



Evidence Summary

Public Libraries Could Better Serve Older Adults by Having More Programming Specifically Directed Toward Them

A Review of:

Bennett-Kapusniak, R. (2013). Older Adults and the Public Library: The Impact of the Boomer Generation. *Public Library Quarterly*, 32(3), 204-222. doi: 10.1080/01616846.2013.818814

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Abstract

Objective – To determine whether programming at public libraries in the United States is aimed at older adults, and whether the programs help older adults maintain their health and well-being.

Design – Web site evaluation.

Setting – Public libraries in the United States of America.

Subjects – The main library of each public library system located in the capital city of each of the 50 states in the United States of America.

Methods – A scan of each of the web sites of the selected public library branches was performed by the author, to determine the number of programs specifically directed towards older adults.

Main Results – The scan of sites indicated that there was very little programming specifically aimed at older adults and their needs. Mainly, offerings for older adults took the form of mixing in with adults of all ages. Computer technology class offerings were particularly lacking. The majority of libraries had programs to teach how to access library resources and electronic media (although not necessarily aimed at older adults), programs for those who are less mobile, as well as some adaptive

technology for those with sensory disabilities. In addition, the majority of libraries had adult literacy programs, and active collaboration with community organizations.

Conclusion – Public libraries can do more to develop programs specifically for older adults. They should take into account the wide diversity of older adults' information and other needs. In particular, they should consider offering programs that focus on technological skills, and also should offer assistive technology for older patrons. There also needs to be more research on the needs of older adults, from the perspective of the patrons themselves and that of library staff.

Commentary

The issue of public library programming for older adults is timely and important. The population of older adults is increasing as the baby boomer generation ages, recent changes in the economy have affected retirements, and never has the need for technical skills been more essential. According to the author, prior research has dealt with what older adults would like to see in library services, but has not focused on programs aimed at this group. Older adults have different needs than younger adults and children, and even within the older adult population there are variations in health status, ability and movement, and technological comfort. These days, mobile services and large print books are not enough.

There are some significant issues with the methodology of this study that make the results applicable only in a very general sense. In this evidence summary, these issues were systematically assessed, using the critical appraisal checklist by Glynn (2006). In the study, the web sites constituting the data sources from which conclusions were made, were surveyed by only one person, who may have had a particular bias. There was no report of comparison assessment by another researcher. The time frame considered was very narrow. In addition, there was no report of how programs listed on web sites were categorized, or any specific terms or

vocabulary that were used to assess the applicability of programs to older adults. The author herself states that the library sample selection criteria (the main branches of library systems in United States state capitals) underrepresent rural areas, and demographically, they exclude the largest systems as well. Furthermore, only the main branches of the systems were examined, which may limit the sample to downtown areas with low residential density and usage. It may be that programming activities for older adults are concentrated in the areas in which they actually live, where they are served by branch rather than main libraries.

However, in a broader sense, the article has important insights to offer, even if the specific findings are not representative. The report on programming offered nationwide, taken qualitatively, can suggest best practices and new programming initiatives. For example, the discussion of frequency of program offerings may be a new concept to some, and the descriptions of services such as therapeutic and reminiscing kits might spark librarians' ideas for new programs. In addition, the discussion section relates a number of concrete steps libraries can take to increase their services for older adults. These include ideas for: grant funding, website enhancements such as having a link or tab for older adults, setting aside a computer lab for technology practice, organizing programs aimed at people with health or disability issues, and rethinking possibilities for collaboration with community organizations serving older adults. Taken with other recent research which also explores improving services to senior citizens (Charbonneau, 2014; Perry, 2014), this article's broader contributions are worth considering.

References

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