

# Disability Awareness Toolkit developed for training library staff

By Deb Thomas.

In 2010, the Services to People with Print Disabilities Working Group (SPPD) was founded within the Special Needs Interest Group (SNIG) in response to growing concern about the changing availability of materials for people with print disabilities. The withdrawal of service to British Columbia's public libraries by the Canadian National Institute for the Blind after it failed in an attempt to get funding from the provincial government, and the ending of Public Library Interlink's contract with the provincial government to locally produce and distribute audiobooks for people with print disabilities, were threatening to reduce the availability of materials for this user group. Our work over the past 4 years toward addressing these concerns can be seen in detail on the SPPD page on the BCLA website ([https://bclacconnect.ca/?page\\_id=896](https://bclacconnect.ca/?page_id=896)).

With recent initiatives such as the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA - <http://www.celalibrary.ca/>) and the National Network for Equitable Service (NNELS - <https://bc.libraries.coop/products-services/nnels/>) that are actively working to make reading materials available to people with print disabilities, the group is considering dissolving. Future work in this area will be continued through SNIG.

Our last project has been the creation of a toolkit aimed at assisting library staff in providing services to patrons with any kind of disability. In late 2013, we applied for and received Vancouver Foundation funding to pursue the project. A sub-committee of Deb Thomas (Burnaby Public Library), Margarete Weidmann (North Vancouver City Library) and Shelley Hourston (Disability Alliance BC) was formed to hire a consultant to undertake the project. Susan Powell, a learning and education consultant with experience working with people with disabilities, was hired early in 2014 and began work on the project in March.

The sub-committee has since been joined by Stephanie Kripps (Vancouver Public Library). We met once a month throughout the project to review Susan's work and consult on various aspects. The goals of the project were:

1. to create a toolkit for libraries and library organizations to use to design and present training for library staff in services to people with disabilities
2. to produce one in-person workshop and one webinar as proof of concept.
3. to promote the toolkit
4. to ensure that people with disabilities are aware of the toolkit

The guiding principles for this project were:

- Effective and quality professional development that improves the competency of library staff to interact and support the library needs of individuals with disabilities.
- Best practices in disability studies provide both a contemporary framework and approaches for supporting inclusion and accessibility of individuals with disabilities. The toolkit and training tools will integrate the application of these approaches to the work of library staff.
- Sustainability is viewed as key to the project. The toolkit is intended to provide tools for libraries around the province to undertake their own disability awareness training with their own staff or local experts in this area. BCLA's SNIG has also committed to offering at least one webinar or in-person workshop or conference session annually to ensure that training continues to be available for all library staff. As well, regular evaluation will be undertaken to keep the toolkit current and to ensure that it remains a reflection of what is being asked of us by people with disabilities.

While Susan was researching and compiling the toolkit, Disability Alliance BC conducted an online survey, *Improving Library Services for People with Disabilities*. Key findings from this report outlined barriers and acknowledged the many supports provided by library staff. Identified supports were:

- Accessing catalogue from home
- Home delivery
- Plain language
- Staff accessing shelves on my behalf
- Being given extra time
- Staff open to various communication modes

Identified barriers included:

- Physical environment
- Time on computer
- Standing in line or carrying items
- Crowded public seating
- Cognitive demands
- Asking for help and feeling like I take too much time
- Confusing signage
- Patronizing, impatient or insensitive staff

These findings were integrated into the content of the workshop and webinar.

The sub-committee and the consultant determine that the toolkit would use a framework of the *social-ecological model* on disability and *universal design* as the concepts informing the content in the toolkit. The social-ecological model states that disability is caused by the society in which we live and is not the "fault" of an individual. Universal design promotes a proactive approach and one that is more aligned with inclusive practices. Environments and designs are created for everyone, not just for a segment of the population.

By using these principles as a way of thinking as we interact, develop and support library patrons with disabilities, we move away from cataloguing or categorizing people (the medical model) and a move towards supports to access resources (addressing the barriers and seeing the individual). The toolkit does not focus on disabling conditions but rather offers a social-ecological lens on disability and uses principles from universal design as a way to

open the library to as many patrons with disabilities, and others with diverse needs, as possible. The toolkit consists of three components: a presenter's reference guide, a workshop presenter's guide and a webinar presenter's guide. Each component of the toolkit is comprehensive and provides all materials necessary for potential presenters with various levels of knowledge and skill.

A webinar using the toolkit will be offered by Susan Powell through the Education Institute on November 27. For details and to register, go to the Education Institute website:

[http://www.thepartnership.ca/web/PARTNERSHIP/Education\\_Institute/Welcome/PARTNERSHIP/Education\\_Institute/Welcome.aspx](http://www.thepartnership.ca/web/PARTNERSHIP/Education_Institute/Welcome/PARTNERSHIP/Education_Institute/Welcome.aspx)

An in-person workshop is planned for Spring 2015 through the Okanagan Regional Library in Kelowna. The toolkit will be available soon through the BCLA website – watch for an announcement. SPPD/SNIG would like to thank Susan Powell for her work on the project. Her instructional and research skills and her knowledge of the topic have ensured that the Disability Awareness Toolkit will be a rich and very useable resource for library staff well into the future.

For further information on the toolkit, contact Deb Thomas at [deb.thomas@bpl.bc.ca](mailto:deb.thomas@bpl.bc.ca).

*Deb Thomas has been co-chair of the Services to People with Print Disabilities Working Group of the Special Needs Interest Group for the past four years. She is Deputy Chief Librarian of Burnaby Public Library and has worked in libraries for 40 years.*