

Library Service to People with Disabilities

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Introduction

The necessity of providing access to information is at the heart of the mission of libraries and library associations around the world. The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) has as part of its mission statement to “empower and inspire society by driving access to information, knowledge, and culture for all, to support development, learning, creativity, and innovation.” Its four core values reflect this commitment, and underline that the access provided by high quality library services should serve all, not least those who have a disability. As the leading organization for all types of library worldwide, IFLA has a particular focus on libraries serving people with special needs, for example through the Marrakesh Treaty, CRPD and the SDGs.

Status of library services to people with disabilities

In the fall of 2017, IFLA conducted a survey of all types of library, in order to obtain a snapshot of the formal policies, and practical assistance in support of information access – notably through technology – for people with disabilities. We received 470 complete responses from 92 countries.

Response by Type of Library

Type of Library	Number	Percentage	Number of Countries
Academic	33	6.9 %	28
Library Associations	48	10.1%	34
Individual Libraries			
Academic	114	24.0%	41
Public	167	30.8%	23
School	30	6.3%	11
Special	78	16.4%	31

Libraries with formal policies on accessibility – including physical, resource and programme accessibility – were understandably more prevalent in larger libraries (66% of national libraries and 73% of academic ones). Around a third of public and school libraries had policies.

However, the many libraries who do not have a formal policy still report both actual accessibility and a commitment to access. For example, the Tampere Public Library in Finland wrote in its survey response:

While there is no official access policy, our library serves a great many individuals with disabilities and special needs, including special needs schools, adults and seniors with visual and auditory issues, members of the Deaf community, as well as people in wheelchairs and with walkers. We also serve a vast array of non-neurotypical patrons.

Despite having the lowest probability of having a formal accessibility policy, 90% of school libraries were physically accessible. This was also the case for 93% of public libraries and 83% of academic libraries. Reflecting their broad mandate, 84% of public libraries offer accessible resources, and 76% provide specific services for people with disabilities.

Individual Libraries with Disability Policies and Actual Services

Policy	Academic	Public	School	Special
Local policy on accessibility	84 (73%)	72 (43%)	4 (13%)	30 (38%)
Actual physical Accessibility	96 (83%)	155 (93%)	27 (90%)	65 (79%)
Actual equal access to resources, programs, and services	58 (50%)	140 (84%)	7 (23%)	39 (53%)
Actual special services for people with disabilities	83 (72%)	125 (76%)	15 (50%)	49 (67%)

Services were most often adapted to people with mobility and visual disabilities, with just under half of public libraries set up to help the deaf, and around 40% to support people with learning disabilities.

Service	Academic	Public	School	Special
Deaf	42 (37%)	82 (49%)	5 (27%)	22 (49%)
Blind	62 (54%)	125 (75%)	5 (17%)	36 (73%)
Mobility	69 (60%)	103 (72%)	6 (20%)	35 (71%)
Dyslexia or other learning disability	33 (29%)	64 (38%)	12 (40%)	18 (37%)

Focusing on public and academic libraries – the types most likely to be used by an adult population as part of education, job-searching, or cultural life – the most commonly offered SDG-related service was access to technology. Not all offered training (although it is possible that respondents did not count informal support). Around 40% offered access to health information, and about a third help in finding work. We are still also far from a situation where everyone is online – initial data from IFLA’s [Library Map of the World](#) shows that much progress still needs to be made.

Service	Academic	Public	School	Special
Employment	13 (11%)	42 (25%)	5 (17%)	10 (14%)
Job training or education	15 (13%)	54 (32%)	6 (20%)	14 (19%)
Health information	43 (37%)	76 (46%)	6 (20%)	21 (29%)
Access to technology	57 (50%)	88 (53%)	5 (17%)	26 (36%)
Training on using technology	33 (29%)	56 (34%)	5 (17%)	17 (21%)

There are efforts within the sector to spread the word. Over 40% of responding library associations and around a third of national libraries offer consulting on accessibility issues to others, and over a quarter of responding national libraries provide standards for others to use. 73% of public libraries surveyed are also involved in outreach efforts, with narrative descriptions underlining efforts to collaborate with relevant partner organizations.

Good practices and policy trends

Across the responses received, there was a clear desire to continue improving services, drawing on the good practices already in existence. National libraries and national library associations in particular are increasingly taking a leadership role in helping members of the community provide services to people with disabilities. Nearly half of those who responded to the survey say that they are already taking action to make libraries in their country aware of issues and methods related to serving people with disabilities. There are examples of physical accommodation, assistive technology, and special and inclusive programming for physical, emotional, and intellectual disabilities.

For example, in 2017, the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Associations, a Division of the American Library Association, updated its Library Accessibility Toolkits. These were developed “to help library professionals understand the challenges and opportunities presented by issues of equitable access for library users”, and offer guidance in supporting people with a wide range of disabilities. Each guide provides an overview, recommended hardware and software solutions, tips and resources to guide library professionals in providing

great library experiences for everyone. Other national library association activities also have dedicated working groups, strategies, and guidelines, at the regional, national and international levels.

IFLA's Section on Library Services to People with Special Needs has guidelines on library service to people with dyslexia, people who are deaf or hard of hearing (being revised); prisoners, people with dementia (being revised), and people who are blind and visually impaired.

Individual public libraries also reported increased services to people with disabilities around the world. In Kenya, Electronic Information for Libraries developed and delivered training for 265 children with special needs on how to use tablet computers.

In the Philippines, libraries were rebranded to become "economic enablers." They partnered with other institutions to acquire resources and help people with disabilities learn to make use of computers and other assistive technology, with a view to building digital literacy, workplace skills, and the ability to use eGovernment services. In the US, adaptive technology kits are made available, as are adapted workstations for people in wheelchairs.

Many libraries indicated they had plans to improve their services. The two most frequently mentioned trends were rewriting policies (libraries in Georgia, Philippines, Netherlands, Sweden) and renovating buildings to make them accessible (libraries in Angola, Ghana, Chili, Paraguay, and the Philippines). The need to take a strategic approach is clear, if scarce resources are to be well used, and all members of the community reached, as highlighted in the [Illinois Library Association's guide](#) on expanding services to people with disabilities. Other trends identified were enhancing assistive technology (Netherlands and New Zealand), writing and complying with standards (Philippines), improving data collection (Argentina, New Zealand, South Africa, and the US), and collaboration (mostly libraries in the US).

Two International groups most recently have reported trends that, while not specifically about service to people with disabilities, do include this population in broader trends in the library community. After research and interviews in many countries, The Princh Blog published *6 Library Trends of 2017* (<https://princh.com/6-library-trends-of-2017-that-we-noticed/#.Wn6A2qinE2w>). Three of their identified trends are most relevant to people with disabilities: community involvement, focus on all library groups, and knowledge about libraries' visitors and non-visitors, specifically mentioning service to people with disabilities in an effort to serve all members of a community.

Taking a wider view, the IFLA Trend Report 2017 Update (<https://trends.ifla.org/update-2017>) underlined the increasing importance of access to information through technology as a driver of development. To achieve this, it noted, institutions such as libraries which could provide space, support, and confidence to users, were also essential. Another trend, particularly in

developed countries, is the “makerspace” movement, with initiatives such as the e-NABLE project (<http://enablingthefuture.org/>) creating prosthetic hands and other limbs using the library’s 3D printers.

Barriers to library service to people with disabilities

Three major barriers were identified in the survey relating to library services to people with disabilities: lack of funds, lack of trained staff (be they specialists, or general staff with relevant support), and a lack of outcome evaluation. All are questions that will require time and investment, from the possibility to understand who may need particular support, and in what form, to hardware, software and physical works on the ground.

Project Evaluation

As highlighted, libraries too often lack the know-how and resources thoroughly to evaluate their services from the point of view of the user. The need to ensure that the methodology used allows full participation – for example through large-print surveys, or telephone or online assistance – means additional requirements.

Nonetheless, three positive examples, two from the US and one from Finland, show very high approval ratings. 97% of respondents believed that Oakland Talking Books Service is ‘excellent’ or ‘good’, while the Colorado Talking Book Library saw 84% of users underline the value of the service as a means of providing pleasure and keeping their minds active, and over 90% describing it as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’. 16% of the respondents used the resources for school/education/or research. As one Colorado respondent reported:

“This has been a God sent for me becuse I am vision disabled and I can not read and I am trying for my GED. I am truening 60 soon I am finding schooling a lot of fun becuse, if you look at it that way you learn more, again thank you for your program. before this I couldn't spell at all. This is after 1 y.” [quoted as received].

A study of the Home Library Service of the Tampere City Library in Finland found seven benefits for people with disabilities who could not travel to the library: made everyday life easier, provided stimulating impact, allowed them to keep reading despite their disability, provided a feeling of importance and personal care, allowed for personal improvement, allowed for a level of autonomy despite the disability, and provided stable human relationships.

Conclusions

- Libraries can play a significant role in helping people with disabilities get access to information through technology, and valuable supporting services.

- Basic capacity is in place, as is the desire to help. However, more will need to be done to help libraries assess the needs of their communities, and to understand what they can do to help.
- Many libraries are unaware of the SDGs but serve people with disabilities as part of their broader commitment to serving their users. Where resources permit – and with guidance from standards and policies – they are already making a major contribution to providing technology access and skills.

Concluding remarks

Overall, the importance of libraries, at a time of an increasing dependency on the Internet as a source of information and a growing need for digital and information literacy, is perhaps greater for people with disabilities than even for the population as a whole.

There is a clear interest and capacity in many libraries in supporting people with disabilities, even where formal policies do not exist. Many libraries who were not currently providing services also underlined that they would if they became aware of a need, indicating that more work to help libraries – and others – assess requirements could be valuable.

In the light of the urgency of progress to achieve SDGs, there is undoubtedly value in building on this solid base. A mixture of guidelines and information for institutions, resources, and legal frameworks from governments, and an investment in ensuring that, in line with the World Summit on the Information Society Principles, that every library is online, will help realize the potential of libraries and access to information to ensure that no-one is left behind.

Resources

Access and Opportunity for All: How Libraries contribute to the United Nations 2030 Agenda
<https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/10546>

Development and Access to Information, 2017
<https://da2i.ifla.org/sites/da2i.ifla.org/files/uploads/docs/da2i-2017-full-report.pdf>
 IFLA, Technology and Social Change Section

The Marrakesh Treaty: an EIFL Guide for Libraries, The EIFL guide is a straightforward introduction to the treaty, its key provisions, and the role of libraries in contributing to the treaty's objectives.

<http://www.eifl.net/news/marrakesh-treaty-eifl-guide-libraries>

<https://www.berkeleypubliclibrary.org/about/disability-services>

Sensory Storytimes; Homebound Services; Technology Tutors are available to help with technology assistance/training one-on-one to all users, including disabled, Berkley Public Library, Palo Alto, CA

Australian Libraries Support the Sustainable Development Goals

https://www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/Sustainable%20Development%20Goals%20report_screen.pdf