

Library Services for People with Disabilities

by
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As library staff, we are very concerned with the right of all people to have access to information. Unfortunately, we often overlook a very important group of people — our patrons who have disabilities. We unwittingly set barriers between people with disabilities and the information they want or need. These can be physical barriers, barriers to employment, barriers caused by the format of materials, and/or attitudinal barriers. This article discusses some ideas and technology that can help overcome all four of these barriers, but it is often the attitudinal barrier that is the most difficult to overcome. The “attitudes of people are more important than funds or technology.”¹ It is important that library staff be educated about the need for assistive technology and special services for people with disabilities, and when they are, we will truly be able to say we stand for the right to equal access for all people. Most of all, library staff must cultivate an atmosphere of understanding for this special group of patrons.

A person with a disability is anyone who:

- 1) has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more of the person's major life activities,
- 2) has a record of such impairment, and
- 3) is regarded as having such an impairment.²

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 states:

No otherwise handicapped individual in the United States . . . shall be solely by reason of his [or her] handicap, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.³

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 gave greater definition to legal aspects of providing services to people with disabilities. It states that libraries, as public entities, must provide equal access and reasonable accommo-

dations to people with disabilities in the areas of employment, accessibility, and telecommunications. However, by their very nature, libraries are one of the most complicated entities to work with in accommodating people with disabilities. People with disabilities have so many different ranges of abilities and special needs that it is almost impossible for most libraries to make every possible accommodation. As an example, because of financial and technological constraints it would be impossible to make every item in the library available in braille, large-print, audio, and digital format on diskette and CD-ROM! Indeed, the ADA does not require such extensive accommodations.

The initial barriers to examine are architecture and furniture. A person with a disability must first be able to enter and maneuver within in the library before he or she can use its services, so the building must be brought up to ADA standards. Examples for consideration might include wheelchair ramps, automatic doors, workstations at proper heights, aisle widths, and proper lighting. Removing barriers could be as easy as rearranging the furniture. Accommodations such as these and alternative telecommunication devices not only help disabled library patrons, but also library employees with disabilities. The changes can even make the library more enjoyable and easier to use for people who do not have disabilities.

Of great importance to libraries is the issue of accessibility of the collection itself. Digital format is rapidly becoming an important technological advancement for people with disabilities who use a computer to access information. However, François Hébert's book, *Copyright and Library Materials for the Handicapped* (Saur, 1982) makes it clear that the availability of digital and other alternative formats mentioned is often hindered by problems with copyright infringement law. People who have disabilities which make it impossible for them to access conventional printed materials are often blatantly denied access because permission cannot be gained to reproduce those materials in an alternate format. Therefore, they are discriminated against solely because of the existence of their disability. A very small number of countries have made special provisions in their copyright laws that allow reproduction of materials in some instances. The United States, although always very vocal on issues of equality, is not one of them. Perhaps our copyright laws require some revision.⁴ A very large part of the process of collection development will also include examining the collection and programs to determine the need for materials and services such as closed-captioned videos, descriptive videos, large-print materials, interpreters, etc. The library might also consider the purchase of periodicals and books by and for people with disabilities and their families. Most libraries already purchase such materials for other minority groups.

As stated earlier, people's attitudes are often a barrier to overcome. Those who have not had much contact with people with disabilities may feel uncomfortable around them, and these feelings tend to be inadvertently conveyed in their interactions. Patrons with disabilities want to feel as welcome in the library as those who are not disabled. Therefore, staff sensitivity training is one of the most important steps in the process. The staff should develop a set of guidelines for interactions with patrons with disabilities. These guidelines should instill an awareness of the needs of people with various disabilities. A large part of this training needs to include "etiquette." The Ohio Developmental Disabilities Planning Council has produced an excellent video on this topic entitled *The Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities* (Irene Ward, 1994). The etiquette covered includes such suggestions as speaking directly to the person with the disability (rather than to a companion or interpreter) and letting a blind person know when someone is leaving the room.⁵ Videos such as this can aid in making staff feel more comfortable when dealing with people with disabilities. Role-playing and sensitizing activities such as those mentioned in Rashelle S. Karp's *Library Services for Disabled Individuals* (G.K. Hall, 1991) can also help increase awareness. Books such as this should be included in the library's collection.

Some of the major problems facing libraries in the area of accessibility have been outlined, but what solutions can be offered to make materials and services more accessible to patrons with disabilities? Accessibility is not a goal that will be achieved overnight, for each library's needs and resources will be different. But forethought and planning are the first steps in the journey.

In her article, "Climbing the Mountain: The Americans With Disabilities Act and Libraries,"⁶ Katy Lenn sets forth guidelines for achieving accessibility. The following suggestions adopt some of her guidelines, and include a few others that are of importance.

First, review and know the law. This might include attending ADA workshops and assigning a staff person the task of coordinating an accessibility program to be eventually developed and implemented by the library. Three sections of the law directly affect libraries. The ADA states:

- 1) Employers must make reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities. This might include altered work spaces, special equipment, and adjusted work schedules.
- 2) Public facilities must be physically accessible.
- 3) Alternative telecommunications must be made available. Every library should have a Telecommunication Device for the Deaf (TDD).

Second, hold a number of meetings to determine the needs of the library. These meetings should include people with disabilities (especially patrons of the library), experts such as rehabilitation technologists and architects, library board members (or other people of importance depending upon their affiliation with the library), and as many staff members as possible. It is very important to garner feedback from patrons with disabilities after the suggestions have been implemented.

Another important thing to consider is the purchase of assistive technology for the library. Assistive technology is "a term referring to any piece of equipment that reduces or eliminates the barriers imposed by a disability."⁷ Assistive technology can include everything from hand-held magnifiers to wheelchair ramps to computer software. The goal is to enhance the independence and quality of life for people with disabilities. Some library staff question spending money on such devices when they see no people with disabilities in their libraries. Barbara T. Mates addresses this with the question, "If there is nothing in your library [for them] why should they come?"⁸ One important point to remember is that an increasing number of library users are elderly patrons, and they can also benefit greatly from much of this technology. Besides hand-held magnifiers, Kurzweil readers, and screen magnification software, Mates sees two other areas as very important for moving one's library toward accessibility. First, an on-line catalog equipped with voice access (input and output) and other types of access such as single-switch or joystick control, is an important consideration. If just one computer in every library could be fitted in this manner, the benefits derived would far outweigh the costs. Second, CD-ROMs with voice input/output and braille printers attached would be invaluable as reference tools for the visually-impaired who cannot use printed materials.

The most important thing to remember when considering the purchase of equipment is to always consult experts in the field of assistive technology as well as equipment manufacturers before making any major purchases. A rehabilitation technologist or engineer can identify the library's needs and most important goals and suggest the most cost-effective ways to achieve them. The most expensive products on the market are not always the best choice for a library's particular situation. Again, this technology not only helps library patrons but can also empower people with disabilities who work in libraries.

People with disabilities are achieving great things in the world today. New opportunities for them have opened in education, sports, and in the workplace. Many of these opportunities have arisen as a direct result of the ADA, assistive

technology, and perhaps most of all, because of changing attitudes. Information is a prime commodity for everyone in this modern age. Access to information is critical, and technology is making access easier for everyone. Libraries are the cornerstone where information and technology joining together enable people to achieve their dreams. Libraries have been historically known for helping to remove barriers. They have fought to remove barriers of illiteracy, barriers of ignorance, and barriers to intellectual freedom. By taking the time and thought to implement steps for removing barriers to information access to people with disabilities, libraries will, once again, set a standard.

Endnotes

1. Kieth C. Wright and Judith F. Davie, *Serving the Disabled: A How-to-do-it Manual for Librarians* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 1991), ix.
2. Donald D. Foos and Nancy C. Pack, *How Libraries Must Comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)* (Phoenix: Oryx, 1992), 140.
3. Ibid.
4. Francoise Hebert and Wanda Noel, *Copyright and Library Materials for the Handicapped* (New York: K.G. Saur, 1982), passim.
5. *The Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities*. Produced by the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Planning Council. 52 min., Irene M. Ward & Associates, Columbus, Ohio, 1994. Videocassette.
6. Katy Lenn, "Climbing the Mountain: The Americans with Disabilities Act and Libraries," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 68, no.4 (Dec. 1993): 36-39.
7. M. Wade Wingler, Rehabilitation Technologist, Crossroads Rehabilitation Center, interview by the author, Indianapolis, 13 April 1996.
8. Barbara T. Mates, *Library Technology for Visually and Physically Impaired Patrons* (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1991), 3.