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# Do Special Populations Require Special Services?

by William Snyder

**T**his article is about special populations and library programs and services. What are special populations? Basically they are any groups or individuals whose needs are different from the norm. The thorny question is "What is normal?" Normal varies from community to community and individual to individual. For the sake of simplicity we will consider the special needs of the handicapped (both physically and mentally), the elderly, and the illiterate. Since we all know our own situations better than we know what is happening elsewhere, I hope you will forgive me for concentrating on Henderson County.

Programming for special populations in today's library may very well mean doing nothing special. The Americans with Disabilities Act basically requires that special populations be included in regular programs. This helps keep a sense of "community". Henderson County is very conscious of being a community library, serving the entire community. Isolating any individuals or groups with special needs is insulting to them and keeps the library from fulfilling its basic mission of making its programs and services available to *all* people of *all* ages and interests.

A telephone survey was conducted of the public libraries serving western North Carolina, using Interstate 77 as the dividing line. Twenty library systems serve 1.5 million persons in thirty-two counties in our region. We were able to speak with all but three library directors in the region.

The survey results are disappointing if one expects to see much effort given to special populations. Special populations were defined as minorities and those who are handicapped, have literacy problems, are homebound, or suffer from age-related infirmities and other such conditions that might hamper use of the library.

The overwhelming response of the directors of these libraries was that they do very little to respond to special needs. Only four of the thirteen libraries in the survey indicated any effort to serve special populations. In one case, the director indicated that the bookmobile went to the homes of some handicapped persons. Three others stated that special needs were handled through outreach programs that also served the general public. Although most library directors agree that the numbers included in special populations are increasing, they do little to reach out to serve special needs because of little or no increases in funding the past several years. In response to a follow-up question to eight directors concerning what a ten percent budget increase might be used for, none indicated that special populations' needs would receive much consideration, perhaps only sensitivity training for library staff.

It is not totally clear why libraries in western North Carolina have not identified special populations as deserving of more attention. Perhaps many are so busy with traditional services that they do not wish to take on any more. Only one library, Transylvania County, indicated that it included special populations in its role identification or mission statement. Several, including Cleveland and Polk counties, indicated that they might address such issues in the future. Even the Americans with Disabilities Act has made little impact. Only three library directors believe the A.D.A. will have any impact other than physical access considerations.

With few exceptions, these libraries at present prefer to offer traditional library services. When possible, they provide some

homebound services, but for those who can visit the library the tendency is to mainstream — if not by design, then by habit. Some services or programs that are of interest to special populations are so widespread that they have become accepted as traditional. In particular, the inclusion of large print materials and high interest/low reading level materials is so common that many directors had to be reminded that they had them in their libraries.

The real focus of this article is how one library, the Henderson County library, has responded to many of the questions and possibilities raised in the survey. This library did not, by design, decide to address the needs of special populations. Rather, the nature of its users and their needs required an ongoing examination of the services and the patron requests that led to those services. These circumstances have resulted in a library that responds to those with special needs, but that response is measured: measured to be tolerant of the

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differences of those special populations, to be willing to go the extra mile to be of service, and always to treat special populations as a part of the total population.

The Henderson County Library is not much different than its neighbors. One of the few differences is that this library acknowledges and is preparing for anticipated changes in response to new laws protecting the rights of the disabled. One suspects that all of us will be paying more attention in the future.

In considering services and programs, several areas of concern are common to all public libraries; only the details change. Since my most recent experience is in a medium-sized library that serves a retirement community, the details I must be concerned with reflect the needs of this community. I have also worked in a small rural county library. The services and programs needed or desired in that community required a different set of details,

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but the underlying principles remain the same. Since I am most familiar with my current library, most of these observations will reflect my current experience. It is my hope that the basic principles we use will transfer to other libraries.

First, a word about the Henderson County Library and the community it seeks to serve. Our population is older, better educated, and has a higher per capita income than most of North Carolina. Presently 31 percent of our population is age 55 or older. By the year 2000 this will increase to 34 percent and by 2010 to 36 percent. Some of this growth is part of the natural aging of the population, especially the baby boom generation. But many of our citizens are transplants — people who worked in other areas and have moved here to retire. They are well-educated, relatively affluent, and have the leisure time to make heavy demands on the li-

brary for recreational as well as informational needs. And they do receive the bulk of our attention.

They also attract higher paying jobs to the area. Studies indicate that our retirement community attracts service jobs that require well-educated individuals. These jobs include doctors, bankers, lawyers, financial consultants, and other professionals. These professionals are working-age persons who have families to raise. And better-educated parents seem to require better library services for themselves and their children.

Finally, better-educated, more affluent communities have the resources to do a better job of offering programs and services to help those with special needs. Our senior citizens are especially valuable in this area. They give money, time, and expertise to a variety of agencies that help support the needs of the physically handicapped, the mentally disabled, the shut-in elderly, minorities, children at risk, and migrant farm workers. Many of these groups would say that more could be done, but the fact remains that they receive more attention here than they would in a more rural, less affluent community. And many of those with special problems, and those who seek to help, turn to the library.

How the library responds is determined by its perceived role(s) in the community and its mission statement. Although similar libraries serving similar communities may have defined the same roles and have similar mission statements, what happens as these are implemented may vary radically. And these roles and missions must be subject to review and

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change as our communities change. A recent conversation with the retired director of the library serving New Bern revealed that the retirement community there is rapidly growing and is similar to that in Henderson County. If the trend continues, it will have a major impact on that community. The library must be ready to respond to the changing demands placed on it. Changes in the economy and demographics of other communities will require that they, too, rethink what they are doing and why they are doing it.

The Americans with Disabilities Act will also have a major impact. The requirements of this new law [A.D.A.] force us to rethink everything we do, from book circulation to reference work to library programming. The law essentially states that if the library offers a program or service, it must make it equally available to all persons in the community who are qualified to receive the service and, if there are any barriers to using the service, they must be removed or reasonable accommodation made. Beyond this, a long list of questions will clog our courts for years, the most basic one being "what is reasonable accommodation?" What is it, who will decide, and how much will it cost?

Roles and mission statements, moreover, are not created by the library alone. We have the major voice in defining the library and its capabilities, but our governing boards ultimately make the decision about what services and programs the library will offer and at what level each time they approve a budget. These governmental priorities are also subject to change. Who can say what changes will be necessary ten years from now as Washington or Raleigh mandate programs or as our society changes and decides on new roles for the library?

Once the library has arrived at a mission statement and defined its role in the community, services and programs follow. In Henderson County, we define ourselves as a reference and popular materials library that also acts as a preschoolers' door to learning and an independent learning center. Our staffing, our budget, our materials selection, and our programming reflect these roles. The existence of a large number of individuals who are viewed as "special populations" has influenced the details of how we go about fulfilling our roles. The existence and relative size of such groups will also influence any other library fulfilling its role in the community.

If a library determines that services and programs beyond the provision of a basic collection of books and other materials are relevant to the role of that library, it can choose the types of programming offered. Among the questions that might be asked are: Will programming be produced in-house? Are there other agencies or groups in the community that are able to complement or replace library efforts, perhaps even do them better? In what depth will topics be covered? How many programs and at what frequency are appropriate? What is the anticipated size of the audience? What is the age level, educational level, etc., of the targeted audience? Always be ready to measure your programs against what you hope to ac-

comply. Far too often we go beyond our expertise to do something simply because it seems to be a good idea without considering how it fits into the mission of the library.

The key to our programming success in Henderson County has been involving other groups, especially those with interests in the targeted populations. Very few of the programs we offer do not include the help of others in planning, if not in actual implementation. This includes our retirement community as well as the physically and emotionally handicapped of all age levels. Among the groups we use, or who use us, are Camp E-TOH-KALU (a camp for emotionally troubled youth), Something Special (a sheltered workshop), the N.C. Center for Creative Retirement, the Henderson County Better Speech and Hearing Council, the Lions Club, the Golden K, and our own Friends of the Library, which has over two thousand members and funds many of our programs. Similar organizations exist in many communities.

In the area of youth programming, more work involving special populations is done for children than for young adults. At one time a special collection of high interest/low reading level materials was maintained for young adults, but it was seldom used. Currently these materials are integrated into the regular YA collection. The adult collection continues to offer these kinds of materials as a special collection. Special lists are made available for teachers, tutors, and parents.

The library always tries to mainstream whenever possible. In children's programs the library makes no effort to tell a parent not to bring a child with special needs to any library program. If a child causes too many disruptions, we may counsel a parent to make better efforts to control the behavior of the child. We try not to label the individual, only the behavior. One mentally handicapped adult attends story hour. She sits with the parents, but colors with the children and enjoys the stories as much as anyone.

The Sheltered Workshop is a frequent user of the library. Each week at least eight to ten clients come to the library, where they receive their own cards and are treated as any library user. We recently started a separate story hour for the Workshop clients, not because of their disabilities but because of the group size. Cal Shepard from the State Library is a good resource for ideas in this area.

Some agencies are reluctant to expose their clients to the open atmosphere of the library. We will, on a limited basis, make special provisions. A local camp for

troubled youth recently hosted a Halloween program provided by the library — library personnel went to the camp. We do encourage such groups to bring their clients to the library as they become better able to handle themselves, but have had limited success.

The adult and reference areas are high-demand areas for the elderly. No programs are specifically targeted to their special needs but most offerings attract seniors. This population also has a definite effect on materials purchases as they are educated, well-travelled, have diverse interests, and bring a lifetime of experience with them. The book collection includes large print materials of all types. Subject matter in the non-fiction collection covers a wide range, including books on a variety of special needs (e.g., pregnancy for disabled women, access for handicapped travelers, etc.). The relative affluence of the retirement community requires large expenditures on retirement financial planning, investments, etc. Often there are long lines of individuals waiting to use these materials.

A popular program was presented by a local senior citizen who surveyed local retirement centers, nursing homes, and rest homes to determine the quality of life offered and costs of each. A large audience enjoyed sharing his findings. The "Let's Talk About It" reading/discussion series presented in conjunction with Duke University always has a waiting list. Once again, it is not designed specifically for seniors, but they are always heavily represented. Their academic, geographic, and temporal experiences are always valuable. The Center for Creative Retirement also has been a co-sponsor of programs that often cross generational lines. The Travel Club series is unquestionably the most well-attended program the library sponsors. Local citizens provide slides and narrations of their travels, often to most unusual locations. Programs which relate to health issues, current events, and hobbies are quite popular.

For those who cannot visit the library for whatever reason, the homebound program steps in. Some clients in this program are temporary due to relocation or hospitalization. Others are longtime users. One lady has been receiving large print mysteries for ten years and the library staff has never met her! She is bedridden and her providers leave books at the door for her. Services also are provided to local nursing homes. Delivery is often made by one of the many library volunteers who take the time to get to know the individuals and their interests.

The library also assists individuals in

filling out applications to receive services from the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. We lend cassette players to patrons who are awaiting delivery from Raleigh to see if the transition from books to books-on-tape can be made by the individual. An ever-growing collection of books-on-tape is also available in the library. The library maintains a collection of hearing devices as well as including an infrared television amplification device and a telephone amplification handset. These items were provided by the Better Speech and Hearing Council to help individuals determine usefulness prior to purchase. When initially developed, the service was possibly the first of its kind and was described in a national publication on hearing impairments, *Shhhhhhh.....* For the visually impaired, the library has an Ednalite illuminated magnifying glass, a Visualtek monitor and enlarging device, and, most recently, a Kurzweil Optical Scanner that reads pages of text aloud.

Little has been said about programming to combat illiteracy because of a conscious decision that this is not an appropriate role for this library. We support literacy programs by housing and making available a collection of special materials of value to tutors and students. We also have several small study rooms where groups of two to six persons can work. These rooms are used for tutoring by our local literacy council. The library board and library staff have decided that it is the role of the library to support educational efforts but not to teach. Library resources are too limited to engage in areas outside our expertise.

In summary, when serving special populations, focus on three principles. First, decide whether or not programming is appropriate for your library and, if so, the kinds of programs you will offer. Second, don't do it alone. There are too many talented individuals and groups in the community who have the talent and knowledge to make your efforts a success. Make resources and support available. As Lee Iacocca says, "Lead, follow, or get out of the way." Sometimes it's better to lay the groundwork and get out of the way. Lastly, include your special populations in your regular programs. And be prepared to change. Technology is ever-changing and so is the law. Between what vendors produce for ADA compliance and what the courts decide must be done, libraries will face challenges for some time to come. One last thought: don't have negative thoughts about "special" populations and their "special" needs. One day any one, if not all, of us may find ourselves facing similar challenges.