

# Community Health Connections

Emerging Models of  
Health Information Services  
in Public Libraries

*Based on the Langeloth Forum  
on Libraries and Health Information*

Libraries for the Future 2005

*Libraries for the Future is the program division of Americans for Libraries Council*



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# Preface

As the primary public source of free electronic and print information, the public library is a necessary and vital link in the information chain that stretches from health-service providers and community-based organizations through researchers, educators, and policymakers. The library is a trusted institution that welcomes people of all economic and cultural backgrounds; it integrates information and ideas from diverse sources and in diverse formats and languages; and it serves people across the lifespan. It plays an especially important role in communities where people are isolated from mainstream health services and health education owing to income levels, geography, or cultural traditions.

The public library is poised to function more systematically as a center for health information and health education. However, it faces barriers in the realization of this potential, barriers that were identified at the November 2004 Langeloth Forum, Building Healthy Communities Through Public Libraries, and a subsequent planning meeting attended by specialists in health information services, health reference, and public library development. The barriers include the lack of a common vision for libraries' health information roles; inadequate opportunities for development of skills in reference, community outreach, and other essential capacities; training initiatives that do not address the diversity of libraries and their communities; lack of an infrastructure for exchanging strategies and best practices; and the low visibility of health information services with policymakers and funders.

Helping public libraries to realize their capacity as providers of health information is important for several reasons. The first is efficiency. The library has inherent capacities to help meet growing health information needs. The second reason is equity. More and more people are unable to access our complex and intimidating health services system and are dependent on community agencies, family members, or the Internet for health information. Third is the need for ensuring quality and consistency of health information assistance. Without clearer guidelines and benchmarks for different levels of service, public libraries do not have a means of assessing their own deficiencies and building their skills.

This publication on emerging models for health information services in community libraries, and the Langeloth Forum from which it was derived, aims to capture the emerging field of health information services in public libraries and provide instructive examples of innovative services for the benefit of libraries and the communities they service. We thank the Langeloth Foundation for its support of these activities, which form the basis for ongoing work to encourage policymakers, funders, and citizens to support the library as a vital source of health information and education.

*Diantha Dow Schull*  
*President*  
*Libraries for the Future*

"There is an element of trust that exists between people and libraries. . . . We are able to uncover people with medical problems and then work with them to get the help they need."

—*Brian Palmer,*  
*Coney Island*  
*Hospital and Great*  
*Southern Brooklyn*  
*Health Coalition*



# Introduction

Health information is one of the most rapidly growing areas of need in American public libraries. Libraries and library systems are responding to this emerging need by developing new services, collections, partnerships, and programs. They have started to create health information centers, expand collections in relation to local language and cultural backgrounds, collaborate in the organization of online health reference resources, partner with local health agencies and schools, reach out to high-needs populations, organize health-related programming, and, most recently, address issues of health literacy and related collection assessment.

Despite the emergence of these and other library-based “best practices,” there is no infrastructure for disseminating or evaluating such models across the library community or for ensuring adequate information exchange as new models are developed, tested, and evaluated. Nor is there a means for developing guidelines and making them available to new practitioners in the field. In its work in diverse states, from Minnesota and Arizona to New York and Pennsylvania, Libraries for the Future (LFF) has documented “best practices” in the provision of health information at the same time that it has found no existing vehicle for the communication of these models within or across states.

## The Langeloth Forum

The Langeloth Forum on Libraries and Health Information convened more than 35 specialists in health information access for a one and three-quarter day program in New York City in November 2004. LFF convened the forum to build a common understanding of best practices in library-based health information services, both to inform and enhance current programs and services and to shape planning for the future. This required a convening of practitioners responsible for current models, analysis of the principles and practices reflected in these models, and development of a common vision for success.

The Langeloth Forum stimulated development of guidelines for creating new programs and criteria for assessing levels of effectiveness. It showcased a sampling of “jewels” in the library-health information landscape and provided an opportunity for committed practitioners and library leaders to discuss and debate the elements that constitute success. The gathering focused especially on the role of public libraries, documenting current practices and strategies for expanding public access to health information. A catalyst for creating an inventory of best practices in public library services, the discussions have stimulated development of a community of practice.

The Langeloth Forum was held in a favorable environment. Both the National Library of Medicine (NLM) and the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM) had only recently committed themselves to enlarging their training efforts for public librarians. At about the same time, the National Commission on Library and Information Science (NCLIS) had decided to give formal recognition to the health-information role of public librarians through its annual Blue Ribbon Awards for Model Consumer Health Information Programs. The publication announcing the awards was one model and source for this report.

The Langeloth Forum enabled LFF and its potential national partners to hear the voices and concerns of librarians working in a wide variety of settings, from urban neighborhoods and suburban counties to rural Native American communities. It was an opportunity for frontline librarians to exchange ideas and information with peers and also to identify the challenges ahead:

- the urgent national need for increased health information services in and through public libraries;
- the need for a framework for public library health services, including competencies for librarians, that can be adapted in diverse libraries for diverse communities;
- the need to coordinate and expand opportunities for professional development;
- the need for ongoing exchange of information on best practices; and
- the need for recognition and support of libraries as key partners in health promotion strategies.

## **An Emerging Focus on Health Information**

The formulation of these challenges confirmed many of the experiences that we at LFF have had while working with librarians on health-related issues. For the past decade, we have been organizing local and regional health information-access coalitions, promoting health literacy, and working with library leaders, practicing librarians, community agencies, library users, public policymakers and philanthropists on health information issues. In cooperation with local, state, and national entities we have helped libraries respond to the varied and growing demands for health and wellness information and education.

We began in 1995, with health-related programming at the Flatbush Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, which led to ongoing partnerships between the library and community-based organizations and underscored the importance of the library as a public resource. In 2000, we joined with the Brooklyn Public Library to coordinate the Brooklyn Health Information Access Coalition, which grew to 40 organizations collaborating on public programs and outreach. It highlighted the need for improved awareness of library resources on the part of local services providers; the need for libraries to be in closer touch with their communities to better tailor their collections and programs; and the great value of local coalitions in advancing a common agenda for equitable information access.

The coalition led, as well, to the formation of an over-arching coalition in the New York metropolitan region—the New York Area Health Information Access Coalition (NYACHIA)—which has, among other things, brought together community-based health promotion groups, city and federal health agencies, academic librarians, and public librarians in a new forum for skills-building and information exchange. NYACHIA is profiled in this booklet.

Our experience led us to not only create a new service framework for public librarians—Health Access—but to obtain support for training librarians to implement it. Our signature program, EqualAccess Libraries, is designed to strengthen public libraries' capacity as centers for information and education. Libraries have become “connected” through donations of computers and software from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. However, all too many libraries have not been able to integrate these new tools in ways that make them readily accessible and meaningful. By training librarians to link residents to locally relevant content, EqualAccess Libraries leverages new technology capacities and promotes community-library connections.

We have been implementing Health Access in Pennsylvania and Arizona, in cooperation with the state library development offices, regional library systems, and local libraries. To date, 20 librarians in Pennsylvania and 13 librarians in Arizona have taken part in Health Access training, which includes a component on reference skills taught by a regional representative of the NN/LM.

Planning and implementation of Health Access underscore the importance of training and support for public librarians who are struggling to respond to their communities' health-related information and education needs. A Health Access Library is a center for improving the health and well being of community residents. Expanding the traditional reference role of the library, the Health Access model builds on the realization that when relevant information about health promotion and maintenance is made accessible through programs and community collaborations, individuals, families, and communities all benefit. Library staff, trained in health reference, outreach, partnering, and programming, can work more effectively with local agencies to match health information to community needs.

Our experience has also identified some of the salient characteristics of libraries that successfully address the need for improved health information access. The common elements of success can be distilled into these major attributes:

- **First** is reaching out to local groups and populations that have not traditionally used the library.
- **Second** is improving the flow of knowledge and best practice between the academy and the public library.
- **Third** is having a dedicated health information center in the library.
- **Fourth** is taking full advantage of electronic information technology. Library users must be able to find the information easily, and the library must display its health information capabilities with enough prominence on its website for maximum benefit.
- **Fifth** is establishing partnerships and other cooperative relationships with local organizations and groups that have an interest in health and wellness.
- **Sixth** is creating interesting programs for young people to encourage the health and wellness habit early in life.
- **Seventh** is having a state library that works actively to make librarians and library users more aware of the public library's capacity for delivering health and wellness information.
- **Eighth** is providing ongoing professional training for public librarians, who must be kept up to date on these changes of content, presentation, and practice.

Finally, it is clear that academic and other kinds of libraries, as well as independent nonprofit organizations, academic centers, and government bodies can offer very useful advice and models for public librarians who want to improve their health-information services. Providing accurate and timely health and wellness information is a concern for the entire library community.

"Our health care and public health systems have...a lot of expectations of people long before they're ill, and then when they become ill, our expectations are much more profound and much more demanding than they used to be. It's anticipated, expected and often taken for granted that people are reading all of the health information we put out there.... The library can play a critical role in building literacy skills, helping people access information, and helping people translate information."

—Rima E. Rudd,  
Harvard School  
of Public Health

## Organization of This Publication

This booklet is organized according to the nine key elements outlined above. For each element short profiles sketch several model programs, with the first two being somewhat more detailed as lead items. Of necessity the models are only a few of many more that could have been presented in a larger publication. The profiles rely especially on the presentations at the Langeloth Forum, with important added profiles culled from additional research.

An effort has been made to present programs that show ingenuity and diversity in their efforts to bring health information to their communities, from circuit-riding health librarians shared by school and public libraries in Dover, Delaware, to training members of the public in health reference and outreach in the colonias area along the Texas-Mexico border. There was also a desire to find examples of projects or programs in which public libraries have played leading and innovative roles.

Although the nine elements overlap somewhat, they are helpful ways of thinking about the relationship of the public library and its communities of users and stakeholders. This publication is, therefore, a significant addition to the emerging literature on health information access in public libraries and a complement to work done recently by NCLIS.