

Maryland AskUsNow!
Service Highlights
Florida Library Association
Annual Conference
April 20, 2006

For more information please contact:
 Joe Thompson
 Project Coordinator: Maryland AskUsNow!
 Baltimore County Public Library
 410-887-6124 jthomps@bcpl.net
www.askusnow.info



“...a partnership of Maryland public, academic, and special libraries.”

Academic Libraries:

Allegany College
 Anne Arundel CC
 Baltimore City CC
 Prince George’s CC
 UM College Park
 Villa Julie College

Public Libraries:

Allegany
 Anne Arundel
 Baltimore County
 Calvert
 Caroline
 Carroll
 Cecil
 Charles
 Enoch Pratt/SLRC
 Frederick
 Harford
 Howard
 Montgomery
 Prince George’s
 Queen Anne’s
 Somerset
 St. Mary’s
 Washington
 Wicomico

Special Libraries:

Maryland State Law
 Maryland State LBPH

Get answers from a librarian, not a machine!

A Quick Look Back

- **When did we start?** Planned in 2002; Launched on March 17, 2003.
- **What is it?** “Maryland AskUsNow! is a 24/7 live online interactive service. It uses the expertise of librarians to provide answers to questions, research guidance, and help navigating the Internet.” Format is *Live chat* with *E-mail follow-up*.
- **How do our customers access it?**
 - Yellow icon on our partner library’s home pages and links throughout site.
 - The statewide promoted www.askusnow.info page.
 - Links on K-12 school, nonprofit, and other organization’s web sites.
- **Why do it?** Allows our students & the public to access to the same trusted library service in a new desirable format - at their time and place of need. Our librarians are also learning a lot about using online sources to provide quality reference service.
- **Why cooperate?** It’s cost effective. We are drawing from each library’s strengths, as well as building an effective communication and learning network of libraries.
- **Who’s involved?** It’s provided by over 250 librarians for 266 hours a week at our 27 public, academic, & special library system partners across Maryland. In addition, librarians from around the country with “*QuestionPoint 24/7 Reference*” back us up at busy times, overnight, and weekends. Training is provided by the project.
- **Where do we get the software?** *QuestionPoint* is a service of OCLC. The backup staffing, chat software, and e-mail follow-up software are all included in our contract with QuestionPoint. The software is online, so nothing needs to be loaded on our machines.
- **Who’s paying for this?** LSTA grant funding from Maryland State Department of Education, Division of Library Development and Services covers the total cost of our QuestionPoint contract, full-time coordinator, training, & statewide marketing. Partner libraries contribute existing staff, Internet workstations, and enthusiasm!



It’s Busy!

- **What is usage like?** Our goal at the beginning was to eventually receive 1000 questions each month, which has been surpassed every month! The highest month of usage so far was April 2005, with 5970 questions submitted. Spring and fall are busiest. In total, we have received over 120,000 questions since the service launched.
- **Who are these people?** In the first half of 2005, 44.36% of people who filled out the AskUsNow! pop-up survey identified themselves as “Student (Kindergarten – 12th)”. About half of all survey responders say they’ve used the service before. Over 40% of people find out about it just by seeing the link on the library’s web site.

Sample Questions:

- “What kind of salary should a nurse make?”
- “This question relates to electric or gas scooters. I need to look up the Maryland law that governs the use of these scooters on public roads in Maryland?”
- “Does the library have a copy of HP and the Half Blood Prince?”

Exemplary Survey Feedback:

- “The service was very knowledgeable and they knew just where to look to find the information that I needed!”
- “Fast, helpful, easy to use, friendly and I can always count on!!”
- “My librarian rep. was very nice and helpful she should get a raise!”

A Model Service for Others



When we planned AskUsNow! in 2002, we had several models to draw from in the state, as well as large new cooperative services like New Jersey’s *Q and A NJ*. Since then, our service has become an example for many others, including emerging state projects in Arizona, Louisiana and the province-wide Bibliothèque nationale du Québec. In 2004, our service was one of only two to receive the *Exemplary Digital Reference Service Award* from the U.S. Department of Education’s Virtual Reference Desk Project.