

“It is my right”: Serving people with print disabilities

By Deb Thomas.

The Services to People with Print Disabilities Working Group (SPPD) was founded in August 2010 in response to growing concern about the changing availability of materials for people with print disabilities. The withdrawal of service to British Columbia's public libraries by the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) after it failed in an attempt to get funding from the provincial government and the ending of Interlink's contract with the provincial government to locally produce and distribute audiobooks for people with print disabilities was threatening to reduce the availability of materials for this user group. SPPD is a collaborative effort between the Special Needs Interest Group and the Public Librarians Interest Group and is made up chiefly of public librarians, with some representation from the academic sector (CILS and VCC), the Canadian Federation of the Blind, and the school sector (ARC).

Our three strategic directions are information seeking, advocacy, and training. To date, our principle activities have been in the “information seeking” realm. We identified these three activities toward that end:

1. Development of a history of services to people with print disabilities to help SPPD members and our colleagues understand what has been done to date and why, and what yet needs to be done to provide services to this group.

2. Survey of people with print disabilities to determine their needs and concerns about access to reading and listening materials - and to find out what they wanted from public libraries.

I . . . feel that it is my right, as a Canadian who is blind, to have access to the same selection of books offered to all Canadians in their local library.
- SPPD Survey Respondent

3. Survey of library staff to gauge their skills and knowledge in serving people with print disabilities and determine their information and training needs in order to better serve this user group.

Beginning in late 2010, we implemented the following:

1. In 2010/11, we worked with SLAIS (School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, University of British Columbia) student Danielle Westbrook to produce [An Exploratory History of Services to People with Print Disabilities in British Columbia \(PDF\)](#).

2. In the fall of 2011, SLAIS student Lisa Snider volunteered her skills to help us develop, deliver and compile the responses from a survey of people with print disabilities. At the same time, consultant Lori Sutej was working with CNIB to draft a workable national strategy to deliver materials to people who can't read traditional print materials. She delivered a version of the same survey to CNIB users through their website.

The British Columbia survey was delivered online through Survey Monkey from November 2nd, 2011 to December 19th, 2011. An invitation to complete the survey was distributed through SPPD members and other library staff who provide services to people with print disabilities and through the BCLA website. Paper copies of surveys were also collected at focus groups of people served by the

[The perfect library would be] one that met all my reading and listening needs, had a comprehensive collection, and with access to special-needs computers. I'd also like the staff to be at least as familiar as I am with special-needs equipment.

- SPPD Survey Respondent

home library or outreach services of the Vancouver, North Vancouver District, North Vancouver City and Burnaby public libraries. These and any other paper surveys were collated by CNIB staff.

We received 123 responses to the survey, and 101 people completed the entire survey. The [Executive Summary \(PDF\)](#) of responses was released in February of 2012. The strongest message in the responses was the desire to be able to access the same materials with as much ease as people without print disabilities. Most of the respondents were over 40 with one third over 65. Two thirds had some kind of visual disability with only 9% identifying with a physical disability and 4% with a perceptual disability. The majority preferred borrowing to purchasing. Only 40% identified themselves as “proficient” on the Internet and many were not yet comfortable with a future that might

require them to download all their reading and listening materials rather than receiving them in physical formats. Respondents wanted a diverse selection of material that was popular and current.

They also wanted knowledgeable staff, online access to books and accessible buildings, collections and websites.

3. Most recently, in February and March of 2012, Lisa Snider assisted SPPD members in developing and delivering an online survey of library staff to determine their training needs in regard to serving people with disabilities. The survey was distributed through the BCLA listserv and its website. 117 library staff responded. A few key points:

- The majority (nearly 90%) had experienced frustrations trying to fill the needs of patrons with disabilities.
- The majority have 1-5 interactions per week with patrons with disabilities.
- The majority of these patrons have visual disabilities, but cognitive and physical disabilities were also seen.
- A significant majority of the staff said that they wanted to know more about Cognitive/Neurological Disabilities (ex: ADD, ADHD, brain injury, etc.)
- The top six topics on which staff would most like information and/or training were:

Every electronic book would be accessible to me. Each library building would have at least one computer terminal I could use with either speech or Braille. The library would be able to quickly scan and Braille documents I would either bring in or email. I would have telephone and on line access to the same range of newspapers, journals, and other magazines as other patrons, access I could achieve from my home phone or computer without necessarily visiting the library. The library would have interlibrary loan arrangements with other libraries around the world who produce material in alternate formats. This would all be available at the same public library my sighted children visit.
- SPPD Survey Respondent

- Specific collections used by people with disabilities (ie: music collection/ large print kids books)
- Online services - Print disabled specific (ie: Audiobooks.com)
- Needs assessment of this user group
- Information on organizations /community groups for people with disabilities
- Accessible library resources/services/collections available in other branches
- Alternative formats (ie: braille, large print, talking book, DAISY)

An executive summary and full results will be available later this spring.

To keep informed on further developments and work by the SPPD, check our web page - <http://www.bcla.bc.ca/SNIG/page/sppd.aspx> or consider joining the group. New members are welcome. Contact co-chairs Deb Thomas at deb.thomas@bpl.bc.ca or Margarete Wiedmann at mwiedmann@cnv.org.

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