

For the People: Organizing and Accessing Federal Documents in the Public Library

by Mimi Curlee

In the public library, you get all kinds — all kinds of questions, all kinds of resources, and all kinds of people. The people you work with and the people you serve are made up of every combination of human circumstance: family background, education level, economic situation, physical ability, mental capacity, race, sex, couturier preference, body-piercing adherence, and hairstyle judgment. According to the Declaration of Independence, all people are entitled to “certain inalienable rights” secured by “Governments [which] are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” To give their consent, the people need to know what is being done or proposed by that government. Fortunately, a mechanism was put into place in 1860 to provide that knowledge: The Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) of the Government Printing Office (GPO).

The Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg became a federal depository library to ensure that information meant for the people gets to the people — all of the people. From

the professional front-line reference staff to shelveers, technical services personnel, and library volunteers, we are all working toward fulfilling this exciting and challenging, but not always easy mission.

Reference Service

In any library, one of the most important tasks of the librarian is to help the patron figure out what information he or she really needs. With the general public, that can be the hardest part of the reference transaction. The next step is to help the patron find that information as efficiently and effectively as possible. Librarians are the “value-added” commodity of the library. Throw 100 patrons into a library building without staff and see how many get what they came for. And, it’s not enough “value” just to sit and point. Between books, indexes, microfiche, microfilm, CD-ROMs, Internet, kiosks, copiers, VCRs, Dewey and SUDOCs (Superintendent of Documents Classification System) — patrons need as much help as possible.

An article recently reminded me that we often encounter three scenarios with patrons: (1) he knows a piece of information is available and knows the source, but needs to know if we have it or can get it; (2) she knows a piece of information is available, but doesn’t know where to find it; or (3) the student wants information about a topic, and doesn’t know where to find it. We all meet and help him, her, and junior every day.

But what about a fourth scenario: you’ve found what the patron asked for and they are ready to go away happy. But you also know another source or

program or Internet site that is about their topic. They had no idea this information was out there so they had no reason to look for it. After showing them this bonus, they declare “You deserve a medal!” and want to know your name. Not only did they get what they came for, they got more. They’ll be back. Scenario four only occurs when there is continual training and an honest desire to connect people to useful information.¹

Staff Training

The public’s need for government information may not fall neatly between nine and five, Monday through Friday. That’s why it is important that each person coming into the library on any day, at any time, get the same high quality of service. Granted, desk schedules, meetings, illness, vacations, and staff turnover may make it difficult to give everyone the necessary training, but we’re always working on it.

I have a tour that I give each staff member to make sure they are familiar with the basic documents, how and why you would use them, and their location. Many of these are used often so we keep them in the Ready Reference collection at the Reference Desk. An experienced, well-trained librarian will know to start with the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* to find the number of families in America receiving alimony, rather than rushing to books in the Dewey 347 classification or wading through a periodical index. Often basic documents will not answer the patron’s question completely, but footnotes may lead to other documents or agencies that will.

Categories of Depository Libraries:

Academic Libraries	50.21%
Public Libraries	20.00%
Academic Law Libraries	11.37%
Community College Libraries	4.96%
Federal Agency Libraries	3.64%
State Libraries	3.42%
State Court Libraries	2.62%
Special Libraries	1.75%
Federal Court Libraries	1.17%
Military Service Libraries	0.36%

http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/dpos/102years.html

As soon as the Tax Form CD-ROM arrives, I take each librarian to the computer and go through the find, select, and print procedure. If we didn't order paper copies of a form, the reproducible has been stolen, or the Treasury Department site on the Web (www.irs.ustreas.gov) has maxed out, staff don't hesitate to get the form from the CD-ROM.

Even with training, it is almost impossible for any one person to remember the intricacies of every resource in the library. Federal documents employ most of the more convoluted methods of organization. For the benefit of patrons and staff, I make cheat sheets that give step-by-step instructions on how to use various tools. For example, if you want to find a Public Law or Act, we have the *United States Statutes at Large* in print back to 1964 and before that on microfiche to 1789. To find an Act, you use *Shepard's Acts and Cases by Popular Names*. By looking for the popular name, you find the year and Public Law number, then you find the statute volume for that year and look at the top of the pages for the Public Law number. If, however, the law was passed before 1964, you use the cheat sheet that we have pasted into the front of each of the three volumes of *Shepard's*.

Access to the Collection

We provide two ways of accessing our collection: through our Dynix Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC), and a CD-ROM called *Marcive*. We contracted with Marcive, Inc. in 1993 for cataloging records that we could add to our OPAC. Each week, in Technical Services, we get a floppy disk that has abbreviated bibliographic records based on the shipping lists. We link that week's documents to the records.

Each month, we get full bibliographic records that overlay those weekly shipping list records, so we retain the holdings. We've had to work out some bugs since the first records arrived in 1994. Since microfiche takes longer to get to us than paper documents (they have to stop by the contractor to get filmed), we only get monthly full bibliographic records for these.

At first we checked microfiche out, but after a few months of calling patrons to explain that the document they put on hold was on microfiche, what microfiche is, and that we have the reader/printers here to use it, we set the microfiche to noncirculating status. Patrons who want to check it out, however, may do so. I also use the floppy to

create a shelf list on a personal computer so that I can create lists whenever I need them. We are beginning to get bibliographic records for Internet sites, our next big challenge.

Marcive also sends us a CD-ROM index to federal documents back to 1976. We have this on our computer's Local Area Network (LAN). Between this and our OPAC's document records, we've seen a much higher use of the documents in the past several years. When a record shows up in a search on the *Marcive* CD-ROM, the patron can find out if our library selects this item, and, if we don't, which other depositories in the country do. If we own the document, it's shelved by the SUDOCs classification system. I put up a simple chart on the first range of documents to help patrons and staff understand the SUDOCs organizational flow.

We also offer services to our branch libraries. Documents relating to health, educational materials, housing information, and more are being requested through the OPAC and sent to one of our 23 branches for patrons to check out. Some documents are not allowed to be checked out of the Main Library: the *United States Code*, *Code of Federal Regulations*, *Federal Register*, *United States Reports*, most of the Census materials, and some Labor reports. We keep these close at hand since they are used so frequently and by so many people.

Collection Maintenance

Maintenance of the collection requires step-by-step instructions. I've had to ask other documents librarians more than one question about looseleaf documents and documents that cumulate. Once I have the answer and understand the procedure, I type it up and put it on the document (if you put plastic tape under the instruction sheet, you can peel the typed instructions off when the next edition arrives and apply it to the new one). This saves a lot of time and trouble the next year. A few people may feel that these instructions should not be so prominent, but I have yet to encounter a patron who got upset about clarity. A dummy on the shelf helps patrons and staff in the search for the next installment when a document format has changed from paper to microfiche to Internet.

As a Depository, we are required to keep most documents for five years. We can keep them longer, but due to storage constraints we are very selective in doing this. There are two ways to withdraw documents from the collection. Documents that supercede themselves are labeled with "This SUDOCs supercedes" stickers and shelved, with the old edition removed from the OPAC and recycled.

The other way to withdraw documents comes after the five-year holding period. I check each document for the date we received it (sometimes the date of publication can be years before the document was released to the public) and subject matter. If the document is of local interest (*Black White Perceptions: Race Relations in Greensboro: A Report*) or popular interest (*Japanese-American and Aleutian Wartime Relocations*), it stays. If it is to be withdrawn, it is put on a list and sent to the Regional Depository in Chapel Hill. After they select any they need for their collection, the list is sent to the other 32 depositories in North Carolina. The documents that are not claimed after 30 days are recycled.

Volunteers and Community Service Workers

I have had wonderful success using vol-

Staff should know the basics:

Tools:

- Andriot's Guide to U.S. Government Publications
- American Statistics Index (ASI)
- CCH Congressional Index
- GPO Access on the Internet*
- Marcive CD-ROM*

Documents:

- Budget of the United States
- Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance
- Census Catalog and Guide
- Census of Population and Housing for North Carolina*
- Code of Federal Regulations
- Congressional Directory*
- Congressional Record
- County and City Data Book*
- Federal Register
- Historical Statistics of the United States*
- Monthly Catalog
- National Trade Data Bank (NTDB) CD-ROM*
- Publications Reference File*
- Slip Laws (Public)
- Statistical Abstract of the United States*
- Statutes at Large
- Subject Bibliographies
- United States Code
- United States Government Manual*
- United States Reports
- Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents

*Kept in Ready Reference

publisher in the world may elicit yawns, but tell them that the demographics they need for their small business plan are all right here and the response will be "All right!! Can you fax that to me?"

I greatly enjoyed organizing three days of training by experts from the Government Printing Office as well as a continuing legal education credit for Mecklenburg County lawyers. While it is always desirable to have experts come to the library and present programs, this kind of participation depends on the agency's funding and staffing levels. If live, warm bodies are out of the question, they may be able to send traveling exhibits or posters to liven up a program put together by library staff. The *Federal Staff Directory* and a phone call will let you know what's possible.

Even a book display can benefit from the use of documents. In our NASA documents were photos of planets, solar flares, rings and lift-offs that I used for a book display entitled "When Was the Last Time You Explored Space?" There are U.S. Postal Service posters of stamps to use with books on hobbies and United States Geological Service maps and Defense Department country studies to enhance a travel book display. The Smithsonian puts out some wonderful

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exhibit brochures and catalogs that would draw attention to art books. CIA political maps and a series of photos from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum would make most patrons wander over to look through military or history books.

The availability of bibliographic records for our documents in our OPAC has allowed us to integrate these wonderful resources with all the other tools we use. They are no longer a separate, mysterious, maze of shelves. Thus, all the picky little details of interviewing, training, indexing, collection maintenance, formats, weeding, and a hundred others are part of the larger battle against ignorance. The Declaration of Indepen-

dence says that the King of England "called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures." Not today. Not in these United States. The Federal Depository Program extends from the pink, dawn-kissed shores of Ocracoke to the ma-

jestic cliffs of Hawaii. No person is denied his/her rights through ignorance if we can help it, and we do help every day. Having a mission implies that there are obstacles to overcome in order to reach a goal. Our Public Library couldn't pick a better goal than providing people with the information to ensure "that governments of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."²

References

¹ Nancy Lemon, "Climbing the Value Chain: a Case Study in Rethinking the Corporate Library Function," *Online* 20 (November-December 1996): 50-57.

² Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address," delivered November 19, 1863.

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