

The frugal lawyer and the value of \$200 | Betty Dykstra - Law360 Canada

7–9 minutes



Betty Dykstra

I went shopping the other day to pick up a few things, nothing special, but the cupboards were getting a bit sparse. Some fresh fruit and veg, some meat in bulk to be repacked, dairy and some pantry staples. Sadly, these days, it is no longer a surprise or shock to pay almost \$200 for a quick trip to a grocery store.

I think about the value we get for our money often. Frugality is a characteristic of my Dutch heritage (along with my directness, stubborn nature and my willingness to voice my opinion). You can always find an article or forum where others are willing to tell you the best things you can purchase with a set amount, which I always scan eagerly to get the best value for my hard-earned money.

So, think about the value of \$200. This is the cost of the County Library Levy specifically named in a line of the 2023 Law Society of Ontario budget and as part of the dues that a lawyer will pay annually. What is the value that you receive? What is the importance of the line that specifically calls it a “County Library Levy?” Who approves the spending budget of \$200?

The Federation of Ontario Law Associations (FOLA) and the Toronto Lawyers Association have always been strong supporters and promoters of law libraries. They are two of the shareholders of LiRN (Legal Information Resource Network) along with the Law Society of Ontario. LiRN administers the grants and provides strategic leadership to the libraries.

Value

LiRN in a [recent blog](#) broke down the cost of the system-wide eLirn electronic resources to show the cost if a solo practitioner personally subscribed to all the e-resources provided in the library (\$40,347). Realistically, a solo practitioner would never need to use all the resources or could afford to pay for them. But they are available in each of the County Libraries province-wide. Now, add the text collection to that value.

A single *Criminal Code* or *Rules of Civil Procedure* will cost more than \$200. Each of the libraries in the system budget and supplement the electronic resources with textbooks for use in the library or lending. In my library, my text collection funding allocation is about equal to the cost of eLirn resources due to a healthier budget than most libraries and in consideration of my location and needs.

“Google can bring you back 100,000 answers, a librarian can bring

you back the right one.”

Neil Gaiman

The Law Library personnel in the system are the most respected and undervalued, in terms of compensation, people I know.

Thankfully, this is currently being updated and addressed, with independent consultation for the first time in over 10 years, which may add some cost to the next LiRN budget. Within the system, we have people with master’s degrees, bachelor degrees, library technician diplomas and a variety of other education designations and years of experience. In my library, we have a BA, three library tech diplomas, a paralegal licence, and a combined 42 years of law library experience among the 2.5 of us. The institutional knowledge alone within the system is of immeasurable value not only to the system but also to the local associations.

Finally, there is the value that supports the practice of law such as office equipment and resources. Computers are available for the drafting of materials, everything you could possibly need while away from your office and then some. Libraries carry extra gowns, Zoom booths, which are becoming a post-COVID necessity in some jurisdictions, meeting spaces and tables for negotiating.

This is what \$200 per year currently gets you. It may cost more in the future, but the reality is this is a whole lot better value than what I got in my grocery trip this week.

Importance of wording

Words matter. There are only a few of us left in the library system that have the institutional knowledge and know the importance of the specific line item and the term “County Library Levy” referred

to in the LSO budget. Without this specific designation, there is a valid concern that funding will get absorbed into a general “Competency Budget” and the funds will then intermix with General Fund and lose that specific designation.

The battle was valiantly fought and won by FOLA years ago to retain the wording and line item but as the FOLA and association board members transition on a regular basis, the importance may have been forgotten or lost. I know there is also the push that some have had to refer to the libraries as “Practice Resource Centres.” I would suggest that is a part, and not the whole, of what we offer. In my (Dutch) opinion, this also dilutes the significance of the wording in LSO fees. I personally (and stubbornly) will never refer to my library as a PRC and maintain that ensuring competency is a function of the LSO. We can provide materials to assist, but it is not the mandate of the library.

Approval

As I write this, the bench election voting results are just in. Those that have the money (or the power) make the rules. The benchers are the voters of the budget that seals the fate of the libraries. For the next four years, they will address the annual LSO budget and the LiRN budget. Historically, if there was a way to reduce the LSO annual fees or keep them in check, it usually meant a reduction in the County Library Levy or a minimal increase.

This year was the first year in many that I can remember in which the County Library Levy was increased (at one point it was \$238). Transparency and the library seemed to be a prominent theme in the elections. It is important that the County Library Levy line

remain transparent in the LSO fees and there is a hope that all the benchers will work together to ensure that the library funding remains strong.

A lawyer once indicated that their Law Library was the only noticeable benefit of their LSO fees that they could use regularly. They too saw the value of \$200.

Betty Dykstra is the current law librarian of the York Region Law Association and a licensed paralegal. She has been in the County Law Library system so long that she first learned how to do manual research when fax machines were the state of the art. Technology has not replaced her yet.

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