

Lighting the Way Providing Timely Resources for Underserved Populations

Jaime Eastman and J. Joseph Prince



Jaime Eastman is a Senior Public Services Librarian for the Plano (TX) Public Library and serves as the Family Place Libraries coordinator for the Harrington branch. J. Joseph Prince is the Curriculum and Outreach Educator for the Jerome Library at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. They are both co-chairs of ALSC's Library Service to Underserved Children and Their Caregivers Committee.



Libraries provide access to valuable information, resources, and services. Yet, despite our best efforts, some populations remain overlooked or underserved.

For libraries, these patrons struggle with access to, use of, or representation in our collections, programs, and services. These barriers may result from language, financial status, race, gender, sexual orientation, or specific skills and abilities. As community and cultural institutions, we must not provide any patron with less than adequate—or better yet, exemplary—service.

The Library Service to Underserved Children and Their Caregivers committee (LSUCTC) hopes to help identify and bridge these gaps, serving as advocates to connect leadership and frontline staff with information and resources to support, serve, and better represent the entirety of our communities. We hope to inspire collective investment in these users and their unique needs.

Creating inclusive libraries must remain a priority; navigating a global pandemic means our conversations must include both virtual and in-person applications. At its core, inclusivity ensures all users have access to our services, provides representation and respect for all populations, and offers variety and authenticity in our collections, resources, and programming. We must engage in uncomfortable conversations, make intentional choices, and learn and grow together. While individual library needs vary greatly, our overall goals for identifying and reaching underserved populations intersect.

1. **Know your unique community.** Take some time to survey, talk to leaders and advocacy groups, ask questions, and learn. Engage experts who can help provide guidance and champion valuable partnerships.
2. **Ask for help.** Admitting you're not an expert or authority leads to growth. Learn from those with the knowledge and experience to reach and support your unique communities. Ask where your efforts will be most helpful and appreciated.
3. **Be intentional.** Identifying and serving historically marginalized populations requires concentrated efforts to make changes and challenge assumptions. Give your work the time and effort it deserves.
4. **Research and learn.** Not every effort will be a success. Learn from each what you can do differently or better. Ask questions, but more importantly, be willing to listen to the answers. Have the humility to admit if you've made a mistake.

To provide resources for and about underserved populations, LSUCTC has spent the past few months gradually rolling out a toolkit.¹ Every other month, we highlight a traditionally underserved population, providing context and background to the population and providing germane resources. In every installment, librarians will find

- **Recommended read alouds:** a minimum of five picture books related to the topic that could be read aloud during programming.
- **Professional resources:** a list of resources from within the last ten years providing deeper context and understanding of the featured population.
- **Community resources:** a list of relevant local, state, and/or national resources librarians can turn to for bolstering their programming and resources.

Select installments may also include the following resource categories:

- **Recommended apps:** links to an app or list of apps relevant to the featured population.
- **Materials for the children's room:** purchases (with links to the products) that would enhance the children's room in a public or school library.
- **Programming materials:** a curated list of materials helpful in providing programming for this population.
- **Publishers and vendors:** Organizations and companies offering materials specific to this population.
- **Successful library programs:** successful endeavors from across the country.

How does the committee determine which underserved populations will be featured in the toolkit? Collectively, LSUCTC has identified communities of which we are a part or in which we have a vested interest. Similarly, we solicited feedback in both a 2019 survey and in a call issued through an ALSC blog

post in September 2020.² We hope to tackle many of those populations in the coming months.

The process for building each toolkit page is detail-driven. Each committee member is part of a pairing that spends two months researching, gathering resources, soliciting recommendations, and drawing on personal/professional experiences to inform the materials that eventually populate the toolkit page. These pages are periodically revisited and updated or refreshed with more current information and best practices. In this way, we hope that toolkit remains timely and vibrant, offering visitors relevant resources.

After each toolkit page has been published, we devote the following month to highlighting resources from the page and/or providing additional information about the topic on the ALSC blog. Our long-term goal is to heavily feature and promote an exemplary library program for each targeted population. We feel very strongly about elevating the wonderful work done by children's librarians across the country.

As of the date this column was submitted, two toolkit pages have been introduced: Autism & Sensory Processing Disorders³ and Financial Insecurity & Homelessness.⁴ Later in 2020, we rolled out a toolkit page that focuses on serving Spanish-speaking populations, and in February 2021, we released a page, which we collaborated on with the Children and Technology committee, devoted to technology accessibility. You can find all of our toolkit pages online at any time and featured on the ALSC blog as they release.

Our work improves through collaboration and communication. You can support our efforts by sharing your own suggestions for future toolkit topics, encouraging conversations, and sharing your own resources and endeavors. &

Reach the LSUCTC at lsuctc@gmail.com.

References

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