

# Symposium: Public Library Service for People with Print Disabilities

February 26-27, 2015



**Public Library Services Branch**

**Alberta Municipal Affairs**

## Did you Know?

- According to the Canadian Copyright Act, a print disability is: a learning, physical, or visual disability that impairs a person from reading conventional print.
- Print disabilities affect approximately 10% of the Canadian population. However, approximately between 5-7% of printed materials are available in alternate formats.
- Alberta is the **only** province currently implementing **both** the National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNEELS) and the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA), the two national strategies developed to help public libraries serve people with print disabilities.

## Introduction

On February 26-27, 2015, Alberta Public Library Services Branch (PLSB) hosted the province-wide Symposium on Public Library Service for People with Print Disabilities. 50 participants from across Alberta attended the symposium and spent the two days discussing library services for people with print disabilities. Guests included librarians, professionals, service providers, and people with print disabilities. The format for the symposium consisted of presentations, panel discussions, and group discussions. The following document is a summary of what we heard from the symposium participants and specifically highlights the feedback from the group discussions.

Thank you to Doris Koop, Executive Director of the Vision Impaired Resource Network (VIRN) and Diane Bergeron, National Director of CNIB, who provided valuable and thought-provoking testimonials about living with print disabilities. Thank you to Michael Ciccone, Executive Director of CELA and Ben Hyman, Executive Director of the BC Libraries Cooperative/NNEELS, who provided overviews of the two unique services.

## CELA and NNEELS

Alberta public libraries that participate in the Public Library Network have access to resources that respond to the needs of people with print disabilities. The provincial government funds access to the National Network of Equitable Library Service (NNEELS) and the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA) for public libraries. Alberta is the only province currently implementing both NNEELS and CELA: the two national strategies developed to help public libraries serve people with print disabilities.

NNEELS is a co-operative network building an online digital repository of alternative format titles. NNEELS offers its users a record-on-demand service, where the organisation records material requested by users. CELA gives public libraries access to 230,000 alternative format titles for provision to library patrons in a variety of formats. Available collections include audio books, magazines, newspapers, and described video in the patron's format of choice.

These two organisations offer unique, but complementary, services. CELA offers patrons a carefully curated collection of popular alternate format materials and NNELS offers patrons record-on-demand service, allowing patrons to help build the digital repository through their requests. These resources have the potential to significantly change library service for people with print disabilities in Alberta.

## **Survey: Current State of Public Library Service to People with Print Disabilities**

In anticipation of the symposium, PLSB circulated a survey to all the public libraries in Alberta. The survey was intended to get a sense of what libraries are currently doing to serve people with print disabilities. As both CELA and NNELS are relatively new resources for Alberta public libraries, we wanted to gather some feedback. We also wanted to hear what is working and what is not working.

44 libraries responded to the survey and the results indicate that libraries are currently in a time of transition in the provision of services to people with print disabilities.

The majority of respondents said that their libraries continue to collect and provide traditional formats for people with print disabilities, such as large print, audiobooks, Daisy discs, and Daisy/Victor readers; only a few of these libraries are actively using CELA and NNELS. However, many respondents indicated that they were familiar with CELA and NNELS, and that they intend to access training. The survey respondents also said that the primary users of these services are people with visual impairments.

## **Group Discussions: Key Outcomes**

The two days of the symposium were divided into three main group discussions. Modeling the discussion on the World Café method, the attendees were seated at assigned tables of about six people. The groups discussed specific questions and reported back at the end of the discussion.

The three main areas for consideration were:

1. Current use of services: The purpose of this discussion was to describe in detail the print-disabled service situation as it exists today.
2. Gap analysis: The purpose of this discussion was to identify problems and weaknesses with existing services.
3. Future strategies: The purpose of this discussion was to identify strategies and tactics to improve services to the print disabled.

The discussions were lively and engaging. The key outcomes from the discussions follow:

- A confirmation that services to people with print disabilities is fundamental to library service



**Great Idea:** One table outlined the negative implications of having specialized resources in a specific section of the library. A few attendees who have print disabilities suggested that the segregation of resources creates a sense of otherness.

### **What services do you currently provide to the print disabled? What resources?**

Many public libraries in Alberta are currently working to provide services and resource for people with print disabilities. The participants outlined a multitude of innovative strategies for serving people with print disabilities: homebound reader programs; home delivery; extended loan periods; bookmobiles to lodges; partnerships with local organisations; Daisy deposit collections; adaptive technologies; tablet and Daisy reader lending; etc. Although many of the librarians at the symposium have been working to provide these services, it was also generally agreed that, in many libraries, usage of the resources is very low.

### **How do print-disabled patrons connect with the library?**

Many libraries are relying on patrons to self-identify as print disabled, or are discovering a print disability through one-on-one interactions. Some libraries are actively promoting their resources at community events and are making the effort to bring their resources out to the community. One of the major challenges for libraries is getting people with print disabilities into the library. Although many are making efforts to connect with print-disabled patrons through marketing and online promotion, libraries face the challenge of reaching those with print disabilities in a print-heavy environment. Some libraries have been successful at partnering with local organizations, while other libraries are finding partnerships difficult.

### **What strategies do you currently provide to the print disabled? What resources?**

Many participants agreed that better promotion is needed, but also acknowledged that promotion is a struggle, particularly in a print-heavy environment. Even promotion on websites can be difficult if the websites are not accessible. Many libraries are undertaking outreach efforts in order to connect directly with potential library patrons that might benefit from resources for people with print disabilities. Working in partnership with other libraries may prove useful, especially in smaller libraries, where collaboration supports many of the libraries' services. Conducting a reference interview has been a successful way of identifying people with print disabilities and connecting them with the appropriate resources. Just like all other patrons, people with print disabilities have specific needs and preferences, so the reference interview becomes a key strategy for connecting them with specific resources.

### **Which agencies are involved in library service to the print disabled? What roles do they play?**

There are a multitude of agencies involved in providing library services to people with print disabilities. Key agencies identified by participants include: CELA, NNELS, AHS, CNIB, FCSS, PLSB, regional library systems, schools, social services, alternate format producers, etc. The agencies' key roles are: providing referrals, connecting patrons with the libraries, funding resources/initiatives, and promoting the resources.

**Great Idea:** There is a lot of support for children with print disabilities from kindergarten through grade 12; however, once they graduate from high school, they no longer have access to the resources. Libraries could play an instrumental role in this transitional time for a young adult with a print disability.

## Group discussion 2: Ideal future

### What is your vision for print-disabled services?

The overall vision for Alberta public library service for people with print disabilities is that all material and services be fully accessible to everyone and that all members of every community are fully aware of and accessing library services. In line with this vision, participants pictured: more titles available in alternate formats; that they would be able to fulfill requests immediately; that all staff are fully trained in library services to people with print disabilities; seamless access to materials; easy sign up process; staff awareness of copyright legislation; one access point; and that collections of alternate format material were no longer considered “special collections.”

**Great Idea:** Full integration of services for people with print disabilities with a “location-agnostic” minimum level of service. That is, there is a province-wide standard for serving people with print disabilities that people can access from anywhere in the province.

### What is missing in print-disabled services today?

The main missing component of library services to people with print disabilities is training and awareness. Key training for staff includes: what qualifies as a print disability; what resources are available through the public library; understanding of accessible formats. Other missing components include: accessible online resources (websites and databases); seamless access to resources; staff time. Waiving library fees for people with print disabilities was suggested as a means to provide them with access to the services.

**Great Idea:** How about hiring people with print disabilities to work in libraries? They could work as consultants, ensuring that their perspective is considered in decision making.

### What are the most difficult challenges in delivering services to the print disabled?

A lack of knowledge among both staff and patrons about what is available inhibits effective delivery of library service to people with print disabilities. The tendency to respond to the 90% of people

who are not print disabled undermines the service to the 10% who experience a print disability. Participants noted that a significant challenge is that many people with print disabilities are not visiting libraries, and wondered if the perception of the library or the identification process might be barriers. The material itself is not seamless or very easy to access and that is proving challenging for some library staff.

**Great Idea:** Libraries have many urgent priorities. Services to people with print disabilities may not *appear* urgent, so they sometimes get forgotten as priorities. Libraries need to make these services an ongoing priority and a fundamental part of library service. There needs to be a high-level commitment to the services that are followed through at the local level.

### **What undermines these services, threatens them or makes them less effective?**

A lack of training and awareness undermine/challenge the services. As well, the people making decisions about the services often have never experienced a print disability. This can undermine genuine effort to make a library more accessible. Money and the cost of equipment may threaten a library's effort to make components of the library accessible. Staff training on these services needs to be regular and ongoing.

**Great Ideas:** There are currently no champions for people with print disabilities. We need more advocates and people fighting for the needs of people with print disabilities.

## **Group discussion 3: Closing the gap**

### **What can we do right now to improve services?**

Staff training is the most obvious strategy for improving library services for people with print disabilities. Ensuring that all staff members are trained is crucial in creating an integrated service approach. Conversely, staff are also responsible to inform senior leadership about community needs. Training can happen in a variety of ways: staff can go to seminars, webinars, undertake training opportunities. Staff can also request training and become a trainer for other staff.

**Great Idea:** Talk about alternate format options at the patron's first point on contact; when registering a new patron, ask if they are interested in alternate formats.

### **What must libraries and front line staff do to improve services?**

Libraries must commit to providing library services to people with print disabilities as a priority. In order to do so, libraries must change the default thinking away from "we can't do this/we don't have time/we don't have money." Management should examine current policies and procedures to see if they have created barriers to library service.

**All** library staff should be trained in and familiar with the resources, rather than having the role assigned to just one staff member. The training should also be incorporated into yearly training. Libraries can also more actively seek partnerships with community organisations.

An immediate solution is to encourage all staff to become familiar with both NNELS and CELA so that they are able to field questions and recommend the resources.

**Great Idea:** Libraries could create a competencies list of services to people with print disabilities for staff.

**Great Idea:** Locally, libraries need to respect the diversity of their patrons and adapt library service models.

### **What must government do to support better services?**

Government can demonstrate leadership and model a positive attitude for library services for people with print disabilities. Provincial policy will help frame the services as a priority and will outline the government's commitment to partnering with libraries to serve people with print disabilities. The government could establish minimum standards, clear attainable policy, and clear expectations.

When acquiring resources for public libraries, PLSB should consider accessibility and continuity of service.

The government plays a role in bringing libraries together to discuss services to people with print disabilities, such as hosting the symposium.

**Great Idea:** Government could consider creating a charter, which would clearly define roles in services to people with print disabilities: government, library, patron.

### **What roles and responsibilities will support print disabled services?**

Government has a responsibility to provide leadership, coordinate services, and help fund resources.

Libraries have the responsibility to make it happen. They have a role as leaders in their communities. Libraries should be creating diverse collections, marketing appropriately, building accessible structures, and spreading the word.

Service providers have a responsibility to advocate, provide material, provide training, and to make products appealing.

Library systems have a responsibility to provide support to libraries with little/no capacity and let libraries with capacity do their own work. Systems should act as resource people. There could be a committee created in each region.

Patrons need to speak up and to work with the libraries. They have a responsibility to share their ideas and knowledge.

**Great Idea:** Everyone has a responsibility to act as a champion for library services for people with print disabilities.

## Conclusion

Alberta public libraries are currently in a time of transition in the provision of library services to people with print disabilities. The conversations at the symposium spoke to a commitment from the libraries to better serve people with print disabilities through new and innovative means and technologies. PLSB will continue to support libraries and help fund these services in 2015-2016 and as budget permits. PLSB is in the process of creating an operational policy on library services for people with print disabilities. The policy will help frame the provision of services in Alberta and will outline the partnership and responsibilities between the Government of Alberta and the Alberta public libraries.

We would like to continue the discussion on public library service to people with print disabilities, and we would like to hear what libraries are doing. Please send Kim Johnson any feedback, great ideas, success stories: [kimberly.johnson@gov.ab.ca](mailto:kimberly.johnson@gov.ab.ca)