

# Grassroots Report

Where Reference Librarians Do Rove

by Jennifer Burek Pierce

**A**LA's Reference and User Services Association articulates the ideal of getting beyond the reference desk, and in Ohio, public libraries are working to translate these objectives into dynamic reality. RUSA's Guidelines for the Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers describe desirable reference conduct thus: "Roves through the reference area offering assistance whenever possible."

But Ohio librarians have gone beyond the guidelines. Their ideas are challenging and engaging, thought-provoking—and responsive.

## Step right up—to the patron

Geauga County Public Library uses a two-pronged approach to patron interactions, explained Director Deborah F. O'Connor. First, circulation staff welcome visitors as they come into the building. Then, once patrons move into the reference and collection areas, staff there follow up. Each member of the reference team also takes a one-hour shift of going out into the stacks to advise and assist patrons.

O'Connor noted that some staff expressed concerns that these advance encounters meant that librarians were becoming Wal-Mart greeters. She frames the activity differently: "We're turning into Nordstrom personal

shoppers" by having librarians deploy their expertise while making personal connections with patrons.

Many patrons feel that because they learned how to use the library in school they should be able to work there independently, O'Connor observed. Still, she noted, "Libraries are much more sophisticated places than they were years ago. We find that people don't know the wealth

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the library has to offer." Farther south, the Westerville Public Library has all but done away with the desk. WPL Director Don Barlow explained that the transition to roving reference as the primary service mode began approximately two years ago. He described the effort as a way to "enhance customer service" to reluctant users. "Traditional library service doesn't work any longer," Barlow said.

WPL maintains an "Ask Here" station but equips reference staff with wireless headsets and tablet PCs that provide access to the OPAC and databases. Soon the library will trade these devices in for new iPAQ pocket PCs that integrate search, phone, and text-message functions with the ability to check out books on the spot. The idea, Barlow explained, is to take the transaction to the patron, rather than expect the patron to navigate the library's systems and structures.

These changes, in turn, require a different approach to hiring and retaining library staff. "Training, training, and more training," as well as being upfront about the service philosophy, are key, according to Barlow. How have WPL staffers responded? "Two-thirds of them really enjoy that. We have lost a couple of librarians because they couldn't get

beyond the traditional idea of service," he acknowledged.

## Wireless walkabouts

Columbus Metropolitan Library is spending \$400,000 to transition to roving reference. "This amount covers the cost of removal of existing desks; wiring, carpet, and other construction/building considerations; and design and construction of the new desks," Associate Director of Public Services Susan Studebaker explained.

A 27-year veteran of the system, Studebaker said that the move to a new service model began with pilot testing last year. Older reference desks are being replaced with smaller—and sometimes portable—models that Studebaker calls "more versatile." The aim is to allow staff to stand or patrons and librarians to sit together at a terminal.

"We are still definitely a work in progress," she said, noting that the driving force is a focus on library users' needs. "We're encouraging staff to do what's best for the customer at their facility," Studebaker said. Determining how to make patrons a priority has involved a range of strategies at CML, from disbanding desk schedules to sharing success stories in order to build enthusiasm. A library task force held training sessions for managers and staff, addressing nonverbal communication and the need to use open-ended questions to engage users. Evaluation is ongoing.

"It takes more time," Studebaker said of the on-the-spot interaction. "You often need more staff working the floor." At CML, this has meant eliminating behind-the-scenes work that has less impact on the public, which Studebaker acknowledged can be "hard" for staff who enjoy those tasks.

"We want them to feel valued," she said of CML staff. "We have to continue to evolve. People are experimenting. That's what's terrific." ☐

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