Chapter 10
Library Services to Patrons With Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Libraries are coming to terms with the fact that their primary role is to provide information resources and services to all equally without any category of users being neglected or feeling left out. Those with disabilities need specialized services and attention, which libraries as public places must be ready to offer. How should patrons with disabilities be treated when they visit the library or need the assistance of librarians? Do they have access to library resources in the format that suits their form of disability and enhances their getting their information needs met? This chapter sheds light on how patrons with disabilities can be served adequately by libraries and librarians.

INTRODUCTION

Libraries play very important roles in the society as they organize knowledge in their collections in various formats: both print and non-print, and make them easily accessible to their patrons; they guarantee, or should guarantee equality of access for all citizens. The principles supporting information services provision should be that of availability and equality of access by all irrespective of class, age, race, gender or physical make up (Adetoro, 2016).

As expressed by Irvall and Nielsen (2005), in many countries all over the world, facilities that can aid access for patrons with disabilities to use libraries are not yet available. To enhance the provision of equal opportunities for all library users (both those with disabilities and otherwise), it is essential to look with the eyes of this patron group at the physical state of library structures, along with library resources, services, programs and facilities. Regardless of the availability of library and information services in several libraries, such services are not easily accessible (or even accessible at all) or optimally used by persons with disabilities (PWDs). This is due to the fact that the typical library satisfies able-bodied patrons more. Therefore, this chapter sheds light on this category of users, their information needs, library services available to them, challenges they face in accessing these library services and the response or

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efforts of libraries to adequately cater for these information needs. Librarians need to see persons with disabilities as equal to those without disabilities, protect them from exploitation and promote their normalization in the library system while at the same time, create an environment which recognizes their challenges (both in terms of physical infrastructure and access to resources).

Libraries and librarians must: be sensitized about patrons with disabilities; discuss and understand the needs of persons with disabilities in the library; clarify the roles/duties (of the library) towards persons with disabilities; promote the subject of integration of patrons with disabilities into conventional library services. Libraries can and should provide the direction in service to persons with disabilities, who also need information for survival and to better their lives. They need information for inclusion, education and employment. Libraries also need to show their know-how, introduce new and innovative means, develop and provide specialized services to these special groups who do not have access to the normal services. It is the democratic and constitutional rights of these differently abled users. Libraries can ensure their access to information and can thus bridge the gap between them and those without disabilities.

Moreover, libraries and librarians need to be awake and sensitive to the situation of patrons with disabilities and the numerous challenges they encounter in their quest to satisfy their information needs; and they also must put in their skill, initiate innovative measures, develop and provide specialized services to this special group who do not have access to the normal services, which is their democratic and constitutional right. Libraries can make certain their access to information and thus bridge the gap between information rich and information disadvantaged groups (with persons with disabilities belonging to the latter).

CONCEPT OF DISABILITY

Disability is complex, dynamic, multidimensional, and contested; it is a term used for impairments, activity limitations and involvement limitations, speaking of the undesirable sides of the dealings between someone (with a health condition) and that person's circumstantial factors: environmental and personal factors (World Health Organization, 2011). Chaudhury, Deka, Chetia (2006) opine that defining disability is not an easy task as no single definition can cover all its aspects. Consequently, there is much debate globally (both within and outside of the disability community) about proper terminology; besides, the word "disability" is subject to multiple legal and colloquial definitions, all of which attempt necessarily to limit the scope of the term.

In the words of the International Classification of Impairment, Disability and Handicap (ICIDH, 1980), as cited in Chaudhury, Deka, Chetia (2006), disability is interference with activities of the whole person in relation to the immediate environment. The Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) endorses the social model of disability, which regards people as being disabled because of barriers (physical, attitudinal or behavioural) created in or by the society (Robertson, 2007). With reference to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) (as cited in Robertson, 2007), a disabled person is defined as anyone 'with a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 aimed to end discrimination against persons with disability, people in employment and access to goods, facilities and services,

Furthermore, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol discusses, extensively, pertinent issues concerning persons with disabilities and their human rights in

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