

# State libraries answer 300,000 questions online

In five years, program draws queries ranging from plumbing to hairstyles

By **Mary Gail Hare**

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Questions to AskUsNow!, the state's 24-hour, online library information service, run the gamut — from what to do when the pipes burst to where to find the latest fashion sensation and how to renew a book.

Jim DeArmey, Baltimore County Library's information services coordinator, recently answered one contact who could not locate his insurer and another seeking photos of "emo" hairstyles. He was at the North Point library in Dundalk on Thursday to celebrate the program's 300,000th question, then spent the rest of the day tracking down a 25-year-old audiocassette of the popular novel "Love Story" to fulfill another AskUsNow! request.

"We try to answer everything as best we can," he said. "It is fun to see just what comes up."

In all, 275 librarians — 22 in Baltimore County — participate in the program that started as a partnership between Harford and Baltimore counties and went statewide five years ago. It now includes 39 Maryland public and private library systems, the Maryland Law Library and several academic libraries at area colleges and high schools.

People with questions can log into AskUsNow! from anywhere via e-mail. A librarian at one of the participating libraries typically acknowledges a message quickly. If necessary, librarians chat with the questioners to reach a better understanding of what they are asking. In most cases, the answer arrives within a few minutes.

Baltimore County answered 8,000 questions last year. The program is funded by the state through a federal grant of about \$175,000 each year. Each jurisdiction contributes staff time.

Edward Landa, the designated 300,000th questioner, came to Dundalk from Silver Spring with a copy of the e-mailed answer he recently received. A geologist with the federal government, Landa was working on a research paper when he came across a Depression-era acronym that he could not decipher. A Google search gave him far too many possibilities, but AskUsNow! located the definition and provided him sources on the time frame.

Landa had originally posed the question on his smart phone. When he lost the signal, he assumed the library connection



BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR/SUN PHOTO

Emil Ferren, left, director of the Charles County Public Library, congratulates Edward Landa for being the 300,000th questioner. Alison Sherwell of the Charles County Public Library looks on.

was also severed.

"I was amazed to find the answer in my inbox the next morning," he said. "I am a big believer in this service."

Jim Fish, director of the Baltimore County library system, praised "the energetic information seekers," who reply to questions.

"They identify what our customers are actually seeking and provide information from reliable sources," Fish said.

As he spoke, a screen in the background flashed e-mailed compliments from dozens of satisfied customers.

"You saved me gas, anxiety and hours of running around," one read. Another said, "You will be my reference from now on." One was grateful for "the painless process without the hassle of telephone prompts."

More than 50 percent of the questions come from students in kindergarten through high school. One student credited the library for a first place in a science fair and another thanked staff for being available even on a snow day.

"Questions don't have business hours," said Julie Strange, statewide coordinator. "We are here for homework and for those who don't have regular access to the library."

With any luck and at any hour, a librarian can evaluate sources and sites and give a prompt, reliable answer, DeArmey said.

"We are humans answering other humans' questions," he said. "We use Google and a whole lot more. A real live person will give you an answer and the resources we used. We can even send the exact pages we used to the customer."

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