

Recommendations for Improved Library Service to the Blind and Low Vision Community

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide recommendations on how local public libraries may better serve blind and low vision users. In order to provide the appropriate service, it is important to be aware of the information needs of this population, as well as how they have historically sought to meet those needs. In addition to providing access to the necessary materials, the library facilities themselves must be physically accessible for this user group. This paper will examine a few cases of public libraries that have taken steps to make their buildings accessible to blind users. In addition, local services to blind patrons will be addressed, as well as a few national programs. Finally, I will offer a few specific recommendations on various steps the library can take in order to provide better service to the blind and low vision community.

Definitions and Attitudes about Blindness

Blindness is a common and growing condition in the U.S. According to a joint report by the National Eye Institute (NEI) and Prevent Blindness America, over one million Americans over age 40 are blind, and 2.4 million people in this age category are visually impaired. (NEI, 2002). These numbers are expected to increase in the next 30 years, due to a general aging in the population. In Washington State alone, the NEI report estimates 20,529 people age 40 and over are blind, with an additional 67,035 cases of visual impairment. (NEI, 2002). However, blindness is not limited to one age

demographic; 8.3 million people of all ages in the U.S. have some type of vision impairment. (Lighthouse International, citing Adams, Hendershot and Marano, 1999).

Medically, blindness is defined as “no light perception (nlp)”, which means the individual can see no light at all; “light perception (lp)” means he/she can perceive light or the absence of light. (Sardegna and Paul, 1991). Various other degrees and definitions of blindness exist, two of which include legal blindness and visual impairment. In legal blindness, the individual may or may not be totally blind; this is the term used by government agencies to determine if he/she may be eligible for certain benefits. People who are legally blind can often work and do most tasks of daily living, with the help of adaptive devices. Visually impaired means there is a “recognizable defect or malfunctioning of the eye” (Sardegna and Paul, 1991). A person with this condition may have some function in one or both eyes, or he/she may be totally blind.

Historically, blind people have suffered from a variety of negative stereotypes and misconceptions. Blind people have been thought of as liabilities, who cannot take care of themselves but must be wards of the state, or burdens to society. In fact, many people who are blind have quite normal lives and are self-supporting. The media also tends to portray blind people as victims, who must be pitied; at the same time, a blind person who tries to fight against discrimination is accused of being angry and bitter. Blindness has been feared as a disease in itself, which has caused others to fear that it can be transmitted or “caught”. (Sardegna and Paul, 1991).

Information Needs & Barriers

The information needs of blind people have been studied by Williamson, Schauder, and Bow (2002), in an Australian research project. In addition to studying their needs, the researchers also sought to learn how blind people had their information needs met, and what were some of the barriers to meeting those needs. The researchers were particularly interested in how blind individuals use the Internet in order to solve their information needs.

Not much is known about the information seeking behavior of blind people; these researchers found that they needed to consult the literature on aging to find out more, as there was some overlap due to the large number of blind and visually impaired senior citizens. (Williamson et. al., 2002). Using focus groups and individual interviews, they aimed to study how this population finds the information it needs in the context of daily living.

Most of the needs were similar to other people's needs, with some exceptions. The participants of the study sought information related to their visual disabilities, and how to get around in normal life situations. Other needs were health, income and finance, recreation (including listening to talking books), government, consumer, travel, and employment information. (Williamson, 2002).

In terms of how the participants got their needs met, much depended on whether the person lived alone or with someone else such as a spouse, family member, caretaker. Those with the most in-home support did not need as much outside help. Those living alone relied more on friends, relatives, and agencies. Family and friends were the most often used source of information, while radio was also mentioned as important. (Williamson, 2002).

The researchers found much excitement about the Internet from the participants. Other studies show that blind people who are able to use the Internet feel a sense of empowerment (Berry, 1999). However, libraries did not generate as much enthusiasm. This could be related to a number of reasons. The participants noted several problems with print, such as Braille; many did not read Braille as it tends to be used mostly by those who have been blind since a young age. (Williamson, 2002). In addition, libraries in the past have not served blind patrons very well, aside from large print and talking books. Adaptive technology for using the Internet are now beginning to be used; the researchers recommended that libraries should seek support of organizations for the blind to help with the cost and training of such software. (Williamson, 2002).

Other studies and reports also show that library service to blind populations is not as good as could be. In interviews with blind library users, Eldridge (1982) shows that many blind people do not use libraries; according to one patron, this is because they did not use libraries before losing their sight, so they are even less likely to use libraries after becoming blind. Other patrons suggest that blind and low vision patrons would like to be able to browse the stacks and make their own choices among talking or Braille books. Some of the patrons Eldridge interviewed also felt that society does not take blind people seriously, and that most people with sight feel uncomfortable around the blind. Blind people would like to be taken seriously; unfortunately, many struggle with poor self-image.

Eldridge also interviewed librarians and library school students. Many had creative ideas on how to improve services to blind library users. At the same time, some of the library school students did not feel there was much attention given to services for

blind users, such as talking books, in the curriculum. In addition, many librarians are not trained in the needs of patrons who are blind or otherwise disabled.

Library Success Stories

In addition to this type of training, library facilities themselves need to be accessible to those users who are blind or have other disabilities. Vaccarella (2001) shows how a new library in New York's Monroe County Library System was built with accessibility in mind from the start. Her story can be used as a case study of how to plan and implement such changes; an existing library could also use Vaccarella's experiences to renovate their facilities. Vaccarella points out that keeping a library accessible is an ongoing project.

The new facilities were planned with the help of a Disability/Technology Team, which contained representatives from various sectors, especially those who would be working with adaptive technology and disabled patrons. In addition, the library organized several focus groups for which they recruited community members with a variety of disabilities representative of who might be using the library; these disabilities included blindness, sighted but legally blind, hearing impaired, and physically impaired. One of the participants of this focus group was a staff member of the library. The focus group was instrumental in allowing the library's intended users to have a voice in the decision making process, in issues that would potentially improve their abilities to access library facilities and materials.

The Disability/Technology team then determined which disabilities they could provide service for; low vision, blindness, hearing impairment, and physical disabilities

were all chosen. After this, they inventoried what materials they already owned, to see how these disabilities were currently represented in the collection. They also visited local organizations for the blind such as the Association for Blind and Visually Impaired. The organization recommended various types of equipment, and demonstrated how to use it. In addition, the people from the focus groups also made recommendations as to what types of equipment would be most helpful to them.

Because the staff would be working directly with patrons, it was critical for them to understand the disabilities of the patrons and how they (as staff) could better serve these patrons. Another local organization, Shared Results, was invited to teach staff-disability sessions in order to make the staff members aware of, and sensitive to, the various disabilities of the patrons.

Finally, the library makes use of Disability Technology Advocates. These are volunteers who know how to use the equipment for the blind and disabled. They also look for information on other, new types of assistive equipment, in order to keep library management abreast on the latest technologies.

Another success story is that of Cheryl Kirkpatrick and Catherine Morgan, of the South Carolina State Library. Kirkpatrick and Morgan describe how they updated their library facilities and computers to be accessible to blind and physically disabled patrons. Their library already had a history of providing services to these user groups (Kirkpatrick and Morgan, 2001). First they provided software for their patrons' use, such as JAWS, VERA, and ZoomText, which make websites accessible to visually impaired users. Then the library was chosen as a pilot site for a study by the South Carolina Access to Information Technology Coordinating Committee (SCAITCC), whose aim was to

provide access to electronic access to citizens with physical disabilities. (Kirkpatrick and Morgan, 2001).

The committee made recommendations according to Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998. The library used these recommendations as a starting point. They upgraded several workstations; in this article, they state the details of the system's hardware, in addition to the ergonomic specifications that were recommended. However, there was some trial and error involved with the equipment. As an example, the library was told to purchase keyguards for the keyboard, in order to prevent accidental keystrokes. They discovered that the keyguards were difficult to use by patrons who did not have problems with physical mobility. Also, the keyguards prevented blind users from feeling the Braille keycaps. The library mitigated the situation by providing two keyboards, one with keyguards and one without; the former may be requested by the patron.

The library also purchased several software tools, such as JAWS for Windows 3.7 and OpenBook, which they describe. In addition to the software, they purchased other assistive equipment for blind users including a bifocal illuminating magnifier and cassette recorder for each workstation. The committee did not invest in technology that was provided locally by other agencies, or that their users did not express a need for. (Kirkpatrick and Morgan, 2001).

In addition to investing in this equipment, the library also re-coded their own website to make it accessible for people with visual disabilities. This was challenging as not much was available in terms of books and articles, but two books that the authors recommend are *Adaptive Technology for the Internet: Making Electronic Resources*

Accessible to All, by Barbara T. Mates, and *Web Accessibility for People with Disabilities*, by Michael G. Paciello. (Kirkpatrick and Morgan, 2001). The library also found several helpful websites, which they list in a sidebar in their article. The authors also provide coding tips for website accessibility, and contact information for the vendors they used.

Services to the Blind and Low Vision Community

Locally, one of the most well known services is the Washington Talking Book and Braille Library in Seattle. The WTBBL is administered by the Seattle Public Library, but is a separate facility. Likewise, the WTBBL's online public access catalog (OPAC) is separate from the Seattle Public Library's OPAC. Staffed by dedicated employees and volunteers, it is actually a program of the Washington State Library, which contracts with Seattle Public Library. The WTBBL provides statewide service to blind and visually impaired individuals; they also serve deaf/blind, physically disabled, and learning disabled adults and children. According to WTBBL's website, in 2002 the library circulated about 2000 items a day, with over 500,000 items going to almost 12,000 customers.

The services offered by the WTBBL include talking books, Braille books, large print books, and magazines. Special cassette players are provided to registered users. Children's services include Braille, large print, and talking books. These books range in age appropriateness from toddlers to teens. The library offers a summer reading program by mail. In addition, there are performances and events for children and their families.

Some other WTBBL services include deposit collections; this is a service where the WTBBL loans books to local libraries, schools, senior centers, and other facilities; Evergreen Taping and Braille Services, where books are taped locally by Pacific Northwest authors for both adults and children; and Evergreen Radio Reading Service, which provides radio broadcast readings of newspapers, grocery ads, and other consumer information. Special radio receivers are provided as part of this service.

In order to hear representative voices of their users, the WTBBL makes use of their Patron Advisory Council. This council gives advice and makes recommendations with regard to the practices, policies, and goals of the library.

More information about the WTBBL can be found on their website, <http://www.spl.org/wtbbbl/wtbbbl.html>.

On the national level, one of the most well known services for the blind is the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS), administered by the Library of Congress. The NLS offers a free program by mail where Braille books and magazines and talking books are sent to the patron's home; the patron returns these by free return postage. Equipment for listening to audio books is also available for loan, including special devices for various physical impairments or limited mobility. Recently, the NLS has launched two new telecommunications initiatives, NFS –Newsline and Bookshare.org. These programs are collaborations with the National Federation of the Blind and Benetech, a non-profit organization. The NLS also works in cooperation with local regional and subregional libraries, such as the WTBBL. As a result, some of the services offered by the NLS are mediated through the WTBBL, while others are available directly through the NLS.

The NLS can be contacted through their website, <http://www.loc.gov/nls>.

Recommendations

Services such as those offered by the WTBBL and NLS are a boon to patrons who do not have access to transportation, or live in very remote parts of the state. For those patrons who are able to travel locally or who want to physically browse the library's collection, or interact with others in person, the public library should be a viable option.

The public library is often one of the first places a person goes when he or she is new to a community. Therefore, the library should be a welcoming place for all users, including blind and vision impaired community members. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case.

The following are my recommendations on how public libraries can improve services to blind and vision impaired users. These are partially taken from the literature, and partially from my own thoughts and reflections.

- Hire someone to act as advocate. This person should keep up to date with the latest adaptive technologies, and make sure that the library owns enough equipment for its blind and vision impaired users. The advocate should also keep up to date with the ADA, and should be able to make recommendations to the library board on any needed renovations that would allow the library to conform to ADA guidelines.
- The library should offer Internet classes or workshops for blind/low vision community members, with the use adaptive technology. The classes could

range from basic Web surfing to advanced Web searches to e-mail. Most public libraries offer these types of classes for sighted community members, but few offer them for the blind. Many blind or low vision people may not have computers at home, but at the same time, would like to be able to “surf the Web.” For these people, the library may be their only option for using a computer.

- The library should offer other types of programming for blind patrons. This could be similar to programs for other users, such as book groups, lectures, poetry readings, etc. These programs can serve as social events for those that want to socialize; granted, not all blind people will be interested, just like not all people with vision participate in such events and programs. However, for those that care to participate, the library should make it easy and fun for them to do so. In one of the interviews by Eldridge, a blind library patron remarked that programs such as these would encourage blind people to use the library. Another patron remarked that blind people are “used to being isolated”; this type of library programming would be a way to ease that isolation.
- Bring library materials to the patrons’ homes. For those who do not have access to transportation, the library could bring talking books or other appropriate devices to the user’s home. This could be part of the library’s regular outreach service; many libraries already offer a similar type of service that goes to senior centers or other places for people who cannot leave home.

- Create a forum for blind and low vision patrons to make recommendations and test new technology. Recruiting focus groups is one way this could be done, for one-time or short term sessions. Individual interviews and volunteer usability testing may also be options. Any of these methods will provide valuable input from the target user group, which may not normally be available to the library. In addition, blind community members will know that the library is taking their needs and concerns seriously.
- Have appropriate training for staff. The staff who will work directly with blind users should know how to communicate with them, how to help them find what they are looking for in terms of talking books or other materials, and how to assist the patrons with technology or equipment. Most importantly, the staff should treat these patrons the same way they would treat their other patrons, with dignity and respect.
- Library schools should include more courses in the curriculum for those students that will work with physically impaired populations, including blind and low vision. In addition, library schools could do a more effective job of recruiting students from these populations also.

Other Resources

American Library Association

http://www.ala.org/ascla/bph_standards.html

The ALA has a section on its website dedicated to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). There are also pages about services to blind and physically handicapped patrons. The ALA has a disability policy, with specific recommendations on how libraries should conform to the ADA in providing library services to patrons who are blind or have other disabilities.

Bobby

<http://bobby.watchfire.com/bobby/html/en/about.jsp>

Bobby is a software tool with the function of checking the accessibility of websites. If an organization is a registered Bobby user, and their site passes the Bobby test, the organization may put a logo on their web site stating that the site is “Bobby approved.”

Bookshare.org

<http://www.bookshare.org/web/Welcome.html>

“Bookshare.org dramatically increases the accessibility of books for people with visual or other print disabilities.” This service allows access to books in digital Braille format, and digital talking book format (DAISY).

Lighthouse International

<http://www.lighthouse.org>

An international, non-profit organization; according to their mission statement, Lighthouse aims “To overcome vision impairment for people of all ages through worldwide leadership in rehabilitation services, education, research, prevention and advocacy.” Lighthouse provides information about the treatment of eye diseases, in addition to prevention. They also serve as advocates for blind people in all aspects of daily life, and provide information on adaptive technology and other resources.

National Federation for the Blind

<http://www.nfb.org>

“It is estimated that about 1.1 million people in the U.S. are blind. Each year 50,000 more will become blind.” – from the National Federation for the Blind website.

The NFB is a national organization that seeks to help blind people increase their self-confidence and self-esteem. They also strive to create public awareness and education about blind people. The NFB promotes the use of adaptive technology; they are also involved in advocacy and civil rights for the blind. One of the services provided by this organization is NFB-Newsline, a talking newspaper service available free to the blind. Other services include job training and Braille literacy training.

National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped

<http://www.loc.gov/nls/>

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These two bibliographies contain many resources, including books, periodical articles, films, and online resources that may help librarians to better understand this user group, and provide appropriate services. The second bibliography listed contains many resources on the Americans with Disabilities Act, in addition to a breakdown by

demographic (older adults, children) and type of disability (visually impaired, hearing impaired, learning disabled.)

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