



Rewriting the American Library Association Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated or Detained

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Libraries can be a lifeline for people who are incarcerated or detained, their families and communities, yet library and information provision in American carceral settings varies wildly from state to state, and institution type to institution type. In this Commentary piece we describe how the ALA (with support from the Mellon Foundation) supported the work of writing a new standard for carceral library provision in the United States that better meets the needs of a justice-impacted people and their families. The new Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated or Detained provides concise recommendations and longer "Where it Worked" (WIW) narratives, showcasing how carceral librarians can partner with a broad range of stakeholders to meet the literacy, learning, legal, and recreational needs of individuals held in jails, prisons, detention facilities, juvenile facilities, immigration facilities, or prison work camps, whether public or private, military or civilian, in the United States and its territories. The new Standards explicitly address the needs of women, LGBTQIA+ people, the aged, people with dementia, people with a range of disabilities, and people who speak primary languages other than English. Library funding is often at the discretion of administrators who are not trained librarians, and who may not be aware of the extensive literature and evidence that demonstrates the importance of privacy of information access for incarcerated people (Austin 2021; Finlay and Bates 2019; Vogel 1995). The effects of restricted access to libraries and information have life-long implications for people who are incarcerated or detained, both inside carceral facilities and after release.



In 2021, Co-PIs Jeanie Austin and Rachel Kinnon of San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) were awarded \$2,000,000 from the Mellon foundation for “Expanding Information Access for Incarcerated People,” a collaboration with the American Library Association (ALA). This grant-funded effort supports numerous initiatives, including a long-overdue update of ALA’s 1992 *Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions*. In 2021, ALA’s Executive Director, Tracie Hall, and colleagues in the Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services, convened a group of around 40 people with varied experiences using, working in or partnering with carceral libraries. The group met virtually in late 2021 to discuss their experiences and insights about what new standards should include. Five project managers were selected by ALA to lead this effort, and each member of the larger working group selected two committees on which to serve: Research, Drafting, Review, Convening, and General. These subgroups determined their own schedules for meeting and collaboration, and full working group meetings were held ad hoc.

The document that emerged from this large collaborative effort is the *Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated or Detained*. It provides concise recommendations and longer “Where it Worked” (WIW) narratives, showcasing how carceral librarians can partner with a broad range of stakeholders to meet the literacy, learning, legal, and recreational needs of individuals held in jails, prisons, detention facilities, juvenile facilities, immigration facilities, or prison work camps, whether public or private, military or civilian, in the United States and its territories. The new *Standards* explicitly address the needs of women, LGBTQIA+ people, the aged, people with dementia, people with a range of disabilities, and people who speak primary languages other than English.

Drafting Process

The Drafting subgroup for the new *Standards* include people who were formerly incarcerated, carceral facility librarians, academics, and non-profit leaders, representing a wide spectrum of identities mirroring those the new *Standards* seek to address. The Drafting group met weekly from March to December 2022, and elected Sharaya Olmeda as chair. Under her leadership, we began a careful clause-by-clause comparison of the 1992 ALA *Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* with a working draft of the fourth edition of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) *Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners*—the third edition was published in 2005. We also shared our own diverse experiences with American carceral library services,

and Victoria Van Hyning and her students Samantha Tejada and Britney Bibeault, at the University of Maryland, conducted a literature review, which is freely available (for anyone with internet access) via a Zotero library.

Drafting group member Ray James was one of the original authors of *The Prisoner’s Right to Read* (PRR) and served on the IFLA *Guidelines* writing group in 2021. He provided invaluable insight into how PRR, the IFLA *Guidelines*, and our new ALA *Standards* could be complementary, yet distinct. *The PRR* is a short document that was commissioned and published by ALA in 2010 and amended in 2014 and 2019. Its authors argue that information access is a human right and that “the denial of intellectual freedom—the right to read, to write, and to think—diminishes the human spirit of those segregated from society” (2019). *The PRR* speaks out against censorship, and in favor of privacy and the dignity of all who are incarcerated or detained, no matter their age, race, ethnicity, or other intersecting identities. The IFLA *Guidelines* provide greater detail about carceral library provision around the world, while the new ALA *Standards* provide detailed guidance for the American context, supplemented with WIW examples to encourage adoption of best practices.

The new ALA *Standards* are designed to push against the status quo of minimal, censorious, and restrictive information access in American carceral facilities. Our goal is to raise the bar for information access for people who are incarcerated or detained by providing librarians with the language and tools they need to advocate for appropriate



staffing, resourcing, materials, space, and programming, and especially greater accessibility, privacy, representation, and technology provision. The section titles are:

1. Access
2. Administration
3. Staffing
4. Budget
5. Facilities
6. Programs and Services
7. Library Materials
8. Performance Assessment

Library standards with the potential to impact 2.3 million people (Sawyer and Wagner 2020, 4) in the US carceral system should be written and carefully reviewed by those who are most impacted. Therefore, in addition to convening a diverse working group in 2021, Hall and ALA leadership convened a public hearing about library services for incarcerated people at ALA's annual conference in Washington, DC, in June 2022. Attendees included formerly incarcerated and detained people, current public and carceral facility librarians, authors, politicians, educational non-profit leaders, and academics, who shared their knowledge and experience of carceral libraries and information access. Participants spoke on panels, took part in listening sessions, and were provided a complete draft table of contents (TOC) and draft language for several subsections of the new ALA *Standards*. They were asked to provide feedback on this TOC, and submit WIW stories about their own experiences of providing or using carceral library services.

Being innovative in carceral settings can be high-risk, and low-reward, but when implemented successfully, may greatly improve the lives of people who are incarcerated or detained. The WIW stories are vital to the new *Standards* because they

broaden the number of institutions and voices represented in the work and provide examples of positive efforts and outcomes that will hopefully facilitate adoption of good practice. These examples are vital because carceral facilities are such closed environments, so it can be difficult to hear about the good work others are doing, much less emulate it.

From June to September 2022, around 30 stakeholders offered feedback on the TOC. This feedback informed the Drafting committee's full draft of the 8 sections, which was edited by the Review group (October 2022) and shared with roughly 30 additional external experts in carceral issues at a convening at the University of Chicago's Center for Race, Politics, and Culture at the Logan Center. In total, more than 60 readers commented on the Standards before their publication in 2024.

Conclusion

The *Standards* will be published as print and e-books by ALA press in 2024. Two thousand printed copies will be distributed to carceral facilities around the US, through the "Expanding Information Access for Incarcerated People" Mellon grant. This will mark the true beginning of the work. Standards and manifestos are insufficient in themselves: we need to raise awareness and incentivize adoption of the *Standards*. This means getting them into the hands of incarcerated users, and the librarians, carceral staff, and those who serve—or may stand as barriers to—people's information needs. We must also ensure that policy makers and educators understand the value of library and information access, and train future generations of librarians who can work effectively in or with carceral facilities. The urgent societal needs that sparked this effort remain and our efforts to meet the challenges of serving information needs for all members of our society must persist, because information access is a fundamental human right.

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