

# Legal Information Services in British Columbia

by Marion E. Richeson

of professionalism.

In addition, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, a voluntary group made up of representatives of women's groups from across the country and having a national office in Toronto, puts out a newsprint periodical, *Status of Women News*, giving news from across Canada with information on recent publications of special interest to women. Contact them at 121 Avenue Road, Toronto M5R 2G3.

## Conclusion

There is a wealth of materials available for interested women but access to them is something else. How much can a library do? While surveying the materials available during International Women's Year, this writer was shocked to find a display at a local public library featuring only one or two Canadian books on women, the balance all American. While we must acknowledge the debt we owe the Americans for their ideas, we seriously devalue ourselves and increase our helplessness if we don't know our own laws and customs.

The efforts made to inform women during International Women's Year have only whetted appetites. Follow up now should be in the area of practical programs and information. Women themselves seem to realize this and more of them are seeking information on law as well as themselves enrolling in law courses. There is a very important role for the librarian and the library. ■

Sitting in a dusty office in Vancouver in the midst of renovations of six months' duration, with our library in boxes, and our budget cut to the bone, I find it hard to believe that participants in the first International Colloquium on Legal Aid and Legal Services were impressed by the structure and the accomplishments of the Legal Services Commission of British Columbia. Like the United States Legal Services Corporation, the Commission is an indirect service-oriented organization. The Legal Services Commission, though funded largely by the government of British Columbia, is an independent agency, a Crown Corporation. The Commission was created by provincial statute in August of 1975 to:

"see that legal services are effectively provided to, and readily obtainable by, the people of British Columbia, with special emphasis on those people to whom those services are not presently available for financial or other reasons."

The Commission's terms of reference define "legal services" as:

- (1) education, advice, and information in or about law; and
- (2) any legal service that may be provided by a barrister and solicitor or a notary public.

From the beginning, public access to legal information has been part of the Commission's mandate. Legal Information Services, the unit of the Commission which deals with the creation and dissemination of legal information to the public, originally came into being as a part of the Justice Development Commission. Since 1975, this unit has been

working with the public library system in British Columbia, the Law Library Foundation of British Columbia, British Columbia colleges and other government departments and agencies and funded groups to ensure that the public has access to legal information.

The problems faced by Legal Information Services were identified in studies on legal information and legal education in British Columbia. A 1974 study of the public library and access to legal information found that:

"Librarians are impeded in delivering legal information by the lack of materials available for the layman."

The report recommended that public libraries be provided with at least Provincial Statutes, that lay materials useful to the librarian be produced, that librarians be trained to use legal materials, and that bibliographies of legal materials be produced and revised continually. Another recommendation was that a closer liaison be established between libraries and other agencies involved in the Administration of Justice, especially the Police.

Another 1974 study of the teaching of law in provincial high schools recommended that, as part of a general upgrading of the law courses taught in the schools in B.C.:

- (1) A comprehensive bibliography of legal teaching materials should be prepared;
- (2)...and legal materials should be produced and provided for students;
- (3)...the establishment of minimum law library facilities for all schools.



Based on these recommendations and those of the Law Reform Commission of Canada's *Access to the Law* study, the B.C. Legal Services Commission initiated a programme of grant funding for public, school and college libraries and other information agencies to assist them in developing core legal collections for the public. These core collections include Federal and British Columbia statutes, regulations, and legal materials for the layman.

Furthermore, the Commission recognized that there would be no point in establishing these collections without staffing them with library and information personnel who know how to use these materials and how to help the public use them. The Commission also recognized that public access to legal information through libraries is only one aspect of public legal information; that librarians must also know where to refer the patron when library resources have been exhausted; library staff must also be aware of other community legal services.

With this purpose in mind, the Legal Information Services unit has offered some twenty workshops and short courses throughout the province since the fall of 1975. We have travelled from Chilliwack to Williams Lake, from Port Alberni to Cranbrook, offering training in legal bibliography and programming for access to legal materials, and providing an introduction to legal services and referral services. As well as teaching the specifics of managing and using a public legal collection, the Legal Information Services staff has had to introduce librarians and information officers to the history of law and the Administration of Justice in Canada. As of November, 1976, we have worked with over one hundred library and information personnel in British Columbia. The scope of our activities is partially demonstrated by a budget of approximately \$200,000 allocated in 1976/77 to the three units of the Commission. In April of 1976, Legal Information Services was combined with Public Legal Education and

Para-legal Training to create a new integrated information and education unit.

There are now Commission-sponsored legal collections for the public in libraries throughout much of the southern part of the province. Some of these collections are located in Vancouver's East End, in the Cariboo/Thompson Nicola Library System, the Fraser Valley Regional Library, Kitimat Public Library, the Okanagan Regional Library, the Victoria Public Library, the New Westminster Public Library, and five branches of the Vancouver Island Regional Library. There is also a legal collection at a college in North Vancouver that offers public access to the law.

The Commission, working with the Library Development Commission, has been active in encouraging the establishment of popular law collections as a first part of information services in new public library systems in the province, and provides "seed money" for this purpose. An example of this is the placement of collections of British Columbia statutes in selected libraries in the East and West Kootenays, even before these libraries have been established as a library system, and in the training session for community librarians of the Kootenays.

Moreover, through joint funding of courthouse libraries — funding by the Ministry of the Attorney-General, the Law Foundation of British Columbia, and the Law Society of British Columbia — courthouse collections have been upgraded and are now accessible to members of the Administration of Justice and to those delivering legal services in the province. Courthouse librarians have also been trained in the Commission's training programme, and there are three librarians in the province who act jointly as courthouse librarians and as public librarians. This co-operation has allowed indirect public access to the province's major law collections.

We have recognized that all trained librarians, and information

personnel, and legal collections in the province would serve little purpose unless the public is informed that this service is available. Programmes of legal education for the public take place in many libraries — Consumer Law and Small Claims Court in the New Westminster Public Library, Rape Relief, Landlord and Tenant and Welfare Law in Vancouver, Youth and the Law and Land Transactions in Kamloops and Williams Lake. Community Law Office staff working with community agencies such as libraries have planned and carried out public legal education programmes. For example, the Interior Public Legal Awareness Society (Kamloops) began as a library system project and is being directed by a law librarian.

Public awareness of the law is also promoted through creation of legal information material. The Law in the Schools Project and the Public Legal Education Group have produced pamphlets on Youth and the Law, loose-leaf books on Wills, Estates and Government Benefits, and multi-media presentations on Native land claims and Family Law. A revised legal research manual and a courtwatching brochure are presently under way.

The Commission and Law Foundation of British Columbia sponsor "You and the Law" radio programmes directed to ethnic groups in the province; "You and the Law" has produced booklets and broadcasts on various aspects of law in Chinese and Punjabi. With Commission funding, Vancouver People's Law School has produced many pamphlets for the non-lawyer on Family Law, Civil Rights, Criminal Law and other legal topics. Bibliographies of legal collections for beginning lawyers and lists of popular materials have been compiled to assist lawyers and para-legals. The Commission *Newsletter* and Resource Centre Acquisitions List aid libraries and Community Law Offices in keeping up-to-date in a rapidly changing field and assist them to select new materials for their collections.

The Commission maintains its



own Resource Centre which includes a basic legal research collection, all popular legal materials published in Canada, and most research materials on legal services on a world-wide basis. This library serves as back-up for Commission research and training programmes, and offers the reference collection to answer the day-to-day queries that come in by foot and by phone. It also offers a distribution collection of those materials on law for the layman produced by groups funded by the Commission and by the Commission itself.

In our first year and a half of operation, we have discovered how much overlap there is in the activities of various groups in the province dedicated to access to legal information and public legal education. To co-ordinate these activities and to make our limited budget stretch, we are developing integrated training programmes for librarians, Community Law Office staff, and other para-legals which will stress access to the law and public legal education from the perspective of needed law reform and crucial current legal and justice-related issues. The other day we received this letter from a member of the public:

"My concern... is the lack of access to studies of the laws that govern us.

For over six years I have been involved in working with adolescents and young adults both in the Territories and British Columbia. During that time I have become very depressed in respect to the legal system of this country.

Generally, through no fault of

their own, people are ignorant of the laws, do not understand basic rights, and are at the mercy of the courts, its interpreters, and enforcers. A situation that creates fear, mistrust and uncertainty towards the whole legal system and those involved in it.

The law is interpreted only when it has been trespassed. It is not something one lives with, but rather what one is ruled by. It appears to be an agent of the police. We are helpless, so are our friends and parents. If we are aware, we can ask for a lawyer to be present when questioned, but not a friend. We can be finger printed and photographed for being drunk. Deals can be made for us, but not by us. The courts will pay to accommodate those testifying against us but not for us. The list of the one sided manipulation of the law can go on and on.

I am interested in the law, the legal system and access to it. I am interested in knowing enough about the law to assist myself and others to live with it."

In the commission, we too are "interested in the law, the legal system and access to it." We work in legal information and education services because we want to help "others to live with it" and to change what we and they cannot live with.

*For more information on the Commission and its operations, contact us at the Legal Services Commission, 200-744 West Hastings Street, Vancouver, BC, V6C 1A5, or call (604) 689-0741. ■*