
Library Programs and Activities: Serving the Aging Directly

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IN SURVEYING the services provided for the aging by libraries, the first question to be asked is: Whom do we mean by "the aging." In an article on such services published in 1970, Muriel Javelin quoted authorities of the National Council on the Aging concerning the political and economic strength of "senior citizens" due to their increasing numbers, and the varieties of the young old, the middle-aged old, and the old old who are embraced by this term.¹ This says nothing about individual differences which are accentuated by age. The Adult Services Division of the American Library Association has adopted a statement accepting "The Library's Responsibility to the Aging" because of the "social, economic, and biologic problems resulting from the process of aging."² The full statement appears in the Javelin paper in this issue. Yet we all know library users over the magic age of 65 who are well and active, and in no need of services different from those provided for other adults. As one looks at what many libraries consider their services for the aging, confusion arises with services for the ill and the visually and physically handicapped, many of whom do not fall into the 65-and-over age bracket. Less than 20 percent of the public library systems in the United States offer services specifically for the aging or services in which more than half of the participants are 65 or older,³ possibly because the older persons seen most are those who show little evidence of "the problems resulting from the aging process." The 1971 *National Survey of Library Services to the Aging* estimated that there are almost 4 million potential users among the aging whose need for extension services is unmet, more than 2 million whose need for group services is unmet, and almost 2 million whose need for special materials is

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unmet.⁴ Yet several respondents to the questionnaires on which the survey is based expressed doubt concerning the need for special services for the aging. Many spoke of the older population's apathy and lack of voice in making their needs known, which results in the likelihood that the elderly are unseen and unheard. The invisibility of older people in need of special services may be the reason why so many libraries prefer to plan services and programs for all adults in general, even though the programs may include features of special usefulness to older people—such as mail service—or be set at times and places convenient for the elderly. Where separate services are provided they are likely to be for the handicapped or the homebound.

One generally recognized characteristic of the aging is their decreased mobility, which may explain the fact that two-thirds of the library services provided for them are extension services.⁴ Other general characteristics seem to be "a narrowing of interests and a change to activities requiring less exertion."⁵ These may indicate a need for more educational group programs such as the well-known "Live Long and Like It Library Club"⁶ of the Cleveland Public Library and the "Never Too Late Groups"⁷ of the Boston Public Library, which broaden the interests and stimulate the minds of participants. Although these are among the oldest and most respected programs directed to older people, they have not been extensively copied. Many group programs which present films, book talks or craft and hobby demonstrations concentrate on entertainment, all having unquestioned value, although programs might be more worthwhile with an added educational component.

While the kinds of services shown in the questionnaires used by the *National Survey of Library Services to the Aging* are essentially the same as those reported in a less comprehensive survey made in 1968,⁸ there now seems to be many more libraries providing such services more fully, with more equipment, more staff and more innovation. Services are reported from every part of the country by all sizes of libraries. Outreach services to shut-ins exceed all others in numbers. Although an urban library, the Cleveland Public Library, is the largest identified provider of extension services, and urban libraries predominate among those providing these services, suburban and rural libraries were found to serve the largest percentage of their potential elderly users.⁹ Some libraries are using the mail to reach the homebound, a service which is generally not limited to older people. The simplest, and probably the commonest outreach service consists of rotating de-

posit collections placed in nursing homes, retirement homes and apartments for the aging, but many libraries are devising ways to deliver books and other materials to individuals wherever they live. Only a few, such as Cleveland,¹⁰ Los Angeles¹¹ and Detroit,¹² can afford individual service by professional staff members. Milwaukee employs those 65 and over as "library aides."¹³ Other libraries are using volunteers to make personal deliveries to those confined to their homes. Among the groups contributing such volunteer service are the Red Cross, FISH (Friends in Service and Help), the Junior League, Church Women United, Beta Sigma Phi, Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Telephone Pioneers, Friends of the Library, Meals on Wheels, Boy Scouts, members of library boards, and teenagers.¹⁴ Some of these volunteers give additional services such as reading aloud, and they all supply the personal attention so important to isolated old people. In Los Angeles, service has been expanded beyond the project's original boundaries by volunteers, but experience there has led to the conclusion that a paid staff member is needed to coordinate the work of volunteers.¹⁵

Elderly recipients of a service may be involved in the program as volunteers serving their peers. In Detroit, residents of one home for the aged charge books and take requests, and the director of the library's program observes that volunteers who have the necessary qualities of personality can be invaluable in extending library services.¹² The utilization of capable residents to assist the visiting librarian in nursing homes is seen as "work therapy" by the Tucson Public Library.¹⁶ Older people were asked to review books for a project in which the Rhode Island Department of State Library Services wanted to develop "a short buying list of books likely to please the general run of older persons."¹⁷ In spite of the misgivings of one of the elderly reviewers, who pointed out what widely varying tastes people have, an interesting list resulted which was unusual in that it was pretested by its audience.

A children's librarian, working as a volunteer for her church, is telling stories to residents in nursing homes. Although this is not a service provided by her library, she believes it would be a good one for public libraries to offer because of the response it has received. Residents who are able assemble in one area for this group activity, but in some instances a public address system is used in order for bed patients to hear the stories. Sometimes the storyteller visits bed patients after the story hour with the puppets used in telling the story. She says the older people enjoy folk tales and fairy stories, and she has also used poetry, records and films. She has done several story hours built around a partic-

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ular country, showing interesting items typical of the country, playing music and songs from the country along with the stories drawn from it.¹⁸

Some libraries which began service to nursing homes with volunteers have since been able to employ paid staff, as the Tucson Public Library has done recently with funds from the Emergency Employment Act.¹⁹ Expanded or new outreach services have been made possible in a number of libraries with funds from the Library Services and Construction Act, the Office of Economic Opportunity, and the Older Americans Act.²⁰ This legislation is described in Javelin's paper in this issue.

Specially built and equipped mobile units are key components in several outreach programs. The bookmobile which provides direct service to various institutions and neighborhoods in Milwaukee where concentrations of the elderly live is equipped with a hydraulic lift, which makes it possible for people in wheelchairs to enter it. The South of Market Area Demonstration in San Francisco has a multi-media van which takes taped programs and films as well as books into the downtown area it serves, where many isolated old people live. A "MultiMedia Mobile" is being constructed for the Daniel Boone Regional Library in Missouri, to serve isolated people of all ages in a predominantly rural area. It will be equipped with a 16mm projection system, front and rear projection screens, a 35mm filmstrip/slide projector with cassette facility, cassette tape recorder/players and a listening system, display areas, a puppet stage, paperback books, arts and crafts materials, etc. Among the many programming ideas are slide presentations by elderly people, demonstrations of various types of reading aids for the visually handicapped, and puppet shows which will appeal to old people as well as to children.²¹

A carefully planned shut-in service for individual home delivery has been incorporated into the Toronto Public Library's Travelling Branch, which already offered service with book deposits in homes and clubs for the aged, and bedside booktruck service in hospitals. They use a station wagon for this service, and have found no need for special equipment other than heavy webbing straps to bundle together the books for each borrower. They have also found useful what they call a "bundle-buggy" for use in apartment houses, especially those for the elderly where several borrowers live in a building. An intensive publicity campaign preceded the initiation of the service, which is limited to genuine shut-ins. Some elderly people are eligible only in the winter! They note that the general reading level for users of this service is higher than that in institutions for the elderly, and believe this is be-

cause the people who can remain in their own homes are likely to be in more active physical condition.²²

In some instances the aging are brought to the library rather than taking the library to them. The Madison Heights, Michigan, Public Library busses senior citizens to the library where special programs, such as handicraft demonstrations, book reviews and discussions, are scheduled for them. The library began the service on a three-day-a-week basis with a rented bus; it proved so satisfactory that the schedule is being expanded with a bus purchased by the library.²³

In North Dakota, one library uses a Volkswagen bus to bring senior citizens into the library on a regular schedule,²⁴ another uses what it calls "The Free Wheeler" to transport the elderly from rest homes and housing units to the library; still another pays bus fare to and from the library.²⁰ While not intended specifically for the aging, the arrangement by which the Marion (Indiana) Public Library has reimbursed the city-owned bus company for each one-way ticket used by a library patron has been of special benefit to older people. The librarian points out that "many passengers are retired persons whose income is limited; reading is a favorite pastime with them and they come often."²⁵

A combination of outreach and in-library service for the aging is found in Newton, Massachusetts in "drop-in centers." One drop-in center in a branch library is "open eight hours a day with comfortable furniture, a continuous coffee-pot, reading material, games, etc., for the senior citizens to enjoy." The library conducts book-talk-coffee hours at apartments for the elderly, and also, by invitation, at drop-in centers in local churches.²⁶ A service which includes many elderly people, the Center for the Visually Handicapped in the Newton Free Library, is "based on a philosophic conviction that visually handicapped persons must not be separated from, but rather, encouraged to use public library resources and facilities."²⁷ The same philosophic base regarding the aging apparently underlies the programs planned specifically for them in this library.

The kinds of special equipment available, often for loan, have been greatly expanded in recent years. There are magnifiers, large print typewriters and Brailers, special games and playing cards for the visually handicapped,²⁸ bed specs and ceiling projectors for bedridden patients,²⁹ photocopying equipment,²⁴ and stands for large print books,³⁰ as well as the specially equipped mobile units mentioned earlier.

All kinds of audiovisual equipment are being utilized. Film projectors, record players and cassette recorders are available for loan as

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well as the films, records and tapes.¹⁴ Two library systems, the Suffolk Cooperative Library System³¹ and the Nassau Library System,³² report the acquisition of videotape equipment which can be used in many community services including those given in visits to nursing homes. Muriel Javelin reports using this equipment in one nursing home where wheelchair senior citizens served as cameramen and immediate replay proved exciting to the residents. Apparently the objective was achieved of helping the residents develop a greater sense of internal community by involving them in this activity.³² Further discussion of the provision of mechanical aids for the visually handicapped among the aged may be found in Romani's paper in this issue.

Most of the libraries reporting services for the aging have indicated having collections of large print books, even though many libraries, such as the Donnell Library Center of the New York Public Library,¹ have found that it is difficult to reach the potential user of these materials. The large size and consequent weight of some of the large print books is a deterrent to their use by the aged. At least one library reported that older users have shown a preference for large print books in the 9 by 6 inch size over those which are 11 by 8.³³ Patients in nursing homes tend to avoid books which are too large and heavy, or small books. In the latter the type is likely to be small and the pages hard to turn.³⁴

Some programs are developing special materials which show great insight into the peculiar needs of the older person who is isolated from the community. In New Hampshire volunteers are recording local newspapers, church services, and school and civic events on cassette tapes for use in shut-in service.²⁰ At a nursing home in Tucson, the Papago Indian residents gather weekly for the "Papago Library Hour" which presents "recordings of traditional Papago songs, *El Pomo*, a comical war narrative taped at Sells in the homes of Papagos who remembered the times, hymns and sections of the Bible read in the Papago language."³⁵

Audiovisual materials are being used extensively in service to the aging. Films are heavily relied upon for programming directed to older people whether inside the library or out. In fact, the *National Survey* finds that programs of films are the type most frequently offered. Even though many of them are not specifically identified as being for the aging, their timing—in daytime hours convenient for older people but not for most employed and active people—implies that they are planned primarily for the elderly.

An increasing number of libraries are making talking books available, for example those in the Nassau Library System.³⁶ In the Enoch Pratt Free Library's Community Action Program, Arthur Meyers saw the need to help eligible inner-city residents, especially elderly ones, to know about and use the talking book service. Many of these people live alone and find the equipment and mechanics of the service confusing. Community aides make visits, first to introduce the service and reassure people that it is free, then to deliver the player and carefully explain how it and the service work, and to help with the selection of materials that particular borrower will enjoy.³⁷

The National Retired Teachers Association and the American Association of Retired Persons are sponsoring a two-year demonstration program of comprehensive library service for the aged, through which they expect to develop and field-test various methods of providing library services for the elderly. The demonstration programs will be conducted in the libraries of Louisville, Lexington, Somerset and Hazard, communities which range from urban to rural and offer contrasting economic conditions and a variety of racial and ethnic population groups in a state which has a higher proportion of people over 65 than the national average. Among their objectives are the development and provision of materials especially adapted to the needs of older adults, the training of staff to serve older people, and the improvement of existing physical plants by the elimination of architectural problems of various kinds.³⁸

Some libraries are placing strong emphasis on their information and referral services for the elderly. In Dallas it became evident that the library was functioning as a resource center both for the older persons themselves and for the people working with them. From this experience the library developed a directory of services for older people, published by a Dallas newspaper as a special supplement. The city's other large newspaper has asked that it also be allowed to publish another year's directory, and it seems likely that an updated version can be published annually.³⁹

Ira Phillips, in his report on the White House Conference on Aging, refers to the strong emphasis on "survival issues" in the conference and the urgent need for librarians to relate their services to these survival issues.⁴⁰ He suggests that the appropriate units of the ALA examine the whole question of information-referral centers to consider how libraries can become involved in alleviating the problems of the aged. This recommendation suggests that such projects as the Dallas Public Library's

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directory point the way in which library services to the elderly should go. Many librarians who observed the preoccupation and intense concern with bread-and-butter questions in the local conferences leading up to the White House Conference will not wait for ALA recommendations, but will proceed to strengthen their information resources for older people and their capability for making delivery of this information in such a way as to meet older people's real needs.

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