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Creating an inclusive community of readers: Tailoring the Reading Experience to
Meet Individual Needs
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Arms Open Wide: Library Outreach to Customers with Print Impairments

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Abstract:

This paper will address how librarians and library staff can reach out in their communities to find patrons with print impairments, how to communicate effectively with this group of customers, how to partner with other agencies, and how to ensure that their library offers quality accessible services. With the population aging, the number of people with print-impairments is on the rise. Oftentimes, these individuals are homebound which can lead to isolation and depression. It is therefore increasingly important for libraries to reach these patrons. Many library staff lack knowledge and experience in how to conduct outreach to individuals with print-impairments. Too often, outreach is viewed as something that will use staff time and resources that could be better utilized elsewhere. The purpose of this paper is to provide a framework on how to get started in outreach, it will justify the importance of reaching all patrons with print-impairments in the community, and offer practical suggestions for accessible services to offer that cost little or are free. The outreach toolkit for public libraries, included as a link, is an extremely helpful resource.

Keywords: outreach, libraries, print-impairments, print-disabilities, accessibility

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Library outreach to all members of the community is important. It is especially vital to reach individuals with disabilities that prohibit them from going to the physical library building. Outreach is the most effective way to reach library customers who cannot come to the library. Yet, many public libraries do little or no outreach at all. There are a number of reasons for this deficit including; lack of education on and experience with outreach, limited staff time, budget constraints, lack of support from library board, and unawareness of the need to reach individuals who cannot come to the library. Individuals with a print-impairment (also known as a print-disability), as defined by the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS), are people that have difficulty reading standard print or holding a book due to a physical disability, a visual impairment or a reading disability (Library of Congress, 2013). Many individuals with print-impairments are home-bound and may be unaware of the services and materials available to them from their local public library. Due to the ageing population, the number of individuals with print-impairments in the United States is on the rise and the numbers are projected to continue to increase in coming years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). It is therefore vital that public libraries be aware of this under-served population and make efforts to reach them. Individuals with print-impairments will benefit from the library's resources – and the library will be reaching more members of the community and increasing circulation statistics. This paper will rationalize the need for public libraries to reach patrons with print-impairments, share practical tips on communication and etiquette while working with individuals with print-impairments, and provide a framework for getting started with outreach. An additional resource provided is the Outreach Toolkit for Public Libraries, also written by Mary Kearns-Kaplan and Tara Kehoe, found at this [link](#) in Word, PDF, and Audio formats.

There are many causes of print-impairments, including; arthritis, brain injury, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, macular degeneration, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's, stroke, and vision loss. The psycho-social impacts on people with print-impairments include depression, loss of daily living activities, and social isolation (Aarsland, 2001; Carsten, 2013; Feinstein, 2011; Hochber, 2012). Being able to access the many resources that a library offers can assuage many of the negative impacts on individuals with print-impairments.

In order to successfully work with people who have a print-impairment, it is important to be able to communicate effectively and amicably. We offer the following tips to help interactions with those who have a print-impairment go smoothly. Think in terms of abilities (not disabilities)—what an individual can do, rather than what they cannot do. Use person-first language (for example, “a person with a vision-impairment” rather than “a print-impaired person.”) Do not assume a person with a print-impairment needs your help, ask if you are concerned. Speak directly to the individual, not to their translator or companion. Avoid using terms like “suffers with”, “a victim of,” and “afflicted with” when discussing impairments. Communicate at an age-appropriate level. When communicating with a person who has a vision-impairment, introduce yourself and others when you join them and be descriptive and specific in your speech so they can follow what is happening. Finally, be sensitive about physical contact-- do not touch an individual's cane, wheelchair, or service animal (New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, N.D.).

With this information on hand, librarians are more prepared to start doing outreach to individuals with print-impairments. Outreach comes in many forms; in-person contact includes bookmobiles, making presentations & networking in the community, and attending

events such as expos, conferences, and meetings. Remote outreach includes mailings, social media posts, and website information. We suggest a five-step approach to librarians and library staff in getting started with outreach. Step one is to start small by adding the services available from the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) to anyone in the United States (and U.S. citizens living abroad) with a print-impairment. The NLS provides accessible books and magazines in the form of digital audio and/or Braille (print or web). Materials are sent in the mail via “free matter for the blind or handicapped” shipping. Patrons receive all services at no cost to them. Institutions serving eligible individuals may establish an organizational account. Many people in need of the services provided by the NLS are not aware of their existence. By adding these services, at no cost, public libraries can make a big impact on many individuals with print-impairments. Step two is to do an internal assessment of what the library currently offers. It is often surprising to library staff to realize how many materials and services they have available already for those with print-impairments. Accessible materials include audio books, DVDs with audio-description, and large-print materials. Accessible services include databases with built-in audio for html text, computers with built-in accessibility, programs (on and off-site), and subscriptions such as with Learning Ally and Bookshare. Most current electronic personal devices (including tablets and smart phones) come with accessibility features installed. Libraries can offer instruction on how to use these features. Step three is to get the word out to the community on the services the library currently has. Some effective methods include developing a special web page, creating fliers, and doing mailings. It is important to use best practices in accessible design when producing materials; some basic tips are to use large font size (16pt or more) in the sans serif font family and be sure to have bold contrast. It is recommended to check the websites referenced for more detail (American Foundation for the Blind, N.D.; American Printing House for the Blind, 2008; Lighthouse International, N.D.) Step four is to train staff on the current accessible materials and services your library offers, on communication and etiquette guidelines to make your library a welcoming place to those with print-impairments, the services provided by the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, and on accessible design guidelines. The fifth and final step of this stage is to incorporate outreach into your library’s mission statement, which will help validate current and future outreach efforts to the library board.

With all of this on hand, it is time to move forward with an effective outreach strategy. Establishing a focus group is an option that can be beneficial both to the library and the community members. A focus group may be an informal gathering comprised of members of the library board or friends groups, local religious centers, the print-impaired community, social service agencies, non-profit agencies, healthcare providers, and staff at local schools. With the help of a focus group, the next stage is to identify outreach targets. Possible outreach targets may include government agencies, medical professions, non-profit organizations, religious centers, schools, senior living places, social services agencies and veteran organizations. With input from the focus group, identify the staff members/volunteers who will be doing outreach and develop a list of target priorities. Determine how much time ought to be dedicated towards outreach per week/month/etc. Develop a script of talking points for outreach workers to use and develop promotional materials. Finally, promote the accessible services already identified that the library currently offers. Then, hit the road!

In conclusion, serving people with print impairments in the community is a needed service justified by the statistics. This outreach will enrich the lives of those who have difficulty reading standard print. Outreach provides an opportunity for staff to learn new skills and can

be done simply and at little or no cost to the library. Reaching out to the print-impaired population in the community provides a way to establish or strengthen partnerships which will help provide support for the library and increase the library's circulation. The Outreach toolkit for Public Libraries available was written to be an easy to use and helpful resource for getting started with outreach.

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