
Statewide and Regional Reference Service

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER is to identify and describe the several kinds of library systems that provide reference services to supplement those offered by the individual components of the systems. In public library organizations, a region encompassing a number of separate political units is the usual base. While examples are used for descriptive purposes, there is no intent to compile a definitive list of library systems offering reference service. Unfortunately, it is impossible to evaluate the quality of service or to analyze it in terms of cost because pertinent facts are not available. Much of the information incorporated in this article was supplied by individuals associated with the major library systems in the country. A bibliography is provided to identify printed sources of information about many of the projects mentioned.

Reference service is one of several activities conducted at the user-library interface. Traditionally, it has been a personalized service where the reader explains his need to a librarian who in turn helps the reader identify and obtain the object that contains the required information. Less frequently, the information is actually assembled or compiled by a librarian and turned over to the reader. It is interesting to note that in regionalized service, this personal quality is often maintained by keeping the reference librarian who was involved in the initial contact actively in the regional network. Most regional reference centers serve libraries, not individual readers. In this sense, regional reference service is as much for reference librarians as it is for readers.

One further point will help to characterize regional reference systems. Since reference service is essentially a means to an end, it is not surprising that there exist only a few systems designed to provide reference service alone. More frequently, reference service is one of the full range of library services provided by a system. In fact, refer-

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ence systems often expand to become systems offering many library services.

The subject scope and the depth and limitations of reference service provided by a system should be noted as distinguishing features. In some instances, a system is established to accomplish only one facet of reference service, such as locating a specific item. To this end, the National Union Catalog, the regional bibliographical centers, and union lists of serials have been developed to record the holdings of a number of libraries.

In other cases, the subject scope of the reference system is restricted, rather than general. For example, the reference service provided by the Engineering Societies Library in New York is actually a system service, in this case designed to meet the requirements of individual members located throughout the country.

Another example of limited service, this time focused on a format category, is that offered by the twelve Regional Technical Report Centers established by the Office of Technical Services. Still in the formative stage, the centers have thus far concentrated on building and organizing collections of technical reports and on making them available to scientific and technical research workers in areas usually composed of three or more states. It is almost certain that the identification and location activities which now dominate report center reference work will soon expand to include comprehensive literature searches. Since records pertaining to technical report literature will most probably be one of the first large categories of bibliographic information to be stored on magnetic tape, it is possible that the reference activity of searching the report literature will be one of the first reference operations to be automated.

The element of depth, or comprehensiveness, of library service is the characteristic that determines kinds of use and the users. Most regional systems now providing reference service in a wide range of subjects are operating at most on a middle level. This level of service could be characterized as that which one might expect from a public or academic library of at least 100,000 and perhaps as many as 500,000 non-fiction titles. Aspirations to provide comprehensive service like that found in large academic libraries and in a few public libraries are occasionally voiced, but seldom achieved in most general systems. Comprehensive service is more common in systems focused on a narrow subject range.

The most obvious, although still unrealized, exception to this gen-

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eralization concerning comprehensive service is New York State's Regional Reference and Research Library plan.¹ Designed to complement the country's most sophisticated operating program of regional public library systems, the "3-R" plan is proposed for the specific purpose of making comprehensive reference service available to individuals in all parts of the state. If the project receives the required financial support from the legislature, it will possibly set the standard for generally accessible research library service for the country at large.

The recently inaugurated Pennsylvania plan^{2, 3} incorporates elements that should result in a high level of reference service for state residents as the state aid program established in 1962 begins to have an impact on library development. In this program, local public libraries may affiliate with one of thirty districts, each centered on a designated district library. Each district library receives state financial assistance to provide specific services, one of which is "walk-in" or telephone reference service, to all readers and libraries in the district. Supplementing district libraries, four regional resource centers have been designated to develop definitive collections of reference materials in selected subject areas to serve the specialized research needs of all Pennsylvania citizens, both through on-site use and through inter-library loan.

The centers include the State Library at Harrisburg, the Pennsylvania State University Library at University Park, The Free Library of Philadelphia, and the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. With the exception of the State Library, each regional library received \$33,000 in state aid in 1962. The thirty district libraries received over \$473,000, and 230 local libraries were provided over \$930,000 from state funds.

One of the most uncomplicated organizations for statewide reference service involves only local libraries and a single central library. Here, the local library (and in some instances, the individual reader himself), turns directly to the state library for supplementary service and resources. New Hampshire⁴ is an example of this basic, and apparently efficient, approach. Local libraries send reference inquiries to the 400,000 volume State Library where four full-time reference librarians process up to sixty reference requests daily. An estimated 50 per cent of the state's 232 libraries use the service frequently and another 25 per cent do so occasionally. Direct service is given to individuals served only by small libraries operating on limited schedules. The State Library maintains a union catalog of holdings of the larger

public libraries and borrows books from these libraries, as well as the University of New Hampshire and Dartmouth College, for reloan.

The New York State complex of twenty-two regional public library systems is further developed and better supported from state funds than any other. While the regional systems vary in size, all have as their hallmark coordinated programs to supplement local library operations. An example is the Nassau Library system,⁵ which includes forty-five of fifty-one public libraries in the county as members, and serves a population of more than 1,120,000. Total annual circulation by member libraries is nearly 8,000,000 items.

The system reference service includes an inter-library loan operation, use of a central reference collection, and telephone reference service. The reference collection includes about 17,500 volumes in a service center and another 15,000 volumes divided among five public libraries functioning as subject centers. Over 5,700 items were circulated from the central reference collection to member libraries during 1962. An additional 4,500 items (of 7,900 requested by teletype) were provided by the State Library. A telephone reference service for member libraries provided answers to more than 2,000 questions during 1962. Preparation of selection guides and organization of rotating collections of foreign books are examples of other types of system reference service. In all, 14.3 per cent of the system budget goes for reference service.

Systems established to provide only reference service have developed in several areas of the country. These are generally financed, at least in large part, by Library Services Act funds. The first objective of projects of this type is to extend reference service on at least a basic level to residents of predominantly rural areas. In some cases, reference service is regarded as the first step towards full service operations.

Three examples of regional systems of this type are described below. Each varies in detail; all have been in operation only two or three years; and accomplishments are as yet difficult to assess.

The first is the Regional Reference System—Wausau (Wisconsin) Area.⁶ Now in its second year of operation, the system has twenty-three libraries participating, with the Wausau Public Library serving as the regional center. Focused for the present only on reference service, this is a pilot project for a potential statewide complex of full service systems recommended in the report, "A Design for Public

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Library Development in Wisconsin," published by the Wisconsin Free Library Commission in 1963.

The objectives of the system, which serves a population of about 320,000, include the creation of a regional reference center at Wausau, demonstration of a cooperative reference system, provision of reference materials by strengthening and enriching existing collections in all libraries, the development of procedures for referral of questions and inter-library loans among all types of libraries in a statewide reference system, and evaluation of the pilot project to aid in planning similar centers elsewhere in the state. Monthly workshops have been held during the past year, principally to instruct staff members of libraries in the region on reference sources. Book selection consultation service has also been provided to member libraries.

The Wausau system is of special interest because it is also being used as a source of information for a comprehensive study of Wisconsin's resources and requirements for reference service now being conducted by the Library Research Center of the University of Illinois for the Wisconsin Free Library Commission. The results of this work should be available early in 1964.

A second example of this type of regional reference system is the Denver-Tri-County Reference Service Project, known as JADA library service.⁷ (The name is an acronym of the initial letters of the names of the four participating counties.) Like the Wausau project, the JADA service is funded by the Library Services Act. An initial budget of \$50,000 was set up to provide for the demonstration period. The budget for 1963 was \$14,500. The Denver Public Library serves as the resource library for the system, and reference calls go directly to the subject departments of the Library. A clerk-driver, employed by the system, is responsible for the material handling and delivery aspects of the system.

Initially, a maximum of 5,880 units of service per year (a unit is a book, a reference question, or duplicated reference material) were to be provided system members by the Denver Library. However, soon after the project got underway, it became evident that the expanded reference service was generating more demand for books. In August 1962, the plan of the project was amended to provide some author-title requests on inter-library loan, and for the 1963 calendar year, the limit on titles that could be borrowed from Denver was removed. To take some of the pressure off Denver, a "round-robin" search procedure

among the member libraries was established for some categories of titles. This approach has produced about fifty books per month. The Colorado State Library searches daily for requests not filled by the Denver Public Library. During the first four months of 1963, a total of about 400 books per month was delivered to the nine municipal and county library units from the Denver Public Library. The monthly average for the first year of operation was 180 and for the second year about 260.

The JADA project has generated a number of inter-library activities. A grant made to the JADA Library Service Committee is supporting a self-study of metropolitan Denver library service. The example of coordinated effort has also sparked the establishment of countywide library service in Arapahoe County through contract with three public libraries located in the county and a bookmobile owned by an adjacent county system. Although the demonstration period is as yet not completed, it is evident that what started out to be a regional reference system is in fact moving toward a more comprehensive approach to regional library service.

The San Joaquin Valley (California) Information Service (VIS)⁸ has been in operation since May 1960. Library Services Act funds supported the project during the first three years, but from July 1963, the service to six central California counties continued with local support. The director, a reference librarian, and three clerical assistants are located in the Fresno County Library. Reference questions not answered on the local or district library level are mailed or, when speed is important, are called in to the Fresno County Library on an unlisted number. Information is sometimes supplied to the patron directly by telephone or by mail. Requests for information, however, are accepted in the Fresno center only from libraries.

VIS handles as many as thirty-five questions daily. No analysis has been made of the composition of the group of patrons or of the information requested, but the largest number of requests are generated by businessmen. A smaller number call for vocational or educational information, or information pertaining to home improvement and hobbies. A lesser number of questions are prompted by research. The center has promoted its service to business and government. VIS makes an effort to provide extensive reference service in all subject fields except technology, medicine, and law. Only inquiries related to student assignments and certain other obvious categories are excluded. Free photo copies of pertinent information are provided the

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patron. A reference in-service training program, consisting of both workshops and a correspondence course, has been conducted for assistants in many of the participating libraries.

The several organizational forms for providing regional reference service have been identified by the examples in the preceding paragraphs. In large part, the systems supported by public funds have as their principal objective the provision of reliable middle-level service to individuals who do not have ready access to a substantial collection such as might be found in most larger cities of the country.

Because the provision of library service "by system" is a process still in the early stages of development, both the concept and the methodology are difficult to assess. It does seem essential, however, that librarians charged with administering or developing library operations on a system basis should pay special and continuing attention to the analysis of costs of services rendered in all segments of their system activity.

A second area calling for critical research involves the relationship between the theoretical service capacity of system resources and the kinds and amount of actual use made of those resources. Such a study might provide valuable information about the effect of system service in various fields and at different levels of comprehensiveness. The virtues of "systems" have been thus far taken pretty much on faith. A critical evaluation of all aspects of library system operation is essential at this time if full value is to be received for the library dollar spent in this country during the years ahead.

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