



Serving Incarcerated Patrons

Barriers, Innovations, and Lessons from
Law Libraries Across the United States

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Introduction

People in prison have a constitutional right of access to the courts to challenge their convictions, contest conditions of confinement, and otherwise protect their legal interests. Granting access to legal information and resources to incarcerated individuals also serves a broader public purpose, helping to expose wrongful convictions, identify unconstitutional conditions, and ensure that correctional institutions remain subject to legal oversight and accountability.

In the first phase of our two-year project, *The Role of the Law Library in Serving Incarcerated Individuals*, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), we traced the history, and progressive narrowing, of the constitutional right of access to the courts and legal resources. We also conducted the first comprehensive scan of state-level policies governing legal access in correctional settings, documenting how states define and implement what constitutes “adequate” access to the law.¹ The picture that emerged was one of sharply limited access, from restricted law library hours and limited collections to the prevalence of pen and paper and typewriters over computers and the absence of trained staff to assist incarcerated plaintiffs.

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As state correctional systems scaled back the resources dedicated to legal access, also responding to a narrowing interpretation of their constitutional obligations, a vibrant ecosystem—including jailhouse lawyers, legal aid organizations, law school clinics, and other community-based actors—emerged to fill the gaps, helping individuals who are

¹ Tommaso Bardelli, Sindy Lopez, Tammy Ortiz, and Laura Brown, “Limited by Design: The Policy Framework of Legal Access in Prison,” *Ithaka S+R*, May 29, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.322816>.

incarcerated to access, understand, and mobilize the law.² Among these actors are state, county, and academic law libraries. Established to provide legal information and research assistance for the broader public, a growing number now serve incarcerated patrons too. In some cases, these services are embedded in the library's mission and codified through formal partnerships with correctional agencies. More often, they originated through the initiative of individual librarians who recognized the unmet legal information needs of incarcerated people in their communities and gradually developed services that expanded over time.

In this second, and final, phase of our project, we turned our attention to this key group of actors in the legal access ecosystem. We are not the first to recognize the importance of law librarians' work serving individuals who are incarcerated: the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) has long supported and documented their efforts, including through the Law Libraries Serving Prisoners directory, first published in 1972.³

What services and materials do law libraries provide to incarcerated patrons? How do they communicate with them? What volume of requests do they receive, and how much staff time do they devote to this work?

In this phase we build on, and advance, that work, by developing a more detailed picture of the law libraries actively serving incarcerated patrons, documenting the challenges they face while also identifying the innovations and effective practices emerging across the field. Our goals are twofold. First, we are seeking to increase the visibility of these institutions within the profession and create opportunities for mutual learning. Second, we want to situate law libraries within the broader ecosystem of legal support available to people who are incarcerated, helping other organizations to better understand their role, distinctive contributions, and potential for collaboration.

In the sections that follow, after a brief overview of the study's methods and data, we present a portrait of the field: What services and materials do law libraries provide to incarcerated patrons? How do they communicate with them? What volume of requests do they receive, and

² For a few examples, see: The Jailhouse Lawyers Initiative, https://www.law.nyu.edu/centers/bernstein-institute/legal_empowerment/jailhouse_lawyers; A Jailhouse Lawyer's Manual, <https://jlm.law.columbia.edu/>; Prisoners' Legal Advocacy Network, <https://plan.lawyer/>; Peter Gruber Challenging Mass Incarceration Clinic, <https://law.yale.edu/studying-law-yale/clinical-and-experiential-learning/our-clinics/peter-gruber-challenging-mass-incarceration-clinic>.

³ "List of Law Libraries Serving Prisoners," American Association of Law Libraries, <https://www.aallnet.org/srsis/resources-publications/assistance-for-prisoners/list-law-libraries-serving-prisoners/>.

how much staff time do they devote to this work? What relationships do they maintain with correctional agencies and individual facilities? The second half of the report turns to the experiences of the librarians themselves. Drawing on interview data, we examine the challenges they face, the innovations and effective practices they have developed, and the lessons they believe may be useful to others engaged in this work.

Data and methods

To achieve the two goals outlined above—providing a detailed landscape of law libraries serving the legal information needs of patrons who are incarcerated, and better understanding their day-to-day work—we conducted a survey to collect descriptive data on the landscape of law library services for incarcerated patrons. We next interviewed a subset of respondents to gain a deeper understanding of librarians’ experiences and practices.

The survey was administered through Qualtrics between October and December 2025. Recruitment was primarily conducted through the “List of Law Libraries Serving Prisoners,” a directory maintained by the AALL Social Responsibilities Special Interest Section that identifies institutions providing services to incarcerated patrons. At the time of the study, the directory had been recently updated and included 70 law libraries. Invitations to participate were also circulated to the AALL listserv and other professional networks. We received 55 completed responses in total. The survey collected information across five domains: (1) library type and geographic service area; (2) legal information services provided and types and volume of requests received; (3) staffing and funding; (4) barriers to serving incarcerated patrons; and (5) respondent demographics.

Following the survey, we conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with a subset of respondents. Participants were selected to ensure representation across different geographic regions and library types. Before each interview, the research team reviewed the participant’s survey responses and tailored the interview protocol accordingly. The interviews explored each library’s service model in greater depth, elicited additional context about day-to-day operations, and invited further reflections on the

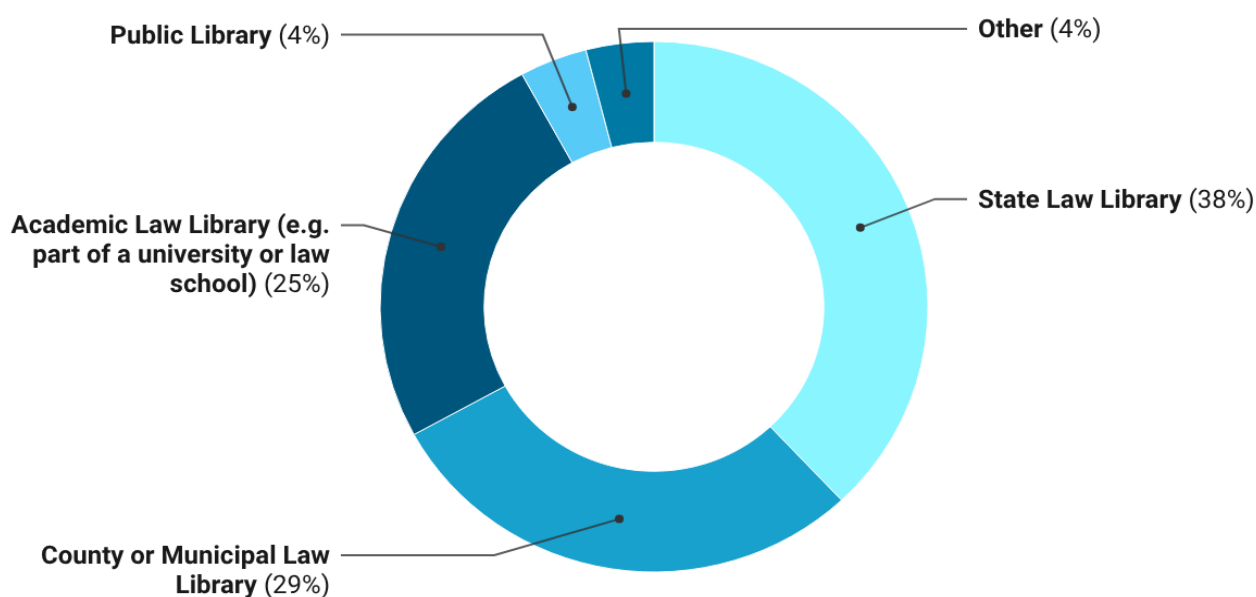
challenges and barriers identified in the survey. Librarians were also asked to share effective practices, lessons learned, and any advice they would offer to other law librarians, especially those interested in starting to work with incarcerated patrons.

The landscape of law library services for incarcerated patrons

Participating libraries

Survey responses were received from law libraries in 32 states. Arizona accounted for the largest number of responses (n=6). The sample included a diverse range of institutions, including state, county, municipal, academic, public, and federal government law libraries. State law libraries constituted the largest respondent group (38 percent), followed by county and municipal law libraries (29 percent), and academic law libraries 25 percent). Two public law libraries and one federal government law library also participated. Most respondents (61 percent) reported serving incarcerated patrons statewide, while 26 percent primarily served only local correctional facilities. A smaller share (19 percent) indicated that they provided services across multiple states.

Figure 1: Which of the following best describes your library type?



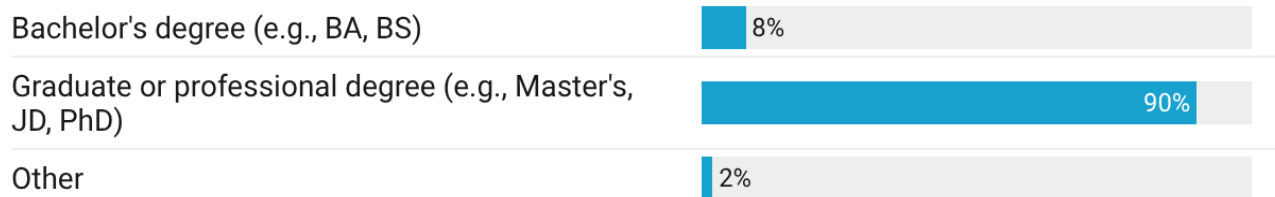
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The survey also collected information about respondents' educational and professional backgrounds. Most respondents held a graduate or professional degree (90 percent). A large majority (85 percent) had earned a master's degree in library and information science, and nearly half also held a Juris Doctor (JD) (46 percent). Forty-three percent reported providing these services for more than 10 years, while the remainder had entered this area of work more recently (Figure 2).

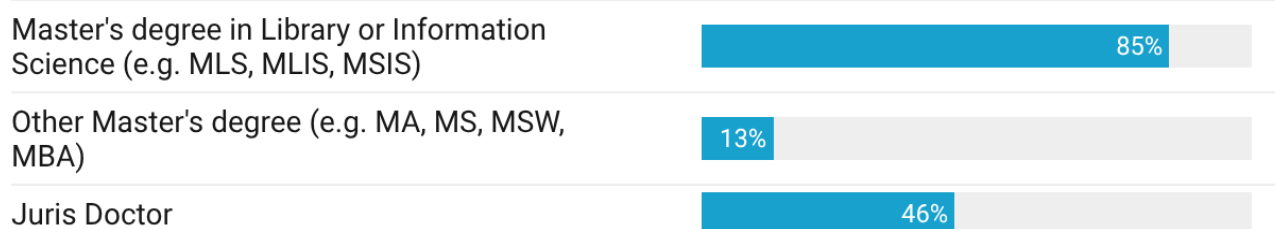
For most librarians, serving this group of patrons was not a standalone position. Only 28 percent reported being formally assigned to this work. A majority (57 percent) indicated that services to incarcerated patrons were provided as part of their broader responsibilities, while 8 percent reported doing this work on a voluntary basis.

Figure 2: Education and experience working with incarcerated patrons

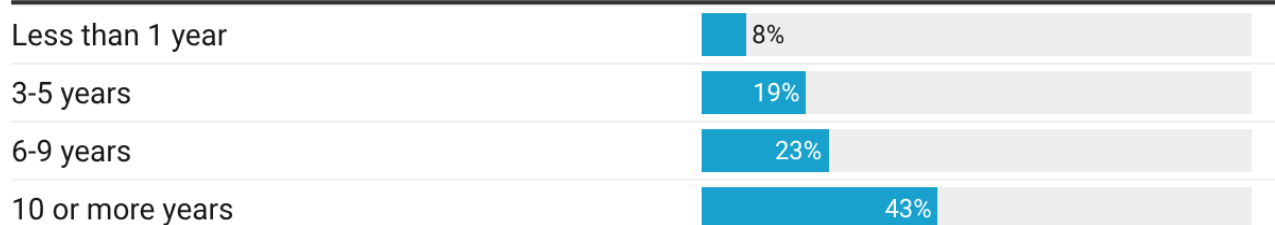
What is the highest level of education you have completed?



Which of the following graduate or professional degrees have you earned?



How many years have you provided services to incarcerated individuals?

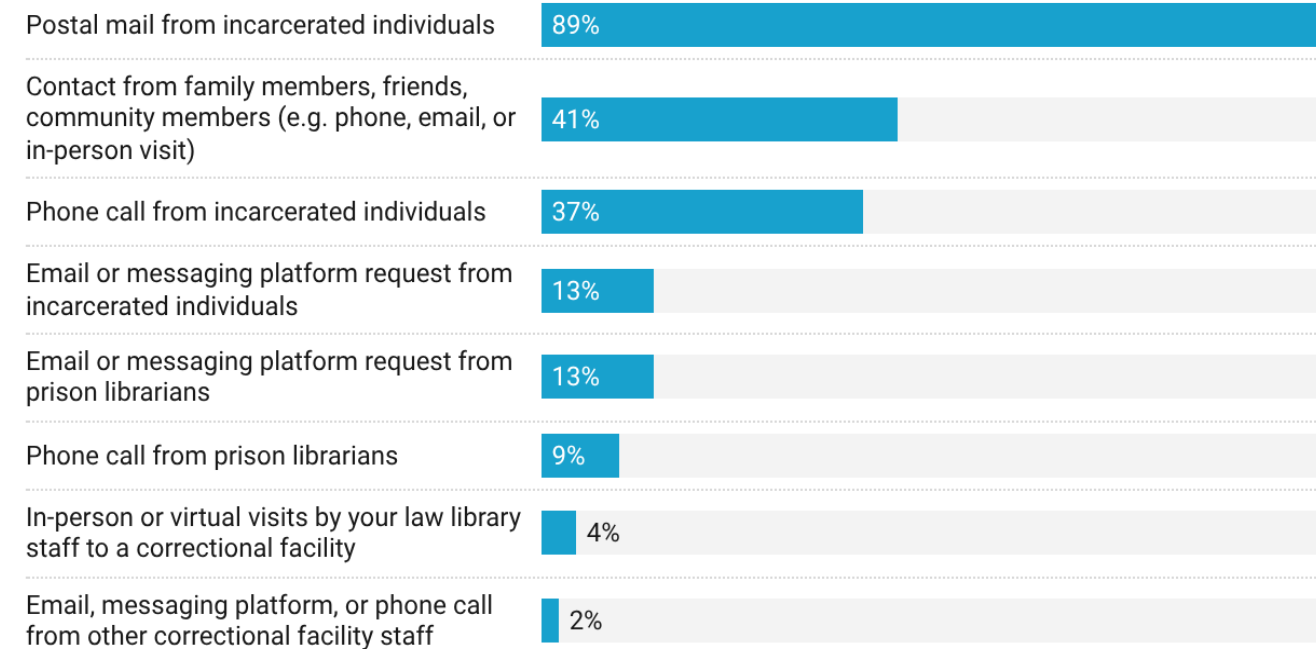


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Communication and service provision

The vast majority of respondents (89 percent) reported that their libraries receive requests for legal information from incarcerated individuals via mail. Other common request channels included contact from family members, friends, or community organizations (41 percent), as well as phone calls from incarcerated individuals (37 percent). Direct contact from correctional facility staff was rare (2 percent).

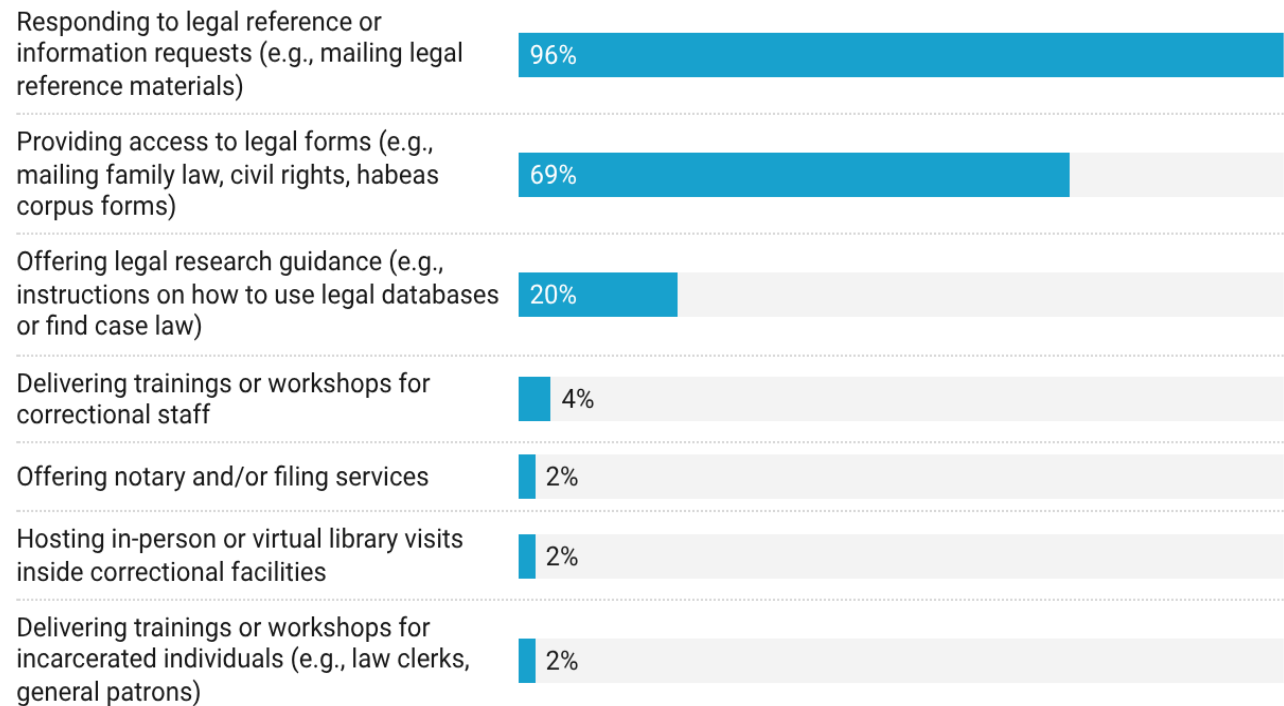
Figure 3: How does your library typically receive requests for legal information or assistance from or on behalf of incarcerated individuals?



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The predominance of mail correspondence likely shapes the types of services libraries are able to provide. As shown in Figure 4, services are currently concentrated in legal reference and document provision. Nearly all respondents (96 percent) reported answering legal reference questions, while more than two-thirds (69 percent) provided access to legal forms and related materials. By contrast, only 20 percent of libraries reported providing legal research assistance, which would require iterative exchanges, clarification of legal issues, and guidance through unfamiliar sources, all activities that can be difficult to support through postal correspondence alone. Services that require in-person access to facilities or close coordination with departments of corrections, such as library visits, trainings, and notary services, were even less common.

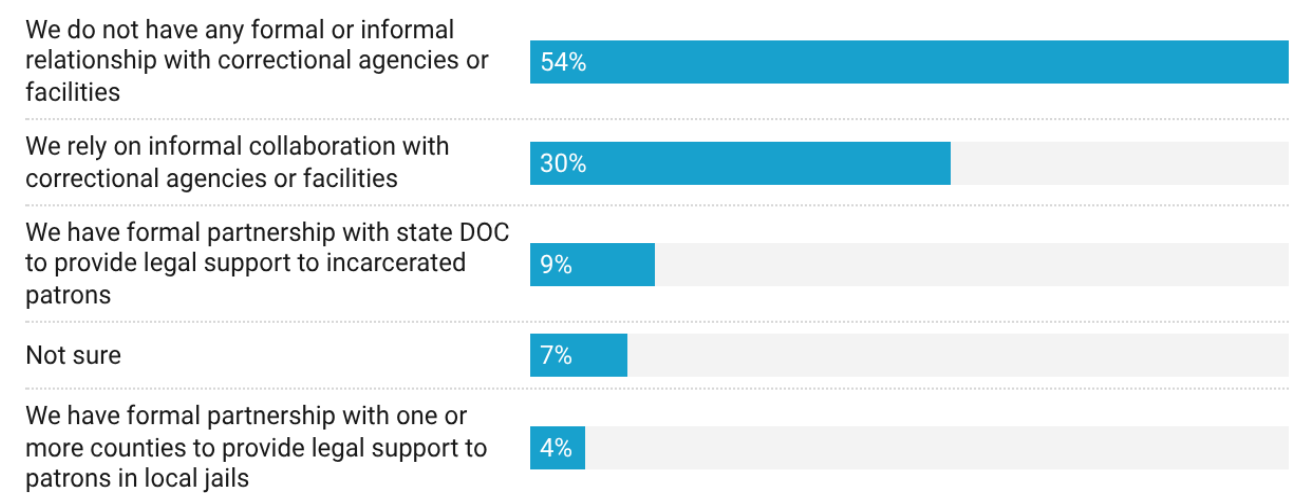
Figure 4: What types of services does your library provide to incarcerated patrons?



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Indeed, a majority of survey respondents (54 percent) reported having no relationship with departments of corrections or local correctional facilities (see Figure 5). As we discuss in later sections, this lack of institutional connection can severely limit the ability of libraries to share legal information with incarcerated patrons. By contrast, libraries with informal (30 percent) or formal (9 percent) relationships with correctional officials are often better positioned to expand outreach, improve communication with patrons, and develop more robust service models

Figure 5: What is your library’s relationship with correctional agencies or facilities?



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Requests volume, topics, and staffing

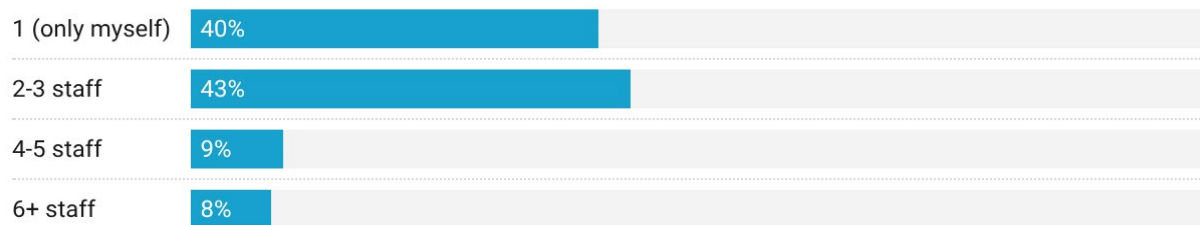
A majority of respondents (59 percent) reported receiving fewer than 10 requests from incarcerated patrons per month. At the other end of the spectrum, a small number of libraries (7 percent) received more than 100 requests monthly. Given the relatively modest volumes of request, it is perhaps unsurprising that services for incarcerated patrons are typically provided by a small number of staff: 43 percent of respondents reported that these services were staffed by two to three people, while 40 percent relied on a single staff member. In addition, most (91 percent) reported spending fewer than 10 hours per week providing services to incarcerated individuals.

Figure 6: How many individual requests from incarcerated patrons does your library receive in a typical month?



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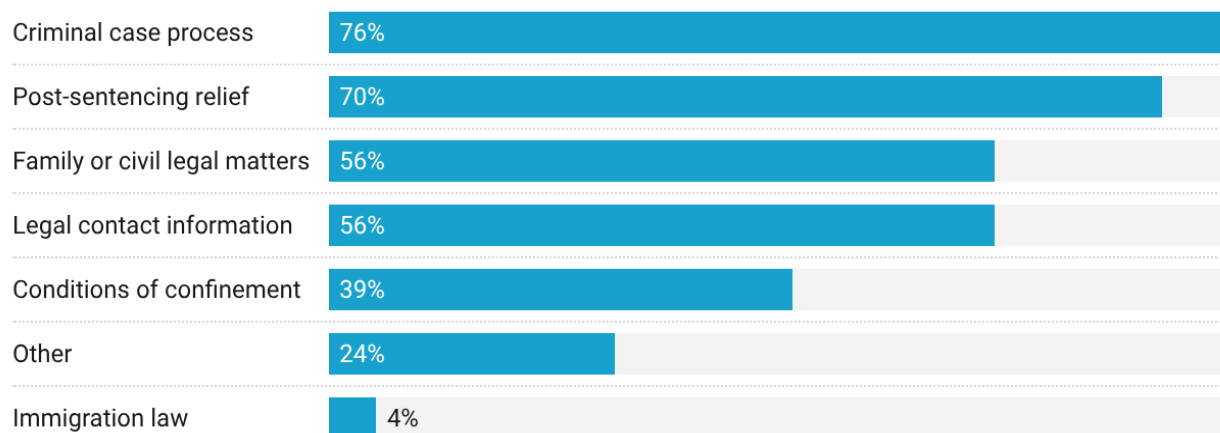
Figure 7: Including yourself, how many staff members currently provide services to incarcerated individuals



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When asked about the legal topics incarcerated patrons most frequently raised in their information requests, respondents identified criminal case process questions (76 percent) and post-sentencing relief (70 percent) as the most common areas of inquiry. Family and civil matters, along with requests for legal contact information, followed closely behind (56 percent). County and municipal law libraries, however, did report that family and civil matters were the most common subject of inquiry (27 percent), reflecting the distinct legal concerns of local jail populations, who are more likely to be navigating ongoing family, housing, employment, and other civil legal issues alongside pending criminal cases.

Figure 8: Which topics do your incarcerated patrons ask about most often?

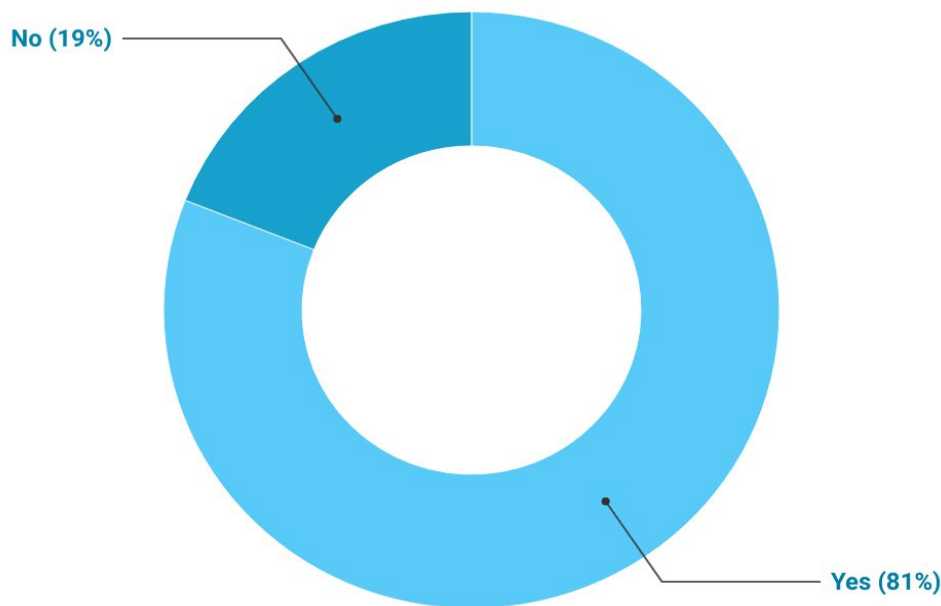


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Service limits, costs, and other barriers

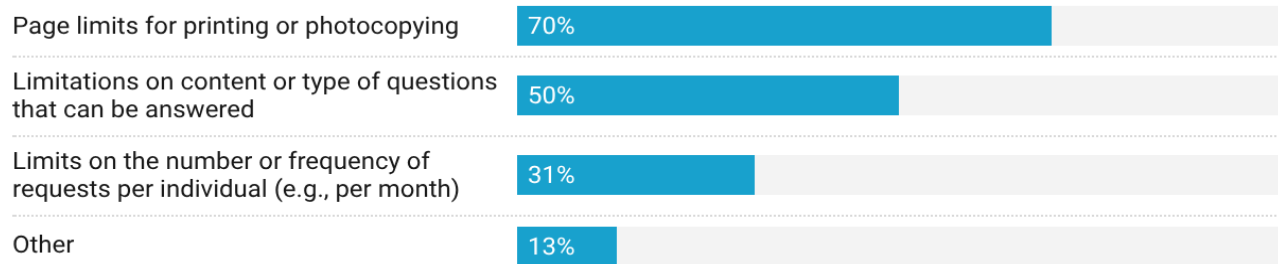
Most law libraries place limits on the amount of mailing, printing, and photocopying they can provide to incarcerated patrons (81 percent). The most common type of restrictions are page limits on printing or photocopying (70 percent), followed by limits on the content or types of questions libraries are able to answer (50 percent) (see Figure 10). Some libraries, for instance, reported that institutional policies restricted them to answering legal reference questions and prohibited them from providing legal research assistance. A majority of survey respondents (53 percent), moreover, reported that incarcerated patrons were not charged fees for services such as printing and mailing (see figure 11).

Figure 9: Does your library have any limits on mailing, printing, or photocopying when fulfilling requests for citations or other documents from incarcerated individuals?



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Figure 10: What types of limits apply?



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Figure 11: Are incarcerated individuals expected to bear costs (e.g., printing, photocopying, or mailing?)



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The survey also asked respondents to rank a series of potential barriers to serving incarcerated patrons. As shown in Figure 12, the heat map shows how law libraries rated different barriers to serving incarcerated patrons. The numbers indicate how many respondents ranked each barrier (from minor to critical). Darker shades represent a higher number of respondents selecting that barrier as a major obstacle in providing services. Respondents noted that requests exceeding the library's services scope, lack of digital access for incarcerated individuals, and communication challenges as the most severe barriers. While issues with funding and staffing were concerns, they were viewed as less severe than access and communications barriers.

Figure 12: Please indicate how much each of the following factors limits your library's ability to serve incarcerated individuals.

	Minor Barrier	Moderate	Significant	Critical Barrier
Requests that exceed the library's scope (e.g., legal advice, prohibited content, page limits)	10	32	42	44
Lack of digital access/tech available to incarcerated individuals	11	20	27	32
Difficulty communicating with incarcerated patrons	15	34	18	16
Insufficient or no dedicated funding	18	8	6	12
Lack of coordination/communication with DOC	11	8	15	12
Delays or restrictions related to DOC mail policies (e.g. digitalization of mail)	18	18	18	8
Translation, language, and literacy barriers (e.g. lacking translation/literacy support tools)	21	6	12	8
Limited staff capacity	13	28	12	4
Lack of formal guidance or best practices on serving incarcerated individuals	17	6	3	4

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The survey used a similar ranking exercise to understand how libraries would prioritize additional resources. Respondents ranked three areas as their highest priorities: (1) building and strengthening relationships with correctional agencies; (2) increasing or expanding service limits (e.g., the number of requests, pages, or photocopies provided); and (3) building or strengthening relationships with community organizations (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: If your library were given additional resources to expand services for incarcerated individuals, which of the following would you prioritize?

	First Place	Second Place	Third Place	Fourth Place	Fifth Place	Sixth Place
Build or strengthen partnerships with correctional agencies	14	9	9	10	6	5
Build or strengthen partnerships with community organizations	3	17	11	8	9	5
Train staff or librarians on the needs of incarcerated patrons	8	9	7	15	8	6
Pilot a new program or service	7	5	8	8	13	12
Increase or extend service limits (e.g., number of requests, photocopying)	16	6	8	6	9	8

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Serving incarcerated patrons

In the 12 interviews we conducted with a subset of survey participants, we asked law librarians to describe in greater depth the day-to-day processes and practices involved in serving incarcerated patrons. We were interested, for instance, in what it was like to rely on postal mail as the primary, and often only, form of communication, and in how librarians navigated their relationships, or lack thereof, with departments of corrections and prison staff.

We also sought to better understand the barriers identified in the survey, including requests that fall outside the scope of law library services, limited technological access for incarcerated patrons, and funding and staffing constraints. Just as importantly, however, we wanted to document examples of what was working well: how librarians expanded legal access in their jurisdictions, built productive relationships with correctional institutions, and worked creatively within resource and institutional constraints to serve incarcerated patrons. Finally, we asked participants to reflect on the lessons and advice they would share with other law librarians, particularly those interested in beginning to serve incarcerated patrons in their own institutions.

Reaching incarcerated patrons

Often, one of the first questions we asked law librarians was how patrons behind bars came to learn about their services. After all, in correctional institutions—where people typically lack access to the internet, email, phones, and even printers for flyers or informational material—outreach is not an easy feat. Indeed, over half of survey respondents could not tell how patrons had initially learned about their services. Their best guess: word of mouth. As incarcerated people reached out to different law libraries, they reasoned, the institutions that responded consistently must have developed reputations inside correctional facilities, with word spreading quickly among incarcerated patrons, and eventually across institutions, and even jurisdictions. “We haven’t really done any outreach,” one participant, a library director at a municipal law library in the Midwest explained. “Somehow word has gotten out that our library can take requests through mail. Most of our requests come from in-state, but we do

sometimes get out of state requests too. I'm not sure how these people heard about us."

Over half of survey respondents could not tell how patrons had initially learned about their services. Their best guess: word of mouth.

While word of mouth was, in virtually every case, important for people to learn about law library services outside their facilities, some libraries were able to extend their reach further by distributing flyers inside facilities or, more rarely, conducting trainings or in-person visits. Any outreach effort, however, depended on some degree of cooperation from departments of corrections and facility staff. Several participants reported relying on prison librarians, or public librarians who had regular access to a facility, to distribute flyers and other informational materials. One interviewee, a library director at a state law library in the northeast, reported relying on a DOC staff member, working inside a state facility library: "She is very much an advocate for incarcerated individuals. But it is still very much an informal network at this point."

In some jurisdictions, these relationships were more formalized. In Minnesota, for instance, as described in our previous report, an interagency agreement between the state law library and the department of corrections grants law librarians expanded access to correctional facilities, including through in-person visits and video communication.⁴ Two county law librarians we interviewed reported that their institutions had developed strong working relationships with local jails and sheriff's offices, often building on already existing collaboration between the jail and the public library.

At Alachua County Jail Library, in Gainesville, Florida, for instance, the relationship between the county library district and the local jail dates back to the mid-1970s, when the local county jail was first built, including plans for a library jail branch inside the facility.⁵ Today, the library employs one full-time and one part-time librarian who provide legal information services in person inside the jail four days a week. Each day, individuals

⁴ "Law Library Service to Prisoners (LLSP): Annual Report 2024," Minnesota State Law Library, 2024, https://mn.gov/law-library/assets/2024_LLSP_AnnualReport_tcm1041-672296.pdf

⁵ "About the Jail Library," Alachua County Jail Library, <https://www.aclib.us/jail-library>.

from five housing units are able to visit the library. “We also get inmate request forms from those who can’t come to the library, and we also make up carts and bins to take out to the pods that aren’t able to access the library [that day]”, said one interviewee, outreach manager at the Alachua County Library District. “It’s pretty non-stop, I think from all the different departments that I’ve seen, the folks who work at the jail library, that’s the most demanding job I’ve seen so far here.”

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Indeed, serving approximately 500 patrons each week, roughly 70 percent of the jail population, the Alachua County Jail Library operates at a scale far beyond that reported by most of our survey respondents, with nearly 90 percent reporting fewer than 50 individual requests per month, and about 59 percent responding to fewer than 10 requests per month. The contrast is striking, and it suggests that the relatively low volume of requests currently observed at many libraries may reflect barriers to outreach and access, rather than the underlying demand for legal information services.

Opening more direct channels of communication with patrons who are incarcerated—as well as with departments of corrections—also can help law libraries better understand the gaps they were filling within local systems of legal access. In many cases, libraries were compensating for shortcomings in public provision, whether limited legal materials inside facilities, inadequate law library services, or broader resource constraints affecting access to counsel and legal assistance. Understanding what resources were—or were not—available inside facilities allowed librarians to tailor their services accordingly.

Having frequent access to the jail, and being able to interact in-person with patrons, for instance, meant that the librarians we interviewed who worked at Alachua County Jail Library, had in-depth understanding of what was driving the high demand for their service. The progressive defunding of legal aid services, they explained, meant that people felt they had little choice but to research their own cases, to compensate for limited access to counsel. “Many people meet their public defender just on their court

date,” one of them explained. “So, we help people be their own lawyers. Really, I think they end up presenting the case to their lawyers when they do get to see them and say, ‘In this case, this happened.’”

The scope of law library services can also shift in response to changes elsewhere in the legal access landscape. When one northeastern state announced that it would discontinue incarcerated individuals’ access to LexisNexis, one interviewee told us, she found herself explaining the likely consequences to court officials: without access to current legal materials, incarcerated people would be forced to rely more heavily on the state law library for information and research assistance. In other words, restrictions and cost saving measures in one part of the legal information ecosystem will increase pressure on another.

Lessons from the field: Outreach and DOC relationships

Identify internal points of contact. Prison librarians, education staff, and counselors can help circulate information about available services.

Understand the gap your library is filling. Learning what legal materials, databases, assistance, and technology are, or are not, available inside a facility can help libraries tailor their services to actual needs.

Consistency is the first form of outreach. Several librarians found that reliable responses helped build trust and, once patrons learned that a library responded to requests, word spread quickly.

Low request volume does not equal low demand. Limited outreach channels are often the reason for low demand. When libraries are able to distribute materials or visit facilities, requests increase.

Resources

The examples below illustrate effective outreach materials developed by law libraries serving incarcerated patrons. They may serve as useful models for libraries seeking to expand awareness of their own services.

- Hawai'i Supreme Court Law Library: [Legal information for Incarcerated Patrons](#)
- Washington State Law Library: [How Can We Help You? Tips For Requesting Legal Research Materials from the State Law](#)
- Minnesota State Law Library: [Law Library Services to Prisoners](#)

Communicating with incarcerated patrons: Challenges and innovations

Communication emerged as a central challenge not only for outreach, but throughout the entire process of supporting incarcerated patrons. Survey findings showed that 89 percent of law librarians used postal mail to communicate with incarcerated individuals, while half reported also receiving requests through other forms of communication, such as emails or phone calls.

During interviews, almost all respondents talked about the challenges of discussing often complex legal research and reference questions through postal correspondence alone. Many described the long delays involved, with letters sometimes taking weeks to travel back and forth between libraries and correctional facilities, even across relatively short distances. A library director at a state law library in the northeast, for instance, said that mail to their incarcerated patrons could take three weeks to reach their destination, even though she could walk to the facility “in less than two hours.” “We had back and forth go on for months, just to get some clarity on the request,” said another interviewee.

Several librarians also noted that mail was occasionally lost altogether, also due to increasingly restrictive and inconsistent facility mail policies. When possible, librarians used legal mail—official correspondence between an incarcerated person and the court system—to reduce these

risks. Using legal mail, whenever possible, is even more important in jurisdictions with policies mandating the digitization of all incoming mail to correctional facilities. One participant, for instance, described how all non-legal mail sent to individuals in Arizona's state prisons was now first routed through a processing center in Texas, where it was sorted, scanned, and then delivered electronically, adding additional delays and failure points to an already slow communication system.

Delays were, however, only part of the challenge. Many librarians also emphasized how difficult it was to interpret requests, ask follow-up questions, or explain legal information clearly without being able to speak directly with patrons by phone or in person, as they would routinely do with other patrons. Recreating this process through postal mail alone proved considerably more difficult. One reference librarian in the South, who had only recently begun working with incarcerated patrons, described the challenge of identifying both what a patron needed and what the library could provide based on a single piece of mail. She quickly realized that serving incarcerated patrons required far more interpretation than she had initially expected. "You need to think about it as if they were actually in front of you," she explained, "in the same way as a typical patron, doing a reference interview." Even so, it's not quite the same: "[With incarcerated patrons] I have to try to find something in their mail that has enough specificity, so that I can locate it on Westlaw, or run a Google search." Another reference librarian, working at a state law library in the Midwest, also spoke about the "frustration" that ensued when things were "lost in translation" along that process, especially when the patrons faced a deadline to file a motion, or other pressing need.

As with outreach, when it came to the available means of communication, librarians developed a range of strategies and workarounds. Many interviewees, for instance, described relying on intermediaries to facilitate communication and ensure information was passed along accurately. Family members often became key conduits of communication, relaying information between incarcerated patrons and the library. In other cases, incarcerated individuals themselves—often jailhouse lawyers or prison law clerks—served as intermediaries and advocates for their peers. In one case, two librarians described being in regular contact with two individuals who had practiced as attorneys prior to incarceration, and whose assistance likely contributed to the unusually detailed and well-formulated requests they typically received from a particular facility. Finally, a handful of participants described collaborating with DOC staff members—

especially prison librarians—willing to pass along messages, help clarify requests, and generally serve as points of contact when additional information was needed.

Many also described using template responses, checklists, standardized packets, and instructional materials both to streamline back-and-forth exchanges and to help patrons in prisons and jails better understand what resources and services were available to them. These tools make communication more efficient and manageable—particularly in contexts of high request volume or limited staffing; they also helped patrons formulate more targeted requests. One librarian from Minnesota, for instance, told us that she had gotten into the habit of including a glossary of common legal terms from the state judicial branch in most of her responses to incarcerated patrons. Another participant reported routinely attaching a chapter from the *Jailhouse Lawyer's Manual*,⁶ whenever relevant to the patron's request. A librarian from Arizona created a LibGuide entirely dedicated to serving this group of patrons, including best practices for responding to requests by mail, a collection of legal aid organizations, books, and other legal literacy materials, and a list of sources for court forms (see “Lessons from the field” below)

Most of these strategies worked around the edges of the problem, helping librarians improve communication within the constraints of postal correspondence. In a few cases, however, libraries were able to expand the available means of communication, dramatically increasing their ability to interact and share information with this group of patrons. As with outreach, these innovations depended heavily on building strong relationships and institutional partnership with departments of corrections, or individual facilities. We have already discussed the example of the Minnesota State Law Library, where a formal partnership at the state level enables expanded access for law librarians to state prisons, as well as Alachua County District Jail Library, where similar results, including in-person access for librarians, were achieved through strong collaboration between the district library and the local jail.

The Hennepin County Law Library in Minneapolis, which serves the local jail population, followed a comparable model, building on an existing partnership between the local prison and the Hennepin public library system. The public library was added to the prison's kiosk-based internal

⁶ *A Jailhouse Lawyer's Manual 13th Edition*, Columbia Human Rights Law Review, <https://jlm.law.columbia.edu/a-jailhouse-lawyers-manual-13th-edition/>.

information system, enabling individuals in the jail to electronically request books and other library materials. This turned out to be a critical lifeline for information services, especially during COVID. Working with the sheriff's office, county law librarians were able to expand this kiosk infrastructure to support legal information requests from incarcerated patrons in jail as well, creating a new channel through which they could request and access legal materials. In the short time this new kiosk service has been available, requests have increased from "went from a few dozen letters a year to about 400 a month," one librarian reported.

Even when formal partnerships at the state or local level were not present, some librarians pointed to another important development with implications for access to legal information inside prisons: the expansion of free phone communication for people who are incarcerated.

Finally, even when formal partnerships at the state or local level were not present, some librarians pointed to another important development with implications for access to legal information inside prisons: the expansion of free phone communication for people who are incarcerated. Since Connecticut first made phone calls from prison and jail free in 2021, campaigns advocating for free phone prison calls spread across several states. Today, five states, including California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and New York, have adopted similar policies.⁷ In these states, incarcerated patrons already have the ability to call law libraries without needing to place them on a special approved contact list or worrying about the financial burden of communication costs.

⁷ Peter Mayer and Bianca Tylek, "Critical Connections: The Power of Free Communication in Prisons and Jails," *Worth Rises*, May 2026, <http://connectfamiliesnow.com/poweroffree>.

Lessons from the field: Communicating with incarcerated patrons

Design for postal constraints. Mail delays, lost correspondence, and limited opportunities for clarification can significantly slow legal reference work. Librarians should expect requests to require multiple rounds of exchange and recognize that incarcerated patrons often have little information about what services and materials are available.

Use templates and checklists strategically. Personalized communication remains important, but templates, instructional packets, and checklists can help libraries manage high request volumes and limited staffing. They can also help patrons understand what resources are available and formulate more targeted requests.

Leverage intermediaries when appropriate. Family members, jailhouse lawyers, prison law clerks, and prison librarians can play an important role in facilitating communication, clarifying requests, and relaying information.

Explore expanded communication channels where possible. In states where phone communication from prisons and/or jails is free, libraries may be able to provide assistance by phone or incorporate phone calls into their services. Librarians should understand how communication policies operate locally and ensure patrons know these options exist.

Provide orientation to legal information resources. Whenever possible, work with correctional staff and prison librarians to ensure incarcerated patrons understand what resources are available, and how to use them effectively. This is especially important for legal databases and other digital tools, which can be difficult for non-lawyers to navigate.

Resources

The resources below are examples of guidance developed by law libraries for managing mail communication with incarcerated patrons. They offer practical recommendations, operational procedures, and model workflows that other libraries may adapt to their own contexts. The University of Arizona Law Library's LibGuide also includes a curated collection of legal information resources, sample forms, and reference materials.

- University of Arizona, Daniel F. Cracchiolo Law Library: [Legal Information for Incarcerated People: Best Practices and Procedures](#)
- LA Law Library: [Responding to Prison Mail](#)

Processing requests: Costs, constraints, and effective practices

The interviews also allowed us to explore how librarians process requests from patrons who are incarcerated and the practical constraints shaping this work. While the survey documented the prevalence of service fees and other limitations, including caps on the number of patrons served or requests, in-depth conversations with librarians surfaced how they experienced and navigated these constraints, and how those might affect access.

Most of the librarians we interviewed reported being able to offer at least some services free of charge, often with limits on the amount of material provided. A common model, for example, was to print and mail the first 50 pages at no cost, charging only for additional copies. Others, however, lacked dedicated funding to waive fees for incarcerated patrons and were required to charge them the same rates as other users.

Most participants were well aware that even modest fees likely posed a significant barrier for this group of patrons. Given the extremely low wages earned by incarcerated workers—most make between \$0.13 and \$0.52 per hour, and seven states pay no wages at all for most prison jobs⁸—even printing fees of a few cents per page can quickly become prohibitive. Additional logistical hurdles often compounded these costs. Several librarians described systems in which patrons could pay only by check, requiring them to estimate the cost of materials in advance and enclose payment with their requests. Because libraries could accept only the exact amount owed, even minor discrepancies could trigger additional rounds of correspondence.

The effects of such fees on access was illustrated clearly by one interviewee. Her institution, a state law library in the Southwest, charged \$0.25 per page for printed materials. While the library received over 100 requests from patrons in state prisons, only about 25 percent were fulfilled. According to the librarian, the remaining patrons simply never followed up once they learned about the costs involved.

⁸- "Captive Labor: Exploitation of Incarcerated Workers," ACLU, June 15, 2022, <https://www.acluok.org/news/captive-labor-exploitation-incarcerated-workers/>.

Librarians described having greater flexibility in navigating other service limitations. While many institutions imposed restrictions on the number of pages that could be provided in a single request, most allowed patrons to submit multiple requests even in short periods of time. Other policies were potentially more consequential: one interviewee, for instance, reported being allowed to print cases or statutes only when patrons provided the exact citation. Yet, she also explained how she was able to interpret library policies in light of the realities of incarceration. Recognizing that incarcerated patrons often lacked the tools and resources available to other users, she routinely conducted limited research on their behalf when their requests contained sufficiently clear information. “Our library official policy was that we could not send anything to patrons unless they had the exact citation in their requests,” she explained, “but that meant we could not respond to anyone from prison, because none of them had access to citations.” So, she and her colleagues developed different, and more flexible, guidelines on how to respond to incarcerated patrons requests: “basically, as long as they stated their request with enough specificity, something that helps us narrow it down, we will work with them. We will print it and send it back to them.”

Lessons from the field: Managing costs and constraints

Consider the real cost of fees. Even modest charges can be prohibitive for incarcerated patrons. Where possible, seek grant funding, institutional support, or other mechanisms to subsidize services. Participants repeatedly emphasized that eliminating fees can have a substantial impact on access and service use.

Whenever possible, develop service policies specifically for incarcerated patrons. Where existing policies cannot be changed, apply them with an understanding of the practical constraints of incarceration, recognizing that many standard library rules assume access to resources (e.g. legal databases, internet access, transportation, or legal assistance) that are unavailable behind bars.

Invest in reusable resources. Frequently requested forms, guides, procedural materials, and curated packets can help libraries respond more efficiently while providing incarcerated patrons with quick access to information that can be shared and reused within facilities.

Resources

The resources below provide examples of service policies and operational guidance for serving incarcerated patrons. They illustrate how libraries define the scope of services, staff responsibilities, and procedures for responding to legal information requests.

- Minnesota State Law Library: [LLSP and Prison Library Staff Responsibilities in Providing Law Library Service](#)
- LA Law Library: [Prison Mail Policy](#)

Conclusion and next steps

Law libraries play a critical role in expanding access to legal information for people who are incarcerated, helping them obtain reference materials, legal forms, and other resources needed to understand and advance legal claims. In doing so, they help fill gaps left by correctional libraries, including limited access to counsel and the broader scarcity of legal information behind prison walls.

This work is often carried out under significant constraints. Many libraries serve incarcerated patrons with limited staff time, modest budgets, and few formal relationships with correctional agencies. Communication with patrons is frequently limited to postal mail, making even routine reference work slow and rendering legal research assistance all but impossible to deliver effectively. Outreach barriers, service restrictions, and costs further constrain who can access these services.

In addition to documenting barriers, this report highlights the commitment and creativity found across the field. When direct relationships with facility or agency leadership proved difficult to establish, law librarians found trusted intermediaries, including public and prison librarians, jailhouse lawyers, law clerks, and family members of incarcerated people, to facilitate communication and expand awareness, and understanding, of available services. Many librarians also developed reusable packets, guides, templates, and other resources that allowed them to lower service

costs, make more effective use of limited staff time, and extend the reach of legal information inside facilities. Nearly every librarian we interviewed described engaging in lengthy exchanges that stretched over weeks or even months to answer questions, clarify requests, and provide assistance that might otherwise have been delivered through a brief conversation.

Our findings suggest that the demand for law library services among people who are incarcerated is substantially greater than current service volumes might imply.

Finally, our findings suggest that the demand for law library services among people who are incarcerated is substantially greater than current service volumes might imply. Indeed, several interviewees described how requests increased, sometimes dramatically, when barriers were reduced, whether through improved outreach, expanded communication channels, or the elimination of service fees. The Alachua County Jail Library offered a striking example: once librarians established a regular in-person legal information program inside the local jail, over 70 percent of the population started using their services.

As such, we hope this report will serve not only as an updated landscape of law library services, but also as a catalyst for future research and field-wide collaboration. Many of the innovations and effective practices identified in this study, from outreach strategies and communication protocols to partnerships with correctional agencies, have been developed within specific institutional and local contexts. Facilitating a conversation about how these practices could be adapted and implemented across different jurisdictions seems like an important next step for the field.

At the same time, our research throughout this project highlights the strengths and limitations of what state, county, academic, and other law libraries can accomplish on their own to expand access to legal information for incarcerated patrons. They aren't in this alone, and other studies are exploring the impact of the jailhouse lawyers, legal aid organizations, and law school clinics that are actively trying to increase access to the law. Understanding how these different actors in the legal ecosystem are already working together and developing strategies to further connect them is key to the legal information needs of individuals in

our country's prisons and jails. Future work should look beyond each of these networks to develop their connections.

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