As our video shows, we’re not big on drama here at the LII. It’s tempting to think about dramatic uses of legal information — people defending themselves in court on murder charges, exposing dark, far-reaching government conspiracies, and so on. Most of the time, though, public legal information is just a story about a lot of people who are trying to figure out what they’re supposed to do, or what their opportunities might be, whether for themselves or for their families or for their business. It’s a quiet story, but it’s a big one.

Impact: by the numbers

The LII reaches 18 million unique visitors every year. Last year, they came from 225 different countries and territories ranging from nearby places the size of Canada to much warmer, much smaller places in the Pacific (the Comoros Islands, for example). About 50% of them are new each year. Even for geeks like us, it’s hard to do the math that would tell us how many people we’ve served in our 20-year history, but we don’t think it’s outrageous to guess that we’ve topped 100 million. Any way you look at it, it’s a lot of people — and at the end of the day, we help each of them one at a time.

Who are they? Here’s a sampling:

I am a licensed attorney and I do pro bono work when I can. Recently I signed up to take an immigration case. I used a manual from the Immigrant Legal Resources Center and the LII to learn about federal immigration law ... Since I only take the occasional case on a pro bono basis, it is not worth it for me to purchase access to a commercial database. I am thankful that I can rely on the LII for accurate and up to date legal information--otherwise, I might not be able to take these cases.

I hope [my] contribution will go toward those who cannot and do not understand the system we live in. I hope it will help to produce young up coming legal persons who care about their clients. It’s a rough road for those of us who don’t understand the legal system, how it affects us...

“
An empowerment story

We don’t seek out dramatic stories, but sometimes they find us. Back in 2009, Joe Arpaio, the controversial sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona decided he’d run a little fib past his constituents. He claimed that Federal law lets him arrest suspected illegal immigrants during street sweeps. He provided a press handout that quotes extensively from “8 USC 1324(a)(1)(A)(iv)(b)(iii)”. He said that this text gives him authority to continue those arrests, despite the fact that Federal officials had explicitly rescinded an agreement that once allowed him to do so.

Arpaio claimed the LII as the source of that law. There is no such sub-section in the US Code. No such text appears on our web site, or ever has — a fact easily discovered by reporters who went to our site. Instead, the text in Arpaio’s presser was made up by an anti-immigration group in Connecticut. But it looked awfully official, though.

Sheriff Joe has powerfully reminded us of why we do what we have done for the last 20 years. We do it because we believe that everybody should be able to find out for themselves what the law is, without bias or interference. That goes for the people of Maricopa County, for Joe Arpaio, and for journalists. It goes for the Border Patrol officers at the Field Operations Training Center in Glyncro, Georgia — where one of our donors tells us that LII resources are regularly used as part of the curriculum.

Policy

A lot of the time we serve individuals as individuals. We also try to help government implement policies and procedures that make it easier for everyone to find and use the law. We have been enthusiastic participants in the law.gov project, we’ve testified in front of Congress about open legal information issues, and we’ve provided expertise to international policy-creating organizations like the Hague Conference on Private International Law and the European Commission as they create the means for individuals to get better legal answers in a global context.

In the last several years, we’ve seen lots of important moves toward openness and transparency in government. We are all best served when the laws and policies that we are obligated to obey are developed, codified, enforced, and explained in the open. While government use of the Internet has enabled great gains on many of these fronts, many of them as a result of our work, much more needs to be done.

If our first twenty years was about making law available, the next 20 are about making it accessible. Through new technologies and developments in information science, we now have the ability to better guide to the information they need, and explain to them the details of what applies to them. This is a far cry from anything the government or other organizations like the LII have ever attempted before. The power to remove the barriers to understanding is within our reach.