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## Librarians to offer 24-hour online service

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Need a librarian in the middle of the night?

The Anne Arundel County library system is one of several in Maryland trying to make sure you'll be able to find one ready to help starting today, and you won't even have to leave the house - if you have a computer with Internet access.

The libraries are seeking to enable Maryland residents to reach a librarian online around the clock for information ranging from recipes to tax information to just about anything you could find in the state's libraries.

Libraries across the state today launched a free service called Maryland AskUsNow!, which will make librarians available 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week for online chat sessions.

"What we're really doing is we're breaking down those barriers of time and space that have existed for hundreds of years," said Joe Thompson, project coordinator for the service.

"People had to always get to their library. They had to walk there; they had to drive there. They don't have to do that now. They can be sitting right at their home PC and they can do it whenever they want," he said.

The service will be available to all Maryland residents by logging on to local library Web sites or [www.askusnow.info](http://www.askusnow.info).

When someone signs on for a chat session, a question can be relayed to a librarian, who will search print and electronic sources for an answer. The user and the librarian will be able to see the same screen at the same time.

Maryland is the second state to set up such a statewide system, Mr. Thompson said. New Jersey has had a similar system for more than a year.

In Maryland, librarian staffing will come from 20 public library systems, five academic libraries - including Anne Arundel Community College - and the Maryland Law Library.



The system will be part of a larger library consortium that will enable librarians from Massachusetts and California to help Maryland residents in the middle of the night.

"This is really the next big leap I'm seeing in providing information online," Mr. Thompson said.

The computer software that is being used by the state is called 24/7 Reference, which is available through a licensing agreement with the Metropolitan Cooperative Library System Pasadena, Calif.

The Baltimore County Public Library received a \$155,602 grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

New Jersey first started making librarians available online from 11 a.m. until 9 p.m. in October of 2001. In that first month, librarians fielded 240 questions, said Peter Bromberg, program development coordinator for the South Jersey Regional Library Cooperative.

But when the service went 24-7 in January 2002, Mr. Bromberg said the amount of questions went up to 100 a day.

Demand has been rising.

Last January, the program, called "Q and A NJ," received almost 5,000 questions.

Some of the most popular inquiries relate to health, law, genealogy and business. Students working on research papers also reach out often to the nocturnal librarians, Mr. Bromberg said.

Librarians who take part in the service take on a wide array of questions.

"There is no typical question," Mr. Bromberg said. "Users ask questions that are completely across the board, which is pretty parallel to the kinds of questions that they ask in person or over the phone."

The longest wait for help is between three and five minutes, Mr. Bromberg said, and usage goes way down at night.

Mr. Bromberg also said the online service has enhanced residents' understanding of library services.

The service has been praised highly by elderly and disabled New Jersey residents.

"We know that we're reaching people," he said. "We know that we're making a difference."

- No Jumps-

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