

Government Information: A Topic for All Librarians
Report from a Forum Sponsored by the American Library Association (ALA)
Committee on Legislation and the ALA Government Documents Round Table
American Library Association Annual Conference, Chicago, Illinois
Friday, July 10, 2009, 8:00 a.m.-12:00 noon

BACKGROUND:

The scope and character of government information, along with expectations within and of the library community, are rapidly evolving. Some trends:

0 The nature of government information is broadening. Government information is much wider in scope than the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP). Besides formal depository programs, cooperative projects and informal networks provide access to government information. In addition to traditional collections of tangible materials (paper, microformats, CD-ROMs, DVDs, etc.) government information now encompasses online resources, government records, archives, and e-government services.

0 More and more government agencies at every jurisdictional level (federal, state, local) are using the Internet as a primary, and sometimes only, means of providing information and services to the public. Some agencies, e.g, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, etc., are posting information and forms online only without print backups.

0 In times of crisis (for example, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina) libraries are the source that people can use for access to information about the disaster, assistance programs, and other relevant information. In addition to providing the capacity for users to consult online resources, libraries are expected to help with locating and using the information itself.

0 Government agencies are referring patrons to the Internet without providing prior information, source documents, notification, or training. Public libraries and (on their campuses) academic libraries are expected to make Internet access available, be knowledgeable about e-government resources, and to provide assistance to their users in the access and use of government services, also often without training.

0 Library patrons do not think in terms of "government information." They simply want information and do not care about the source. When trying to locate government information at a library, they expect to be able to get help from any staff member regardless of "subject specialty or training"

0 Government agencies, as a rule, are most concerned with the current needs of their users and often do not provide for preservation of earlier versions of information or "rollover" from one system to another as technology evolves and old access methods

become obsolete. Changes in administration often place materials at grave risk as well.

0 More than ever before, knowledge of government information and services is crucial for all librarians. Government information is no longer the province of "government information specialists" or of any one segment of the American Library Association. Nor can government information remain defined as the print publication distribution of the Federal Depository Program, although that is a valuable component of federal government information.

In recognition of these trends, the ALA Committee on Legislation and the ALA Government Documents Round Table (GODORT) sponsored a forum on the future of government information at the 2009 ALA Annual Conference. ALA Division and Round Table Presidents/Chairs were sent a cover letter stressing the broad nature of government information and its importance to all ALA units. The Chairs were asked to designate a representative from the unit to attend the forum and were given a list of four questions to be answered in advance of the meeting. The questions were:

1. How do your members help users find government information from all levels?
2. What ways do you provide and/or organize your government information for your users?
3. What training do your members have/need in government information?
4. What does your group consider to be government information?

Desired outcomes of the forum included developing common values and interests across ALA units regarding government information, providing an avenue for units to bring forward their concerns with the future of government information, and increasing the level of advocacy within the ALA organization.

FORUM STRUCTURE:

Attendance at the forum was just under 200 people, including nearly 50 representatives from almost 30 units. After introductory remarks, audience members were asked to introduce themselves and indicate which (if any) unit affiliation they were representing. The group then broke into small groups and was asked to discuss the four questions that had been on the preliminary mailing. After the small group sessions completed this assignment, the entire group reconvened for a report from the small groups.

HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS:

1. Importance of and Nature of Government Information. Government information is ubiquitous, nontraditional, and is part of the job of every librarian. It goes beyond publications and maybe beyond cataloging capacity. It is threaded through all of our work. It is "community" information regardless of format or jurisdiction.

2. Recommendations for ALA

2A. Action to encourage less "segregation" of government information. People are

needed throughout the Association who understand jurisdiction and provenance (federal/state/local/international). Subject experts and generalists are needed association-wide. ALA Divisions/Round Tables need to interact. ALA-APA (American Library Association Allied Professional Association) certification documents should mention government documents. Use of virtual communication tools like the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS) electronic forum should be considered. There is a government information interest group on ALA Connect. Attendees at this Forum should go back to their Divisions/Round Tables and get ideas for follow up to this meeting. Perhaps there can be a portal on the ALA website to all government information guides prepared by ALA units. GODORT should work to get its messages into virtual committees of ALA groups like RUSA (Reference and User Services Assn.), the Federal and Armed Forces Libraries Round Table, etc.

2B. ALA Conference scheduling. Perhaps there can be a "government information" track as there are currently tracks for Administration and Leadership; Authors, Literature and Cultural Programming; Children and Young Adults; Collection Management and Technical Services; Digital Information and Technologies; Human Resources and Staff Development; Issues; Research; and User Services. Although it is probably impossible to avoid all Conference scheduling conflicts, units should be encouraged to cosponsor relevant programs and to ensure representation from their membership at programs dealing with government information. They should explore joint meetings and other collaborative efforts with interested groups.

3. Training. People are not "born knowing" about government information. More training is needed in library school and should not stop after library school graduation. Projects like the "Government Information in the 21st Century", funded by an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant, provided 75 training sessions in five states, many of them to people without MLS degrees. These "train the trainers" programs are very useful. The Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) recommended to the Gates Foundation that grants be considered to train beyond the Federal Depository Library Program. Core competencies are needed for government information. The Western Council of State Libraries has developed core competencies for a number of areas. ALA's RUSA (Reference and User Services Association) is looking for people to develop training materials and will pay them to do this work.

4. Advocacy. There is not a clear agenda in ALA regarding government information. The Association must speak with one voice about the importance of government information before proceeding outside the organization. Advocacy training is needed in order to become more effective. Advocacy efforts should stress the value of government information; if the information is not known it has no value. Library directors and users do not know what government information librarians do; they need to be informed and government information issues need to be part of the conversation. There needs to be communication with government agencies about the "ownership" of government information so that ownership is not abdicated solely to their interests; if government agencies are expecting libraries to provide services for their products they need to work with the government information community. Thought needs to be given to necessary

legal and administrative changes for improved access to government information. The focus of all this work has to be on the user. The window appears to be open to reaching the new Presidential administration; follow up has to be done to ensure that the issue stays viable.

NEXT STEPS:

The ALA Committee on Legislation will be briefed; it is hoped that members of ALA Council will take the word back. GladysAnnWells will follow up with the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA). All Forum attendees were encouraged to go back to their Divisions/Round Tables to report and work on follow up.

POST-CONFERENCE FOLLOWUP:

The ALA Committee on Legislation was briefed about the Forum during the 2009 Annual Conference. They expressed their pleasure with the result, are looking forward to receiving the report, and asked that a follow up meeting be held at the 2010 Midwinter Conference. GladysAnn Wells will follow up with the incoming ALA Committee on Legislation. A suggestion was made to try to get coverage of the 2009 Forum written up in AL Direct or American Libraries.