

Library Services to People with Special Needs

A shared framework for a stronger future: tales of working with the IFLA Strategy

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Abstract:

Library Services to People with Special Needs Section (LSN) is one of the oldest Sections in IFLA. LSN targets „special needs groups” that include, but are not limited to, people who are in hospitals, nursing homes, and other care facilities; people in prisons; people who are experiencing homelessness; people with physical disabilities; people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deafblind; people with dyslexia; people with cognitive and mental disabilities and Section’s members have been troubled by its name for some time. This paper will explain the importance of having a name that each group that the Section targets is content with it’s name. Also this paper will provide information on how LSN’s past work and future plans are aligned to the IFLA Strategy 2019-2024.

Keywords: IFLA Strategy, LSN, people with disabilities, special needs, terminology

Introduction

Library Services to People with Special Needs Section is one of the oldest Sections in IFLA, dating to 1931. In late 2008, IFLA approved a proposal by the Libraries Serving Disadvantage Persons Section (LSDP) to rename it Library Services to People with Special Needs (LSN). As was the case with previous name changes, this one was felt necessary, not only because it better reflected the section’s current work, but also because the terminology surrounding its areas of concern had again significantly changed. Throughout its long and productive history, the section has remained remarkably true to its mission, thus it continues to advocate for those in the community who cannot make use of conventional library resources [1]. LSN has evolved from a sub-committee concerned with library services for hospital patients to a section dedicated to fostering improved library systems, resources and services for a range of special needs groups. It continues today to work to improve the availability of all forms of library materials to people with special needs and to provide an international forum for discussion of those needs. LSN targets „special needs groups” that include, but are not limited to, people who are in hospitals, nursing homes, and other care facilities; people in prisons; people who

are experiencing homelessness; people with physical disabilities; people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deafblind; people with dyslexia; people with cognitive and mental disabilities. [2]

Terminology

Due to wide range of different groups LSN targets, standing committee members have been troubled by the section's name for some time. Terminology for appropriately addressing different groups is changing mainly because after some time negative connotations begin to be attached to a certain term and also because language is constantly evolving. It is evident that our attitude towards a certain group of people is already reflected in the name we use to address them. According to this understanding, unequal treatment or discrimination begins already in the name with which, perhaps inadvertently, we initially labeled a person less valuable, who lacks something, and thereby reduced him to his lack instead of experiencing him as a person who has some difficulties, but at the same time has abilities, desires and needs like all of us. LSN as a Section is doing its best to use the language that is respectful and informed. In doing so, we have found ourselves taking another look at the term "special needs". While there are some groups that continue to use this term, many if not most people with disabilities question the idea that their needs are "special." LSN believes that it is critical to listen to the language people use about themselves – they know best how they want to be addressed, referred to and described. Respect begins and ends with listening and should be step one in our efforts to truly serve the entire community. That is why LSN have decided to rethink the name of the Section and try to find the name of the Section everyone will be content with.

Results

Because LSN targets such a diverse groups of users LSN as a Section is mainly focused on publishing guidelines unlike the majority of IFLA's Sections and Special interest groups. In the last few years LSN has been working on publishing several guidelines: Guidelines for Library Services to People Experiencing Homelessness; Guidelines for Accessible Libraries and Services for Everyone; Guidelines for Library Services to People in Prisons; Guidelines For Library Services to Displaced Persons; Guidelines for Library Services to Deaf, hard of hearing or Deafblind. LSN can proudly announce that due to results of a survey from 2017-2018 on library policies and practices in support of access to information for people with disabilities that offered a snapshot of library initiatives in different parts of the globe, and was fed into the flagship 'Disability and Development Report' by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), LSN was encouraged by UN DESA to do another survey this year. LSN lead an initiative to capture new insights and developments on serving library users and community members with disabilities by a new survey. Colleagues around the globe were asked to contribute to this initiative by responding to a new survey, and share their own experiences, insights and perspectives! This modular survey invited respondents to focus on the thematic areas they are most comfortable addressing, including:

- National and/or local government policies setting out the work of libraries to serve people with disabilities;
- The work of their National, State and/or Regional libraries to serve people with disabilities;
- The work of their library association to support and champion accessibility;
- And, of course, their own library's policies and practices to meet the informational needs of people with disabilities. This can range from physical accessibility of the library building, to resources and materials in accessible formats in library collections,

to dedicated library services for people with special needs – in such areas as lifelong learning, employment, health literacy, etc. [3]

The survey was conducted online via Alchemer at the end of May until mid of June this year and in the end had 870 responses from more than 40 countries. “Disability and Development Report” by UN DESA is due to be published in June, 2023. There is much work to be done until the Report is finished but it is such an important task to represent IFLA and equitable access to information and knowledge that lies at the heart of the mission of libraries – and accessibility as a crucial part of it, to the UN.

Aligned with the IFLA Strategy 2019-2024 [4]

LSN's work is intertwined with almost all Key Initiatives of the IFLA Strategy but mainly through:

Key initiative 1 Strengthen the Global Voice of Libraries.

1.2 LSN is building a strong presence in international organizations and meetings as a valued partner through the collaboration with UN. The UN report will go around the globe sending powerful message that libraries contribute to helping people with disabilities.

Key initiative 2. Inspire and enhance professional practice

2.3 Through developing standards, guidelines, and other materials that foster best professional practice LSN is enhancing librarianship as a field.

Key initiative 3. Connect and empower the field.

3.4 LSN is empowering libraries by helping them to improve their programs and services through guidelines and definitely through collaboration with other Sections. For example - Libraries Serving Persons with Print Disabilities Section, Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section, Libraries for Children and Young Adults Section etc.

Future plans and the IFLA Strategy

By following IFLA Strategy Key initiative 2. Inspire and enhance professional practice or better 2.3 Develop standards, guidelines, and other materials that foster best professional practice) as already mentioned in this paper, LSN will research feasibility of Section's name change and try to find the name of the Section everyone agrees upon and LSN will do it in collaboration with LPD, IFLA HQ and other interested Sections and SIGs. The research preceding work on writing Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder one of the rare groups of users LSN has never written Guidelines about, already started. Last but not least important, every year after WLIC, LSN writes a WLIC Accessibility report that is being send to IFLA HQ. Several years ago LSN wrote Guidelines for an accessible conference and a few documents on how to make presentations accessible to all. LSN will do it again this year covering this year's WLIC combined with last year's WLIC due to announcement of WLIC 2023 being hybrid.

Acknowledgments

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References

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