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Readers' Advisory Services for Persons with Disabilities

by Ann E. Brownson

A young woman approaches the service desk at your library. You recognize her as a person who has used your library extensively in the past, but who has not recently been a patron. She explains that due to a progressive disease, she is visually impaired and unable to read materials in regular print form. She asks if you can assist her in selecting appropriate items.

This young woman is a member of a long neglected group of Americans that is finally, through legislation, being fully included in American society. Once hidden and ignored, persons with disabilities are increasingly able to participate in activities long denied them. The legislation that has begun to provide them with this access is the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. This act is changing the way buildings are constructed and renovated, people are employed, and services are provided to disabled persons.

In order to understand these changes, particularly as they relate to libraries and readers' advisory services, it is important to have a background knowledge of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The purpose of the Act is "to provide a clear and comprehensive national mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities and to provide clear, strong, consistent and enforceable standards addressing discrimination against individuals with disabilities."¹ For those familiar with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the ADA differs in that it provides specific guidelines concerning access to information, programs, and resources, and redefines employment, transportation, and telecommunication regulations.²

The ADA extends civil rights protection to people with disabilities by providing equal access in four areas: employment, public services and accommodations, transportation, and telecommunications relay. It states that service providers must make reasonable efforts to accommodate

those with disabilities and will exempt only those who can prove that making such accommodations would impose unreasonable and undue hardships on the organization. Individuals who believe they are being discriminated against may bring lawsuits to obtain court orders to stop the discrimination. For example, a person using a wheelchair might file a complaint against a library that offered income tax assistance on the second floor of a building without an elevator and refused to move the program to an accessible location when asked to do so.

Because of the potential implications of the Americans with Disabilities Act, a description of the types of reader guidance a library can offer to both its disabled and non-disabled patrons is presented. In addition, some of the special formats and technology which may be required and several ways items may be delivered and distributed to provide these services effectively are discussed. Finally, a model is posed for developing a comprehensive readers' advisory program, taking into account the thin line libraries walk between providing good service to patrons while keeping an eye on the costs of those services.

DEFINITIONS

The ADA defines the term "disability" with respect to an individual as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual; a record of such an impairment; or being regarded as having such an impairment."³ An individual with a profound hearing loss, a person who is classified as legally blind (vision no better than 20/200 after correction), or someone testing HIV-positive are examples of each part of the definition.

Under Title II, Public Services, the phrase "qualified individual with a disability" is further defined

as "an individual with a disability who, with or without reasonable modifications to rules, policies, or practices, the removal of architectural, communication, or transportation barriers, or the provision of auxiliary aids and services, meets the essential eligibility requirements for the receipt of services or the participation in programs or activities provided by a public entity."⁴ In other words, if a person otherwise meets the requirements for various services, programs, or activities offered by a public organization, he or she may not be excluded or denied participation in those services, programs, or activities because of a disability.

Title II directly impacts both publicly and privately funded libraries in several areas: auxiliary aids, provision of reading materials in alternative formats, and physical access to services and programs. Some of the auxiliary aids that may be required include qualified interpreters, note takers, transcription services, written materials, closed caption decoders, telecommunications devices for deaf persons (TDDs), videotext displays, and qualified readers or reading machines. Alternative formats may include taped, brailled, or large print materials as well as materials available in electronic format.

Under the provisions of Title II, any service which is provided for non-disabled patrons must be made available, with or without accommodation, to those who are disabled as well.⁵ Disabled persons must also have the opportunity to request the auxiliary aids and services of their choice. A library is required to honor that choice unless it can show that another effective means of communication exists or that the chosen aid or service would be unnecessary.⁶ In a library setting, for example, the use of a notepad for simple transactions with a deaf person at a reference desk might be appropriate; however, an extended reference interview would not be easily accomplished with a notepad and might require some type of assistive listening device. In the case of the visually impaired woman described above, it would be reasonable for a librarian or clerk to read her a short passage from an encyclopedia, but perhaps not as reasonable to read the jacket information for all of the books on the "new books" shelf.

The terms "reasonable" and "readily achievable" are used extensively in the language of the ADA. Some of the aids and services required by people with disabilities are expensive and librarians are concerned that providing accessibility will cause other services to be cut or reduced. While not totally unfounded, this concern can be somewhat alleviated. There are a number of grants available to assist in making facilities and services

accessible, and some assistive technology is eligible for tax credit.

BOOK SELECTION BY NON-DISABLED PATRONS

How do people select books to read? Well over half of the materials patrons choose to take out of the library are selected by browsing. For example, 83 percent of the books checked out during a survey conducted in the late 1980's at the Age Concern Centre Library in Leicester, England were selected in this way.⁷ Browsing can be defined as looking for reading materials with no preconceived notion as to the specific materials to be selected. Patrons are thus open to influence from a variety of factors when making their selections. The cover art, physical condition, synopsis contained on the book jacket, print size, length, and location of the book on the shelf may all contribute to an item's selection or rejection.⁸

Librarians have developed many techniques to assist patrons with book selection that can be used in addition to browsing. Some of these techniques are included in traditional readers' advisory services. Readers' advisory services are direct or indirect interactions between librarians and patrons involving exchanges of information. Librarians help patrons to select items, primarily of fiction, which will be of interest to them. A direct librarian-patron interaction may include an interview which can best be described as the development of a relationship centered on books. For example, Chris is a patron who is interested in science fiction but doesn't want books that are too technical. Chris and the librarian talk at some length about his reading interests and ability. He wants to read about other planets and galaxies, and likes strong characters who deal with moral issues. They also discuss books he has read in the past and determine reasons he liked or disliked those books. The librarian then develops a written profile of Chris's interest and uses that profile, along with an extensive knowledge of the fiction collection, to help him discover other books he will enjoy.

Many librarians are designing readers' advisory tools to help patrons help themselves. For example, some librarians develop annotated booklists to describe materials in a particular genre or on a subject of potential interest that are owned by the library. Book displays catch the attention of patrons and encourage them to take a closer look at selected materials. Electronic readers' advisory software programs ask patrons to describe themselves and their interests, and then suggest poten-

tial items for selection.⁹ Putting special labels on the book spines of certain types of genre fiction such as westerns, science fiction, or romance provide patrons with clues about the contents of particular items. Readers' advisory work is also done by shelving genre fiction or new books in separate sections that provide an easy finding aid for patrons who are looking for specific types of books.

BOOK SELECTION BY PATRONS WITH DISABILITIES

Each of the techniques for selecting books described above may be either an appropriate or an inappropriate means for persons with certain types of disabilities. While a person who is deaf or speech-impaired may be able to browse the shelves, read booklists, and examine displays, that same person may not be able to engage in an extended conversation with a librarian about potential reading materials. On the other hand, a person with mobility impairments or visual disabilities may be able to talk with a readers' advisor at length, yet be unable to browse the stacks effectively. This may be true even if the library has taken steps to aid the patron. For example, librarians at the New York Public Library for the Blind put braille titles on the spines of all books, tapes and other materials in their open stacks, hoping this would allow blind patrons to browse these shelves more easily. The librarians discovered, however, that their patrons did not like making their selections from title information alone. Patrons preferred to have annotated booklists to find items of interest or to talk with someone about reading choices.¹⁰

A comprehensive readers' advisory service that includes both face-to-face interactions and self-help techniques such as those described above provides better access to the fiction collection for both disabled and non-disabled patrons; therefore, to meet each person's needs, a complete service should be offered. An individual who is deaf-blind will likely need specialized equipment to communicate with library staff members. This equipment may be something as simple as a tele-touch machine, a sort of two-sided manual typewriter with a typewriter keyboard on one side and a braille template on the other. When a key is pressed on the typewriter, the corresponding braille character appears on the template. For more extended communication, a human interpreter who can fingerspell into the hand of the deaf-blind person may be necessary. Someone who uses a wheelchair and is speech impaired may need an entirely different setup to take advan-

tage of the library collection. Here an example of appropriate technology may include the use of computer software and hardware, perhaps with synthesized speech for communication.

In addition to being familiar with the collection, the readers' advisor must also be aware of the different formats included in that collection. Depending on the needs of patrons, large print format, audio or talking books, and braille are all possible alternative ways to provide library materials. Two other formats, computers and CD-Rom technology, are now available and will greatly increase access to any library's collection. Many libraries now have computer workstations available for use by their patrons, both for the online catalog and for CD-Rom technology. By providing computer peripherals such as optical character scanners, speech synthesizers, print enlargement software, and refreshable braille or braille printers, libraries can put nearly anything in the collection into formats usable by people with all types of disabilities.

Another important aspect of a total readers' advisory service for disabled patrons is the delivery and distribution of library materials. A significant portion of the disabled population cannot visit the library to make their reading selections. One type of distribution program that can be used effectively for disabled patrons is the depository collection. A small number of materials designed to meet the needs of a group of disabled people can be placed in a location accessible to that group. For example, it may be appropriate to provide a deposit collection at a home for senior citizens or at an adult day care center for developmentally disabled persons.

Another method of distribution which a library may choose to provide is a home delivery system. A homebound disabled person may make item selections from regularly mailed annotated booklists, may speak directly with a readers' advisor by telephone, or may complete a written profile from which the librarian determines appropriate selections. Those items are then personally delivered to the individual by volunteers or staff members. A library may work with a program such as "Meals on Wheels" which makes regular visits to homebound people, so that food for the mind can be delivered at the same time as is food for the body.

A third method of distribution which may be used is mail delivery of library materials. Again, the disabled individual can select items from booklists, through a conversation with a readers' advisor, or by filling out a profile. One problem with this type of delivery is the cost, especially since the Americans with Disabilities Act states

that no extra fees can be charged for special services provided to disabled persons, including mailing costs.¹¹ However, materials in alternative formats such as large print, audio, or braille may qualify for free delivery if the disabled individual is allowed, by registering with the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, to receive and send reading materials without charge.¹²

A MODEL READERS' ADVISORY SERVICE

A comprehensive readers' advisory service is one portion of a library's total commitment to serving the needs of persons with disabilities. Because of this, the first step a library should take in developing a readers' advisory service which meets the needs of both disabled and non-disabled patrons is to read the ADA completely. A number of excellent books are also available that can help the library staff to decipher this often perplexing piece of legislation.¹³

The second step a library can take is to appoint and empower an interested member of the staff to coordinate the review, implementation, and evaluation of the library's efforts toward compliance with the requirements of the ADA. It is better to have one coordinator rather than a coordinating group, because a single coordinator can better maintain timelines and ensure that the work is completed.

A third, and absolutely vital, step to be taken in bringing about a comprehensive library program that serves the needs of persons with disabilities is to involve those most affected; that is, talk with disabled people about what they need and want. This will take some work. Many librarians say honestly, but rather naively, that they don't have any patrons who are disabled. There are disabled people in the community to be served, but they will not use a library that does not or cannot meet their needs. Contact social service agencies, religious groups, local governmental agencies, and advocacy groups, such as The American Council of the Blind, to find disabled people willing to serve on an advisory committee or take part in a focus group. A well-advertised public forum may also give people with disabilities an opportunity to share their needs and concerns about what the library can do for them.

While surveying people with disabilities who live in the community, the library can also evaluate its current facilities and services. Is the library physically accessible to people with disabilities? What kinds of barriers exist? What services does the library offer to any or all patrons? Do all people have access to group programs, information and

referral services, and outreach programs? Other library activities to address include policies and procedures, staff training, and employment practices.¹⁴

The fifth step in providing access to both disabled and non-disabled people is to plan for implementation. The library should continue to involve potential consumers as these plans are made. This step, more than any other, will take into account the costs of providing service to all members of the community.

When specific plans are made for a comprehensive readers' advisory service, it is important to budget for the costs of developing the collection to include alternative formats, of auxiliary aids that can enhance communication between the library staff and patrons and provide access to the print collection, of staff training, and of appropriate delivery and distribution services. Budget requests for renovations, the purchase of auxiliary aids, and the costs of staff training and accommodating disabled employees should be prepared at this time. This is also the time to begin applying for grants, including, for example, Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) funds and local and state grant funding.

The sixth step of the process is to implement those plans the library has chosen that will provide needed service or access and to do so cost-effectively.

Finally, the library and those people affected by the changes should evaluate the implementations on an ongoing basis. Disabled people should continue to serve in advisory roles in the library, and all patrons should be surveyed at regular intervals to assure that needs are being met.

CONCLUSION

People with disabilities have many of the same needs for readers' advisory services as the non-disabled. They also have many of the same interests.¹⁵ Librarians who develop collections and offer advice to users about their recreational reading choices can create comprehensive readers' advisory programs which will serve all of their patrons more effectively.

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10. Tom McNulty. Electronic mail message to author, January 25, 1993.
11. Foos and Pack, p. 152.
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14. Ruth O'Donnell, "Planning to Implement the ADA in the Library," in Foos and Pack, pp. 42-43.
15. There may be a subconscious tendency to encourage persons with disabilities to read items about others who have "overcome their problems" or to refrain from suggesting books that might upset the individual. It is important to remember that people have the right to make their own decisions about what they choose to read.

Native Americans. The American Library Association's *Library Services and Programs for Native Americans* (1991) is a valuable resource for librarians. It provides information on the needs of Native Americans and on the role of libraries in serving them. The book also includes a list of Native American libraries and a bibliography of resources. The book is a valuable resource for librarians who are interested in serving Native Americans.

THE NATIVE AMERICAN DEMOGRAPHICS

The Native American population in the United States is estimated to be 20 million. This population is distributed across the United States, with a higher concentration in the Southwest and the Great Plains. The Native American population is diverse, with many different tribes and languages. The Native American population is also growing, and it is important for libraries to be aware of this growth and to provide services that meet the needs of Native Americans.

Native Americans have information on their culture, history, and language. They have access to books, magazines, and other materials that are relevant to their culture. They also have access to libraries that provide services that are tailored to their needs. Libraries can play a role in helping Native Americans to learn about their culture and to preserve their language and traditions.

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Everything wasn't called down. Too many of our people died too quick back then. They didn't have time to pass it all down. So we Indians today have to go back and find the things that got left along the trail. It's up to us to go back and pick them up. We have to educate ourselves to know who we are.

Edie Benton-Banai, Ojibway