interactions in FY2018).

Question Format	FY2011	FY2012	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018	FY2019
Telephone	33%	27%	23%	25%	23%	21%	21%	23%	21%
In Person	35%	35%	35%	29%	26%	25%	25%	24%	21%
Email	30%	34%	39%	41%	46%	47%	46%	47%	55%
Chat	1%	3%	2%	4%	4%	3%	3%	1%	<1%
Letters	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%
Interlibrary Loan	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	3%	4%	3%	2%

Conclusion

The Library continues to see growth in the workload dedicated to interactions with the public. The investment of effort in addressing questions from a segment of the population largely uninformed about legal concepts and processes contributes significantly to staff workload.

In summary, Fiscal Year 2019 saw the following notable activity:

- The percentage of public interactions rose once again, from 51% (FY2013) to 77% (FY2019);

- The overall duration of interactions increased, reflected mainly in the decreased percentage of brief (0-5 minute) interactions, from 62% (FY2014) to 39% (FY2019);

- The percentage of interactions received by email continued to rise, from 30% (FY2011) to 55% (FY2019).

- Staff recorded almost 11,000 interactions in FY2019, an increase in reference desk workload of 31% from FY2018.