

Jessica Almeida

Cases, statutes, law review, and more

A guide to free online legal resources

In the 2014 report “Law Libraries and Access to Justice,” the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) urged law librarians of all walks (court, firm, and academic) to provide legal resources to all. Speaking directly to academic law librarians, the report reminds us of the AALL ethical principle that states, “legal information needs are best addressed by professionals committed to the belief that serving these information needs is a noble calling and that fostering the equal participation of diverse people in library services underscores one of our basic tenets, open access to information for all individuals.”¹

Today, all librarians, not just law librarians, can provide access to legal information through myriad free online legal resources. Whether your patron needs a case, statute, or regulation, there are online portals and search engines available to bring this information to the public. There is also a wealth of information available that analyzes the law and helps to educate everyone on legal issues at both the state and federal level.

Cases (and much more)

- **Casetext.** Created by two lawyers who clerked for the 1st Circuit of Appeals, Casetext is a visually appealing platform that gives free access to cases, statutes, and regulations. This open source database covers all federal cases, statutes, and regulations but has limited state resources. Casetext also has a unique community of lawyer-authors who contribute analysis and annotations through

posts and comments. *Access:* <https://casetext.com/about>.



- **FindLaw.** Findlaw is a Thomson Reuters product, the same folks who brought us the legal juggernaut Westlaw. This free online resource provides articles on a variety of legal topics, from criminal law to tax law. This is a great starting point for any legal topic, and the articles direct the reader to important laws and cases on each subject. *Access:* <http://www.findlaw.com/>.

- **Justia.** Created by the founder of Findlaw, Justia is an open access database that provides legal resources to all. Users will find U.S. case law, codes, and regulations as well as legal resources for all 50 states. You can research the law by subject, find local lawyers, and learn all about law school. You can also subscribe to Justia newsletters, which send daily court opinion summaries, as well as legal news and analysis. *Access:* <http://law.justia.com/>.

- **Legal Information Institute (LII).** LII is an open access database from the Cornell University Law School. The LII collection covers federal law (specifically Supreme Court cases, the U.S. Code, and the Code

Jessica Almeida is assistant librarian public services at UMass Law Library, email: jessica.almeida@umassd.edu

© 2016 Jessica Almeida

of Federal Regulations, as well as the Uniform Commercial Code). LII also links each state's website so users can access state constitutions, bills, laws, and much more. There is also access to Wex, a legal dictionary and encyclopedia edited by legal experts. *Access:* <https://www.law.cornell.edu/>.

- **Oyez.** From the IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law, this website follows every move of the Supreme Court, and is the archival home of the high court's oral arguments. Type a case name into the search box and get the CliffNotes version of the case, with a summary of facts, the essential question being asked, a synopsis of the decision, and how each justice voted. You can browse cases by term or issue, read justice biographies, and take a virtual tour of the Supreme Court building. A great resource for all things Supreme Court. *Access:* <https://www.oyez.org/>.

- **Ravel Law.** Ravel Law is free with a .edu email address and is a great legal resource for schools and libraries that do not have the big ticket items of Westlaw and Lexis. If you need to look at case law, this the place to go. You can use easy keyword searching, narrow by the jurisdiction you want, and Ravel Law will give you a detailed map of case law. This is a great tool for visual learners, as well. The most important cases are larger circles with lines connecting them to smaller circles that denote similar cases. Recently, Ravel Law announced a project to digitally house the entire Harvard Law School collection and just added the United States Code. *Access:* <https://www.ravellaw.com>.

Legislation

- **Legiscan.** Legiscan is a free database that monitors current legislation in all 50 states, as well as the U.S. Congress. This open access resource devotes a page to tracking each state's active legislation. The state legislation pages also include top bill sponsors, a list of the most viewed and monitored bills, and an overview of past legislative sessions. The database allows you to easily browse Congressional bills by House and Senate and by their current status. Register for a free account and

track bills being debated in your home state or current federal legislation. *Access:* <https://legiscan.com/>.

- **Open States.** Developed by the Sunlight Foundation, Open States gives an overview of recently introduced and pending legislation in all 50 states. For each bill, you can view the bill text, any actions taken, who sponsored the bill, and much more. You can browse by state using their interactive map or use your address to discover the bills your local legislators are considering. The site also provides the contact information of current legislators, the committees they belong to, and what bills they have sponsored. With the use of Influence Explorer, you can search for legislators and view who contributed to their campaign. Open States now has an app for your phone, so you can track legislation on the go. *Access:* <http://openstates.org/>.

Ordinances

- **Municode.** Municode provides codification and publishing services for more than 4,200 cities and counties in all 50 states. More than 3,200 municipal codes are available online for free in the Municode Library. All the codes are easy to browse using a side panel table of contents, and the changes function lets you see what sections have recently been edited. *Access:* <https://www.municode.com>.

municode

State resources

- **Legal Information Services to the Public Special Interest Section (LISP-SIS) Public Library Toolkit.** The AALL special committee LISP-SIS provides legal research resources through its public library toolkit. The site helps librarians understand the legal research process and offers best practice guides. There are also toolkits for all 50 states, which include information and links for each state's constitution, statutes, bills, regulations, and so much more. *Access:* <http://www.aallnet.org/sections/lisp/Public-Library-Toolkit>.

• **National Center for State Courts (NCSC).** NCSC is a best practices website tailored mostly to court employees, but it has a variety of resource guides that anyone can view. The resource guides cover topics from court security to technology in the courts. There are a variety of data projects that compare the state courts, like the Court Statistics Project, which examines caseload data from all 50 states. Best of all, the site has compiled a list of state court databases, which house court dockets and documents (if available, every state is different). *Access:* <http://www.ncsc.org/>.

• **National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL).** NCSL is an organization that provides research and resources for legislators and their staff. This website is a great resource if you are looking for information about the differences and similarities of legal topics between states. The research tab is divided into a variety of topics like agriculture and transportation. Under each topic you can find reports on a specific legislative issue. These reports are a great starting point for researching current issues facing state governments. *Access:* <http://www.ncsl.org/>.

Legislative history

• **Congressional Research Service Reports (CRS).** These reports are provided to Congress by the CRS and cover a variety of topics from healthcare to cyberterrorism. The University of North Texas has scoured the Internet to find all CRS reports that have been made public (usually through a freedom of information request) and archived them in their digital library. These reports are extremely well researched and give detailed background information and legislative history on a large number of topics. *Access:* <http://digital.library.unt.edu/explore/collections/CRSR/>.

Legal scholarly works

• **Digital Commons Network.** With more than 300,000 works devoted to law scholarship, the Digital Commons Network is a great place for access to free, full-text law review

articles and legal scholarship. Using the subject heading wheel, you can explore disciplines from family law to transportation law. Each discipline has its own page that showcases popular articles, institutions, and authors. *Access:* <http://network.bepress.com/law/>.



Digital Commons Network™

Open Access. Powered by Scholars. Published by Universities.®

• **Social Sciences Research Network (SSRN).** Not just for law scholars, SSRN allows authors to post their scholarship for all to read. SSRN encourages not only the dissemination of ideas, but also discussion of research between authors and readers. Works are grouped in research and working paper series in subjects covering topics from globalization and public policy to taxation. You can view both abstracts of each work or the full text (if available). *Access:* <http://www.ssrn.com/en/>.

Practitioner materials

• **American Bar Association (ABA).** Many of the ABA committees produce reports and publications on a variety of legal topics usually geared towards practitioners. However, many of these reports are free through the ABA website and can give great background information or current best practices on both federal and state legal issues. The public resources page includes a legal help finder, information about preparing for law school, statistics about the legal profession, and information about the courts. *Access:* http://www.americanbar.org/portals/public_resources.html.

Citation issues

• **Cardiff's Index to Legal Abbreviations.** Sometimes patrons just bring you a strange legal citation. To help figure out the abbreviated title, try Cardiff's Index to Legal Abbreviations. This easy to use database lets you plug in what you know and then gives you a list of possible titles. When you click on the title, the database gives you publication information, so you can easily track it down. *Access:* <http://www.legalabbrevs.cardiff.ac.uk/>. 