

## Shaffer Envisions World Law Library for 21st Century

Roberta I. Shaffer, who on Aug. 30 will become the new law librarian at the Library of Congress, envisions an historic institution rising in stature to that of a "National Law Library" as well as that of a universal law library that uses the latest digital technologies to make the world's laws and law-related materials accessible and useable everywhere.

She sees a 21st-century national law library that harnesses the latest technologies to acquire the most current legal materials from government, academic and other authoritative sources and to process, preserve and deliver them quickly to all its legislative, judicial, scholarly and law practitioner clients.

This 21st-century law library in Shaffer's mind's eye also would lead a global effort to assemble the world's historic and current legal materials and make them available universally in digital formats and multiple languages. She said a model for such a library already exists in the World Digital Library—the Library's "proof of concept" of a collaborative effort, using interactive, web-based technology, to assemble, organize and disseminate historical documents in multiple languages from all over the world.

To fulfill her vision, Shaffer said, "I will enlist the input of the staff, of practicing lawyers, law librarians, judges, leading thinkers in government and the academy, and, of course, Congress itself, to define and to build this proof of concept of a 21st-century law library," Shaffer continued.

She already has had conversations with various congressional committees and the Department of Justice "to begin to understand the challenges we face in the leadership role of bringing together legal materials from all over the world and our own back yard," she said.

"To those who say the responsibility is too great because of the sheer volume of information, I say that every generation has faced more information than they thought they could process," she said. "We must use the benefit of technology others did not have to overcome this information-overload challenge."

Although some law schools and law firms have attempted to build modern legal information systems, she said, "none has at its fingertips the incredible collections of the Law Library and of the Library of Congress, nor the staff expertise, not only legal expertise but also the ability to draw on the analytical skills of the Congressional Research Service, the technical skills of OSI [Office of Strategic Initiatives], and the collections-building and standard-setting skills of acquiring, organizing and preserving information that has been the hallmark of Library Services since the beginning of the 20th century. No other institution can match the Library of Congress and its Law Library for the breadth and depth of their resources."

Even if the Law Library became the National Law Library, as has been suggested by some legislators and lawyers, it could not be separated from the Library of Congress, in Shaffer's



Photo Credit: Reginald Massie

view. "The Library of Congress is an enterprise that all works together. Every part of it works for the whole.

"The Library of Congress is not a federation of unrelated parts. The Law Library is a part of the greater whole. The Law Library does not act alone," she continued. "From government information to science to the arts and humanities, laws are informed by their context, made and applied. Laws are not created in a vacuum; they are a product of a culture, and that culture is represented by the universal collections of the Library of Congress.

"The credibility of a national law library depends on the credibility of the entire organization," she said.

She also mentioned some practical reasons for keeping the Law Library and the Library of Congress together. The Law Library is highly dependent on the Copyright Office for receipts of materials and other legal resources deposited with the Library of Congress during the copyright application process. The Law Library can draw on resources in Library's general and special collections and the expertise of curators and reference librarians. Likewise, the Library of Congress draws on the unparalleled resources of the Law Library's 2.6-million volumes collected from around the world for over 200 years, as well as on the knowledge of the Law Library's legal and foreign-law specialists.

Shaffer noted that the Law Library is not only the largest law library in the world but also houses the largest collection of foreign legal materials in the world. This is the legacy of the nation's founders, who, having access only to foreign laws at the time they were drafting the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution, naturally focused on acquiring an initial Library of Congress collection of foreign law books.

Because it contains the world's legal information, much of it historical, the Law Library has been able to play an ambassadorial role for the United States in being able to give laws back to lands that have had their laws destroyed through regime changes or natural disasters. Also, in the post-colonial world, leaders of emerging nations have been able to use the Law Library's collections to compare and contrast laws and choose those that best fit the cultures of their new nations.

"Now, in the 21st century, we see that real world leadership comes in the ability to be collaborative and to lead through cooperation. The United States, through its Library of Congress and Law Library, can offer to the world its example with our own laws and also bring to the table of nations the experience and expertise of others," she said.

"We can better relate to our fellow nations by consulting their laws, and we can draw upon their legal expertise in helping us to address major challenges facing our own nation."

"When we can use technology to make our resources available to everyone, then we are a true superpower of the 21st century. Knowledge is power."

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August 19, 2009

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