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Elder Law-Related Organizations on the Internet

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ON-LINE

Elder Law-Related Organizations on the Internet

Almost all organizations now maintain Web sites, which enable them to increase their memberships and provide current information about the groups to members, prospective members, and the public. Here, we will explore how to navigate through these sites and look at some of the best sites related to elder law information.

By Robin C. Schard

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Organizations provide a wealth of information to both their members and the general Internet surfing public. For those who are active members of these organizations, recommending these sites may be like preaching to the choir. You already know the amount of information these organizations make available. To those who are neither members nor regulars of these sites, you are missing some great resources.

Most associations are driven by their membership. They are often trying to increase their membership, and many groups also have a specific service aspect to their mission. The Internet helps fulfill both of these goals. If an organization provides valuable information via the Internet, more people will be attracted to the site. More traffic creates more visibility and more people interested in joining the group. The Web is being used increasingly as an advertising tool, and many associations are taking advantage of it for that purpose.

Moreover, the groups fulfill a service function by providing information that is useful not only to their members or prospective members but also to the general public. Indeed, many organizations provide information that is specifically geared to the layperson and not the expert. As a researcher, however, it is still important to evaluate the source of the information. On the whole, organizations are reliable sources for all types of information, from pending research to statistics. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that these organizations often have an agenda other than just providing information to their members or the public. The material provided on the Web sites may be skewed to fit their agenda. For that reason, it may be wise to consult the mission statement of the organization, which is almost always included on the Web page, before relying on the information provided. The mission statement should provide the researcher with some basis for evaluating the accuracy of available information.

Besides basic contact and membership information, many Web pages designed for organizations share other characteristics. There are some general recommendations for searching this type of Web site, even though many of these hints are certainly helpful in using other Internet resources. First, do not overlook the news or press release sections of the page. While these sections do indeed have news about the organization, they may also have updates on administrative and judicial decisions, recently released government reports, or advances in scientific research. Additionally, they are excellent sources for current or pending changes in legislation and regulations, particularly with organizations that are involved in lobbying.

For those who do not automatically equate press releases with pending legislation or for other quirks created by Web page designers, many Web pages have site maps to help locate needed information. Site maps are similar to a table of contents. They outline the contents of each section of the Web site and provide links to each section or subsection. Because the designer of the Web page may process information differently from the researcher, site maps allow the researcher to browse the entire site, rather than having to enter each section individually to locate useful information. They are particularly helpful in larger, more complex Web sites, such as the one for the AARP. Another tool for quick access to useful information is the mini-search engine. A mini-search engine¹ lets the researcher search for

keywords or phrases within the Web site. This tool is also quite helpful with larger Web sites. Both the site map and the mini-search engine will increase the researcher's efficiency in finding pertinent information.

Another way that organizations distribute information is through listservs or mailing groups. Subscription is made by an e-mail message to the computer that maintains the mailing group. The subscriber then receives a confirmation message and instructions on participating in the mailing group. Save the instructions because they will also tell you how to unsubscribe from the listserv, where to send messages, and what the e-mail addresses are for the people who maintain the listserv. Once a person subscribes to a mailing group, any e-mail sent to the listserv is sent to each subscriber. Members² post (e-mail) questions, responses, announcements, or other relevant information to the list, and it is distributed to the other subscribers. Most lists allow anyone to subscribe, but some lists maintained by organizations will let only members join. Listservs, however, should be used with caution. Some listservs spawn enormous amounts of e-mail, so they may generate more mail than valuable information. One example of a pertinent mailing group is ELDERLAWL@topeka.wuacc.edu, which covers legal issues concerning aged persons: For subscription, send the following message to listserv@topeka.wuacc.edu:

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subscribe elderlaw-l [your first  
name] [your last name]
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For a large list of other law-related mailing groups, try Lyolette Louis-Jacques' Law Lists at <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/~llou/lawlists/info.html>, or Liszt, the mailing list directory at <http://www.liszt.com/> for all other nonlaw mailing groups. Although listservs should be used cautiously because the subscriber never really knows who is participating in the group, they are a great way to communicate and network with others who share similar interests.

Web Sites

Below are listed some of the best organization-sponsored Web sites for elder law-related information. Although not stated in every listing, each organization's Web site includes membership information, contact information, upcoming conferences sponsored by the group, and other information about the society itself.

National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys, Inc. (NAELA) <<http://www.naela.org>>

The first screen for NAELA's Web page provides information on recent decisions, legislation, or organizational updates. The majority of the information provided on this Web site is designed for members; even the press releases in the News and Events section deal mostly with information about members (although the events portion announces upcoming educational programs). There is a membership directory and a listserv and discussion group, as well as information listed by subject or Special Interest Group (SIG). Accessing this information requires a password that is only

distributed to members. However, NAELA does provide some useful information to nonmembers. For example, under Elder Law Resources, NAELA has the Consumer Directory, which allows anyone to search for a member by name, location, or area of expertise. An extensive listing of other elder law-related Web pages, arranged by subject, is also found under the Elder Law Resources section of this page. Although most of the information in the Publications and More section is about ordering NAELA publications, the page also includes the full text of the Law & Aging Series brochures. These brochures are aimed at the layperson. They contain a brief discussion of the issues on such topics as durable power of attorney and living trusts. One final feature of this Web site is the Contact Us section. While every page in this site contains the address and telephone number for the organization, the Contact Us section provides an electronic Request for Information form that allows the user to send an inquiry to the group by e-mail. Overall, this site is quite well organized and helpful even though it is definitely geared toward members of the NAELA.

**American Bar Association:
Section of Real Property,
Probate and Trust Law (RPPT)**
<<http://www.abanet.org/rppt>>

As with the NAELA site, the ABA Section of Real Property, Probate and Trust Law (RPPT) places news on the initial page. Unlike NAELA, however, very little of the news has anything to do with the organization itself.

Most of the information on the What's New page deals with federal legislative and regulatory proposals. The news portion also has some other interesting features. RPPT has a What's New listserv that e-mails news items to subscribers. This is a great current awareness feature for those who are interested in recent and pending changes in the law of real property, probate, and trusts. The news portion is also archived. While the benefits of old news may be limited, it is nice to be able to refer back to some bit of information read months ago. This Web page also goes a step further. Not only can researchers read news but there is also a link to submit news to RPPT. The Publications section permits on-line purchase, in addition to providing information on publications and tables of contents for periodicals that the Section publishes. The Links and Listservs portion of this site has a short list of links and a list of several listservs that are sponsored by the RPPT. The final sections of this site contain typical organization information, such as membership information, including committees and special projects, staff listings, upcoming CLEs, and meetings. To help users navigate this Web site, there is a site map and also a mini-search engine that can search just the RPPT site or the entire ABA page.

**National Senior Citizens Law
Center (NSCLC)**
<<http://www.nsclc.org>>

This Web site provides the standard information on the NSCLC and the services that it provides. The real information in this

page, however, lies in the Library section. The first screen of the Library section describes periodicals and manuals that the NSCLC publishes. For full text articles, the researcher should use the Articles by Subject or Articles by Date subsections. The Articles by Subject section reports on court actions and recent and proposed legislation and regulations. The articles are sorted into subjects, such as Medicare, legal services, or Social Security/SSI. The Articles by Date section is a useful way to browse articles that are arranged chronologically. Also helpful is the Links to Other Organizations page, which includes other related Web pages. The entire site is not very large, but it does have a site map to assist the user in finding relevant information.

**American Society on Aging
(ASA)**

<<http://www.asaging.org>>

The ASA site provides access to the full text, or at least selected text, of many of its publications. For example, in the Publication section, about two years' worth of *Aging Today: The Bi-monthly Newsletter of the American Society on Aging* is available, as well as selected articles from *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging* and several subject-specific newsletters from the Networks portion of the Web page. Members have access to a great deal more information, such as a directory of experts, on-line training options, a chatboard, a program to design surveys, and much more.

This Web page also has a rudimentary mini-search engine.

American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)

<<http://www.aarp.org>>

AARP provides a wealth of information on all issues involving older persons. The problem is finding relevant information. There is a simple search engine that allows a researcher to search this Web site, or the researcher can start with the site map to get an overview of everything included. The Legislative Issue section of this site is of interest because it includes indexes to Issue Statements, News Releases, and Congressional Testimony as well as information on specific topics such as Long Term Care and Social Security. Another useful section is Reference and Research, which has a subsection called AARP Guide to Internet Resources Related to Aging listing many useful Web sites, listservs, and newsgroups.

National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA)

<<http://www.gwjapan.com/NCEA>>

This center is funded by the U.S. Administration on Aging and is a consortium of several other groups, including the National Association of State Units on Aging and the Clearinghouse on Abuse and Neglect of the Elderly at the University of Delaware. The Web page contains contact numbers to report elder abuse in the 50 states and citations to state laws related to elder abuse. NCEA also provides basic elder abuse statistics in its Fact Sheet section, and the

center's newsletters for the last year or so. This Web page has virtually no navigational aids, such as a site map, but since it is fairly small the researcher will have no trouble locating relevant information.

Medicare Rights Center (MRC)

<<http://www.medicarerights.org>>

In addition to providing direct services for those who cannot afford an attorney, MRC also has interesting information on Medicare and other insurance options. The What's New section mainly includes information on testimony before federal committees. The Consumer Publications section mostly contains order forms. The HMO Flash subsection does have brief discussions of various HMO-related issues. A lot of information is buried in the MRC Programs portion of the page. For example, MRC Programs has issues of *MRC News*, MRC's quarterly newsletter, for the last two years, and the Press subsection has press releases for the last three years and a press release listserv. The Policy subsection of MRC Programs includes the text of reports, testimony, and studies published by the center. This site has no search aids to assist the researcher in finding information.

American Bar Association: Commission on Legal Problems of the Elderly

<<http://www.abanet.org/elderly>>

This site does not look like it has been updated recently, but it does have some interesting con-

sumer information, such as "10 Legal Myths about Advance Medical Directives," and an index for *Bifocal*, the Section's quarterly newsletter.

As with everything on the Internet, change is constant. Many of these sites changed from the time I initially started writing this article until the day I actually finished it. Some, like the RPPT site, changed significantly in both design and content. Even if you are unsuccessful at one of these sites on one day, you may still find the exact piece of information you need the next time. This seems particularly true with association-sponsored Web pages because more or less resources are diverted to different aspects of the association's mission. So, keep an open mind when using these Web pages and browse these sites periodically for changes and enhancements.

Endnotes

1. See Robin Schard, *Search Tools: Skills and Strategies*, ELDER'S ADVISOR J., Winter 1999, at 56, 57.
2. Some lists also allow outsiders to participate.

Web pages mentioned in this article:

- ABA Commission on Legal Problems of the Elderly www.abanet.org/elderly
- ABA Section of Real Property, Probate and Trust Law www.abanet.org/rppt
- American Association of Retired Persons www.aarp.org
- American Society on Aging www.asaging.org
- Law Lists www.lib.uchicago.edu/~llou/lawlists/info.html
- Liszt www.liszt.com/
- Medicare Rights Center www.medicarerights.org
- National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys, Inc. www.naela.org
- National Center on Elder Abuse www.gwjapan.com/NCEA