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Maryland Launches Special Library Service to Provide Information Anywhere, Anytime Through Live Online Chat

Expertise of Librarians Provides Answers That Are Fast, Focused

(Baltimore, MD – 3/10/03) On March 17, 2003, libraries across the State of Maryland will launch a new online service to provide residents and students with answers to questions and professional library services 24 hours-a-day, seven days a week through *Maryland AskUsNow!*. This unique cooperative effort brings together the resources of public, academic and special libraries for the first time in a project of this magnitude. Through “virtual reference,” *Maryland AskUsNow!* offers answers to questions, research guidance, and help navigating the Internet through live online chat sessions with a librarian.

This free service is available to all Maryland residents by logging on to local library Web sites or www.askusnow.info. Unlike an Internet search engine, *Maryland AskUsNow!* uses the expertise of experienced librarians to find the information needed. Upon signing on to a chat session, customers can relay their question to a librarian who will search the vast print and electronic resources available to find an answer. Through a technique called “co-browsing,” which allows the librarian and the customer to see the same screen at the same time, the librarian can share the information, as well as links to Web sites and databases, or show the customer how to complete a search.

Libraries continually seek new ways to support customers wherever they might be. Over the past five years, 24/7 Reference™ has been delivering customized software tools for the emerging virtual reference market. Maryland is now part of a consortium of libraries worldwide through 24/7 Reference™ offering round-the-clock online service. After hours, libraries from Massachusetts to California will provide service to Maryland residents, and librarians in Maryland will do the same when other areas of the country have gone to bed.

This project has been funded for the first year by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, LSTA grant funds, through the Division of Library Development & Services, Maryland State Department of Education.

For more information on *Maryland AskUsNow!* log on to www.askusnow.info.

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