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Planning and Implementing Prison Libraries: Strategies and Resources

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Abstract

*This paper provides information on a current IFLA project to revise the 1995 edition of the **Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners**. It summarizes information obtained through an international survey on the status of prison libraries worldwide and offers specific suggestions to library professionals, library organizations and agencies that wish to develop such services at the local or national levels. The author highlights publications from the professional literature that describe the prison library situation in various countries. Suggestions are provided for using existing guidelines as models for developing similar documents in countries which are trying to establish library services to incarcerated persons. An extensive bibliography is included.*

Revision of IFLA's *Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners* (1995)

The Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons Section (LSDP) is currently working on a project to revise the second edition of the prison library guidelines, and we hope to have the new publication out this autumn. As part of this project, a small working group set out to obtain information on the current status and level of development of prison library services in as many countries as possible.

This "snap shot" would be one element of a needs assessment that would determine the type of information most helpful to libraries, library systems and government agencies which had already established prison library services or were planning to do so. Another element of the needs assessment would be a thorough literature search.

The working group solicited input through an Internet survey and other targeted mailings, specifically asking for:

1. What government mandates on contracts exist to provide library services to incarcerated persons (national, regional, or local)?

2. Who provides these services? Public libraries, academic libraries, school libraries, prison authorities, volunteer organizations, or other agencies?

3. Where does the funding come from?

4. Do national, regional, or local standards or guidelines exist for prison library services?

5. If yes to #4, please provide information on how to obtain these documents.

6. Please provide contact information for persons knowledgeable about prison libraries in your country.

From this survey, and from personal contacts and follow-up, the working group obtained information from 20 countries, mostly North American and European, but also from Australia and a few countries in Africa and Latin America.
The working group also read numerous articles to get a broad picture of the world prison library situation. The most relevant articles from the period 1990 – 2003 will be included in the bibliography of the guidelines document **[also included with this paper**].

The level of prison library development, as expected, varies widely – from fledgling attempts by a few pioneering individuals or spearheading organizations to establish a few basic services and core collections to national legislation mandating such services as part of a comprehensive prison education, rehabilitation, and recreation program. Those countries with a history of providing prison library service for many decades (e.g., the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Scandinavian countries), have also adopted guidelines or standards that are used as planning and development resources, as well as evaluation instruments and funding justification tools. Such documents have proven very useful, and the LSDP Section hopes that the new IFLA prison library guidelines will serve as a model for those countries that have yet to develop their own.

The working group realized quickly that in many countries there is little philosophical commitment from the general public and little government support for providing incarcerated offenders with more than the bare minimum of services. In many developing countries, the idea of offering education, rehabilitation, and meaningful employment is still not widely accepted, let alone the concept that offenders have <u>rights</u>, not only to decent and humane treatment, but also to read and to freely access information! Resistance to these approaches may exist for political, philosophical, or economic reasons – even though it is a well known fact that education and rehabilitation of offenders prevents recidivism and saves taxpayers money in the long run. Library professionals from those countries with a more developed and mature prison library system can be of great help to their struggling colleagues by sharing strategies, resources, and expertise. The members of the LSDP Standing Committee participate in a wide network of experts and are most willing to serve as a referral point.

Some of the articles and documents identified by the working group give good accounts of how some librarians became strong advocates for libraries in prison, and how they proceeded to work with local and national authorities to make their goals a reality in spite of many obstacles.

Strategies

Libraries that are committed to include incarcerated persons, whether adults or juveniles, along with other "special needs" group they serve, may find some or all of the following strategies helpful:

1. If no legislative mandates exist, contact local politicians or national legislators to convince them of the existing need and offer to work with them to develop such legislation. In doing so, keep in mind that it is important to:

   - Present facts and figures on the relationship of literacy and education to the level of offender recidivism and the social and economic development of the country. Emphasize the educational role of libraries rather than the recreational role.
   - Demonstrate how the resources and services currently provided by the public or academic library are relevant to the needs of incarcerated persons and the programs already provided by the prison or prison system.
   - Obtain demographic data from the prison authority on the prison population, including age, sex, race/ethnicity, languages spoken, educational level, social & economic background, sentence structure, and treatment needs.
   - Establish a special interest group on prison libraries within the national library association.

- Take the initiative to develop local/national guidelines or standards and involve government authorities.
- Market the guidelines through all means possible, and seek endorsement by appropriate prison accreditation agencies.
- Start modestly by establishing contact with one or a few prisons in the library service area. Identify the key administrators and decision makers. Work with those who appear most receptive.
- Submit grant proposals on behalf of the prison to obtain funding from government agencies, and private & public foundations.
- Develop a pilot project, e.g., a deposit collection selected specifically for the prison population that includes many foreign language and multicultural titles; a regular delivery and reference service; a mobile library service (bookmobile stop); a literacy tutoring program, a book discussion group.
- Develop a plan to provide prisoners about to be released with public library cards and information about education, social and employment services in the community.
- Include targeted prison staff in library orientation and relevant workshops.
- If initial "informal" collaboration is positive, develop "formal" contract/agreement, specifying services and resources to be provided by both parties. A model agreement may have the prison authority responsible for library space within the facility, technology, furniture and equipment, supplies, and inmate workers; the library may be responsible for the initial collection, and the selection & processing of new materials; both parties may share the costs for upkeep of the collection, and both should be involved in the development of policies and procedures.

2. In those countries where the prison authority itself employs education and library staff, collaboration with public and academic libraries could include:

- Interlibrary loan arrangements.
- Access to union catalogs and bibliographic databases for cataloging.
- Training for prison library staff in information technology.
- Joint publications.
- Providing staff and expertise for prison library programs and special events.
- Solicitation by the public library for donation of books to the prison.

In general, it is very important to disseminate information about new projects and model programs, especially if they charter new territory. The objective should be to document the impact and viability of the services and projects with hard data, such as circulation statistics, number of patron interactions, program attendance,

reading improvement scores, etc., as well as patron comments. Successful pilot projects are likely to lead to more funding and support.

Dissemination about prison library programs should include articles in professional journals, presentations at workshops and conferences, development of web pages, and postings on Internet discussion lists.

Resources

For a general background on how prison library services were developed in several countries and how they function today, I recommend the articles by De Carolis, and the IFLA 2003 papers by Barlotti and Costanzo (Italy); by Fernandez (Spain); by Hugo (South Africa); by Lehmann and Stevens & Usherwood (USA); by Desmond and Lithgow & Hepworth (UK); by Fabiani & Soldini (France); by Franzén (Sweden); by Peschers (Germany); and by Womboh (Nigeria). **See included bibliography**.

In addition, two comprehensive handbooks (practical how-to" manuals) were published in 1995 in the USA; both are still in print and are used widely as textbooks in library schools:

1) ***Libraries Inside: A Practical Guide for Prison Librarians*** (edited by Rubin & Suvak);
2) ***Down for the Count*** (by Vogel).

Although reflecting the reality of US prisons, both books give a lot of practical hints that are applicable in all prison settings.

Libraries Inside is a compilation of articles contributed by several experienced prison librarians and consultants, giving background information and recommendations on a broad range of library management and operations issues – seen from the special perspective of the prison environment. Areas covered are the prison "community", the planning process, the professional staff, the inmate workers, collection development (including the "hot" topic of censorship), services, programs, literacy, budgeting, physical facility & equipment, information technology, and access to legal materials. The book includes a bibliography and several appendices, including samples of a prison library collection development policy, a request form for challenging or reconsidering library materials, and automation & information technology needs assessment questionnaire. All of these forms can easily be adapted to local circumstances.

Down for the Count goes into great detail about the dynamics of the prison environment and the roles played by different groups (administration, security officers, program & treatment staff, educators, inmates, and the library staff. The author is very frank in her depiction of the inhospitable environment for any

service, including library service, that is perceived to "enable" or "empower" the inmates. The book offers many practical hints on how to deal with "difficult" people – both inmates and staff – and survive with one's sanity intact. Also included are a series of "most frequently asked questions" by those unfamiliar with prison libraries or contemplating a career as a prison librarian. The appendices contain a list of criteria for evaluating a prison library, lists and samples of policies and procedures, a needs assessment survey, a list of core reference materials, and documents about the human and legal rights of prisoners.

The decade from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s saw a significant growth in prisons in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in the United Kingdom. This building boom was the driving factor behind a re-examination of the effectiveness of correctional programs and services, including prison education and libraries. Existing standards and guidelines were no longer perceived as relevant or useful, due to many changes in technology and methods of operation.

A special subcommittee of the American Library Association took four years to develop the *Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* (1992), which included both qualitative output measures and quantitative standards – the latter based on data obtained from a national prison library survey and reflecting actual figures on collections, staffing, funding, physical facility, and access hours. Using "real" figures as benchmarks was intended to increase the credibility of the document among prison administrators and government authorities. Since the ALA publication was designed as a standards document for self-assessment and accreditation purposes, it has enough flexibility to allow compliance according to size of institution, inmate demographics, level of security, age of facility, total range of inmate programs, and employment options available. The document was developed on the premise that a prison library must select primary and secondary roles and then allocate available resources according to the selected roles. The standards were developed under the assumption that "Library services shall encompass the inmates' right to read and their right to free access to information. Services shall encompass the same variety of material, formats, and programs as available in the outside community and shall comply with the following American Library Association documents:

a) "Library Bill of Rights" (1948; revised 1961, 1980)
b) "Resolution on Prisoners' Right to Read" (1982)
c) "Policy on Confidentiality of Library Records")1971; Revised 1975, 1986)
d) "Freedom to Read Statement" (1953, Revised 1972, 1991)
e) "Freedom to View" (1979)."

These documents are core professional ethics and values statements, and the fact that their full texts are included in the appendices is testimony to the commitment to treat prisoners no differently than any other patron group. As

librarians in other countries develop their own service plans, guidelines or standards, they would benefit greatly from including similar statements and philosophies.

The ALA *Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* cover the usual areas of access, administration, staffing, budget, facility, services, and library materials. The document also has a summary of key figures, an extensive glossary, the results of the 1990 National Prison Library Survey, an article on selection of roles and the use of output measures, and a bibliography. This autumn (2003), an ALA subcommittee will begin to revise the 1992 standards and will include additional chapters on information technology, marketing, as well as planning and evaluation. As it is written now, the document is still very useful as a planning and justification tool. During 1997, this author, with the help of an outside consultant, used it to develop a strategic planning process and manual for prison librarians in the state of Wisconsin, USA. This manual contains templates for conducting a needs assessment, selecting roles, writing a mission statement, creating a long range plan with goals and objectives, and developing an implementation schedule.

The Library Association in the United Kingdom in 1997 published the 2nd edition of *Guidelines for Prison Libraries*. Any group intending to develop new national prison library guidelines will need to consult this model publication, which was designed to provide a comprehensive and practical source of reference for librarians, prison authorities, education staff, prison library officers, and inmate library workers. The recommendations are also helpful for public libraries which, under a service level agreement, provide the actual collections and professional staff.

The document assists in the entire process of needs assessment, establishment, management, and evaluation of services. Like the US standards, it allows a certain amount of flexibility in the implementation of services, taking into account the many variables among prisons. The main chapters address the nature of services required, the provision of library materials, the promotion of services, the physical facility requirements (with formulas and measurements), and financial resources and management. A helpful summary of key recommendations for each chapter appears in the beginning of the document. The publication also contains a short bibliography and eleven (11) extremely useful appendices with the full text of relevant policy documents, lists of required legal and community information titles, position descriptions for library staff, content of staff training programs, detailed space planning recommendations, as well as definitions of responsibility areas between the prison authority and the local library. Although these documents are UK specific, they are representative of the type of information that would make any national guidelines document more valuable. The UK guidelines were still available when I checked a few months ago.

Another helpful resource to be consulted when trying to enlist support for a comprehensive prison library service plan is the 1990 Council of Europe publication, *Education in Prison*. This document not also serves as the foundation for many European prison education programs, it also devotes a separate chapter to the prison library as an integral part of prison education, as well as a source for information and recreation, and as a cultural center. The document calls for cultural pluralism of library resources, professional library staff, free and direct access, and the absence of censorship.

As mentioned at the beginning, IFLA's LSDP Standing Committee is currently revising the *Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners*. The first edition (1993) is also available in Spanish, and the second edition (1995) is available in German. The Standing Committee plans to provide the new third edition in all five official IFLA languages, as well as Chinese. Although the new edition will cover some exisiting areas in more detail and will add chapters on planning, information technology, and library promotion, it will still subscribe to the same basic philosophies and assumptions about the rights of inmates to read and access information. The current version of the IFLA document still gives a good overview of what to include in a guidelines document; it is meant to give broad directions and guide practitioners to international declarations, manifestos, and universally accepted principles about human rights, dignity, and democracy. These documents provide the foundation on which a wide spectrum of human and social services are built.

The Standing Committee of the Library Services to Disadvantaged Persons Section is also now working on its strategic plan for the next two years. One of the goals included will be to "Promote the development and adoption of standards and guidelines for library services to persons with special needs" – and to that end the section intends, among other things, to provide training on the development of such standards and guidelines. We will seek funding and will collaborate with library organizations and institutions in developing their own guidelines documents for services to population groups with special needs – be they prisoners, patients in hospitals, deaf people, people with cognitive or physical disabilities, with dyslexia and learning disabilities, or others who are unable to use traditional library services. The LSDP Section has devoted much time and effort over the last decade to develop model guidelines for all these population groups and is ready to make its resources available as widely as possible.

So please let us know if we can help!

BIBLIOGRPHY

PRISON LIBRARIES:
STANDARDS, GUIDELINES AND RELEVANT LITERATURE
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