

The Bookmobile and Its Future

By Richard L. Waters

What we know about our present and our future can answer many questions for the bookmobile operator. The average life span in 1900 was 47; now it is 79. With the increase of human life span the population will increase; bookmobile services should expand their services to meet the needs of the growing population. By 2040, twenty-one percent of the population in the United States will be over the age of sixty-five. This is up thirteen percent from now. With this shift in age groups to a fifth of the entire population, bookmobiles need to make adjustments to the collection and places of visitation to meet the needs of the patrons. A survey of Americans show that seventy-one percent of the respondents expect good health when they are old and twenty-eight percent say that they will not be able to drive. For bookmobile operators this is an opportunity to provide services to over a quarter of the elder. Today's marketplace is divided into three broad generations. The Mature, which are the senior citizens, the Boomers who are middle aged, and the X-ers making up the youngest age group. The Boomers are starting to reach retirement age, another reason to be aware of the shift in the ever-changing community that you service.

Social, economic, taxes, and local issues are imperative to the success of a bookmobile. Be aware of changes enacted by Congress that have significant impact on many communities. Some changes that are occurring are that people who have never worked or supported themselves are being put to work as a result of legislation. You need to be aware of the ever-changing communities that you provide services to, so that you can best meet their needs. The top five economic issues rated by 250 small businesses are: generating more sales, marketing products and services, understanding financial conditions of business, establishing retirements plans, and setting personal and business goals. These five concerns reveal much information about the community at large. In smaller communities sixty percent of the population pay federal and state income taxes in addition to local property taxes. Of the sixty percent, persons in the \$45,000 to \$54,999 range believe that local investment is the best investment that can be made.

The latest survey by NLC shows that government officials are continuing their five-year trend which indicates their optimism in the ability of local government to solve problems that arise in the community. The most improved conditions are in police-community relations, recreation, economic conditions, infrastructure, and unemployment, while the worsening conditions are the increasing cable television rates and services, unfunded mandates, drug and alcohol abuse, youth crimes, and gangs. Four local

conditions that are the most important to address in the next two years are infrastructure, fiscal conditions, quality of education, and overall economic conditions.

You need to be aware of what makes up a strong community and continually assess changes occurring before your eyes in your own community. Know what churches are in the surrounding area, what sort of influence they have on their parish and the community. What are the civic organizations, what do they do, what sort of influence do they have, what can you do to help meet their needs? Be aware of the small locally owned manufacturing firms in your community. They can instill a sense of community, a positive feeling for their employees and the surrounding areas by the treatment of the employees and the support given to organizations and activities. Voluntary association will enhance political participation and give members a sense of integration and cohesion. The small retail establishments create social "glue" as a place for informal public life to grow.

A survey done by the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship of Pennsylvania of bookmobile patrons revealed some interesting facts. Of those surveyed eighty-one percent replied that convenience was the chief reason for them to use the bookmobile. Thirty-eight percent of the respondents said that they get books for themselves and thirty-three percent bring their children so that they can choose books. The majority of the circulation was for pleasure and relaxation while general knowledge was the second category. Out of the respondents a total of fifty-five percent of the users visit the bookmobile every time that it stops in their area. A surprising statistic of the bookmobile users, fifty-one percent borrowed materials from their local library last year as well. One indication made by these respondents was that sixty-six percent believed that access to the bookmobile made their lives better. The runnerup was a tie between their child's learning had improved and that they had been given opportunities to access books that they would not have had. When asked about the value that they received, sixty-five percent replied more than twenty dollars. Of the bookmobile patrons responding to this survey eighty percent of the users were females. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents do not have a computer with a modem at home to access information online.

Retired persons are the largest group of bookmobile patrons, followed closely by homemakers. Bookmobiles spent thirty percent of their time stopped at schools even though they accounted for less than twenty percent of the patrons. Eighteen percent of the stop times are at nursing homes and senior citizen center; this is almost half of the schools' stop time even though retired persons almost double the patronage of schools. Sixty percent of bookmobiles service communities where the population ranges from three hundred to a thousand. Just under twenty percent of the book-

mobiles provide services to communities with the population between a thousand and fifty thousand. The rest of the communities have less than five percent of the bookmobile services.

In conclusion, bookmobile services need to respond to the users' needs; be aware that more females are working, so schedule weeknight and weekend stops. This also means more children in day care centers; use this opportunity to provide your services to the youngest patrons. Develop the collection according to the needs of the patrons that you are serving; if the major part of the circulation is for pleasure and relaxation, have a major part of the collection in this area. Develop a marketing plan to reach males, since they make up only twenty percent of your patrons. The elderly population is increasing, so adjust stops to meet their needs and add books to the collection that interest them. The government is putting people to work who have never worked; have books on job skills and on job hunting. Small businesses are an integral part of communities; make them targets for some of your stops. Encourage involvement from community members, provide direct services to business, and also willingly accept volunteers that would like to assist you in the bookmobile. Stress the role of the library in the educational and economic development of the community, and plan stops and collections that will meet these issues.

These are some issues that you as a bookmobile operator must keep in mind. Be aware of the changes happening in the community in which you provide bookmobile services. Make the stops that will best meet the needs of your patrons. Build the bookmobile's collection around the needs of the patrons. By keeping up on the ever-changing community which you are in you will be able to adjust all aspects of your bookmobile operation to best meet the needs of your patrons.

This article is based on a presentation by the author at the "Bookmobile and Its Future" Conference, held in Grantville, Pennsylvania, on June 13, 1997. The conference was sponsored by the Commonwealth Libraries of Pennsylvania. Mr. Waters is the Principal Consultant in Providence Associates, Inc., Denton, Texas.