

Library services for people with disabilities

As librarians strive for inclusivity in their services and spaces, it is important to remember those with visible and invisible disabilities. This special issue of *Reference Services Review* focuses on the ways in which librarians have developed services and programs to better serve people with disabilities. The Disability Rights Section of the US Justice Department defines a person with a disability as:

[...] a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment ([US Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2009](#)).

The World Health Organization's "International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health" (ICF) also addresses the importance of context in defining disability, including environmental factors, cultures and settings ([World Health Organization, 2018](#)).

People with permanent or temporary disabilities (which may be hidden) make up a significant percentage of any population. According to the US Department of Education, in 2011-2012, 11 per cent of undergraduates reported having a disability, and in 2015-2016, 6.7 million students of age 3-21 received special education services, amounting to 13 per cent of public school students. ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2016, 2018](#)). Worldwide, it is estimated that 15 per cent of people live with a disability, and 2-4 per cent have "significant difficulties in functioning" ([World Health Organization, 2011](#)). Many more people will be temporarily disabled at some point in their lives, due to accident or illness. As people age, they may also need and will appreciate accommodations which allow them to continue to enjoy use of libraries and library services. Furthermore, in keeping with the philosophy of universal design, many activities that libraries undertake to improve services and access for those with disabilities may also improve service for all library users.

A genuine concern for providing inclusive services is evident throughout the articles in this theme issue. Librarians have long been proud of being socially conscious, and continuously seek opportunities to serve all their patrons in the best ways possible. In addition to providing information, librarians have goals to promote diversity, attempt to eliminate harmful societal practices such as stigma and stereotyping and stress equity and inclusion for all. In the context of disability, which is a fundamental aspect of diversity, librarians have long been in the forefront of making sure that accessibility to information is equitably available to individuals with various challenges, whether these be physical or mental differences. An example of early efforts is an article from 1934 entitled "Library Work for the Hard of Hearing" ([Smith, 1934](#)) This inclusive service ethic continues to be articulated in various current library association documents, including the ALA's Library Services for People with Disabilities Policy ([American Library Association, 2006](#)), and IFLA's Manifesto for Libraries Serving Persons with a Print Disability ([International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2015](#)).

Librarians further have an interest in both complying with and shaping legal requirements that relate to library services and access to information. The regulations of the Americans with Disabilities Act stipulate requirements for building accessibility and



accommodations both for the public and library employees ([USA Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2017](#)). More recently, international strides are being made in providing a legal mandate to increase accessible information formats across borders. Already in force in 39 countries, the Marrakesh Treaty:

[...]has a clear humanitarian and social development dimension and its main goal is to create a set of mandatory limitations and exceptions [to copyright law] for the benefit of the blind, visually impaired, and otherwise print disabled ([World Intellectual Property Organization, 2018](#)).

As this article is being published, the Marrakesh Treaty Implementation Act is headed for a vote by the USA Senate (S. 2559).

In keeping with the library profession's spirit of inclusivity, this theme issue includes articles on services for both adults and young people, articles from both public and academic libraries, articles from both large and small libraries, articles about specific local programs and an article about a nation-wide program, articles that describe services designed specifically for people with mental and physical disabilities and articles recommending service design for all abilities (universal design).

In "Defining, evaluating, and achieving accessible library resources: a review of theories and methods", Kimura provides a critical review of over 95 peer-reviewed articles published since 2010 on accessibility of digital library resources. With the frame of accessibility as a social justice concern, Kimura focuses on "underlying considerations and approaches that will remain relevant even as technologies change".

The history of a national model for supporting public library accessibility is detailed in "Equitable library services for Canadians with print disabilities" by Ciccone. The story of how this publicly funded organization evolved provides an interesting case study in the possibility of achieving lofty goals "by building on the economies of scale offered by a centralized system".

Several of the articles describe approaches that are feasible for smaller libraries, libraries on a tight budget, yet wanting to increase accessibility of existing programs. In "Collaborating to improve access of video for all", Keenan describes development of an efficient workflow for improving access to video for the deaf and hard of hearing. Collaboration with other university departments and prioritization makes the program sustainable with limited resources. In "Accessible online course reader services: a proactive approach to providing accessible texts", Kwak and Newman describe how a small academic library works to make accessible online course readings the default, rather than being dependent on student requests for accommodation. In "Building inclusive communities: teens with disabilities in libraries", Grassi provides a primer on concrete strategies that can make existing teen programming more accessible for teens and young adults with disabilities, as well as specific techniques for improving communication with both the young people and their parents.

While many of the articles describe multi-pronged approaches, three articles describe programs that provide a particularly comprehensive approach to improving services to those with disabilities. In "AnyAbility: creating a library service model for adults with disabilities", McGowan, Martinez and Marcilla describe their library's "cultural shift to fully embrace and serve" people with disabilities. They achieved this through leadership expectations, staff training, relevant programming, and service accommodations. In "Building bridges: working with students on the autism spectrum", Cho describes the "Bridges to Adelphi", a university program of academic, social, and vocational support. As a librarian who has worked closely with Bridges program participants, Cho provides first-hand observations of the challenges faced by

those on the autism spectrum, and suggests several practical strategies to improve library support to this population. In “Implementing accessibility initiatives at the Michigan State University libraries”, Schroeder details a five year, comprehensive accessibility plan. Actions include dedicated staff, training for all staff, on-demand remediation to make e-books accessible, proactive website and digital collection improvements, e-resource license language for accessibility and a consortial collaboration to conduct and make public accessibility evaluations of vendor platforms.

The literature on library services for people with specific types of disabilities is enhanced by two additional articles. In “EBSCO usability study on accessibility”, Power details a rigorous usability study of the company’s discovery service interface conducted with visually impaired students, providing insights into how library e-resources and websites are used by these students and ways to improve their accessibility for everyone. In “Accessibility of distance library services for deaf and hard of hearing users”, Getts details specific approaches to increase access to local and purchased e-resources, tutorials, and films. Technology for conducting real-time reference consultations with the deaf and hard of hearing is also described.

As this collection of articles demonstrates, librarians in various library settings are developing innovative services to meet all manner of patrons’ special needs. Many of the ideas presented do not require a large financial investment, making them feasible for any library to implement. It is our hope that the articles will provide inspiration and examples of successful practices which librarians may adapt to build service for people with disabilities into their routine practices.

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Further reading

Marrakesh Treaty Implementation Act, S. 2559, 115th Congress (2018), available at: www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/2559 (accessed 7 June 2018).