

Recommendations for Action in Implementing ALA'S "Library Services for the Poor" Resolution

(aka ALA's "POOR PEOPLE'S POLICY")

The American Library Association promotes equal access to information for all persons, and recognizes the urgent need to respond to the increasing number of poor children, adults, and families in America.
(from the Poor People's Policy)

Actions for Citizens

1. Challenge public policy that adversely affects low-income people, such as, punitive welfare reform, cutting tax credits, reducing food stamps, eliminating benefits to immigrants, limiting health care access, and criminalizing homeless persons (e.g. through laws against loitering, panhandling, and camping).
2. Join local advocacy groups that work to promote resources and services for poor people.
3. Promote full, stable, and ongoing funding for existing legislative programs in support of low income services, and for pro-active library programs that reach beyond traditional service sites to poor children, adults, and families.
4. Promote an expanded federal low-income housing program, national health insurance, fullemployment policy; living minimum wage and welfare payments, affordable day care, and other programs likely to reduce, if not eliminate, poverty itself.

Actions for Library Professionals

Related to library services and policies:

1. Examine your library's mission statement. Who is supposed to be served? Are all people welcome? Are all people being served? What are the barriers to people using the library? What steps could be taken to eliminate these barriers?
2. Insure that people know how library policies are determined and are able to voice their concerns.
3. Evaluate library policies to ensure that they do not discriminate based on the ability to pay for access and/or service (e.g. video rental fees and bestseller rental programs).
4. Promote the removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges, as well as homeless-excluding residence requirements.
5. Ensure the future success of all children by contributing to efforts that insure children know how to read and are encouraged to read.
6. Work with local literacy providers to publicize availability of Adult Basic Education classes, GED and ESL to help adults improve their literacy skills.

Related to Staff Training:

1. Promote training to sensitize library staff to issues affecting poor people and attitudinal and other barriers that hinder poor people's use of libraries.
2. Promote training opportunities for librarians in effective techniques for generating public funding to upgrade library services to poor people.

Related to budgets and funding:

1. Promote the incorporation of low-income programs and services into regular library budgets in all types of libraries, rather than the tendency to support these projects solely with "soft money" like private or federal grants.
2. Promote equity in funding adequate library services for poor people in terms of materials, facilities, and equipment.
3. Promote supplemental support for library resources for and about low-income populations by urging local, state, and federal governments, and the private sector, to provide adequate funding.

Related to Outreach Services:

1. Ask local welfare consumer and antipoverty organizations what issues they're working on and how the library can contribute to their work.
2. Promote the determination of output measures through the encouragement of community needs assessments, giving special emphasis to assessing the needs of low-income people and involving both anti-poverty advocates and poor people themselves in such assessments.
3. Have a special area of reports, brochures, and newsletters of local organizations and agencies with addresses, contact names, and purpose of groups so that interested people can get involved.
4. Fund and support outreach services that address community needs such as literacy and read-aloud programs.
5. Promote networking and cooperation between libraries and other agencies, organizations, and advocacy groups in order to develop programs and services that effectively reach poor people.
6. Build partnerships with organizations in your community that serve low-income families. Tell those organizations what you have, how the library works, and update them on new materials and services.
7. Promote among library staff the collection of food and clothing donations, volunteering personal time to anti-poverty activities and contributing money to direct-aid organizations. Also, promote related efforts concerning minorities and women, since these groups are disproportionately represented among poor people.
8. Compile a database of local community organizations and make it part of your library's web pages and/or online catalog, readily available to patrons who may need it.
9. Sponsor public events (such as forums, speakers, community discussions, presentations by local organizations) so people can understand issues affecting them, like taxes, child care options, corporate welfare, crime, school services, growing wealth disparities, housing and health policies, and fair trade.

Related to Public Awareness:

1. Promote increased public awareness – through programs, displays, bibliographies, and publicity – of the importance of poverty-related library resources and services in all segments of society.
2. Promote direct representation of poor people and anti-poverty advocates through appointment to local boards and creation of local advisory committees on service to low-income people, such appointments to include library-paid transportation and stipends.
3. Collect, display, and make readily accessible current and up-to-date information on issues such as wealth distribution, child-care, welfare reform, living wage laws, single-payer health insurance, and affordable housing.
4. Promote the publication, production, purchase, and ready accessibility of print and non-print materials that honestly address the issues of domestic and global poverty, hunger, and homelessness, that deal with poor people in a respectful way, and that are of practical use to low-income patrons.

Related to Professional Association activities:

1. Read ALA's "Poor People's Policy" and think about how its recommendations may be implemented in the libraries where you work.
2. Distribute copies of ALA's "Poor People's Policy" to colleagues. Initiate a discussion of the "Poor People's Policy" at the libraries where you work, and get your colleagues thinking about and discussing ways it can be implemented.
3. Ask ALA's Washington Office to actively support legislative initiatives that would contribute to reducing, if not eliminating, poverty (e.g. living wage, more low-income housing, and universal health care).
4. Get involved in the ALA units working on the issues of library services to poor people, such as the Social Responsibilities Round Table Task Force on Hunger, Homelessness, and Poverty or the OLOS subcommittee on the "Poor People's Policy."
5. Document effective library services aimed at serving poor people and share information about these programs through ALA publications, conference sessions and electronic discussion lists, as well as with groups outside ALA.
6. Encourage library science programs to offer courses on services to both urban and rural poor people.
7. Volunteer to develop and lead creative strategies within ALA and other professional associations that can bring visibility to the issue of libraries' services for poor people.
8. Ask all ALA units to report on past, present, and future activities undertaken to implement the "Poor People's Policy."

Compiled by the ALA/SRRT Task Force on Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty
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The Dismissal of Miss Ruth Brown: Civil Rights, Censorship and the American Library by Louise S. Robbins, University of Oklahoma Press, 2000.

Reviewed by Zoia Horn

There is nothing like a story about a real person battling for a principle against great odds to bring a surge of faith, optimism and even action in support of the good cause. *The Dismissal of Miss Ruth Brown* is such an account

The bare bones of the story are simple. Ruth Brown, a long-time librarian at the public library in Bartlesville, a small city in Oklahoma, was dismissed by its City Commission. She was highly regarded in the community. There was no question of her competency. But, early in 1950, forty Bartlesville citizens accused her of "supplying 'subversive' materials at the library" (p. 55). When asked for particulars, they identified subscriptions to the *Nation*, the *New Republic* and *Soviet Russia Today*. The Bartlesville Library Board supported her. A "Friends of Miss Brown" Committee was quickly formed to publicize what had happened and to raise funds for her.

The pressures against Miss Brown escalated. The City Commission crafted a new ordinance that permitted a summary dismissal of the Library Board and the replacement of the board members with anti-Brown people who could then "control" and oversee "material selection" (p. 69). Such were the times after World War II when the cold war was revving up, and anti-communism was unleashed by Senator Joseph R. McCarthy with its flagrant witch hunts and loyalty oaths. As Louise Robbins graphically describes, on the surface, this was a censorship issue. But, the urge to censor had an underlying fear driving it. Ruth Brown had shown a "commitment to racial equality" both within and outside the library. She had informally opened the library to African-Americans; she had friends among them, and she had, most shockingly to the community, come with two African-American teachers from the local segregated school into "the largest drugstore that served food" (p.54) and asked to be served. (This was five years before Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man and before the sit-ins of the Civil Rights Movement.) It was February 1950, which was Brotherhood Month, and it seemed an appropriate step to take. She had come to her anti-racist views through voracious reading over