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I Could Tell You Stories: Am I a Librarian or Social Service Provider?

By S. Michele Echols

People love stories, people have stories, all Librarians have stories, and we love to tell our stories. *“I Could Tell You Stories: Am I a Librarian or Social Service Provider?”* is a term I coined to address the changes in reference librarianship. Many librarians are baffled by the notion that librarianship encompasses social services. The increase in the public use of the library for digital literacy has spawned this not-so-new epidemic. Libraries for centuries have been the epicenter of the community, and community residents both old and new view the library as a hub for all types of information. This column seeks to provide information and resources to assist librarians or staff working in public libraries with understanding the ever changing reference services of the 21st century; as a result of access to e-government information and beyond.

In my opinion, the role of reference librarians today does not simply duplicate social services available in the community, but rather utilizes emerging technologies and a variety

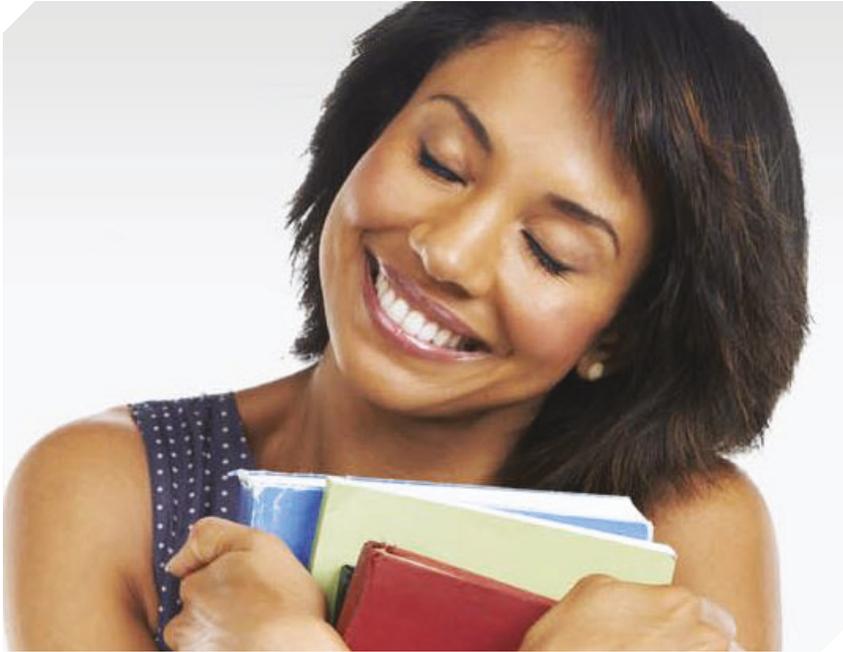
of media to provide information, expertise, and instruction. However, this role mirrors the role of the 20th century reference librarians who worked in their communities for the community. There is a vast amount of evidence to support my claim of librarians who worked in their community to address all sorts of social service needs.

There are countless stories available concerning African American librarians who worked diligently in their communities. These librarians worked fearlessly and tirelessly to ensure that their patrons were able to access all information available. If the information or program was not available these pioneers worked to ensure that the resources were brought to their respective libraries for the communities in need.

Today, we can see there is an increasing gap in digital literacy and access to information is widening. In addition, we ponder who has ready access and who can benefit the most from the explosion of E-Government. In

2002, the Electronic Government Act (PL107-347) was established in an effort to “promote use of the Internet and other information technologies to provide increased opportunities for citizen participation in Government.” Increasingly, libraries are well positioned to partner with government entities to meet their constituents online - the place where people can voice their opinions and influence decisions, transforming citizens from passive observers to active participants in a more inclusive conversation. As a vehicle for citizen engagement, libraries help build trust and maximize transparency of government while expanding their civic agency role in local communities. (<http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/egovtoolkit/civicparticipation/index.cfm>)

For many of us this is a great phenomenon. We no longer need to wait in long lines at the Department of Motor Vehicles. Access to government information is now available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. However, for the patrons we serve,



access can be very limited. As noted by Paul T. Jaeger and John Carlo Bertot, *“(A) new but extremely important social role for public libraries is ensuring that all citizens have access to and assistance using E-Government information and services”*. They continued to state, *“(T)he intersection between public libraries and E-Government has many significant implications and impacts for library management, expectations for libraries and the activities of librarians, among many other implications”*. I am highlighting this information in order to further the discussion around librarians as de facto social service providers. Has reference librarianship taken a shift to include other

modes in reference services aside from looking for a book?

Imagine the new immigrant who is not fluent in English or the low-skilled worker who does not possess the basic computer skills to access this information. For these individuals the public library is the only place where they can learn and have access to the Internet. The digital gap has widened and the new reference question is not, *“Can you assist me with finding a book on resume writing?”* The new question for most is, *“How can I apply for the retail job on line?”*, or *“The Department of Social Services told me that I can access the documents I need online and the public library can assist me”*. Now, I imagine

many reading this article may say to themselves that they did not attend the MLS program to provide social services when in fact it is not social services we are providing; it is merely great customer service. We should not shut down when a patron requests assistance with what we deem a social service issue but use this interaction as an opportunity to assist and perhaps gain the confidence of the patron. Out of this interaction we may be able to provide a book or invite the patron to a program, thereby promoting life-long learning opportunities.

If you are pondering over the idea that librarians are becoming social service providers and you feel it is beyond the scope of librarianship, I would ask if you, the reader, have any suggestions related to how will libraries seek out the support required to meet the needs of our patrons and reference librarians where we can create a win-win situation.

I welcome any inquiries from you as I have worked previously in a public library setting answering a multitude of non-traditional reference questions from both patrons and staff seeking answers related to the question: Am I a Librarian of social service provider?