

IFLA 2014

Session 100: How Special Are We Anyway?

NLS and US public libraries: Cooperative strategies old and new

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The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS), Library of Congress, United States of America, has a long history of cooperation with public libraries in the U.S.

Records indicate that library service for blind patrons began in the late nineteenth century. As early as 1868, the Boston Public Library established a department for the blind after receiving eight embossed volumes. In 1882, the Pennsylvania Home Teaching Society and Free Circulating Library for the Blind was founded in Philadelphia and in 1899 was incorporated with the Free Library of Philadelphia. The Chicago Library, in 1894, received a collection of embossed books from a local women's club. The New York City Free Circulating Library for the Blind was organized in 1895 by a blind man who had a private collection of embossed books. In 1903 this collection became the nucleus of the Library for the Blind of the New York Public Library. The Detroit Public Library placed 110 volumes on the shelves in 1896, and in the same year New York became the first state to create a department for the blind in a state library. Other state libraries soon followed New York's example.

In 1931 the U.S. Congress passed the Pratt-Smoot Act, providing funds for the Books for the Blind program to the Library of Congress. The Librarian of Congress at that time determined that it would cost too much to provide copies of books to every public library in the country, and even if braille books were supplied, the libraries may not have been able to shelve or circulate them. He decided that the most efficient way to administer the program nationwide was to work with a few select libraries across the country which would serve specific regions. He chose 18 libraries initially, including nine public libraries who agreed to cooperate in the program. The libraries would house the books that the Library of Congress produced. They would also do all of the patron registration, circulation of books, reader advisory and related services. These libraries were able to serve large regions because patrons did not have to come to the library to receive service. Everything was handled through the mail. The libraries would mail books to patrons, and patrons would mail them back, all at no cost to the library or the patron. This was made possible by a subsidy which Congress provided to the United States Postal Service (USPS)

funding “free” mailing privileges for books and materials for the blind. This proved to be a very efficient system, and the number of cooperating libraries grew from the original 18 to 55 regional libraries today.

In 1969 the concept of subregional libraries was introduced. Under the auspices of the regional libraries, subregional libraries would receive limited collections through the Books for the Blind program and would serve a portion of the geographic region assigned to the regional library. Most of these subregional libraries were administered in public libraries and served the blind patrons in the geographic area of the hosting library. The number of subregional libraries rose to a high of 104 in the 1980s. After 1985, the number of subregional libraries began to decline due, mainly to loss of federal funding through the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA), and increasing efficiency through automation of circulation systems at the regional library level. Today there are still 37 subregional libraries and 15 advisory and outreach centers (AOCs). These AOCs consist of former subregional libraries that continue to provide reader advisory service and outreach but no longer handle the physical circulation of materials. Circulation is handled by the regional libraries serving the state.

In addition to the regional and subregional libraries and outreach centers, the NLS program encourages deposit collections in local public libraries. Today, 5,042 public libraries across the U.S. have deposit collections. These deposit collections are intended to introduce library patrons to the NLS service and provide them with short-term loans of books and equipment.

Deposit collections are established in institutions and agencies in order to provide ready access to recorded and braille books and magazines for eligible blind or physically disabled readers who can share equipment or who require temporary service. Typically, deposit collections are located in public libraries, public or private schools, schools for the blind, nursing homes, retirement centers, and rehabilitation centers.

A typical deposit collection contains playback equipment for digital talking books as well as representative titles selected for their potential interest to the clients of the institution. The libraries also maintain a supply of applications for individual service. These deposit collections are administered by the regional or subregional libraries in the NLS network.

In 1996 the U.S. Congress passed the Chafee Amendment to the U.S. Copyright Law. This amendment allows authorized entities such as NLS to produce books and magazines with U.S. copyright in specialized formats solely for the use of those persons who are residents of the United States or U.S. citizens living abroad who cannot read standard print because of a visual,

physical, or organically based reading disability. The Chafee Amendment removed the burden of requesting permission from rights holders before converting each title to a specialized format.

In 2009 NLS introduced the Braille and Audio Reading Download (BARD), its download service, allowing patrons to download digital talking books directly. Institutions with defined populations such as nursing homes and schools for the blind were permitted institutional accounts on BARD which allow the institutions to download books and magazines on behalf of their residents. Because public libraries do not have a limited, defined population such as a school or nursing home does, public libraries not affiliated with NLS network libraries have been given demonstration accounts on BARD rather than full and unrestricted access. The demonstration accounts are intended to demonstrate the download process for eligible patrons but do not provide unrestricted access to the NLS collection on BARD. However,, if patrons want to download books through the infrastructure of their public libraries, they can do so using their own personal BARD accounts. This model is most effective for patrons who can arrange transportation to their public libraries and who may not have internet access at home, or the skills required to download and transfer selected books and magazines. All patrons continue to have access to NLS books and magazines through their regional and subregional libraries utilizing the USPS mailing privileges.

In 2013, NLS conducted a pilot project through the New Jersey Talking Book and Braille Center (NJTBBC) to train public library staff on BARD and eligibility issues and give them full access to the download service so they could assist NLS patrons living in their service area with BARD downloading. The intent of the pilot was to address issues including verification or certification of eligibility; resources required to train public library staff on eligibility, NLS programs, and BARD; providing appropriate assistance to qualified patrons; and tracking and record-keeping.

NJTBBC selected eleven libraries to participate in the pilot. They developed training modules and conducted in-person training for each library. Training topics included eligibility requirements, certification, requirements and procedures for record-keeping and reporting usage, and copyright law pertaining to the NLS service. They also included training on the BARD registration process; navigating BARD; selecting, downloading, unzipping and transferring files; and using the NLS digital talking book machine.

NJTBBC notified all patrons in the participating library service areas of the new options through their public library, and provided them with library cards verifying their eligibility and

participation in the NLS service through NJTBBC. They also publicized the pilot through news releases, public service announcements, and web site and newsletter articles.

Participation included 480 downloads during the pilot and several new patrons signing up for services.

Issues raised included the extensive training required to implement the pilot and the need for additional training of public library staff on NJTBBC/NLS services, procedures, etc. as well as on BARD itself and assistive technology.

The eleven pilot libraries continue to provide the BARD service to patrons, but the pilot has not been expanded because of the intensive efforts required to train public library staff and the need for ongoing publicity and support to maintain the project.

NLS has always hoped to involve all 9,000 U.S. public libraries in promoting NLS service, particularly to patrons who are in the transition phase from print to non-print reading options because of the onset and advance of visual and physical disabilities. The deposit collections and BARD access have been helpful in promoting NLS services. Issues persist, however, around the need for constant promotion and training. NLS services are not included in most Masters programs in Library and Information Science (MLIS) in the United States, so librarians are often unaware of the program. Library technicians and other non-MLIS staff also require training and information on an ongoing basis to promote the service. The pilot project reinforced the need for intensive and on-going support to public libraries and the staff of over 100,000 branches and book mobiles across the United States.

Many public libraries have attempted to expand service to blind and disabled patrons by installing assistive technology in their libraries. These projects have been most successful in areas where good public transportation makes access to the library practical for blind and disabled readers. Additionally, staffing assistive technology centers with knowledgeable personnel who can provide a significant level of technical support to users is another important factor in their success. Unfortunately, without adequate training and support for public library staff on an ongoing basis, and users with basic skills and the ability to travel to the library, these projects often fail.

The United States comprises a full spectrum of communities from isolated rural settings to large, concentrated metropolitan areas. Public transportation is excellent in some areas and virtually nonexistent in others. In addition, the infrastructure to support ubiquitous cell phone and internet access is not yet complete, leaving some rural areas with less than adequate coverage. Because of these geographic differences, the NLS program relies on the regional expertise of its network libraries to customize outreach and training opportunities within their service areas.

NLS will continue to enlist public libraries as partners in promotion of NLS services, but expects to rely on the network of regional, subregional and advisory and outreach libraries for the primary service avenue. Cooperation, funding and support from state library systems, rehab agencies and public libraries hosting talking book and braille centers, Free Matter Mailing Privileges through the United States Postal Service, toll-free telephone service, and NLS's Braille and Audio Reading Download service continue to make this model effective.