

Senior citizen's library resources, usage and their growing needs essay sample



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ABSTRACT

Our senior citizens deserve to avail of special services as they have special needs. As globalization is pursued by the world's economy, the government seems to have overlooked the needs of the growing sector of our society- the senior citizens' sector. These people do not only need health and insurance services, legal and financial services. This sector is also in need of mental stimulation and of enjoying their reading habits. This is the reason why library resources must be made available and accessible for them.

This paper aims to present facts and figures that will prove the shortage of libraries that offer special services for seniors. This is for the purpose of informing the readers what services do seniors need in order to maximize their use of the library resources. This paper also aims to establish web services as extended library facilities although this may only be for those who can afford. In this paper, this writer aims to inform the readers that they too can help provide for special library services for seniors by several means.

The first section of this paper discusses the truth about the growing population of the senior sector and their interests especially in spending their past time. A separate section is provided for statistical data relative to this sector's use of the internet as alternative source of information. The needs of seniors of more and better library materials are also discussed including the barriers that deprive them of using their library resources. Lastly, a separate section is provided for recommendations for improving library materials and services in order to better accommodate senior citizens.

I. THE GROWING POPULATION OF SENIOR CITIZENS

Even if this paper focuses on the library resources for senior citizens, this writer finds it important to discuss first the population highlights of the said age category for the purpose of having a general yet concrete idea of how much of our elderly fellows are in need of library resources not just for their reading hobbies but more importantly on how these resources will contribute to satisfying their need of living a meaningful life in their later years.

While it is true that the age of senior citizenship differs from countries in the world, the world's aging demographics in 2001 concluded that the population of our elderly neighbors is definitely growing. In the 2001 aging demographics report by the U. S Census Bureau and the National Institute of Aging, researchers found that the world's population of people aging 65 years and above has been rapidly increasing at 795, 000 each month, since 1999 (Aging World: 2001). The same group also estimated that the world has a senior citizens total population of 420 million in 2000, a figure increased by 9. 5 million from 1999 (pg 7). Geographically, Europe was found to have the highest rate of elderly population with 25. 4% of its total population compared to North America with 16. 5% (U. S. Census Bureau, 2001). Africa has the lowest rate elderly rate of only 6. 3% and 4% in Near East/North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa respectively.

Country specific, Italy was hailed the “ World's Oldest Major Country” by the U. S. Bureau of Census having the highest percentage of persons aging 65 and above (18. 1%) in 2001. Of the 25 oldest populations Greece, Sweden, Japan, Spain and Belgium were among the top five while Estonia, Slovenia,

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Luxembourg, Ukraine and the Czech Republic at the lowest five slots. The increasing trend, according to the demographers' calculations will continue in the next three decades. What is important in these figures is that such demographic trend in our senior citizens should encourage us and the government to make improvements on services that is supposed to be especially designed for them.

As a person ages, his needs and interests relatively changes such as his need for assistance in maintaining his health, in spending his spare time in activities he really enjoys and in finding the means of doing meaningful tasks without sacrificing their health. To be able to do this, they also have to be continuously informed and undeniably, the best means to carry this out is through media. This writer believes that our elderly deserves to have the equal access of the latest technology in order to cope up with the fast changing world. However, to gain knowledge and information should not be stuck on traditionally watching television and listening to radio. To increase their awareness and to be well-informed they need books, magazines, newspapers and journals, reading materials which are available, preferably free to them, in libraries. The question is how accessible are libraries to the senior citizens? The answer to this question will be the main focus of this paper which this writer hopes to find at the end of this paper.

II. INTERESTS OF SENIOR CITIZENS

If anyone has to look into articles and websites that relate to the interests of senior citizens today and compared them with those of the seniors two decades ago, one will likely come up with a common idea: senior citizens

today are more active and enthusiastic. There are several possible factors that have influenced such change in preferences and behaviors of the aging population such as technology, economic trends, media and changes in socio-political trends. Because of the growing availability and accessibility of technology and media, our seniors no longer confine themselves at home doing gardening, cooking and needlework. Increased health consciousness encourages them to go out and do some light exercises like walking and a little jogging. Those who can afford make use of their spare time, and even make it a hobby to travel (AARP, 2002). What is quite impressive here is the seniors' love for reading, as it ranks third of the most popular hobbies of the seniors as per AARP survey results of their 3, 400 senior members.

III. THE NEED OF SENIOR CITIZENS TO ACCESS LIBRARIES

Seniors Need Mental Stimulation- it is a common belief that as people get older they used to lose their usual knowledge and intelligence during the earlier years. However, experts say that intelligence only starts to decline when people do lesser mental exercise. These are becoming common to those who retire from work and then stopped reading and engaging in the activities that exercise the brain. This suggests that seniors, in order to continue doing mental exercise, need to have continuous access to reading materials, and so for libraries. With reading books, magazines and journals and even simply doing mental games, the community will be able to cater to the need of seniors for mental stimulation. Even at their age, they still can contribute a lot to the community and so they need to keep their mind alert.

Need for Socialization and to stay connected to family members and friends- one of the many reasons why seniors make use of the library is their interest on genealogy. This only suggests that seniors really would want to keep their connection with their families. Libraries which offer internet access and special services will be able to cater t these needs especially when they have trained staff that specializes in these areas.

Need to be informed and be socially aware- even after people retire from work, they still need to have access to information in order to keep informed with the social and political conditions of their area. The accessibility of reading materials and libraries will help retirees to keep their awareness. It is important to note that these seniors are still important sector of the community and so the government should increase their awareness and eagerness on planning and providing for services to the seniors. As have been discussed in the earlier section, the senior population is continuously growing and so the best thing we can do is to keep them on the right track.

Health and Investment- health is one of the major considerations of seniors in their search for information. Libraries therefore have a big responsibility in providing for health information needs of the senior sector. Libraries should also provide for media, like newspapers, magazines and journals especially for senior citizens as their major source of health and investment information. Libraries should not be confined with offering conventional books but should also be accommodating the information needs of the growing population of senior citizens.

IV. LIBRARY RESOURCES AVAILABLE FOR SENIOR CITIZENS

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1. PUBLIC LIBRARIES- despite the fact that internet surfing is embraced by many senior citizens, a majority of their sector still stick to the use of older media for searching valuable information. Besides, not all seniors can afford to pay for internet bills. For these reasons, the government and non profit organizations are becoming aware of their needs and so libraries especially for seniors have been established and maintained. Several cities, counties and states in the United States do maintain senior libraries. Bloomfield Public Library, Candem County Library System, West Islip Public Libray in New York and Alvarado Public Library are only few of the public libraries that offer special services for seniors. Their services range from large print books, talking books and computer tutorials especially designed for senior library users. The following are the list of services offered by these public libraries:

1. Closed Circuit Television Viewers- at Candem County, Aladdin Ultra Closed Circuit Television Viewer is made available in all their library branches. This technology makes use of video camera lens that will enable the text to be enlarged by three to 30 times the normal size in order to accommodate the visual need of senior citizens. Zoom text computer access and Electronic Magnification system are also offered at West Islip Library in New York.
2. Large Print Book Collections- books imprinted with large texts are designed especially for those who can no more read the usual text size of conventional books. These services are offered by most public libraries although there are no specific figures available to assess how much of these books are available for seniors.

3. Audio Books – for visually impaired library users, audiobooks are made available at public libraries for alternative. These “ talking books” may come in CDs or cassettes designed for seniors. There are 2. 5 million CDs available in public libraries worldwide, half of which are found in the USA (Libecon).
4. Computer and Internet Tutorials- one of the reasons why seniors do not make use of internet and the computer for searching information is their unfamiliarity with technology. Those who have been educated in schools which offered computer classes and those who have computer experiences at work may not be hard up in coping with the technology trend especially in search for information. For the benefit of those who are unfamiliar, computer and internet tutorials are offered by public libraries. There are library staffs that were trained to assist the seniors who are considered beginners in computer and internet usage.
5. Assisted Listening Devices- these services are especially designed for the hearing impaired. These devices allow them to acquire information which can be played in a small room or in conferences. At Candem County, Assisted Listening Devices are allowed to be borrowed without charge for as long as one month.
6. Homebound Services- at West Islip Public Library, homebound services for seniors are its distinctive features. Homebound services are designed to reach for those who are physically incapable of using the conventional library. BY these services, physically handicapped and home bound seniors can make use of the library by ordering r borrowing books which are literally delivered at their doors.

7. Library Adventure Bus Trips- there are library that integrate mobile libraries on their programs. These services are especially beneficial to those who do not have the financial resources to visit libraries and for those who are homebound. However, not all libraries offer this kind of services.
8. Special Services - at West Islip County Library, blood pressure screening is a free library service for senior citizens. Free bookmarks, brochures and schedules are featured services at the Alvarado County Library. Other libraries also offer tax help for seniors through consultations at regular cycles.
2. WEB SERVICES- There is already couple of websites that are senior citizens friendly. Such websites may become alternative for senior citizens who, for several reasons are unable to visit conventional libraries. Such websites offer free memberships for seniors in order to have unlimited access to information relation to health, investment, news, financing, hobbies and even for socialization. There are already special genealogy sites that are useful for senior citizens. Among the ² popular websites available for senior citizens are listed below:
 3. AARP 55 Alive- <http://www.aarp.org/55alive/> - This site is the largest driver improvement site for motorists age 50 and older.
 4. AARP Webplace- <http://www.aarp.org/indexes/computers.html> -AARP presents Internet training opportunities for senior citizens.
 5. Access America for Seniors- <http://www.seniors.gov/>- This site helps senior citizens access government services and information without having to visit an office.

6. Administration on Aging- <http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/> -The U. S. Dept. of Health and Human Services provides information on programs, resources, etc. for senior citizens and their families.
7. Aging Well- <http://agingwell.state.ny.us/index.html> - A health and wellness village for mature adults.
8. American Association of Retired Persons- <http://www.aarp.org/> - The AARP's website provides a wealth of information for senior citizens on a wide variety of topics.
9. American Geriatrics Society- <http://www.americangeriatrics.org> - Seniors, find valuable information from the American Geriatrics Society.
10. Elder Care Online- <http://www.ec-online.net/> - This site provides an online community where supportive peers and professionals help you improve the quality of life for yourself and your elder.
11. Eldercare Locator- <http://www.aoa.gov/elderpage/locator.html> - The Eldercare Locator is a nationwide, directory assistance service designed to help older persons and caregivers locate local support resources for aging Americans.
12. Elderhostel- <http://www.elderhostel.org/> -Provides information on educational programs for senior citizens.
13. Estate Planning- <http://www.estateplanninglinks.com/> - This site contains hundreds of well-organized, time saving links to Estate Planning, Elder Law, Tax and related websites.
14. GeroWeb- <http://www.iog.wayne.edu/GeroWeb.html> -Provides a wide variety of resources on gerontology from Wayne State University.

15. Guide to Choosing a Nursing Home- <http://www.medicare.gov/nhcompare/home.asp> -This site helps make the decision of selecting a nursing home easier. Follow the links to aid in your search.
16. Medicare- <http://www.medicare.gov/> - The official U. S. government site for Medicare information.
17. Medicare Rights Center- <http://www.medicarerights.org/> - This site provides access to information and advice for Medicare patients.
18. The Merck Manual Of Geriatrics- http://www.merck.com/pubs/mm_geriatrics/contents.htm - This sites addresses medical issues that are specifically aimed at geriatric care, nursing care, prescription medications, Alzheimer's disease, and many more.
19. The National Center on Women and Aging- <http://www.heller.brandeis.edu/national/ind.html> -This site provides information on health, care giving, financial security, and many more topics of interest to women.
20. The National Council on the Aging- <http://www.ncoa.org/> - This site provides information on policy, legislation, and improvement of the quality of life for senior citizens.
21. National Institute on Aging- <http://www.nih.gov/nia/index.htm> - Information on specific diseases and health conditions, treatments, and research for use by the general public, patients and family members, health professionals, voluntary and community organizations, and the media. From the National Institutes of Health.
22. NIH Senior Health- <http://nihseniorhealth.gov> -This site is designed to help senior citizens find the latest information on health issues.

23. ONLINE: Retirement Resources- <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/nycu/money/moretire.htm> -Provides links to retirement resources.
24. Resource Directory for Older People- <http://www.nih.gov/nia/related/aoaresrc/resource.htm> - For older people and their families, health and legal professionals, and others. Contains names, addresses, etc., of organizations which provide information on matters relevant to the needs of senior citizens
25. Senior Citizens- <http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/resource.html> - This site contains names, addresses, phone numbers, and fax numbers of organizations which provide information and other resources on matters relevant to the needs of older persons.
26. SeniorNet- <http://www.seniornet.org/> - The nonprofit SeniorNet provides adults 50+ access to and education about computer technology and the Internet.
27. SeniorLaw Home Page- <http://www.seniorlaw.com> - This is a site where senior citizens, their families, attorneys, social workers, and financial planners can access information about Elder Law, Medicare, Medicaid, estate planning, and more.
28. SeniorSearch- <http://www.seniorsearch.com> - Information on all sorts of topics of interest to seniors and their families, including health, fitness, housing, and elder law.
29. Social Security Information- <http://www.ssa.gov/> -Provides benefit information, rulings, social security handbook, Medicare information, etc.

In the 2000 survey made by the Pew Internet and American Life Project entitled "Wired Seniors: A fervent Few Inspired by Families", results revealed that the main most popular reason for senior citizens to surf the internet is to stay connected with their loved ones (S. Fox). It is important to note that the 13% senior citizens population of America makes up only 4% of all America's internet users. Of the total sample of 4,335 interviewed senior citizens (aged 65 and older), only 670 were internet users (pg. 02). If internet users are to be grouped by age, we will be able to see the significant gap in the percentage of internet surfers. Pew Internet

Organization summarized their findings as presented in the table below:

2000 America's Internet Access Data by Age Group

Age Group	Ever Online	Never Go Online
America's Total Percentage	56%	44%
18-29	75%	25%
30-49	65%	35%
50-64	51%	49%
65 and above	15%	85%

Table D. 1. Pew Internet and American Life Project Survey: November-December 2000

Reasons for Surfing the Internet

1. Email- seniors primarily use the internet for reading their emails. This is evidenced by the 93% internet usage of their age bracket equal to all internet users. UNESCO and Libecon's survey revealed that 53% of these seniors make use open and send emails on ordinary days a percentage common to all seniors regardless of sex and social status. This also suggests that more than any other reasons, seniors place high importance on keeping constantly connected with their families and friends.
2. Health- as required by their age, seniors make use of the internet to conveniently search for health information. Currently, there are several websites that are especially designed for senior users. Their products and services cater especially to the health information needs of people ages fifty and above. Even senior organizations do maintain their own websites to conveniently provide for health information to their members. Some of these organizations are the Seniorsite, Senior Women Web, SLM Seniors and a lot more.
3. Financial Reasons- seniors still seek for financial security and one way to do this is through the internet. It is important to note that 27% of the senior surfers, according to the IFLA report maintain their personal finances online, 12% traded stocks and 8% of them do online banking.

4. News- As suggested by the table, seniors do surf the internet for meaningful information. One of these is the seniors' love for political information. Of the 36% online news readers, 21% of these seniors surf the internet everyday while 53% surfed for weather information. Fifty nine percent of them are men and the rest are women.
5. Fun-during ordinary days, 17% of the seniors spend their past time in internet surfing. As with their educational background, 63% of these seniors have at least high school education while 46% of them are have college education and more.

KEY INTERNET ACTIVITIES BY SENIORS

Activities	Seniors	All Internet Users
Email	93%	93%
Search for Health Info	53%	56%
Acquire Financial Info	44%	44%
Read Political News	36%	39%
Play Game	32%	34%
Buy/Sell Stocks	12%	13%

Table D. 2. Key Internet Activities by Seniors: UNESCO and Libecon

V. BARRIERS TO THE ACCESS OF LIBRARIES

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Transportation- one of the major reasons why seniors are unable to go to conventional libraries is the lack of transportation facility that will bring them to the reading place. There was a study done by the Hawkeye Valley Area Agency on Aging (HVAAA) which revealed that seniors basically need assistance in driving or even in simple trips to a clinic or hospital and to grocery stores. It is also important to note the results of the survey made by the LSTA Partnership Grant in Iowa seniors which concluded that 15% of the participants in the 2000 library Needs/Interest Survey said that the lack of transportation basically hinder them from accessing the library. Public transportation facilities may not even be much of their benefits because such trips, as with the subsidized Metropolitan Transit Authority (MET) do not cover trips to the library. Other transportation facilities may be too expensive for other seniors as they do not all own cars.

Physical/Health Reasons- health problems are common to seniors. Physical disabilities like vision impairment may discourage them to read. Also, seniors commonly have arthritis and other bone and nerve diseases deprive them of at least roaming the library even if the library is near their houses. Survey says that 35% of seniors are unable to access the library because of their health conditions ¹.

Senior Center Became More Popular- Recreation and socialization are major interests of seniors since a significant percentage of the senior population live alone or at least left alone in the house. In the HVAAA survey, 70% of the senior participants said that senior centers are their major access to socialization and recreation. This only means that centers that provide them

with the opportunity to enjoy their hobbies and forms of recreation greatly encourage them to participate and be physically present in the area. This would suggest that apart from their reading hobbies, seniors are also in need of socialization that boosts their morale. HVAAA survey results indicates that library access will be more meaningful to seniors if it will be in partnership with the senior centers, having 52% of the respondents said they are willing to be a part of library access program through the senior centers.

Lack of Library Staff to assist the seniors- Speaking of worldwide library accessibility, there are about 570, 000 library service points around the world according to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Global Library Statistics released on September 2003. The report was a combined data from UNESCO and Libecon including data from 1990 to 2000 library survey results. Out of the more than half a million library service points, only 267, 000 service points are classified as public libraries and barely 341 service points as national libraries. From here alone, we can say that more or less 50% of these libraries are accessible to anyone in the world and that figure supposed to include the senior citizens. The big question is if these libraries offer services that are especially designed for the needs of the seniors. In the said statistics, no data or single figure was provided for special libraries, which should give us the idea of how much of these libraries care for the needs of the senior citizens.

As had been mentioned a while ago, visual impairment is major hindrance for seniors to read. This alone suggests that large print book collection should be increased to accommodate their needs. Since most of them also are in need to assistance, library staff should be trained to assist the seniors
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in their library needs. In the same statistics reported by IFLA, there are barely 357 thousand library staff serve in the 267 thousand public library service points. Extracting the ratio of library service points (public only) versus their staff will give us 1: 1.3 ratio which means that these service points has at least two library staff to assist library users. This means that for public library users to maximize their usage of library, it has to be some sort of "self service" as with finding the books they need. This will give us the idea that users are expected to know how to use the catalogues, the shelving system, and internet services other media in the library of which seniors cannot possibly cope up as fast as the younger ones do. In this case, libraries should make efforts to hiring staff that are trained to assist the seniors in their special needs in the library.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS ON BETTER SENIOR LIBRARY SERVICES

In order to encourage senior citizens to make use of the libraries, library management should always consider facilities and services that will ensure that their libraries and senior users friendly. Few of the many suggestions and recommendations gathered by this writer are summarized as follows:

1. Qualified Senior Citizens Friendly Staff - this writer believes that it will not be of too much cost for the government and non-profit organizations to hire or train library staffs on special senior assistance. This is an effective means of encouraging the seniors to use the library despite their several impairments. With this kind of service, seniors will be able to maximize their available time and resources in acquiring information, whether they maybe for health financial and job reasons

and even for just enjoying their reading hobbies. Every community must encourage volunteers who maybe trained for senior assistance.

2. Outreach Programs for seniors – homebound services are of excellent benefits for seniors. Libraries must at least consider such kind of services in their programs in order to reach out for seniors who cannot physically visit the libraries. Mobile libraries which may at least visit local areas one a week may help a lot.
3. Partnering with community groups that serve seniors- there are non-profit organization whose mission is to help the senior citizens. Public libraries may offer partnership with these organizations. Senior centers are good partners since they have already active members that maybe be encouraged to enhance their knowledge and skills by acquiring valuable information in the libraries.
4. Provide comfortable reading and research areas for seniors- this writer suggest that if local governments can provide for separate reading and research areas for seniors, it will be of great benefit. Wider walkways, parking close to the library entrances, shelving that are easily accessible for seniors maybe some of the library improvements that can be made. A separate area for seniors is suggested for reasons that these people do have special needs in reading and researching especially to those who are visually and hearing impaired. Well-lit and well ventilated libraries are beneficial to seniors.
5. Encourage Participation of Seniors- senior library users have their own expertise because these people have educational backgrounds or work experience that may be used to serve the seniors. For example, seniors who have experience with computers and the internet may also

volunteer to assist other seniors who are inexperienced. Seniors who do have experience with other media such as operating or running audiobooks and assisted listening devices may also help their fellow seniors. Those who have experience with taxation and other government services may also volunteer for special sessions that will cater to these information needs of other seniors.

6. Increase volume of large print books and collection of audio books- for governments who can afford large print books and audio books collections must be increased in order to cater to the needs of the growing population of seniors. The government should not hesitate investing for them because seniors can still provide for valuable contributions to the society as they too have their own expertise and skills. For those citizens who are generous enough, they maybe encourage to donate such library materials so that libraries can afford to offer them for free.

7. Transportation Facilities- governments who can afford to subsidize rides going to the libraries should start doing so. If they could provide for scheduled trips, say for example bus, for trips to libraries, they should have priority services for seniors especially those who have physical impairments.

CONCLUSION

The population of senior citizens is undoubtedly growing, as evidenced by the 2001 demographics report by the U. S. Census Bureau. This figure suggests that the government and other concerned organizations must increase its programs and services that will cater their needs and one of

these is the library services. In this research, this writer only found data of senior citizens libraries on developed countries which suggest that those senior citizens who live in non-developed or developing countries are deprived on library services. In areas where library services are available, this research was able to find that not all public libraries offer special services for seniors as UNESCO and Libecon did not provide data that will suggest that they do so. This paper also found out that the seniors' main concerns in acquiring information include health, financial and investment information, political and social information including that of their hobbies. We have also found out that reading still rank third on the top ten past time activities for seniors, which means that despite their visual and hearing impairments, they still crave for information and their love for reading does not fade as they age.

Because of the limitations of libraries in catering to the library needs of seniors, this paper also found that web services is an alternative source of information. WE have found through statistical data that seniors are active internet surfers and thus this writer have considered internet as extended research and information site besides the conventional library building and conventional media. We have also found that there is already a long list of websites that are especially designed for seniors.

By gathering suggestions and recommendations from books, research materials, articles and online resources, this paper as come up with several recommendations on how libraries should be further improved for the benefit of the seniors. Through the list, this writer conclude that the world has a lot

more things to do to improve its library services and the world should also make considerations on the growing need of our senior citizens.

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