

# Standards in Colorado Correctional Libraries: Uniting Service and Security

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Standards in Colorado's state-operated adult correctional libraries are crucial to the planning, operation, implementation, and evaluation of meaningful library services. Without standards, the general libraries might be no more than reading rooms with limited access, insufficient space, and none of the services taken for granted in community libraries. These standards address effective offender management and are directed toward meeting the mission of the Department of Corrections (DOC). Following is an overview of the standards that affect DOC libraries, why they are important, how they are used in library operations, and what the future of correctional library standards will look like.

## The Standards: A Brief Overview

A discussion of correctional library standards would not be complete without addressing the primary mission that guides all practice within the Department of Corrections: "to protect the public through efficient and effective management of offenders in controlled environments." Facility libraries are one of the spokes in the wheel of offender management; as such, libraries must balance service and security. Three sets of standards provide the roadmap. These are: *Colorado Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* (CDE, 1989), *Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* (ALA, 1992), and *American Correctional Association Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions*, 4th ed. (ACA, 2003).

*Colorado Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions and Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* are intended to be used as planning documents, "to describe components of an

effective correctional library program," assist in planning library service improvements, and to "provide a guide for planning library services in new correctional facilities..." (CDE, 1989, iii)

ACA's *Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* are developed jointly by the private, nonprofit American Correctional Association and the Commission on Accreditation for Corrections. These organizations administer the only national accreditation for all aspects of adult corrections; DOC facilities are audited yearly for standards compliance. The standards' purpose is to, "promote improvement in the management of correctional agencies through the administration of a voluntary accreditation program and the ongoing development and revision of relevant, useful standards." (ACA, 2003, xvi) Seven library standards address overall services, staff qualifications, selection of materials, interlibrary loan, library access, and the use of offender library assistants.

In looking at these standards, a common vision begins to emerge. The goal is to create a complete library within the institutional setting, a place where - like a public library - an array of services is available to patrons. Per ACA Standard 4-4505 (Comprehensive Library Services), "The institution's library service should be comparable to a public library." (ACA, 2003, 158)

## Library Planning and Operation

Although developed in 1989, Colorado Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions remains an exceptionally useful tool for planning a new library or a library expansion. Design considerations such as the square footage for each functional area,

layout, shape, and permanency of the library's physical structure form an important component of the standards. Considerations of space and layout have a twofold importance in the corrections environment. Proper design, in keeping with security standards, allows visual control of the library and the efficient, secure provision of service. For example, windows must be plentiful to permit complete visual surveillance of the library from both an external hallway and the librarian's office. Design elements covered by Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions include lighting, acoustical treatment, climate control, placement of electrical outlets to accommodate audiovisual, electronic and computer equipment, telephones, and electronic communication systems for use in emergency situations.

*Colorado Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* utilize "Minimum Quantitative Standards by Population." (CDE, 1989, 23) These include minimum square footage, staffing, hours open, budget, number of volumes (books, AV materials and magazines), and number of tables and chairs. By tying quantitative standards to facility population, DOC libraries confront the fact that prisons are closed environments where offenders have limited access to educational, recreational, and cultural materials. A library that is too small and crowded may discourage some offenders from visiting the library. Too few books means offenders must wait longer to read the books of their choosing; this in turn encourages hoarding and theft (Vogel, 1997, 36).

#### **Administration, Staffing Levels, Budget**

While *Colorado Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* and *Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* remain useful tools in the planning of a new library, in times of budgetary crisis the reality of funding shortages underscores the fact that budget and staffing standards

are merely guidelines. Current budget and staffing levels in many facilities fall below the standards. Lower staffing levels affect the number of hours the library can remain open, as well as the amount and quality of library programming. Instead of creating substantive programs such as life skills and information literacy classes, librarians spend much of their time on administrative duties. Similarly, budget constraints affect the quality, currency, and quantity of library materials and services available to offenders. This in turn impacts the quality of offenders' library experience. The existence of a standard, even an outdated one, provides a needed benchmark with which to evaluate library practice and, indeed, library standards themselves.

#### **Access, Services, Materials**

*Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* directs correctional libraries to serve all offenders "...regardless of sentence, security designation, or placement in the institution." (ALA, 1992, 1) Offenders who cannot visit the library due to high-security risk or punitive classification status receive outreach service in the form of book delivery, book carts, or library time outside of regular library hours.

In Colorado's adult correctional facilities, offenders are expected to work or attend educational and vocational classes during the day. Therefore, to ensure the greatest possible access for offenders in the general population, standards mandate that the library be open during peak times of use, which are weekends and evenings.

*Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* and *Colorado Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* also provide guidelines for the types of services, materials, and material formats institutional libraries make available. These include providing materials about vocational

programs; institution regulations; educational programs, such as college courses and GED; community reentry; and support for rehabilitative programs, such as substance abuse recovery. (ALA, 1992, 11) Library orientation, reference information and referral, interlibrary loan, and facility program support round out the services that libraries are expected to provide. (CDE, 1989, 12)

One aspect of user services that is not addressed in the current standards publications - but is implemented in practice in Colorado's adult correctional libraries - is accessibility or usability. The libraries in facilities which house disabled offenders are accessible for all users. The library collections reflect the languages and needs of the offender population, including non-English languages and materials in accessible formats such as large print and Braille. Libraries in facilities which house offenders who have requested accommodation due to blindness or visual impairment have magnification readers and magnification software for the public access catalog. Future revisions of correctional library standards will most certainly address assistive technologies and equitable access for users with disabilities.

### **The future of correctional library standards**

While the standards and guidelines discussed above have been enormously effective in improving library services and planning new libraries, they all have a major shortcoming: they do not measure the outcomes of these efforts. Standards with outcome measures would be an important management tool, providing DOC decision makers with the information they need to implement practices that unite the security and educational goals of each institution.

In 2000, the American Correctional Association began the process of revising its standards to reflect the movement toward performance-based standards nationally.

To date it has developed these standards for areas such as health care, correctional industries, and therapeutic communities. What was formerly termed a "standard" is now called "expected practice." Each area, such as the general library, will have a goal statement, with associated performance standards, outcome measures, and expected practices (ACA, 2003, xxii-xxiii) In the near future, the adult correctional library consultants at the Colorado State Library will be working to develop outcome measures and expected practice for correctional libraries for recommendation to the Commission on Accreditation for Corrections and the ACA Standards Committee.

*Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* is also in the process of revision. This publication combines quantitative standards with qualitative output measures to define an acceptable level of library service. Extant data about the use of state-operated adult correctional libraries was gathered nationally in Fall 2006, with a more in-depth survey of these institutions to follow. Once baseline data has been gathered, new benchmarks can be established and a discussion can begin as to what appropriate outcome measures can be developed for evaluating library services.

Given their date of publication and the snail's pace of the introduction of technology into most prison libraries, both the *Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* and *Colorado Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* fail to address technology. While the rest of the public library world is discussing the Library 2.0 model and providing virtual reference, personalized OPAC interfaces, and downloadable media, many correctional libraries in the country do not even have a computer in the library. In Colorado, DOC libraries do have an automated library management system and library patrons use a public access catalog; some even have stand-alone "multimedia" computer workstations for CD-ROM programs. Librarians have workstations with Internet

access in their offices, where offenders are forbidden to tread. This cannot be said for many of the nation's prison libraries. Developing standards that address technology issues, while also meeting the security needs of the institution, may be the biggest challenge of all.

### **Conclusion**

Libraries in corrections have a difficult time documenting their contribution to the institution and securing adequate funding for materials and services. The time has come for correctional library standards that demonstrate the value and importance of general library services, lead to effective library service improvements, and direct limited fiscal resources to activities that make a difference. Assessment tools that enable libraries to demonstrate improved literacy, increased chances of successful reintegration, and reduced recidivism among library users and participants in library programs are key elements in the creation of future standards. If libraries can demonstrate such improvements in the offender population and show that their services dovetail with the security concerns and educational goals unique to the corrections environment, the standards by which they operate will result in true accountability to the mission of their parent organization.

### **References**

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