

An Evaluation of the American Models of Public Library Service for Disabled Users for Poland

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Abstract

The service of disabled people is an extremely important segment of public libraries activity. In the United States, Canada and Scandinavian countries a great importance is attached to expanding library offer by adding services aimed to this category of users. In this work three American models of library service in public libraries are discussed. The models are: delivering library services outside a library, in other words, an outreach program, rendering services in special needs centers and integrated service, which is provided in the same place and in the same way as for the remaining members of the community (it is also called mainstreaming). Next, the models are compared with actions taken in this field in Polish libraries, which after many years of isolation from the latest trends currently are trying to overtake backlogs.

Keywords: *Library services, public libraries, public library services, Poland, disabled library users*

Öz

Engellilere yönelik hizmetler, halk kütüphanesi faaliyetlerinin çok önemli bir parçasıdır. ABD, Kanada ve İskandinav ülkelerinde bu kullanıcı grubuna yönelik halk kütüphanesi hizmeti sunmak büyük önem arz etmektedir. Bu çalışmada, halk kütüphanelerinde verilmekte olan kütüphane hizmetlerine yönelik üç Amerikan modeli tartışılmaktadır. Bunlar; dışarıya sağlanan kütüphane hizmetleri, başka bir ifade ile dış erişim programı; özel eğitim merkezlerine yönelik hizmetler ve kütüphaneyi kullanan okuyuculara verilen standart hizmetlerin kütüphane içinde aynı koşullarda engellilere sağlanmasını içeren tümleşik

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hizmetlerdir. Çalışmada ayrıca, Sovyetler Birliği'nin parçalanması ile birlikte özgürlüğüne kavuşan Polonya'nın, yıllarca geri kalmışlığın etkilerini en aza indirerek, halk kütüphane sistemine bu modellerin uygulanması ve bu uygulamaların nasıl yapılacağından bahsedilmektedir

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Engellilere yönelik kütüphane hizmetleri, Halk kütüphaneleri, Halk kütüphanesi hizmeti, Polonya halk kütüphaneleri, Polonya'da engelli kütüphane kullanıcıları*

Introduction

The fact that the number of disabled people is increasing and European societies are getting older is indisputable (WHO..., 2006). At the same time the figure showing people with limited capabilities to move and to take advantage of a widely understood offer (including cultural offer) of today's civilization is rising. It is estimated that 10% of world population are disabled people. In Poland out of over 38 million inhabitants 14% are people with disabilities. Public libraries as social institutions should react on changes taking place in society by preparing an offer of library services, which would fulfil needs of users also those with disabilities. The actions taken by libraries to meet future special reading needs should be considered.

Literature Review

The issue of access to information for disabled people and servicing this group of clients has not been discussed briefly in Poland so far. In Polish librarianship and scientific information literature the issue is either just mentioned (e.g. Biliński, 2001, ss. 142-149; Kotodziejska, 2006, pp. 91-93; Pindlowa 2006, pp. 7-11; Wojciechowski, 2001, pp. 55-56; Zybert, 1996, pp. 41-47) or presented as actions taken by particular institutions. (e.g. Czajkowski, 1999, pp. 3-13; Motylewska, 2003, pp. 43-50; Rogozińska – Bieñ, 1996, pp. 64-67; Tuleya, 2002, pp. 32-44) Meanwhile monographs about library services for disabled users are published in English (especially American) literature (np. Brophy, Craven, 1999; Mates 2003; Rubin 2001; Velleman, 1990; Wright and Davie, 1991). Aspects such as: attitudes about disabilities, making the library accessible (physical access, collections, adaptive technologies, library service), specific information needs, including disabled on staff, involving disabled users in planning and introducing library programs, preparing staff to serve patrons with disabilities or assisting people with disabilities are analysed and discussed. Thus the

issue of disabled users service is presented in wide context, what is a result of a long tradition of library practice code in American conditions. In addition since American with Disabilities Act (1990) was in force such actions have become obligatory.

Options of Public Library Service

There is no surprise that in the United States, but also in Australia, Canada and Scandinavian countries, the issue of disabled people is dealt perfectly well. There are a few options of fulfilling needs of disabled users with developmental disabilities in public libraries.

They are:

- delivering library services outside a library (outreach programs),
- rendering services in special needs centers,
- integrated service, which is provided in the same place and in the same way as for the remaining members of a community (it is also called mainstreaming) (Wells, 1995, p. 211).

Outreach Option

Delivering library services to people with disabilities outside a library can be organized in classrooms, social welfare houses or common rooms, in other words, in client's surroundings. Using mail or different distribution channels to supply clients with library materials is also an indication of this model of client service. The mentioned activities make a library more noticeable in a local environment. On the other, this option has some disadvantages as well. Constant enjoying library services outside a library may cause reluctance to use them inside it.

Moreover, a higher amount of labor and costs must be taken into account even though some duties are performed by volunteers (Wells, 1995, pp. 211-212). The book mobiles are worth mentioning here, as they operate successfully in the United States and Great Britain whereas, for instance, in Poland they are perceived as a symbol of communist system rather than a cheaper way of delivering a library service.

Special Needs Centers

Special needs centers are located inside a main library building or inside its

branch and they concentrate on informative needs of disabled people. Not only documents concerning various aspects of disabilities are gathered, but also alternative library materials and technical equipment, including hardware, which enable users to read standard and electronic texts. It is extremely effective method of meeting library needs of disabled people, since the special needs centers are equipped with indispensable facilities, which improve quality of offered services (Wells, 1995, p. 212).

Mainstreaming Option

As far as the integrated service model is concerned, willingness and skill of library staff to serve disabled people is a vital aspect. If this way of service of disabled people is chosen in a library, the architectural features of the building have to be adjusted to requirements of people with movement disability. Moreover staff has to be sensitized to the needs of the mentioned group and adequate materials have to be selected.

Improved accessibility to materials and information for all library users is a side effect of the discussed model. Avoiding dysfunctional users' feeling that they need special treatment is a significant characteristic of this option. A large emphasis is put on library staff trainings on how to serve a disabled reader, who usually requires more time and attention than others. The personnel should act with great tact and delicacy and must have an ability to select library materials adjusted to receiving capabilities of disabled users. A situation that the other library clients behave improperly towards the disabled is possible in this model. In such case personnel must stress common accessibility to public libraries (Wells, 1995, pp. 213-214).

Sambiblioteket in Härnösand in Sweden, which is a merger of Västernorrland District Library, University Library of Central Sweden and Public Library in Härnösand, is an example of mixture of services targeted to a big number of clients (including disabled clients) and also an example of a different type of library. The Apple Library (in Swedish: Äppelbiblioteket) is an integral part of it. A three-meter-high apple is the symbol of it. Inside the apple children can read books, listen to an interesting story and observe what is happening outside. Organizers of the library, who, while designing it, cooperated with teachers from special schools, organizations working with partially and completely visually impaired or with people suffering from allergy or asthma, aimed to create a unified department consisting of a part of a library intended for disabled children, which would not be separate from the rest of a library (Westerlund, 2004, pp. 19-20).

Library Service of the Disabled in Poland – Short Review

In Poland library service of disabled users (except for the blind and visually impaired people¹) is not part of a long tradition. Since 1981 National Section of Ill and Disabled People has been operating at The Main Board of Polish Librarians Association. National Section of Ill and Disabled People patronises the research works on the ill and disabled readership, organises conferences and workshops for librarians who work with this group of users and popularises problems of disabled people among librarians. It was no other institution but National Section of Ill and Disabled People which stimulated library environment what caused founding the first readership centre for ill and disabled people in Toruń in 1984. The centre was aiming at providing library services to clients with various disabilities. Dates mentioned were an incentive for the practical public and scientists to become more interested in this segment of library services. It was not reflected in legal regulations, which were not introduced until 1997 when the Library Act went into effect. The Act discussed service of ‘the special user groups’. Despite some delays in preparation of public libraries to render services to disabled clients and deficiency of native treatises on this issue, the options for servicing disabled people presented earlier can be observed in Polish conditions. Obviously this type of actions is not as common as in the United States.

Outreach Option in Poland

Researches show that providing users with services outside a library in Poland takes at least several forms². Firstly, a lot of public libraries deliver library materials to elderly and immobile people. The service is called ‘book by phone’ or ‘lending by phone’ and it is really popular among users who are unable to use a library sources on their own. Another method of meeting clients’ needs outside a library is establishing branches and library outlets in health care institutes, in widely understood social welfare houses and rehabilitation centers for the youth and adults. An example of this activity can be the branch of The Cyprian Norwid

¹ The Main Library of the Blind in Warsaw was founded in 1951. There are gathered Braille books and spoken books, books with enlarged type and digital books. These materials can be used by users who personally visit the library, but also by those who are immobile. The library delivers the materials to the latter group. If users are from Warsaw or precincts materials are delivered by car, otherwise they are sent by post for free.

² The information concerning Polish libraries is the result of as yet unpublished researches carried out by the author.

³ The city in western Poland with population of 120 000 inhabitants.

Provincial and City Public Library for Disabled People in Zielona Góra³ which serves library outlets not only in the Detention Centre but also in The Co-operative of Visually Impaired Invalids, Group Therapy Workshops, social welfare houses, Psychiatric Hospital and local libraries in the neighboring small towns where spoken books are available as well.

Special Needs Centre in Poland

Considering an alternative option of service of disabled people in special needs centers it can be noticed that they also exist in Polish public libraries, for instance, in disabled readership centers. At least nine of them operate within a public library structure (Fedorowicz, 2003). Apart from gathering adequate library materials which are adjusted to receiving capabilities of the disabled, they also: constitute information centers in the field of widely understood disability issue; conduct individual activities for people with reading disabilities; organize integration parties and support a creative activity of the disabled. All the mentioned places are free from architectural barriers. The oldest and the most popular institution of this kind is supra mentioned The Center of Ill and Disabled Readership at the Provincial Copernicus Public Library in Toruń⁴.

Another possibility to fulfill needs of people with disabilities in special centers are establishments which operate within the network of public libraries and provide access to spoken books. The beginning of such activities was in 1975 when the agreement between the then Ministry of Art and Culture and Polish Visually Impaired Association concerning gathering and making spoken books available in public libraries was concluded⁵. Currently there are over 50 library outlets which closely cooperate with The Central Library PZN, i.e. they provide access to spoken books by taking them in a deposit from CL PZN. Moreover, recorded books are bought by many public libraries and are made available in their seats. The Pomeranian province (among the other 16) can constitute an example of such situation. Sixteen outlets with spoken book operated there at the end of 2004. It is worth mentioning that currently not only people with damaged sight use the outlets but also citizens with dyslexia, defective movement organs and even seriously ill inhabitants.

³ The city in western Poland with population of 120 000 inhabitants.

⁴ University town with population of 200 000 inhabitants. The place of birth of Nicolas Copernicus.

⁵ The agreement between The Ministry of Art and Culture -The Culture Houses, Regional Associations and Libraries Department and the Board of Polish Visually Impaired Association concerning gathering and making recorded texts of books available in public libraries (typescripts in The National Library - T. D. 81)

Mainstreaming Option in Polish Libraries

Analyzing the third model of service of disabled people, which is based on operating in the framework of the main stream of activities for all library users, the biggest amount of problems which hinder meeting its aims can be observed. The first and essential barrier against satisfying disabled clients' requirements is a lack of architectural adjustment of buildings to capabilities of people with physical disabilities. According to the data from the Main Statistic Office, in 2003 only 1020 libraries and their branches were adjusted to people using wheelchairs, which constitutes over 11% of all establishments operating within the network of public libraries (Radkowski [et al.], 2006). Librarians' awareness of the essence of particular disabilities is still low and it causes the next problem. As the consequence of it, there are limited possibilities to meet reading, educational and informative needs of this group of clients in public libraries, for example when special hardware is used. Insufficient public information about special reading materials which are published by decreasing number of publishing houses is also an undoubted obstacle. On one hand it is a result of high production costs of these materials, but on the other hand there is a lack of interest from purchaser side, what makes it necessary to convert valuable publications into cash in low-price bookshops. The fact that library service of disabled and ill people in Poland is still treated as marginal activity with hint of altruism is also worth mentioning. The reason of such a state of things can be found in absence of legislative bases in this issue. The United States can be quoted as a positive example in this matter. Libraries have been obliged to respect recommendations to eliminate any discrimination against individuals with disabilities since 1990 when The Americans with Disabilities Act came into force (The Americans with Disabilities Act, 1995, p. 40).

Finally, psychological barrier should be presented as a direct influence on establishing contacts between a librarian and a disabled client. A set of trainings and workshops in this issue would be helpful to overcome this barrier.

The presentation of problems with service of disabled users does not mean that libraries, being special establishments, are passive in this area. Quite a lot of them successfully cooperate with schools and kindergartens where disabled children attend by conducting educational classes on library premises. Unquestionably more librarians attempt to stimulate seniors to read by organizing reading events and allowing them to use library rooms during meetings of a senior club. Libraries also cooperate with group therapy workshops by preparing exhibitions of pieces of art created by participants of a therapy. However, there are still some places where, according to librarians working there, are not any disabled people so there is no use in rendering library services for them. It is hoped that the number of librarians who think that those people who really need library materials

will find their way to a library themselves will decrease gradually. It is also expected that libraries will be staffed only by empathetic librarians who are aware of needs of disabled people and have great knowledge about library resources, hardware capabilities and other technical devices.

Future

The conclusion which can be drawn from supra mentioned examples are that signs of American options of disabled users service are visible in Polish public libraries. Nonetheless theoretical and practical research on development of this segment of library service should be continued. First of all system solutions can be treated as starting points, which ought to be contrasted with short-term actions performed by some libraries. It is essential to study library environment and analyze geographical structure which should result in estimating a number of ill and disabled readers and senior people. Exploring reading and informative needs of this type of users is another stage. The next step is preparing an offer of library service directed to them and making a decision about a library where the services should be rendered. The success of actions performed by libraries is conditional upon: cooperation between institutions and organizations which support disabled people, enlightening staff on the essence of disability and resultant barriers in access to information. A role of institutions which educate and shape future librarians or information workers ought to be of great importance. Syllabuses should include issues of library services and related topics. Currently compulsory curriculum standards at faculty of scientific information and library science oblige students to conduct classes in this field. Consequently future library staff can be expected to represent professional approach to designing and realizing library services to the disabled.

Conclusion

As it can be observed, a lot of backlogs in library service have been eliminated since the fall of communism in Middle East Europe 15 years ago, after almost 50 years of isolation from the free world. However, not all the countries managed to do it. It is exemplified by Poland. The models of practice formed e.g. in the United States, which are already examined, should be employed there. It is priority action when a number of disabled and senior people in Poland is increasing constantly. More and more of the disabled study and are willing to work so public libraries might have an essential influence on fulfillment of these needs. Polish researchers predict that libraries will serve basically children, senior people and

the disabled soon. Therefore libraries should get ready for this. It is the best idea to start today.

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Summary

The service of disabled people is a significant segment of public libraries activity, whose essential aim is fulfilling library and informative needs of all members of local community. In the United States, Canada and Scandinavian countries a great importance is attached to expanding library offer by adding services aimed to this category of users. It is vital especially as European societies, including Poland, are getting older. They have to take needs of the part of population whose physical fitness has become weaker into consideration. In this work American models of service of disabled customers in public libraries are presented. Among them there are: delivering library services outside a library, in other words, an outreach program, rendering services in special needs centers and integrated service, which is provided in the same place and in the same way as for the remaining members of the community (it is also called mainstreaming). In spite of the fact that library services for disabled people in the United States and Western Europe are an apparent issue, in Poland there is a lot to do in this field. It does not mean in the least that public libraries do not take any actions in this area, what is proved by examples set in the article.