Realizing the "Poor People's Policy" through community needs assessment:

Opportunities to learn from HIV/AIDS information outreach projects

Karl-Rainer Blumenthal

Drexel University

Introduction

ALA Policy 61, "Library Services to the Poor," established a rhetorical commitment on the part of public librarians to meeting the needs of poor[1] patrons. However, ambivalence and uncertainty about implementation of the policy within public libraries persists and threatens to undermine its promises of inclusion, respect, and equitable access to information. Recent and ongoing national studies of library services to the poor were designed to provide more specific guidance, but their methodologies perpetuate the evaluation of models that are, at best, tangential to the needs of this specific user group. In order to better understand the needs of poor people, librarians must return to qualitative and community-based assessments of need. In the time since this method has generally fallen out of favor among public librarians, it has proven integral to the success of organizations founded on the principal of creating social change through information access for a population that is increasingly urban and poor: those affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This essay presents a theoretical basis for the study of these information outreach organizations as models for the realization of the "Poor People's Policy."

The "Poor People's Policy"

Delivering the keynote address on "Unequal Access to Information Resources: Problems and Needs of the World's Information Poor" to the Congress for Librarians, gathered at St. John's University in New York in February, 1986, then-Director of the Boston Public Library Arthur Curley established a bleak tone:

> The answer to the question 'Are there serious obstacles to general access to information?' is one to which anyone would have to answer 'Yes.' 'Are those obstacles becoming greater rather than less, despite our efforts to eliminate them?'

my personal observation has to be 'Yes.' The follow-up question, 'Are we in fact at some point that could even be called a point of crisis in terms of access to information in this country?' My personal observation is 'Yes, we are.'(Curley 1-2) Curley and others commissioned by the American Library Association had spent over ten years studying the problem of ensuring equitable access to information resources. "It is no surprise," he deadpanned, "that the committee did not come up with either earth-shattering or easy answers," proceeding without irony to pat himself and his ALA committee on the back for at least not considering the imposition of user fees (Curley 3).

The Congress treated this crisis as a practical matter; they perceived the problem in the context of the rapidly changing technological landscape. The concurrent problem, represented before the Congress by retired Berkeley professor Fay M. Blake, was the stagnation of motivation to effect radical social change through services to the poor, which had invigorated many socially conscious librarians in the previous decade. "Library school curricula don't include the poor and their information needs," she lamented, "nor do our library scholars build research projects around the poor as a specific information clientele" (Blake 11-12). By the late 1980s, public librarians had effectively lost interest in the information needs of the poor, lost command of the access technologies to which they were entitled, and lost their sense of social responsibility to poor populations more generally.

Given the state of the practice, the 1990 adoption of Policy 61 was a remarkable achievement. Advocates for meaningful library services for poor people, led by former Hennepin County Library Head Cataloger Sanford Berman, had at last lobbied the national organization into a rhetorical commitment, and one that acknowledged the role of the

librarian in "enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society." The policy reads, in full:

> The American Library Association promotes equal access to information for all persons, and recognizes the urgent need to respond to the increasing number of poor children, adults, and families in America. These people are affected by a combination of limitations, including illiteracy, illness, social isolation, homelessness, hunger, and discrimination, which hamper the effectiveness of traditional library services. Therefore it is crucial that libraries recognize their role in enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society, by utilizing a wide variety of available resources and strategies. Concrete programs of training and development are needed to sensitize and prepare library staff to identify poor people's needs and deliver relevant services. And within the American Library Association the coordinating mechanism of programs and activities dealing with poor people in various divisions, offices, and units should be strengthened, and support for low-income liaison activities should be enhanced. ("61 Library Services to the Poor")

The inescapable truth of the matter, however, is that the "Poor People's Policy" (PPP) has not eliminated the problem of anomie. The lack of "concrete programs of training and development" in the intervening years has enabled ambivalence among librarians unconcerned with the needs of poor people and alienated those with sincere social justice interests. Commenting from their experience programming services for the poor in the St. Louis Public Library system, Leslie Edmonds Holt and Glen E. Holt remarked in 2010—two decades since the policy's adoption and last substantive amendment—that

"it would be difficult to lead a crusade—or even operate a library—under such vague professional canon" (Holt and Holt 15).

Assessing Needs and Evaluating Services

The Hunger, Homelessness & Poverty Task Force (HHPTF) of ALA's Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) was formed in 1996 to promote and implement the vision of the PPP, and while it proliferated thoughtful studies and policy statements, it has yet failed to endear the policy to the daily operations of ALA's membership. The results of HHPTF's 2007 survey of ALA membership are testaments to the ongoing ambiguity with which public librarians' view their professional relationships and responsibilities to poor patrons:

> Surprisingly, respondents said that they did not know their library's 'official' policy on service to economically disadvantaged. Many said that their library identifies the poor as people who use the public computers, people unaffiliated with the university, community members who use the library as a public space, and those who are seen as a nuisance and 'high maintenance' users. (Gieskes 52)

While 65% of the survey's respondents claimed that their libraries made measurable impacts on the lives of their poor patrons, 58% of them declined to specify any programs or services that their institutions provided, and 70% professed no knowledge of any libraries with successful service models from which to learn (Gieskes 52-54).

HHPTF's resulting recommendation was "that ALA clarify why library services to the poor are integral to our profession, the Library Bill of Rights, and the Freedom to Read and not a fringe issue" (Gieskes 54-55). This is an unfortunate misinterpretation of the survey data. ALA members can already reference a clear policy statement on the *importance* of

services to the poor. What they now need, and what their survey responses virtually plead for, is concrete direction on how best to design and deliver these services.

The survey respondents were in fact able to identify areas of service and advocacy that address common and persistent needs of poor patrons at their libraries:

Respondents … said libraries should invite Medicare and food stamp advocates to the library for outreach purposes, provide finding aids for social service agencies, address legislative issues before Congress, help poor and homeless people access needed books and materials, provide library cards to those people who do not have a permanent address, provide tutors for poor students, include libraries in crisis planning programs (Hurricane Katrina was used as an example), coordinate programming with social service agencies (especially on career day), provide sensitivity trainings, encourage donations to social service agencies, work with job loss programs, and provide ESL language training and after prison re-entry into society programs. (Gieskes 54)

The dearth of action is not the result of a lack of expressed needs or of their perceived importance, rather of a central authority that provides no resource planning. Asked to explain why they were not engaged with community partners on addressing the types of issues described above, respondents "overwhelming [sic] they said it was because their institution had no process to do so, there was no 'official' library policy (Gieskes 53).

Holt and Holt have high hopes for the instructive potential of the US IMPACT studies, a suite of mixed-methods studies led by Karen Fisher and Mike Crandall at the Information School of the University of Washington that are funded by both the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The project focuses on evaluating possible performance metrics for the use of public access

computing stations in confronting the digital divide (Becker, Crandall, and Fisher 110). Admirably, the studies aim to codify performance indicators based on evidence of sustained, satisfying use among poor patrons. However, its methodology inopportunely focuses only on services currently provided by ALA member libraries, which HHPTF's research has proven to be wanting for foundation in community needs. While the studies might ultimately provide public library administrators with the necessary metrics with which to assess satisfaction with a basic service upon which a great many poor patrons rely, they are not designed to reveal the needs that motivate their use, to say nothing of new and tailored services that could more appropriately address them. They continue to ignore the limitations that we use to define this population and do not account for the "wide variety of available resources and strategies" needed to produce "concrete programs of training and development."

Many respondents to the 2007 survey remarked on this problem, stating their preference that future research include non-ALA libraries as well as organizations with poverty-focused missions (Gieskes 55). Berman has likewise advised librarians to seek direction from community actors like shelters, food shelf operators, affordable housing groups, welfare rights organizations, and interfaith social justice networks (Berman).

The essential benefit in collaboration with these organizations, and in the study of their assessment models, is that they are reflections of their communities' most vital needs rather than of the services proven to perform to the highest levels of generic satisfaction relative to others already routinely offered by public libraries.

In his 2007 Braverman Award Essay, "Towards a Progressive Discourse on Community Needs Assessment: Perspectives from Collaborative Ethnography and Action Research," Marcel A.Q. LaFlamme summarized the importance of collaborative models for

community needs assessment as alternatives to the quantitative research instruments that increasingly dominate decision making in public libraries, drawing parallels to their usefulness in allied social sciences (LaFlamme 55-56). Though it may have fallen out of favor in information science schools, this perspective is neither altogether new to librarianship nor is it unfamiliar to librarians seeking to effect radical social change. To read the history of public libraries as written by the UK-based authors John Pateman and John Vincent[2] is to see the needs of marginalized communities at the very core of their founding and sustaining promise:

> Public libraries were founded to educate the poor and disadvantaged. They were not established for the rich or the middle class. They were not intended to be neutral, universal or open to all. They were targeted, focused and pro-poor. They were an early form of positive action (not discrimination). Developing a needs-based library service is a return to this tradition and these values of self-help and self-improvement for those who need us the most but use us the least. (Pateman and Vincent 119)

Librarians interested in returning to community needs assessment for guidance in developing services that result in positive action on issues affecting the poor, at least in urban contexts, need not look only to history for guidance, though. A subset of the community actors available to them as resources and partners have already had measurable (quantitative as well as qualitative) success with their own information outreach initiatives.

HIV/AIDS Information Outreach Projects

Speaking at ALA's annual conference In 1987, less than a year out from despair intoned at St. John's, Yale University Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health Lowell Levin extolled the potential of public libraries to achieve equity in access to information for one particularly marginalized community: those affected by the growing AIDS epidemic.

> [Libraries] are in an absolutely superb position to be of service. They are local, they are usually free, they are convenient, and they are trusted. If it's in the library, it must be legitimate. Most people feel that the library doesn't have anything that isn't good, that isn't right. It's trusted … Libraries are stable and can be counted on as a continuous resource—if budgets aren't cut any further—and they allow for a far more in-depth pursuit of information and ideas. They really don't have any significant competition regarding access to hard copy health materials. (qtd. in Gough and Greenblatt 173-174)

As budgets were indeed further reduced, and as librarians in turn intensified their commitments to assessment instruments that produced the most "rigorous" or "objective" results, that competition for access emerged in the form of information outreach programs specific to the epidemic. Initiatives founded with missions to combat the effects of the epidemic and new organizations sharing the explicit goal of easing access to health information overtook the role of public libraries as the 'continuous resources' of the 1990s and 2000s. Following the National Institutes of Health's 1993 HIV/AIDS Information Conference, the National Library of Medicine (NLM) issued its first request for proposals (RFP) for "AIDS Community Information Outreach Projects." NLM since became the most reliable source of funding to these projects, and its 2006 review of projects it had funded plainly endorsed the community-based approach to need assessment.

Among the 242 projects that earned NLM funding between 1994 and 2005, 130 (54%) were run by community-based organizations, while only 23 (10%) were run by public libraries (Dancy and Dutcher 323-325). Explanations for the disparity in funding can be gleaned from the different approaches taken to addressing one or more of NLM's core information access priorities. NLM made clear the importance of bridging the digital divide and taking full advantage of the information resources of allied organizations in order to alleviate the problems of making healthy behavior decisions and improving health status more generally. Sustainability, expansion, and the skills sharing it enabled among groups were considered indicators of a successful project. Yet whereas community-based organizations obtained special computer equipment, internet connections, and training programs for both staff and clients, public libraries devoted their funding to "enhancing" their existing print and video collections (Dancy and Dutcher 325).

Case Study Opportunity: The AIDS Library

Exacerbating the problem of equitable access to information, HIV/AIDS has since the time of NLM's initial RFP come to disproportionately affect those living in urban poverty. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) studied rates among the urban poor worldwide in 2008 and concluded that they had reached the level of a "general epidemic."[3] A follow-up study sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2010 came to the same conclusion regarding HIV/AIDS rates specifically in impoverished urban areas of the United States (Denning and DiNenno 1). The 2.1% HIV-prevalence rate identified by the CDC placed urban poverty areas in the US among low-income countries like Angola, Ethiopia, and Haiti, all of which, unlike the US, have generalized HIV epidemics in their overall populations (Denning and DiNenno 1).

An instructive example of a community-based information outreach project that has learned to adapt its HIV/AIDS-focused service to the specific needs of this poor, urban population can be made of the AIDS Library in Philadelphia. Founded by AIDS prevention activists John Cunningham and Heshie Zinman barely two months after Levin's address to ALA, the AIDS Library has the distinction of being the nation's first public lending library dedicated solely to the subject (Fraser, Pierce, and Scipio 16). Its mission is "to improve access to health and support services, prevent HIV transmission, and continue to nurture life-long learning" ("The AIDS Library: About us"). To achieve this mission the library provides circulating book and video collections, free literature, educational and training programs, personal reference assistance, and online resources tailored to people affected by HIV/AIDS in the Philadelphia region.

Today, the AIDS Library is an educational program of the nonprofit organization Philadelphia FIGHT (Field Initiating Group for HIV Trials), which since 1990 has operated service programs for behavioral health, peer teaching, and youth health initiatives, as well as a clinic for HIV testing and counseling. The vast majority of those whom Philadelphia FIGHT and the AIDS Library serve are African American, are male, have histories of drug abuse and/or dependence, and live under conditions of urban poverty consistent with the larger demography of HIV/AIDS rates worldwide ("Philadelphia FIGHT: Annual Report" 2-3; Remsen).

Among approximately 100 full-time staff members, Philadelphia FIGHT employs three professional librarians at the AIDS Library: one responsible for collection management, one for public services and reference duties, and one for care outreach. The small professional staff is supported in their duties by a rotation of volunteers and interns, the latter of which primarily work towards course credit in Temple University's

undergraduate program in public health. As of February 2013, nine volunteers and interns assist the librarians with clerical tasks, correspondence with prison inmates affected by HIV/AIDS, and with the annual publication of the library's print and digital reference source, the *Greater Philadelphia AIDS Resource Guide*. (Remsen)

NLM is the single largest source of funding to the AIDS Library, and the library's history of grant-funded programs reflects NLM's expectations that services address community needs. Like its public library counterparts, the AIDS Library was primarily occupied with expanding access to its print and video collections throughout the 1990s, devoting its resources to the early completion of a digital catalog for the Web (Fraser, Pierce, and Scipio 17-18). Patrons did not, by and large, have the requisite computer literacy skills necessary to use the OPAC, and circulation rates at the AIDS Library have only fallen since it went "live." In 2013, Public Services & Reference Librarian Ben Remsen observed that no more than two out of a daily average of 20-30 visiting patrons borrowed from the collections. Because the library subscribes to no medical databases, Philadelphia FIGHT's clinical staff meanwhile relies on academic and medical libraries for their research needs (Remsen).

In response to the need demonstrated by its patrons, the AIDS Library has since focused its resources on computer literacy programs that aim to bridge the digital divide. Since 2007, it has offered its patrons a free "Computer 101" training course, which serves as the first introduction that many get to the world of computing. The immediate and consistent popularity of this program led to expansion into more computer literacy courses tailored to patrons' individual needs and now include introductions to Microsoft Office applications, writing workshops, and online health information seeking classes, among others ("Philadelphia FIGHT: Annual Report" 6). AIDS Library staff, interns, and

volunteers in a lab adjacent to the AIDS Library's main reading room lead all courses. The

recent technology upgrades needed to make these courses possible were obtained

through grants from the AIDS Education and Training Centers Program of the Ryan White

HIV/AIDS Program, a $2.1 billion initiative of the US Department of Health and Human

Services that, like NLM, funds community-based programs that demonstrate need.

Leveraging the success of their computer literacy programs, the AIDS Library and

Philadelphia FIGHT's Education Department recently introduced a GED preparation

course. This course was also well received, but the librarians' sensitivity to their patrons'

highly specialized needs led them from its initiation to devise a plan to have the AIDS

Library itself certified as an official GED testing site. From their experience working closely

with their patrons, they knew that without a facility that accommodated their unique

mental, physical, and financial needs, future test takers were not given an opportunity to

succeed. Planning is now in its final stages, with only the logistics of scheduling and

training test administrators remaining to be completed (Usseb).

Conclusion

The diverse range of community needs assessment methods in use, the

applicability of each to a public library, and generalizability to non-urban contexts demand

closer study. However if public librarians accept that the "Poor People's Policy" represents

their ambitions for social change, and that community needs assessment is a valid

methodology for realizing that change, then the information access services provided to

the urban poor by HIV/AIDS information outreach projects are rare and relevant

precedents for their practice. Their successes are measured by the positive impact they

make on the lives of poor people rather than the efficiency with which they are

implemented. Outside of the scope the national policy statement, these projects have

managed to confront serious obstacles to access born of "illiteracy, illness, social isolation,

homelessness, hunger, and discrimination," with training that prepare them "to identify

poor people's needs and deliver relevant services."

Notes

1. For the purposes of this essay, "poverty" is an economic condition under which one lacks the means to purchase goods and services. A "poor" person is a person living under this general condition. Neither term is intended to reference any federally established guideline or threshold.

2. John Pateman is the Head of Libraries and Learning Inclusion for Lincolnshire County Council, Lincoln, UK. John Vincent is the principal of "The Network," a London-based research and training consultancy specializing in social justice issues in libraries.

3. An epidemic is considered "generalized" when the prevalence rate of a disease is >1% in the general population (Denning and DiNenno 1).

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