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#LawHacks: Websites that You Wish You'd Known about Sooner Highly-useful Websites for Conducting Legal Research at the Local, State and National Levels

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#LawHacks: Websites that you wish you'd known about sooner
Highly-useful websites for conducting legal research at the local, state and national levels.

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Introduction

For many of us when conducting legal research typing a few random words or phrases into a search box yields results that are wholly unusable. Frustratingly the same methodology that we use to search for zucchini bread recipes and funny puppy videos fails to work for us when conducting legal research. It is helpful to have a collection of websites on hand where legal researchers can find reliable information quickly. Herein is a listing of websites that contain useful legal information at the local, state, and national level. This list is by no means exhaustive but, instead serves as a good starting place legal researchers developing a “go-to” collection of internet resources that you can use in your practice.

Local Legal Research

Tip O’Neill is attributed with the phrase, “All politics is local” and in many respects the practice of law is local as well. For many legal professionals accessing local law can be cumbersome and time-consuming. It is often difficult for a legal researcher to locate authoritative sources of this information online. Adding to the researcher’s frustration, verifying the currency of an ordinance can be a challenge. While the availability of local law online varies wildly from city to city there are some websites that can aid even the most beleaguered researcher.

NOLO

www.nolo.com

Publisher of do-it-yourself legal books and software, NOLO provides creditable legal information to individuals online. Complaints from the legal community about the website have not been lost on the publisher. There is a conspicuous disclaimer urging users to consult an

attorney for difficult or complex legal matters. Nevertheless, NOLO provides users with a wealth of links and resources.

For matters governed by local law, NOLO advises users to begin their online search with the name of the city or county and keywords such as “code” or “laws.” Many cities provide online access to local law from their websites. In addition, NOLO advises researchers to consult with the local clerk’s office, county libraries or agency (public health, building inspection) as many of these entities have digitized portions of the local code on their websites.

Municode

www.municode.com

The municipal ordinance of many cities and counties all over the country are available online. The website provides access to over 3,100 local codes from all over the country. Researchers can browse and search one code at a time for free under their “Code Library” from the link in the navigation bar or from the button on the homepage. The codes are also available on the mobile platform version for easier access. Be forewarned that the codes are only as current as the most recent update from the local government. Changes made at town halls and council meetings from last week may not be online. There is a last updated date marked in the banner information for each code. Municode is the oldest and largest codifier of local law and has demonstrated a strong commitment to making these ordinances freely available on the internet.

State Legal Research

Our Republic provides that each state has legal sovereignty to make its own laws. Given that each state has its own legislature, executive and judicial branches (not to mention scores of agencies, departments, divisions, and so on) finding state law can be difficult at times. Each state maintains a structure that it is unique and appropriate for that jurisdiction. Researchers often must decipher the state governing structure before embarking on locating the appropriate answer for their research query. It goes without saying that some rudimentary orientation into state governance is an important step when researching outside of your own jurisdiction.

The Library of Congress – Law Library

www.loc.gov/law/help/guide/states.php

The Library of Congress provides researchers with the *Guide to Law Online*, an annotated compendium of sources for locating the law governing all 50 states and U.S. Territories.

According to the editors of the *Guide*, full text of laws, regulations, and court decisions have been included. In addition to links to primary materials, the *Guide* includes links to legal guides written by lawyers primarily for other lawyers and links to general sources of state information. Researchers should include this online guide into their toolkit as it provides links to sources of federal, indigenous, and international law.

Justia

www.justia.com

This legal information portal is committed to making primary legal materials freely available online. Justia partners with educational, public interest, and similar-minded organizations to provide legal and consumer information to the public. Justia is organized into nine basic

categories including a section entitled “Legal Research & Law Practice.” Researchers can locate case law, codes, regulations, and legal information from this section. There are also free daily opinion newsletters you can sign-up for, documents regarding cases in the news, and access to some Latin American law. Justia has a “Lawyer Directory” and a “Ask a Lawyer” section that allows the public to ask lawyers questions free of charge.

Google Scholar

<http://scholar.google.com>

In addition to the scholarly articles and patent information, *Google Scholar* offers an extensive database of state and federal cases. Contents include state appellate and supreme court cases since 1950, federal cases since 1923, and Supreme Court cases from 1791. To locate state cases, navigate to “Case law” button, select courts of interest, then enter search terms or citation into the search box. Introduced in May 2016, Google Assistant is an intelligent assistant that competes with Amazon’s Alexa, Apple’s Siri, and Microsoft’s Cortana. Voice controlled and interactive, you can ask Google Assistant anything that you would normally type into Google Search or Maps. The app features an incognito mode so conversations can be more private and there is even a self-destruct command that can be set to specified amount of time. To utilize the assistant, researchers should navigate to “More” on the top tool bar on the Google Scholar webpage and follow the prompts for “Meet your Google Assistant.”

Public Library of Law

www.plol.org

Created by the developers of *Fastcase*, the *Public Library of Law* allows users to search cases from the U.S. Supreme Court (1791–present), U.S. Courts of Appeals (generally 1950–present),

and state appellate courts (1997–present). The searchable interface to a large collection of primary law at both the state and Federal levels including, federal and state statutes, regulations, constitutions, and court rules. Clicking on the “Advanced Options” dropdown arrow allows you to limit results by court and by date. On the right side navigation box there is a button for “More Resources” that links to the PLoL blog and podcast. There is currently a downloadable Word document on “Boolean Searches” that researchers will find especially informative when crafting search queries across various platforms. Finally on the homepage in the same area researchers can access video tutorials on finding cases and statutes.

LII – Legal Information Institute

www.law.cornell.edu

LII is a legal information portal maintained by the Legal Information Institute at the Cornell Law School. Dedicated to the mission of providing free legal information on the internet, LII is a non-profit endeavor that offers more than 500,000 pages of content and host more than 30 million visitors each year. The website features a collection of links to case law, statutes, state constitutions, as well as the entire Uniform Commercial Code, Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, Criminal Procedure, Bankruptcy Procedure, and Evidence. You can access state primary law by navigating to the link for “State Law Resources” and “State statutes by topic” from the subheading “Primary sources.” Of note the “State Law Resources section has useful state-by-state links to legislative and court resources, administrative codes, agency information, state bar association, and ethics information. The state statutes link takes researchers to a topical index where most, but not all, state statutes are organized along common topical categories. *LII* offers researches their own legal encyclopedia and dictionary entitled *Wex* that is a freely available, community-built resource edited by legal experts.

Georgia State-Specific Legal Research

Fortunately for researchers access to Georgia specific resources covering legal topics is made possible by the State of Georgia. The official website of the State of Georgia, *Georgia.org*, is an excellent starting place when searching for Georgia state-specific information. The tab “About Georgia” directs users to a several menus including “General Resources” that includes links to the state archives, the digital library and GeorgiaInfo (state almanac). Researchers searching for specific regulatory or statutory sections may want to begin by perusing the “Popular Topics” index or typing in a search term into the box. The websites below prove most useful when searching for authoritative sources of primary law in Georgia.

Georgia General Assembly

<http://www.legis.ga.gov/en-US/default.aspx>

Free access to the official Georgia Code, legislation from both houses, live broadcast of legislative sessions, and profiles of senators and representatives is available at the *Georgia General Assembly* webpage. The code, hosted by LexisNexis, is searchable by keyword and code number. Researchers can also brows by title, chapter, and section. Announcements about the legislative calendar are also posted on the website.

Digital Library of Georgia

<http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu>

Based at the University of Georgia Libraries, the *Digital Library* is an initiative of *GALLILEO*, the state’s virtual library. The editors boast that the *Digital Library* connects users to a million digital objects in more than 200 collections from 60 institutions and 100 government agencies. The various databases contain digitized books, manuscripts, photographs, government documents, newspapers, maps, audio, video, and other resources. Users can search across the

many databases that make up the library or browse the databases by topic, time period, county, institution, or media type. For legal researchers, the “Government & Politics” section includes several databases with legal-related topics. For example, the subsection “Georgia Government Publications” includes monographic public documents of the departments or agencies within the state government published from 1994 to present. The section “Historic Georgia Codes Collections” contains all the historical Georgia codes beginning with the *1799 Watkins Digest of Statutes* through the *Code of Georgia of 1933*. Finally, researchers may find the “Georgia Legislative Documents” collection useful. The collection has fully searchable versions of the *Georgia General Assembly’s Acts and Resolutions* from 1799-1999.

Georgia Secretary of State

www.sos.ga.gov

The Georgia Secretary of State website offers links to the six major areas of service at the top of their homepage: Secretary of State, Corporations, Elections, Licensing, Securities, and Charities. Each section offers a drop down menu that includes information on the rules governing, proposed amendments and forms. Particularly useful are the search boxes that allow researchers to search registered Georgia corporations, charities, candidates for office, and financial brokers. From the homepage there is also an advertisement for the Secretary of State’s mobile app that can be downloaded from both the Google Play store and the Apple App store.

Federal Legal Research

Sources of primary federal law are numerous online. A best practice to ensure validity of the online information is to navigate directly to the federal governing body’s website. The federal government provides many portals, directories, and search engines to make locating information

easier. Below are just a few of the websites to begin your research that will prove more useful than a generic Google query.

USCourts

www.uscourts.gov

Maintained by the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts on behalf of the Federal Judiciary. Aimed at providing information from and about the Federal Judiciary, the website includes the rules and regulations essential to court operations. The “Forms” tab contains links to the standard forms used in all the court divisions. The “Fees” tab outlines the fees applicable for filing in the federal courts and information about post judgment action. Of note the “Court Records” tab has links to locating a case (via PACER), electronic filing (CM/ECF), and information regarding the Court Records Schedule.

Congress.gov (formerly Thomas)

www.congress.gov

This is a great source for federal legislative information, including Senate and House bills, reports, and debates. The online database is a project of the Library of Congress superseding *Thomas* in July 2016. Designed to be a comprehensive portal for U.S. legislative information past and present, the website uses data from the Office of the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives, the Office of the Secretary of the Senate, and the Government Printing Office. Improvements from over *Thomas* include a cleaner interface design, easier linking, and a mobile app. *Congress.gov* provides searchable access to bill status and summary, bill text, the Congressional Records, Congressional Record Index and committee reports, and executive actions such as nominations, treatise and communications, with historic access back to 1973.

From the homepage users can link to live and previously-aired coverage of House and Senate floor proceedings.

FDsys (formerly GPO Access)

www.gpo.gov/fdsys

Another great source for federal legal research, this site also has executive resources like federal regulations and presidential documents. The website is a service of the Government Printing Office (GPO) that provides free online access to official publications from all three branches of the Federal Government. *FDsys* has an advanced search engine that allows users to narrow search for easier access to documents of interest. *FDsys* serves as a repository that guarantees long term preservation and access to digital government content. Researchers are encouraged to browse the over 50 collections from a right-side text box that links to various sections including “Economic Indicators,” “Congressional Documents,” and “Public and Private Laws” among others. The ultimate goal of *FDsys* is have a complete historical record of all federal government documents from the nation’s founding to present.

Data.gov

www.data.gov

Launched in May 2009 by the then Federal Chief Information Officer (CIO) of the United States, the website is maintained and hosted by the U.S. General Services Administration, Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies. On this website you can find data, tools, and resources to conduct research, design data visualizations, and more. Under the terms of the 2013 Federal Open Data Policy, newly-generated government data is required to be made available in open, machine-readable formats to the public. The datasets can be browsed from the catalog of

government data, searched with keywords, or searched by geospatial area by drawing boundary boxes on a map. There are a myriad of software applications that are powered by the datasets on topics ranging from locating an alternative fueling station to the Red Cross Hurricane app.

Conclusion

These websites are just a sampling of what is available for online research today. Creating your personal list of “go-to” websites provides the researcher a helpful and convenient starting place for successful research.