

# **Library Services For People With Disabilities**

**OLOS Preconference  
Different Voices, Common Quest:  
Adult Literacy & Outreach in Libraries!**

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## Why is it so important for libraries to serve people with disabilities?

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- It becomes your responsibility.
- It serves your community – remember the makeup has changed over the years.
- As a professional, you are interested in providing accessible services.
- We need you to promote cultural diversity.
- We depend on you to make it a success.

“More than 50 million people – one out of every five Americans – have a disability” as of May 28, 2002, according to the American Association of People with Disabilities’ web site.

- "Disabilities" are only ONE component of someone.
- We are ALL made up of a variety of components.
- Speaking for myself – my hearing impairment is not the essence of my reality.
- It is only one aspect of "me."
- My lack of hearing does not stop me from achieving my goals.
- We all have something that makes us unique.
- Some of us may have disabilities or “differabilities” but it does not change who we are.

Bottom Line: People with disabilities and children with special needs, are simply US with different needs. We ALL have something that makes us unique. It does not change who we are. And our disability does not stop us from achieving our goals.

## What defines disability?

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The American Disability Act defines disability as “(a) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, (b) a record of such impairment, or (c) being regarded as having such an impairment.” PL 101-336, 104 STAT.327, Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 3(2), 1991.

In other words, a person has limited ability to hear, see, walk or communicate with others.

Rhea Joyce Rubin wrote a book entitled *Planning for Library Services to People with Disabilities*, published in 2001. On page 12, Rubin provides the statistics based on the United States population:

Blind or visually impaired 3% of population	Speech or language impairments 5% of population
Mobility impairment 2.9% of population and .4% for wheelchair users	Deaf or hard of hearing 4.4% of population
Learning disabilities 15% of population	Developmental disabilities 1.8% of population
Severe mental illness or serious emotional disturbances 5.5% population	

## Types of Disabilities

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- *INVISIBLE*

You will not know that these people including children have disabilities until you begin to communicate with them. For example, you may think a deaf person is rude when she/he does not respond when you talk to her/his back. That person did not hear you talking!

The speech disorder is not apparent until the person begins to talk.

With the dyslexia individual, if you want to point out signage, they will have difficulties, and will be too shamed to say that she/he has dyslexia or is illiterate.

Groups include

1. Deaf/hard of hearing
2. Speech disorders – language disorders, deafness, other physical ailments such as strokes
3. Learning disorders – dyslexia, illiteracy
4. Mental disorders – panic/anxiety attacks, depression, etc.

- *VISIBLE*

Disabilities are apparent to the public. These people are “different” from you.

Groups include

1. Visually impaired – users with Seeing Eye dogs or walking canes; or partially sighted without a need for Seeing Eye dogs, canes, but need magnifiers
2. Mobility impairments – wheelchair users; people using canes, crutches, etc.
3. Developmental disorders – autism, mental retardation, schizophrenia, etc.
4. Physical impairments – users who have cerebral palsy, spina bifida, etc.
5. Physical illnesses – strokes, Parkinson’s, etc.

- *TEMPORARY*

This group receives the same treatment prior/after their injuries and/or physical illnesses. It is understood that their disability is only temporary, since their broken bones will heal and they will be “normal.” It is when the physical illnesses become permanent that it may result in people being uncomfortable and uncertain in how to deal with them.

Groups include

1. Injury-related – broken bones resulting in orthopedic impairments and mobility
2. Physical illnesses that could become permanent – strokes, paralysis, arthritis, etc.

## **Barriers for People with Disabilities...**

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- It is normal to be uneasy in dealing with this group.
- It is normal to feel awkward in situations when you do not know what to do or say.
- Remember, there are stigmas related to the disability that should always be avoided.
  - Deaf and dumb
  - Crippled
  - Crazy or Insane
  - Handicapped
  - Defective
  - The list goes on....

In order to provide accessible library services, it is important to put aside our feelings, uncomfortable or otherwise, in order to communicate with people who happen to have disabilities. Overall, they are just like US in many aspects, except for their disability.

## **Communication starting points**

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Hearing impaired? Speech impaired?

Speak normally. Do not speak loudly as it does not help. For the hard of hearing, take the person to a quiet area. Speak clearly facing the deaf/hard of hearing person. Ask for their preference in communicating such as writing notes or signing. If the deaf person uses a sign language interpreter, do not speak to the interpreter as if the deaf person does not exist. Face the deaf person while speaking with an interpreter present. Additionally, it helps to know a bit of sign language but it is not required because not all hard of hearing people use sign language.

Allow the speech impaired to complete their sentences. Listen attentively and see if you can understand their speech patterns. For example, the deaf have monotone voices and may not pronounce words correctly. Repeat what was said to make sure you understood what was said.

Visually impaired?

Speak normally. Make your voice friendly. Again, face the visually impaired even when a guide is present. Do not touch the visually impaired without permission.

Remember that Seeing Eye dogs are dogs on duty, and are not to be petted. Use a clock face, such as noon, 3 p.m., 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. to guide the visually impaired in finding their direction.

#### Mobility impaired?

If they are using crutches or canes, ask them how to help. If they are wheelchair users, stoop to their eye level by kneeling or crouching. Make sure walkways are clear of obstacles or wide enough for wheelchairs to pass through.

#### Learning disorders?

Do not treat people as if they are stupid or lazy. They rely on visual aids, so you will need to be literal in showing them what they need to know.

They may be "different" from us, but they are normal in many other ways. They enjoy food, watch movies, listen to music, and many other activities we take for granted. It benefits us to reach them as community partners, providing them an opportunity to be active and fulfilled members of society.

- Libraries should provide basic services to meet the special needs of their community.

*Are your elevator buttons within reach for wheelchair users?*

*Are your elevator numbers in Braille for the blind?*

*Is your library signage in universal design for the illiterate?*

*Is there a quiet spot in the library for you to communicate with your patrons?*

*Does your collection have large print materials for the visually impaired?  
Close captioned videos/DVDs for the deaf/hearing impaired?*

It is that basic, yet not that obvious to the rest of "normal" society. This is where library professionals, who are knowledgeable about these needs, become vital.

## **Starting points in providing ACCESSIBLE library services**

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### ACCESSIBLE ARCHITECTURE

- Handrails
- Elevators
- Ramps / moving ramps
- Extra large doorways
- Automatic doors
- Braille instructions within hand reach
- Braille elevator buttons / signage
- Visible / Large Signage – Universal Design (i.e. Female/Male shapes for restrooms)
- Break of recess at stopping points on bottom of walls for visually impaired using canes
- Shelf height within hand reach and/or provide page assistance to pull materials for wheelchair users

### ASSISTIVE LISTENING DEVICES

- Good amplification system
- Telecommunication Device for the Deaf in public phone areas
- Headphones / microphones in conference rooms
- Audio books

### VISUAL AIDS

- Large print materials
- Braille materials
- Close captioned videos/DVDs
- Good lighting
- Magnification software, hand held magnifiers, screen enlargers, etc.
- Smoke detectors with strobe alarms

## **Open dialogue with participants**

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- Changes should come from community needs. There are demands for diverse materials, but at the same time there is resistance to embrace inclusion. How do we balance this or come to terms with it?
- What are some of the changing expectations of user groups?

- What impact does serving people with disabilities have on library services?
- What impact does serving people with disabilities have on library staffing?
- What kind of personnel will the library need?
- What are some advantages/disadvantages to making people with disabilities one focus of many library services?
- Does the term “disabilities” have a negative impact? Do we need another term?
- Are user expectations different for people with disabilities? Why?
- What can we do to increase access for people with divergent needs and preferences?
- How can we incorporate assistive technology and universal design/signage?
- Are there instances where the library should make special accommodations for users?
- We tend to create “special collections” or “special sections” for multicultural material, i.e. African American, Sign Language, and Spanish Language, etc. Are we helping or hindering by compartmentalizing our collections?
- What kinds of policies inhibit or facilitate communications with minority users?
- Cultural conflicts will inevitably arise when serving a culturally diverse population. Some of the most common conflicts include: gender, religion, politics, and privacy. How can staff training improve the library’s response to these issues?

- Should training assist staff or should it impact the general public awareness? Both?
- What kind of sensitivity training does staff need? Other patrons using library?
- Should the library provide sensitivity training for the community? Why? Why not?

We must not allow disability to cause divisiveness but rather unity among us!

*You can make a difference!*

Remember, people with  
disabilities or “differabilities”  
are simply US!