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Initiative on Equitable Library Access Library And Archives Canada

Consultations on Public Library Service

September 2008

Background

Initiative on Equitable Library Access (IELA) is an initiative of Library and Archives Canada, mandated to create the conditions for sustainable and equitable public library access for Canadians with print disabilities. IELA has been asked to develop a nation-wide strategy for implementing partnerships, activities and services to meet the long-term library and information access needs of Canadians with print disabilities.

The Canadian Library Association established a Working Group on IELA to help provide liaison with the Canadian library community. During the summer of 2008, during discussions on the details for library service, it was agreed that a series of focus groups with libraries would be of benefit to IELA in understanding the challenges and opportunities that face public libraries in providing service to clients with print disabilities.

Participants

Recognizing that these issues would not necessarily be the same for libraries of different sizes, a consultation initiative was undertaken in three separate locations in September 2008. Sessions were organized as follows:

- Large public libraries in Toronto;
- Medium-sized public libraries in West Vancouver;
- Small public libraries in Halifax.

The choice of locations also reflected the different perspectives that would likely result from libraries that were in a provincially-based system and libraries that were in a primarily municipally-based system. The IELA Team also visited the Bibliothèque et archives Nationales du Québec in July 2008.

The target participants were front-line library staff who deal with clients with print disabilities, library managers, and potential clients who have a print disability.

Key questions

It was recommended that participants prepare for the consultations by reading the following background documents:

- [Report on the May 18, 2008 meeting between the Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians and IELA](http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/iela/005002-6020-e.html)
http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/iela/005002-6020-e.html
- [Opening the book: a strategy for a national network for equitable library service for Canadians with print disabilities](http://www.cla.ca/Content/NavigationMenu/CLAAatWork/Advocacy/NNELS_FINAL_EN.pdf) / by Canadian Library Association, Working Group to Define a National Network for Equitable Library Service. – Ottawa, September 2005.
http://www.cla.ca/Content/NavigationMenu/CLAAatWork/Advocacy/NNELS_FINAL_EN.pdf Note especially Section 3 (Strategy for a national network for equitable library service), pp. 13-24.
- [Libraries for the blind in the information age : guidelines for development](http://www.ifla.org/VII/s31/pub/Profrep86.pdf) / edited by Rosemary Kavanagh and Beatrice Christensen Sköld. – 2005.
http://www.ifla.org/VII/s31/pub/Profrep86.pdf

The following four key questions were formulated to stimulate discussion and identify the challenges and opportunities:

- What are the roles and responsibilities of front-line public library staff in providing equitable service?
- What collection issues need to be resolved and how?
- What issues related to assistive devices need to be resolved and how?
- What support systems must be in place (local, provincial or national), what roles and responsibilities will they have and how will libraries access their services?

A detailed record of the discussions was prepared by INTERSOL, the company which provided the facilitation for all three sessions and is available on request from: IELA-ISBE@lac-bac.gc.ca

Summary findings

Public libraries are core institutions

Public libraries exist in virtually every community. They present a welcoming, comfortable environment for individuals to relax, to learn and to interact. They have dedicated staff which is well trained in the delivery of mainstream and specialized services and libraries are therefore well-positioned to serve as the intermediary between people with print disabilities and the information that they need.

Public libraries serve a broad range of constituencies

However, libraries are responsible for serving entire communities with a broad range of general and special needs. Their capacity to meet the requirements of persons with print disabilities often suffers from a lack of adequate training, specialized staff and funding.

Training is the primary need

The single most important recommendation of the consultations was the need for improved training for library staff. Training is required to better understand the varying needs of persons with print disabilities, to understand and benefit from technology, particularly assistive devices designed to improve access for persons with print disabilities and to keep abreast of the evolving sources of material in formats suitable for persons with print disabilities. It was strongly recommended that training packages be developed for libraries and that this training material be delivered in mechanisms that exploit on-line technology and that meet the capacity of libraries to fully train their staff particularly in smaller libraries where staff time is at a premium.

Centralization of expertise

Not all libraries serve large communities of people with print disabilities. They may therefore have difficulty in maintaining the needed level of expertise. Centralization was seen as a possible solution. Depending on the size of the library, centralized provision of service to persons with print disabilities in a single urban service point was identified as a possibility, but the need for a national centre of expertise to which all libraries and their clients would have access, was also identified.

Libraries need to better promote their services

The need to increase community awareness of the benefits that libraries can provide was also identified as an issue related to training. However in this case, the assistance would take the form of advocacy and outreach tools that libraries can use to promote their services. It was particularly noted that persons with learning disabilities tend to avoid the use of libraries even though libraries have the potential to provide service and collections in a way that would greatly improve their access to reading materials for leisure and life-long learning. In the same vein, it was noted that libraries are known for working well with children

and that libraries should be promoting their services to families and children affected by print disabilities.

Partnerships are key

Partnerships emerged as a major theme. Libraries are well known for their capacity to share information through such mechanisms as interlibrary loan and by their very nature are magnanimous in their ability to share their resources with their respective communities. Libraries need, however, to expand their focus to partner with disability organizations, consumer organizations and vendors which specialize in services to people with print disabilities. The CNIB VISUNET Partners Program is an important example. But it was also noted that libraries need to partner with health care professionals, disability groups and government agencies to better advocate the services and the benefits that libraries can offer. National coordination was identified as a need in this area. Public libraries also need to broaden their scope to share resources and expertise with other types of libraries, particularly academic libraries that may reside in the same community.

Mainstream availability of multiple formats

The increased availability of multiple formats in the commercial marketplace was identified as a key measure in improving access for people with print disabilities. Commercial audiobooks and electronic publications can be accessible for people with print disabilities and are also used by the general population. Mainstreaming the availability of this material would not only serve to increase the choice of reading material available to people with print disabilities, but would facilitate the process of collection development in libraries. It is, however, important that commercial material be unabridged and accessible.

Changing technology is a challenge

Libraries face major challenges with the changing technology. Legacy materials such as analog tapes continue to be used by their communities at the same time as new formats emerge. Deciding on what types of material to acquire, what formats to support and what sources to use for selection is difficult. Not all users are comfortable with all technologies and not everyone agrees on the benefits of emerging formats and technologies. Standardization, national coordination and more consultation is needed to help resolve these issues.

More Canadian content

Libraries wish to have access to more Canadian materials. National agencies need to work with Canadian publishers to make their materials available in multiple formats; on-demand publishing needs to be exploited and more production centres for multiple formats are needed.

Multiple formats are needed in many languages

Libraries face increasing challenges in serving the disparate groups within their communities. Multiple format materials suitable for persons with print disabilities need to be provided in both official languages as well as in other languages used

by the local community. At the same time, the general availability of materials in multiple formats needs to be increased. There was strong interest in the development of international agreements that would facilitate access to materials in multiple formats from other countries. This is true for materials in English and in French but also, as noted above, for materials in other heritage languages that would serve Canada's multicultural population.

Assistive devices pose challenges

Assistive devices are costly and this presents a barrier for persons with print disabilities. Libraries have traditionally made assistive devices available to their clients when this is necessary to access multiple formats. Increasingly, however, libraries are finding that issues of equipment maintenance, proliferation of technological platforms and cost are making this difficult. National coordination is required to facilitate access to assistive devices enabling libraries to concentrate on information access rather than equipment. Partnerships with vendors was identified as a possible remedy. On the other hand, libraries recognize their role in providing guidance for assistive devices; they are well-positioned to showcase various technologies so that clients can better understand the technologies that might best suit their needs.

In Summary

Mainstream access to library services and collections was identified as one of the most cost-effective measures for improving services to persons with print disabilities. Audiobooks are may be used by the general population but are a necessity for most persons with print disabilities. The publishing of multiple formats at source was seen as a key factor. Increased funding for staff training, collection development and assistive devices was also identified as a major priority as was the need for the development of training packages. Finally, the maintenance and nurturing of existing and new partnerships was identified as a significant factor in improving the conditions for equitable library access.