

10-28-2019

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Recommended Citation

Brodbeck-Kenney, K. (2019). Find Ways to Say Yes: How we Made our Library More Inclusive Through Removing Barriers to Membership. *OLA Quarterly*, 25(2), 5-7. <https://doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1984>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Find Ways to Say Yes:

How we Made our Library More Inclusive Through Removing Barriers to Membership

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Creating policies that are equitable and inclusive can often mean an iterative process of incremental changes that slowly evolve the culture of an organization. One example of this is the way that Driftwood Public Library, a medium-sized coastal library in Lincoln City, changed its library card policies to better serve members of the community experiencing homelessness or without a fixed address.

In 2013, Driftwood Public Library (DPL) began an initiative to look at our policies and procedures with fresh eyes, and modify those policies that were presenting significant barriers to individuals who wished to use the library. Library card policies quickly rose to the top. At the time, the library required official photo ID and proof of address to obtain a card, as well as the contact information for a third party who did not live with the applicant. The proof of address requirement was very stringent, requiring a lease or utility bill in the person's name. It presented a great deal of difficulty for individuals who had recently moved to the city or who did not have any accounts in their own name. A scenario that library staff encountered more than once concerned adult children who had returned to Lincoln City to care for an ailing family member. Because they did not own or lease property in the area, were in town for an extended visit with an uncertain endpoint, and were usually staying with the family member, proving residency was a surprisingly difficult hurdle.

The requirement of third party contact information was ostensibly to provide a point of contact for extremely overdue items, but in practice, many patrons were unwilling or unable to provide contact information for a third party. At the same time, the Circulation Coordinator reported that the requirement was rarely—if ever—helpful in recovering items that had been checked out and not returned.

In early 2014, with the approval of the board, DPL significantly expanded the options for patrons to prove residency by including mail postmarked within the last 30 days, as well as a host of other forms of identification. The library also removed the third party contact



requirement for new patrons. To further protect patron privacy, existing third party contact information was deleted from all Driftwood patron accounts.

Round Two

The changes in the card policies were readily embraced by library staff, who reported much more pleasant interactions with potential new patrons, as well as a greater number of cards that could be issued on first inquiry. The number of library cards issued surged, from 1,349 issued in 2013 to 1,482 in 2014.

One population remained that was unassisted by these new policies, however. There was little in the policy to address individuals who had no fixed address or who were residing in a local shelter. DPL had long offered a “guest card” to visitors to the area, but the guest cards were quite strictly controlled: only one could be issued per family, they were only good for 30 days, and there was a limit of two items at a time on the card. Patrons with guest cards also could not place holds. The guest card was originally conceived as a solution for vacationers confronted by a few days of bad weather, and for that it worked admirably—but for patrons experiencing homelessness, it was a poor substitute for true library access.

One patron who was residing in a local shelter laid out the issue for staff in a way that was hard to ignore: she had three children, and with the limits imposed by the card, there was no way she could check out enough materials to satisfy them all. Additionally, her oldest child was reading books from a series, and the next one in the series was held by another consortium library—which meant that she could not access it. Since reading was one of the few ways her children could entertain themselves for free, the lack of access was a major problem. Stated bluntly, she felt the library was treating her and her family as second-class citizens, even though they lived in the library’s service area.

At the same time, the DPL Outreach Coordinator attended trainings on bringing a trauma-informed approach to library services. What does this mean? In short, a trauma-informed library takes into account the fact that many patrons, particularly patrons experiencing homelessness, may have traumatic experiences in their past that affect the way they interact with library staff. For example, people who have experienced homelessness may have had many experiences with government bureaucracies denying needed services. Subsequently learning that they also cannot receive a library card due to their housing situation may be the last straw, provoking a strong negative reaction or just leaving them feeling completely demoralized. By focusing on providing library services in a positive and non-judgmental way that conveys safety and caring, the experience of using the library can be more enjoyable and safer for everyone.

The rest of the DPL staff learned about the concept of trauma-informed librarianship at an in-service in early 2015. Out of this in-service emerged a clearly stated staff goal: “find ways to say yes.” In broad terms, this meant that staff committed to “leading with the positive” whenever possible during patron interactions. “You can’t eat in here” became “You are welcome to eat in the lobby.” “You can’t check this out, this is a reference book,” became “You are welcome to use this book here in the library; however, since it’s a reference book, it needs to stay here.” On a policy level, staff agreed that it was time once again to revisit card policies with an eye toward removing barriers—staff wanted more ways to say “yes” to those seeking library cards.



By May of 2015, the library director, with staff assistance, was ready to propose several major changes to the library card policy. Because the library is funded by local tax dollars, the challenge was in finding ways to make it easier to obtain a card, while still ensuring residence in the library’s service area. The proposal favored a multi-pronged approach to providing library services to patrons experiencing homelessness:

- 1) Individuals without a permanent address who were residing in a shelter or similar residential program would be granted full-privilege library cards by DPL upon providing a letter on program letterhead, signed by the program director or their designee.
- 2) A new, robust “guest card” program was proposed: The expiration date on the guest cards would be extended to 90 days, and these cards would be eligible for indefinite renewals in person at the circulation desk. The “one card per family” rule was rescinded, making guest cards available on a one-per-person basis. Guest cards, by consortial agreement, could also now place holds and access online resources. These cards would still be limited to two check-outs at a time.
- 3) In addition, the director proposed that, after 120 days, a patron with a guest card in good standing (no unpaid lost items) could request in person at the circulation desk to have it upgraded to a full-privilege card. Staff judged that four months was long enough to establish that a patron was living in the area for the long term.

The proposed changes would allow visitors and individuals experiencing homelessness alike to continue to use the library while they visited or established residency in Lincoln County, while still maintaining the library’s responsibility to county residents. If an individual moved away or their vacation ended, their card would expire after 90 days.

The library board accepted the proposed changes unanimously, and they were rolled out in May of 2015. The result? Greater patron satisfaction, less stress on frontline staff, and more library cards issued—1,499 in 2015, an all-time high. The library administration was prepared to accept an increase in lost items, but no such increase materialized.

Onward and Upward

The assessment of library access and policy equitability did not end here. In the years since DPL rolled out the new library card policies, the iterative process of recognizing an issue and subsequently removing barriers has continued. Last summer, DPL modified library card policy to make it easier for minors to obtain a library card, and in the fall of 2018, the library and Lincoln City Council took the major step of removing overdue fines across the board.

The reaction to almost every change the library has made toward equitable service has been, “We should have done this sooner!” And indeed, there are times when sweeping and thorough policy changes are the best choice—but sudden change does not have to be the only way. Without the success that followed DPL’s first foray into more equitable policies, the second round of changes might not have been possible—and without that successful program, even more major changes like removing fines would not have seemed like the logical and obvious next step. As librarians and as service providers, sometimes the surest path to success is one in which we keep doing the next right thing, knowing that as we find ways to say “yes,” another next right thing is just around the corner. 

