

# The ABLS Library of the State Library of North Carolina: Profile of Accessibility

“*The Accessible Books and Library Services...is a unique resource that caters to the needs of persons with a visual or print disability.*”

The Accessible Books and Library Services (ABLS) Library of the State Library of North Carolina (SLNC) is a unique resource that caters to the needs of persons with a visual or print disability. Strategically located in Raleigh, North Carolina, it is a convenient hub for library professionals, including those from academic, public, school, and private libraries. The ABLS stands out for its diverse range of services, a wealth of information, and robust network, all used to assist and engage its patrons. Established in 1958, ABLS provides books to people who cannot use regular print because of a visual or print disability. Material formats include braille, large print, and digital formats delivered on memory cartridges. ABLS loans digital e-readers to library patrons, who use them to play audiobooks. Since the federal and state governments fund the core services, the services are free to patrons.

As an individual with a visual disability, my connection with ABLS is not just professional but deeply personal. This organization is more than just a library; it's a beacon of empowerment and hope. ABLS equips its patrons with the necessary technology, such as braille and large print, Digital E-Readers, or Refreshable Braille E-Readers, to enhance their independence and access to information. Moreover, ABLS is committed to improving its patrons' information and technology literacy and offering valuable technology and reader advisories.

## ABLS - The Basics

According to Catherine Rubin (2023), the Director and Regional Librarian, the Accessible Books and Library Services is a comprehensive library that circulates books and magazines via the US Postal Service

for individuals who cannot use regular printed materials (C. Rubin, Personal Communication, October 18, 2023). Operated by SLNC as part of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (DNCR), ABLS is also a part of the network of regional libraries used by the Library of Congress National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled (NLS). A physical space in Raleigh houses ABLS. Patrons can access the online collection from the library's homepage, and ABLS mails physical materials throughout the state to its users.

The physical space includes a reference desk and various offices for the Director and Associate Director, Reader Advisory, Technology Support, Technology Repair workshop, Outreach Librarian, and other staff numbering twenty-four. When contacted in October 2023, the ABLS was facing the challenge of filling vacant staff positions. Subsequently, the library managed to recruit five new additions to the staff, which reduced the number of open positions to two.

The director refers to the collection storage area as the warehouse, comprising shelving for braille books, large-print books, flash drive cartridges containing books and magazines, collapsible shelving, and a book prep station. To prep digital materials for distribution to patrons, a staff member downloads digital copies of books onto specially-developed flash drives containing 6–8 books or magazines, based on genre requests by the patron, and then ships to patrons as *Free Matter for the Blind*. When the patron returns the flash drive cartridge (i.e., the digital books or other materials) to the ABLS, a staff member erases it and reloads it with new books for the following user.

In an October 2023 interview, the director addresses why the name changed from the NC Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (its original name). Rubin explained that the trend in naming is to focus on person-or-service-first names rather than disability-first names, so the library opted to stress the function of service and resources in our new name; thus, SLNC ABLIS. This is also why services are provided to any individuals with a visual or print disability and not simply Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped.

With ABLIS's rich service history of providing information literacy to North Carolinians, Friends of the NC ABLIS ([About the Friends of ABLIS](#)) was chartered as a North Carolina nonprofit corporation in 1990 to provide monetary and advocacy support to the Library. Donations and bequests can provide tangible support to library programs and promote projects and advocacy activities designed to engage and support persons with visual or print disabilities in information literacy. The ABLIS is about literacy and life-long learning; likewise, the Friends group supports this cause wholeheartedly by enhancing state funds to purchase large-print books, descriptive DVDs, and fund library programs (e.g., summer reading and other themed programs). In addition, ABLIS's passion engages the community of patrons in its equity, diversity, and inclusion values.

### **Staffing and Management**

In 2023, ABLIS underwent a complete restructuring. This brought the various parts of the library together to have better backup systems if staffing was low, which allowed for more cross-training. While the Assistant Director and Collections Management Librarian manage the other twenty-one staff members, the ABLIS is a Regional Library for the National Library Service (RLNLS), and the director serves as its liaison.

The director also manages patron engagement, collection management, reader advisory, and marketing, and travels to speaking engagements to promote and advocate for the ABLIS. In addition, the director currently oversees the overall management of the library and, under the new structure, supervises the assistant director, who manages the Patron Engagement branch of the library. Furthermore, the director

supervises the Collection Management Librarian, who in turn manages the Access and Discovery Services (Rubin, 2023).

### **The Collection**

The collection is comprised of three basic materials, including braille books (2,000–3,000 books), large-print books (5,000–6,000 books), and digital audiobooks and magazines (19,000–20,000 different books). Unlike a public library, the ABLIS collections reside in a secure location with restricted access. ABLIS features an online catalog accessible to users, but unlike traditional libraries, ABLIS does not utilize the Library of Congress or Dewey Decimal classification systems. The ABLIS collections are organized according to unique accession numbers. The National Library Service assigns these numbers to audio and braille titles, while ABLIS assigns numbers to large-print books, descriptive DVDs, and locally produced audio or braille books.

Furthermore, ABLIS has a dedicated studio where North Carolina authors and volunteers collaborate to record books, contributing significantly to the program. Patrons may discover these and other books via the ABLIS Catalog. In addition, patrons have five modes of access, including the (1) new, refreshable Braille E-Readers that will be made available to the public in coming months; (2) Digital E-Reader; (3) Large-Print Books; (4) Braille Books; (5) Braille and Audio Reading Download (BARD).

### **Services and Programs**

People who desire to become patrons of ABLIS fill out an online application to verify a visual or print disability; once approved, users respond online or by telephone to what kind(s) of genres most interest them. There is also a reader advisory for digital books—via telephone, chat, and podcast—and technology support to assist with technology questions, problems with digital e-readers, and refreshable braille e-readers.

The ABLIS offers tactile tours for librarians, public library groups, library school students, student groups, and persons with visual or print disabilities. In a tactile tour, a group is introduced to books in braille and other aspects of the library. It is priceless for librarians and library school students to under-

stand firsthand what the library offers to this diverse community of persons with visual or print disabilities; therefore, allowing students to observe by sight and touch the technology available at the ABLS, including the new, refreshable braille e-readers. As of October (2023), ABLS's primary focus is its work with the Braille Challenge and the summer and winter reading programs.

In 2008–2009, the ABLS transitioned to digital book e-readers, a device approximately 6 inches high by 9 inches wide by 2 inches thick (see Image 1), in which the patron inserts a cartridge containing a flash drive loaded with 6 to 8 books (see Image 2). When the patron inserts a cartridge, they can listen to the audio version of each book.



Image 1 – Digital E-Reader, Image from Library of Congress



Image 2 – Photograph Taken by Author. Flash Drive Cartridge for Digital E-Reader

When the leaders of the library decided to move toward a digital format, the issue arose that such a device did not yet exist; therefore, the National Library Service (NLS) had to commission a company to invent the digital reader for ABLS, and it had to go through design development and product testing. During the product testing phase, the company provided the library with a functional prototype of the digital reader. It had to undergo rigorous evaluation to determine its suitability for use and potential for

mass production and distribution. Following the prototype's approval, the next problem arose when the devices arrived at ABLS. Library staff had to switch out the old devices for the new ones, which was quite an ordeal.

The Refreshable Braille E-Reader is another innovative device for patrons who read braille (See Image 3). This compact device, with dimensions of approximately 6 inches by 9 inches by 1 inch, features an eight-inch touchpad. The pad displays braille characters in a tactile format that can be dynamically refreshed, allowing for an interactive reading experience and allowing patrons to feel and read the information. After reading a section, the user can press a button to refresh the display and proceed to the following text segment. This technology provides a seamless reading experience for braille users.



Image 3 – Refreshable Braille E-Reader, Image from Disability Insider

Then there was the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, which had ABLS under a lockdown order, requiring the library to close; thus, it was a tumultuous time. How could staff get books to patrons and assist them through the pandemic? The lockdown mandate did not permit anyone to enter the building. In addition to the problem of the library shutdown, the library had an antiquated phone system that did not forward calls, and contacting patrons proved to be challenging. The library's patrons were isolated, and the digital reader was the only source to relieve this for homebound residences. Also, library staff were not allowed to enter the building to process books when the shutdown order first came.

The author, having personally navigated the pandemic with a visual impairment, deeply empathized with the challenges faced by the ABLS, including patrons throughout the state who chose to stay inside, only going out sporadically. This was especially true

for those homebound due to health concerns, leading to a profound sense of isolation from the broader world. During the ABLS's closure, this sense of isolation intensified among certain members of the visually impaired community, making the situation seem three times more daunting. Eventually, the ABLS reopened under strict COVID protocols, operating in limited shifts to reestablish communication with patrons. This included processing and dispatching book requests to their homes.

One rewarding aspect of the director's role at ABLS is "the opportunity to collaborate with volunteers who dedicate their time to reading and recording books by North Carolina authors in the specially designed recording studio," according to Rubin. She went on to affirm that "The sense of purpose this position affords me is profoundly fulfilling. For instance, four to six weeks back, a patron expressed their gratitude by saying, 'I do not know what I would do without this service,'" underscoring the library's impact and value (Rubin, 2023). During the interview, it was evident that the director strongly emphasized fostering a positive work envi-

ronment by actively engaging with the staff throughout the library. This approach promotes team building and contributes to a workplace where conflicts among staff members are infrequent. However, if disputes arise, Rubin addresses each with professional coaching to ensure a constructive resolution for all involved.

## Discussion

The author resonates with Rubin's position, for ABLS is an institution expecting and responding to change, whether from patrons' needs or technology and advancement. In the past sixty years, ABLS has transitioned through various technological innovations: records (vinyl), cassette tape, and finally, a digital platform. Another service offered through the ABLS is the Braille and Audio Reading Download (BARD), an iPhone App that will read books to the patron. Patrons fill out an application to activate the BARD App, which only current patrons of ABLS receive approval to use. In addition, the library's collection and user numbers are growing. ABLS's efforts in including such a diverse community of persons with



Image 4 – Panel Discussion at the NCLA's Biennial Conference, 2023.

From left to right: SW for the Blind, Assistant Director of ABLS, Catherine Rubin (Director of ABLS), a patron with a guide dog, the staff member who assists patrons with technology and braille needs, Craig Freeman (i.e., the author), and Clint (Outreach at ABLS & student at UNCG MLIS)

a visual, physical, or print disability are laudable.

After visiting ABLS, the author received an email from Rubin inviting him to participate in a panel discussion following the interview that ABLS was hosting at the NCLA's Biennial Conference at the Benton Convention Center in Winston-Salem (October 2023). The panel addressed the needs and concerns of persons who are visually disabled and how other libraries can assist their patrons with a visual disability, as well as improve their approach to helping and engaging individuals in the visually impaired community. For example, one way that libraries can improve their services is to have appropriate signage that is readable by persons with a visual impairment, in at least 48-point font, and, wherever suitable, include braille on the signage. Furthermore, it is essential to consistently extend the same degree of

respect and dignity to all patrons, as any perception of patronization or incompetence is unacceptable.

The other panel members were a staff member from ABLS specializing in braille and braille technology, a patron, and a Social Worker for the Blind in the Winston-Salem region. The panel was well-received by the attendees. Librarians at the event spoke of having users with visual and print disabilities; thus, the presentation was quite informative and valuable to all librarian types. In addition, this type of presentation is something that every librarian, regardless of library type, should experience (see Image 4). For more information or to schedule a tactile tour, contact ABLS.

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## References

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