

# OUTSOURCING FEDERAL LIBRARIES

by R. Lee Hadden

Outsourcing, privatization or contracting has been growing over the past two decades in libraries all across the country. In the Federal government, many libraries have been contracted out entirely. This started under the Office of Management and Budget's Circular A-76, which included libraries as a subject for contracting out on Federal installations, along with janitorial services, laundry and street maintenance.

There are a large number of contracted libraries in the federal system, including the Department of Interior library, the EPA Regional libraries, Dept. of Energy and many others. Aspin, Anderson-Lamont, Garcia and other contracting companies will take over all or part of any of these library operations.

Contracting-out practices are also coming to private institutions and universities. In Florida, OCLC's TechPro contracted to supply acquisitions and cataloging for the entire university library system. Others will follow.

Contracted libraries are different from corporate libraries. In contracted libraries, the books, equipment, etc. all remain the property of the organization, but the staff are hired and report to someone outside the organization. Staff are generally contracted for terms up to five years, and at the end of the contract there is generally no provision to hire the current staff if a new company comes in, or that there will not be a break in service between the completion of one contract and the beginning of another one.

What are the results? Fewer federal libraries are suppliers on OCLC or mailed ILLs. Since contractors are not paid to provide services to the public, they don't. Hours are cut, and some refuse to supply reference services to walk-ins who are not part of the federal agency.

Wages and staff are the one area in which contractors can cut, and they

often do. As a result, the libraries suffer from lack of adequate staff and resources. Often when a library is within six months of completing a contract, library staff begin to look for other jobs, since they are not guaranteed a job should the contractors change, or when there is a gap between the completion of an expiring contract and the beginning of a new one. If a staff member quickly finds a new job and leaves, it is usually hard to hire new staff for a position that will only last six months.

Rather than be responsible to the federal agencies, the library staff are responsible to their company. Thus, in any ethical question, the library staff is expected [by the contractor] to support the company and not the agency. If the federal agency requests a service that is not spelled out in the contract, it should not be supplied, especially if it would cost the company anything at all in hours, resources or money. Service can be added to the contract, which takes time, some dickering, and lawyers.

Are contracted librarians professional and responsible people? Of course they are. I was one once, myself. They are regular librarians simply hired by a contractor. However, under the contract, the librarians must chose to support their company, not the owner of the materials or the library patrons. This makes their point of view very different (both overtly and subtly different) from other librarians.

For example, if they are not specifically paid to provide services to the public, such as reference or ILLs, then often they do not provide this service. If there is an ethical action that is profitable to the company, but not in the best interests of the agency, what would you, if you were a contractor, do?

If you were not paid specifically to provide ILLs to the public, simply because this was an oversight on the part of the agency, and it would cost you to do so, should you provide this service and cut into your company's profits? Or, if you were paid per item to borrow through ILL, and you see an item is borrowed often, would you purchase a copy for your library, and thus cut down on a possible continuing source of revenue, or would you continue to borrow through ILL and make a small profit off each transaction? Would you screw the company that hired you, or the agency that hired your company? Now, what would you do if there were only six months to go on the contract, and you knew that your company wouldn't get the new contract, and that you may not be hired by the new company? Would you

still purchase the book for the agency?

Anyway, as a result of contracting out so many federal libraries, and downsizing, and eliminating the collections, federal representatives on the OCLC Advisory Council dropped 30% last year.

What are the results of contracting out? Mainly there is a drop in expenses. Without long term obligations to employees, contractors can hire at lower costs, pay fewer benefits, and recoup savings from the employment relationship. Obligations to pensions are reduced, hiring costs and firing costs are reduced, insurance coverage can be reduced. Since contracted librarians are hired for five years or less, vacation time and salary step increases are kept low. Pay increases can be based on performance, on inflation or can be non-existent.

To bean-counters who know nothing about libraries, this drop in expenses can be very appealing. Managers and others get big awards for cutting costs, and far too often personal desires for these awards and promotions outweigh the greater good of the organization.

However, during times of reduced budgets, these are decisions that are being made all the time. After all, in a world where professors can be given tenure without a job, is a contracted university library that hard to imagine?

### **Librarians Against War: An Open Letter 2/28/98**

**W**e speak to you as librarians, members of a humanistic profession whose practice implies commitment to openness, democracy and freedom. We speak to you as believers in the superiority of reason over force and dialogue over violence.

Dedicated to an ideal of human progress which attends to preservation and continuity, librarianship is committed to patient, constructive work for a better future. A profession which helps create and maintain space for discourse and argument, for the free speech and dissent so important to a robust democracy, librarianship is also a profession based on mutuality. This includes international cooperation in the service of a world of knowledge which knows no borders. Educators and public servants, scholars and researchers, we are above all a profession of nurturers.

Hear us out, though we speak for the moment not of books and databases, but on an issue implicitly our legitimate professional concern.

We speak to you of war and of the threat of war. Not of a battle joined of necessity, in self-defense, but of war, planned and plotted with cold calculation against another nation and – less abstractly – against another people. As we write, our government is preparing an air assault on Iraq which will be devastating to the already suffering Iraqi people and which will contribute nothing to the cause of democracy or peace. We do not accept the planned death of countless civilians, the destruction of the infrastructure of their lives and society, as an “acceptable price to pay” or as “collateral damage.”

We speak in solidarity with our colleagues in the nation of Iraq, in its libraries and schools and universities, who strive for freedom and the end of oppression but in no way wish to see their people suffer another round of punitive military attacks and destruction.