

# Fundamental Freedoms, Library Services, and Multi-Lingual Populations

By Loida Garcia-Febo

*“As libraries serve diverse interests and communities, they function as learning, cultural, and information centres. In addressing cultural and linguistic diversity, library services are driven by their commitment to the principles of fundamental freedoms and equity of access to information and knowledge for all, in the respect of cultural identity and values.”*

IFLA Multicultural Library Manifesto, 2008

Recently a number of libraries have had to justify providing access to information to multi-lingual customers. In light of this, I am revisiting resources that may help libraries in such situations. Access to information for all in the community is a right stated in Article 19 of the United Nations' Declaration of human rights, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and **to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.**” [emphasis added] The UNESCO Public Library Manifesto mirrors this Article by expressing that “the services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all.” Furthermore, it says “Specific services and materials must be provided for those who cannot, for whatever reason, use the regular services and materials, for example linguistic minorities, people with disabilities, or people in hospital or prison” (UNESCO, 1994). Therefore, we can conclude that inclusive services for all community members reflect fundamental democratic values by which our society operates.

The Library Bill of Rights of the American Library Association (ALA) includes powerful policies promoting services of interest to all those within the library service area. For instance, “Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of **all people of the community** the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation” (*Library Bill of Rights*). By enriching their communities libraries contribute to life-long learning by its members thereby increasing their opportunity to develop skills needed to succeed in life.

ALA Policy 60 Diversity includes strong arguments for the provision of education, training, programs and services for multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic populations. Inclusiveness, combating racism and discrimination are also pivotal points of the Policy which highlights “the critical need for access to library and information resources, services, and technologies by all people” (ALA, 1998). Additionally, Policy 53.1.11 Diversity in Collection Development, states

that “librarians have the professional responsibility of being inclusive” and furthermore, “include materials and resources that reflect a diversity of political, economic, religious, social, minority, and sexual issues” (ALA, 2008). Consequently, libraries adhering to these policies will assist in the building of communities where all diverse groups have a voice and a space in the process.

Over the years, ALA has also approved resolutions in support of immigrant rights stating that “the library community opposes all attempts to restrict access to information by immigrants” and “supporting the protection of each person's civil liberties, regardless of that individual's nationality, residency, or status” (ALA, 2007). In 2005, the Association also adopted a Resolution in Support of Immigrants' Rights to Free Public Library Access (previously endorsed by REFORMA, The National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking). It highlighted the development of ways to educate “about alternate forms of identification that will allow free public access to library services for all immigrant populations” (ALA, 2005). This resolution paved the way for libraries to expand access to information for those using alternative types of identification to obtain library cards reflecting the profession's commitment to universal right of equal access for all.

We must continue unwavering advocacy for libraries to provide services reflecting our fundamental freedoms and access to information for all. Other helpful resources with facts to support arguments about the above rights may be found in the following titles, *Library services to youth of Hispanic heritage* (2000), *Immigrant politics and the public library* (2001), and *Still struggling for equality: American public library services with minorities* (2004).

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