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Stronger Together: Successful Community Partnerships Serving Youth with Special Needs in American Public Libraries

Renee Grassi

Dakota County Library, Dakota County, Minnesota, United States of America.

E-mail address: renee.grassi@gmail.com



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Abstract:

Public libraries in the U.S.A. are taking a more community-focused and collaborative approach to service—especially when it pertains to addressing the needs of underserved populations, such as youth with special needs. The goal of this article is to provide concrete and replicable examples of library services for children and teens with disabilities that are informed, planned, and delivered in partnership with community stakeholders. Programs featured in this article will include Dakota County Library’s drop-in Sensory-friendly Saturdays at Dakota County’s annual Special Needs Resource Fair; the Library’s Autism-Friendly Book Discussion series for young adults in partnership with the Autism Society of Minnesota; and an informational program hosted by Dakota County Library featuring the University of Minnesota’s Autism Initiative. This article will use examples from the author’s experience working with Dakota County Social Services to create and distribute a county-wide assessment tool gathering authentic feedback about the Library and its services. It will also provide examples of the Library’s outreach programs, such as maker space programs for young adults participating in an afterschool program at the Minnesota Organization of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. In addition, this article will share the author’s experience developing universally designed spaces, as well as low-cost strategies to make existing libraries more welcoming and inclusive for all. Moreover, this article will share the author’s experience partnering with local organizations and participating in professional networks in Illinois and Minnesota to support disability awareness training and capacity development for library staff. In order for public libraries in the U.S.A. and worldwide to remain relevant in serving the ever-diversifying needs of their communities, they must leverage partnerships and tap into local disability advocates and stakeholders, as this is an essential part of developing more inclusive libraries and creating a more tolerant and accepting world.

Keywords: Inclusion, Accessibility, Disability, Partnerships, Youth Services

There is an African proverb, which states “It takes a village to raise a child” (Goldberg). This proverb communicates a shared sense of responsibility and collective purpose to achieve a common goal—to care for the well-being of children. While this sentiment should be true for any child, not all children know the same sense of belonging in their own villages, schools, and communities. Not all children are accepted in the same way by others, which ultimately affect opportunity. Not all children experience similar barriers to a positive quality of life. The disability experience may be such a barrier for today’s youth.

There are many organizations that have a vested interest in the welfare of children with disabilities, and libraries should be one of them. Libraries are symbols of democracy—institutions for all, where everyone is welcome. However, library staff may not have the experience or expertise needed to create welcoming spaces. By turning outward towards the community and leveraging the power of partnerships, libraries can work towards true inclusion of youth with disabilities.

Libraries across the United States are refocusing their efforts to address community concerns by collaborating with local organizations. Dakota County Library (DCL) in Dakota County, Minnesota is one of those libraries. Equipped with a new Strategic Plan (Dakota County Library), DCL is working towards tackling issues of inclusion and equity across the organization and the county.

In early 2017, DCL was approached by another Dakota County Department. The County’s Social Services team had received a grant focused on improving the inclusion of individuals with autism. This directly aligned with the Library’s equity work, so DCL agreed to the partnership. An early indicator of future success and impact was the intentionality of the Social Services Autism Grant team to seek out a conversation with the Library. Another indicator was DCL’s willingness to learn more, engage in conversation, and align with County priorities. Because of this initial meeting, DCL and the Autism Grant team began a fruitful partnership. Not only was this association mutually beneficial, it had measurable impact for youth with disabilities in Dakota County.

Community Assessment

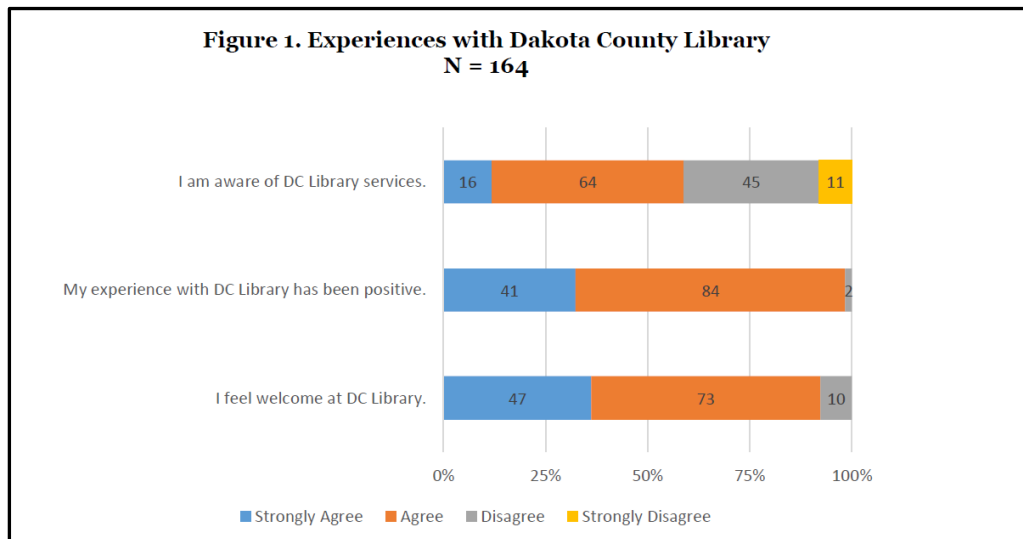
Dakota County Library Survey

In July of 2017, DCL and the Autism Grant team developed an online survey. The goal of this assessment was to gather authentic feedback from the autism community to inform further collaboration between DCL and Autism Grant team. Utilizing their vast network of contacts, the Autism Grant team shared the online survey county-wide. In addition, DCL utilized their contacts, promoting the survey to the library community, local schools, and patrons. At the end of the three-week assessment period, a total of 156 individuals completed the survey, providing qualitative and quantitative responses to guide future service planning.

Responses to three online questions proved particularly impactful to DCL and the Autism Grant team’s assessment. When asked if they were aware of DCL services, approximately 36% answered “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree.” DCL and the Autism Grant team concluded there was inequity of access to DCL because of seemingly ineffective marketing and communication to certain audiences. Qualitative data supports this, as one respondent stated, *“People with ASD often have the skills to advocate for themselves but often do not know who to ask or what is available to them. Having a resource or a point of contact would significantly help. A monthly 'here is the stuff at the library' would help parents know as well. There could also be an opportunity to help new parents navigate the system with a parent*

mentor. 1 in 8 kids have ASD and it is often hard to find simple places that are inclusive. This could go a very long way to assist kids and families.”

When asked if respondents had a positive experience with DCL, 79% answered “Agree” or “Strongly Agree.” This data indicated the vast majority of respondents felt DCL provided good service. Similarly, when asked if they felt welcome at DCL, approximately 77% answered “Agree” or “Strongly Agree.” DCL and the Autism Grant team concluded that this data reaffirmed the Library was perceived by the general public as a welcoming place. See **Figure 1** for more information.



When respondents were asked about programming preferences, results were divided. The survey asked whether DCL should integrate people with autism into existing library programs, or if the Library should offer special programs to people with ASD. The goal of this question was to evaluate what type of programming approach was best. Specialized programming is defined as targeted programs designed and marketed for to the autism community. Integrating people with ASD into existing programs meant providing people with ASD additional supports and accommodations on demand, so they could attend programs with neurotypical peers. While 97% of respondents were in favor of integrating people with ASD into existing programs, another 89% said DCL should offer specialized programming.

Qualitative data helped unpack these preferences even further. For those who believed specialized programs were superior, the unique sensory needs for individuals with ASD were cited as a reason for desiring more targeted programs. One respondent said, “*Because there aren’t any specialized programs at the Library that I am aware of, I am deterred from bringing my child with ASD to the library because of the environmental expectations of quietness, well-mannered environment, etc. This won’t give my child a warm and positive experience.*” Other respondents said parents and caregivers shared a need for confidence in the program space and the expertise of staff being prepared for the unique needs of students with ASD. Furthermore, there is a need for socialization opportunities between children and teens with ASD to interact with other peers on the spectrum; offering specialized programs allows for these types of friendships to develop. See **Figures 2 and 3** for more information.

Figure 2. Percent of Participants Indicating Libraries Should and Should Not Integrate People with ASD into Existing Programs

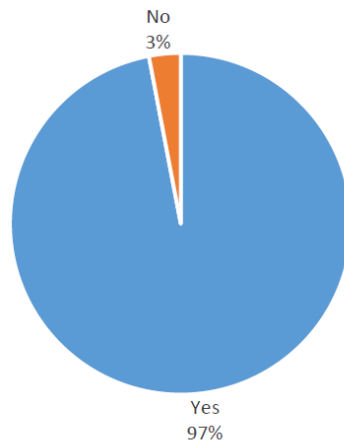
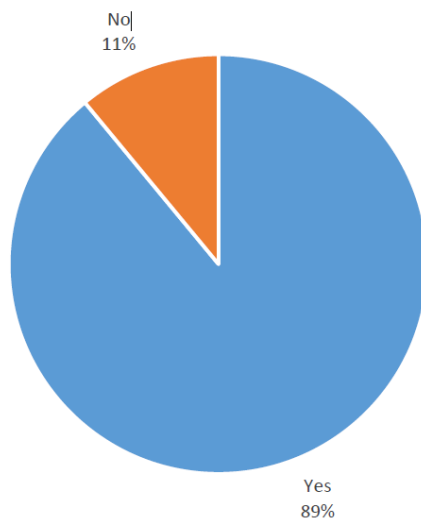


Figure 3. Percent of Participants Indicating Libraries Should and Should Not Offer Special Programming to those with ASD



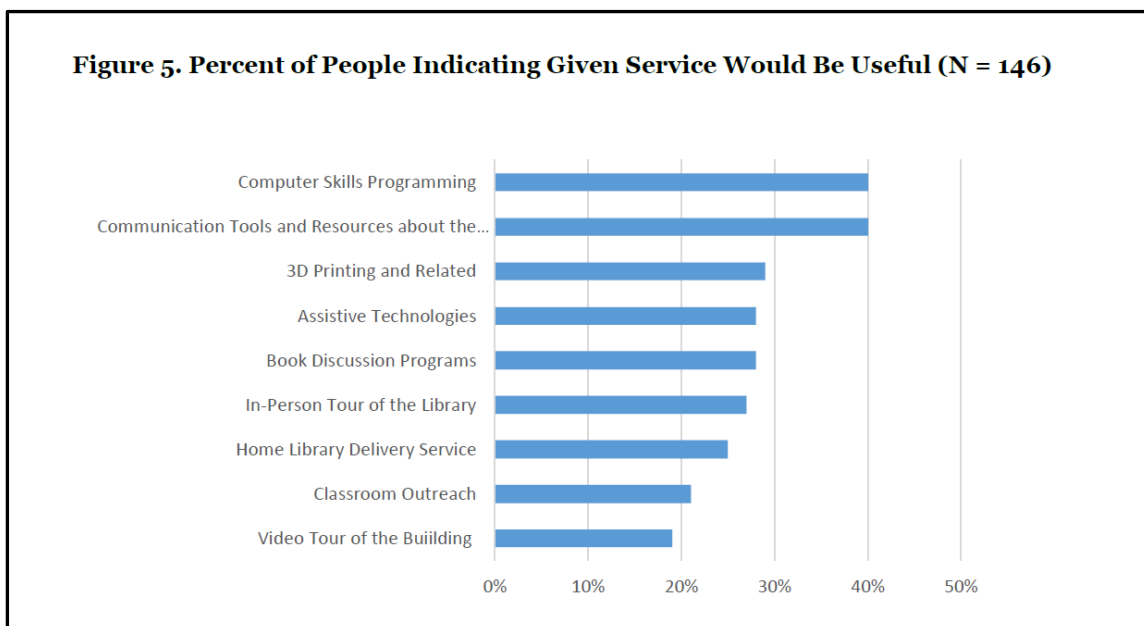
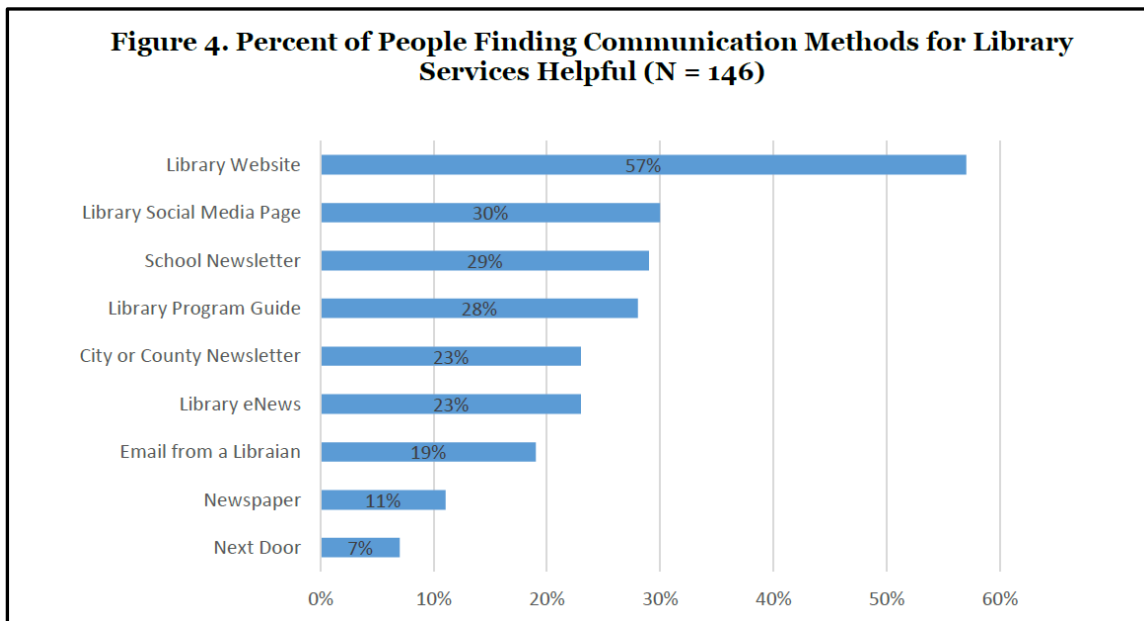
The majority of respondents who opposed specialized programs shared a desire to increase the overall environment of DCL for individuals with autism. These respondents felt the environment should include everyone naturally without special programs, and it would be optimal to create general supports into all facets of the library, rather than offering separate programs. In addition, some felt the diversity of individuals across the autism spectrum was, in and of itself, reason to offer a variety of programming options—both targeted and integrated. One respondent said, “*One type of program would definitely not fit all*” because the diverse needs of those with ASD makes special programming unnecessary. Overall, the survey proved to be inconclusive in determining a preference; however, data suggested providing both specialized and integrated programs would be best.

While all of the survey responses were valuable, the most impactful and regular piece of feedback received focused on concrete steps the organization should take to become more autism-friendly—training. One survey respondent said, “*Librarians should receive training*

on issues related to ASD, not only to increase their understanding of what ASD is, but also how a library can best serve people with ASD.” This suggestion was a common theme.

Still, some respondents said DCL is not ready to include individuals with autism. Citing negative society views on autism, they said there is a need for awareness and education before integration would be successful. One respondent said, “Society at large expects my 8 ½ year old moderately autistic son to be quiet in the library and that is an unrealistic expectation for him.” The survey data proved what DCL needed to prioritize was staff training to enhance customer service and support a more welcoming environment.

For more survey data results from the DCL Survey, see **Figures 4 and 5.**



Focus Groups

As a follow-up to the online survey, DCL and the Autism Grant team conducted a series of focus groups to complete their community assessment. The goals of the focus group were to gather detailed feedback from community members about Library experience; make individual connections with community members; and investigate common themes. The Autism Grant team members moderated and compiled themed notes during the focus groups, which allowed for participants to remain anonymously. DCL staff members were not present, which supported open conversation.

Throughout August of 2017, five focus groups were held attended by a total of seventeen participants. All participants were asked the same questions. Those questions included:

- When you think of public libraries in general, what is working well for people with autism spectrum disorder?
- What are some barriers or potential barriers for people with autism spectrum disorder in using public libraries?
- What has been welcoming about Dakota County Library for people with autism spectrum disorder?
- What has not been welcoming about Dakota County Library for people with autism spectrum disorder?
- What programs or services do you wish were offered for people with autism spectrum disorder?

These focus groups proved useful in assessing what aspects of Library space and service supported individuals with autism. Participants said the Library was a quiet, safe, and comfortable place. In addition, they indicated the wide range of easily accessible, free and engaging activities were an asset. Toys, books on autism, and dedicated programs and spaces for activity and movement were also appreciated. Feedback from the participants also provided concrete examples of how DCL is a welcoming place for individuals with autism. Those in attendance overwhelmingly agreed that library staff had been extremely welcoming, happy, helpful, and non-judgmental. Music and cultural programs, as well as structured activities with clear rules and expectations benefited the autism community.

Participants identified several barriers for people with autism as well. Because of the quiet nature of libraries, some felt bringing loud or disruptive autistic children to DCL was stressful, as people stare and judge. Some locations were crowded and not designed for people with sensory issues. Participants also indicated many programs and services were only available at larger locations and not smaller branches, which was a barrier. In general, individuals on the spectrum do not find sensory-friendly places when they visit DCL.

One topic that received much discussion during all focus groups was the concept of what it means to be sensory-friendly at the library. By adding paper towels to the bathroom utilities, and eliminating noisy hand dryers and automatic flushing toilets, participants thought the accessibility of the library environment could be improved. In addition, participants indicated that autism-friendly supports, activities, and programs would be helpful. Furthermore, they felt that staff should be trained on autism and be proactive in offering more support to families.

The focus groups affirmed that DCL is considered a trusted and safe space for people with autism and their caregivers. And though participants identified key steps for the organization to be more sensory-friendly, overall, participants felt DCL to be a welcoming place.

Staff Development

With the data gathered from the online survey and focus groups, the Autism Grant team and DCL prioritized training as a next step to improve inclusion for individuals with autism. With the financial support of Dakota County's Autism Grant, DCL consulted with an educational program specialist from the Autism Society of Minnesota (AuSM). Together with the Autism Grant team members and the AuSM consultant, DCL developed a one-hour autism-focused customer service training for December, 2017. This training provided an overview of the disability and shared best practices for autism-friendly communication strategies. In total, this training presented by AuSM was attended by 50 Library staff members representing all levels of the organization.

As a follow-up training, the Autism Grant team, AuSM, and DCL developed a series of "Autism Spectrum Disorder 101" workshops for April, 2018. During these workshops, DCL staff members learned about autism, heard ideas about making programs more welcoming, and participated in a discussion about autism-related customer service scenarios. In total, 72 DCL staff members participated in this training series.

Grant-Sponsored Library Programs

Autism Book Club

One of the primary goals of the Dakota County Autism Grant included expanding services and supports for individuals with autism and their families. This was achieved, in part, by helping individuals be active participants in their communities and providing caregiver relief and respite. Another goal was to increase ASD opportunities for inclusion and participation in Dakota County activities. With these two goals in mind, the Autism Grant was eager to sponsor and fund a new program for transition aged individuals with autism.

With financial support of the Autism Grant, DCL and AuSM launched a monthly book club program for individuals fourteen and older with autism and other disabilities. Facilitated by a local special education reading teacher, this club supported all reading and interest levels. The program had three goals: provide opportunities for socialization; practice life skills by teaching how to use the library; and support reading and literacy. This program provides individuals with choice, as group members vote on monthly themes and topics for their reading choices. Members are supported in selecting their preferred book for the month, as DCL staff and facilitator work one-on-one with each participant to locate a book at their individual interest and reading level. Participants return next month, having read all or part of the book, ready to share what they read and learned and engage with other participants.

Community Programs

DCL and the Autism Grant team were eager to offer community talks and public lectures for concerning topics of autism. So, the Autism Grant team connected DCL with a network of disability experts, such as the University of Minnesota Autism Initiative. Capitalizing on this opportunity, the Library hosted a community research talk entitled "A Look at Autism Research: What We're Learning from the Autism Initiative." Presented by Dr. Amy Esler, a published author, researcher and premier expert in the autism field in the United States, and Jaclyn Gunderson, the program presented relevant information about autism research and the

various studies and findings. This program also shared information about the university's programs and resources available to family members with children on the spectrum.

During Autism Awareness and Acceptance Month, DCL collaborated with AuSM again to offer two Autism Spectrum Disorder 101 public workshops. Adult community members received an overview of the disability, as well as practical tips for welcoming people with ASD in the community. Without the financial support of the grant and the introduction by the Autism Grant team, the Library would not have been able to provide these learning opportunities

As a result of the Library's growing network of autism advocates in Dakota County, the Library became acquainted with local author Tera Girardin, who wrote Faces of Autism: Inspiration, Admiration, and Celebration. An accomplished photographer and mother of a son with autism, Girardin combined her passion for autism advocacy and talent for photography and wrote a children's book. As part of DCL's Autism Awareness and Acceptance series, DCL invited Girardin to host an author program. During her lecture, she discussed her book, which features thirty unique photographs and accompanying stories of thirty Minnesota children with autism. As explained during her presentation, Girardin's vision in publishing her book was to make autistic children visible in children's literature, and celebrate them for their strengths and abilities.

Innovations Group

One of the goals of the Autism Grant was to connect community members, share resources, and explore opportunities for partnership and collaboration. To achieve this goal, the Autism Grant team created an informal networking group of self-advocates, parents, caregivers, professionals, and stakeholders to innovate and support the autism community. As one of the original members of the group, DCL was a regular participant, raising awareness about the Library by hosting meetings, promoting services, and gathering input about the accessibility of the Library. For example, one of the five focus groups was facilitated with the Innovations Group.

The collaborative nature of the group allowed for DCL to meet new stakeholders. As a result, the Library connected with the Minnesota Organization of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (MOFAS). A nonprofit organization serving teens with fetal alcohol syndrome disorder, MOFAS wanted to give students in their after school program hands-on experience with technology. The Library aligned with this need, promoting DCL's new iLab at Wescott Library—a makerspace with 3D printers, 3D scanners, video and audio software, and sewing machines. DCL and MOFAS collaboratively designed a program series, in which teens would create stop motion animation videos using the Library's video and audio equipment and learn about 3D printing creating 3D designs using Tinkercad. To support the students' learning differences, DCL staff developed text-based schedules and provided visual instructions to supplement the program.

Another positive outcome of DCL's participation in the Innovations Group was the ability to market and promote library programs and resources, particularly programs that were designed for families with children with disabilities. For example, DCL launched a program called Sensory-friendly Saturdays for children ages three to eight of all abilities, including autism, sensory-processing disorder, and other disabilities. The Innovations Group offered a built-in audience of well-networked caregivers and professionals, who had direct contact with

families. This strategy, which utilized the power of word-of-mouth marketing, proved effective and successful, increasing awareness and attendance of the program.

Next Steps

Library Accessibility Project Team

As a direct result of the community assessment, DCL desired to be proactive in considering the various needs of all customers with disabilities. So in order to remain relevant and accessibility into the future of the organization, DCL created the Library Accessibility Project Team.

This team was charged with supporting opportunities for innovation in the area of accessibility and inclusion for customers with disabilities. As part of this work, the team is tasked with the following:

- Review Library survey data results to inform additional inclusion work across the organization
- Identify, prioritize, promote, and help implement projects, services and initiatives across the system
- Evaluate, advise, assist, or lead a project or initiative relating to accessibility and inclusion of people of all ages with disabilities in the Library
- Conduct a program and service inventory
- Recommend and prioritize the Library's work and services to people with disabilities
- Develop a two year library accessibility work plan
- Evaluate and recommend changes and enhancements to the Accessibility webpage
- Evaluate and recommend services, programs, and collection changes

What makes this team unique is its membership; it is comprised of Library staff and community members. This strategy helps achieve the team's goal to develop relevant services, which are informed by community input. It also provides community members to participate in the organization and lead positive change.

Department of Human Services Grant

The Autism Team/DCL partnership paved the way for a significant funding opportunity for the Library. In fall of 2017, the Autism Grant Team introduced the Library to the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) Disability Services Innovations Grant. By sharing this opportunity with DCL, the Autism Grant team hoped to support further sustainability of the Autism Grant even after its end in June, 2018.

In early 2018, DCL was awarded a two-year \$100,000 DHS Innovations Grant to support a multi-pronged plan enhancing the accessibility of DCL to individuals with disabilities. The grant-funded plan included funding for staff training, programs and supplies, marketing and communication, collections, and consultants for addressing accessibility of physical and virtual library space.

In addition, DCL's grant plan included the design and construction of autism-friendly calming spaces as part of major remodel projects at three library locations. These spaces are for children, teens, and adults on the autism spectrum, those with sensory-processing issues, or anyone desiring a calm space. Features of the room include dimmable lights, noise cancelling headphones, sensory supports, lap blankets, and comfortable seating.

To support the development of these new calming spaces, the Autism Grant team connected DCL with several local autism related organizations, who consulted specialized on the design and planning of autism and sensory-friendly spaces. Experts from two Minnesota-based organizations, AuSM and Fraser, advised DCL which supports, training, and services would be needed to welcome people with disabilities into these newly remodeled facilities. Suggestions included DCL social narratives, videos, and an Accessible Library Hour program that would allow patrons with disabilities to visit the library before open hours in a calm, more structured environment.

Librarian Partnerships

The Chicago networking group SNAILS (Special Needs and Inclusive Library Services) developed out of a need for librarians to learn about accessible and inclusive library service. Its membership includes library professionals from libraries in and around Chicago, Illinois. The group's goal is to support librarians in providing specialized services and programs to children and teens with disabilities through library collaboration and librarian training (SNAILS). In-person quarterly meetings, an online blog, and a YouTube channel act as forums to exchange ideas, learn, advocate, and inspire. Each meeting, SNAILS invites professionals from outside the library community to provide trainings on topics specialized to the disability community. Past training topics include universal design, inclusive dance and movement, deaf culture and American Sign Language, building collections for kids with disabilities, adaptive toys, sensory play, and apps for children with autism.

Inspired by the impact of SNAILS on the profession, a similar cohort of librarians developed in Minnesota entitled the Inclusive Services Committee. Sponsored by the Metropolitan Library Service Agency (MELSA), this group connected the Anoka County, Carver County, Hennepin County, Ramsey County, Saint Paul Public, Scott County, and Washington County Libraries. Representatives from these library systems meet quarterly to discuss topics of accessibility and inclusion for youth with disabilities in metro-area Minnesota. While topics of discussion focus around creating autism-friendly libraries, the group covers all topics of disability related to youth services, including American Sign Language family programs, inclusive library websites, and marketing strategies to families with children with disabilities.

In late 2016, DCL became an official member of this committee. Together with other library systems, DCL helped develop trainings for library staff, such as the Minitex and MELSA co-sponsored workshop entitled "Programs for Teens with Disabilities." MELSA staff even filmed this workshop and posted the video on their website, so as to increase the accessibility and availability of this information to librarians in greater Minnesota.

Summary

Dakota County Library is definitively stronger for having pursued a partnership with Dakota County's Autism Grant Team. This is demonstrated by the numerous positive outcomes that have been achieved as a result of their collaborative work. These outcomes include:

- Increased funding to support programs, services, and spaces serving individuals of all ages with disabilities
- Increased awareness of community concerns and feedback about DCL
- Better trained staff with increased knowledge about autism and inclusive customer service
- Increased knowledge by members of the public about autism and other disabilities
- More opportunities for self-advocates with autism of all ages and other disabilities to be participatory members of DCL

- More opportunities for community members to participate and lead library initiatives
- Increased accessibility of family restroom spaces
- Increased capacity for organization on topics of accessibility and inclusion
- Increased awareness of DCL, its services and value by community members
- Increased awareness of DCL as an active and willing community partner
- Increased reputation of DCL as an advocate and leader in accessibility and inclusion

Because of the partnership between the Autism Grant team and DCL, the organization, and by extension, the larger Dakota County community has become a more inclusive and welcoming place for all. In fact, this may be one of the most impactful results of the collaboration—the alignment to County goals and community concerns. When libraries can position themselves as activators for positive change that supports and is responsive to community concerns, libraries prove to be more relevant and necessary.

Public libraries in the United States, such as Dakota County, are democratic institutions that stand for free and open access for everyone. Librarians strive towards achieving that ideal. Unfortunately, because of a variety of barriers, children and teens with disabilities may not have always felt welcome at the library. The model of Dakota County Library proves it takes support, expertise, knowledge, and hearts of local community stakeholders who share librarians’ idealistic views and want to see everyone be visible and participating in libraries and their communities. When libraries and their communities can plan together, work together, and hope together—libraries can be stronger together.

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