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Diversity and Special Services

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Libraries meet their communities' needs by providing diversity in their collections and their formats and by providing access to a diverse population. One might think that Talking Book and Braille Services (TBABS) of the Oregon State Library doesn't deal with much diversity. Our service population is vision impaired. Period. Right? So why is the Regional Librarian writing about diversity matters? What possible insight can she have into this subject?

Actually, as the spokesperson for Oregon's Talking Books and Braille Services, I bring a valid but often overlooked viewpoint to this discussion. Diversity is not limited to culture or religion or race. It includes a wide array of abilities. Most libraries, by nature of their dependence on print materials, videos, and computers, have great appeal to the sighted and even the deaf populations. What about those segments of the population who, for various reasons, may not be able to access knowledge or entertainment through books or video screens?

Increasingly, public and academic libraries are expanding audio book collections and providing computer screen enlargers and screen readers in order to serve this user group. However, shrinking budgets may not cover basic services, let alone such enhancements. A library's ability to provide these additional services is also limited by the relatively small number of individuals who have need of these services, and by the difficulty they may have just getting to the library building.

The mandate for libraries is to provide information to all segments of the population. Can community and school libraries fulfill this mandate on their own? Probably not entirely. Probably not with the constraints surrounding us. But with assistance from special libraries the answer is a resounding "yes!" Oregon public and academic libraries can provide assistance to those with visual impairments or physical disabilities courtesy of the very special collection of

TBABS at the Oregon State Library.

TBABS provides Braille materials, talking books (cassettes) and playback machines, and descriptive videos to Oregonians who have vision impairments or physical disabilities (including dyslexia) and are unable to read regular printed materials. TBABS doesn't just have a few titles: the National Library Service has about 60,000 titles on tape and 5,000 in Braille.

Before coming to TBABS, I spent six years working as a public librarian in Corvallis. For three of those years, I also worked as a cataloguer and reference librarian for DB-LINK's National Information Clearinghouse on Children Who Are Deaf-Blind at Western Oregon University. These experiences acquainted me with the information and entertainment needs of people who are vision impaired and with the limits public and academic libraries face serving these users—limits imposed by budget and space considerations, as well as by the small number of users in each community who might need these materials, compared to the community at large.

Accommodations for TBABS in the State Library are expensive and space consuming. Consider the amount of space taken up by tax forms and instructions in most libraries each year for a limited time. Now imagine the extra space and cost for each library to provide that information in Braille. TBABS can and does provide this tax information in Braille each year. Those volumes are only a supplement to the complete TBABS cassette tape and Braille book collection, a collection that required 13,275 square feet of stack space and circulated 348,224 books in 2001 and 2002.

Is the staff at TBABS concerned about collection diversity? You bet. TBABS users can request non-fiction and fiction, adult and juvenile materials. They have access to Spanish, Russian, and Japanese language materials; children's large print books and Twin-Vision books (Braille overlays in regular children's picture books);



newspapers and magazines in Braille and on tape; old-time radio shows and contemporary videos.

TBABS members also have home access to Web-Braille on a password-protected site. This Web-based service provides the full text (in an electronic form of grade 2 Braille) of thousands of Braille books and all Braille magazines currently produced by the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS). Also offered by NLS via TBABS membership is access to a music collection consisting of music scores in Braille and large print; Braille and large print textbooks and books about music; music appreciation cassettes, including interviews and opera lectures; and self-instructional cassettes for voice, piano, organ, electronic keyboard, guitar, recorder, accordion, banjo, harmonica, and other instruments. This material contains more than 20,000 music-related items.

Whom does TBABS serve?

- The 90-year-old widower with macular degeneration who wants to listen to the Bible.
- The blind parent whose sighted 3-year-old wants to see pictures as well as hear the words.
- The 22-year-old student looking for career guidance.
- The 45-year-old businessman who wants to know more about the Middle East.
- The visually impaired student needing to read a novel for class.
- The 65-year-old grandmother whose arthritis won't allow her to hold the books of her favorite author anymore.
- The grandfather who wants to share his favorite childhood stories with

his grandchildren; he can't see the print well enough to read but can listen to the cassettes with them.

- The skier with two broken arms who still wants to read his favorite authors.
- The school librarian helping a teacher find Braille materials for her class.

What else does the staff at TBABS do to provide diverse services? Like librarians everywhere, we provide readers' advisory and ILL services. We provide referrals to people seeking books that NLS hasn't produced—usually we send them to their local libraries. We provide copies of books for reading discussion groups. We provide phone numbers and addresses to local support groups and national information services. We give tours of our facility. We connect Braille readers with libraries and schools for special storytimes. We do outreach to senior centers, retirement homes, and support groups.

Yes, diversity matters—in collections, in communities, and in libraries. We need to reach out to the visually impaired or physically disabled and let them know what is available locally and from Talking Book and Braille Services. The Talking Book and Braille Services can partner with each and every public and academic library in Oregon. Together we can provide service to a portion of the state's population that by its very nature is not likely to use the major parts of most library collections. 

