



**Webinar Transcript**  
***Positive Interactions:***  
***Making the Library a Welcoming and Empowering Place for***  
***People with Disabilities***

Presented by Brenda Hough, May 2013

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Hello and welcome. My name is Brenda Hough and I'm a library consultant working with ASCLA and I'm the speaker for today's session, *Positive Interactions: Making the Library a Welcoming and Empowering Place for People with Disabilities*. Today's session is brought to you by ASCLA, which stands for the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies. ASCLA is a division of the American Library Association and it serves librarians who work primarily with people with disabilities. ASCLA members are involved in interest groups and there are many of them, including a universal access group, a group focused on assistive technology and more. Today's session is the first topic in a larger ASCLA accessibility academy and this academy will provide information and skills' training to help prepare librarians and staff at public, academic and special libraries to work with special populations.

There's a print handout with discussion questions and resources to accompany this session and you can either use those questions for your own reflection in learning or you may find it useful to discuss them with others at your library. You may be viewing this recording with others at your library and the discussion questions will give you a chance to share experiences and ideas with one another that are specific to your library. Here's a quick overview of what we're going to talk about today. I'll talk about the wide range of types of disabilities and how they might impact someone who is able or not able to use the library. I'll share tips for interacting with people with disabilities and we'll see that a lot of the advice and techniques are really just good customer service.

In addition to talking about the interactions you might have as an individual, I'll also talk about the ways in which you can work to create an

overall culture at the library that fosters interactions that are positive, welcoming and empowering for people with disabilities. Ultimately, libraries want to be able to provide excellent customer service to everyone who uses the library and today's session is designed to help with that. As librarians, the more we know about different disabilities, the better prepared we are to be flexible and meet the needs of each individual. I think the place we need to start is by talking about what we mean by disability. How do we define disability? Who are people with disabilities?

The international symbol of accessibility is the blue and white picture of a person in a wheelchair, with which we're all familiar, but people who use wheelchairs are just one example. What else comes to mind? If you think about your library and the people you serve or would like to serve, what types of disabilities are you aware of people having?

Most likely, you have family members and friends who have disabilities. You may have a disability yourself.

Do you know how many people have a disability in your community? The census bureau collects data on disability primarily through two different surveys – The American Community Survey and the Survey of Income and Program Participation. And one thing that we'll talk about during this session is that definitions of disability are not always alike so it can be difficult to make comparisons across surveys. Because of those two smaller studies, the – there is no disability data in the 2010 census. It's actually now in those smaller surveys.

And with those, you are able to produce estimates for states and counties and metropolitan areas. That would be a way to look at the numbers that are specific for you community. The statistics I'm going to talk about are the national – national average. According to 2010 data, approximately 56.7 million people have some kind of disability. That's 18.7 percent of the populations. That's roughly one out of five individuals.

The source for this is at the bottom of the site but it's also included in the handout that accompanies this session so if you want to go back and look at

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the entire study, you can do that. The US Census Bureau uses a more restricted definition of disability than the PEW project. I'm guessing you are aware of the PEW project. They conduct large scale, public opinion surveys and reports. And according to a September 2010 survey by PEW, nearly 3 in 10 American adults – 27 percent – live with a disability that inhibits their daily functioning.

If you remember the previous slide – the U.S. Census bureau, again, which has a more restrictive definition of disability – estimates that nearly one in five Americans live with a disability. According to the PEW data and definitions, more than one in four Americans have a disability. And again, the source for the PEW study is also included in your resources so you can read the whole study if interested but I'll highlight from data because I think it demonstrates the range of types of disabilities that people have. According to the PEW survey, 15 percent of American adults say they have serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs.

11 percent have – because of physical, mental or emotional conditions – difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions. Nine percent have serious difficulty hearing. Eight percent say that because of the physical, mental or emotional condition, they have difficulty doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor's office or shopping. And seven percent of American adults are blind or have serious difficulty seeing, even when wearing glasses. You may have noticed [in] the PEW survey, it just looked at adults with disabilities so if we add the number of children who have disabilities, the numbers are even greater.

These statistics, I think, are useful because they illustrate the large number of people with disabilities and the wide variety of types of disabilities that people have. But ultimately, when working in libraries, we're not working with data - we're working with individuals. Some people have disabilities that are temporary - for example, someone who broke their leg and will be on crutches for a few months.

Some disabilities vary over time. For example – someone with arthritis may be able to do certain things most of the time, yet when they're

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experiencing an arthritis flare, they might not be able to do those same things. Many disabilities are invisible - for example, someone who has a learning disability. As with all disabilities, every individual with a learning disability is unique and will have a different combination and degree of difficulty.

Autism prevalence is now one in every 88 children in America and I see more libraries all the time reaching out and providing programs and resources for people with autism and their families.

Depression or anxiety – I think these are good examples of the varying definitions of disability and some of the challenges with defining “what is a disability.” Most people feel anxious or depressed at times where they've lost a job, they're going through a divorce. Some other difficult situations can lead to a person feeling depressed or anxious and the feelings are normal reactions to life stressors. But there are other people who experience these feelings and it makes it difficult to carry on with normal, everyday functioning.

I think if you work for social security and your job is to determine whether or not someone gets benefits, then you're going to have one definition of what qualifies as a disability. But if you're working in a library, then we don't need to define it. What we need to do is focus on the individual and how he or she may need to be served or may act or interact with the library. In libraries, what we're trying to do is make our services and resources available to everyone. We're legally required to make our services and resources available for everyone.

When people think of the American with Disabilities Act – ADA for example, which is just one law related to disability rights, but it's the one most people think of – when people think of ADA, they often think of building codes. But really, ADA is a civil rights law. The goal of ADA is to encourage independence and involvement in the community. And building codes are really important and they're part of it but there's so much more to it. As life expectancy rises and modern medicine increases the survival rate of those with significant injuries, illnesses or birth defects, a larger percentage

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of the people have disabilities and as we've seen, there's just a wide variety of definitions of disability.

But whatever definition you use, it is a significant percentage of the population and again, many disabilities are invisible. You may not even know if someone has a disability. For these reasons, I think as libraries, rather than considering whether people have a disability, it's most useful for libraries to think of disability as a gradient on which every person functions at different levels due to personal and environmental factors. Disability not as a yes/no question but instead as a gradient and every person is just functioning at different levels for different personal or environmental factors in their lives. Well, let's start talking about what this means for library services and interactions.

[FIRST DISCUSSION EXERCISE]:

We're going to take a few minutes for our first discussion exercise. I'm assuming your library already does things to meet the needs of people with disabilities. There may be certain people who use the library and who you know have a disability and you do things to help that person. For this discussion question, if you're completing the session as part of a group, pause the recording now for several minutes and brainstorm together. Just inventory what you are doing already.

What are you doing to make individuals with disabilities feel welcome at the library? If you're working through this session alone, I encourage you also to pause the recording and just take some time to jot down notes and if possible, find a way to talk to others in your library at a later time about their ideas, too. But ultimately, what is important is what you can apply and learn for your own community in your own library. Please pause the recording now and take several minutes to reflect on that question. What is your library already doing to make people with disabilities feel welcome?

Okay. Welcome back. I hope that exercise was a useful way to start a conversation about the ways in which you can make people with disabilities feel welcome at the library and also, just to recognize all of the things that

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you are probably already doing. Many of the things libraries do to make the library accessible to people with disabilities fall in to one of these categories. And if you look at the list you brainstormed in that exercise, how many of these did you mention?

These are things related to the physical space or facilities. If you mentioned parking spots, accessible bathrooms, tables that are at the right height, aisles that are at the right width – if you mentioned that you have an elevator – those are all things, physical space or facilities. You may have mentioned assistive technology. Maybe you have screen reader software available on a computer. You may have mentioned collections.

You might have large print books. You might have materials that are in braille. You may have audiobooks. You may have mentioned programming, whether it's things that you're doing to make your general programming inclusive or special programming with things like sensory story times. Another thing you may have included is things that you're doing related to electronic access.

You might, when selecting databases for the library, choose ones that have audio components. You might be using universal design principles for your services and programs. Maybe you provide tours for individuals or groups with people with disabilities. Libraries must not discriminate against individuals with disabilities and need to make sure that individuals with disabilities have equal access to library resources. Some other things to insure that access – some libraries provide individuals with disabilities with services like extended loan periods or waived late fees. Or extended reserve periods or providing library cards for proxies – sending books by mail; providing reference services by fax or email; providing home delivery service; remote access to the library catalog; remote access to other library resources.

Libraries mention things like volunteer readers in the library, volunteer technology assistants in the library. Some libraries have provided an American Sign Language interpreter or real time captioning at library programs, radio-reading services. Many libraries also include people with

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disabilities as participants in planning or evaluating library services, programs and facilities. There are many things libraries are doing to be welcoming places – and I'm guessing many of the things I listed are things that you mentioned too. You probably have more things that I didn't mention or haven't thought of. But in my experience, the greatest barrier facing people with disabilities comes not from the physical aspect of the library but from how others perceive them and how others treat them because of their disability.

Our interactions with people with disabilities can have the greater impact on whether or not the library feels like a welcoming place. And I wanted to share this quote which is from a young woman with a disability about her local library. She has a physical disability that impacts balance and she uses a cane. She says, “The library is an amazing resource for me. Now that they know me, many of the staff call me by name. Some of them know that if I have a big stack of requested items, then I'll need some extra help getting them to the checkout desk and into my backpack. I feel comfortable asking most of them for help if there's something I need. When I first started going there, it was harder.” I think this is a good example of a library that has become a welcoming and empowering place.

Staff at the library welcome the woman by name. Because they know her, they have established a relationship with her and some of the staff members know what extra assistance she'll need. And she feels comfortable asking for help – although there is the qualifier there, “most of them” – so there are some staff who are more adept at creating a welcoming atmosphere than others. Let's talk about how to be welcoming. Again, meeting the needs of a person with a disability is not so very different from that of any other library users

Some of these things are just basic customer service advice and some of these things will be more specific customer service advice for working with people with disabilities. The first piece of advice – to say “Hello.” Smile. Ask if there's anything with which you can help. These are things that you [provide] – [they're] just basic customer service that you already provide probably to everyone at your library. Be sure to include people with

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disabilities in that welcome, the friendly greeting, and as the woman said in the quote, maybe greeting by name as you get to know them. Another tip when working with people with disabilities is to ask before you help and then if you do offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted, then listen to or ask for instructions. Don't be afraid to ask questions if you're unsure of what to do. If you offer assistance and the person declines, do not insist. And if it's accepted, ask how best you can help and then follow their direction. Don't take over.

And again, this is the type of thing that becomes easier as relationships are developed. The woman in the quote mentioned that she had become familiar enough with the staff and that she felt comfortable asking for assistance and staff also became familiar enough with her that they knew some of the assistance she would need or knew when to ask if she needed extra assistance. I think it's important to be building those relationships and that it's always important to ask before you help because assistance may not be needed or you may – what you assume is needed may not be actually what would be most useful. Just ask. Ask before you help.

Another tip is to speak directly to the person with the disability not to his or her companion. If the individual has a sign language interpreter, speak directly to the person, not to the interpreter. If someone with a disability is accompanied by another individual, address the person with the disability directly rather than speaking through the other person. People with disabilities that have nothing to do with their hearing often find that people speak to them very loudly which is, of course, not necessary. Even people who do have a disability related to hearing will often not find it useful for you to speak loudly. If someone does need you to turn up your volume, they will usually ask.

This may be the most important thing we talk about today: it's vitally important to treat people as individuals rather than as representatives of a group. Everyone really is unique and just because we know things about one person with a disability doesn't mean that we'll be able to make assumptions about others. We need to always be working to determining what will work for the individual and getting to know the needs of an



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individual. Also, we want to be really careful not to make assumptions. There are many assumptions that get made about people with disabilities.

Don't assume that because someone has a disability they will need help. They might not. Don't assume that because someone has a disability they will automatically want to use your disability resources or services. They might want to use the standard resources instead. Don't assume that someone doesn't have a disability.

[As mentioned previously] many disabilities are invisible. Again, this goes back to [the fact that] we just need to treat people as individuals. Another piece of advice is to respect privacy. When you barely know someone, it's not appropriate to ask about his or her disability. You might be very curious to know what caused someone's disability or what specific type of disability they have but it's better not to ask. It's fine to ask how to assist with library services and resources but not to ask about details or private information about their disability.

Many people with disabilities will tell you about their disability but it really should be left up to them whether or not they do, allowing them to discuss their situation if and when they feel comfortable doing so. Some people make the mistake of either portraying people with disabilities as helpless victims in need of charity or alternately of as courageous, inspirational heroes just because they are living with a disability. And these assumptions or these mindsets can be subtle. It's just the language used when talking. Here are some quotes from the woman with disabilities about two ways people label her.

She says, "I get tired of condescending statements like the woman who was talking to me about allergies but then stopped and said, 'I shouldn't complain. Look at what you have to deal with every day.'" She found that someone pitying her felt condescending, but then alternately, she said, "Almost as condescending are statements that try to make me a hero just because I have a disability. One time a woman came up to me in a restaurant and said, 'I just want you to know you're so inspiring to me.' I had never met her before. I was just eating lunch. I'm glad to be a hero but

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only when I'm truly doing heroic things.” Again, not making people with disabilities into victims or into superheroes just because they have a disability but again, seeing them as individuals living their life.

This is an important one too: person first language. Positive language is an empowering thing in when writing or speaking about people with disabilities, it's important to put the person first. Instead of saying – the lower part of the chart has some examples of what not to say – “Disabled person” or “The disabled” where the person is identified by their disability, instead, using person-first language says things like, “Person with a disability” or “Person with disabilities.”

This chart gives examples of positive and negative phrases and in addition to putting the person first, I think it's important to be descriptive but to use descriptions that are descriptive but not negative. For example, “wheelchair-bound” is a very negative way of describing a person who uses a wheelchair. A person who uses a wheelchair probably doesn't feel bound but the wheelchair feels like the device that's empowering. So, being conscious of language that is positive and empowering as much as possible. Okay, so we'll talk about some tips for interactions.

If you're working with someone who uses a wheelchair, of course don't touch or push someone's wheelchair without asking or without them asking you to do so. If possible, put yourself at the wheelchair users eye level – especially if you're going to be working with someone for a while. Don't lean on someone's wheelchair, or on their assistive device. Again, don't assume the individual wants to be pushed. Ask first.

Of course, offer assistance if someone appears to be having difficulty opening a door, that type of thing. The best way: offering assistance and asking what's needed but not making assumptions or offering is better than providing assistance that hasn't been asked for and may not be wanted.

If you're working with someone who is blind, some good general tips are to introduce yourself as you approach the persona and say that you work at the library and offer assistance. And if someone has a guide dog and you

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are walking with that person to show them where something is in the library, walk on the side opposite of the guide dog.

And again, speak to the individual when you approach him or her and state who you are, identify yourself. Guide dogs, again – never touch or distract a service dog and also, as you approach the person, you want to verbally let them know that you're approaching and also let them know when you're leaving. Don't attempt to lead an individual without first asking. Allow the person to hold your arm, maybe as you show them where something is in the library and be descriptive when you're giving directions and verbally give the person information that will be needed. For example, if you're approaching steps, mention how many steps.

“We're going to be going up some stairs. There are three of them.” That type of advice can be really useful. If you're working with someone who is deaf or who has difficulty hearing, speak clearly and look directly at the person to whom you're talking. Follow the person's lead on whether to use writing or gestures for communicating and again, don't shout. If someone wants you to or if would be useful for you to be talking at a higher volume, they'll let you know that. Often, it can cause interference with hearing with assistive devices so don't raise your volume unless asked to do so.

If you're talking to someone who has a disability that impacts speech and they say something and you don't understand what they have said, ask the person to repeat what he or she has said. Don't pretend that you understand when you don't. And again, be aware that not all disabilities are apparent and many disabilities are invisible. For example, someone might make a request or ask in a way that seems strange to you but that request or behavior may be disability related.

For example – you may give someone seemingly simple, verbal directions but the person asks you to write the information down. He may have a learning disability that makes written communication easier for him. Or someone may ask to sit rather than stand in a line and that person may be fatigued from some sort of medical treatment or medicine and they may be feeling the effects of that. Even though disabilities are hidden, they're real

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and we need to respect people's needs and requests whenever possible. Again, the most important thing is to treat each person as an individual.

Ask what will make him or her most comfortable and respect their needs. And if you think back to the quote from the woman who said when she started using the library, things were more difficult; but as she built relationships, as she got to know staff as staff got to know her, things became easier. These are some initial steps that the library can take to treat an individual person's needs. But sometimes, despite best efforts to make people comfortable or to address people's needs, you may need to deal with someone who is angry or upset.

And again, this is a customer service situation that is not unique to interactions with individuals with disabilities. This is a customer service situation that staff need to be prepared to use with all types of individuals using the library. If someone is angry or upset, ways to de-escalate – this could be an entire session on dealing with difficult situations, so this is just some quick tips that will be included here. But defusing stressful situations – staying calm and speaking in a low voice, listening and then again, building relationships. That can help you know how best to work with an individual.

I think that when someone is angry or upset, our biological reaction is to also get upset. Being really conscious and thoughtful about that can help you stay calm. Speaking in a low voice is a way to do that. Maintaining an appearance of being calm is important. And also listening. Listening to what it is that is making the person upset.

Okay, as we've discussed, there isn't a specific prescription for all of this. It's all about working with individuals as individuals and I hope that as you hear this advice that you don't feel afraid to make mistakes but instead feel willing to learn. I think that's what it's all about – being willing to learn and to think about things from someone else's perspective. Some of the things that are key are being patient, being flexible, being creative, being open-minded and then being always respectful. We've spent a lot of time talking about customer service and how it can help the library be a welcoming

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place. Those were tips for effectively communicating with people once they are in the library. But another important piece of communication is letting the people know the library is an inclusive and welcoming place so that they will come in the door. How do you do that? Let's take a few minutes now for another discussion exercise.

[SECOND DISCUSSION EXERCISE]:

Again, we've talked about customer service and making the library welcoming when people come to the library but how do you get that chance? How do you invite people with disabilities to use the library? Again, if you're completing this session together as part of a group, pause the recording for a few minutes and brainstorm together, "What are we doing to invite individuals with disabilities to the library?" If you're working through the session alone, I also encourage you to pause the recording and just take some time to jot down some notes. And then, if possible, find a way to talk to others about it at a later time to get their input and ideas, too. Please pause the recording now, take a few minutes to reflect and discuss about that question – how are you inviting people with disabilities to use the library?

Okay. Welcome back. I hope that exercise was a useful way to start a conversation about the ways in which you invite people with disabilities to the library. That discussion was an opportunity to consider, "Can we be doing more? Who is not coming to the library? Who is not coming to library programs?" You may have discussed groups as a way to reach out to individuals.

Do you connect with organizations in your community? Become familiar with local, state and federal resources. Word of mouth is so important, too. Again, it's not just welcoming people once they get to the library but often times, an invitation needs to be issued, too – thinking about how to do that.

Groups, organizations in places in the community that serve or that are used by people with disabilities – those can be a great way to reach out into

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the community. Connect with those groups and organizations and places in order to connect with individuals who might not know the library is a welcoming place for people with disabilities. Okay. The last thing we're going to talk about today is organizational culture. We've talked about customer service and how, as an individual, we can communicate effectively and respectfully but how do we foster an organizational culture that fosters positive interactions with people with disabilities?

[THIRD DISCUSSION EXERCISE]:

This will be our final discussion question for the session. How can the library create an organizational culture that fosters positive interactions with people with disabilities? Again, we've talked about customer service and the things we do as individuals. Now think about it more broadly. How can the library culture be an overall culture that is empowering and positive?

And again, pause the recording; take a few minutes to talk about this as a group. And then if you're watching as an individual, same thing. Just pause the recording, jot down some notes and then, if possible, have the discussion with others later. Because I think it's so valuable to think about these things in the context of your own library. It makes it all way more meaningful.

Okay. Welcome back. The customer service section of this session focused on things at an individual one to one assistance level. This is, instead, focused on a broader level. If reaching out to and serving people with disabilities is a priority and goal for the organization, then that needs to be reflected in the library's strategic plan.

Is it something that's in your strategic plan? If so, maybe it came up in your discussions. Another thing with the strategic plan is hopefully, people with disabilities were consulted or involved in the creation of that plan. And if that hasn't been the case with your previous strategic plans, maybe it's something to consider as you work on your next strategic plan. Another important thing is providing regular staff training.

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The training you are attending today is an example of staff training. What other training do you offer or attend? There are experts within your community, no matter the size, who could help with training. We talked about connecting with local organizations and local resources as a way to invite people with disabilities to use the library but also, connecting with those resources within the community can be useful for staff training. You may have local organizations, parent groups, advocacy groups, support groups, people working in health care, law enforcement, health, education – all of these people have expertise that could be useful to people working in the library in trying to increase understanding and awareness.

It's a two-way communication. It helps heighten awareness of resources that are available. It helps heighten awareness of the library's desire to be a welcoming place. Another important thing that can be done to foster an organizational culture that's empowering is to provide regular staff training. There's always so much to learn and so I think that being focused on that possibility – the different possibilities, the different specific topics that would be useful to learn about – there's always more to know and staff training can be a great way to cover not only the basics but also some more specialized topics.

Another important thing is hiring people with disabilities. This is one of those topics that could, in fact, become an entire presentation. But one of the most important things a library can do to create a culture that's welcoming for people with disabilities is to employ people with disabilities. Volunteers with disabilities can be a wonderful asset to the library, too. And communication – this session is all about communication.

Communication isn't just the face-to-face interactions that you have but as technology becomes increasingly important and technology, for many people with disabilities, is such an important thing. There are other pieces of communication, other types of communication that we need to consider, too. What about the library's website? What does it include? Do the messages the library's sending on the website reflect that it's a welcoming environment?

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I know many libraries include, on their website, a list of resources that are available. Like special collections and assistive technology that are available – listing those sorts of things is great but I think also ensuring that your website language makes it clear that the library is a welcoming place and that the staff is ready to work with you as an individual and make the library a place that will work for you.

The language that you use when describing programming at the library – is it inclusive? Including a statement on all your program flyers, letting people know that accommodations can be made – that's important information to include.

And again, this statement says, “The DC public library encourages persons with disabilities.” It doesn't just say, “We will do this” but it says, “We encourage persons with disabilities.” So, it's a language that is welcoming and it reflects that the library wants to do this, that the library wants to be a place for all and wants to know how best to do that for individuals with disabilities.

Another thing is to ask for input about the library's accessibility. Technology can be a way to do that. I think when we have face-to-face conversations with people, we can ask, “How were things? Is there anything that could have made your visit today better?” Asking questions like that as part of our customer service, part of our interactions is great but also technology gives up opportunities to ask for more input about the library's accessibility. Asking about any barriers that were encountered, any ways in which the library could be more accessible.

Some people might be more comfortable sharing that type of information using a form on the website rather than in a conversation with a staff person. That's something to consider, too. Okay. Well, we are nearing the end of our session today and we've talked about what disability means, the different types of disability and the prevalence of disability in our communities. We've talked about providing customer service that is welcoming and respectful for people with disabilities and we've just



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wrapped up talking about ways to create and organizational culture that reflects that it wants to be a welcoming place.

There's a checklist included as a resource with today's session materials and as you look at it and as you reflect on the ideas shared during the presentation and discussions or reflection time you've had today, what will you do next? Was there something that was discussed that you feel inspired to address in your own library? Maybe during your discussions an idea was shared or a suggestion was made. Think about what will you do next to make the library an even more welcoming and empowering place for people with disabilities. I think there's always more to learn and because there are always new individuals, there are always new things to try, new things to do.

As you think about your next steps and your ongoing learning about people with disabilities, maybe as you think about ongoing staff training in the library, there are resources that can help. Again, today's session is the first in a series of modules that will be developed to help.

One of the resources listed on your handout today is the ASCLA Library Accessibility What You Need to Know Toolkit (located here: <http://www.ala.org/ascla/asclaprotocols/accessibilitytipsheets/>). It's a series of 15 tip sheets that were developed to help librarians in all types of libraries understand and manage accessibility issues. There are tip sheets for working with patrons who have cognitive, mental or emotional illnesses, working with patients who have learning disabilities or developmental disabilities, tips for patients with service animals, for patrons who need assistive technology, for autism and spectrum disorders and children with disabilities, for working with people with mental illness, for working with people who have multiple disabilities – so more than one type of disability.

With that, I want to thank you for your participation in today's session. Thank you for being interested in this important topic and I wish you luck with you endeavors. Thank you so much.

*[End of Audio]*

