



## Librarians On Call – VALNET’s Virtual Reference Service

Priscilla L. Stephenson, MSLS, MSEd, AHIP, Philadelphia VA Medical Center, Philadelphia, PA  
 Mary Virginia Taylor, MLS, Overton Brooks VA Medical Center, Shreveport, LA



### OBJECTIVES

In 2005 the Department of Veterans Affairs Library Network (VALNET) librarians established Librarians On Call (LOC), a nation-wide virtual reference service for the 150 VALNET member libraries. LOC is designed to provide clinicians with reference service during hours when their libraries are not open or when their regular library staff is not available.

The LOC service is now 5 years old and has moved through several stages of development. This poster reports on a dual evaluation of the program: an analysis of the questions received and a survey of VALNET librarians' attitudes about the service.

### BACKGROUND

The LOC virtual reference service was initially email-based. In 2006 a contract was established with QuestionPoint, but QP was discontinued after 2007. Since 2008 the service has been exclusively email.



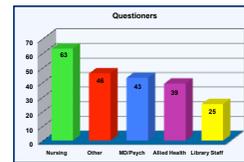
Today 20 volunteer librarians cover the desk from 8 am – 7:30 pm ET, Monday-Friday. LOC librarians each work a 3-hr. shift per week, with an appointed back-up person. Users submit questions to an email list distributed to all 20 members. If the librarian on duty does not respond within 30 minutes, other members of the group step in to assist. Questions are acknowledged within 30 minutes and answered within 60.

The service is designed as ready reference; no document delivery is provided. The service is not intended to replace local library service, and all responses are copied to the local librarians.

### METHODOLOGY

We analyzed the 216 questions received by the service since its inception to assess their range and scope. We also assessed the demographics of the requestors and correlated that information with services available to them in their local institutions.

### FINDINGS

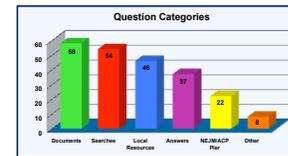


- Greatest use (29%) has been by nursing personnel.
- Librarians (11% of questioners) use the LOC as an expert searching resource for difficult questions.
- The large percentage of "Others" is because the professional affiliation of many questioners could not be determined from their email signatures.

### Comments from VALNET librarians:

*"It is a great resource for all staff!"*

*"Several library customers have used this and like it. I'm glad VRS let me know they were contacted."*



- 15% of the questions were received before or after regular LOC hours.
- 5% of the questions were from locations without regular library service – and half of those came from 1 location.
- 31% of VALNET librarians responding to a survey in Oct. 2009, said they promote the LOC service for vacations and for other planned absences.
- Many librarians indicated they were not aware of the scope of the LOC service.



### DISCUSSION

#### Barriers to Collaborative Reference

- Computer firewalls
- Database license restrictions
- Copyright limitations
- Perceived threats to librarians' job security
- Limited pool of volunteer librarians

#### Aids to Collaborative Reference

- VA libraries' union catalog - VALPAC
- VA libraries' database of library profiles
- Librarians On Call SharePoint

### CONCLUSIONS

- Librarians on Call helps solo librarians by providing expert reference help as well as coverage for vacations and other absences.
- LOC service enhances reputation of VALNET libraries.
- Library customers have been satisfied and pleased with the LOC service.
- Marketing targeted at both librarians and other VA employees is needed to increase the visibility and use of the LOC service.

