



HE. Ms. Michelle Bachelet,
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
Palais des Nations
CH-1211 GENEVA 10,
Switzerland

Dear High Commissioner,

Please find below a submission from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, Prins Willem-Alexanderhof 5, 2595 BE, The Hague, The Netherlands, www.ifla.org) for the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review in the United States of America.

IFLA is the global organisation for libraries and library associations, founded in 1927, at present with over 1500 members in around 150 countries. IFLA works to represent the interests of library and information services and their users, and is committed to promoting the principles of universal and equitable access to information and freedom of expression as drivers of development and well-being. We are grateful in particular to Laurie Bridges, of IFLA's Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression Advisory Committee, for her help in developing this submission.

Overview

1. According to the latest estimations of the American Library Association, there are approximately 116,867 libraries in the United States at present, including 9,057 public libraries, as well as school, academic, government, armed forces and special libraries (such as medical or law libraries).¹ The traditional mission of the library sector is closely aligned with, and directly contributes to, the rights codified in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – particularly the freedom to receive and impart information without barriers. Libraries throughout the US also work to promote the rights to education, health, inclusion, and access to public services.

Access to information

2. On the most fundamental level, libraries work to provide free and equitable access to knowledge and information. In this area, an important development in the United States library sector is the move by a growing number of libraries to limit or eliminate library overdue fines, which have been shown to act as a deterrent to certain populations.
3. In January 2019, the American Library Association passed a resolution *on Monetary Library Fines as a Form of Social Inequity*, urging to move away from the practice of imposing library fines as they present barriers to access. The “Fine Free Libraries Map”, a project run by the Urban Libraries Council, underlines that one of the key motivations for this policy is the elimination of barriers and expanding access to information.
4. Library-based literacy programmes offered through public libraries are also crucial to people's enjoyment of the right to access to information (as well as rights to education, employment, and participation in cultural life). In the US, there are many initiatives for both adult and youth literacy – some examples of replicable programmes are collected in the Literacy for All – Adult Learning through Libraries ALA resource.² Many initiatives are carried out by individual libraries, others by library organisations or associations. A 2017 paper by the Open Door Collective highlights several examples of partnerships between libraries and adult basic skills programs to offer literacy training.³

5. Libraries in the US do at times face challenges to freedom of access to information and freedom of expression in the form of book challenges – the 2019 State Of American Libraries report highlights that in 2018, there were 347 challenges targeting 483 books in libraries, schools and universities – many were challenged on the grounds of addressing LGBTQA+ themes, including profanity, violent or sexual themes. Similarly, objections were at times raised to exhibitions, services or other initiatives (e.g. the Drag Queen Story Hour, further discussed in the “Inclusion and non-discrimination” section).⁴

RECOMMENDATION: In light of these developments, and in accordance with the 2019 update of the IFLA Statement on Censorship, we strongly call for a recognition that library and information sector collection and services should, as fully as possible, be free of intentional censorship in order to ensure the human right of access to information.

6. Another relevant development in this field is the controversy over the applicability of intellectual freedom policies in U.S. libraries in cases where hate groups or groups which have been reported to practice hate speech reserve meeting spaces in public libraries. This is an issue which is subject to ongoing monitoring.

Access to information and digital inclusion

7. In the US, public internet access in libraries is often perceived as an extension of their traditional mission - providing access to knowledge and information. As early as 2008, more than 98% of public libraries in the country offered internet access services for their patrons.⁵ Now, more than ten years later, libraries continue to work to help bridge the remaining digital divide, which is becoming an increasingly important aspect of the right to access to information as more resources, materials and services are offered online.
8. Particularly relevant in delivering meaningful access to information online are the numerous library initiatives to offer digital literacy training. 2014 estimates suggest that approximately 90% of libraries offered “technology training”⁶; while a 2017 publication by ALA suggests that nearly 90% of libraries offer digital literacy training, and over 50% of libraries also offer training on such topics as “using new technology devices”, “safe online practices and social media use”.⁷
9. Apart from on-site public internet access and workstation availability, libraries in the U.S. are beginning to adopt new ways of addressing the lack of connectivity in their communities: hotspot lending programmes⁸ and installing remote internet access points in public areas.⁹ These are examples of good practices which can be further extended to expand access to information online to vulnerable and low-income populations.
10. **In relation to the right to education:** Internet access services in libraries are particularly important as a means of making a reality of the right to education of children from lower-income families, minority families, and children in vulnerable situations. According to a 2019 Commonsense census, 12% of teachers in the US reported that the majority (over 60%) of their students did not have home access to the internet or a computer.¹⁰ This was more likely to occur in schools serving predominantly lower-income students and/or students of colour, and teachers in schools serving predominantly students of colour were also more likely to say that this can have a significant negative effect on their students’ learning.
11. Internet access provided by libraries offers one way to address this gap. New solutions are being developed alongside traditional on-site access to the internet and ICT workstations. In North Carolina, for example, the State Library and the Department of Information Technology works with the public library network to develop and implement a holistic solution to the ‘homework gap’.

12. **In relation to the rights of indigenous populations:** An American Community Survey released in 2018 highlighted markedly lower broadband subscription rates for Native Americans, particularly those living on American Indian land.¹¹ While tribal libraries can play an important role in bridging this gap, their connectivity rates also remain unsatisfactory.
13. Even for those libraries which are connected, the speed of internet connectivity among tribal libraries is comparatively low, making it more challenging for them to provide access to information for indigenous populations. As a result, a proposed bill to expand the national *E-rate program* (which provides internet/telecommunications services to certain schools and libraries at a discounted rate) and widen eligibility criteria for tribal libraries, has been proposed.

RECOMMENDATION: We call for urgent action to pass legislation expanding the E-rate programme to make it easier to draw on resources to provide high-quality connectivity to tribal libraries.

RECOMMENDATION: We encourage further development of an enabling policy environment favourable to the provision of public internet access in libraries to ensure their ability to provide access to information without conditions that place unreasonable limits on the freedom to access information, and that promote the right to education and the rights of indigenous minorities.

Libraries, inclusion and non-discrimination

14. Several activities initiated by the library sector aim to promote non-discrimination – e.g. as spelled out in recommendation 176.162, “Heighten efforts to promote non-discrimination of any kind, including discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity”. A prominent example is the introduction of Drag Queen Story Hours to combat marginalization and promote inclusion of LGBT+ community – as well as provide an engaging experience for children which has been shown to have positive effects on literacy – first established in 2015 and now adopted in many libraries throughout the country.
15. However, the initiative was met with pushback in many libraries across the nation, and several petitions have been addressed to the American Library Association challenging its support and promotion of these initiatives.

Libraries and the right to health

16. Many libraries in the US frequently work to assist their visitors with finding and assessing health-related information. These practices contribute to the recommendations relating to the general right to health, such as 176.314 and 176.313.
17. A 2016 Pew Research Center report showed that 71% of survey respondents believed that libraries contributed to their communities “a lot” or “somewhat” by helping them seek health information; and 38% of internet users over the age of 16 have used these library facilities to access health information in the past 12 months. For instance, a recent study in the *Preventing Chronic Disease* journal highlighted that, among Pennsylvania public libraries, many have reported various health-related programming initiatives and services – this role is particularly crucial in helping the vulnerable members of the population.¹² Nonetheless, it appears that demand continues to outstrip supply, implying a need for greater resources.
18. The National Network of Libraries of Medicine has pursued several initiatives to equip public libraries and librarians with the skills and resources necessary to address health information requests; and together with the Public Library Association (PLA) works on the *Promoting Healthy Communities* project. PLA’s *Insurance Education and Outreach Initiative* equips librarians with

the tools necessary to help their users with affordable health insurance enrolment; in addition, in the 2019 – the first year of the initiative – 64 public libraries received small “Libraries Connecting You to Coverage” grants from PLA to assist their communities with insurance enrolment.

19. A separate subsection of libraries’ response to users’ healthcare needs are various initiatives aiming to address the ongoing opioid crisis. As part of an ongoing project, OCLC and the Public Library Association are studying public library responses to the opioid crisis in order to establish recommendations, tools and best practices.

RECOMMENDATION: Based on the reported demands for these library services, we would invite the report to examine the role of public libraries in providing access to healthcare information and health literacy, and its impact on the right to health.

Libraries, the right to participate in public affairs and access to public service

20. Many public libraries in the US work to offer ‘non-traditional’ services which contribute to people’s right to participate in public affairs and access to public services. A prominent example is libraries offering free in-person tax help (e.g. with assistance from volunteers) – for instance, in Seattle, Los Angeles or St. Paul Public Libraries.
21. Other examples of libraries carrying out social service and wellbeing-related tasks include addressing patron queries and/or helping with voter registration, employment, social welfare benefits, food insecurity, questions about social housing, and more.¹³
22. Some libraries have initiated collaborations with social work schools – the *Whole Person Librarianship* project documents and maps examples of such collaborations.¹⁴ Other libraries hired social workers to join the staff (2018 estimates suggest that at least 30 libraries in the country employed full-time social workers). As the demand for such services grows and libraries work to help their most at-risk users, libraries often need more resources to carry out and/or expand their social work functions.

RECOMMENDATION: We encourage additional support allowing libraries to meet the growing demand for social service-related tasks and access to resources.

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- ¹ ALA Library Factsheet, <https://libguides.ala.org/numberoflibraries>
- ² ALA, “Literacy for All – Adult Learning through Libraries; Strategies and Resources from the American Library Association’s Committee on Literacy and Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services”, http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org/aboutala/files/content/Literacy%20for%20All_Toolkit_Online.pdf
- ³ The Open Door Collective, “Why Public Libraries and Adult Basic Education Programs Should Advocate for and Partner with Each Other”, 2017, <http://www.opendoorcollective.org/why-public-libraries-and-adult-basic-education-programs-should-advocate-for-and-partner-with-each-other.html>
- ⁴ ALA, “The State of America’s Libraries Report 2019”, <http://www.ala.org/news/state-americas-libraries-report-2019>
- ⁵ Bertot et al., 2009, “Public Libraries and the Internet 2009” report, <https://ii.fsu.edu/solutions/public-libraries-internet/reports>
- ⁶ Information Policy and Access Centre, “2014 Digital Inclusion Survey: Survey Findings and Results.”, <https://digitalinclusion.umd.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/2014DigitalInclusionSurveyFinalRelease.pdf>
- ⁷ ALA, “Digital Empowerment and America’s Libraries”, 2017, http://www.ala.org/advocacy/sites/ala.org/advocacy/files/content/access/Broadband_web_01-15-17.pdf
- ⁸ Strover, 2019, “Public libraries and 21st century digital equity goals”, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/22041451.2019.1601487>
- ⁹ Landgraf, 2019, “Wi-Fi in the “White Space””, <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2019/05/01/wi-fi-digital-white-space-libraries/>
- ¹⁰ Vega & Robb, 2019, “The Common Sense census: Inside the 21st-century classroom”, https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/uploads/research/2019-educator-census-inside-the-21st-century-classroom_1.pdf
- ¹¹ “2013-2017 American Community Survey Five-year Estimates”, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/2013-2017-acs-5year.html>
- ¹² Whiteman et al., 2018, “Public Libraries as Partners for Health”, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5985906/>
- ¹³ Whiteman et al., (2018)
- ¹⁴ Whole Person Librarianship, <https://wholepersonlibrarianship.com/map/>