Service to the Disadvantaged: A Pilot Project—The Los Angeles Public Library

EDITH P. BISHOP

In the fall of 1964, Los Angeles Public Library submitted a request for $519,536 of Library Service and Construction Act funds to finance an experimental two year program of service to the culturally and economically disadvantaged.

The program was designed to reach people of all ages and to provide an awareness of the services available, of reading guidance and opportunities for self realization. The objective was to provide the library with the means of serving more adequately the citizens of certain selected areas and to work with other agencies in offering educational, cultural and recreational stimulation and satisfaction. Primarily this was an endeavor to go into the community, taking library service to the residents.

The staff assigned to the branches of Los Angeles Public Library had long been aware of the necessity of a dynamic program of work in and with the community, especially in areas where the residents were unfamiliar with free library service, struggling with functional illiteracy and overwhelmed by providing the barest necessities to maintain life. Librarians extended themselves to meet the needs, but the staff allocations were inadequate. Budget requests for additional staff had been unfruitful. Library Services and Construction Act funds appeared the only hope to demonstrate the need and the desirability of meeting that need.

The seven regional librarians and the Director of Branches approached the problem first with the idea of fulfilling the requirements of the entire city. It became quickly evident that such an approach was not feasible economically or administratively. And so a project in four phases was proposed.

Edith P. Bishop is Director of Branches, Los Angeles Public Library, Los Angeles, California.

JULY, 1968
One phase was the establishment of bookmobile service in the Southern Region, a low-income area with a heavy concentration of Negroes. The stops would be scheduled in such places as housing developments and shopping centers. Though there were branch libraries available, citizens were not using them, so it seemed essential to go to the people. A second phase would also concentrate on service to a largely Negro population. In this project the emphasis was to be coordination, stimulation and training of the staff in existing branches by three senior librarians, specialists in service to children, young adults and adults. They would work in the Central Region, operating from the regional office. The third and fourth phases were similar in that the program was to concentrate on development of service in a single community by assigning additional librarians to an existing branch. These two phases varied in the type of community they were to serve. Lincoln Heights Branch is located in a community whose population is more than 60 percent Mexican-American. Venice Branch is located in an area of mixed ethnic groups, many with low incomes and substandard housing.

With the assistance of the library's business manager, David Bass, a cost was determined and then the recommendation presented to City Librarian, Harold L. Hamill, the Administrative Group of the Library, and the Board of Library Commissioners. Affirmation by the persons consulted sped the request on its way.

Word from State Librarian, Mrs. Carma Leigh, in April, 1965, that the request had been granted was received almost with disbelief, then with excited joy and the sobering knowledge that there was great responsibility and much hard work ahead.

The necessity for acceptance of the contract by the Board of Library Commissioners and the Mayor and City Council, with the attendant delays, meant that it was December, 1965, before the first staff appointment was made. Meantime much planning was afoot. Regional librarians and the Director of Branches developed broad outlines for getting the work established.

The first appointment was that of the coordinator of the project, Mrs. Johanna Sutton. In quick succession the rest of the staff was chosen, three senior librarians and a clerk-typist for the Central Region, three librarians for Venice Branch, three for Lincoln Heights Branch and the senior librarian and three librarians for the bookmobile. Clerical staff was added as the program developed and as they were needed. All librarians and most of the clerical staff were already...
Service to the Disadvantaged: A Pilot Project

working for the library and had volunteered for this assignment. Some of these people were already working or had worked in the selected areas of the city or in similar communities; they had already tried to work with the residents within the limited time available. Their concern was both personal and professional. From the volunteers, an effort was made to select those with the energetic, imaginative dedication which is essential to success. In-service training of all staff is varied and continuous: individual members have taken conversational Spanish and courses in race relations; attendance at appropriate institutes and workshops given by universities and other agencies has been encouraged; regular monthly meetings are held to give opportunity for discussion and sharing of experiences and also to present speakers or training in such fields as audio-visual equipment and materials and community programs.

Planning of duties and establishing lines of responsibility and technical procedures were accomplished through conferences between the Project Coordinator, Director of Branches and appropriate staff member. In this way the project was able to take advantage of the knowledge of regular staff and proceed with a minimum of misunderstanding.

The bookmobile program was longest in reaching the community. The ordering, receiving and processing of materials started almost immediately using whatever temporary quarters could be commandeered. A building was located and prepared for occupancy by June, 1966. The bookmobile, with record player, public address system, projector and screen in the side of the van was ordered but the anticipated date of delivery was months away. It was decided to start service in July by using a borrowed bookmobile for the summer months. When that vehicle had to be returned in mid-September a small truck was secured, prepared for use, and service continued under trying circumstances until the long awaited van was finally delivered.

The stops are made regularly once a week and vary from an hour at a job-training center to three hours at most of the locations. The library materials are not differentiated as to juvenile or adult except for picture books and readers. This makes it possible to assist patrons to find materials they can read without any stigma or embarrassment. The bookmobile staff say that they have reached many persons not previously reached; 95 percent of the patrons are new to the library. The community has become more aware of Los Angeles Public Library and hopefully will ultimately turn to the larger book collections and longer hours of service of the branches.

July, 1968

[83]
The staff in the Central Region believes they have established an image of the library as a community agency through the variety of services offered by the staff. In addition, they have created a demand for library service by a number of agencies and have made books available to greater numbers of people through deposits in such places as “Teen Posts” and Health Centers.

Lincoln Heights staff has worked closely with established groups, has joined with community organizations in their projects, and has made extensive use of paperbacks and audio-visual materials, including records for quiet listening.

The Venice staff has been able to develop a feeling among the community of the library as a center of activity; patrons turn to the library for information, they offer help with programs and the staff is invited to meetings. There is a feeling of need for service offered by the library.

The charge to all of the staff has been to take the library to the people, to experiment with materials and techniques. This challenge they have accepted. They have made personal contact by going from door-to-door, talking to people on the streets and attending meetings. There has been continuous involvement with schools, established groups and agencies working in the communities. Head-start groups and adult evening classes have provided particularly meaningful contacts. In the effort to make residents aware of the library, there have been programs and activities in the library and in the community: hobby clubs, film showings, discussion groups, dramatics, bands, fiestas, family nights, block parties, art exhibits, book fairs, guest artists, displays and discussion at banks, manufacturing plants and all kinds of meetings. Posters, banners and give-away materials have carried our message.

The materials selected for use with these citizens have been designed to meet their interests and needs, which are as varied as any other community’s. There has been emphasis on job training and basic skills, on books which are easy to read but of mature interest, on materials in Spanish and Negro history. Particular attention has been given to format; paperbacks are especially acceptable. Audio-visual materials of all types are vital. In all the selection there has been an effort to meet the patron on his own ground. We have had difficulty in identifying, locating and securing many of the materials we need. So we make do when necessary, but continue the search.

We have had two full years of service for this program. It has been
Service to the Disadvantaged: A Pilot Project

carried on generally in accordance with the original concept. However, we soon realized that we had made one grave miscalculation. A request for amendment to the contract and the addition of $62,500 has made it possible to employ a public relations representative and a display artist. Though we still have limited experience in this area, there is already a substantial difference in the effectiveness of reaching potential patrons.

Funding of the program for another year has been granted, so we will not only carry on until December 31, 1968, but will expand the service of the bookmobile. We are adding two more librarians, another truck operator and supporting clerical staff so we can operate the van from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. six days a week. Presently we are experimenting with integrating the project staff into the regular branch program at Lincoln Heights, although at first the special staff did not share in reference desk assignments and other regular responsibilities. We need to know how effectively we can operate with the branch librarian coordinating the program and all the staff sharing in all activities.

We must begin to seek local funding to carry on the program. Our first step will be to present a budget request to take over the bookmobile program. This most nearly approximates service we are already giving, as it is more tangible and the effects are more capable of measurement than some of the other phases. We hope we may secure Library Services and Construction Act funding to continue the work in the Central Region, at Venice and Lincoln Heights for at least another year. We must have more experience with the absorption of the program into our regular service pattern, and we must also experiment with community aides or some other means of liaison with the community.

Mrs. Selma Benjamin, a member of the project staff at Venice, expressed the sentiments of all the staff when she said in a recent report: “Our job is no bed of roses, because every success has to be earned by great effort, and by trial and error. However, I have never enjoyed a job as thoroughly as this one.”