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WebWatch—Legal Self-Help

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BY PAT NEWCOMBE

CLICKING ON THE WEB...When faced with a legal problem, fewer than half of middle-income Americans consult a lawyer, according to a 1998 study by the American Bar Association. Instead, many consumers turn to legal self-help sources on the Internet. Yet even if individuals eventually seek professional advice, the knowledge gained

through online research can make for a more educated client.

Many self-help sites warn that their information should not be construed as legal advice, nor is it meant as a substitute for the services of an attorney. Indeed, consumers should evaluate each site carefully and consider whether it is produced by a trustworthy source, like a well-known publishing house, established law firm, or governmental agency. Also check on currency.

The web sites reviewed here are designed to answer basic legal questions for the layperson. They provide resources on a broad range of legal topics, such as divorce, real estate, and criminal justice, as well as legal forms and information on finding a lawyer.

WEB OF THE MONTH

NOLO LAW CENTERS

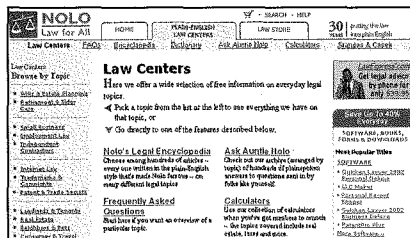
www.nolo.com/lawcenter/index.cfm

Date Visited: 5/6/02

Developer/Provider: Nolo Press

Nolo Press has published self-help legal books and software since 1971. Its web site covers 22 law topics, including such popular subjects as wills and estate planning, retirement and elder care, small businesses, employment law, real estate, marriage and living together, and divorce and child custody.

Each topic area includes frequently asked questions (FAQs); Auntie Nolo, an archive of questions and answers; and a link to relevant articles in Nolo's Legal Encyclopedia. FAQs provide hundreds of answers to everyday legal questions. Auntie Nolo allows users to browse or search a topically arranged archive of hundreds of questions asked by Nolo users. While visitors can no longer ask questions, the answers are updated peri-



odically. Nolo reports that all material is reviewed twice a year, more often when there is a significant change in a law.

Nolo's Legal Encyclopedia—accessible through the main page or from the topics—includes hundreds of easy-to-understand articles on such subjects as consumer fraud, debt and bankruptcy, and divorce and child custody. Subjects are further subdivided with links to brief articles from Nolo publications.

Although Nolo often challenges the legal status quo, promoting legal reforms on the web site, recommendations as to when to contact an attorney are furnished when necessary. The site includes a search engine that permits users to search the entire site or just specific areas. While there is information aplenty, pages can at times be crammed, including ads for Nolo products.

The Bottom Line: Nolo Law Centers has an abundance of free information, in a variety of formats, designed to help the public understand their legal rights. The publisher's longtime commitment to demystifying legal language makes this the most accessible of the consumer sites.

ABA LAWINFO.ORG

www.abalawinfo.org

Date Visited: 5/8/02

Developer/Provider: American Bar Association

Launched by the American Bar Association in August 2001, **ABA LawInfo.org** is for consumers who need answers to routine legal questions or want to determine their rights. The front page presents

eight broad topics: family, home, job, finances, buying and selling, courts, criminal justice, and finding a lawyer. Each topic lists sites provided by various ABA publications. Information is sometimes in the form of FAQs or links to external resources. Clicking on "your job," for example, results in a page that lists law in the workplace, privacy and the workplace, and women in the workplace. Each has multiple subtopics. The language is consistently clear if not as accessible as **Nolo Law Centers**.

The site's best feature is its practical information on using a lawyer. This includes advice on finding and hiring a lawyer, legal fees and expenses, and what to do if dissatisfied with a lawyer. **ABA LawInfo.org** also assists consumers in locating free or low-cost legal help. Click on Find a Lawyer, then Finding a Lawyer, and then select the Self-Help tab on the "Consumer's Guide to Legal Help on the Internet and a little beyond..." State web sites are listed under Public Service Assistance Providers.

The layout is uncluttered. However, when searchers drill down to a more specific topic, they will find on the left side links about the ABA that have nothing to do with consumers.

The Bottom Line: ABA LawInfo.org provides basic information about the most common consumer topics and may be the best place for the public to start their research. Check here on how to hire an attorney.

FINDLAW FOR THE PUBLIC

pub.findlaw.com

Date Visited: 05/6/02

Developer/Provider: FindLaw

FindLaw, produced by the major legal publisher Westlaw, has separate sites for law professionals, students, and businesses. This site is created for the general public. On the left side of the page are ten legal guides on housing, autos, injuries, money, family, work, immigration, health, education, and crime. Multiple subtopics are listed beneath each guide. The work guide, for instance, includes links to subtopics on harassment, termination, compensation, and safety. Clicking on these links brings consumers to articles, FAQs, forms, and web sites.

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Running down the center of the homepage are the FindLaw Resources, the site's main offering. These include links to cases and codes, general legal subjects, federal and state resources, legal references, foreign and international resources, and community message boards on legal topics. The links to state laws are especially important since these often govern the most common legal problems. At Find a Lawyer, consumers can search a particular state, zip code, or select from over 75 practice areas. While the ABA LawInfo.org also links users to various lawyer directories, FindLaw provides the simplest navigation.

The public should find FindLaw highly accessible; its subject categories are arranged hierarchically, reminiscent of Yahoo's homepage. The entire site is searchable via LawCrawler, a search engine specifically designed for legal resources. Advertising is not too overwhelming. Westlaw claims it is constantly updating the site.

The Bottom Line: FindLaw for the Public is a comprehensive site for searching for anything legal, including a lawyer, but without Nolo Law Centers'

consistent attention to making legalese understandable. FindLaw is unique in providing extensive links to primary materials, such as cases and codes.

■ ALLLAW.COM'S LEGAL TOPIC INDEX WEB ADDRESS

www.alllaw.com/topics

Date Visited: 05/6/02

Developer/Provider: AllLaw.com

The Legal Topic Index is actually a part of Alllaw.com, an online directory of legal-related information and services. The site covers 14 broad topics, on the left-hand side of the page, with more specific topics listed toward the bottom. Among the topics are bankruptcy and business, divorce, taxes, health, and estate planning. These contain signed articles, forms, and links to external resources.

Reviewers Needed

Librarians with experience evaluating and analyzing web sites—and solid knowledge of a specific academic or popular subject—are invited to write for Web-Watch. For information, contact Brian Kenney <bkenney@cahners.com>.

The site also offers a search engine for finding lawyers and calculators to assist in determining both child support and penalties for drinking and driving violations. There are pop-up ads for nonlaw products.

While the public will often find the free information helpful, it should be assessed carefully. The site has a disclaimer stating it hasn't reviewed all the information, which is submitted mostly by practicing attorneys, and it makes no claims about quality. The coverage is not exhaustive. Because the site uses a three-column format, the layout can be cluttered.

The Bottom Line: AllLaw.Com can best be used as a backup, helping consumers research a specific area of law not often found in the sites listed above. The sources and quality vary.

Alternate Sites

■ FreeAdvice.com
www.freeadvice.com

■ LawGuru.com
www.lawguru.com

FreeAdvice.com and LawGuru.com both offer legal advice from lawyers, for a fee and free, respectively. Both have

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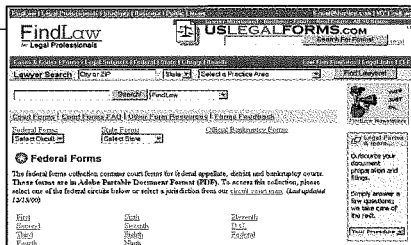
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caveats stating that their services are not a substitute for retaining legal counsel. **FreeAdvice.com** offers a one-week membership, for \$9.95, that lets users ask a lawyer a question—via one of the scheduled live chat sessions—and receive an immediate response. **LawGuru.com** is a free advice service that is dependent on whether an attorney in the network handles that particular area of law in the user's state. At **FreeAdvice.com**, the lawyers may not be licensed in a specific state.

■ The California Courts Self Help Law Center

www.courtinfo.ca.gov/selfhelp

Some state governments provide online legal information; the best is the **California Courts Self Help Law Center**. It is designed to help consumers locate legal assistance, learn about the state's law and court systems, and, in some situations, forgo the use of lawyers. The site provides information on such topics as California family law, traffic information, and juvenile law. Most useful are the instructions on the court system and procedures. It also provides general



resources helpful to those out of state, including a page of links on how to secure free or low-cost legal help.

■ FindLaw-Forms forms.findlaw.com

Most legal web sites list some legal forms, ranging from simple wills and employment contracts to complex licensing agreements. To help consumers locate forms without browsing many sites, **FindLaw-Forms** uses a search engine that collects forms from the Internet and adds them to its database of almost 8000 state and federal court forms. Forms are in PDF format and are grouped into federal and state sections.

■ DivorceNet www.divorcenet.com

Divorce is one of the most frequently searched topics, and **DivorceNet** is one of the most comprehensive family law sites available. It provides a state-by-state re-

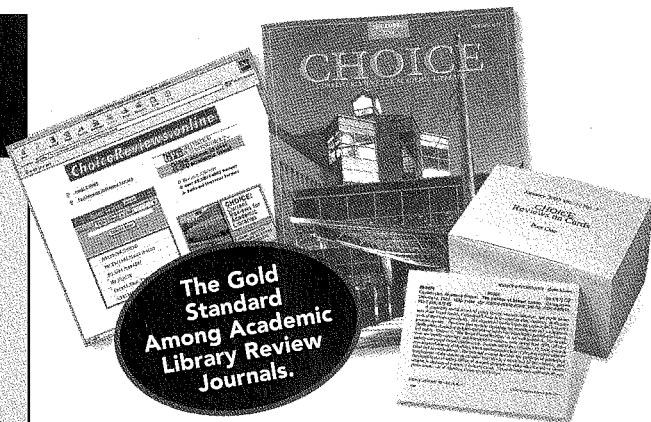
source center for divorce law. These pages offer summaries of each state's divorce laws, often with links to full-text statutes; listings of family lawyers and support services; articles on divorce law; child support calculators; and resource links. Answer desks allow consumers to e-mail questions on law, relationships, taxes, and psychology. There are over 20 discussions devoted to matters such as domestic violence and child support; state-specific discussion boards; and a live chat room. Child Support Network, a company that helps parents who are owed court-ordered child support, sponsors the site, which has ads for in-depth publications.

■ Electronic Credit Repair Kit mix6.com/credit

This guide helps consumers remove errors from credit reports. The site includes sample letters that can be used to get action from credit bureaus, credit reporting agencies, and debt collectors and how to begin fixing an unfairly damaged credit history. The provider is a private individual, Michael Kielsky, and the page is supported by commercial ads for credit services; still, the content is valuable.

4 DIFFERENT WAYS TO PURCHASE MATERIALS FOR YOUR COLLEGE LIBRARY

- 1 **Read CHOICE Magazine** for hundreds of brief, critical, expert reviews of new books each month. Every issue features essays, special features and lists of forthcoming titles.
- 2 **Use CHOICE Reviews on Cards.** You'll get a complete set of reviews and *nothing but the reviews!* Each pack is easily divided for quick reference and portability.
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