

## ***Ask?Away: The New Virtual Reference Service*** **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)**

April 2006

The Illinois State Library is building on the success of virtual reference projects like *Answers Unlimited*, *Ask Us!*, and *MyWebLibrarian (MWL)* to create a new and dynamic 24/7, multi-state, affordable virtual reference service called ***Ask?Away*** ([www.askawayillinois.info](http://www.askawayillinois.info)).

### **Who are the partners?**

You can [be a partner](#) with the Illinois State Library (ISL), Wisconsin Library Services (WiLS), and other multi-type libraries across the states of Illinois and Wisconsin. ISL is providing the services of [Debra Aggertt](#) as the full-time project coordinator to implement this service. Plus, as a partner, your library's patrons will have access to the backup services provided by *OCLC's Question Point 24/7 (QP24/7)*. This means that there will be someone available 24/7 to answer questions, and queries requiring more in-depth research can be referred on to an appropriate library.

### **What about MWL?**

Many of the libraries currently participating in *MWL* will be joining the [Ask?Away](#) project. That means that these seasoned veterans will be bringing their knowledge and expertise in providing virtual reference services to this new project. The ISL sought the input of these librarians—particularly Bill Pardue and Bruce Brigell—in creating the framework of this project. [Ask?Away](#) is viewed as the next evolution in virtual reference service in Illinois. After June 30, 2006, the *MWL* libraries will be providing their services under the ***Ask?Away*** banner.

### **What about Night Owl?**

*Night Owl* has been an important partner in *MWL*. They have provided training, administrative oversight of daily functions, and finances for the service, as well as providing after hours coverage. The partnership will end on June 30, 2006 as *MWL* merges with ***Ask?Away***. *Night Owl* will continue to provide after hours phone reference for libraries that subscribe to their service. For more information or questions about *Night Owl* and its other services, please contact [Marilyn Uselmann](#).

### **How is Ask?Away being funded?**

ISL is providing three years of funding for this project. During this time, the focus will be on increasing the number of participants in the service. Each year the funding level will decrease, but increased membership should keep costs low. Sustainability is an important part of the service. At about a year and a half into the project, the [Ask?Away Advisory Committee](#) will focus their efforts on the matter of sustainability.

### **What are the benefits of membership?**

You can be a pioneer and break new ground in the formation of one of the first multi-state virtual reference services. Your library's users will reap the real benefits of the service. They will be able to easily locate the service from the link on your library's

home page. Their questions will be answered on a 24/7 basis. Because you will create a detailed library profile, the degreed librarians providing back-up support can customize their answers for your patrons.

### **How much money and staff time will it cost to join?**

[Pricing and staff hours required](#) are based on your library's size and type. A small public library can join for as little as \$25 and one hour per week of required staff time. School libraries can join for between \$25 and \$100 with staffing optional.

### **What does my library have to do to participate?**

Your first step is to complete the [Letter of Intent to Participate](#) and send a copy to both [Debra Aggertt](#) and [Ruth Downey](#). NSLS also needs you to email [Ruth Downey](#) the following key bits of information:

- Name of the actual “on-the ground” point person for your library
- The point person's complete contact information (email, direct line or extension, etc.)
- How you want your page linked to the project (directly from your home page or from the state's project page)
- All of the ZIP codes your library or institution serves

### **What kind of training is required?**

Consistency of service is a vital part of the success of this project. It is also important for participants to review all of the links and documents listed under [Training](#) on the on the [Ask?Away site](#). In addition, [Question Point 24/7](#) provides some excellent tutorials. **One person** from each participating library **must** complete general training, which includes using flash chat and email functions, and a special instructional session on using the administrative features, before a library is given a password and access to the service.

### **How will these training sessions be provided?**

The programs will be presented both online and in person. Information on the statewide training schedule is located online at [www.askawayillinois.info/training.php](http://www.askawayillinois.info/training.php). NSLS is providing traditional hands-on training for the chat/email and will show a recorded session of the administrative module training. So, by attending one session with us, you can get your logins. Upcoming courses offered by NSLS can be found on our website under [Events](#).

### **How do I market this service to our community?**

The **Ask?Away** site has a useful link to marketing materials, sample press releases, and suggestions for strategies at [www.askawayillinois.info/marketing.php](http://www.askawayillinois.info/marketing.php). You may also seek advice from other participants, [Debra Aggertt](#) or [Anna Yackle](#).

### **What if I still have questions?**

Please contact Debra Aggertt, Illinois Virtual Reference Coordinator, at [daggert@ilsos.net](mailto:daggert@ilsos.net), 217-558-1945 or Anna Yackle at [ayackle@nsls.info](mailto:ayackle@nsls.info), 847-459-1300, ext. 7151.