

MORE THAN MAIL-A-BOOK:

How Queens Library Uses Interactive Programs to Enrich Lives of Homebound Customers

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Public libraries in the 21st century provide a lot more than simply lending books, videos and other materials. They are community gathering places. They provide stimulating and entertaining programs, such as performances, panel discussions and book talks. They bring socialization along with lifelong learning and intellectual growth. In December 2008, Queens Library received a grant from the Weinberg Foundation to carry out a long wished-for expansion of its services to homebound and disabled library customers.

The goal was to provide library customers who were to not able to come to the library with more of the benefits of regular library usage than what was currently being offered. In interactions with customers via telephone and letter, staff perceived a lack of “community” and peer relationships among the program’s users.

For decades, Queens Library has had an active Mail A Book program that delivered free books, videos, audio books and other materials by mail to homebound library customers on request. Customers do not reveal the cause of their homebound status; however the staff know from the kinds of materials that are requested and casual telephone conversations that they range from mobility challenges, hearing and/or vision challenges to psychiatric disorders. For some, it is a temporary situation. A few are children with chronic illness. Mail A Book actively serves approximately 850 individuals. They send regular print books, large print books, movies and music based on preferences that the customers indicate. Additionally, rotating collections are delivered to 35 nursing homes.

Upon receipt of a grant from the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation in December 2008, the Mail A Book program sent out a survey to more than 600 Mail A Book customers. They also did sampling by phone. Again, the cause of the homebound condition is not known; it is inferred that there are a variety of causes. The survey asked questions about the kinds of library materials customers preferred, the quality of service received/desired and what customer would like to see going forward.

The program manager, Madlyn Schneider, and the senior librarian, Willie Simmons, often spend extra minutes chatting with customers on the phone when they call to request library materials. It is a small kindness. They know homebound people often feel isolated, bored and starved for peer relationships. Many have only the part-time company of home health aides with varying degrees of shared language skills and almost no shared experiences. (Of course, not all customers can communicate by phone, but it’s a start).

Using creativity and imagination, the Mail-A-Book staff decided to build on already-strong in-library programming to enrich homebound patrons’ lives and relieve their social isolation very cost-effectively. They combine library know-how with technology.

Part of the grant from the Weinberg Foundation was used to install a teleconferencing console and an 800 phone number that customers would use to call in. Since the library already had a full schedule of live programs, many of which are enjoyable if only the audio portion is available, it was a simple matter of making them available on the phone console. Other programs are conducted solely for the benefit of the homebound customers. One particularly valuable program is a twice-weekly chat.

The Mail-a-Book staff canvassed homebound subscribers and set up regular times for them to phone in to their toll-free number. Chats sometimes follow a pre-set agenda, such as discussion of a book or TV program that all have agreed to watch, or it may be freewheeling conversation. There are about 20 regular weekly chatters, and several others who participate occasionally. Staff facilitate the conversation and have ice-breaker topics at the ready. The participants often take off on their own topics: which food stores deliver, the problems of being homebound, even intimacy among adults with limited mobility. In a short time, the chatters have formed strong bonds. It is a chance to enjoy friendships for which they are very hungry.

For the first time, participants were invited to join special phone-in sessions on New Year's Eve 2010 and on New Year's Day 2011. During previous conversations, it became apparent that the homebound feel particularly isolated during the New Year, when most people traditionally celebrate in groups, and when caregivers find it a burden (and quite possibly source of resentment) to spend time with them.

Homebound library customers participate in "special events," such as a concert that is being held in the library. Often, the program presenter will spend a few minutes after the program to chat with those who are phoning in. To play monthly bingo, game cards are mailed to the players in advance. Everybody wins a small prize, which is later sent by mail. The Mail-A-Book staff conduct monthly book groups over the phone and invite guest speakers to lecture and discuss their area of specialty. The Metropolitan Museum of Art does a multi-part lecture series; print reproductions of artworks to be discussed are sent out to registered participants in advance. There are sing-alongs and trivia games. Twice each month a Doctor from "Doctors on Call" and a Nurse from "Calvary Hospice" along with student nurses from York College and Pace University call in to discuss relevant health topics with the Homebound. An amateur local drama group performs live comedy routines. The homebound participants are always ready to try something new. Ms. Schneider moderates the Facebook Group "Mail a Book @ Queens Library", where members submit book reviews and interact with staff and each other. Weekly Skype chats are new to the program. Very few of the users are computer-literate enough to take advantage, but that may change as time goes on.

The weekly chatters occasionally get together for a luncheon at a local restaurant. Although it takes several weeks to organize, and they had to travel by disability transport, in wheelchairs and with walkers, several of the regulars have been able to attend, escorted by family members and home health aides. The homebound folks have often never met in person before, but hug and converse as if they were the best of buddies -- and they are. The Mail-A-Book staff has a gift bag ready for each to take home. The event has the quality of a near-miracle.

The interactive Mail-A-Book programming piggy-backs on many of the library programs that are already in place. It is cost-effective and easily replicated by other public libraries. Challenges are reaching out to potential users and interesting them in participating. Many homebound are self-conscious about speech or hearing impediments.

The program's main assets are the caring and creativity of its staff. With all their hearts, they want to enrich homebound customers' lives and give them the same opportunities other users have to benefit from the community and lifelong learning available at their library. They are conducting an average of ten live programs a month, in addition to the delivery of library materials. There is also a related newsletter. During a recent advocacy campaign for funding, the homebound customers were asked to write to their elected officials in support of the library. Many did. It gave them equity in their library as well as emphasized that their homebound status does not disenfranchise them.

Interactive programming is a relatively cost-effective adjunct to the regular Mail-A-Book program. In Calendar 2009, a one-year grant from the Weinberg Foundation was obtained through the efforts of the Queens Library Foundation. It purchased the audio conferencing equipment and needed telecommunications line (one-time charge of \$3,000) plus additional funding for library materials in English and multiple languages, additional large-print and multi-media collections. It also allocated \$5,000 for marketing the Mail A Book program, and funds to pay for program presenters. Additionally, library staff volunteer their time to facilitate programs. An example is a library staff member with a personal interest in classic film who conducts discussions on 1940s and 1950s movie stars. (Valued at \$1,000 annually in program fees).

Homebound customers receive a tiny percentage of the 23 million library items Queens Library circulates every year. In terms of the impact on their lives, it means the whole world.



Queens Library is an independent, not-for-profit corporation and is not affiliated with any other library system. These services are offered to registered Mail a Book customers and to those who work in support of the Homebound.