

# CONNECTING WITH THE COMMUNITY: STRATEGIES TO HELP PUBLIC LIBRARIES BETTER ENGAGE WITH HARD-TO-REACH GROUPS

**Debra Rosenfeldt**

Manager, Public Libraries  
State Library of Victoria  
328 Swanston Street, Melbourne 3000  
drosenfeldt@slv.vic.gov.au

Suggested paper length: 10 pages maximum

## **ABSTRACT**

Public library services to Indigenous Australians, disadvantaged young people, Horn of Africa communities, low income families, and vulnerable learners are the focus of this paper. These are some of the groups identified in the landmark *Libraries Building Communities* project of the State Library of Victoria and the Victorian public library network (2005) who have much to gain from using public libraries, but do not use them. During 2007 in-depth qualitative research was carried out with each of these groups. This was supplemented by consultation with public library staff and with agencies providing community support to each group, and a literature review of the field. The conference paper will cover the findings and outcomes of this work. It achieved a much clearer picture of the nature of the target groups and their library and information needs, and greater understanding of the factors that inhibit their use of public libraries. It came up with five principles of engagement common to all of the groups; and generated ideas and strategies, and identified lessons for reaching each individual group. It is being supported by a program in the second half of 2008 to up-skill Victorian public library staff in this important area of service. The program includes publication of a report and engagement guidelines for each group, seminars and small workshops conducted around the State.

## **BODY OF PAPER**

‘Woolworths, eat your heart out.’

I love that line. It was written by Alan Bundy in an article that appeared late last year in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and it’s in relation to the take-up of public library services in Australia. They enjoy a level of patronage that corporate giants, like Woolworths, might dream about but could never hope to match. Nearly 50% of the Australian population are members of a public library service. Even better, studies have shown that many more, about 12 million in total, actually use public libraries. This is a tremendous figure.

## **Background**

Many of you will be aware of the work that has been undertaken in Victoria since 2002 under the banner of Libraries Building Communities. This work has been auspiced by the Library Board of Victoria (which governs the State Library) and the Victorian public library network. Libraries Building Communities is essentially a research and development project. The first reports, published in 2005, showed how public libraries contributed to their communities. In 2006 the public library user survey that had provided much of the data for the first reports was refined and repeated.

The findings of both surveys were quite extraordinary. I quote here from the 2006 survey report:

- Over half of library users visit on a weekly basis
- Over 90% list borrowing books as their main reason for using the library
- 37% list use of computers and the Internet as a reason for visiting the library
- 46% list getting help to find information as a reason for visiting the library
- 61% say that they talk with people outside their usual social circle at the library; 50% said that it is a place where they meet new people

This is all good news and worth reminding ourselves about. But what of the significant proportion of the Australian population, around 40%, who do not use public libraries? Who are they? Why don't they use public libraries? Do public libraries have anything to offer them and, if they do, how can they reach them?

The first Libraries Building Communities research found that approximately 27% of the population do not use public libraries for 'lifestyle' reasons. They have busy lives and alternative ways of securing all of the benefits that public library usage can bestow. However, volume three of the first research reports (*Bridging the Gaps*) identifies about 13% of the population that is not using public libraries, but which has potentially much to gain from public libraries. Many of these 13% are from marginalised social groups who experience severe deficits in their access to information and technology and face special difficulties in accessing and using libraries. This 13% is the focus of the Connecting with the Community work that I am here to talk about today.

## **Research focus, aims, approach and recommendations**

The Connecting with the Community work was undertaken in 2007 and 2008 as an extension of the original Libraries Building Communities research. Its intention was to provide public libraries with tools that will assist them to better engage with some of the hard-to-reach groups within the 13% of non users who have been identified as having much to gain from public libraries. The intention is that ultimately their number might be reduced to 10% ... 8% ... or lower. Connecting with the Community provides public libraries with a deeper understanding of each target group, especially its library

and information needs; knowledge of the factors influencing their low level of engagement with libraries; and strategies, or opportunities, for public libraries to reach out.

Where to start? The original Libraries Building Communities research identifies many groups within the 13%: Indigenous Australians; new migrants; senior citizens and younger people; people with low educational status, particular occupational groupings, particular family structures, people with disabilities, people living in remote areas or living in detention, itinerant people and the homeless, amongst others. Ultimately five target groups were selected using the criteria of:

- Universality - relevance to the majority of Victorian public libraries
- Achievability - likely to be interested in or benefit from access to public libraries
- Policy connectedness - groups identified as socially excluded and target groups in government policy statements
- Research efficiency - groups who were not the subject of similar research in the public library system
- Coverage - groups that represented a significant proportion of the thirteen percent

The five target groups are:

- Indigenous Australians
- Disadvantaged young people – early school leavers; the homeless, or those at risk of homelessness; young people in families where parents are unemployed, or who face other forms of social or economic hardship
- Horn of Africa communities – a new wave of migrants to Australia arriving as part of humanitarian and refugee programs
- Low income families – including families dependent on Centrelink benefits and sole parent families
- Vulnerable learners – older men and women seeking employment but lacking the skills critical to their capacity to participate in the workforce

It is recognised that these groups, as well as the other groups considered for but not included in the Connecting with the Community work, are not mutually exclusive and that there is overlap between groups, for example: disadvantaged young people and low income families, vulnerable learners and the unemployed. It is also recognised that not all members of these groups face barriers in accessing and using public library services.

The research approach was essentially qualitative. Consultation was carried out through focus groups with representatives of each of the targeted hard-to-reach groups. The project worked with some of the community agencies that support these groups to locate

them, and the consultation took place on their turf, in their time and on their terms. Community stakeholders were also interviewed and, as always with the Libraries Building Communities work, focus groups were conducted throughout Victoria with public library staff to capture their perceptions and their ideas. In addition, a literature review was conducted. This identified existing library guidelines and protocols for working with each targeted group. It also provided inspiration through practical examples of libraries nationally and internationally leading the way in working with these groups.

The results of the work with each target group are presented in five individual reports containing six sections:

1. A description of the selected target group
2. A description of the group's primary library and information needs
3. Ideas and lessons for engaging the target group drawn from a literature review and survey of best practice amongst libraries nationally and internationally
4. Discussion of factors that limit use of libraries by the target group
5. Discussion of actions that Victorian public libraries can take to improve usage and build connections with the community
6. References and further reading relevant to the research

While the findings and recommendations for each group varied, the research came up with five principles that underlie the effective engagement of hard-to-reach library users:

- Awareness – ensure all targeted user groups are aware of available library services
- Engagement – create places and spaces that are accessible, inviting, engaging and comfortable for each targeted group
- Collections, Programs and Services – provide collections, programs and services that meet the library and information needs of each targeted user group
- Policies and Procedures – implement policies and procedures that maximise access to library services and allow all library users to have an enjoyable library experience
- Customer Service – ensure library staff have the motivation, capacity and resources to engage and support library users

It is not possible within the scope of this paper to present the detailed findings and recommendations specific to each of the target groups. The following snapshot of the research with Horn of Africa communities is indicative of the approach taken with each target group.

## Case study: Horn of Africa communities

### Who are they?

African settlement in Australia started in about 1984, with a 'wave' of settlement since 1999 primarily through refugee and humanitarian migration programs. The *Connecting with the Community* report draws on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics to sharpen our picture of these settlers. By 2007 there were more than 20,000 African settlers in Victoria drawn from the Sudan (50%), Ethiopia (22%), Somalia (19%) and Eritrea (9%). Many languages are spoken. While the most common is Arabic, others include Amharic, Somali Dinka and Eritrean. The Sudanese are predominately affiliated with Christian religions, while the Somalian, Eritrean and Ethiopian born populations are generally affiliated with Islam. Victoria's African settlers live mainly in public housing in four Melbourne municipalities. They are generally young (50% under twenty years of age) and a very large proportion (approximately 50%) arrive in family groupings of a single mother with a large number of children.

### What are their primary needs?

Many papers have been written about the needs of African refugees and asylum seekers in Australia and the issues that make their settlement process particularly difficult. The *Connecting with the Community* report brings together the key points, including:

- The experience of prolonged physical and mental trauma.
- Lack of access by those on temporary visas to many government settlement and other support systems (eg: Centrelink payments; Medicare) and to family reunion rights.
- Lack of language skills, general education, training and previous work experience.
- Substantive issues of employment, education, health, problem gambling, domestic violence.
- Young people 'caught between two cultures'.

Existing research also identifies factors that help to promote settlement of refugees. The most relevant to public library services are:

- Welcoming host communities, able to build ties with newcomers and deal effectively with discrimination.
- Access to English tuition classes that also offer social contact.
- Opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to participate in community, especially through sharing of their culture and crafts.

Connecting with the Community investigated the specific library and information needs of Horn of Africa communities through multiple focus groups with community

members held in locations around Melbourne. The focus groups included library users and non users and were brought together using library contacts as well as drawing on the assistance of other agencies providing support to Horn of Africa communities that had established contacts.

Four areas of need, where libraries could help to fill the gap, were identified by the focus groups:

1. Acting as a conduit to accurate and up-to-date information about government and community services that will assist community members to access the housing, employment, education welfare and social services that they require. The best way to do this is by helping them to make links with the relevant community workers and other agencies, rather than trying to provide primary information themselves.
2. Supporting migrants to develop and enhance their information technology skills, or just to build their confidence in accessing information and using computers, skills that are becoming increasingly important in the workplace and in education, and in day-to-day communication and in accessing community services.
3. Providing access to computers and the Internet, so that migrants can keep in touch with people at home, develop their information technology skills and meet their information needs.
4. Assisting migrants to feel better understood and accepted in their new communities by providing them with opportunities to share information about their cultural background.

**What are the main factors that limit their use of public libraries?**

The Horn of Africa community focus groups were asked about the factors that influenced whether and how they used public libraries. Interviews with stakeholders in related community organisations and focus groups with interested public library staff were also asked about this. In summary:

Awareness is a key issue. Although there are clear patterns of frequent and intensive use of public libraries by some members of the African community, it would be more accurate to say that there is generally a low level of awareness of the role of libraries and the services they offer, particularly amongst women. Many newcomers from the Horn of Africa are not familiar with the concept of a free public library and have little or no experience of libraries.

For those members of Horn of Africa communities who are familiar with their local public library, there is a tendency to be highly engaged and they are eager to suggest ways that public libraries can better meet their individual and community needs. Parents especially are likely to be engaged, picking-up on opportunities presented by public libraries to support the education of their children through programs such as storytimes and homework clubs.

On the flip side, some members of the Horn of Africa communities who discover public libraries are discouraged from using them by the limited amount, and sometimes the complete absence, of resources available in their community languages. Many Africans have limited English skills and not much experience of reading and writing even in their own spoken language. While there is a need to address the difficulties around obtaining resources in community languages, there is also the opportunity for public libraries to introduce programs that support the acquisition of English language skills, along with the development of skills in using computers.

Another constraint to usage lies with policies and procedures. Many Horn of Africa migrants do not have the motor or literacy skills to efficiently sign-up for library membership. Some Victorian public libraries have responded to this issue by introducing simplified sign-up processes. Policies relating to acceptable behaviour in a public library also need to be re-examined and sensitively communicated. The behaviour of some African community members does not conform to what is generally accepted in libraries. Shouting, bringing food into the library, even having dinner around a library table, leaving young children at the library in the care of older siblings, and a more relaxed attitude to time and appointments all create challenges for libraries.

The need to seek assistance, or customer service, can also be a constraint to library usage for some Africans, not because staff are unhelpful, rather because there is unease, discomfort and sometimes feelings of ignorance and shame in asking for assistance and explanations.

#### **What can Victorian public libraries do to increase their use of libraries?**

A range of potential responses to some of the factors that inhibit library usage by Africans were suggested by public library staff engaged in the Connecting with the Community research.

Given the concentration of Horn of Africa communities in a small number of municipalities there is an opportunity for libraries to work collaboratively on a range of fronts from developing common joining procedures and delivering cultural awareness training for staff, to developing and investing in collections and coordinating library websites containing useful information to support refugees.

Partnership approaches with local community organisations and complementary service providers are an important way of reaching non users, rather than distributing printed promotional material that potential users may not have the capability to read, even in their first language.

Facilities could be improved by the provision of computers with Arabic keyboards.

Customer service issues could be eased by employing at least one library staff member of African origin who speaks relevant community languages.

#### **What are others doing to engage this group?**

Many other suggestions are contained within the *Connecting with the Community* report, along with a substantial number of outstanding examples of programs and services already provided to Horn of Africa, and other communities with significant refugee numbers, by libraries in Australia and internationally. The following are especially worth noting:

- Building Bridges: Making Connections, an initiative of Nottingham City Libraries and Information Services
- The People's Information Office, the Job Corner, the Health Centre and the IT Competence Boost, all initiatives of the Gellerup branch of Denmark's Aarhus Public Libraries
- The American Place program at Hartford Public Library in Connecticut
- The Celebrating Diversity program of Melbourne's Maribyrnong Library Service

#### **Strategy to assist public library staff to engage with and act on the *Connecting with the Community* report**

To encourage Victorian public library staff to reach out to some of the hard-to-reach groups in their community, a number of activities have been undertaken to coincide with the release of the *Connecting with the Community* report in May this year.

A one-day seminar on Reaching the Hard-To-Reach was held at the State Library of Victoria, attracting over one hundred Victorian public library staff. Ian Phillips from I&J Management gave an overview of the *Connecting with the Community* project. Victorian Multicultural Commissioner Elleni Bereded-Samuel, who came to Australia as an Ethiopian refugee, provided a very personal insight into what it is like for refugees trying to settle in a new country. Liliana Chiriano from Maribyrnong Library Service described how her library worked with the local African community to develop an African language collection. Natalie Brown from City of Greater Dandenong Libraries spoke about her library's long-standing English Language and Literacy Access program

for new arrivals. Libby Woodhouse gave a presentation on the Koori Library Pathways Project, which has begun to build links between Shepparton's large Indigenous community and the Shepparton Library. Anna Boland from Hume Libraries reported on her learning from a study tour of Californian libraries that are leading the way in providing family literacy programs, especially in low-income areas. Staff from the Darebin and Yarra Plenty library services shared their experiences of implementing the finding MY place program, targeting 'at risk' youth, while Shane Cathcart from South Australia's West Torrens library service told the story of his library's approach to dealing with 'youth problems' by working with local youth, youth workers, police and others to develop a youth strategy. As always with these seminars the emphasis of the day was on sharing the experiences and learnings of different libraries, celebrating their successes and providing inspiration to others.

Four half-day workshops were also held for Victorian public library staff at locations around the state – in Melbourne, the regional centre of Geelong to the west, Traralgon in the east and Wangaratta in the north-east. Over 80 staff attended from 31 of Victoria's 45 public library services. Each workshop kicked-off with a guest speaker from a community agency already working closely with one of the hard-to-reach groups targeted through Connecting with the Community. This was followed by workshop participants' discussion of some of the issues they encounter in dealing with these groups. Small groups brainstormed ideas and strategies for improving their connection with these groups and the workshop concluded with the sharing of ideas. We are still in the process of digesting the rich material that emerged from the workshops. The following is a small sample of some of the ideas put forward, in no particular order:

Connect with Centrelink / service providers	Overcoming fear of failure
Run sessions after hours	Joining forces with other libraries
Sessions with visiting sports people	Have library brochures at doctor's surgery
Teenagers teach technology to older people	Set up youth advisory groups
No fines / fine amnesty	Develop strong partnerships with Council
Help to publish oral/traditional stories	Go into the community
Morning tea for newcomers	Library can't be thought of as a 'cultural palace'
Mobile library to Koori football club/match	Things take time
Identify access to grants	Can't always do what's easy
Visual cues for ease of understanding policies, collections, areas and programs	Actively recruit 'shelvers' from emerging community groups

## Conclusion

Has the *Connecting with the Community* report made a difference? It is early days yet and only time will tell.

Connecting with the Community is the last report in a body of work under the banner of Libraries Building Communities that began in 2002. In this sense it is the end of the line for Libraries Building Communities, but in another it is really just a beginning.

In May this year the Victorian State Government announced a \$1 billion package targeting 'at risk' groups including disabled people, people with a mental illnesses, victims of family violence, disadvantaged families, Indigenous people and new migrants from the Horn of Africa. In the same month the Federal Government held the first meeting of its Australian Social Inclusion Board. The accompanying media release stated:

*Every Australian should have an opportunity to be a full participant in the life of the nation. Unfortunately, too many Australians remain locked out of the benefits of work, education, community engagement and access to basic services.*

*This social exclusion is a significant barrier to sustained prosperity and restricts Australia's future economic growth.*

*Promoting social inclusion requires a new way of governing. Australia must rethink how policy and programs across portfolios and levels of government can work together to combat economic and social disadvantage.*

*Tackling disadvantage involves generating effective, practical solutions at the level of government, local communities, of service providers, employers and of families and individuals themselves. The Board will be asked to focus on the most disadvantaged geographic areas and communities in the nation.*

*In doing so the Board will be asked to make recommendations on policy that could change the lifetime circumstances of jobless families and children at risk.*

*The Rudd Government has already begun work on a number of priorities which are important to the social inclusion agenda, including work on homelessness, a disability and mental health employment strategy, closing the gap for Indigenous Australians and universal access to pre-school.*

At one time the role of public libraries in reaching the hard-to-reach and connecting with marginalised and disadvantaged groups in the community was a role that they might choose to pursue with vigour, or not. Now, if they are to continue to be seen as relevant by funding bodies, this role must be part of 'core service'. You are challenged to pick-up and be inspired by the *Connecting with the Community* report, available at [www.slv.vic.gov.au](http://www.slv.vic.gov.au).

## REFERENCES

*Libraries Building Communities: the vital contribution of Victoria's public libraries – a research report for the Library Board of Victoria and the Victorian public library network* (2005), Melbourne, Victoria, State Library of Victoria (<http://www.slv.vic.gov.au>)

*Libraries Building Communities – Library User Census and Survey Project 2006, Report 1: Statewide Analysis and Comparisons* (2006), Melbourne, Victoria, State Library of Victoria (<http://www.slv.vic.gov.au>)

Bundy, Alan (2007), 'Build a Library, Build a Clever Country', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 December 2007, p.25

*Libraries Building Communities – Connecting with the Community* (2008), Melbourne, Victoria, State library of Victoria (<http://www.slv.vic.gov.au>)

Prime Minister of Australia 21 May 2008, Joint Media Release with Deputy Prime Minister, The Hon Julia Gillard MP – Australian Social Inclusion Board. Retrieved 30 June 2008 from [www.pm.gov.au/media/Release/2008/media\\_release\\_0256.cfm](http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Release/2008/media_release_0256.cfm)

## BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PRESENTER

Debra Rosenfeldt worked for many years in a variety of senior roles at several Victorian metropolitan public library services until coming to the State Library of Victoria in 1997. After a detour into the Public Programs arena, her passion for public libraries was re-ignited. She is now the State Library's Manager, Public Libraries, in which role she is responsible for relationship management, advocacy and strategy concerning public libraries, and sponsors a diverse range of collaborative development projects for Victorian public libraries.