

Fitchburg library working on becoming more inclusive

Neal Patten Unified Newspaper Group

Jan 11, 2020

Over the next few years, the state is asking its member libraries to take steps to better listen to underrepresented voices in their communities.

Those voices will likely include people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, people with disabilities, the elderly, low income individuals and people from all walks of life, Tessa Michaelson Schmidt, youth and inclusive library consultant at the state Department of Public Instruction said. The voices at each library will differ based on the community.

In her role, she serves the roughly 400 libraries across the state's 16 regional public library systems. For the past eight years, she has focused her work on supporting inclusive libraries, and that has resulted in an inclusivity statement in May 2017 and an assessment guide for libraries in July 2019.

In Fitchburg, a variety of changes have been made in recent years to be more inclusive and user-focused, including redesigning the parking spaces in the garage to better accommodate accessible vans, creating gender neutral restrooms on the second floor and eliminating overdue fines.

Library director Wendy Rawson said the goal of each of these projects was to make library patrons feel comfortable and welcome at the Fitchburg Public Library.

"We are fortunate that our newer building was created to be accessible, but there are always ways to improve," Rawson said. "We are looking forward to using this new tool, crafted by DPI, to make additional improvements."

Michaelson Schmidt said the statement and resulting assessment guide are partially intended to show how DPI interprets the law that sets requirements for libraries to remain eligible for state aid.

The trends that shaped the statement – drafted by people actively working in Wisconsin libraries – came from local library input, as stakeholders found it helpful to have a set definition of the law, she said. To get there, she did a lot of listening to the different libraries to learn what would provide more inclusive services.

“Things like income, race, identity – what that actually looks like and concerns or hesitations or complexities will look different in every community,” Michaelson Schmidt said. “There’s not one prescription that will work for everyone.”

She held a retreat that led to the drafting of the statement, then brought library staff together from around the state to look at race, social justice and bias, using examples of their experiences for the Inclusive Services Institute.

Among the topic areas the guide addresses are: collections, services, practices, policies, procedures, perceived friendliness, programming, location, hours, restrooms, computers and technology, library card registration, online access (website and internet card catalog), marketing, community engagement, funding, self care for library workers, and inclusive culture at the library.

The assessment includes a checklist of questions and prompts representing these topics which were made to align with Wisconsin Public Library standards.

The assessment and guide were shared with the Fitchburg library’s Board of Trustees in the fall of 2019 and will be referred to during the library’s strategic planning process this year.

A workgroup of library staff has been formed which will focus on completing the various assessments in the guide and consider how to improve the facilities, collections and services that the library provides.

Michaelson Schmidt said the assessment provides overall goals that all the regional libraries can be striving for, but adapt to the needs of their local community.

“In many ways, it’s exciting words like equity, social justice and inclusion are more understood now than even one to five years ago,” she said. “I am pleased to hear libraries are taking these documents to heart and not just having these conversations because this is a nice thing to do or trendy or on the radar for now. This is what libraries have always stood for, to be a place for everyone regardless of literacy or income, it’s one of the true democratic institutions in our country.”

She is working on additional resources tying together the statement and assessment document, including new checklist prompts based on feedback about areas where libraries are not inclusive. She is also creating video modules to be used at board meetings or staff inservices to help buffer difficult conversations on topics like race or class and diffuse potential tensions.

“Libraries can be a great location for having conversations that can be hard to wrap your head around, a place of safety and trust,” Michaelson Schmidt said.

Neal Patten, community reporter, can be contacted at neal.patten@wcinet.com.

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In Oregon, that assessment has led to several initiatives already, including diversity and inclusivity training for staff members, offering adaptive technology accessories such as a track ball mouse and portable digital magnifier and making their Facebook page and website more accessible on screen reader devices.

Other changes the library staff wanted to make are not possible in the current building because the space doesn't allow for it, Oregon Public Library director Jennifer Endres Way said adding that the changes will be implemented in the new library.

Endres Way said for her staff, it's a great framework to evaluate how they are doing.

"It really helps us take a step back to make sure we are being as inclusive as possible and eliminate any barriers," she said.

Michaelson Schmidt said the statement and resulting assessment guide are partially intended to provide how DPI interprets state statute 43.24(2)(k), the law that sets requirements for libraries to remain eligible for state aid.

The trends that shaped the statement – which was drafted by people actively working in Wisconsin libraries – came from local library input, as stakeholders found it helpful to have a set definition of the law, Michaelson Schmidt said. To get there, she said, she did a lot of listening to the different libraries to learn what would

provide more inclusive services.

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Among the topic areas the resulting assessment guide addresses are collections, services, practices, policies, procedures, perceived friendliness, programming, location, hours, restrooms, computers and technology, library card registration, online access (website and internet card catalog), marketing, community engagement, funding, self care for library workers, and inclusive culture at the library.

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Endres Way said the tools in the assessment have been helping them make sure that the new library will be accessible for everyone. She believes the plans have exceeded what’s recommended in the document, not just met the minimum requirements for the new building.

Based on recommendations from the guide, goals for the new library include providing state of the art technology in meeting and event spaces, like microphones and sound system; adjustable lighting; reducing the height of shelving to allow easier access to top shelves; a new mothers and caregivers room for people who are nursing or pumping and to offer a hearing loop system in meeting rooms, which lets people with hearing aids hear better during meetings and programs.

“There’s a lot to it,” Way said, “We are going through it systematically to determine where we are now and we’d like to be.”

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She said she is now working on additional resources tying together the statement and assessment document. This includes new checklist prompts based upon the feedback she's been hearing of more areas where libraries are not inclusive. She is also creating video modules which could be used at board meetings or staff inservices to help buffer difficult conversations on topics like race or class and diffuse potential tensions.

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Neal Patten Unified Newspaper Group

Jan 3, 2020

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In Stoughton, this has led to a policy change that eliminates the question asking for gender on library card applications and a short list of immediate goals, such as increasing the font size on hold slips and improving signage and wayfinding.

Library director Jim Ramsey said the library never used the gender information internally or reported it to anyone externally, so the staff eliminated the gender question from the library card application.

"That's a relatively small change a lot of people won't even notice, but for people who may be nonbinary or gender nonconforming, that is one less barrier for them," Ramsey said.

Stoughton's library also invited Michaelson Schmidt to lead exercises in examining bias at a staff in-service in September 2019.

"She had us looking at the idea that the public library by its definition is for everyone and how to break down barriers that may prevent people who enter our doors with certain backstories or backgrounds from using certain services," Ramsey said.

Ramsey said there are some accessibility problems the library cannot fix without a building upgrade such as widening the aisles.

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The assessment first came to Ramsey’s attention while working in Middleton in 2018, when members of the task force presented a draft of the guide. When he became Stoughton’s director in April, it was something he wanted to use as soon as possible for policy planning and overall library direction.

Ramsey held an in-service to look over the assessment with staff and presented it to the Library Board.

There is a policy committee on the library board that meets almost monthly to ensure that policies aren’t unnecessarily onerous to library users. Ramsey said the committee has begun using the assessment guide to ensure the library does not have any policy that creates an undue barrier to service.

He said it’s an ongoing project, not something with a specific beginning and end date. The library will continue to look at the document when putting together strategic plans and planning for the future.

“Some things in there are easier to implement and some are harder, but it is a way to ensure you are providing the greatest level of accessibility to the greatest number of people,” Ramsey said.

Michaelson Schmidt said the assessment provides overall goals that all the regional libraries can be striving for, but adapt to the needs of their local community.

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In Verona, that assessment has led to a list of 10 areas the Verona Public Library will focus its energy working on in the coming year, including adaptive technology and better signage for people who speak different languages.

Assistant library director Julie Harrison said the Library Board has also read the statement and agreed with changes to make the Verona library as inclusive as possible.

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After Verona's team completed the assessment, it identified several priorities.

These include providing more adaptive or assistive technology in the computer lab, such as high contrast screens, ergonomic keyboards and alternative mice and touch pads; translating more library documents such as policies and promotional materials; increasing the size of bookshelf labels; improving basic signage in the library by adding pictograms for people who speak different languages; and identifying where new signage is needed to help people get around the building easier.

Verona's library also wants to ensure it is being inclusive in its hiring process and leadership including Harrison and director Stacey Burkart plan to talk to the city's human resources coordinator to meet this goal.

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