

## **Public Libraries in the Future: Connecting with Our Communities**

When I was first asked to be a speaker tonight, I said no because I assumed the word "connecting" referred to computers and the Internet and WLS was looking for a tech talk. That wasn't for me; but when it was explained to me that the connecting was to people, I gladly agreed.

My 29 years as a librarian, most recently as Chief Operating Officer at Queens Library, have all been about learning about people first, then figuring out what library services they need, whether that's books in foreign languages or literacy classes or materials delivered to their homes. Before working in Queens, I worked in Library Development at the State Library and was responsible for the State's Coordinated Outreach Program providing library services to specific target populations: prison inmates, the aged, people with disabilities, low literate, unemployed and non-English speaking. My friends called me the "Statue of Liberty Librarian" since my passion was to provide library service to people no one else ever thought about in terms of public libraries. I made a career out of this. With the growth of the Internet and more and more information, especially government information online, there's an even greater need today to think about how to bridge the gulf between what a library can provide and the people who need information.

### **Patrons/Customers**

Who are your library users? Are they the people who come into your library or all the people in your chartered service area? Those two groups aren't the same. Who is your library serving and who are they missing and what could you do to reach a new audience?

### **Statistics**

In preparing for tonight I looked at the WLS website on the statistics page. There was information from the annual report for public and association libraries collected by the State Library. Information about book stock, how many volumes added, percent of the total budget spent on materials, additional holdings as a percent of the total, and I could go on. The only figure that reflected people was total population.

This isn't the fault of the individual libraries or of WLS, it reflects the data asked for at the state level which is then forwarded for a federal report. I think all of us would say, libraries are about more than books; but it would be hard to prove it by these annual reports. Libraries must think this data is important because it takes time and effort to collect and report it; but why is there so little asked, or known, about the people who use, or could use, libraries?

### **Confidentiality vs. anonymity**

Libraries are proud of the fact that the information they provide is confidential. That's one of our values; but it can also be a scapegoat, an excuse to not know users or what they need. If I were having surgery, I certainly wouldn't want my doctor talking about me or my condition, that's confidential. On the other hand, I would want to

know how many of the same surgeries the doctor had performed and about the success rate. Libraries traditionally keep count of reference questions; but does your library break that down further into how many questions are about health, or specific health issues, diabetes for example? If not, how do you know what materials to buy or programs to offer?

And what happens when the patron doesn't want their information to be confidential? A patron may be in a job training program and get credit for time spent taking a computer class at the library but needs to prove participation. Will your library do that?

### **Circulation**

Circulation is something libraries count, but I'd say it's not the be all and end all of measuring library service. High circulation does reflect the fact that the books and materials purchased are being used, which is positive. On the other hand, in some service situations, circulation count doesn't make much sense, not from a public policy perspective nor common sense. A mother checks out 10 books from the library to encourage her 21-year-old son to look for a job. He ignores them, they sit on a shelf and she returns them. A woman fills out an online job application at the library with help from library staff – and she gets the job. Circulation count 10 vs 0. In the second scenario, would your library ever know the woman got the job? If she came in and thanked a librarian for helping her get the job, would your staff know how to report it?

### **Opportunities**

Technology is offering new ways for libraries to connect with people. In fact, people are coming to libraries to use computers who might not have considered using a public library before or come from a country where libraries aren't free or – we all hate to think this – but maybe they had a bad library experience in the past at a public library. Now they're coming to the library to apply for food stamps, fill out job applications, print tax forms or find a child care program. Are we prepared? Are we preparing our librarians to help them? Many of these new patrons may not read well, or not read English well, or may not know computer basics. Training is needed; this isn't ready reference.

People have been coming to libraries for years with these questions. Twenty-five years ago when I was on a reference desk and someone asked about food stamps, I'd turn to the librarian's rolodex and give them a phone number. Today, in counties outside NYC, people have to apply online for food stamps. Is it the work of a social worker? I'd say it's helping someone find readily available information and it's the job of the librarian.

### **Relevance**

Providing government information will help a library reach a new audience and demonstrate relevance. In addition, if libraries want to be relevant in their communities, they should look at local public policy issues, network and partner with

local agencies and not for profits and become part of the solution. It means getting out of the library, not assuming that everyone knows all that you do, nor reciting a mantra of what you do that you think is important. Whether the issue is providing after school help with math for school kids or helping seniors access programs to pay for heat so they can stay in their homes, there are ways the library can be part of the solution.

There's funding out there for libraries willing to step up to the plate and take on a role in working to solve public policy issues. Look at the federal BTOP (Broadband Technologies Opportunity Program) program, New Rochelle has an award and the New York State Library is looking for ideas hoping to coordinate future applications. The funding is to bring technology to disadvantaged communities and serve vulnerable populations, and the first step is to know the target audience and what they need. Queens Library has been awarded government and foundation grants in non-library fields like Juvenile Justice and afterschool programs, because we frame our application in terms of how we solve a problem, not that we're a library. The fact that we have a building and staff in a high-needs area comes first. Books and computers second and that's a big bonus over other providers.

I just came back from NYLA, the New York Library Association's, conference in Saratoga last week. There was a lot of hand wringing about the economy and what that meant to libraries and library systems. We're always being asked to do more with less. I attended a meeting where Commissioner Steiner of the State Education Department spoke about how libraries can impact K-12 education in New York State. Most of his speech was about school libraries; but during the question and answer period, a public library system director reminded him about public libraries. Steiner's response was to describe one of his, and New York State's biggest issues, the highest failure rate on GED exams in the nation and to ask how libraries could help. There weren't hands shooting up around the room and that's a shame.

- *Keynote speech given by Maureen O'Connor at the Westchester Library System 51<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting held on November 9, 2010.*