

*PUBLIC LEGAL INFORMATION IN BC'S RURAL AND REMOTE
COMMUNITY LIBRARIES: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
LAWMATTERS*

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Preface

This research study looks at Public Legal Education and Information (PLEI) in British Columbia and how public libraries in rural and remote locations, with materials from the LawMatters program, provide legal information to the public. Thanks to the committed staff at Courthouse Libraries BC (CLBC), particularly Megan Smiley (LawMatters Program Coordinator), we connected with 57 individual librarians in B.C. in the matter of weeks to learn more about their experiences supporting PLEI. Our intent was to build on the LawMatters program evaluation conducted just under two years prior and to further understand where libraries could use support from LawMatters to deliver legal information in their communities. We acknowledge the library participants who gave us their time and expertise during the difficult wildfire season affecting close to 80% of the communities we reached. We also recognize the Law Foundation for its support of LawMatters and dedication to seeking effective delivery of PLEI for British Columbians.

Introduction

Public libraries have broad and aspirational social goals to meet - building communities, providing fair and equitable access to quality information, and inspiring the populace to engage in lifelong learning. As they are widely dispersed and offer a fair, open and non-judgmental service, they are natural partners in expanding the reach of PLEI. The LawMatters program at CLBC, made possible with funding from the Law Foundation, has been working directly with public libraries (PLs) in BC since 2007.¹ The main offering is collection grants provided to libraries to purchase print legal materials annually. Having worked with all 71 library systems in BC, LawMatters offers a unique perspective on public library needs within the PLEI sector. This research study looks at public libraries in rural and remote regions and how they support the PLEI needs of BC's rural and remote communities.

Two previous evaluations² of LawMatters pointed to the capacity challenges public libraries face in providing legal collections and information services to the public in terms of: space, staffing, outreach, and technology. It showed that while legal collections were very important, the relative infrequency of legal questions in many public libraries created a dynamic of low collection use and limited opportunities to practice legal reference.

¹ Legal information service outreach to public libraries in British Columbia has been active since 1975 with the “Legal Information Services Program” (LISP) launched by the Legal Services Society. In 2002, this program was disbanded due to governmental cuts. In 2007, CLBC was successful in applying for funding and re-establishing a similar program through LawMatters (pp. 1-4, Janet Freeman & Nancy Hannum. *LawMatters at your local public library: A history of BC's program for public legal information and education in public libraries*. CFCJ: 2015. Available online: <http://www.cfcj-fcjc.org/sites/default/files/A%20History%20of%20LawMatters%20at%20your%20local%20public%20library.pdf> [last accessed Oct 10, 2018.]

² Brewin, Alison and Aspinwall, Emily. “Evaluation Report. LawMatters Program, BC Courthouse Libraries.” February, 2017.

Hannum, Nancy. “Talking to Librarians about Law Matters: Promising Practices” Courthouse Libraries BC, 2011. Accessed online Feb 19, 2019. https://www.courthouselibrary.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/LawMatters_Promising_Practices_Report_2011.pdf

Nonetheless, the grant program LawMatters offers was reported as highly valued, particularly by smaller libraries that would never be able to purchase such legal materials with limited collections budgets³.

Our new line of research focused on public library capacity and community needs to understand what might further support librarians in answering legal information questions; seeking to understand more about the public's use of local libraries for PLEI. We looked at the priorities of public libraries and their communities to contextualize the relative importance of PLEI by asking:

- What are the relative rate and type of legal information questions being asked?
- What other community constraints/barriers are libraries facing?
- How could LawMatters better support their community's legal information needs?

We had heard from previous studies and preliminary interviews that the rate of legal questions was perceived as low in libraries serving smaller communities.

Research Methodology

This study intentionally focused on libraries serving rural and remote communities, conducting primary and secondary research we:

- **Surveyed library staff** through interviews and online surveys
- **Conducted a literature review and environmental scan** of PLEI organizations working with public libraries and provincial public library data.
- **Analyzed LawMatters collection reports** from participating libraries,
- **Summarized outreach evaluation findings** from training evaluations of public library outreach on legal resources delivered by CLBC Liaison Lawyer.

Survey Methodology

Our primary research group for this study were the 54 small-medium non-regional library systems in British Columbia to focus on the rural and remote community needs in BC. This included direct contact with 54 libraries to engage in either an interview or a survey. We targeted libraries that fell in the following categories (based on provincial data):

Size	Population served	FTE equivalents
Very small	<1,001	<5
Small	1,001 - 14,999	5 – 13
Medium	15,000 - 30,000	14 – 30

³ Ibid.

We noted that certain regional library systems (Thompson-Nicola, Cariboo, Okanagan, Vancouver-Island and Fraser Valley) served similar kinds of communities, but given the differences in operating models, we chose to survey these libraries slightly differently (through an online survey circulated to branches).

Response breakdown:

In total, we heard from 57 individuals, representing 49 library systems (of 71 total systems in BC).

- 1) Of the 54 non-regional rural/remote libraries we heard from 44 library systems (82% of the primary sample group) through:
 - 15 interviews of librarians from very small to medium sized libraries
 - 29 online survey responses.

The following map shows surveyed libraries (North Central underrepresented due to wildfires with the yellow points indicating interviewed libraries and the orange points representing those that completed a survey).



Figure 1 Library locations that participated in surveying

- 2) Regional systems: We received 10 individual responses from two regional systems.
- 3) Finally, for comparative purposes we interviewed representatives from three Lower-Mainland larger urban and suburban systems.

Findings

Below are key principles regarding how LawMatters can further support public libraries to deliver PLEI services in their communities.

1) Public Libraries are coping with a very diverse range of community information priorities. Legal information questions, while infrequent, are still seen as important.

How much time and effort is available to develop legal information reference skills is simply a practical concern; low frequency of questions relative to other needs (i.e. recreational reading, personal interest research and self-education) impacts libraries' ability to be "in the practice" of answering legal information questions. It is unclear why the frequency of legal questions asked of librarians seems low. A recent LSS study "Everyday Legal Problems" states that 76% of low-income British Columbians face at least one legal problem in a three-year time span.⁴ It is possible that legal need is under-reported for a few reasons:

- 1) Public librarians' and the public's concept of "legal" differs from that of the PLEI sector, so librarians could be providing legal service for issues that do not seem legal in nature.
- 2) Many legal books are non-circulating in house use only (limiting circulation record evidence).
- 3) The public might be reluctant to seek help where privacy is at issue, especially in smaller communities.

Additionally, of the 71 library systems, more than half serve populations of under 10,000 individuals.⁵ It is only logical that legal information questions would be a small actual number of questions in an area of lower population (compared to a common need like recreational reading, for example). As the LSS study states, once every three years, considering library users are a subset of the population, could in number be quite small annually.

From outreach training feedback, however, we heard that librarians have not been made aware of the range of legal resources available (online, in particular) and the understanding of what constitutes "legal" (including more day-to-day issues) is indeed quite different from the PLEI sector. After training, there was a noted change in how librarians saw legal issues. Confirmed during interviews, more everyday issues like "form location" and "applying for benefits" were not necessarily thought of as "legal." If we include these kinds of questions, the perceived frequency of legal questions increases among librarians as well as confidence in providing support increases (compared to other more complex questions).

⁴ "Everyday Legal Problems." *Legal Services Society*. 2018, pp. 7

https://lss.bc.ca/assets/aboutUs/reports/legalAid/lssEverydayLegalProblems07_2018.pdf

⁵ 21 serve populations of less than 2,000 with fewer than 2 FTEs, 18 serve populations of less than 7,500 with an average of 4 FTEs. "BC Public Library Statistics 2002-Present" Public Libraries Planning and Funding. British Columbia. Published 2017, accessed Sept. 28, 2018

http://catalogue.data.gov.bc.ca/dataset?=&q=public+library+data&sort=score+desc%2C+record_publish_date+desc

2) A “one-size fits all” granting & program model will not address the unique PLEI needs of small communities. Offering a range of training and support options that can be selected by individual libraries will address this diversity.

Public libraries in BC communities respond to community needs and survey results show that most rural/remote libraries face at least one of the following three community use barriers:

- 1) Geographic isolation (distance to get to services)
- 2) Connectivity (no reliable internet or cell service)
- 3) Digital information literacy (challenges using computers/internet for information).

Other issues such as adult literacy and language barriers are also factors affecting how the public might access the library for legal information. Geographic isolation indicates a higher need for the local library to be a necessary information hub, while digital literacy and adult literacy levels indicate general barriers librarians face in facilitating access to information (even more pertinent with a highly-specialized topic like law). Individual community events (e.g. an industry collapse, a single environmental problem, the shuttering of a service, a closure of a bus line, etc.) can significantly impact how the community needs the library’s services.

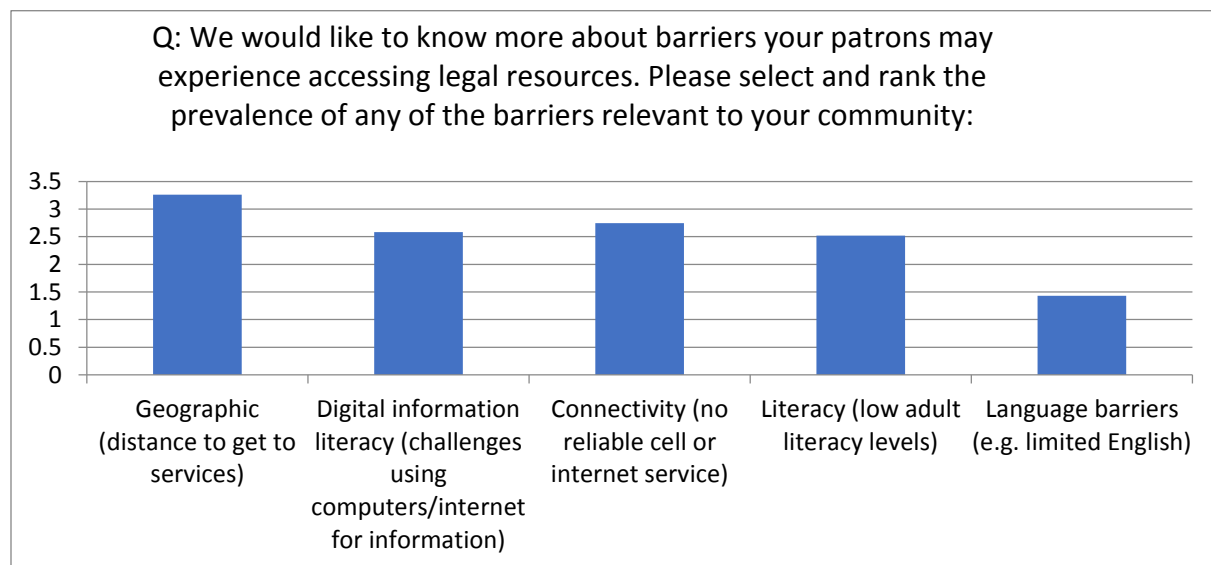


Figure 2 Results reflecting community barriers to legal resources. Weighted Average Barriers N=36

These are barriers to consider in developing a LawMatters program that fits the community and library need. Because of the diversity of need, an effective feature of the current LawMatters grants system is the freedom to choose based on community needs. The recommended next step would be to scale this model to offer more choice including training, promotional tool supports, and collection budget flexibility.

3) Libraries are highly connected to other community agencies, but not necessarily around the point of legal information.

We heard that most communities are likely to have: Childhood/Family Centres, Employment services, Seniors Centres, and Women’s shelters. Most librarians, 74% reported that they connect with these centres through a range of points, mostly promotion/advertising and referrals, and joint programming. However, we see that a significant minority (40-30%) do not have local services in all these areas, instead they might have one or two. Smaller communities must rely on the services of the larger centres “nearby” (within 1-2 hour drive) - the larger the town, the more services exist.

	Locally, in town
Women’s Centre/Shelter	51.85%
Business services	26.92%
Community Centre	18.52%
Childhood and Family Resource Centre	62.96%
Employment services	59.26%
Seniors’ Centre	59.26%
First Nations Education/Friendship Centre	44.44%

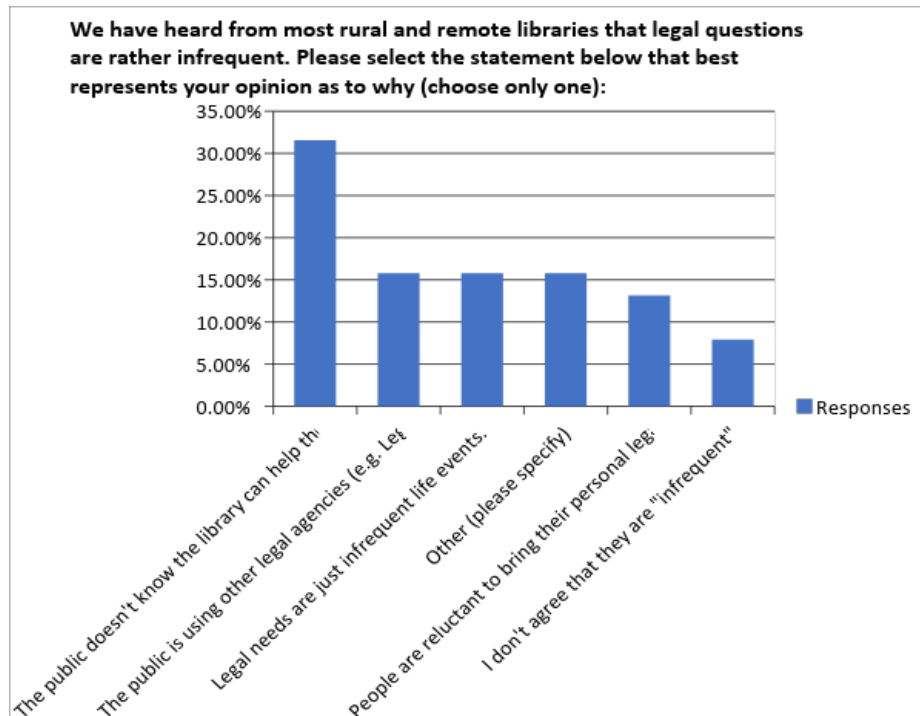
Pertaining to legal information, this is meaningful because these types of services are part of the community advocacy network to support legal information. For libraries to be able to support legal information having a knowledge of the range of advocates and community services is important. The connection goes both ways (where advocates and community workers are referring the public to the library for information). A key recommendation for LawMatters is to build network connections and provide clarity around what legal information libraries and community organizations provide.

4) Legal information needs might be underestimated because the concept of “legal” public librarians hold is different from PLEI-specialists and legal professionals.

LawMatters feedback and previous evaluations indicated that rural and remote libraries experience a low rate of legal information questions. As mentioned above, this response changed when we asked about “everyday legal issues” such as license applications, governmental forms and benefits, and was confirmed during training outreach where questions about forms were common. We learned that how the public might perceive “legal information” was quite different from the legal sector’s understanding. The “continuum” of legal information (and the ancillary benefits of early legal intervention) is not well understood by those outside the legal information field.

Part of our research was to understand *“If not the library, where are people going?”* given the perception among PLEI organizations that there is a significant need for legal information among British Columbians. We were curious as to the librarian perspective on why the low rate and surveyed them on their “best guess” as to why questions are low. The most likely assumed was *“The public is unaware that the library can help them. (31%).”*

Seven percent (7%) disagreed that they were infrequent and reported that they were asked frequently for help with form selection and completion.



Further study from the PLEI field, Legal Services Society’s study “Everyday Legal Problems,”⁶ suggests that the public most often go to other non-professional sources (friends and family, the Internet) and professional sources (lawyers, the Internet) and might not consider the library as a source (though the study did not provide this as an answer option). While we cannot be sure any of these hypotheses are the actual reason, a recommended approach is for the LawMatters program to provide more guidance and support in the range of what constitutes a “legal issue” and what information helps to address it.

5) Public libraries are being called upon to fill the gap of shuttered government and professional services and are not further resourced by these services to help.

Of the range of legal questions, public libraries are most asked for support in: applications for benefits/government services, license application and estate issues. Our survey responses also indicate that

⁶ “Everyday Legal Problems.” *Legal Services Society*. 2018, pp. 7

https://lss.bc.ca/assets/aboutUs/reports/legalAid/lssEverydayLegalProblems07_2018.pdf examines low-income British Columbians’ information seeking behaviours for legal issues. It provides further insight into where people go to seek legal professional assistance vs. non-legal assistance. The study did not ask specifically about visiting the library, but found that those who sought non-legal assistance went first to “Friends or relatives” (59%) and then the “Internet” (37%). For those who sought legal assistance, ranked “Lawyer” (56%) first and the Internet second (21%). Those using the Internet reported the highest level of success (89%) in getting the legal assistance they needed.

librarians, apart from locating forms, are asked to help in completing the forms (typically beyond the scope of a librarian’s work). This confirms a very clear trend emerging from our initial interviews and the in-person workshops is that government services (particularly federal) are off-loading locating forms onto public libraries. Reports indicate that federal agencies were deliberately sending people to public libraries to locate and print their forms (at one time, the government agency would provide these).

- *“As there are no Government Agencies in town and no law offices we are used for general information on all topics.”*
- *“Patrons ... are often referred to the library to complete forms (mostly federal) but not told how to access these (ex. Citizenship, Employment Insurance, Vital Statistics)”*
- *“Forms finding filling scanning emailing” (from a medium sized library)*
- *“we get at least a few patrons every week who are looking for forms online or who are filling out paperwork for family maintenance or other issues.*

It is recommended that LawMatters support libraries in these types of questions through training and resource selection.

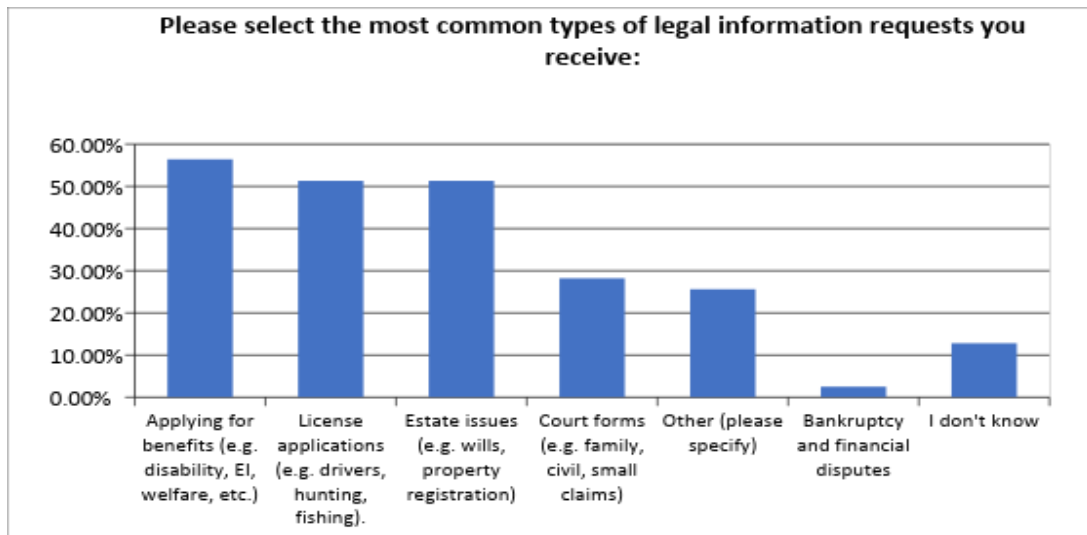


Figure 3 Percentage of responses N=39, multiple selections

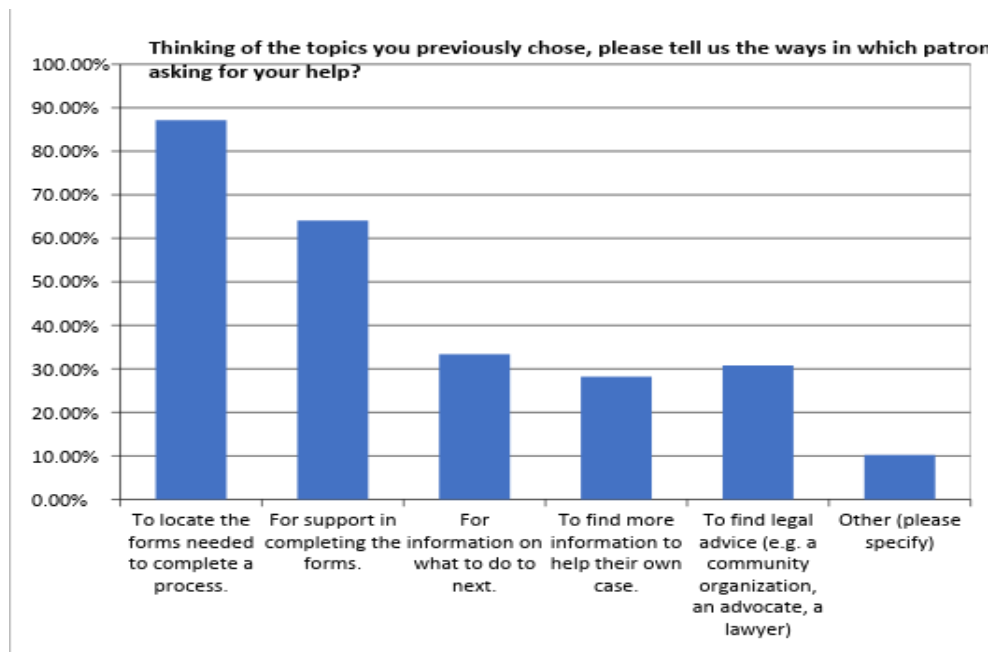


Figure 4 Percentage of responses N=39, multiple selections

6) Public libraries are not necessarily aware of all the services offered by the range of PLEI organizations and when they are helpful to access.

Interview results indicated that various PLEI organizations reach out to and provide tools for public libraries, but further facilitation of these resources might support better PLEI outreach in general. There is an opportunity for LawMatters to coordinate activities with other PLEI organizations to ensure relevant, accessible and reliable information is shared throughout the province to public libraries. There have been efforts made by LawMatters, LSS and People’s Law School to work together with public libraries on an ad hoc basis when it made sense. These seemed to be request driven. Exploring other ways to align and tailor activities to scenarios public libraries face may raise the profile of these organizations’ services, offer more options for libraries, and share the load of PLEI knowledge translation.

PLEI Subject Needs & the LawMatters Collection Analysis

Librarians report that legal subject matter needs and gaps are due to several factors:

- a) Emerging demand and new topics (i.e. new legislation, demography, Truth & Reconciliation)
- b) Formats and usability of materials (i.e. plain language, practical tools, print vs. online)
- c) Management of materials (i.e. expense, space, availability from book seller)

Responses indicate these factors are somewhat contingent on one another. For example, an area might be a gap because demand is currently low but it may be a need in the future. If budgets and space are limited,

librarians may choose not to purchase. Or similarly there might be a high community demand, but the materials available are technical and not accessible. The librarian might choose to save the budget for something more user-friendly instead.

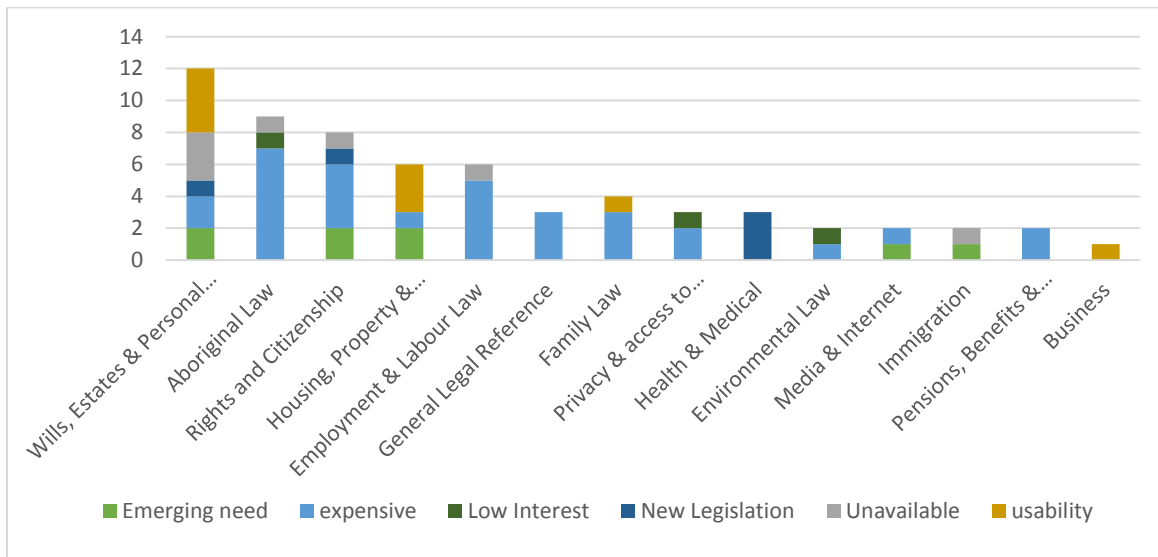
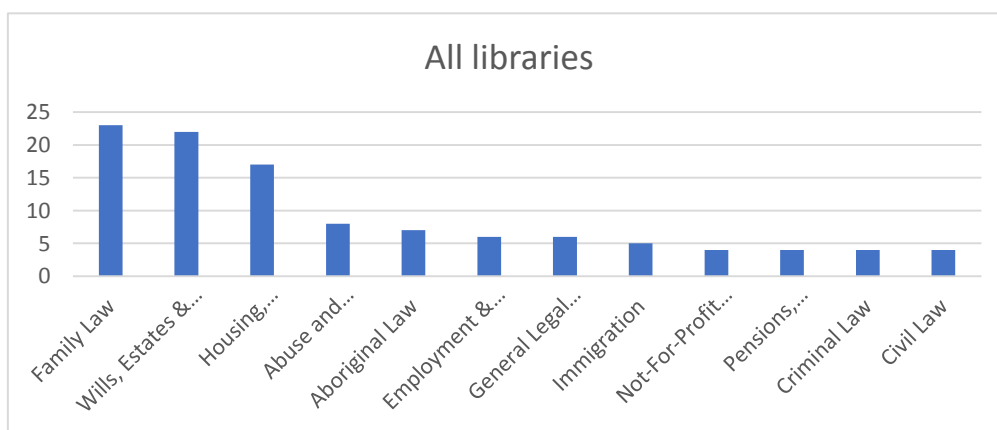


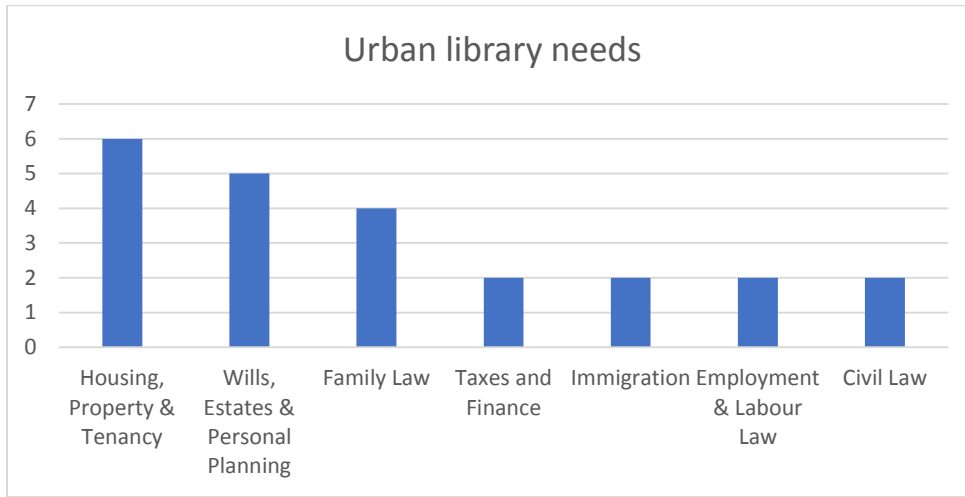
Figure 5 Reason for collection gap cross listed with gap topics

We also hear that the top three reasons for not purchasing in topic areas are: “expense,” “limited availability” and “user-friendly/plain language.” More frequently we hear that material on Aboriginal Law and Truth and Reconciliation are stated to be “too expensive.” New legislation issues such as: cannabis, blockchain, and medically assisted dying are listed as gaps, where materials might not be available yet. Finally, regarding “user friendly” materials, the “Self-Counsel Press” kits were requested by name but are no longer available to libraries due to the publisher’s constraints.

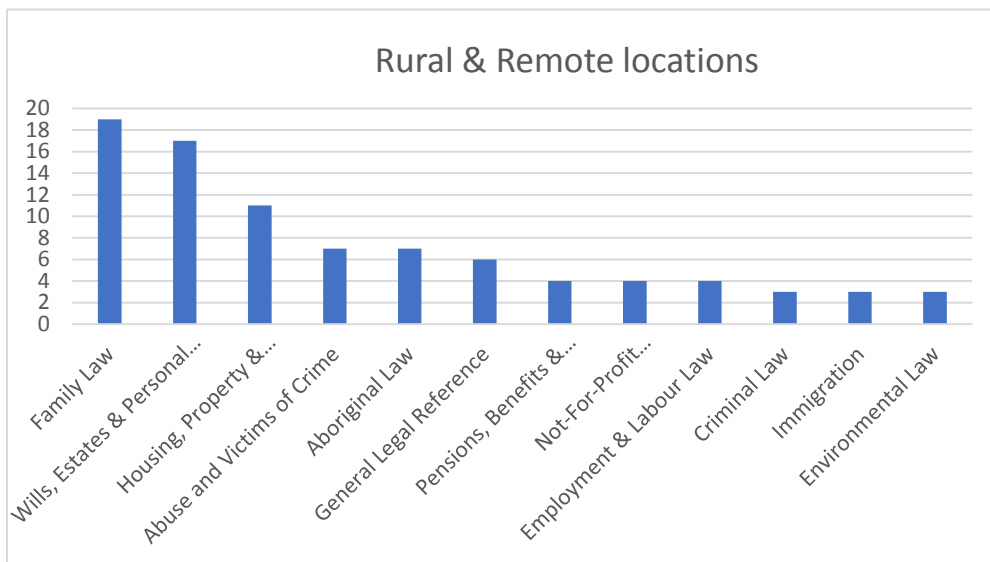
Below is a range of “Wish List Topics” reflecting areas of the collection. We see subject overlap with what we heard from librarians in interviews and surveys. Rural/remote libraries need more support in “Family Law” compared to urban need in “Housing, Property & Tenancy.”



Curious to know if there are differences between the smaller more remote/rural regions of BC and larger urban libraries, we isolated the respondents in urban regions. Bearing in mind a small sample group might skew data, topic trends are somewhat different between urban and rural/remote libraries. In urban libraries, housing is the most prominent need. From interviews we certainly heard that housing in smaller communities that surround the Lower Mainland (a few hour's drive like Squamish for example) and areas the interior (Nelson, Lillooet, Penticton) also experience this as a major legal issue. Note that topics receiving one or fewer notes of gaps have been removed from this chart to highlight the areas of greater need.



Here in an isolated look at collection gaps from Rural and Remote BC public libraries, the top priority need shifts to Family Law and certainly we see a need for a more diverse range of topics than with urban libraries.



Recommendations for LawMatters and the Law Foundation

There are several activities that the Law Foundation can support through LawMatters in response to the research question we originally sought to answer:

“What would it take to provide robust training and support to public library staff so they can help the public with their legal information questions?”

We learned that knowledge brokering, curation, and education will be most impactful in helping public librarians leverage their collection resources. The Law Books for Libraries List and online tools such as Clicklaw Wikibooks and Clicklaw are the necessary foundation for PLEI in BC libraries.

Public library staff need support from subject-matter experts to design the framework for bolstering legal information service in libraries. To enhance and facilitate public library provision of legal information we recommend **increasing funding to LawMatters to allow the program to:**

- 1) Increase LawMatters staff resources to liaise more actively with public libraries:
 - a) Curate and create meaningful content
 - b) Communicate regularly about legal topics and scenarios.
 - c) Develop professional guides to support legal reference questions.
 - d) Provide training through online and occasional in person options.
- 2) Continue the collection grants adding more options about how to apply the grants to public libraries. Include site visits from CLBC representatives (where possible).
- 3) Promote online resources and integrate the use of Clicklaw more heavily into the LawMatters activities. Fund activities to mobilize and curate online resources, as these offer a different option and flexibility of use.
- 4) Develop and provide: Education, Outreach and Knowledge Translation.
 - a) Promote legal resources for the “layperson.”
 - b) Develop a digital communication strategy to maintain a clear, user-friendly online presence, e.g. a web hub for resources, sending bi-monthly/monthly newsletters). This would incur up front and ongoing costs.
 - c) Engage in more usability testing of web resources and communication documents to develop more publicly accessible tools.
 - d) Produce short and flexible online training.
- 5) LawMatters can be a key connector between other PLEI organizations in BC to provide an outreach framework of services to public libraries.

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