

Enabling Libraries:
How to Serve People with Disabilities
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Editor's note: Our regular readers may notice that a portion of this article appeared in our last issue of TL, which was devoted to the topic of libraries and people with disabilities.

DISCLAIMER: This article is not meant to be a technical guide, but rather a practical and awareness building guide. Please see the following websites for technical assistance:

ADA : <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm>

Rehabilitation Act of 1973: <http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/504.html>

Each of us has our own strengths and weaknesses. Some people are better at sports than others; some people excel in academics or music or a craft. What are your strengths and weaknesses? Have you ever challenged a weakness of your own and changed it into a strength?

A "weakness" can be likened to a disability. People with disabilities have additional or different challenges because they must overcome a physical or mental disability before they can succeed. All too often there are additional environmental or societal obstacles that inhibit their ability to cope with what others would perceive to be normal or mundane activities, thus making it even more difficult for people with disabilities to succeed in areas outside their own personal lives (e.g., in school, jobs, hobbies).

You might ask, "How does this relate to libraries?" Librarianship is an enabling profession. Stories abound about librarians helping people find the appropriate information they need in order to succeed. Yet, somehow we are thrown when a person who is differently challenged (with a "disability") calls or comes into the library seeking services. How do we cope? We are challenged to work outside of our comfort zone to make accommodations.

But stop and think a minute: we have the easy job - the person with the disability has a much harder time coping because they live with their disability day in and day out, in a world that is not very tolerant of people who are different from the mainstream. We must learn to look beyond our own personal discomfort and provide the same level of service to this population as we do to more physically or mentally capable persons.

Morally, we know that providing appropriate service is the right thing to do. However, for years our society has ignored the needs of this special population. That is the reason there are two federal laws that mandate our serving people with disabilities: the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (ADA) and the [Rehabilitation Act of 1973](#). These two laws attempt to stop this unwitting discrimination against people who are differently challenged.

So, how do we help our library patrons with disabilities? This article will deal with how libraries and librarians can make accommodations to our facilities, programs, and services. Instead of trying to cover all disabilities, I would like to address three major groups of people with disabilities that librarians may typically encounter: people with physical (e.g. ambulatory) disabilities, people with sight loss, and people with hearing loss. (Please note that I did NOT say “disabilities that we encounter,” because we are working with people first and foremost!) The disability is the obstacle both the patron and the librarian need to address in order for both of us to succeed.

People with Physical Disabilities

People with physical disabilities immediately come to mind when we think of a person with a disability. The disability is visibly evident – people using a cane, crutch, cast, sling, wheelchair, or people with obviously restricted movement of their arms or legs (awkward gaits or malformed arms and hands). We can see these disabilities and can anticipate their needs.

Accommodations for People with Physical Disabilities

There are a multitude of accommodations that can be made to help these individuals. Usually they are environmental changes such as parking and

building modifications. Other times, it may be service related. Here is a partial list with suggestions for accommodations for older libraries and mandated accommodations for newly constructed and renovated buildings. This is NOT meant to be an all-inclusive list.

Specifications for compliance and further information are available at the “ADA Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities (ADAAG)” web site: <http://www.access-board.gov/adaag/html/adaag.htm>.

OBSTACLE	ACCOMMODATION
Parking & curb ramps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide a designated space for people with “handicapped” license plates and parking placards ▪ If there is a curb, make sure a curb ramp is installed for wheelchair and scooter users
Getting in the door	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide a wheelchair ramp for people in wheelchairs, if there are steps ▪ Provide a push button and/or electronic automatic door opener
Service desks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Make sure at least one section of each service desk (reference, circulation, etc.) is at seated desk level for someone in a wheelchair.
Stairways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide an elevator or lift for people who cannot navigate stairs.
Elevators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Push buttons should be located at a height where wheelchair users can reach them.
Shelf height	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ While there are no mandated provisions for bookshelves, please make a staff person

	available to help someone in a wheelchair retrieve materials from higher shelves.
Aisle width between book shelves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The width between bookshelves should be wide enough for a person in a wheelchair or scooter.
Card catalogs & magazine displays	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ At least one OPAC must be at desk height ▪ The lowest shelf of a card catalog is 18 inches ▪ Allow floor space for people in wheelchairs to reach ranges of magazines
Reading and study areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Have one adjustable height table for wheelchair and scooter access (preferably electric push button) ▪ Moveable chair(s) for wheelchair/scooter access
Public computers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Adjustable height table (preferably electric push button) to accommodate wheelchair/scooter users ▪ An additional one in the Children's Division, if applicable
Navigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ While it is not required, providing a wheelchair and/or an electric scooter is a nice accommodation for larger libraries to provide for people with mobility problems.
Restrooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Compliant bathroom/stall ▪ Sink height, faucet handles and spout reachable ▪ Automatic hand dryer or paper towels and trash receptacle at appropriate height ▪ Door standards for accessing restrooms and stalls for people in wheelchairs
Water fountain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A second one may need to be installed at

	wheelchair height
Holding print material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reading stand ▪ Tennessee Library for the Blind & Physically Handicapped (see related article below) ▪ Nashville Talking Library (see related article below) ▪ (WYPL Memphis – see link below)
Computer height wrong for people in wheelchairs or people who are tall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Push button adjustable height table
Difficulty using computer keyboard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Install touch screen computer monitor ▪ Provide programmable keyboard keys (e.g. Intelli-Keys)
Difficulty using computer mouse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Replace computer mouse with tracking ball or joy stick
Picking up items/Pulling wheelchairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Service Animals” for people with mobility and balance problems are allowed in all public facilities. See U.S. Dept. of Justice: http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/qasrvvc.htm

People who are Blind or Visually Impaired

This population includes people with low vision and people who are blind. According to the National Center for Health Statistics 2003 Health Interview Survey, 9.4% of the adult population living in the South experienced vision trouble (defined as trouble seeing, even with glasses or contact lenses). “Women were more likely to have experienced vision trouble than men” ([Lethbridge-Cejko](#) 2005, p.6).

Accommodations for People who are Blind or Visually Impaired

People who are blind were the first politically proactive group of people with disabilities to advocate for services. As a result there are some exemplary services available for people who are blind or have a physical disability that would render them unable to hold a book, turn the pages of a book, or read print materials (e.g. dyslexia). Following are three programs available in Tennessee:

Tennessee Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped – a free service providing books and magazines in large print, braille, and audiocassette formats and a descriptive video collection. Please see article in the last issue of *TL*, [The Library as Oxymoron](#) or visit their website at <http://www.state.tn.us/TSLA/lbph/index.htm>.

Nashville Talking Library - Please see article in *TL*'s last issue: [“Nashville Talking Library – 30 Years Later”](#) by Fran Zigar.

WYPL Memphis - <http://www.memphislibrary.org/wypl/>

For people coming into the library who are blind and visually impaired, there is a continuum of services (equipment) that can be made available. Below are suggested accommodations starting with those for people with low vision then moving to people who are blind:

OBSTACLE	ACCOMMODATION
Small print (in paper formats--book, magazine, newspaper, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Hand-held magnification devices in a variety of magnification levels<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ available in 1x–10x, and some with lights, depending on brand and model▪ Portable video magnifiers<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ 3x–15x, depending on brand & model▪ Closed circuit television (CCTV)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a variety of devices are available that magnify print utilizing a video camera and large screen monitor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 3x–56x, depending on brand and model) ▪ Search Google: “Video Magnifiers” for multiple product listings
Small computer print	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Screen magnification software <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ magnifies images, both text and pictures, on the computer from 1x–36x (depending on brand) ▪ two major brands are “MAGic” and “ZoomText” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ both brands also come with screen readers
Low vision - cannot see at a distance (for programming)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monocular scopes, binoculars, or binocular glasses
Blind - cannot see to read print materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stand-alone scanner/reader <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a free-standing device that allows the user to scan a piece of paper, magazine, newspaper, or book and reads it back through a speaker or headphones ▪ Major brands include “ScannaR” and “SARA” ▪ Computer software for a computer with attached scanner <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ software program allowing same function as stand-alone device, but attached to and controlled through your computer ▪ Major Software Brands: “OpenBook” and “Kurzweil 1000” ▪ Have a staff member or volunteer read to the patron
Blind – cannot read computer monitor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Screen reader software <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ reads text, including the internet and word

	<p>processing documents, spreadsheets, etc. on the computer screen aloud through your speakers or headphones</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Major software brands: “JAWS” and “Window Eyes” ▪ Refreshable braille display <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Displays text on your computer monitor in braille on either a cable or wireless connection to your CPU ▪ Major brands: “Brailiant” and “Focus” ▪ Have a staff member or volunteer read to the patron
Blind – need braille printout from computer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Braille conversion software <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ converts text into braille ▪ major brand: Duxbury ▪ Braille embosser (printer) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ creates Braille printout on paper – will need to buy special paper ▪ Several major brands
Navigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Seeing Eye Dogs” or “Service Animals” are allowed in all public facilities. See U.S. Dept. of Justice: http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/qasrvvc.htm ▪ Elevators and signage should have braille markings

For more information about the products listed above two possible resources are Freedom Scientific (<http://www.freedomscientific.com>) and Humanware (<http://www.humanware.com/>)

People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Hearing loss ranges from mild or moderate (hard of hearing) to profound hearing loss (deaf). According to the National Center for Health Statistics 2003 Health Interview Survey L ([Lethbridge-Cejku & Vickerie 2005](#)), 14.3% of the adult population living in the South experienced some hearing

difficulty without a hearing aid (defined as "a little trouble, a lot of trouble, or deaf"), and more men than women experience hearing loss.

Hearing loss is a communication disability. This communication gap is functional rather than generational. And while most people have some residual hearing that may or may not be rectified with hearing aid usage, the impact can be minor or devastating depending on 1) the age of onset of the hearing loss; 2) degree of hearing loss (mild, moderate, severe or profound); and, 3) the individual's ability to cope with the loss.

Accommodations for People Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Tennessee has the most comprehensive statewide library relating to deafness and hearing loss in the country, Library Services for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing. It is open to *all* Tennesseans, including Tennesseans with no hearing loss. See the related article in TL Volume 56 Number 1, "[Have You Heard about the Library Services for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing?](#)" for more information about collections and services. To contact the library, call 1-800-342-3262 (TN Only) or e-mail library.hearingimpaired@nashville.gov. Look for the library's future website at: <http://www.tndeaflibrary.nashville.gov/>

Depending upon the variables listed above, accommodations will vary, but usually fall within two categories: people who use amplification and people who use their vision to compensate for the hearing loss. Below is a listing of possible accommodations:

People who are:	Need these accommodations:
Hard of hearing or deaf	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clear signage to help direct people ▪ Visual alert/warning system ▪ Equal accessibility to all programs and services ▪ Paper and pencil -- to provide written communication when verbal communication is not successful
Hard of hearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Personal portable one-on-one Assistive Listening Device (ALD) (amplification system) for use

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ at service desks ▪ on tours ▪ ALD system for use in meeting rooms, auditoriums, children's story rooms, theaters, etc. ▪ Headsets and "neckloops" for use with amplification systems ▪ Hearing aid compatible public telephones
Deaf	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Qualified sign language interpreters for public programming such as children's story times, or for staff meetings if there is an employee who is deaf ▪ A staff person knowledgeable in sign language to handle basic communication needs (e.g. to answer a reference question) ▪ Captioning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Make sure videos or DVDs that may be used for public programming are closed captioned ▪ Provide open captioning for public programming ▪ Telephones: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Public TTY ▪ Video relay service access ▪ As with all other service animals, Hearing Ear Dogs or Signal Dogs are allowed in all public facilities. See U.S. Dept. of Justice: http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/qasrv.htm

Two websites that address communication accommodations are

U.S. Dept. of Justice: Title III ADA Regulations, Section 36.303 Auxiliary Aids and Services:

<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/reg3a.html#Anchor-97857>

National Association of the Deaf:

<http://www.nad.org/site/pp.asp?c=foINKQMBF&b=101229>

How to Communicate with a Person Who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Get the person's attention before speaking - Tap the person on the shoulder if you are standing, on the knee if sitting; flick a light switch; or wave within the person's sight line.

Ask which communication strategy the person prefers - Aural/Oral communication (speechreading and speaking) - ask if the person would like an assistive listening device, sign language, cued speech, or written communication.

"Key" the person in to the subject matter being discussed (e.g. overdue fines or rules of conduct or library hours) - If the person knows the subject matter, it is easier for them to anticipate what will be said and make it easier for them to speechread.

Speak slowly and clearly, at a normal rate - Over and under exaggeration distorts lip movements.

Do not nod your head while speaking - This makes it harder for the person to speechread.

Look directly at the person when you speak - Look in their eyes. Do not look down, at a computer, or another person when speaking.

Position yourself so the light falls on you instead of behind you - If there are windows with streaming sunlight in the room, this is a problem. Do not put the person in a position where they have to squint to see you.

If the person has a hard time understanding, rephrase the sentence - Certain words are easier to speechread than others.

Keep your sentences as short as possible - Short sentences are easier to speechread than long ones.

Don't get frustrated and say, "Forget it!" - Find a way to make your point instead of making the person feel stupid for not understanding or making them feel left out.

Use writing when necessary - Although writing can be useful, keep written messages short and to the point.

Do not cover your face - Do not chew on pencils or gum; make sure that you do not talk with your hands in front of your face; moustaches need to be cropped above the lip.

Do not assume the person understands when he/she smiles and shakes their head in agreement - People do not want to look stupid. Here are strategies to make sure individuals understand:

- Use open-ended questions that DON'T require a Yes/No answer;
- Ask the person to repeat what you said.

Tips for Using a Sign Language Interpreter in a One-to-One Situation:

- The interpreter should stand a half-step behind and to the side of you so the deaf person can look at you and the interpreter at the same time.
- Never say, "Tell him/her." You are speaking to the person who is deaf, not his/her interpreter. Address the person as you would anyone else.
- Do not ask the interpreter to do anything other than facilitate communication.

Whatever the circumstance--whether ability or disability--the fruits of our labors as librarians result in people accessing the information they want and/or need in order to live more enjoyable and productive lives. Let us be the model to enable all of our patrons with disabilities to succeed in their encounters with us.

References

Lethbridge -Cejku M, Vickerie J. 2005. Summary health statistics for U.S. adults: National Health Interview Survey, 2003. National Center for Health Statistics. Vital and Health Statistics 10(225). (http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_10/sr10_225.pdf)