

# Three Good Reasons for a Lawyer to Visit the People's Law Library (PLL)

*PLL is the Maryland Judiciary's primary method of providing legal information and referral assistance to self-represented litigants.*

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Maryland People's Law Library (PLL) website. The browser address bar displays "www.peoples-law.org". The website header includes the title "The Maryland People's Law Library | Law-related self-help information for Marylanders - Mozilla Firefox" and a search bar. The main content area is organized into several columns. On the left, there is a sidebar with "Editor Login" and "How Do I" options such as "Evaluate My Situation", "Find Alternatives to Court", "Find Court and Legal Forms", "Research the Law", "File a Case", "Prepare for My Day in Court", and "Appeal or Enforce a Decision". Below this is a "Get Help" section with links for "Legal Clinic Calendar", "Legal Services Directory", and language options: "Español", "Français", "简体中文", "한국어", and "Non-English Help". The main content area features a grid of legal topics: "Consumer" (Automobiles, Bankruptcy, Contracts, Credit: Debts & Loans, Identity Theft, more), "Criminal" (Defendant's Rights, Expungement, Filing Charges, Victim's Rights), "Domestic Violence" (Definitions of Abuse, Legal Options, Non-Legal Support, Safety Issues), "Education" (Discipline, Enrollment & Registration, Home School), "Employment" (Discrimination, Pension Issues, Unemployment Benefits, Workers Compensation, Working Conditions, more), "Family Law" (Adoption, Annulment, Birth Certificates, Child Abuse/Neglect, Child Support, more), "Government Benefits & Services" (Disability Services, Food Programs, Income Assistance, Medical Benefits, Social Security, more), "Health" (Advance Directives, Alcoholism/Substance Abuse, Disability Law, Insurance, Medicaid/Medicare, more), "Housing" (Homeownership, Long-term Care, Landlord/Tenant, Homelessness), "Motor Vehicles" (Licenses, DWI, Traffic Court), "Senior Citizens" (Discrimination Issues, Nursing Homes/Assisted Living, Pensions, Social Security Benefits, Wills/Estates/Probate, more), "Wills/Estates/Probate" (Advance Directives, Estate Administration & Probate, Powers of Attorney, Trusts, Wills, more), "Youth Law" (Child Abuse, Criminal Law, Custody, Emancipation, Employment, more), and "Other Legal Issues" (Civil Rights, Immigration, Land Records, Maryland Small Business, Personal Injury, more). On the right side, there is a "Legal self-help information for Marylanders." banner with images of diverse people, an "Ask Us Now!" section stating "Law Librarians are available live Tuesdays 9-11 am & Tuesdays & Thursdays, 2-4pm. Send an email for a response from a reference librarian at the State Law Library.", a "District Court Help (for civil cases)" section with a "Live Help" button and "Start Chat" link, and a "Featured Content" section listing articles like "Filing a Motion in a Maryland Circuit Court", "Defamation Law in Maryland", "Steps to Record a Maryland Real Estate Deed", "Tutorial: Reading the Maryland Rules on Westlaw", and "MD Code and Rules on Westlaw". At the bottom, there is a "ShareThis" button and a footer with the website name "peoples-law.org" and navigation links for "MD Judiciary", "State Law Library", "Court of Appeals", "Court of Special Appeals", "Circuit Court", and "District Court".

*This article originally appeared in the August 2014 edition of the Maryland Bar Bulletin and is reproduced by permission of the Maryland State Bar Association.*

The Maryland People's Law Library (PLL) website ([www.peoples-law.org](http://www.peoples-law.org)) is a collection of hundreds of individual articles about the types of civil legal issues most frequently encountered by self-represented litigants in Maryland state courts. PLL articles address specific questions about scores of substantive legal topics like domestic violence, child support, consumer credit, residential leases, wills and estates, and guardianship.

PLL also provides plain-language explanations of court procedure (like filing a case, motions, discovery, and default judgments); as well as alternative dispute

resolution; topical legal research guides; legal forms; a county-by-county look at free legal clinics; and an extensive searchable directory of local and statewide legal services providers.

So what good is the site to a lawyer? I'll suggest three ways a lawyer could make use of this public resource.

## 1. Jump-start your own research with a free, curated collection of legal summaries, citations, and links

While every citizen is "presumed to know the law," most of us still have questions from time to time. For a practicing attorney seeking a quick entry point into a less familiar area of law, time is money, and so are

Westlaw searches. PLL won't answer all of your questions, but it provides a well-organized, searchable entry point that can frame a topic and lead you to useful legal citations and reliable online resources.

PLL articles include plain-language summaries of Maryland law, as well links to relevant primary law and government web sites. Many also include citations to suggested secondary sources.

You can navigate the site topically or search by keyword across the entire site's content. Articles range from broad topics (like "Child Custody in Maryland"), to specific issues (like what happens when a "House Guest or Squatter Refuses to Leave"). Some articles, written in response to specific questions, even address unique topics like local rules for raising urban chickens.

Even if you don't find an article already written on your specific question, you may benefit from one of a dozen topical research guides on the site (for example, "Researching Debt and Credit Law"). You can even use the site to connect with a Maryland State Law Library reference librarian by email or online chat.

## 2. Prepare clients for what lies ahead

In significant ways, the role of a lawyer mirrors that of a translator. The lawyer helps the client to present a point of view to the court or another party, "translating" the client's reality into the language of legal procedure and persuasion. At the same time, the lawyer helps the client to navigate and make sense of what may be unfamiliar rules and procedures.

But some of the work of translating the rules and procedures into accessible language has been done for you. PLL strives to explain the law and its procedures in understandable language, without sacrificing accuracy. Consider printing or emailing a link to a PLL article for your client. The explanations contained in the article provide valuable background information and can help your clients to see the bigger picture and to develop realistic expectations for their situation.

Obviously, your clients benefit when you do the heavy lifting of representation, providing guidance and expertise, and speaking on their behalf. But you and your client can both

realize cost savings by making use of free, reliable legal information to streamline the process of explaining basic legal concepts and creating realistic expectations.

## 3. Contribute for the public good

PLL is the Maryland Judiciary's primary method of providing legal information and referral assistance to self-represented litigants. Coordinated by the Maryland State Law Library, PLL seeks to educate Marylanders by providing clear, reliable summaries of Maryland law, links to primary and secondary legal sources and referrals for legal services.

Want to use your legal writing and research skills to make a difference and to meet your pro bono goals? Want to do all that from the comfort of your home or office? PLL has a long history of partnering with Maryland attorneys like you to provide this valuable free legal information for everyone's benefit.

Because of the frequency with which the law changes, keeping PLL articles up to date is a significant undertaking. But when an experienced attorney volunteers to review just one article, that brief period of reportable pro bono activity goes a long way! Many of the articles on the site generate hundreds or thousands of page views each month.

If you look on the site for a quick answer to a basic question, and don't find one, consider writing up your research into an appropriate article, and submitting it for possible inclusion on the site. It's a great way to maximize the value of the work you've done, and to give back at the same time.

Even if you find yourself conflicted out of other pro bono activities due to government employment or client considerations, PLL offers a conflict-free way to serve the public good. With your permission, you'll also be publically recognized on the site for your work.

To learn more about PLL, including pro bono opportunities and procedures, visit [www.peoples-law.org](http://www.peoples-law.org), or contact Dave Pantzer, the web content coordinator, at [Dave.Pantzer@mdcourts.gov](mailto:Dave.Pantzer@mdcourts.gov), or at 410-260-3708.

**Encourage your firm, bar association, or pro bono committee to partner with us by "adopting" a page or section on PLL.**