

# NEWS

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## *ALA releases ground-breaking study on library service to new Americans*

### **Libraries working to level playing field for non-English speakers**

MINNEAPOLIS - About 21 million people in the United States speak limited or no English, 50 percent more than a decade ago. As our country's demographics continue to change, U.S. public libraries continue their efforts to meet the demand for service to non-English users. Today the American Library Association (ALA) released "Serving Non-English Speakers in U.S. Public Libraries," an unprecedented study on the range of specialized library services for non-English speakers. The announcement took place at the Hennepin County Library's New American Center during the Public Library Association's National Conference, March 25 – 29.

"Serving Non-English Speakers in U.S. Public Libraries," is the first national study to consider the range of library services and programs developed for non-English speakers, including effectiveness of services, barriers to library use, most frequently used services and most successful library programs by language served. The study also analyzed library service area populations and patron proximity to local libraries that offer specialized services. The most frequently used services by non-English speakers were special language collections (68.9 percent) and special programming (39.6 percent), including language-specific story hours and cultural programming.

Today's libraries provide a wide range of opportunities for people with diverse needs and interests. Libraries reported the most successful library programs and services developed for non-English speakers were: English as a Second Language (ESL), language-specific materials and collections, computer use and computer classes, story time and special programs.

"Libraries are part of the American Dream, places for education, self-help and lifelong learning," said ALA President Lorlene Roy. "The findings presented in this study can provide a venue for developing

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better and more precise materials, services and programs for those linguistically isolated. It is our hope that libraries, library supporters, and the research community will find this study valuable as a planning tool to better serve non-English speaking users.”

The study found that Spanish is the most supported non-English language in public libraries. Seventy-eight percent of libraries reported Spanish as the priority #1 language, after English, to which they develop services and programs. Asian languages ranked second in priority at 29 percent. Another 17.6 percent of libraries indicated Indo-European languages as a second priority.

Conventional wisdom predicted that the density of library service to non-English speakers would have been in larger, urban settings. The study data indicates quite the opposite. Public libraries in communities with fewer than 100,000 residents are the majority of libraries meeting the demands of non-English speaking residents. More than 53 percent of residents in these smaller communities traveled between 1-3 miles to reach a library, and another 21 percent traveled between 4-6 miles for library service. Although any distance may be a barrier when transportation is an issue, it was the lowest ranked barrier to use reported by libraries.

Literacy proved to be the most dominate barrier for non-English speaking library users. Literacy is both a barrier to using library services designed for non-English speakers and is what most libraries support in specially designed services and programs. Reading and library habits negatively impact use of the library by non-English speakers (76 percent). Knowledge of the services offered by the library was the second most frequent barrier to their participation (74.7 percent) identified by librarians. A lack of discretionary time was the third most common barrier (73.1 percent).

“Serving Non-English Speakers in U.S. Public Libraries,” was conducted by the ALA’s Office for Research and statistics. Completed in spring 2007, the study was made possible through funding from the 2006 World Book – ALA Goal Grant. Dr. Christie Koontz and Dean Jue of Florida State University conducted the research for the ALA. The ALA Offices for Literacy and Outreach Services, Public Programs, and Diversity provided additional support.

Bilingual spokespersons are available for interviews. Interested media should contact Macey Morales, ALA Media Relations, 312-280-4393 or [mmorales@ala.org](mailto:mmorales@ala.org) to schedule interviews.

For more information, or to view the complete report please visit [www.ala.org/nonenglishspeakers](http://www.ala.org/nonenglishspeakers).

The American Library Association is the oldest and largest library association in the world, with more than 65,000 members. Its mission is to promote the highest quality library and information services and public access to information.