Assisting Rural Domestic Violence Victims: The Local Librarian’s Role

Abstract:
Rules prohibiting the unauthorized practice of law by non-lawyers serve many important purposes. However, they can also limit non-lawyers from engaging in otherwise helpful activities, particularly in the domestic violence legal arena. Laws against the unauthorized practice of law have been relaxed in some states, including Illinois, in the case of laypersons working to assist domestic violence victims in court as advocates. Librarians are ideally suited, especially in rural areas, to serve as advocates for domestic violence victims as well. Indeed, with the proper training, librarians could be an ideal partner to combating domestic abuse in rural areas, as many victims of domestic abuse are prevented from working outside the home and may only be permitted by their abuser to access public places, like a library, without punishment.

Research Question:
Can public librarians assist rural domestic violence victims in meaningful ways without violating unauthorized practice of law (UPL) rules?

Background:

Why Rural?
- Isolation
- lack of resources

Why Librarians?
“Critical shortage” of lawyers in rural areas
Librarians can meet information needs
46.8% of public libraries are rural

Exceptions to UPL Rules:

2003 Washington State Study

>80%

20%

More than 80% of low income individuals had a legal need, but no attorney

Solutions:
Advocates
Limited Licenses
Court Clerks

Recommendations:
Rural Public Libraries and Librarians can help domestic abuse victims with:
- educational programs
- access to information
- safe computer access
- confidentiality
- community connections
- court paperwork
- child programming

References:
American Bar Ass’n Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service & The Center for Pro Bono, Rural Pro Bono Delivery: A Guide to Pro Bono Legal Services in Rural Areas 12 (2003).

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