# PROVIDING INFORMATION TO ALL PEOPLE

"Information is power, and a healthy democracy must guarantee access to this information and power for all of its citizens."

*—Sarah Hawthorne, Jeffrey Denge, and Norman Combs, "The Law and Library Access for Patrons With Disabilities."*

## Providing information access to people with print disabilities

The library profession has many service specialties within it, such as youth services librarian, adult services librarian, and database specialists. Instructing patrons as to how to use the library and library services is their strength and challenge. Most staff enjoy seeing patrons locate useful information and are eager to see them soar.

Service to patrons with disabilities is a task that all librarians should take on, since people with disabilities cross all cultures and demographics. As library staff work with patrons with disabilities, they will be able to pass onto them the tools to help them achieve equity in education and in the workplace.

Assistive or adaptive technology has previously not been available in libraries, so people with disabilities, such as visual impairment, haven't had a good reason to visit traditional libraries. With recent technical developments, librarians now have the opportunity to teach some people with print impairments how to access information using adaptive technology and of describing to patrons the enormity of libraries.

Automation librarians who develop and maintain library Web sites also have the opportunity to enrich the educational goals for people with disabilities. Those who take on the responsibility of designing and maintaining Web sites accessible to those using screen readers or refreshable Braille displays receive the gratification of knowing that they are developing electronic curb cuts that will allow people with disabilities to access information and be empowered.

### The American Library Association's Library Services for People with Disabilities Policy

The American Library Association has issued a "Library Services for People with Disabilities" policy. It recognizes that people with disabilities are a large and neglected minority in the community and states that libraries play a catalytic role in the lives of people with disabilities by facilitating their full participation in society. The document provides an overview of Disability Law and outlines the infrastructure needs for this population, including assistive technology.

*On January 16, 2001 the ALA Council unanimously approved the Library Services for People with Disabilities Policy.*

See text at: http://ala.org/ascla/access_policy.html.

### Who are the people with disabilities who cannot access information?

A disability is legally defined as "a physical or mental impairment that limits a person from a major life activity." Some people are born with disabilities, others acquire them as they age or as a result of a disease or injury. Some disabilities are temporary and others permanent.

People with disabilities are considered a minority group, but are the only group that anyone may join in a blink of an eye. Most people have a time when they are temporarily able to experience the challenges faced by people who cannot read text. For instance, seasonal allergies or dry eyes may limit the ability for a person to read, or a severe headache may limit the ability to comprehend what is being read. Fortunately, these temporary impairments pass and most people are able to once again read the newspaper, a novel, or a report.

Many physical conditions cause people to access information in different ways. Generally speaking, most disabilities require individual solutions. That is to say, equipment for someone who is blind and uses Braille would be different from that which would be appropriate for a person who has some vision and cannot read Braille.

As people are individual, so too are their disabilities. Some people may be legally blind, but still may be able to see light, shapes, and some large print. Some people may not have dexterity but still can control a finger. The disability definitions offered below are those that are typically accepted when discussions of computer access arise.

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*When working with people with disabilities, never hesitate to ask the individual how he or she wishes to access the information. For example, to ask, "Do you have any vision?" is acceptable.*

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### Diversity and disability

People with disabilities should be included in every facet of life and community and in that vein should be able to enjoy the full range of experiences that libraries give to society. Libraries are one of the greatest and most respected community resources, and therefore should lead the way for inclusion of people with disabilities in all facets of life. Technology makes access and inclusion possible; library policy and staff make it a reality.