

Services to Older Adults: Preliminary Findings from Three Maryland Public Libraries

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This article reports preliminary findings of an evaluation of the services to older adults at three public libraries in Maryland. Data were collected in spring 2007 through interviews with nine library administrators and staff, and surveys with twenty-six older adult patrons at the three libraries. Approximately eight hours of observation were also conducted to gather contextual data to supplement the interview and survey data. The seven guidelines laid out by the American Library Association (1999) were used to guide the design of data collection instruments and the analysis of data. One key finding is that these libraries offer few programs and services geared to healthy and active older adults, thus leaving much room for improvement in the future. Interestingly, the libraries still received high praise from the older adult participants, a phenomenon that requires further examination. A number of recommendations are offered to help public libraries to better serve the aging population in their communities.

Keywords: Older adults, aging, public libraries, user satisfaction, American Library Association Guidelines

Introduction

The population of the United States is aging rapidly. By 2005, 36.8 million Americans were age 65 and above, a 9.4% increase since 1995 (Administration on Aging, 2006). The number of older adults in the country will continue to rise in the coming years as the Baby Boomers age. It is projected that the population of people 65 or older will expand to 40 million in 2010, and reach 55 million by 2020—a 36% increase in that decade alone (Administration on Aging, 2006).

American public libraries have traditionally focused most of their resources on the frail, homebound, and older adults residing in institutions. While these initiatives were well-intentioned, they sometimes came at the expense of the ma-

jority of older adults who are active and generally healthy (Kleiman, 1995; Moore, 1985; Robertson, 2001; Van Fleet, 1989). In addition, similar to what Bundy (2005) found among the Australian libraries he studied, many public libraries in the United States do not have older adult specialists, or services and programs geared to older adults. Part of the challenge is that many public libraries, especially smaller and rural libraries, face increasing budgetary problems (Gordon, Gordon, Moore, & Heurtz, 2003; Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2004). But even when public libraries do offer these services, they are sometimes mixed with programs for other age groups (Van Fleet, 1989). As a result, older adults may not always receive age-specific attention (Van Fleet, 1995).

In this article, we report the major findings of the evaluation of library services to older adults at three public libraries in Maryland. Along the way, we aim to emphasize that older adults are not a homogenous user group, but rather have diverse interests, skills and needs, which public libraries need to better address. Finally, we propose potential further research directions, and recommendations to help public libraries better meet the needs of older adult patrons, including both those who are homebound or institutionalized and those who are more healthy and active.

Though the study described here has limitations with regards to the small sample size and the not-identical data collection instruments used at each library, we believe that the findings are still useful for public libraries nationwide. In particular, library staff could use our methods, findings, and recommendations to evaluate and improve their own programs and services to older adults, which could help to attract older adult patrons. Not only do public libraries potentially stand to gain assistance from older adults as volunteers, advisors, or staff, but these "satisfied customers" could be strong allies when county governments are deciding what public services should receive more funding (Mates, 2004).

Literature Review

Previous research has addressed the diverse information needs and interests of the older population (Jones, Morrow, Morris, Rites, & Wekstein, 1992; Moore & Young, 1985; Palmer, 1988; Wicks 2004). Income, transportation, health and healthcare, housing, nutrition, homemaker services, employment, consumer needs, legal problems, companionship, and nursing home care are among the most common types of information in which that older adults are generally interested (Moore &

Young, 1985). Other researchers have pointed out that these diverse interests have encouraged older adults to use the mass media, including various print sources, radio, and television for finding information relating to personal needs and leisure activities (Chatman, 1991; Williamson, 1998). Older adults also rely on interpersonal contacts—especially family and friends—as sources of information (Wicks, 2004; Williamson, 1998).

In addition to their diverse information needs and interests, older adults themselves are diverse, including the full range of cultural, ethnic and racial group-affiliations that occur in the larger society as a whole. There are also different age stages among the older adult population. It has been documented that the "young-old" (60–74), "old-old" (75–84), and "oldest-old" (85+) have different skill levels, interests, and at varying stages in life (Kleiman, 1995; Turock, 1982; Wicks, 2004). Key among the older adults entering into the "young-old" stage are the Baby Boomers who are challenging earlier stereotypes about what it means to be an older adult through the ways that their interests and capabilities affect how they adjust to retirement age (Dempsey, 2007; Hildreth, 2006; Kleiman, 1995; Moen, 2003).

With the onset of the Internet boom of the last decade, more attention has been given to older adults' use—or rather, non-use—of computers for information. While greater numbers of American older adults are using computers, only 35% over 65 use the Internet. In comparison, 90% of Americans 18–29 are going online (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008). While age-related changes have contributed to difficulties for older adults trying to use computers (Chaparro et al., 2000; Charness & Holley, 2001; Smith, Sharit, & Czaja, 1999), lack of training and technical support is another major factor affecting older adults' use of computers and the

Internet (Xie, 2003). Most public libraries have not been able to help to address the generational digital divide, mainly because budgetary shortfalls at public libraries do not allow them to provide computer training for older adults (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2004).

While some attention has been paid to the generational digital divide, relatively little is known about potential gender differences in older adults' computer use. An earlier study found that factors such as age and gender can influence attitudes towards technology (Kraus & Hoyer, 1983). Barnett and Adkins (2001) examined the online experiences of older women in Australia and found that even though these older women had different levels of technical skill, each of them was able to find ways to use computers and the Internet to build relationships, and stay mentally active. Another study examined older adults' range of motion in their wrists, and found that older men may have more difficulty using computer input devices than older women (Chaparro et al., 2000).

In evaluating public library services to older adults, the American Library Association's Guidelines for Older Adults (American Library Association [ALA], 1999) can be very useful (there are seven sections in the ALA guidelines, which we will describe in more detail when reporting the major findings of our study; see the Findings section below). These guidelines were first created in 1975 and have been updated twice in 1987 and 1999. The ALA Guidelines are pertinent to services to older adults because they stress three important things: (1) Empowerment in terms of allowing older adults to have a say in the creation of services for older adults; (2) A focus on finding ways to help older adults to stay healthy mentally, physically, and socially; and (3) The important role of technology in improving the lives of older adults, especially through Internet usage.

The Present Study

The findings discussed in this article are based on research conducted in a graduate course entitled *Older Adults' Information Needs, Behaviors, and Resources* at the University of Maryland in College Park. A main assignment in the course required teams of three to five students to select a public library and write a report evaluating its past, current, and planned services to older adults. The teams were each required to use a combination of research methods in order to collect data from library administrators/staff and older adult patrons at their chosen library. Three public libraries were studied because they were easily accessible for the members on each team, and were where some of the students previously worked or volunteered. Data collection instruments were based on the ALA Guidelines (1999) and questionnaires used in an Australian study (Bundy, 2005).

Key Research Questions

Key research questions included:

- What are the past, current and planned public library services and programs for older adults?
- What are the main reasons behind these services and programs for older adults? (e.g., library administrators/staff's perceptions of the characteristics, needs and preferences of older adult patrons in their communities, available funding).
- What are older adult patrons' perceptions of their libraries' services and programs for people of their age?

Research Sites

We report here major findings from three public libraries: Library A and Library B, both of which are branch libraries of the Prince George's County

Memorial Library System (PGCMLS) in Maryland. Library C is a branch library of the Montgomery County Public Library (MCPL) in Maryland. These libraries all serve ethnically-diverse populations. Both Library A and Library B have significant African American populations; Library B also has a large Hispanic or Latino population. Meanwhile, Library C has a relatively large Asian population. More detailed demographic information about the geographic area of each of these libraries is reported in Table 1.

Staff Interviews

Each team of student researchers contacted the administration and gained permission to conduct interviews with staff, administer survey questionnaires among older adult patrons of the library, and conduct observation of the older adult patrons. The student researchers wanted to get input from as many view points as possible, so they conducted interviews with library staff at varying levels of hierarchy, including branch managers, refer-

ence librarians, and circulation staff. With the exception of one interview conducted over the phone, all interviews with library staff were conducted face-to-face and took place at the respective library. While the questions in the interviews were worded somewhat differently by each team, they all centered around the three key research questions.

Older Adult Patron Surveys

Older adult patrons' insights were gained through surveys. A total of 26 older adults filled out the survey questionnaires. More detailed information about these older adult participants is shown in Table 2.

To select older adult patrons for the surveys, the student researchers approached patrons that "looked" like older adults and, after explaining the purpose of this study, the researchers then asked these patrons if they would be willing to participate in the study. Interested patrons were given the consent form (approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Maryland) and any

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Areas of the Three Research Sites.

	Library A	Library B	Library C	U.S.
Total Population	50,269	14,733	47,388	281,421,906
Percentage of population age 65 and over	9.4%	10.9%	13.1%	12.4%
Race/Ethnicity				
Black or African American	30.8%	41.0%	9.1%	12.3%
White	62.6%	39.5%	67.8%	75.1%
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	2.9%	18.1%	11.7%	12.5%
Asian	2.9%	4.0%	14.8%	3.6%
Median Household Income (dollars)	76,778	45,355	68,074	41,994
Non-English Speakers (at home)	9.1%	26.6%	36.9%	17.9%
Minimum Education Level (of Ages 25+)				
High school graduate or higher	94.7%	80.5%	89.1%	80.4%
Bachelor's Degree or higher	43.0%	26.6%	52.9%	24.4%

Source: US Census Bureau (2000).

Table 2: Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Older Adult Survey Participants.

	Library A	Library B	Library C	Total
Gender				
Female	5	5	5	15
Male	6		5	11
Total	11	5	10	26
Race/Ethnicity				
White	9	4	7	20
Black or African American	2	1		3
Asian			3	3
Total	11	5	10	26

questions the patrons had were answered by the researchers. After obtaining the signed consent form, each patron was asked to fill out the questionnaire, which took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The student researchers remained close by to assist the older adults with any questions that arose during the process of filling out the questionnaire.

All three teams developed questionnaires that contained both open- and close-ended questions. The open-ended questions allowed the older adults to answer some of the questions in their own words (e.g., “Do you have any thoughts you would like to share about the public library and its services?”).

Some of the questions posed to the older adults by the teams required that the older adults also answer questions by way of a Likert Scale. An example of one of these questions is “Based on previous interactions, how likely is it that you will ask the library staff for assistance in the future?” The older adult participants could select one of the following anchors: “very likely,” “likely,” “neutral,” “unlikely,” or “very unlikely.”

Library Observation

Another method of data collection was approximately eight hours of observation. Specifically, the researchers wanted to discover which departments or areas of

the libraries older adults regularly use. With regards to older adults’ behavior, the researchers also attempted to observe the ways that older adults interact with library staff and other patrons, as well as the layout and accessibility of the libraries.

Major Findings

The seven sections in the ALA Guidelines for Older Adults (ALA, 1999) are used to guide the description of the findings below, including whether and to what extent each of the libraries addressed issues related to public library services to older adults.

1. Integrate Older Adult Services into Library’s Overall Budget and Service Program

Overall, the three libraries that we studied budgeted little towards older adult programs. None of them employed an older adult specialist, but there is a staff member in charge of coordinating older adult services for the whole PGCMLS—which includes Libraries A and B. This person helps to arrange delivery of library materials to nursing homes and senior centers in Prince Georges County, and a similar arrangement exists for the MCLs, to which Library C belongs. It was discovered through staff interviews that

none of the libraries had any separate funding for older adult services, or could give a definitive answer as to when such services might be created. One exception was that both Library A and B did maintain a budget for a large-print collection.

2. Provide Older Adult Access to Library Buildings, Materials, Programs and Services

All three libraries offered homebound services and were American Disabilities Act-compliant. Yet, some problems with accessibility were nonetheless apparent. For example, one librarian at Library A had difficulty using a wheelchair at the entrance because the sidewalk ramp was "too steep." Construction at Library C also caused access problems for patrons. Nevertheless, many of the older adult participants at Library C described their enjoyment of the layout and look of the branch itself, which gave the library a welcoming ambience. Other positive aspects of Library C include both a Disability Resource Center and a Special Needs Library housed in the same building. Yet, the researchers at all three branches noticed through observation some minor access issues, such as the need for bolder call numbers on book spines, better lighting, and bookcases that are more easily reached by older adults.

3. Treat All Older Adults with Respect at Every Service Point

Each library received high praise from their older adult patrons. At Library A, all older adults surveyed agreed that the reference librarians were friendly and helpful. However, there were some differences in gender by responses at Library A: while the older women participants were most satisfied with the library's cleanliness, older men liked its accessibility. Meanwhile, the staff at Library B also

received generally high marks from its older adult patrons. In fact, four of the five older adult participants at Library B said that even though their information needs had changed as they grew older, Library B accommodated them well. One older adult at Library B even went so far as describing public libraries as "one of the greatest public services we have in the U.S." At Library C, eight out of the ten older adult participants said that their experiences at this library's information desk were "very helpful," and the remaining two said they were "somewhat helpful." When asked to list three things that they liked best about Library C, the older adults replied that they appreciated the helpful and friendly staff, the beauty and spaciousness of the library, and its materials.

4. Utilize the Experience and Expertise of Older Adults

The ALA guidelines request that libraries should take actions to ensure that older adults are visible as volunteers, staff, and on advisory boards at public libraries (ALA, 1999). With regards to volunteerism, there are benefits for both the library and older adults. For one thing, many older adults are retired and able to assist with activities that may be harder for libraries to accomplish with limited staff. Growing empirical evidence also suggests that "volunteering slows the decline in self-reported health and functioning levels, slows the increase in depression levels, and improves mortality rates" (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005, p. 31). Unfortunately, even though there were some older adult volunteers at all three libraries that we studied, none of these libraries had plans to recruit older adults as staff or to create senior advisory boards. Also, none of these libraries were offering training for staff on how to communicate with older adult patrons.

5. Provide and Promote Information and Resources on Aging

With regards to information and resources on aging, we noticed that while all three libraries had print and online resources pertaining to retirement planning and health issues, collection development in these areas did not appear to be emphasized. Our patron surveys revealed that older adult participants at all three libraries mostly favored information about entertainment and leisure, while fiction, travel, and retirement sources were also popular. Many of these older adults also read magazines and newspapers, and checked-out DVDs/videos. It is noteworthy that Library C has a large Asian user population, and as mentioned earlier (Table 2), three of the older adult survey participants at Library C were of Asian origin. Two of these participants were observed browsing AV materials, and seeking recreational books, while the third, a man who said he was originally from China, came to the library to find materials on "citizenship."

6. Provide Library Services Appropriate to the Needs of Older Adults

Neither of the participating branch libraries of the PGCMLS offer many lifelong learning opportunities specifically designed for older adults, though there are classes open to all age groups that older adults may attend. For example, staff at Library A indicated that book discussions are popular among older adults, and Library B offers free programs such as bilingual tutoring and English conversation clubs for non-English speakers.

One especially important program for older adults that none of the three libraries offered was computer instruction geared for older adults. Staff at Library C said that since there are twenty-two computer terminals located near the information desk, a li-

brarian could assist older adults with technological problems. Meanwhile, although no computer classes were currently being offered at Library B to older adults, librarians at that branch did give individualized sessions to teach patrons how to use databases available on their computers. Library B staff claimed that about 20% of the patrons using this service were aged 65 or older. A computer class for all age groups had previously been offered there, but was discontinued due to low attendance.

7. Collaborate with Community Agencies and Groups Serving Older Adults

ALA guidelines require that public libraries try to collaborate with other organizations that offer senior-oriented services such as community or senior centers, veterans' organizations, or educational institutions in order to foster library/local community involvement and life-long learning initiatives (ALA, 1999). Regarding collaborations, Library C was not found to be partnering with any outside groups, except for a program with the Counselors to America's Small Business Association (SCORE). SCORE is a national non-profit association that allows people to learn from retired business executives about the "formation, growth and success of small business nationwide" (SCORE, n.d.). Library C's role is that of a host facility for people interested in attending the SCORE meetings. The only collaboration found at Library A was that the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) provides annual tax services to older adults at this library. Meanwhile, Library B has been collaborating with other organizations such as developing a classic films program with a local theater, and allowing the literacy council to meet on its premises, but they were not partnering with groups that specialize in older adults' needs.

Discussion

As reported above, each library that we studied received high marks from the older adult participants, despite the overall lack of older adult-oriented services as recommended by the ALA Guidelines (ALA, 1999). This was the case especially with regards to the older adult participants' attitudes towards library staff. The older adult participants generally felt that reference assistance was friendly and helpful in attaining needed information. The question that these findings lead us to ask was why these older adults were satisfied, despite the issues our study identified (e.g., each of these libraries had some access difficulties, they offered few, if any, services and programs to active older adults, did not have older adult specialists/advisory boards, and did not appear to be planning any future services to remedy these issues). One possible answer might be that having older adult-related programming may not be as important to older adult patrons as having the friendly, positive atmosphere that a public library can offer. Older adults may simply enjoy having interactions with a library staff member who is friendly, appears knowledgeable, and takes the time to listen to patrons' information requests (Durrance, 1989, 1995). Having the chance to speak casually with a friendly reference librarian may help to meet the social and emotional needs of the older adults, especially those who live alone or far from loved ones. Our older adult participants may be happy with the sense of "place" that their public library offers to them. This is further illustrated in some of the Library C participants' responses that the renovations at that branch had made their visits even more enjoyable because of a more welcoming ambiance.

Another possible answer might be that these older adults were not dissatisfied because they were not aware that these shortcomings existed at their libraries. In other words, it could be a case of not

missing what you do not have. Perhaps these older adults expected that few programs and services that took into account diversities of their interest and needs could exist at their library. However, since the three libraries did not appear to aggressively publicize any programs that they *do* offer, it probably should come as no surprise that the older adults are not aware that their needs could be better addressed. In fact, one respondent at Library B said that she was not aware that the library offered one-to-one instruction on how to use databases to search the Internet.

To determine the reasons behind this finding, more systematic examination of older adult patrons is necessary, including asking older adult patrons how aware they are of services that are (not) offered at their branch. This would allow us to examine whether the general level of satisfaction we found in the older adult participants in this study would be different if older adult patrons were to become more conscious of the extent to which the services offered by their branch meet the ALA guidelines. Perhaps the general level of satisfaction might be lower if the older adults believed that they were being short-changed with regards to services. On the other hand, responses to a question that asked older adult patrons to rate the services (e.g., access to older adult-specific materials, computer instruction, helpful and knowledgeable staff) that they believe are the most important to their needs, might help in understanding what it is that older adults really want from their public libraries.

Another issue that deserves attention is whether the ALA guidelines need to be updated. While each of the seven guidelines were useful for structuring this project, the fact that few of the three libraries met any of them—yet the older adults were still generally satisfied—points to the possible need to revise the guidelines. Emphasis on guidelines as compared to others may be lacking. For instance, is

Guideline #3 (“Treat all older adults with respect at every service point”) more important to a library’s success with older adults than #8 (“Utilize the experience and expertise of older adults”)? Our findings seem to support such an argument, though more systematic examination is necessary before any firm conclusion can be drawn.

In addition, future research needs to take into account the potential impact of the time of the day on the sample selection and, consequently, on the research findings. The surveys for this study were conducted during Friday and Saturday afternoons. How different would the findings have been if the surveys were conducted during the evenings, when older adults who work in the daytime visit the library? Could the older adults who visit the library during the mornings and afternoons have more free time to learn about computers than older adults who have to work during the day? These questions deserve further attention.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we recommend that public libraries interested in better serving their communities’ aging populations: (1) Use computer classes to promote collaboration and lifelong learning; (2) Provide more outreach to older adults; (3) Approach older adults; and (4) Engage minority and foreign-born older adults groups.

Use Computer Classes to Promote Collaboration and Lifelong Learning

Libraries need to collaborate with other organizations and create programs that promote intergenerational learning and interaction through, for instance, computer training (Xie & Jaeger, 2008). In our study, we found that recently there have been concerns at Library A about teenagers from a nearby high school who come to the library after school and loiter,

talk loudly and engage in other disruptive behavior. These concerns have prompted the library to hire a security guard and have a local sheriff patrol the library on weekday afternoons. Perhaps an additional solution would be to develop an intergenerational program in which the teenagers teach the older adults to use computers. This type of intergenerational programming might help to break down stereotypes that younger people have of older adults, while also cementing strong community ties (Friedman, 1997). To encourage teenagers to participate, the libraries could work with the schools to award service learning credit. Another option is to try “seniors-only” computer classes. Eventually, older adult graduates from the classes could teach other older adults in a peer-to-peer program, which may help older adults feel more comfortable and welcome (Rosser-Hogben, 2004).

Another positive aspect of computer training is that it could help isolated older adults maintain contact with family and friends. For example, e-mail or participation in senior-oriented online discussion groups or chat rooms could help older adults not only find support for the challenges presented by aging, but also form new friendships with age peers who have similar interests. These types of activities can help empower older adults and give them a better sense of control over personal and social lives (Dunst, Trivette, & Lapointe, 1992; McMellon & Schiffman 2002).

Provide More Outreach to Older Adults

Public libraries need to better publicize any special programs or services to older adults in the surrounding community. Not only should libraries post information about older adult services within their libraries or on a website, but also in places where older adults are frequently found, like churches, American Legion posts, grocery stores, senior centers, and

hospitals. A concerted attempt at outreach not only helps to publicize events, but it is also a good way to draw nonusers into public libraries (Moore, 1985).

Approach Older Adults

Another important step that public libraries can take to ensure older adults' needs are being met is to simply ask them what their needs are. As Jones et al. (1992) suggest, "the first step in any attempt to help elderly people cope with the myriad demands of later life is to find out what they perceive their needs to be" (pp. 227–228). Periodic user surveys or a suggestion box specifically for older adults to provide feedback and to share their ideas on how the library can better suit their needs are two mechanisms for collecting this information. Public libraries need to ask older adults what their needs are, rather than assuming that these needs are self-evident.

Engage Minority and Foreign-born Older Adult Groups

Public libraries could also benefit from user studies of ethnic minorities in their communities. Minority groups among all older adults in the United States are projected to increase to 8.1 million (just over 20% of the older adult population) in 2010, and then to 12.9 million (23.6%) by 2020 (Administration on Aging, 2006). Public libraries should learn about the cultural traditions among ethnic minority groups in order to create programming that celebrates older adults' diverse backgrounds. Public libraries might also celebrate the cultural diversity of older adults by planning exhibits that celebrate such holidays as Chinese New Year, Cinco de Mayo and Kwanzaa. Older adult volunteers could be in charge of setting up the materials and telling stories and folktales to children from their native cultures. These culturally-based initiatives may also bring non-users into public libraries.

Conclusion

Through surveying older adults, interviewing staff and observation, this study found that not enough attention was being given to older adults' needs at three Maryland public libraries. Yet, despite the lack of specifically-targeted programs, services and leadership opportunities for older adults, the older adult participants expressed general satisfaction with their libraries, and specifically, with reference services. While more research is needed to understand this assessment by older adults, the generally strong approval rating of reference staff and librarians found in our study may suggest that these older adults put more value on a kind and helpful environment than they do on services and programs geared toward older adults. It is also possible that the level of satisfaction is related to these older adults' lack of awareness that their libraries are not offering the services and programs geared toward older adults that the ALA guidelines recommend. These aspects should be examined in future research.

Based on our findings, we recommend that public libraries should be more proactive in addressing the diverse needs and interests of their older adult patrons, including interaction with foreign-born and minority groups in the libraries' communities. Better outreach efforts to publicize services may help bring older adults who are currently non-users into the library for lifelong learning and empowerment. These recommendations can help public libraries to better serve the rapidly aging population in their communities.

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