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# Md. libraries to connect with patrons via the Internet

## 24-hour service to offer live, interactive help from reference librarians

By Alyson Klein  
Sun Staff

Originally published March 17, 2003

Libraries across Maryland are scheduled to begin offering a service today that combines the 24-hour convenience of the Internet with the professional expertise of a reference librarian.

Maryland AskUsNow! will be the second program of its kind in the nation.

The program will be launched at 10 a.m. at the Towson Library.

Although similar services are available in other states, "the uniqueness of the Maryland program is that it is 24 hours and virtually every public library in the state is involved. We're the second state ... that has managed to pull together a consortium of libraries that can provide information at the speed of light," said Bob Hughes, a spokesman for the Baltimore County Public Library.

Administered by the state Division of Library Development and Services -- a division of the State Department of Education -- AskUsNow! will be similar to an instant message system and is free to users.

"Instead of spending 15 minutes just going through the sites Yahoo or Google provides, in the same amount of time you can talk to a trained person who will be able to directly search

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for exactly what you're looking for," said Joseph Thompson, the Baltimore County library project coordinator for the program.

When users log onto local library Web sites or [www.askusnow.info](http://www.askusnow.info), they will be connected with a librarian, most likely at a county library, one of five college or university libraries, or the Maryland Law Library, said Andrea Lewis, a consultant for the state library system.

When a user types in a question, a librarian responds almost immediately with an appropriate Web site. The user decides whether the site meets his or her needs. If so, the librarian helps him or her navigate the site.

"It seemed like a natural fit. .... This makes information from the library available whenever you need it, like if your child comes home at night and announces he has a report due the next day," said Irene M. Padilla, assistant state superintendent of library development and services.

By using the new system, residents can avoid Web sites that contain advertisements and unreliable sources.

"A lot of people aren't trained to think critically about information. Librarians know whether or not a site is just trying to advertise something and can limit the search to only valid sources," Thompson said.

The service will give Marylanders access to Web sites and databases they may not otherwise use.

It also will be useful in navigating the "invisible Web," databases not detected by Yahoo and other search engines, said Stacey Aldrich, a state library system consultant.

Some of the people staffing the service will be the same librarians residents see at their local information desk.

Staff members at libraries around Maryland will be assigned different shifts throughout the day and part of the night.

Early in the morning, questions will be answered by librarians in California who are part of the nationwide consortium that administers the service.

"I think people are intimidated by the library sometimes. They think it takes a lot of time, and this gets it done more quickly and efficiently. ... They don't even have to leave the house," said Elizabeth Rafferty, a Baltimore County librarian.

The only other state with such a service is New Jersey, which

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has been operating [www.qandanj.org](http://www.qandanj.org). on a 24-hour basis since January of last year.

The New Jersey service answers about 5,000 questions a month, said Peter Bromberg, the program development coordinator for the South Jersey Regional Library Cooperative. "We're really just doing what we've always done, helping people locate information. We're just bringing it to them where they are, which increasingly is on the Internet," he said.

New Jersey's program, and similar ones around the country, served as models for Maryland's.


"It makes the Internet much easier to navigate and brings the resources of the library into their homes long after our doors are closed," Thompson said.

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