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## Activities of the IFLA Section on Library Services to People with Special Needs

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### Abstract:

*The Library Services to People with Special Needs Section of IFLA has as its mission to serve: people who are in hospitals, nursing homes, and other care facilities; people in prisons; people who are experiencing homelessness; people with physical disabilities; people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deafblind; people with dyslexia; and people with cognitive and mental disabilities.*

*It does this by providing an international forum for the discussion of ideas, sharing of experiences and development of tools designed to promote and improve the effectiveness of library and information services to special needs groups, and the promotion of national and international cooperation at all levels.*

*This paper will explore the various activities of LSN such as writing guidelines, presenting programs at conferences, and advocating for accessibility at IFLA and other conferences. It will also present the results of a survey conducted by LSN to determine international programs serving people with disabilities to share with the a United Nations Committee on how the needs of people with disabilities are addressed in the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).*

*The paper will conclude with a discussion of future projects on the table.*

**Keywords:** Disabilities, Accessibility, Good practice, Universal Design, Libraries.

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library and information services to special needs groups, and the promotion of national and international cooperation at all levels.

### **Guidelines**

LSN is particularly productive in the area of Guidelines. Our goal is a new or revised set of guidelines on library service to one of our target audiences every two years. You can see all of the LSN current Guidelines at <https://www.ifla.org/publications/50>.

In 2014, LSN published the Guidelines for Library Service to People with Dyslexia. Its complete Guidelines have been translated into six languages and the Checklist, into eight languages. While the original Guidelines are not being updated, examples from around the world are added as an appendix each year as is a general Knowledge Base with information such as: Are people with dyslexia included in the Marrakesh Treaty? (It depends on each country's laws.) In addition, LSN members around the world have used the Guidelines as a basis for workshops on serving people with dyslexia. A brochure was developed on library service to people with dyslexia that can be used when doing workshops.

In early 2017 (we missed the two year goal by a couple of months), we completed the Guidelines for Library Service to People Experiencing Homelessness. Homelessness is a growing problem around the world because of international economic hardships, area warfare, and the refugee crisis. IFLA's official publisher, DeGryter asked LSN to edit the Guidelines into a book with more examples. The IFLA Professional Committee suggested that LSN create a checklist from the Guidelines, such as was done for the Guidelines on Dyslexia. IFLA has also suggested that we broaden the chapter on library service to refugees and publish this as a separate document. This is currently under consideration.

As we were finishing the Guidelines on Homelessness, a Task Force began work on Guidelines for Library Service to People Who Are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Deaf/Blind. This is on track to be published in 2019 and the Task Force is still looking for examples.

We haven't decided on the next set of Guidelines to be written or revised.

### **Accessibility at IFLA/WLIC conferences**

In 2016, following the 2014 WLIC conferences in Lyon, France and the 2016 conference in Cape Town, South Africa, LSN issued a report on accessibility at IFLA/WLIC conference. This came about because some of the venues chosen for the conference were inaccessible to people with disabilities. Two years later, following the conferences in Columbus, Ohio, USA and Wroclaw, Poland, LSN issued another report. The reports are organized in four sections:

- What IFLA has done to make conferences accessible. Following our first report, IFLA staff asked LSN and LPD members to review the conference app for accessibility and to add questions about accessibility to the post-conference evaluation survey. They also added information serving people with disabilities to the conference website and to the site selection application form.
- Problems we still see particularly the lack of accessibility at the Poland conference.
- Additional action that can be taken to make the conference more accessible without substantial cost, such as a sign in the registration area where people can bring up accessibility issues.
- Additional action that could be taken that has a cost associated with it, for example, captioning of plenary sessions.

## Programs

LSN sponsors a program at each WLIC conference, typically connected to projects that LSN has underway. For example, while we were writing the Guidelines for Library Services to People Experiencing Homelessness, the program in Columbus, Ohio was a preview of the Guidelines. In Wroclaw, Poland, the program focused on accessibility at all library conferences including WLIC. This year, as you can see, this program is on universal design. In Wroclaw, we also visited a prison and while at a mid-year meeting in Oslo, visited a prison there.

## IFLA, SDGs, and people with disabilities

In 2016, the UN General Assembly asked the UN Office of Rights of Persons with Disabilities to prepare a “Flagship Report” on how the needs of people with disabilities are addressed in the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in the areas of quality information, gender equality, employment, and access to information. IFLA was privileged to be asked to participate in this effort. My goal as a member of MEDD, (Monitoring and Evaluation for Disability-inclusive Development – what they called the Committee) was to get libraries mentioned as sources of services and programs as the SDGs are implemented.

As part of IFLA’s participation, we were asked to conduct an international survey on library services to people with disabilities. Below are some of the key highlights of this survey.

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 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 program 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.

### **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.

## **LSN Future Projects**

Our LSN goals and objectives sometimes outpace our ability to accomplish them, despite the hardworking librarians who serve on the Standing Committee. Three projects we have just started are:

- A checklist on accessibility in libraries for people with disabilities
- Proposing a policy to the IFLA Board on accessibility at IFLA conferences and in libraries
- Special publication on library service to refugees

LSN remains committed to helping IFLA, library associations around the world, and individual libraries do a better job of serving people with disabilities.