

CONTRA COSTA LAWYER

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"There 's nothing
stronger than the heart
of a volunteer"
-Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle

Pro Bono & Non Profits



Contra Costa Public Law Library: 130 Years of Serving the Public and the Bar

photo courtesy of the Martinez Historical Society

By Joshua Klein

In 1891, California's Legislature passed a statute establishing public law libraries in each of the state's counties.¹ By law, each library exists for the "free" examination of books and other publications on the law, not only by governmental officials and members of the bar, but by "all residents of the county."² That framework recognizes that, in a society based on the rule of law, access to legal materials is vital not only for members of the legal profession but for all who need to know and protect their rights. In the 130 years since its founding, the Contra Costa County Public Law Library has evolved to meet the developing needs of the legal profession and the public.

Library Resources in Martinez and Richmond

The main branch, in Martinez, is open five days a week. It features a comprehensive collection on California law as well as key resources on federal law. Primary and secondary material for the other 49 states is also available. A satellite branch, located in the Richmond courthouse, is open three days a week, with a smaller but still substantial collection. (When needed, library staff can also arrange for certain Martinez materials to be made available for patrons to use in Richmond.)

The library's staff of eight is headed by librarian Carey Rowan. Rowan,

who holds a Master of Library Science degree from the University of Southern California, originally worked in public libraries in southern California. In 2003, however, she returned to Solano County, where she had originally grown up, to serve as that county's public law librarian. She moved to the Contra Costa County Public Law Library in 2008. Library staff field about 240 information requests per day from in-person patrons, phone calls, and email. Dean Barbieri, the former dean of JFK University Law School, who also served for years as a Library Trustee, says he has always been extremely impressed with "the quality of knowledge of the library's staff." Rowan, for her part, describes the staff as "the best," stressing that they work together to aid the many people who seek their assistance.

Each day, about 100 patrons visit the library's branches. In-person visitors can take advantage of the 45,000 printed volumes and more than 300 CD-Roms. They use the on-site Westlaw to locate cases, statutes, secondary sources, and templates for drafting legal documents. Secondary legal material and templates for drafting forms can also be accessed through CEB OnLaw at the library. Visitors can obtain an account that can be used remotely to access the Lexis Digital Library and Matthew Bender treatises.

The Library's website contains a wealth of information, including a Q&A section dedicated to conservatorships. The online catalog allows users to identify available resources remotely before they visit. The library also offers online training for those who will be required to submit court accountings. Both onsite and offsite services are free, except for small fees for those who use the copiers and printers or faxing services.

Carey Rowan left, leads a tour of the Public Law Library in Martinez.



Services for Unrepresented Litigants

Many of the library's visitors are non-lawyers seeking information and help because they are involved in proceedings concerning family law, landlord/tenant disputes, domestic violence restraining orders, conservatorship, guardianship, minor emancipation, or general civil litigation. The library also frequently sees non-lawyer patrons who are dealing with estate planning, elder abuse, and name-change issues.

Barbieri describes this "pro bono service to the community" as central to the institution. Library staff do not provide legal advice. (Those requiring such advice are referred to the Contra Costa County Bar Association's Lawyer Referral Service.) Instead, library staff identifies appropriate resources to allow people to help themselves — such as form-books, templates, or laypersons' guides. Librarian Rowan emphasizes that the library's staff consists of "empathetic listeners" who are frequently called upon to help those in crisis—such as people who urgently need legal authority to oversee the medical care of a suddenly-ill family member; who need to settle the estate of a deceased relative; or who face impending homelessness due to a housing dispute.

Services for Lawyers

Of course, lawyers also benefit from the library's services. According to Rowan, solo and small-firm practitioners find remote access to Lexis treatises to be an especially valuable service. Free onsite resources such as judicial profiles, case reporters, and electronic databases can be useful for those trying to keep costs down, or for whom an unexpected issue comes up while at the courthouse. And of course, input from library staff can lead to quicker and more effective research for any attorney—a useful result to demonstrate to clients and colleagues alike.

Lawyer in the Library

One of the library's noteworthy services is its *Lawyer in the Library* program, in which licensed lawyers volunteer for in-person pro bono consultations. Library patrons sign up in advance for a consultation, fill out a form, and provide relevant documents to the library, which sends them in advance to the volunteer attorney. Attorney Steven Piser calls his monthly volunteer sessions at the Richmond branch, "the most gratifying part of my practice, in some respects." Judge Lewis Davis, a formerly active member of the Superior Court who retired in 2022, has described Lawyer in the Library as a "valuable resource" for

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the community. Librarian Rowan concurs. She says that she would love to expand the program, and that attorneys interested in volunteering for the program should contact her at the library's main number.

Joshua Klein is an attorney in California and a Trustee of the Contra Costa Public Law Library. This article is written in his personal capacity and does not represent the views of his employer or the Library.

1. Stats. 1891, ch. 225, pp. 430-433.

2. Bus. & Prof. Code § 6360, subd. (a).

Contra Costa Public Law Library

<http://cccpllib.org/>

Main Library (Martinez):

A. F. Bray Courts Building,
1020 Ward Street, 1st Floor, Martinez, CA 94553
(925) 646-2783

Richmond Branch:

David Del Simone Memorial Law Library,
Superior Court Building,
100 37th Street, Room 237,
Richmond, CA 94805
(510) 374-3019

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