

The Library as Oxymoron?

The Library for the Blind & Physically Handicapped

Ruth Hemphill, Director

Ed Byrne, Reader Advisor

Tennessee Library for the Blind & Physically Handicapped

When I told my friends I was going to work for the state's Library for the Blind & Physically Handicapped (LBPH), one of them responded with rather a puzzled look: "A library for people who can't see; isn't that a bit of an oxymoron?"

The reality is that the blind do use libraries, and some of them use their libraries a lot more than most of the sighted. One of our patrons at the Tennessee Library for the Blind & Physically Handicapped (TLBPH), a 97-year old woman in the Memphis area, has read more than 3,000 of our talking books. That sounds pretty impressive until we compare her with a patron in Chattanooga who has read more than 4,500. This total averages out to about ten books a month for almost forty years, a rate that even the most avid sighted readers would be hard put to match.

The only real difference between blind patrons and sighted patrons is that the blind don't use their eyes to read. Instead they rely on their fingertips and – most of all -- their ears. Many of those diagnosed as blind do have partial sight, but to read visually they must rely on large print materials and assistive devices like illuminated magnifiers, CCTV reading stations, and screen magnifying programs on their PCs. (Note: For more information on assistive technologies, please see [Special Needs](#) and [Inexpensive Solutions](#) articles elsewhere in this issue.)

Of course, the blind aren't the only people who cannot rely on standard printed media. Physical disabilities like paralysis, multiple sclerosis,

Parkinson's disease, muscular dystrophy and brain trauma can also render a patron unable to read print materials. These patrons may be able to see well but are unable to hold books or even turn pages. Dyslexic readers can also see perfectly well. But the same words that make perfect sense to their ears just don't make sense to their eyes.

The Tennessee Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (TLBPH) is Tennessee's only library dedicated exclusively to serving this diverse group of patrons. We work in collaboration with the National Library Service for the Blind & Physically Handicapped (NLS), a division of the Library of Congress that provides LBPH services to any eligible resident of the United States. Once a patron is registered for NLS service, he or she may transfer registration from one state to another if they change residence. Registered U. S. citizens residing outside the United States receive service directly from NLS.

LBPH services are joint state and federal programs, publicly funded by both federal and state tax dollars. Each state operates the program differently. In some states, LBPH services come under the auspices of major public libraries in the state. Some states may have additional "branch" or "subregional" libraries. In Tennessee, TLBPH is housed within the Tennessee State Library & Archives, and, as such, is a division within Tennessee's Department of State. We currently hold about 49,000 cassette books, 16,000 braille volumes, and 9,000 large print titles. As in any other library, the range and diversity of our collection is determined by the tastes and preferences of our readers.

I am often asked, "What do blind people read?" The answer is, "The same things anyone else reads." Our collections consist of many of the same books and magazines that are available through local public libraries—best sellers, both fiction and non-fiction; children's books; popular magazines; cookbooks; mysteries; westerns; inspirational books—you name it. We also circulate numerous titles recorded in foreign languages, including Spanish, French, Russian and Vietnamese.

The books and magazines that are available from TLBPH are in large print, braille, or on audiocassette tape. Individuals may borrow reading material in any or all of these three formats. We anticipate getting books and magazines in a new format—flash memory—in 2008. However, we do

anticipate continuing to loan audiocassette books and magazines for quite some time after that, until everyone is familiar with the new format.

In addition, the TLBPH circulates a descriptive video collection. Designed for persons with visual disabilities, the descriptive video collection includes approximately 400 popular and classic VHS video tapes. These videos feature a narrator who describes the action, costuming, and setting of a movie at times when there is no on-screen dialogue.

The library also loans audio players to persons who borrow our audio books and magazines, and will continue to do so after the format change takes place. Persons reading books from the TLBPH need to borrow our players, because our cassettes are recorded at a slower speed than commercial books and magazines (15/16 of an inch per second (ips) as opposed to 1 7/8ths ips). In addition, our technology records four tracks on each cassette, so our players have a “side-selection” switch that determines which track is being played.

All of these items are loaned to eligible Tennesseans free-of-charge. They are shipped to the individual’s mailing address (and returned to TLBPH) using the United States Postal Service’s “Free Matter” mailing privilege, so there is no charge whatsoever to use the service.

The federal government, through the National Library Service/Library of Congress (NLS), provides the books and magazines, in both audio and braille formats; the players for use with the audio materials; large print, braille and audio catalogs of those collections; public relations support and much valuable consulting and advice. The Library of Congress also reimburses the United States Postal Service for the “Free Matter” mailing. The state provides the direct service operation, including office space and housing of the collections, staffing, and day-to-day activities of the library. In addition, the State of Tennessee provides the large print and descriptive video collections.

In order to become a patron of the TLBPH and access these materials, a person must complete an application signed by a competent “certifying authority.” (Application forms are available through the TLBPH website at <http://www.tennessee.gov/tsla/lbph/index.htm>.) This certifying authority cannot be a member of the applicant’s family, but should be someone who is familiar with the condition which prevents the reading of standard print.

We are able to accept applications for persons with visual and/or physical disabilities that have been certified by librarians, health care and/or social work professionals. If the only qualifying disability is a reading disability, the federal government requires the application be certified by a physician, either a medical doctor or a doctor of osteopathy. Again, it cannot be a member of the applicant's family.

As of December 20, 2005, there were 5,215 individual Tennesseans registered for TLBPH service. In addition, 609 residents of nursing & convalescent homes, schools, hospitals, etc. were active users of the service, for a total of 5,824. A study conducted by the Library of Congress estimates that 1.4 % of the general population is eligible for the service, meaning 79,560 Tennesseans, according to the 2000 Census. So only 7% of all eligible Tennesseans are currently registered for this service. We'd like to increase that percentage dramatically. To do so we will need your assistance.

Please do everything you can to educate your patrons about TLBPH and our services. Place brochures and applications for LBPH services in your information racks. Put up posters for the service in your library and elsewhere in your community. We have a variety of posters, both large and small for your use, as well as "tabletop" easels to place on desks or shelves if you don't have free wall space. Please feel free to mention in library presentations that your library can be a "gateway" to LBPH service for all the residents of your service area who cannot read print due to visual or physical disability. Consider having a story hour on disabilities, including handouts of the braille alphabet, with brochures for the children to take home. Many families have older members whose eyes are aging.

If you need print copies of our application and/or brochures for your file, alphabet cards, or posters to put up in your community, please do not hesitate to call the library at (800) 342-3308. We will be happy to send them to you.

Ultimately, we want you to view TLBPH as an extension of your own library and the services you provide to your patrons. The motto of the National Library Service (or Talking Book program) is, "That All May Read." Please join us in making this goal a reality in your community and all of Tennessee.