

LIBRARY ACCESSIBILITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Montgomery County Public Libraries

MEETING NOTES

September 2, 2020

Attendees

Jane Williams (MCPL Library Board Liaison); Debbie Brown (Sligo Creek Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind); Francie Gilman (Independence Now board member and twice-retired Montgomery County librarian); Cynthia Buddington (Independence Now board member; Equipment for Children board member; electric wheelchair user and advocate for people with disabilities for over 20 years); Elizabeth Lang (MCPL Assistant Facilities and Accessibility Program Manager); Jane Carona (American Council of the Blind of Maryland, National Capitol Area Chapter; treasurer of American Council of the Blind of Maryland and Braille Revival League); Jill Lewis (retired director of the Maryland Library for the Blind and Print Disabled, now in New York); Alfred Sonnenstrahl, advocate for Deaf people; Amy Fier (Director of Representative Payee Program for EveryMind, which serves people with mental health concerns); Betty Thompson (consultant who became involved because of her sister Jeanie); Matt Barkley (Montgomery County ADA Compliance Manager); Monica Martinez (former executive director of Partnership for Extraordinary Minds, now on their advisory board and consultant and advocate for special education); Richard Bell-Irving (treasurer of the Learning Disabilities Association of Montgomery County and now working with LD of Virginia); Anita Vassallo (Director of Montgomery County Public Libraries); Barbara King (member of the American Council of the Blind; long-time library user and former library volunteer); Jonina Duker (moved to Montgomery County in 1987; worked as a tutor and Library Advisory Committee member at the Special Needs Library).

Visitor: Josephine Rios-Davis, member of the Aspen Hill Library LAC.

Cindy Buddington chaired the meeting.

Follow-up from previous meeting

Cindy noted that at the March meeting we discussed the problem of groups of people with cognitive disabilities brought to library branches by service providers and left unattended, not getting any benefit from being in the library. Jill sent our comments to Anita. Anita Vassallo said that she and her staff met with HHS staff who had connections to the service providers, but that MCPL closed for the pandemic before solutions could be implemented. We will see what happens when we re-open.

Board report

Jane Williams gave her report first because she had another commitment. This is her last meeting as our liaison. We thanked her for her devoted service to the AAC. The library board met in July and will meet September 9. There are several vacancies, and they are now reviewing applications to fill them. The confirmations are up to the county executive and county council. A Board task force is meeting to decide whether MCPL should continue to charge overdue fines for all materials. Currently there are no fines for overdue children's materials. Fines deter people from using the library, and many public libraries are eliminating fines. Carroll County is now fine free. Jane noted that there is a budget cut announced this fiscal year. The Board is already gearing up for budget forums for the coming year. Jane said as a farewell that she respects what we are doing, and our understanding that building strong relationships with library leaders and managers is important, and our ability to be persistent.

Library report

Elizabeth Lang gave the library report. Buildings have been closed to the public since March 16, with no opening date set. Staff have been in the branches since July 6, answering phones, hosting many virtual programs, offering the Holds to Go Service, and continuing the Books at Home service. Returned materials are quarantined for five days before being shelved, as a precaution against COVID. Fines are waived now. Long Branch's renovation is underway, the flooring is being installed. It will reopen at the end of this year or early next year, for the same limited service provided by the other branches. Germantown is next, but the scope

of that refresh will be slightly limited because the money is not available for the original refresh plan.

Al Sonnenstrahl asked about what his PIN was when using the Libby app. Anita suggested using his birth year. If it says “invalid” then email or call a library for help. Also, library cards are not expiring anymore, as long as you use them once a year.

Anita added information about the Holds to Go program and other library services. Holds to Go is a contactless way to request and pick up library materials at a library branch. You can do it online or call a library to talk with a librarian. You can have up to 100 items. It was launched on July 6, and there have been over 66,000 appointments to pick up materials.

All of the digital services are available. The libraries closed their buildings on March 16 and did their first virtual program on March 23. They now have about 50 programs a week, including book groups, tai chi lessons, and author talks with Edwidge Danticat, Steve Roberts, and Thomas Friedman. They are doing everything they can do without fully opening the branches to the public.

We do not know when the libraries will reopen. Libraries are slated for phase 3 of the County’s re-opening plan. Anita is very proud of the staff. The county is allowing staff who are more vulnerable, elderly, or caring for someone to telework; about 70 Library staff are teleworking.

The summer reading program had 4000 children registered, significantly down from previous years, but they were happy to be able to do it.

Jane Carona asked about the MCPL Virtual Events webpage, because the URL sent by Francie Gilman was not accessible. Anita suggested going directly to the Library’s page, <https://montgomerycountymd.gov/library>, and look for the Spotlight “Virtual Events at MCPL.” Jane wasn’t sure it would work with a screen reader. The virtual events page is hosted by a program called Communico, and Elizabeth said she had not tested that page with a screen reader. The direct link to the Events page is <https://mcpl.libnet.info>. Jill asked Elizabeth to send an email with results after she has tested it with screen

reader. Elizabeth agreed and Jane said she would be glad to help her test. Anita thanked Jane for raising the issue.

Children's braille collection

Cindy introduced the discussion, noting that Jill sent AAC members' comments to Anita and that the National Capital Area Chapter of the ACB sent a resolution opposing the dissolution of the braille collection. She said that it is important to have braille books because it's a great resource, for sighted and people who are blind and that every library should have 15-20 books so that children, parents and grandparents can stop in and pick up a book.

Anita wants the braille collection to be placed somewhere where it will get more use, it's not a matter of "getting rid" of the collection. She says she understands its importance to the AAC members and the braille reader community. Anita has read all the comments and the NCAC resolution. She agreed with Cindy's comment about the educational value of braille books to the sighted population.

Anita said the collection began when then County Executive Isaiah Leggett asked then Director Parker Hamilton if the Library had a braille collection and at the time the library did not, so the decision was made to purchase braille children's books. The collection is in 6 library branches. No new materials have been added since the original purchase in 2015. Of the 815 books in the collection, 36 were checked out from March 2019 to March 2020. Thirteen were renewed, for a total circulation of 49. This is a low turnover rate, indicating how many times the book is used. Years ago, it was determined that each book sitting on the shelf costs the library \$.60. For most library materials, a turnover rate of 6 times per year is considered good. The turnover rate for the braille books is 0.06.

Anita consulted with Elizabeth, who had been Director of the DC Talking Book library for several years, and John Owen, Director of the MD State Library for the Blind and Print Disabled. Mr. Owen said that braille presents a paradox that few people have learned to read braille. The braille collection represents about 4% of their overall circulation, while 92% is audiobooks, and the rest is large print books.

Mr. Owen mentioned refreshable braille devices, used by some braille readers, but it is expensive. Jane showed a braille display. She said that her two refreshable braille devices would cost between \$3000 and \$10,000 if new. The National Library for the Blind and Print Disabled is piloting two refreshable braille readers.

Debbie said she knew that people came to use braille books while in the libraries, and wondered if that is also measured. She said that children prefer going and

selecting their own books rather than waiting for them to come by mail. This was later answered by Anita, who said that in-house use is also tracked.

Debbie suggested using pictures of braille readers on library websites or promotional materials. The NFB chapter does the Louis Braille birthday party every year, so it would be good if the Library can help market the collection and show diversity. She said the AAC could help with marketing.

Al said Deafblind people are dependent on braille. They cannot take advantage of new technologies such as voice recognition. They don't have a way to receive information and don't always have interpreters, so they are very isolated. It's a small population but the need is out there so he strongly recommended that all of the braille books be kept. He suggested that the collection could be centralized, and marketed to Deafblind organizations. There are more Deafblind people in Montgomery than in P.G. County.

Anita asked if Deafblind adults would want to read the children's braille books. The State Library for the Blind and Print Disabled gets new materials and it is not MCPL's purpose or mission to supplant what the LBPB provides. She mentioned that MCPL is facing budget challenges, and it is not likely that the collection can be expanded. Perhaps the collection could be held in one area. She learned that other libraries in Maryland have braille collections, but they are mostly small and for the purpose of showing children about braille.

Elizabeth said that the books are not print/braille, so they cannot be used by both a sighted person and a blind person. She also said that the Library doesn't have a marketing department and that no collections get marketed.

Barbara King said it didn't seem clear that the braille books could be borrowed, when she saw them during library tours.

Jill reflected on the comments from AAC members, saying that due to the AAC's place in the system that we hoped that we would have been involved before the decision was made, and that we mentioned marketing in terms of what we can do with our various groups to help. Jill said that, from her experience as Director for 13 years, the population served by the State LBPB is an older population and not one that would teach children braille, and not intended to be a diverse community resource such as a public library.

Debbie asked about marketing and the use of photographs. She suggested mentioning the braille collection at public presentations, and finding ways to show

blind people participating in Library programs. Having more print-braille would be good for parents to read to their children.

Al said that the collection is not for sighted children. He suggested developing a centralized and coordinated program of information-sharing. Use a website to provide information on where the braille collections are and list some of the books. Deafblind children would be the losers without the collection.

Jane told about her childhood memories of browsing through the braille collection at her local library in P. G. County. If she had known the collection existed at MCPL she would have gone to look at them and check them out. Adults just learning braille need a simple children's book to start. She said she didn't know they existed as a collection in MCPL, or that there was such a small turnover and that we could market them to kids and adults in Montgomery County.

Cindy noted that the braille refreshable displays are expensive, and so are books for some people, so people go to the library. If the County doesn't want to keep the braille books, find a way to make them available to County people. Jane's interest in braille as a child made her a reader, she's a library reader since she was a child. Also, if you're newly blind it's best to start with a simple book that you're familiar with. It would be good to have a diverse collection and not separate people out by their needs.

Anita said she wants the AAC to understand that there is no budget to expand the collection. Perhaps consolidating to one location is a good approach. She asked us to work among ourselves to come up with possible ways to market. Photos of individuals are not used because a particular audience is identified, excluding others. Graphics are used. She emphasized that we do not have an active modern collection of braille books.

Elizabeth said that braille books sitting on a shelf can get bent, and she is not sure about their condition.

Francie asked Anita if the final decision will wait until the AAC members suggest marketing avenues. Anita said her goal is to have the collection used if at all possible. It would be good if the AAC can suggest ways to use our network.

Francie said her memory of the collection was that at one of the first AAC meetings, Debbie Brown suggested to the Director at the time, Parker Hamilton, that MCPL have a braille collection and Parker agreed and it happened. She also

remarked that in her experience, public libraries don't usually market very well, maybe because they don't have the budget or know-how.

Jane said it would be easier to market the collection if she knew which books were available and where. She would be happy to make a list, but the MCPL website is not easy for her to use with a screen reader. Elizabeth said to include making a list of the books in our recommendations.

Debbie asked if other collections, languages, etc. are being cut. Anita said they run a monthly report on the entire collection that identifies the materials that have not circulated in a year, and those that have not circulated can be removed from the collection. Public library collections are monitored for relevance to their local community. She mentioned they gave a lot of the local history books to the Historical Society, for example, as a way to get materials out to where people can use them. Anita had a meeting and had to leave. As a parting comment she said she would guarantee that nothing will happen to the collection until a further decision is made. She would like nothing more than to see the collection heavily utilized and earning its place.

Jonina said the measurement is circulation, so people with library cards taking books out is the use measured. Anita said that MCPL also tracks in-house use, so that is measured.

Anita had to leave to attend another meeting. She thanked AAC members for expertise and work for MCPL

Jonina contrasted treatment of the braille collection with the Gale Online High School which had cost \$100,000 (her estimated cost from a dedicated salary) which had only two people finish. She has a Freedom of Information Act request out to get more information.

Jill said she would email the AAC asking for ideas on how to proceed, to form a subcommittee, or to begin to send in ideas for marketing, etc. She had to leave the meeting and the meeting continued.

Betty expressed an interest in the subcommittee idea along with reaching out to a wider group, to see what has worked. She wondered if libraries have had success in reaching out to specific groups to engage them about collections — for example Vietnamese people in Gaithersburg about services and programs in Gaithersburg. Elizabeth said she supervises the Outreach Team, and it's difficult to identify who does not know about you so they can be targeted with information. Also, the

Outreach Team is helping with hotline and food distribution now, so the priorities have shifted from their usual outreach.

Accessibility complaint at Aspen Hill Library

Josephine Rios-Davis had concerns about the Aspen Hill Library. After the renovation the curb cut leading from the parking lot to the main library entrance and the Community Room is difficult to get to and a long way to go for people with mobility impairments. The LAC is concerned and has made complaints and so Josephine came to this meeting to find out what to do. Elizabeth explained that the ADA Compliance Office architect placed the curb cut where it could go for ADA compliance. Matt Barkley, ADA Compliance Manager, said he is new to the County but indicated that there's nothing in the ADA that says you can't go over and above the recommendations. Elizabeth cited budget cuts and suggested talking directly to Anita because she is aware of it and it involves budget. Matt said he would follow up with Elizabeth.

The meeting was adjourned.

Action items

1. Test the Virtual Events page with screen readers and send an email to the group about how to access it. (Elizabeth and Jane)
2. Email AAC members regarding next steps for the braille collection and whether to form a subcommittee or ask for recommendations for marketing along with those responsible for tasks. Include in the recommendations a request for a list of braille books and where they are located. (Jill)
3. Advertise braille collection (everyone).
4. Determine how the curb cut issue at the Aspen Hill Library can be improved. (Elizabeth and Matt).