

## Summary of the ALA Task Force Survey on ALA Policy 61 Library Services for the Poor

## Policy 61 states:

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 mechanisms 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.

## Policy 61.1 objectives are to:

1. Promote removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges.
2. Promote the publication, production, purchase, and ready accessibility of print and non-print materials that honestly address the issues of poverty and homelessness, that deal with poor people in a respectful way, and that are of practical use to low-income patrons.
3. Promote full, stable, and ongoing funding for existing legislative programs in support of low-income services and for pro-active library programs that reach beyond traditional service-sites to poor children, adults, and families.
4. Promote training opportunities for librarians, in order to teach effective techniques for generating public funding to upgrade library services to poor people.
5. Promote the incorporation of low-income programs and services into regular library budgets in all types of libraries, rather than the tendency to support these projects solely with "soft money" like private or federal grants.
6. Promote equity in funding adequate library services for poor people in terms of materials, facilities, and equipment.
7. Promote supplemental support for library resources for and about low-income populations by urging local, state, and federal governments, and the private sector, to provide adequate funding.
8. Promote increased public awareness--through programs, displays, bibliographies, and publicity--of the importance of poverty-related library resources and services in all segments of society.
9. Promote the determination of output measures through the encouragement of community needs assessments, giving special emphasis to assessing the needs of low-income people and involving both anti-poverty advocates and poor people themselves in such assessments.
10. Promote direct representation of poor people and anti-poverty advocates through appointment to local boards and creation of local advisory committees on service to low-income people, such appointments to include library-paid transportation and stipends.
11. Promote training to sensitize library staff to issues affecting poor people and to attitudinal and other barriers that hinder poor people's use of libraries.

12. Promote networking and cooperation between libraries and other agencies, organizations, and advocacy groups in order to develop programs and services that effectively reach poor people.
13. Promote the implementation of an expanded federal low-income housing program, national health insurance, full-employment policy, living minimum wage and welfare payments, affordable day care, and programs likely to reduce, if not eliminate, poverty itself.
14. Promote among library staff the collection of food and clothing donations, volunteering personal time to anti-poverty activities and contributing money to direct-aid organizations.
15. Promote related efforts concerning minorities and women, since these groups are disproportionately represented among poor people.

ALA charged the Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty Task Force to do the following:

- \*Survey ALA members on their knowledge and implementation of ALA Policy 61
- \* Evaluate member survey responses
- \* Identify key issues and trends
- \* Make recommendations

#### Findings

A small percentage of ALA external members responded to the survey (648 people) and many participants failed to answer all survey questions.

There was only one question that was answered by 100% of respondents (648 people), which was the first question, "At our library the poor are:"

32% of respondents said that poor people were a scarcity at their library, 31% said rather visible, 26% said numerous, and 8% said a majority and 4% said the poor do not use their library.

#### Identifying "poor" people

Some respondents took offense at the survey question number four, "My library identifies the poor in the following manner:" Respondents were upset about the idea of labeling their patrons. However, it is worth noting that 100% of respondents answered the question about the numbers of poor people using their library. This suggests that although the idea of patron categorization is appalling library workers do make class distinctions.

How do people identify poor people? Surprisingly, respondents said that they did not know their library's "official" policy on this and 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." Respondents also mentioned that the poor were those who live near the downtown library. There were also traditional interpretations such as those who receive Pell grants, Head Start participants and those who fall within official federal poverty guidelines, and those who receive free or reduced lunches.

Over 58% of survey respondents skipped the question that asked what specific programs or services libraries provide for the poor even though 65% said that they could measure the impact the library had on their poor patrons. Some respondents who answered said that their library did not offer any discounts or deferred payment options to anyone, regardless of economic status. They also said that those people without a permanent address were not allowed to have a library card. Library workers did say that they offered listings of subsidized housing, offered General Educational Development (or GED) and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, and a mobile library.

42% skipped the question that asked if their library partnered with other agencies and partners. Of those who answered a little more than half did. Partners mentioned were school districts, Head Start and charity groups.

#### No official ALA policy

When respondents were asked why they were not collaborating with agencies and partners to provide services or programs they overwhelming said because there was no process to do so and that there was no "official" policy. Nearly half of respondents did not consult poverty-focused agencies for resources. Those who did consulted child care providers, ESL and Adult Basic Education (ABE) providers, community centers, health and human service agencies, Big Brother/Big Sister, regional councils, State Departments of Education, Department of Social Services Job Service, Legal Aid, Eldercare, domestic violence programs, local chambers of commerce, Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Urban League, and the United Way.

#### Lack of professional guidance on library services to poor people

Over 72% of respondents do not consult ALA Divisions or ALA resources in seeking assistance and information to serve the poor. Respondents suggested ALA publish a guide and provide web pages, programs and resources. Those who did consult ALA Divisions or ALA resources used the HHPTF, Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS) Subcommittee to the Poor, Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Outreach to Young Adults with Special Needs, Public Library Association (PLA), Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT), Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), Association for Small and Rural Libraries and the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA).

#### Training and networking support needed

When asked about what libraries should do for the poor many (85%) advocated sponsor training to sensitize library staff to issues affecting the poor and to attitudinal and other barriers that hinder use of libraries by the poor. 82% said network with and cooperate with other libraries and local agencies, organizations and advocacy groups to develop programs and services to reach the poor. Respondents who chose other 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 (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 language and re-entry into society programs.

## Measurement issues

When answering whether or not respondents knew of any libraries successfully providing services for the poor over 70% of respondents said no. Some respondents questioned what the survey deemed successful.

A large amount, over 41%, of respondents who filled out this survey said they were non-managerial and that they provide direct service to the public.

## Suggestions

Since many survey respondents said they work directly with the public and therefore have an interest in and a stake in the library services for poor people ALA needs to address their concerns.

“Serve the poor as well as we serve the better off”

When asked to complete the sentence, “For a library to serve the poor effectively, it is essential to” one survey respondent said “provide free and equal access to library resources” while another said “serve the poor as well as we serve the better off.” Given the low rate of ALA member survey response and certain hostilities shown when answering some questions the task force recommends that ALA clarify why library services to the poor is integral to our profession, the Library Bill of Rights and the Freedom to Read and not a fringe issue.

Therefore, the task force recommends ALA take a broad based approach to addressing issues of class and library service starting with regular reportage on the subject such as a pro-active monthly *American Libraries* column as well as appointing a permanent ALA staff member to work on the issue. Since many poor patrons appear to be an invisible population ALA should adopt an all encompassing advocacy campaign similar to @ Your Library.

## Team approach needed

Survey respondents remarked that this survey should have been open to all librarians regardless of their ALA membership status since many librarians cannot afford an ALA membership and, like their patrons, understand obstacles to participation and issues of poverty. Furthermore, survey respondents said poverty affects all librarians in some way and that there should be more cross collaboration between various library organizations. Though the Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS) sent out the survey to the OLOS listservs, which do not require ALA membership (for example poor, aging, and rural lists), the task force strongly suggests that library administrators include poor people and poverty focused organizations in library decision-making. It should be noted that this survey should, at some future date, be distributed to homeless and poor people via service organizations and libraries. ALA membership and librarianship should not be a requirement for active participation on this issue.

## Action Items

Add class to article V of the *Library Bill of Rights*.

Ask the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom to partner with the HHPTF and adopt ALA Policy 61 by including it in their *Intellectual Freedom Manual*.

Ask the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom to educate librarians and the general public about the nature and importance of services to the poor as an issue of intellectual freedom in libraries.

Ask the ALA Public Information Office and the Library Administration & Management Association (LAMA) to advocate for library services for poor people and to include poor people in library decision-making.

Ask ALA to appoint a staff member devoted increasing awareness of ALA Policy 61 and needs of the poor and working class. Allow this staff member to work with all interested parties without regard to ALA member status since many librarians actively serving poor people cannot afford ALA membership.

Provide pro-active advocacy columns (implement the @ Your Library Campaign) to *American Libraries* and Office for Literacy and Outreach Services.

Provide a toolkit similar to the Office for Intellectual Freedom's toolkit for libraries interested in serving the poor.

Ask libraries who serve the poor to post their information and resources to the Library Success Wiki page at:  
[http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Services\\_for\\_the\\_Poor\\_and\\_Homeless](http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Services_for_the_Poor_and_Homeless)

Offer ALA distinguished service awards to libraries that successfully serve the poor.

Seek financial assistance for award winning libraries who serve the poor.