Bridging Health Information Services Gaps Through Community Outreach Programs at the Public Library

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Abstract:

        The current economic climate in the United States has enhanced the significance and scope of public libraries. This presentation will describe the health information outreach programs at three different health information programs at public libraries in the United States. Each program is a compelling example of how systems across the country are responding to community needs and creating new forms of relevance in today's society. Despite the challenging economic climate, public libraries in the United States continue to find innovative solutions to meet the information needs of an increasingly diverse public. They remain strong in their commitment to overcome the barriers between the public and reliable, authoritative health information.

Introduction

The current economic climate in the United States has enhanced the significance and scope of public libraries. Public libraries have increasingly taken on a new role as community information centers that serve the needs of diverse, multi-generational users. This has created unique challenges for public library systems, but has simultaneously generated opportunities to expand services and reach new populations. This is particularly true in the area of consumer health information. Many people are unsure of where to turn to for reliable health information and their access to affordable and high-speed Internet may be limited, but they are familiar or aware of their local public library. A growing number of public libraries are developing innovative programs to address these emerging imperatives. This paper will focus on different health information programs at public libraries in different parts of the United States. Each program is a compelling example of how systems across the country are responding to community needs, and creating new forms of relevance in today's society.

Background

At the outset, it is useful to define a public library and to understand the scope and reach of this public institution. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) gives the following definition for a public library:

> *"A public library is established under state enabling laws or regulations to serve a community, district, or region, and provides at least the following:*
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> 1. *an organized collection of printed or other library materials, or a combination thereof;*
> 2. *paid staff;*
> 3. *an established schedule in which services of the staff are available to the public;*
> 4. *the facilities necessary to support such a collection, staff, and schedule, and*
> 5. *is supported in whole or in part with public funds.*
>
> *There may be only one public library in a community or there may be a public library system. Just as a school system has elementary and secondary schools, a public library that administers a branch, a bookmobile, a central library, and/ or a books-by-mail service is called a public library system."* (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2011).

Whereas academic, school and special libraries serve a restricted patron base, public libraries exist to serve **all** residents in a specified geographic location. This means that all groups, regardless of socioeconomic status, education level, income level, age or cultural heritage have the freedom to access the information in a public library. It would be reasonable to describe the public library as one of the most recognizable bridges between the US population and information at large.

From 1989 through 2007, the National Center for Education Statistics administered the Public Library Survey and the State Library Agency Survey. Since 2007, responsibility for administering these two surveys has been given to the IMLS through the President's Budget Request for 2008. The data is collected from over 9,000 public libraries in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the outlying areas. The annual reports generated from this data describe the trends in library expenditures, revenue, staffing and services over the course of the current fiscal year and over the 10 years preceding.

According to the Public Libraries Survey, Fiscal Year 2008, public libraries in the United States between 1999 and 2008 have steadily increased services despite the reality that the level of revenue is not increasing and staffing levels have remained steady. There was a 19.7% increase in visits to the library during this time period and from FY 2007 to FY 2008, the number of visits increased from 1.43 billion to 1.50 billion. The report also indicates that both circulation levels and Internet use levels are rising the at the public library. While traditional reference service levels are decreasing, program levels at public libraries, particularly ones designed for children are increasing. Staffing levels have remained mostly steady during this time period. Operating costs and expenditures have increased steadily and while state-level funding has dropped greatly overall, local funding has increased which has helped to offset this decrease. The message is clear -- public libraries in the United States are doing more for the populations they serve despite the staffing and financial challenges they face (Henderson, Miller, Craig, Dorinski, Freeman, Isaac, Pierson, O'Shea, & Schilling, 2010a).

Simultaneously, health is a topic in which the public is increasingly interested. In 1972, the American Hospital Association created a Patient Bill of Rights which described what the average person in the United States should expect from their healthcare experience. Replaced by The Patient Care Partnership in 2003, the documents advocate for patients to seek as much information about their health condition as necessary in order to be fully involved in their own healthcare (American Hospital Association, 2003). The current version of Healthy People 2020, an federal initiative to improve the health of Americans, includes a topic dealing with health communication and health information technology. The goal of this particular topic is "Use health communication strategies and health information technology (IT) to improve population health outcomes and health care quality, and to achieve health equity." (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Since 2000, the Pew Internet and American Life Project has reported that increasing numbers of US residents are taking more responsibility for their health care by seeking more health information online. As institutions which serve entire populations, public libraries have a unique ability to help the public in these searches.

This paper will look at the activities at three public libraries in the United States geared towards bridging the gap between the public and consumer health information. Each of the authors had the opportunity to work at one of these libraries during the course of their graduate education in library and information sciences and was impressed by the commitment to consumer health evidenced by the outreach programs offered. These libraries -- Prince George's County Memorial Library System in Maryland, the Central Rappahannock Regional Library in Virginia, and the Pima County Public Library in Arizona -- are just three examples of how public

libraries or library systems can intentionally make an effort to bridge these gaps and mediate between the public and health information.

Libraries

1. Prince George's County Memorial Library System, Maryland

Prince George's County Memorial Library System (PGCML) of Maryland borders Washington, D.C. and serves a growing international and diverse socioeconomic population through its 19 branches. Over 840,000 patrons are served in 18 branches by over 339 staff members, including 146.5 librarians and 193 other staff (IMLS search result). With the help of an Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant, Masters of Library Science students from the University of Maryland taught older adults, age 60+, how to use the Internet to find reliable health information at two PGCMLS branches, close to the the district and state border.

Dr. Bo Xie, from the University of Maryland's iSchool, was the principal investigator for the IMLS grant, "Meeting older adults' health information needs through peer training: An innovative public library approach to lifelong learning and volunteering later in life." The objective of the grant was the design a public library-based program that would provide high-quality, Internet-based health information to seniors from diverse backgrounds. Key to the project was the incorporation of a cadre of committed, older adult volunteers who would help design the curriculum and then serve as peer trainers, teaching other senior volunteers how to access, assess, and use a broad range of quality online resources. The research project, grounded in participatory design methodology, will develop curricula, procedures, and other guides, which will be made available to public libraries nationwide.

The project, later named eHILLL or electronic Health Information for Life-Long Learners, involved graduate students in library and information science who taught older adults how to use the Internet to final reliable health information from trusted government sources, NIHSeniorHealth.gov and MedlinePlus.gov. The program also incorporated peer-to-peer teaching so that more advanced students could assist struggling students. Dr. Xie solicited student teachers through from the University of Maryland iSchool's student listserv. In preparation, each teacher was required to read an article she authored on teaching older adults.

The curriculum of the course was based on a toolkit developed by NIH Senior Health and broken into 8 modules, ideally one module per training session. The curriculum was distributed to the older adult students in paper format so they could take notes, study the material on their own, and complete their homework if they did not finish in class.

The classes were held at the Hyattsville and New Carrollton branches of the library system. Classes were held at both locations using the existing public computers on Mondays and Wednesday in addition to Tuesdays and Thursdays. Each class met twice a week for four weeks and lasted for two hours in the morning starting at 9 am, one hour before each of the libraries opened to the public. Class sizes ranged from four to eight people.

Since the grant focused on the older adult population, each person enrolling had to be at least 60 years of age. Many of the students drove themselves to the library, a few walked, and one student took 3 public buses to attend the classes. Some of the students had worked with computers before they retired years ago, while others had never used a computer. Everyone had heard about things on the Internet and most wanted to be able to email with their children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren. Many of the students had medical issues they wanted to learn more about, which gave them extra practice after they had finished their assignments for the day.

The eHILLL program has been a success. Over 500 older adults have been trained through the eHILLL program. Training locations have been expanded to senior centers in Gaithersburg and North Brentwood, Maryland. In addition, a partnership has formed with OASIS, "...a national education organization dedicated to enriching the lives of adults age 50 and older through lifelong learning and service. Offering stimulating programs in the arts, humanities, health, technology and volunteer service, OASIS brings people together to learn, lead and contribute in their communities" (OASIS, 2009).

Dr. Xie commented that, "The project is a success because it makes a difference in people's life. People are excited to find information and we can see a difference. We are also helping MLS students. We have given over 25 graduate students a chance to develop information literacy instruction skills." While teaching as a graduate assistant for this project, one of the authors, AiMeeBabcock-Ellis, developed lasting relationships with some of her students. In the year which has passed since she finished teaching through the eHILLL project, she has kept in touch with some of her students and foresees a lasting relationships with these former students. These new friends have expressed their thankfulness for the program and what a difference it has made in their lives. One student reported going to the Hyattsville library frequently to search for information, to email with her family, and to apply for jobs electronically.

The program has evolved to include a new component where experienced or students who feel more comfortable with using the computer and internet engage in peer teaching. This program is called Older Adult Team, or OAT. Every Friday morning, Dr. Xie, her graduate students, and OATs meet to "to collaboratively develop learning strategies and tutorials that can help older adults learn to use technology more effectively" (Xie, 2010). Recently, the OATs, Dr. Xie and her staff "have explored topics such as how to find reliable health information on MedlinePlus, what is social media, why we would (or would not) want to use Facebook and blogs, and how to use GMail" (Xie, 2010).

The eHILLL program has started collaborating with the computer science department at the University of Maryland to develop better tutorials that are more accessible and older adult-friendly.

2. Central Rappahannock Regional Library System, Virginia

The Central Rappahannock Regional Library System serves the widest geographic area in the state of Virginia through its 8 branches, covering the city of

Fredericksburg and three surrounding counties. The estimated population which has access to this library system is 276, 640 as of the 2009 fiscal year (Henderson, Miller, Craig, Dorinski, Freeman, Isaac, Pierson, O'Shea, & Schilling, 2010b). Through grants from the National Library of Medicine and the American Association for the Advancement of Science and a desire to continuously improve, CRRL has refined its ability to make health information publicly available through the Internet, personalized training sessions, and community health fairs.

When the library system was redesigning their website in 2000, they wanted to ensure that a portion of the site would be devoted to consumer health. Internally, they were motivated by the director's interest in consumer health. Externally, they were motivated be recalling the numerous times they were a resource for the community, providing people with more information than they had received from their healthcare practitioner. For decades, they have maintained a medical dictionary and selected consumer health resources in print format; these were always kept as current as possible. Being able to provide health information on the web would allow them to keep more current consumer health resources, particularly since these would include subscriptions databases which patrons could access.

Around the same time, the Central Rappahannock Regional Library System was collaborating with the Mary Washington Hospital on a Health Information for the Public grant from the National Library of Medicine. The project had six specific goals: (1) providing training for the CRRL staff on the use of National Library of Medicine resources such as PubMed, (2) offering workshops for the public, (3) designing and launching a website, (4) creating a brochure to promote the website, (5) acquire additional computers for both of the libraries for outreach, and (6) provide enhanced services for the residents of Fredericksburg and the counties of Stafford, Spotsylvania and Westmoreland counties (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2001). The project allowed both libraries to take advantage of the resources held by the other. By the end of the project, CRRL knew that they needed to continue in their commitment to continuously provide access to the public they served.

In 2003, the library was invited to apply for a grant from the American Association for the Advancement of Science. These grants funded the Healthy People Library Project which focused on providing libraries with information to be used when helping the public access health information. Central Rappahannock Regional Library was awarded the grant and tasked with developing materials emphasizing preventative care and treatment of diabetes in African American and Latino communities. The library staff was able to exhibit at various health fairs across the city of Fredericksburg and found that people were very receptive to the materials they handed out. One of the reference librarians also coordinated a presentation on healthy eating for diabetics with a nutritionist from the local hospital; this event took place at a community center in the city. The public who attended the session were interviewed and these interviews were made available through CRRL Presents, a weekly cable television program produced by the library which highlights events and programs occurring at the library.

The community has been very receptive to the library's efforts and shown a great eagerness to learn more about health issues. While the public is urged to always consult their healthcare practitioner about health issues, the library works to

ensure that the public also has access to additional resources which can supplement the knowledge they receive from their physicians. One outcome has been the increase in community partners which has been useful for continued collaboration in health information promotion. Another encouraging outcome is the changing perception of the community regarding the library's ability to provide health information. Increased confidence in and awareness of the breadth of knowledge available from the library has resulted in an increase of cardholders and circulation.

Going forward, the library is strong in its commitment to provide current health information resources to their public. They continuously look for ways to improve and promote the Health Answers section of their website in addition to the print resources. During a practicum for The Catholic University of America, one of the authors, Jennifer McDaniel, had the opportunity to propose a revision to the section which is being considered for a future update. In addition, she was able to help with the collection development for the consumer health section for the collection in a recently opened branch of the library system. Promotion of their services will continue to include presenting at health fairs in the region. The Central Rappahannock Regional Library will continue to work hard to be a reliable health information resource for its community.

3. Pima County Public Library, Arizona

The Pima County Public Library (PCPL) serves a large and diverse metropolitan community in Tucson, AZ. PCPL consists of twenty five branch libraries, making it the largest system in Southern Arizona. Its libraries serve a population of over 1 million residents that comprise the following demographic groups: White non-Hispanic (56%); Hispanic (34%); Native American (4%); Black (4%); and Asian (3%) (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Given its proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border and large Spanish-speaking population, PCPL has a long tradition of extending bilingual library services and programs. The system is well-regarded for its outreach efforts and multicultural programming such as *Dia de los Niños* and the *Nuestras Raíces* Festival. PCPL is also adept at reaching local Native American communities, and has a history of successful partnership with the local Pascua Yaqui Tribe and Tohono O'hdham Nation.

Nonetheless, the city has recently experienced a rise in its refugee population, and is grappling to integrate these new community members. Arizona is one of the top five states for refugee resettlement and Tucson has been designated as a 'Preferred Community' for resettlement by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Serves Office of Refugee Resettlement. It is currently home to over 11,500 refugees representing fifty countries and forty-five languages. Refugees are eligible for cash and medical assistance, employment services, English language training, and other limited services when they first arrive to the United States. Refugees are enrolled in the Refugee Medical Assistance Program and receive Refugee Cash Assistance for the first eight months after their arrival. After the initial period of assistance, these new residents are expected to become economically self-sufficient, and are essentially 'dropped' from services.

Integrating refugees into the Tucson community has been a challenge; the local social service infrastructure is already strained by the large low-income

population, is designed to serve a different population, and language barriers are an ongoing problem. Agencies such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Lutheran Social Services, and several new mutual assistance associations work tirelessly to support this community, but many of their needs remain unmet. The majority of refugees live in the center of the city in apartment complexes close to the University of Arizona. PCPL's Martha Cooper Branch is a mid-sized library that serves the area where many reside. The Branch Manager, Margaret Guerrero noticed that many refugee patrons had unmet health needs. Guerrero has a strong background in library services to Spanish-speakers, which provided her with transferable skills in serving this new user group. She decided to organize a Refugee Health Fair as a way to promote health screening, and connect patrons with local resources and services.

Recognizing the importance of enlisting community partners, Guerrero invited the Pima County Public Health Department, International Rescue Committee, and a professor and refugee advocate from the University of Arizona to join her in this endeavor. The project management responsibilities of the Fair were assigned to a University of Arizona School of Information Resources and Library Science, Jessica Hernandez, a student who had a graduate assistantship at the library. Hernandez worked to recruit over forty community organizations and agencies to exhibit and provide free health screenings at the fair. Screenings included blood glucose, cholesterol, vision, hearing, dental, developmental, etc., and were provided by the University of Arizona College of Pharmacy, Tucson Downtown Lions Club, Pima County Public Health Department Oral Health Program, and others. Examples of exhibitors included El Rio Community Health Center, Tucson Birth and Women's Health Center, Southern Arizona AIDS Foundation, and many more.

Over fifty student volunteers signed up to provide a free transportation service to and from key apartment complexes; assist with publicity, creating flyers in 5 languages; and coordinate a diaper drive as a way to attract refugees to the fair. The graduate student also gave outreach presentations to local refugee groups inviting them to attend the fair. In addition to the free health screenings and exhibits, key features of the fair include: a private Women's Health area; children's activities; live music; and paid interpreters provided by IRC and PCPL who were on-hand to facilitate the provision of health information. Representatives from the State of Arizona Department of Economic Security were also on-hand to help attendees in applying for Medicaid, food stamps, and cash assistance. Early on, the decision was made to hold the fair at the Martha Cooper Branch. Many refugees were already familiar with the library, and its proximity to key apartment complexes made the location very convenient.

In the end, three hundred people attended the fair, making it the largest refugee event in the history of the state at that time, and the most well-attended program in the library's history. Many attendees also signed up for library cards and learned about PCPL programs and services. Interestingly enough, existing familiarity with the library helped to attract community members to the event, which conversely served to draw in new library users. The local media provided nice coverage of the event, and the library received very positive feedback from the PCPL administration, and all fair collaborators. Many refugees in attendance received case management services from IRC. Follow-up was conducted by IRC health educators to solicit

participant feedback, and assist them with interpreting the results of their screenings, and making the necessary follow-through.

A second fair was held in 2010 to similar success, and this has now become an annual program offered by PCPL. The key to this program's ongoing success has been the library's ability to develop and sustain partnerships with local stakeholders, as well as recruit student volunteers from the University of Arizona. The library has used very little from its own programming budget to coordinate each event because of its ability to leverage its partners and volunteers. The planners' careful and creative use of resources is essential for offering a program of this scale during limited budget times. In addition to resource sharing, these partners were also indispensable for gaining access to the refugee community through outreach to mutual aid associations, recruiting interpreters, and publicizing the event in multiple languages.

Much of the event's success is due to the free transportation service that was offered by undergraduate student volunteers. This was very difficult to coordinate and involved creating a schedule, obtaining liability insurance from the university, and borrowing and safely installing numerous car seats from IRC. Recruiting and coordinating the numerous paid interpreters was also a major logistical feat. All interpreters were referred by IRC and had previous professional interpreting experience. They were trained in handling private health information, but as with all medical interpreters, this is a skill that requires special training and involves ethical considerations. Finding qualified interpreters fluent enough in English and the major identified languages (Nepalese, Arabic, Kirundi, Swahili, Spanish, and French) in Tucson was very difficult. Eleven interpreters were hired for the first event, but the interpreter to attendee ratio was not sufficient, and lead to many refugees waiting at exhibit tables for long periods of time to be assisted. Exhibitors were encouraged to bring their own interpreters to facilitate communication, but for many, this was their first attempt to reach the refugee population, and they simply did not have the staff resources to do so.

Despite the challenges, this program is an overwhelming success, and one that other public library systems can easily replicate. The first Refugee Health Fair was organized in exactly two months and was offered on a shoe-string budget. The expense incurred by the library ($300) was nominal compared to the depth of the program, and the number of people that were served. This initiative is an excellent example of how PCPL identified a need in the community, and attempted to fill existing gaps through collaboration with local partners. In so doing, the library not only reached a new group of users, they also developed strategic relationships with Tucson agencies and organizations, and created a new form of relevance for PCPL. Throughout the course of coordinating this event, the planners received ongoing feedback from exhibitors and partners alike akin to "I didn't know the library did *that*!" Organizing a health fair was certainly uncharted territory for PCPL, but the standard response became "why not?!" Public libraries are dynamic institutions that must be responsive and proactive if they are to remain significant to the people they serve. In organizing the Refugee Health Fair, PCPL has continued their tradition of excellence in serving special populations of library users. They have also become a leader for serving and advocating for Tucson's refugees; crafting a place for themselves as a

trusted and welcoming information source and community center for this emerging population.

Conclusion

Each of the library systems represented here have dealt with significant reductions in both their budgets and staffing. Despite this, each system remains strong in its commitment to overcome the barriers between the public and reliable, authoritative health information. This paper has shown a range of options for consumer health outreach that public libraries have from instruction to online resources and the coordination of community health events. These are only three examples in the trend of public libraries finding new ways to bridge the gap to health information for the populations they serve.

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