

Libraries: All Things to All People

by Carol H. Reilly

Libraries can no longer stand apart from the social issues that affect their patrons. Libraries cannot afford to remain merely neutral institutions while the communities they serve are struggling with delinquency, teen pregnancy, violence, homelessness, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, substance abuse, intolerance of racial and cultural differences, and other concerns.

Human service and education professionals, political and business leaders, planners and advocates are seeking or designing new approaches to prevent — as well as remedy — some of these social problems. Individuals of all ages and abilities are searching for health care, day care, housing, vocational, and other options so that they can become financially and socially independent. Families are looking for support to deal with domestic troubles and to help their children become successful.

Libraries must not only be aware of these trends and issues, but also must redefine their mission to become active participants in community problem-solving.

I believe that library administrators and staff should use the concept of Information and Referral (I&R) as a starting point for evaluating their goals and for developing training, service, and marketing strategies in response to social issues.

Libraries should view their connection to community resources as essential in providing thorough, accurate service to their patrons. Employees at every level should be taught to think of themselves as community information providers having access to a universe of knowledge much broader than the library. Given appropriate training, employees can become comfortable in judging when to recommend or call on resources beyond the library, even if they do not have their own in-house I&R staff and database.

Involvement by administrative and branch staff in interagency networks and community planning efforts enables libraries to cope with changing demands resulting from societal problems. Using I&R contacts, librarians can:

1. Find out more about information and help available to latchkey children, parents of troubled teens, homeless people, the unemployed, people with different communication needs, and other groups who may be visiting or calling the library.
2. Become indispensable in meeting the information needs of local professional colleagues and decision-makers.
3. Encourage and participate in multi-agency alliances which may help everyone strengthen existing services, create innovative programs, make better use of current resources, or identify new volunteer, staff, and funding sources.

For example, by forming a partnership with the local teen helpline, tutoring and mentoring programs, PTA, Cities-in-School office, or youth council or other groups, library employees may be better able to work with children and teens who have academic and behavioral problems, or find volunteers who can help them.

Library employees can gain valuable ideas for collection development, booklists, displays, programs, and cooperative outreach efforts from such groups as public health agencies, parent education groups, information sources on the Americans with Disabilities Act, task forces dealing with issues such as AIDS and teen pregnancy, career counselors, the AARP, and the Bar Association.

By using their unique skills and tools, librarians can provide valuable assistance to government officials, human service planners and advocates, neighborhood development groups, and citizens seeking services for themselves and their families. They can build a computer file on support groups whose meetings are mentioned in the newspapers, offer to track down hard-to-find articles and statistics, facilitate interagency training and community information exchange activities, and collect or compile resource guides to local day care providers, summer camps, job listings, scholarships and grants, and translators and interpreters.

All of these I&R-related activities are well within the traditional role of libraries, but they place libraries in the mainstream of social responsibility to their patrons and their community.

COUNTER POINT



But It's Not What They Paid For!

by Harry Tuchmayer, Column Editor

The other day, I was approached by an individual who demanded that the library maintain a permanent display that warns citizens of the coming environmental catastrophe. In fact, this is the second time we have been approached by the same individual as he travels up and down the East Coast of the United States. You see, he and the organization he represents know that "libraries traditionally respond to public demand" so he wants to "persuade libraries ... to influence (that) public demand." Now I care about the environment, but where do I draw the line between political activism and professional responsibility?

Unfortunately, many of the serious issues facing society today — teen pregnancy, homelessness, intolerance etc. — are more than just social concerns; they are highly volatile political issues. As publicly supported institutions, many libraries increasingly will find themselves in the middle of community debates that are not cut and dried. In this environment, libraries will be expected to provide information to support, justify, and help formulate any number of possible solutions to a problem. And in order to meet community needs, libraries will be expected to perform their traditional role of information provider free of bias or interpretation. In short, libraries will become more important to the entire community, not because we made it our mission to solve a single individual's problem, but because we never wavered from our overall mission of collecting uncensored materials representing all points of view.

How can an organization which has consistently resisted all attempts to censor ideas or opinions do anything other than "stand apart from the social issues which affect (our) patrons"? If we don't, we run the risk of alienating the very people (not to mention the taxpayers) who rely on us to provide the community with the information necessary to solve all of its problems. This doesn't mean that we must turn our back on those in need, nor does it mean that libraries can't offer some sort of information and referral service. It does mean, however, that libraries must be careful in how they structure this service so as not to cross the line separating referral from endorsement.

A fully staffed, well trained, and competent reference department already serves many of the same functions as a good I & R service. The difference is that libraries traditionally shy away from endorsing or suggesting the use of one service over another. I know that referring someone to Crisis Line is not the same thing as sending a patron to one bookstore over another. Unfortunately, it's no longer that simple. When you suggest the services of a group like Planned Parenthood instead of Life Line, you might run the risk of infuriating a special interest group in your community.

Giving patrons the number of an Information and Referral service might seem like needless double work, but maintaining some distance from the issue does insure the library's autonomy.

Librarians have always been taught that good reference service does not mean serving as the patron's legal advisor, doctor, financial consultant, or contractor. Yet in order to provide effective Information and Referral services, librarians would be cast in these very roles. Basically I & R practitioners must serve their "clients" much like a good social worker handles his caseload, with a level of involvement that cannot be part of the reference transaction. Like it or not, libraries cannot and should not serve as all things to all people. When those 'things' require us to change fundamentally the nature of library services, we lose sight of our mission and ultimately run the risk of diluting our effectiveness.

It is precisely because libraries have been successful in promoting themselves as impartial institutions essential in a democracy that we must shy away from social activism. As much as it hurts, transferring that call rather than answering it is exactly what libraries were created for. ... Oh, by the way, the contact number for the Environmental Action Alert Group is

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