

Society of American Archivists 2009 Annual Meeting, Austin, TX

Session 307: Strategies for Accommodating People with Physical Impairments
and Disabilities in Archives

August 14, 2009

8:30-9:30 am

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This morning I'll be providing an overview of the Joint RMRT/AMRT Working Group on Diversity in Archives and Records Management Physical Disabilities Project and Survey.

I'd first like to thank everyone who has helped our group with this project over the last almost two years—all of the working group members, who poured their hearts, time, and energy into it; our survey respondents, who generously provided important and sometimes very personal information that was invaluable to us; and our advisors—especially Daria and Russell, whose vision to create this group, and whose patient and insightful advice and support have kept us working and thinking and producing.

I also want to thank Daria for so beautifully coordinating this presentation and for her absolutely on-point introduction today. Her assessment of the generosity of people in our profession and of our desire to “do well by our colleagues and patrons with physical impairments” is exactly the reason our joint working group was assigned its first charge to, through networking and study, develop tools to assist persons with disabilities in archives to overcome some of the challenges they face.

I want to make it very clear that this group is fully aware that there are other kinds of disabilities that were not addressed in our work. This is not because we don't think those are important—we just needed to limit our work to a manageable group of issues. No doubt there should also be some examination of mental and cognitive disabilities in archives.

Volunteers who worked on this project came from several professions—archivists, records managers, librarians, and even students. It's an amazingly dedicated and diverse group of individuals, who have taught me more than I ever imagined I could learn about this subject.

The first step in our process was to gather research materials that would help us to understand some of the issues and challenges facing people with physical disabilities. We were quite surprised to discover that there is only one published work concerning people with disabilities in archives and we very fortunate to have the author, Frank Serene, with us today.

Because the group members live at great distances from one another, we used a wiki to gather these resources and to create drafts of our survey questions and recommendation documents. We initially also used our wiki to share comments, but discovered that email was a more useful way to communicate about our work.

We quickly discovered that our first discussion would have to be about preferred disability terminology and that there is not always agreement about what is preferred. This was one of the educational aspects of the project for me. For example, I didn't know that the terms "handicap," "handicapped," and "disabled" are objectionable, and that the phrases "people with disabilities" and "person with a disability" is preferred. The Department of Justice, in its publication, "Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability in State and Local Government Services," states that:

The use of the term "disability" instead of "handicap" and the term "individual with a disability" instead of "individual with handicaps" represents an effort by Congress to make use of up-to-date, currently accepted terminology. As with racial and ethnic epithets, the choice of terms to apply to a person with a disability is overlaid with stereotypes, patronizing attitudes, and other emotional connotations. Many individuals with disabilities, and organizations representing such individuals, object to the use of such terms as "handicapped person" or "the handicapped."¹

We found a good explanation of these objections in the University of North Carolina-Wilmington Division of Student Affairs Publication, "Disability Terminology":

People with disabilities prefer that you focus on their individuality, not their disability. The term "handicapped" has fallen into disuse and should be avoided. The terms "able-bodied," "physically challenged" and "differently abled" are also discouraged. The preferred usage, 'people with disabilities,' stresses the essential humanity of individuals and avoids objectification.

And further that "to refer to a person's disability, choose the correct terminology for the specific disability." For example, use "people who are deaf" rather than "deaf people" or "the deaf." Use "person with a visual impairment" rather than "the visually impaired."

These guidelines also recommend that we "be careful not to imply that people with disabilities are to be pitied, feared or ignored, or that they are somehow more heroic, courageous, patient or 'special' than others, and that we should "never use the term 'normal' in contrast."

And my last example from these guidelines: "A person in a wheelchair is a 'wheelchair user' or 'uses a wheelchair.' Avoid terms that define the disability as a

limitation such as 'confined to a wheelchair' or 'wheelchair-bound.' A wheelchair liberates; it doesn't confine."²

Once we had reached consensus on the preferred terminology, we were ready to begin working on our charge and we agreed that the best way to “network” with our archival colleagues would be through a survey to ask archivists about their experiences with people with disabilities in their workplaces, whether those people were themselves, their co-workers, or researchers in their archives.

Avery Olmstead, who spoke to you on video just a little while ago, generously shared oral interview questions he created about accessibility in archives that he had used as the basis for a library school class paper. These questions formed the starting point for our survey questions.

With Brian Doyle's help, the survey was distributed online through the SAA website during July 2008.

The survey was divided into three parts—questions for responders with disabilities, questions about their co-workers with disabilities, and questions about researchers with disabilities in their archives.

Some common questions included those about: the nature of a disability, the challenges faced in the archives, strategies used to address the challenges, and how, or whether, accommodations were provided to ease the challenges, either by archives staff or administration.

To save time, I won't go into detail about all of the survey questions here. If you're interested, you can find them reprinted on pages 13 and 14 in the November 2008 issue of *The Records Manager*, newsletter of the Records Management Roundtable.³

Out of 77 respondents to our survey, 47 (61%) were archivists, 5 (6%) were records managers, 4 (5%) are administrators, and 21 (27%) listed their occupation as “other.” For a summary of the quantitative survey data, see Working Group Co-Coordinator Casey E. Green's “Summary of Responses to the Survey,” printed on page 15 in the November issue of *The Records Manager*.⁴ Although we did hope that the survey would gain wide participation, we were more interested in the qualitative than the quantitative information. While in a different context it might be important to know how many archives employees and researchers have physical disabilities, our focus was not on the numbers, but on specific challenges and solutions, so the commentary the respondents provided was crucial for our work.

To give you some idea of some of the conclusions discerned from the survey responses, I'll quote a bit now from a paper written by one of our members, Michelle Ganz, for the November/December 2008 issue of *Archival Outlook*:

“One of the most striking issues to come out of the survey is that while most institutions are more than willing to make accommodations for **employees** with disabilities, few, *if any*, are made for **patrons** with disabilities beyond what is mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act.” And “Most people are happy to help out a co-worker or patron when needed, and these include accommodations beyond the standard communication devices and software programs.” “According to our survey responses, some of the biggest challenges faced by employees with disabilities seem to be the ergonomics of the workplace. In terms of patrons’ challenges, the biggest issues seem to be mobility-related.”⁵

Other disabilities are certainly represented in the survey responses. Out of 77 respondents, 11 indicated that they themselves had disabilities and 10 of these indicated the nature of their disability: 10% reported sight impairments, 20% reported hearing difficulties, and 40% reported mobility impairments. 40% selected the “other” category. The fact that these add up to 110% indicates that some have more than one kind of disability.

When reporting about co-workers with disabilities, 18 (23%) indicated that they have co-workers with disabilities, the most common being mobility impairments (67%).

78% of the respondents indicated that they work with patrons with disabilities, the most common again being mobility-related (40%).⁶

Although this was an anonymous survey, we asked for volunteers to provide contact information for follow-up interviews. We did this because we suspected that there would be information provided that would need further explanation. Nine people volunteered and were contacted for follow-up interviews. They were first contacted through email and given a choice between an email or telephone interview—8 of the nine chose email and one preferred a telephone interview because typing is a difficult task for that person. Much of the information they provided was instructive and heartwarming. Most responded that their institutions do as much as possible to be flexible and accommodating.

One of our interviewees, when talking about elderly volunteers, reminded us that “one of the struggles for folks who do not have disabilities is that they cannot see all of the things that might limit someone who has some sort of limitation.” This statement was prompted by his work with elderly volunteers, who often also have a multitude of disabilities. This can also be true of paid archives employees and researchers, young and old. For example, we might encounter a person in a wheelchair and realize that they are unable to retrieve and carry heavy boxes, but we might not see that their hands are full of pain and they need assistance with other tasks as well. They might also have difficulty hearing, seeing, and/or speaking. It will never be possible to know every time someone has a disability

or limiting condition. Awareness of this reality can help us to remain sensitive and flexible.

The joint working group has created two sets of recommendations for working with people with disabilities in archives: one for working with researchers with disabilities and one for working with archives employees with disabilities. These recommendations are based on information learned through our survey responses, and on two published documents: Frank Serene's *Making Archives Accessible for People with Disabilities*, (The only accessibility publication specifically for archives that we were able to find) and the Association of Specialized & Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA) *Library Accessibility Toolkit*.⁷

Copies of our recommendations can be available on the RMRT and AMRT websites and in the Online SAA Conference Program with our session information.⁸

The next charge for this group has not yet been decided because we're just finishing up this project. A recent survey of the RMRT membership provided some suggestions:

- Look into accessibility of electronic records and records management and archival systems. This was one of the more popular recommendations.
- Advocate for archives to alleviate some of the challenges and convince archival administrations to work to implement changes. This is a great idea, and one of the intended outcomes of this project. But I think this is too big a task for our little working group. The hope is that these recommendations will be used by archivists and records managers to advocate for accommodations in their own repositories and institutions as necessary.
- Facilitate roundtable discussions on a variety of diversity-related issues. I also think this is a great idea, but affects more than just the RMRT and AMRT. Our group will definitely discuss the possibility of initiating these kinds of discussions on the archives & archivists list.

During the next few weeks, the joint working group will consult with the Diversity Committee and our SAA advisors to determine our next charge. We would also love to hear your suggestions.

¹ Department of Justice. Office of the Attorney General. 28 CFR Part 35. "Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability in State and Local Government Services." 26 Jan. 1992. <http://www.ada.gov/reg2.html>

² "Disability Terminology." University of North Carolina-Wilmington. Division of Student Affairs. http://uncw.edu/stuaff/disability/faculty_terminology.htm

³ Kmok, Debra. "The Survey." RMRT/AMRT Joint Working Group on Diversity in Archives and Records Management." *The Records Manager*, November 2008, 13-15. http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/recmgmt/resources/newsletters/TRM_200811.pdf

⁴ Greene, Casey E. "Summary of the Survey Questions." RMRT/AMRT Joint Working Group on Diversity in Archives and Records Management." *The Records Manager*, November 2008, 15.

http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/recmgmt/resources/newsletters/TRM_200811.pdf

⁵ Ganz, Michelle. "Survey Conducted on 'Accessibility in Archives.'" *Archival Outlook*, Nov/Dec 2008, 8; 24. http://www.archivists.org/periodicals/ao_backissues/AO-NovDec08.pdf

⁶ Greene.

⁷ Serene, Frank H. "Making Archives Accessible for People With Disabilities." National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). <http://www.archives.gov/publications/misc/making-archives-accessible.pdf>; DeLatte, Monique, ed. "Library Accessibility: What You Need to Know." Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA).

<http://www.ala.org/ala/ascla/asclaprotocols/accessibilitytipsheets/>

⁸ "Recommendations for Working with Archives Researchers with Physical Disabilities." RMRT/AMRT Joint Working Group on Diversity in Archives and Records Management, 2009.

<http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/archmgmt>; "Recommendations for Working with Archives Employees with Physical Disabilities." RMRT/AMRT Joint Working Group on Diversity in Archives and Records Management, 2009. <http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/archmgmt>