

Introduction to the Service Responses

Service responses are the links between the community's needs, interests, and priorities and the programs and services a library offers. Specifically, *a service response is what a library does for, or offers to, the public in an effort to meet a set of well-defined community needs*. Service responses serve multiple purposes in a library strategic planning process.

Service responses describe the primary service roles or priorities of public libraries.

Service responses provide a common vocabulary that can be used by librarians, trustees, and community leaders to identify service priorities for specific libraries.

Service responses identify possible policy implications that library managers will need to address if the service response is selected as a priority.

Service responses define the resources (staff, collections, facilities, technology) required to support specific service priorities.

Service responses provide suggested measures that can be used to evaluate services in priority areas.

A Brief History

Service responses have evolved over the years. The concept was first articulated by Lowell Martin, who believed that libraries needed to focus on providing a few services well rather than providing a lot of services poorly. Martin suggested that there were a series of standardized roles from which libraries might choose their priorities. Those roles provided the philosophical framework for the original public library roles in *Planning and Role-Setting for Public Libraries*, published in 1987.¹

The advent of the Internet and the rapid changes in information technology in the 1990s raised questions about the applicability of the public library roles developed in the mid-1980s. In 1998, the publication *Planning for Results: A Public Library Transformation Process* included thirteen service responses, which were defined as *what a library does for, or offers to, the public in an effort to meet a set of well-defined community needs*.²

The pace of change continued to accelerate, and in 2006 the PLA initiated a process to review and revise the 1998 service responses. The process was designed to allow all interested librarians, library staff, and library trustees to participate, either in person or via the Web. The process started with three meetings held during the 2006 ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans to discuss the current service responses and to begin to identify possible new service responses. Those who were unable to attend one of the meetings in New Orleans were given an opportunity to participate in the revision process through the PLA blog. In mid-November, June Garcia and Sandra Nelson developed a list of proposed service responses that reflected all of the suggestions and comments that had been received. On January 4, 2007, drafts of the complete descriptions of eighteen proposed service responses were posted to the PLA blog for review and discussion. The drafts were presented at an open meeting during the 2007 Midwinter Conference in Seattle and were completed in mid-February 2007. The final service responses reflect the wide array of input received.

The Service Responses

The eighteen service responses are not intended to be a comprehensive list of every service or program offered in every public library in the country. They are, however, designed to describe the most common clusters of services and programs that libraries provide. As noted in the introduction to the 1998 service responses, "The service responses . . . are not intended to make libraries more alike. Quite the contrary, the descriptions and examples offered are provided to help library planners see the many possibilities that exist for matching their services to the unique needs of their communities. The service responses are a starting, not an ending, point."³

Each service response contains eight sections: the title, the description, suggested target audiences, typical services and programs in libraries that select this as a priority, potential partners, policy implications, critical resources, and possible measures. These sections are described in detail below.

Title

The title includes two phrases. The first phrase describes what the user receives, and the second describes what the library offers. The titles are intended to be descriptive and easily understood by both staff and community residents.

Description

This describes the benefits that the user receives because the library provides the service. It is written in terms that lay people can understand and is intended to help library planners make the connection between identified community needs and the library's service priorities.

Suggested Target Audiences

Target audiences are defined either by demographics (typically age) or by condition (student, business owner, new immigrant). If a service is designed to serve a single target

audience, that audience has been defined in the title or description (for example, “Create Young Readers”). However, if a service can be delivered effectively to multiple target audiences (for example, “Stimulate Imagination”), then the title and description are age- and condition-neutral, and library planners are encouraged to identify target audiences during the goal-setting process.

The target audiences defined by age are *children*, *teens*, *adults*, and *seniors*. In those service responses in which adults are identified as a target audience and seniors are not, the term *adult* is intended to include everyone over the age of eighteen. In several service responses, the target audiences include both adults and seniors. In those instances, seniors have unique needs or interests which are different than the needs or interests of the younger adult population. The term *seniors* includes everyone over the age of sixty-two.

Typical Services and Programs in Libraries That Select This as a Priority

These are the kinds of services and programs that libraries *that select this as a priority* might provide. This list is illustrative, not prescriptive, and is intended to describe services that go well beyond the basic level of services that a library might provide to support services that are not priorities. It is designed to help planners visualize the effect of selecting the service response as a priority.

Potential Partners

Libraries have always collaborated with other community agencies and organizations to provide services, and that collaboration has become even more important in the past several years. This section lists some of the groups that the library might partner with if the library selects the service response.

Policy Implications

All service priorities have policy implications. This section includes a list of some of the policy issues that may need to be addressed if a library selects the service response. The list of policy implications is not intended to be all-inclusive. Each library is unique, and staff will have to assess all of the policy implications of a new priority based on local conditions.

Almost all of the policy issues identified in the eighteen proposed service responses have been addressed in the policy development templates included in *Creating Policies for Results: From Chaos to Clarity*.⁴ The templates include a list of questions to consider when developing and revising policy statements.

Critical Resources

These are the types of resources that libraries that select the service response will need in order to provide the service effectively. Again, the lists are simply illustrative. In most cases, the suggested critical resources are directly linked to typical services and programs listed in the service response. Obviously, the specific resources required will be driven by the programs and services that the library chooses to offer in support of that service response. The required resources are divided into four categories:

Staff (Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities)

“Knowledge refers to the information and concepts acquired through formal education and job experience. . . . *Skills* are the manual and mental capabilities acquired through training and work experience, the application of knowledge gained through education or training and practical experience. . . . *Abilities* are the natural talents, capacities, and aptitudes possessed by employees.”⁵

There is no mention of training in any of the staff resource sections. It is assumed that library managers will provide the training needed to ensure that staff have the knowledge and skills required to provide the programs and services that support the library’s priorities.

Collection (Print, Media, and Electronic Resources)

This is a list of subject areas that support the service response. There is no discussion of the level of collection development in each subject area, but it is assumed that staff in libraries that select a service response as a priority will develop collections in these subject areas in much greater depth or breadth than would be the case in libraries in which the service response was not a priority.

There is also no discussion of the language of the materials provided, even in the service response that most directly serves people who speak languages other than English (“Welcome to the United States”). Libraries are expected to provide materials in the languages spoken by the people within the target audience or audiences of the selected service responses.

In some service responses, there are no format-specific recommendations, and the expectation is that staff will purchase materials in the formats most appropriate for their community. However, in other service responses the format in which materials are made available is an important factor, and specific formats have been recommended. For example, libraries that select “Stimulate Imagination” will have to provide visual, audio, print, and electronic materials to meet user expectations and demand.

Facility (Space, Furniture, and Equipment)

Space describes an area of the library building that has a common usage or purpose.⁶ *Furniture and equipment* are the physical items within the structure.

This section does not include shelving, basic furnishings (tables, chairs, etc.), or basic equipment (copy machine, etc.) It is assumed that the library will provide shelving for all materials that support the service response and that the library has appropriate furnishings and equipment for general services. Most of the items identified in this section go beyond the minimum requirements for providing general service and are unique to the service response they support.

All library facilities should be in full compliance with the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Technology (Hardware, Software, Networks, and Telecommunication)

Hardware includes computer workstations, servers, and other technologies such as scanners, self-check machines, and printers. *Software* includes desktop operating systems and

unique programs that support the service responses (for example, literacy tutoring programs for “Learn to Read and Write”). A *network* is a group of interconnected computers. *Telecommunication* refers to the transmission of data.

It is assumed that libraries provide public access to the Internet and have sufficient bandwidth to manage the online services provided. It is also assumed that the library has an existing web page and that the web pages included under “Typical Services” can be added to that web page. Finally, it is assumed that the library technology is in full compliance with the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Possible Measures

There are four methods that can be used to measure progress toward meeting the goals that are established to support the selected service response. This section includes sample measures for some or all of the four methods. The four methods are:

Number of Users

This includes the total number of people who used a service during a given time period or the number of unique individuals who use the service during a given time.

User Perceptions

This measures the user’s opinion about how well the library’s service(s) met his or her needs; this opinion could be about the quality of the service, the value of the service, the user’s satisfaction with the service, or the impact of the service.

User Outcomes

This is also referred to as *outcome measurement* and is “a user-centered approach to the planning and assessment of programs or services that are provided to address particular user needs and designed to achieve change for the user.”⁷ Outcomes typically result in changes in knowledge, skill, attitude, behavior, or condition of the end user.

User outcomes are always expressed in both number of users and percentage of users. Outcome measures can only be used with programs planned “to meet the identified needs of a clearly defined group of end-users” (library customers).⁸ Each of the suggested user outcomes starts with the phrase “Number and percent of specified users . . .”

Units of Service Delivered

This is the number of actual library service transactions that were done to make progress toward a specific goal. This includes all of the standard library outputs such as circulation, number of reference transactions, number of hits on the library web page, and so on.

Notes

1. Charles R. McClure and others, *Planning and Role-Setting for Public Libraries: A Manual of Options and Procedures* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1987).

2. Ethel Himmel and William James Wilson, *Planning for Results: A Public Library Transformation Process* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1998), 54.
3. Ibid.
4. Sandra Nelson and June Garcia, *Creating Policies for Results: From Chaos to Clarity* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2003).
5. Scott B. Parry, "The Quest for Competencies," *Training* 33, no. 7 (July 1996): 50. Quoted in Jeanne Goodrich and Paula Singer, *Human Resources for Results: The Right Person for the Right Job* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2007).
6. "LIBRIS Design Glossary," available at <http://www.librisdesign.org/help/glossary.html>.
7. Rhea Rubin, *Demonstrating Results: Using Outcome Measurement in Your Library* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2006), 3.
8. Ibid., 15.