

# **Youth with Special Needs**

## **A Resource and Planning Guide for Wisconsin's Public Libraries**

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Bulletin No. 07097  
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Funding for the development of this plan was provided by the  
Library Services and Technology Act.  
Full text of this publication is available online at  
<http://dpi.wi.gov/pld/ysnpl.html>

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Printed on recycled paper

# Foreword

**P**ublic libraries can make a major contribution to the quality of life of youth who have special needs, regardless of personal circumstances or economic background. *Youth with Special Needs: A Resource and Planning Guide for Public Libraries* is designed to provide guidance and practical suggestions to public libraries to ensure that all youth with special needs have appropriate, convenient, and equitable access to materials and technology at public libraries to meet their informational, educational, cultural, and recreational needs.

This resource and planning guide offers strategies public libraries can use to provide youth with special needs the means to use library services effectively, foster personal growth, and obtain information necessary to be successful and productive members of their communities.

Collaboration with other agencies is one of six strategies recommended in the publication. Public libraries, schools, alternative high school programs, detention facilities, jails and prisons, and other agencies that work with youth who have a wide range of special needs can accomplish much working together. Public libraries are encouraged to form partnerships with these organizations in their local communities to assure quality library services for youth populations who are largely underserved or for whom modified services are not typically offered. Throughout the state, mutually beneficial programs and activities are likely to develop through this cooperation to benefit our youth who have special needs.



Elizabeth Burmaster  
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# Acknowledgments

Throughout the publication many best practices examples are cited. However, these are just a sampling of the many ways public librarians welcome and serve youth with special needs on a daily basis. The efforts of public librarians who strive to accommodate these youth are appreciated. Sincere thanks and appreciation go to the following people for their contributions toward the creation of this publication.

## **Division for Libraries, Technology, and Community Learning Staff**

Richard Grobschmidt, Assistant Superintendent, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Michael Cross, director, Public Library Development Team, for their leadership, guidance, and support. John DeBacher, division consultant, and George W. Hall, office operations associate, for their assistance in proofing portions of the publication and consultant Bob Bocher for making this publication available online. Thanks also to Meri Annin, Department of Public Instruction graphic artist, for designing the cover and assisting with the printing process, and Tom Casey for coordinating the printing.

## **Editors and Formatter**

Many thanks to Coral Swanson, library consultant, and Donna Collingwood and Robin Gee for their work on the design, format, and editing of the publication.

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# Introduction

## Definition of Youth with Special Needs

For the purposes of this publication, youth with special needs (YSN) are defined as children and teens through age 18 who are poor, have disabilities, or both. Youth with special needs include, but are not limited to, persons who are economically and educationally disadvantaged, those for whom English is a second language, and youth who are institutionalized or incarcerated or homeless or who have cognitive, emotional, or physical disabilities. The term is occasionally broadened in this plan to include any individuals, agencies, or organizations that work with or care for youth with special needs, and always includes the youth's family.

## Public Libraries in Wisconsin

Wisconsin has 388 independent, statutorily recognized public libraries organized under 17 public library systems. There are 382 public libraries that provide services through a public building and six county library services that offer services through other public libraries, but do not have a building open to the public. Public library systems are county and multi-county administrative units that receive state aid to coordinate library development and resource sharing among the public libraries within their service areas. Every system has a staff person with the responsibility for promoting and facilitating library services to individuals of all ages with special needs, and each system designates a liaison who coordinates services to children and teens. In some systems one person shares these responsibilities. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, through the Division for Libraries, Technology, and Community Learning (DLTCL), is responsible for statewide library development, resource sharing, and administering state aid to public library systems within Wisconsin. The Division also administers the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), a federal grant program for libraries.

## Background on the Youth with Special Needs Planning Guide

This publication is an expansion and revision of the 1999 *Public Library Services for Youth with Special Needs: A Plan for Wisconsin*. It is based on DLTCL's experience in administering LSTA grants for users with special needs, the recommendations of a 1998-99 Task Force on Youth with Special Needs, various articles, publications and websites, and input from Wisconsin librarians and regional system liaisons who provide services to youth with special needs. Wisconsin public librarians, system staff, Department of Public Instruction (DPI) content area consultants, and social service agency staff who work with various populations of youth with special needs reviewed sections of the publication and offered content suggestions. Additions to the 1999 publication focus primarily on providing in-depth information on various special needs, examples of successful library programs, public library service suggestions, and information resources.

The 1999 publication was developed through a group planning process that identified the needs of YSN, barriers to public library use, and strategies to overcome those barriers. Those conclusions are still relevant today and remain at the core of this revision.

## How to Use this Document

The heart of this document is the plan itself, which offers a variety of ways public libraries, public library systems and DLTCL can implement six basic strategies. Public libraries are the focus of the plan because that is where direct service to youth with special needs usually is provided, while public library systems and DLTCL can strengthen and support community level activities. The plan is supplemented with more in-depth information on special needs and resources libraries can use when designing services best suited to their communities.

Given specific local, regional, and statewide situations, many individuals will find the plan essential to short-term and long-range planning.

- For youth services librarians, the plan will be a model against which to test present activities and to use in analyzing what they already do in cooperation with other community resources. They will find it a stimulus in considering new or revised services, and will be able to use it as a base for discussion with other community agencies and organizations concerned with serving youth with special needs, their families, and caregivers.
- For public library directors working in conjunction with youth services staff members, the plan will be a catalyst for defining or redefining outreach services and the library's active role in the community.
- For public library trustees working in conjunction with the library director and staff, a thorough acquaintance with the plan will help in the formulation and adoption of proactive appropriate budgets and formal policies. The community connections represented by members of the board of trustees will enhance efforts to promote and publicize the library's services to special populations.
- For public library system consultants in the fields of special needs and youth services, the plan will stimulate exploration of potential new regional partnerships and resources, offer ideas for working with member libraries, suggest avenues for planning continuing education workshops, and lead to helpful, relevant resources. The resources in each section are intended to help these consultants help their libraries answer patron questions.
- For public library system directors, familiarity with the plan will strengthen understanding of and support for service to youth with special needs. It will be a foundation for discussion with system staff.
- For trustees of public library systems, the plan will broaden knowledge of demographics and the potential for library initiatives. As with local boards of trustees, the occupations, insights, and commitments of individual board members will facilitate meaningful cooperative efforts.
- For staff members at the DLTCCL, the plan will reinforce the effort to provide support and technical assistance and to disseminate information about best practices and resources in a timely way. The plan will serve to focus continuing attention on services to youth with special needs and continuing interaction with state-level organizations that serve those young people, and their families and caregivers. The resources in each chapter will help DLTCCL staff answer questions for system consultants and public librarians. Response from public libraries and systems will help direct the use of future state and federal dollars.
- For schools and for community programs serving youth with special needs, the plan will broaden their understanding of potential strategies for partnerships with public libraries.

Note: All web pages listed in this publication were accessed in January 2007.

# Planning for Success

## Needs of Youth with Special Needs

- **Basic:** To have adequate food, clothing, shelter, and health care, and a comfortable, safe environment that includes space and opportunity for self-definition.
- **Emotional:** To be respected, valued, accepted, trusted, understood, encouraged, and loved. To have self-confidence and hope for themselves and their futures. To find fun and enjoyment in life. To be seen as distinct, whole individuals, not only or merely as “individuals with special needs.”
- **Social:** To have a support network that includes family, friends, dependable adults, and positive role models who provide love, guidance, and discipline. To have the ability to communicate. To have a place where they feel they belong and where they can have positive interactions with others.
- **Educational and Recreational:** To have access to a variety of community resources that offer, at very little or no cost, opportunities for stimulation, training, education, learning, recreation, physical activity, and participation.
- **Access:** To have affordable access to education, information, recreation, and service resources that have no physical or transportation barriers and are welcoming and easy to use.

## *Barriers to Public Library Use*

### **Inadequate Access**

Inadequate access includes physical barriers related to a public library building, geographic, neighborhood, and transportation barriers in getting to a public library.

### **Knowledge, Culture, and Climate Both Outside and Inside the Library**

Outside the library, barriers include lack of familiarity with library services, limited language and literacy skills, the attitudes of peers and parents about library use, competing demands and responsibilities, and inadequate emphasis on agency cooperation. Inside the library, barriers may include unwelcoming and uninformed staff and patron attitudes; unfriendly, inflexible, and costly library policies; the lack of involvement by youth with special needs in library planning that affects them; and the perception that services to youth with special needs is an “extra” (i.e., expendable) service.

### **Lack of Resources for Youth with Special Needs**

Lack of resources includes the lack of appropriate materials, programs, services, equipment, technology, and the staff time to provide them.

