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Rural Communication Strategies: Disability and the Role of Public Libraries

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RURAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES: DISABILITY AND THE ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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FACT SHEET

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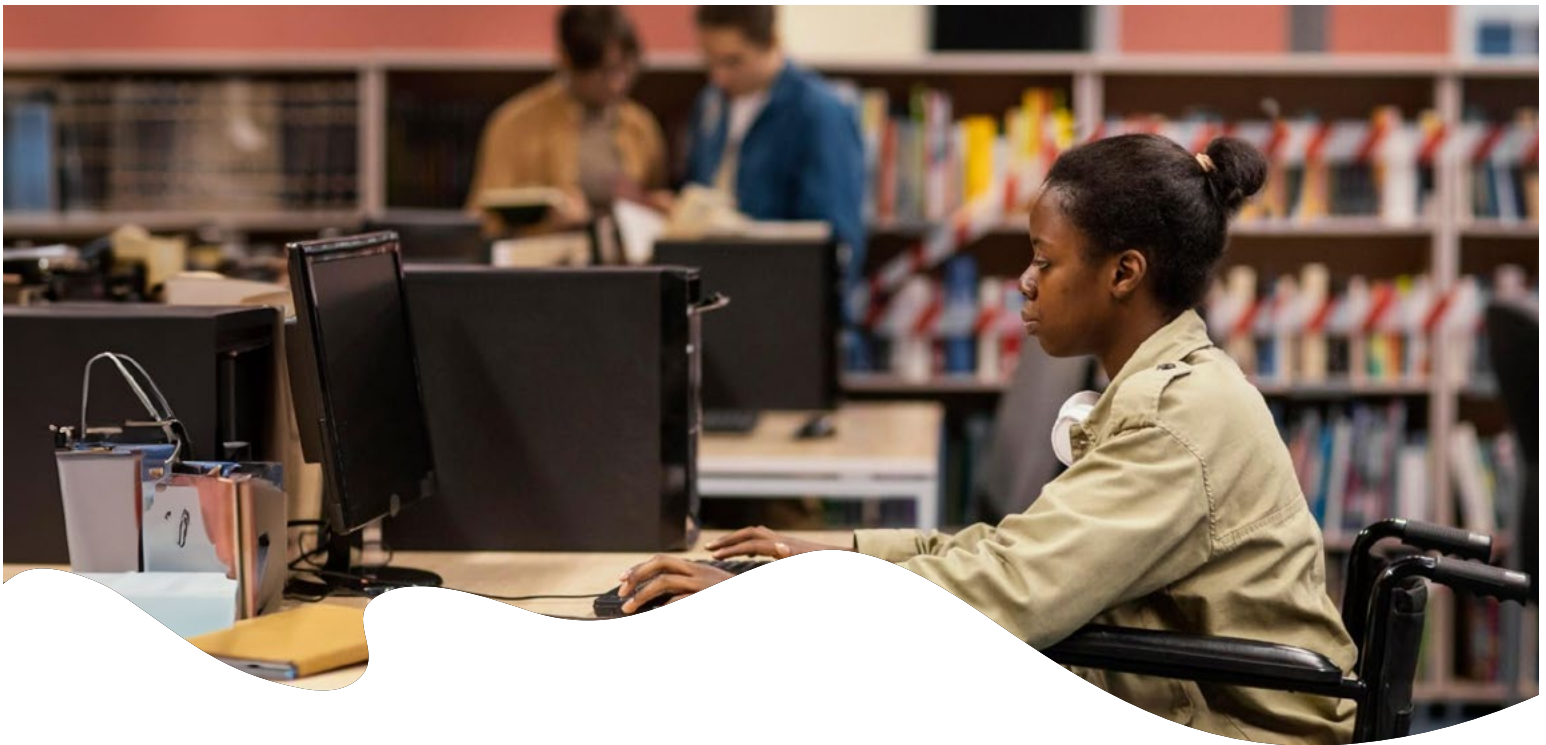
HIGHLIGHTS

- Rural libraries have extensive local partnerships that increase the reach of their communications.

- Interviewees expressed motivation to expand outreach to people with disabilities and underserved populations.

- Libraries are innovating their programs and services in response to the needs of community members.

- Opportunities exist for increased collaboration between libraries and Centers for Independent Living (CILs).

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INTRODUCTION

Communication in rural areas can often feel like a mystery to outsiders. Local identity and informal networks tend to thrive, but if you are not from the community, it can be difficult to stay in the loop. Even rural people with disabilities, who have lived in these communities their entire lives, can still struggle to participate. How do people find out what is going on and stay connected with local resources and services?

This project's goal was to explore the role of libraries in rural communication strategies for people with disabilities. We started with four primary objectives:

1. Learn how libraries are networked within their respective rural communities.
2. Gather best practices for sharing information and resources in rural communities.
3. Help rural community-centered organizations better communicate information and resources to people with disabilities.
4. Assist rural people with disabilities in accessing local resources and information in their communities.

Additional objectives emerged through the research and analysis, including:

5. Increase awareness of disability needs in rural areas.
6. Identify shared values and populations for libraries and Centers for Independent Living (CILs).
7. Explore potential partnership between libraries and CILs for communication and programming.

WHY LIBRARIES?

In the Library Bill of Rights, The American Library Association (ALA) maintains that libraries have the potential to serve a "transformational role in helping facilitate more complete participation in society" for people with disabilities (Services to People with Disabilities, n.d.). The Library Bill of Rights outlines available services and the importance of inclusion, accessibility, and representation of people with disabilities (https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/servicespeopledisabilities).

While a detailed look at ALA policies is beyond the scope of this project, it is important to recognize the position and priorities of the largest library organization in the nation. The ALA's dedication to removing barriers to access through initiatives such as Libraries Transforming Communities program illustrates its recognition of the transformational social role libraries have the potential to fulfill.

Furthermore, in 2016, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) produced a report entitled Strengthening Networks, Sparking Change: Museums and Libraries as Community Catalysts. This report examined the role of museums and libraries in addressing community challenges. In 2021, IMLS released a report on Understanding the Social Wellbeing Impacts of the Nation's Libraries and Museums. In this report they interviewed 24 institutions to document their response to the COVID-19 pandemic and rising inequality in American society. The case studies in this report contained detailed program descriptions, including those designed for often-marginalized groups like people with disabilities. The ALA's position and these reports set the foundation for this project's interviews with small and rural libraries.

METHODS

We recruited libraries through the Association of Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL) list serv to ensure a rural focus. We asked interested librarians to complete a brief, four-question survey about their libraries and rural service areas. The researcher reviewed the survey responses and emailed suitable rural libraries to schedule semi-structured interviews. Of these, we scheduled twelve interviews, eleven with librarians working at single locations and one who oversees a regional library system.

RESULTS

The interviews yielded a considerable amount of information about the participating libraries and the communities they serve. We limited our analysis to focus on the objectives and developed four main categories:

1. Networking within a rural community
2. Sharing information and resources
3. Outreach
4. Accessing community information and resources

Networking Within a Rural Community

The importance of local partnerships was the most common theme. Based on the interviews, rural libraries utilize partnerships for communication, programming, and to respond to community needs. Interviewees frequently described their libraries as "central," "connectors," and "community anchors." This not only applied to their communication role, but also to the physical space of the library.

"We are central. Absolutely central. I heard somebody say, like, library is the anchor, and I think that's pretty apropos."

Interviewer: "So, it's not just connecting people's knowledge and information. It really ends up being that space where individuals can connect to, yes?"

Librarian: "Yes, in terms of the community piece. Yeah, absolutely… Yeah. I mean, more broadly, just talking about what is our role? How do we serve the community? I'd say the biggest thing is giving them space."

A major reason for the importance of networking is the prevalence of established informal networks and word of mouth communication. Appropriate networking as a partnership strategy helps ensure that rural libraries are part of the communication pipeline. Respondents highlighted schools, food pantries, chambers of commerce, and local government as frequent partners who helped them reach various segments of the population. Schools help libraries reach children and parents and develop afterschool activities; food pantries and libraries cooperate to serve unhoused populations; chambers of commerce connect libraries with local businesses; and local government tends to manage public libraries. Respondents also emphasized the importance of establishing relationships with trusted, well-connected, local community "gatekeepers" to spread the word:

> *"There is a lot of informal networks, right? Like, in every community, there's like 5 or 6 people who do everything. And it's really a matter of time tapping into who those 5 or 6 people are."*

Despite their extensive networking and partnerships, interviewees described challenges related to negative attitudes and stigma about libraries. These manifested themselves through ideas like "Oh, that's not for me; that's for the other people" or concerns about free Wi-Fi attracting "riff raff" in addition to serving the 50% of the population that utilizes it each month. While libraries pride themselves on partnerships that make them a place for everyone, they can still struggle to reach certain segments of the population.

Sharing Information and Resources

Interviewed librarians explained how they engaged their partners to help share information through a variety of communication modalities. They characterized this broad blanket approach using digital, print, and word of mouth as necessary to connect with their populations' various communication preferences.

> *"I don't think that there's any one form of communication that can - that would be successful. It's like a combination, you kind of have to do everything you can possibly think of and hope, and sometimes it's just time."*

Every interviewee had an active social media presence, with 11/12 focusing primarily on Facebook and 8/12 explaining the importance of local social media groups as a trusted source of information. Such groups included community/town-wide groups and chat boards, as well as more dedicated affinity groups such as a seniors' collective and an active autism group started by parents that serves as a valuable program planning partner.

Of almost equal importance (10/12 interviewees) was the function of word of mouth and local gatekeepers in sharing information.

"I found this has been true in any library setting I've been - when you find the key person who gets everyone to come to a program, that's it, you've struck gold."

Local media was also a popular mode of sharing information, with 8/12 librarians describing the effectiveness of working with a local newspaper. However, they strongly noted the importance of centering the information on their town or community. This focus on local identity and norms was a prominent interview theme, with interviewees noting that their small, rural libraries serve as an extension of local identity. To further illustrate this local-centric context, 10/12 librarians explained that they produce their own newsletters in addition to working with local newspapers to ensure they are sharing the local information residents want.

Outreach

With their goal of reaching and serving their entire community, outreach is often a necessary part of a librarians' job. While the target population(s) changed slightly depending on the community, 11/12 interviewees brought up struggles to connect with "invisible patrons" or groups of people who do not feel that the library is for them. This included people with disabilities, the elderly, the unhoused or transitioning, migrant workers, non-native English speakers, and those who question their tax funds going to libraries.

"But some don't choose to take advantage of the services, and then that's my challenge is to identify them, figure out how I could connect with them, and then serve them in the way they actually want to be served. I mean, otherwise, I'm just writing and writing reports."

People with disabilities are one of the populations that could most use what public libraries have to offer. But despite the emphasis on partnerships and various communication strategies, libraries experience challenges connecting with people with disabilities. 7/12 interviewees conduct disability outreach of some kind, but 7/12 are also unsure if they have a local Center for Independent Living (CIL). Three interviewees made comments about their community "not having much disability" or that "not many people with disabilities are coming through" their libraries. This is concerning in light of data that show rural areas have a higher percentage of people with disabilities (Leopold & Greiman, 2022).

One interviewee created a survey to gauge the appropriateness of language they used in program descriptions. However, when she sent the survey to a local disability service organization to get feedback, no one completed the survey. While she was happy that she tried, and hopefully showed she cared, she admitted that lack of feedback is part of the

challenge. She acknowledged that putting the question onto community members was unfortunate, but her dilemma was finding an appropriate and effective means of conducting outreach to people with disabilities in her community.

Accessing Community Information and Resources

Overall, we can divide the ability of people to access community information and resources through libraries into three primary categories: 1) physical accessibility, 2) digital accessibility, and 3) accessibility of materials and programs.

One interview succinctly stated the first requirement of accessibility: "#1 – can patrons access the building?" Although demand has shifted to an increase in digital materials according to interviewees, on-site library programming and services still require an accessible building. This is especially pertinent since 9/12 librarians interviewed described their operations as doing more with less, particularly in filling perceived gaps in social services and often without training or additional resources.

"We need money…... money and expertise. Write that in very big capital letters. You know, I think the willingness is there. The connections are there. The goodwill is there. The money is not there, and the expertise. None of us went to library school… to learn about ADA Compliance, you know, with old historic buildings… I can write a really good grant, but I would need… training on providing service. What do people who are disabled in some sort, or under margins, what do they need?"

Interviewed librarians seem to understand the importance of physical accessibility, with 9/12 librarians indicating accessibility improvements or universal design as a current priority or need. However, this is an area that they cannot usually address through partnerships, and library budgets do not always reflect such priorities.

"So, I mean, I think libraries are underfunded. And underfunded for extras… my board is still not a hundred percent on the fence, on putting a lift up in the kid's area, because they're like, "do we really have any patrons that need that?"'

"You know, when it comes to programming, we have to get very creative and very resourceful about that. So, there are a lot of things that keep us from serving more people. And those biggest things are, you know, just our facility itself, the accessibility, the space, you know. And then everybody's issue, you know, is money."

Rural libraries also serve an essential role in providing universal access to digital resources and services. While providing digital access to their communities is invaluable, the services can have unintended consequences that create community friction alongside benefit.

"I am so proud of our library and I and our staff and the services that we provide to our community. Hotspots, for example, are another thing that we can provide to the community. I just got a visit today from the police department. They asked us to turn off our Wi-Fi signal at night, because there's too much riff raff outside the library... trying to find that balance between 'Okay, I don't want people defecating outside the library, but I want I want to give the service.' And really struggling with serving the community and not burning out my staff."

Interviewees described the challenge of maintaining balance of responding to community needs and providing access. Similarly, the accessibility of library materials and programs involves a combination of physical and digital accessibility. Libraries want accessible programs and innovative services that cater to certain community members, such as people with disabilities. In response, libraries are increasingly concerned with meeting the growing demand for digital materials such as electronic books in their library collections while simultaneously making physical program spaces welcoming and accessible.

SUCCESS STORIES AND INNOVATIVE IDEAS

Interviewees also had success stories and innovative ideas for reaching and including people with disabilities, such as:

- Partnering with a local autism group to vet inclusive program planning.

- Working with a disability consultant to universally design spaces and programs.

- Adding language to marketing, such as "Everyone is welcome at all of our programs. Please let us know how we can make this program accessible to your family."

- Using a "buddy system" to help provide patrons with disabilities a social connection and gain comfort in the library.

- Game Day doubling as respite care, with trained staff from community partners and a caregiver support network.

- Expanding craft classes to integrate the development of vocational skills.

- Building a Literacy Hub for families of children with disabilities, with teacher and parent resources and a safe space to talk about their experiences.

In all cases, whether successful implementation or idea generation, interviewees were responding to a community need with local resources. This strength-based approach could be a key to planning future library innovations to meet the needs of their diverse rural communities.

DISCUSSION:

Research indicates that despite the array of resources and services provided by public libraries, people with disabilities are not visiting them as regularly as they could be (Lewis, 2013). The primary barriers to increasing library use by people with disabilities, as well as other non-library users, are related to 1) not knowing what libraries have to offer, and 2) the comfort level of library staff in providing services to people with disabilities (Lewis, 2013). This indicates the potential impact of improved communication with the disability community and appropriate training for librarians, preferably by people with lived experience, to ensure they can respond to their patrons' needs.

Interviewees' assessment that they are being more regularly called upon to fill gaps in social services is documented in library research (Aykanian et al., 2020; Chase, 2021; Lewis, 2013; Strover et al., 2020; Swan et al., 2013). Likewise, the demand for more digital materials has caused a challenging and expensive shift in library operations (McGrane & Murphy, 2024). Libraries must respond to digital culture changes and patron preferences, in addition to regularly providing digital access for community members in the form of Wi-Fi, public computers, specialized equipment, and technical assistance (Strover et al., 2020; Yudarwati & Gregory, 2022).

Innovative program ideas centered on expanding access to services and meeting the needs of specific groups of patrons help libraries reduce barriers and promote community diversity (Potnis et al., 2020). Moreover, accessible programs and innovative services that cater to certain community members help bring in people from typically under-resourced groups, such as people with disabilities (Potnis et al., 2020).

By further engaging with the disability community, public libraries could learn local people with disabilities need and make the necessary adaptations; and by enlisting public libraries, the disability community could help improve the accessibility and inclusivity of public programs and spaces and raise disability awareness. Since rural libraries tend to be more agile than their urban counterparts, and are dedicated to meeting the needs of their communities (Chase, 2021), they seem an ideal partner for Centers for Independent Living and are motivated to serve their communities in any way they can.

"How do we let people know that this is a space for them? No matter who you are, we've got something for you. Please come, spend time with us… whatever age you are, whatever interests you have, we've got something for you, and you're really welcome here. We really want you here… I think one of the things we learned in the pandemic, resilient communities are those that are really connected and that are communicating, right? Like, that's when the problems start happening is when there's not open and trusted communication. And so, I want libraries to really be a trusted resource."

CONCLUSION

Small and rural libraries are multifaceted spaces that provide programs, services, education, entertainment, and a social outlet for residents of rural communities. Interviewees detailed their libraries' communication capabilities, partnership acumen, and good will. With libraries doing more with less, particularly in providing social services and technical assistance, they could benefit from a focused expansion of program partnerships to appropriately respond to community needs.

Centers for Independent Living (CILs) are "community-based, cross-disability, non-profit organizations that are designed and operated by people with disabilities."(National Council on Independent Living, 2019). In this role, they often serve as the conduit for communication, resources, and guidance for people with disabilities. CILs are steeped in disability rights and bring expertise regarding public access for people with disabilities. While CILs provide a community for people with disabilities and a host of supports, barriers remain that can limit the reach of communication and participation of people with disabilities in public spaces.

As a vital part of the rural infrastructure, libraries could use guidance from disability service organizations like CILs to inform their evolving role. CILs, in turn, could use the community connectedness provided by libraries. In their role as community hubs, libraries have moved to a focus on listening to community members to address community needs and facilitate civic engagement (Coward et al., 2018; Sikes, 2020). However, libraries should further engage people with disabilities and other often-marginalized sections of their communities in a locally appropriate way to improve communication and services for these populations.

There is significant potential for communication and program partnership between libraries and CILs, but questions remain as to how to solidify the relationship. It would be beneficial for future research and initiatives to focus on the communication dynamics within rural communities to identify opportunities for increased partnership and collaboration between libraries and organizations that serve people with disabilities and other often-marginalized groups.

Born of generations of stigma and exclusion, the motto of the Independent Living movement is "nothing about us without us." Interviewed librarians repeatedly emphasized that libraries are a place with "something for everyone." By grounding librarians' charge with Independent Living philosophy, perhaps "nothing about us without us" can merge with "something for everyone" to make something for all of us.

CITATION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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