

Implementing low barrier cards

By Anna Ferri.

Both the Vancouver Public Library (VPL) and Fraser Valley Regional Library (FVRL) have taken action on the problem of better serving socially excluded and vulnerable populations in their communities. In the BC Library Conference session "No-one Leaves without a Card – 'Low Barrier' cards at Fraser Valley Regional Library and Vancouver Public Library", Randy Gatley, Community Librarian with the Vancouver Public Library, and Jacqueline Garden, a Librarian at Fraser Valley Regional Library, described how each of their library systems separately saw a need for "low barrier" cards. The two libraries designed the cards before coming together to share ideas and experiences in getting these cards successfully deployed to patrons.

The basic objective of low barrier cards is to preserve as many of the functions of a regular card as possible while implementing a minimum of limitations and reducing access barriers. These cards do not require official IDs or proof of address and incur no lasting late fines. Both cards set five item borrowing limits and allow limited holds. Certain other services remain unavailable, especially in the area of eBooks, electronic databases and interlibrary loans, but internet access is the same as with regular cards. Most importantly, these cards look identical to regular cards.

Gatley spoke of needing a systemic solution for reducing the number of times the library has to say "no" to people who want access and lowering the number of patrons who cease using their cards due to late fines. Both speakers stressed that these cards do not in themselves solve issues with fines and lost items, but that these cards empower front-line staff with better and more flexible solutions to these problems. Neither library is advertising these cards widely, relying on limited promotion with specific

vulnerable populations, such as through food banks and in direct conversations with individual patrons.

VPL and FVRL found that internal promotion to staff was even more essential than external promotion in making these cards work. Staff needed training in how to tactfully suggest these cards and plenty of supporting documentation such as FAQs, narratives, and charts of all card types on offer. Garden noted that staff reception became more positive with the realization that these cards reduce stress on front-line staff and allow them to put a friendlier face forward to the public.

Audience concerns included the limited advertising of these cards to patrons and the potential for abuse given low ID requirements and the forgiveness of existing fines when patrons switch from regular to low barrier cards. Garden stressed that these cards are for specific populations, not just every patron everywhere, and that suggesting these cards often needs to be done gently in a non-stigmatizing manner. Also, both Gatley and Garden spoke about deciding to wait and see if abuses became a large scale problem, deciding that the philosophy of universal access was more important than a likely limited number of abuses.

VPL and FVRL are both currently in either soft release or early stages of wider implementation of these cards. Both libraries plan to evaluate the success of these cards in detail during the coming year, with Gatley stressing the need to focus on qualitative, not just quantitative, evaluation of these kinds of services. Numbers, he stressed, can be very deceptive in this area.

Anna Ferri is an MLIS student at UBC School of Library, Archival & Information Studies.