


Social responsibility to ensure equal opportunities: The activities of the Berzsenyi Dániel Library in Szombathely in the field of library services for the disadvantaged

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One of the fundamental objectives of the Berzsenyi Dániel Library (BDL) is to provide high quality library services to the public by providing access to documents and information, which means that special attention must be paid to the rights of people with health and physical disabilities and social disadvantages when using the library. The article summarises the legal background, provides a historical overview, details the main elements of the library's equal opportunities programmes and strategic goals.

disadvantaged and disabled people, library services, sensitization programmes, Berzsenyi Dániel Library

Introduction

The Act XXVI of 1998 on the Rights and Equal Opportunities of Persons with Disabilities¹ highlights four areas when discussing the rights of persons with disabilities: the right to a barrier-free (accessible), perceptible and safe built environment; possibility of equal access to information of public interest and public services; a person with a disability is entitled to equal information opportunities when using social information service; the right to be provided with the appropriate support service. The Act identifies five areas of everyday considered important for equal opportunities: healthcare; education, training; employment; place of residence, community inclusion, independent living; culture and sports.

Library services for people with health and physical disabilities, and those with social disadvantages, are a priority in the mission statement² and strategic plan³ of the Berzsenyi Dániel Library of Szombathely⁴. The library supports equal opportunities in the use of its services with all means available.

The Research and Analysis Department of the Hungarian Library Institute analysed the efforts made by Hungarian libraries in this area, focusing on the period of 2018–2021. The colleagues have published a document summarising their research⁵, in which BDL is mentioned twice.

The HNMPCC National Széchenyi Library (HNMPCC NSZL) has drawn up an action plan⁶ for the implementation of the Marrakesh Treaty. On the basis of this plan, and in accordance with the legal obligation⁷, HNMPCC NSZL informs the European Commission about the activities of the authorized entities operating in Hungary, including the activities of the municipal library of Szombathely.

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The Project "As a blind person – Getting to know the library through the glasses of visually impaired readers"⁸, developed by Zsuzsanna Marianna Nagy, a staff member of the Szombathely library, is mentioned among the best practices listed in the research paper⁹ published by the HNMPCC NSZL Hungarian Library Institute.

History

The county library in Szombathely, together with its predecessor, has a history of nearly 150 years, during which time it has provided a number of special services. For instance, during the First World War, books were delivered to soldiers treated in the hospital in Szombathely, and between the two world wars, library materials were sent to readers in the countryside by post. Home delivery was organized, even a bicycle was purchased for this purpose. However, after 1945, no attention was paid to those living in disadvantaged circumstances for a long time.

There was pretty a long period when services provided to disadvantaged groups were organized in a traditional way, using already tried and tested practices. Book collections were set up in the day-care centre for the elderly, the Forest School (a hospital for long-stay patients), various departments of the county hospital, and in clubs run by the socialist party, whose members were elderly or retired. These collections were exchanged and updated at regular intervals. In 1979, the Berzsényi Dániel Library introduced home lending, which meant an important innovation. In the beginning, reading material was only delivered to homes of elderly people who were housebound or bedridden due to their illness or age. Later, the service was extended to readers with limited mobility who lived in the city and were unable to visit the library.¹⁰ Ágnes Tilcsikné Pásztor worded her experience regarding this service in an article published in 1981: "In order to establish and maintain a personal relationship, a reader was visited by the same librarian each time. This gave librarians the opportunity to learn about the circumstances and problems of the people using their services, and in addition to lending books, they also had the chance to help housebound people solve their everyday problems. This is the only way in which home lending can become a real social activity of the library."¹¹

In addition to home lending, our library was active in other areas as well to make information accessible to people with health and physical disabilities and social disadvantages. We made our audio books available to the visually impaired, enabled homeless people to use our premises, and launched a project to help those who lost their jobs. Our colleagues, Éva Nagy, Erika Vörösné Adler, Márta Pallósiné Toldi held bibliotherapy sessions for psychiatric patients. We informed the public about these activities through the local and national, professional media.¹² In 2024, Éva Nagy concluded her article by saying that "we still need to make more efforts in this field, but we consider it a significant achievement that we have already successfully launched this initiative, and those concerned could feel that librarians see them as a natural factor in society, and could help them cross the threshold of public anxiety."¹³

Home lending has been continuously working for the last 46 years too. Our reader services colleagues still look after our readers who are homebound or bedridden due to their age or health issues. Marianna Zsuzsanna Nagy recalls the years 2009–2024 in her personal memories: "I regularly participated in the home lending services, visiting both institutions and private homes. I visited the Specialised Social Institute (Szakosított Szociális Intézet) (Szombathely, Gagarin u. 5.).

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Every 2 to 3 months, I delivered a deposit (composed of books, CDs, newspapers, DVDs) for the blind, visually impaired or disabled residents, for those living with dementia, and for their staff. In addition, there were about 10 to 15 persons whom I personally visited to fulfill their private requests. Personal relationship was of high importance for them. I also attend the Nursing Home for the Elderly (Szombathely, Pozsony u. 47), where Éva Nagy, Erika Vörösné Adler and I took turns reading to inpatient elderly people who could no longer read. I lent books, audio books, and CDs to those who could still read. I delivered deposits (books, CDs, newspapers, DVDs) to the visitors and the staff of the retirement club, which operates in the same building. I delivered deposits to the House of Tomorrow (Holnap Háza) (Szombathely, Bádonfa u. 15.) on a monthly basis, fulfilled individual requests, held library sessions and paper theatre storytelling (depending on the moods of the residents), and prepared quarterly craft sessions. They still »make an excursion« to visit me at the Kámoni branch library. I also took deposit collections (DVDs, some books) to the homeless shelter (Szombathely, Kolozsvár u. 27.) on a monthly base. Every month I visited a blind father at the Diocesan Home of Priests (Szombathely, Várköz 1.) to deliver him audio books. He also highly appreciated personal relationship. There were 4-5 blind, visually impaired or mobility-impaired patrons living in their own apartments. Depending on their requests, I borrowed them printed books, audio books, CDs, or DVDs. They were especially grateful for the in-face encounters, because they spent most days alone."

BDL has been purchasing and supplying audio books for the blind and partially sighted since these types of documents were first published. In the 1980s, library staff contributed to bibliotherapy sessions at the Neurology and Mental Health Department of the County Hospital. Also, we have taken in the homeless, provided support for the unemployed, and dealt with deviant young people. Unfortunately, we have had to face the fact that the library building's lack of accessibility means that a large proportion of potential users are excluded from our special services.

We also experienced that many people had found out about our services from the press and personal contacts, but there was no contact, or no regular contact with social services, self-help groups, pensioners' clubs, and there was no active cooperation with local groups of people with disabilities. Finally, on 17 August 2002, the renovated and extended building was inaugurated, and full accessibility made it possible to welcome all those who had previously been unable to use our library services.¹⁴

The equal opportunities programme developed in 2002-2003

Although the collection and services are suitable for meeting the wide range of users' needs, during the planning period, we identified tenders for providing quality services to the target groups. In 2003-2004, we could expand our audio-book collection, as well as our literature and music CD collection, using various grants (Fogyátékosok Esélye Közalapítvány 2, NKA Könyvtári Kollégium 2, "The library is not only for the sighted" funded by the Ministry of National Cultural Heritage), to a total value of more than one and a half million HUF (ca. 3700 EUR). In addition, we bought CD players for loan, and purchased books with large print and magnifying glasses to help the visually impaired. The expanded infrastructure brought by the renovation of the building included a computer with an audio reader application.



The successful applications gave a solid background and motivation for the launch of our equal opportunities programme developed in 2001–2003.¹⁵ The main goals of the programme were the following:

1. Reach out to social services, self-help groups, and the organizations of the retired and people with disabilities.
2. Reach out to the target groups in order to inform them about the opportunities and the use of library services.
3. Expand the document collections and tools needed by the target groups, using grants.
4. Reduce the costs of the use of library services for the people with disabilities by offering free use and other discounts under the cooperation agreement.

An agreement was offered to organizations willing to cooperate. The agreement included the following:

1. the library provides free use for members with disabilities;
2. the organization will have the right to borrow items on a group basis;
3. members of the organization can participate in computer and internet use courses free of charge, with the option to extend this opportunity to management and staff;
4. the organization will be free to use our facilities for cultural events, meetings, product and tool demonstrations.¹⁶

In 2004, the cooperation was put in writing with the National Association of the Hungarian Blind and Visually Impaired of Vas County, the Association of the Disabled of Vas County, the National Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing of Vas County, the Support Service for the Disabled, the Day Care Centre for People with Disabilities of the Regional Social Resource Centre Non-profit Ltd, and the Misszió Public Benefit Association (supporting cancer patients).¹⁷ The leader of the equal opportunities programme developed in 2001–2003 was deputy director of BDL, Éva Nagy, who summarized the experiences in the following way: "We can declare, that our programme works: individual users attend our library on a regular basis, there is a demand for group visits, our outreach events and activities bring joy to participants. Nevertheless, our experiences lead us to make some suggestions for consideration. Ensuring equal opportunities in libraries, as in other institutions, is first and foremost a financial issue. Today, only a few buildings are accessible for wheelchair users and disabled elderly people. Once the accessibility has been achieved, we can start to provide the necessary equipment to help people with disabilities to use the library. These tools, including applications, are expensive and cannot be purchased from our regular budget. Grants are uncertain, and take a disproportionate amount of time to administer. The most important factor is the employee who has to take on demanding tasks in addition to his or her normal duties, and who is willing to learn and spend extra time at work if required. Recently, several young librarians with disabilities who have graduated have contacted our library to inquire about job opportunities. We have no open positions, so we have not been able to offer them a job. In the meantime, we have started to think about recruiting professionals into our programme who have personal experience of the needs of people with similar disabilities and who are familiar with library services. We know from statistics that a large proportion of people with disabilities cannot find work, but it is important that they are involved in useful

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activities. Equal opportunities, which have become an obligation for libraries under Act CXXV of 2003¹⁸, could be achieved by means of a targeted subsidy from the central budget, which would also cover the possibility of employing these professionals."¹⁹

Strategic goals for library development for people with disabilities 2014–2020

BDL's second equal opportunity programme also covers activities for people with disabilities.²⁰ In line with our goals to be achieved by 2020, the library will seek and develop partnerships on the basis of its collection and services in order to provide high quality services to readers with disabilities. Its equal opportunities programme and user training activities will enable cultural equality. Its experiential programmes promote the institution and its collection, as well as literature, the arts, and sciences. As a community place and information centre, it strengthens social inclusion. To achieve these, our overall objectives are to:

- Improving the quality of services for people with disabilities by developing our central library and branch libraries in order to make them more or fully accessible.
- Providing organized training for our staff to update their knowledge and develop their skills and competencies.
- Maintaining our practices to provide information and resources to those who are unable to visit the library in person.

Objectives:

- Improving accessibility outside working hours by implementing technological solutions and developing content services in order to keep those who are unable to leave their homes informed.
- Launching programmes initiated by organizations for people with disabilities and other events to increase literacy and digital literacy among people with disabilities.
- Increasing social inclusion through community services within our remit.
- Promoting our collections and library use among people with disabilities and institutions and organizations supporting them.
- Putting into practice regular surveys of satisfaction and needs.

Priority targets and their realization:

1. target: Supporting the use of libraries by people with disabilities is a top priority of the Berzsenyi Dániel Library, which can be achieved by setting up a consciously designed, comprehensive structure of tasks and requirements and by special training of library professionals.

Realization:

- Full accessibility (mobile amplifiers, pictograms, light signals, guide bars, reading machine, Braille printer).
- Expanding the range of resources with new types of documents (such as printed books in Braille, books written in easy-to-read languages). Collection development should be based on needs assessments.
- Improving skills for mentally demanding communication through training.
- Gaining practice in the use of sign language in everyday communication.



2. target: Proving accessibility for people with disabilities at the central library through implementing new IT technologies.

Realization:

- Making information that helps library use accessible to people with disabilities (full accessibility of the library's website, creating guides).
- Special technologies to make content accessible (purchasing new, state-of-the-art reading software).
- Maintaining library user training to improve information-seeking skills of people with disabilities.

3. target: Berzsényi Dániel Library considers it a priority to support small communities and people living in institutions, and to share cultural experiences.

Realization:

- Individual sessions and group programmes for disadvantaged people to share cultural experiences.
- A commitment to equal opportunities becomes part of the library's internal and external communication.
- Facilitate the organisation of independent events by bringing our services to the venue.

The financial background of realization:

Most of the maintenance and staffing costs of the complex functional system are covered by the central budget and the municipality of Szombathely. These costs are supplemented by the library's income, which represents 10% of the total budget. We will apply for additional grants.

All our equality plans for 2014–2020 have been implemented. As a third place and information centre, we have promoted social inclusion, and our library services and events have been implemented in line with these objectives. A special mention should be made of the Roma Cultural Days, a unique event in the life of our city.

BDL's best practices – some examples²¹

Let us give you a brief overview of our cooperation, programmes and activities for people with disabilities.

We have had a special partnership with Rum-Kastély Unified Methodological Institute for Special Pedagogy, Kindergarten, Primary School, Vocational School, Skill Development School and College (Rum-Kastély Egységes Gyógypedagógiai Módszertani Intézmény, Óvoda, Általános Iskola, Speciális Szakiskola és Kollégium, EGYMI)²², which has been at the service of people with disabilities for 60 years. Their goal is for students to be accepted by society and not just tolerated. This goal is supported by the library's film session, which is realized with the help of our colleague, Ferenc Boros, an independent filmmaker.²³ In addition, in 2017, the "Encounters" programme gave pupils and students the opportunity to discover the world of people with intellectual disabilities in our library. An exhibition was organized entitled "My favourite pastimes" with artworks created by the residents of the institute,²⁴ a new exhibition entitled "You can do it too" ("Te is KÉPes vagy rá") was opened in 2018 in cooperation with H+ Media and Cultural Association featuring photographs by the students of Kanizsai Dorottya Bilingual Secondary Grammar School and EGYMI. This programme included a film session

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entitled "Special perspectives" ("Speciális nézőpontok"). The photos were taken in mixed groups of students and the exhibition did not indicate whether a photo was taken by a disabled or a non-disabled student. Difference and strangeness are difficult to accept for many people, so programmes such as "You can do it too" and "Special perspectives" can play a significant role in this area. Photography and filmmaking go far beyond "making pictures": they help us gain personal experiences, and creating artwork brings a sense of success.



Fig. 1: "Special perspectives" – words of happiness after screening

In 2016, Berzsenyi Dániel Library and Hungarian Special Films Association²⁵ launched a joint programme entitled "Special cinema". It was organized by the librarian, Ferenc Boros, and the aim was to give healthy young people an insight into the intellectual and emotional world of their disabled peers, and to raise awareness among schools for young people with disabilities of the benefits of engaging with movies, and to encourage independent filmmakers and media students to approach people with disabilities and their unique and colourful world.²⁶ Since then, every September, a one-day programme is organised to give young people an insight into filmmaking, scriptwriting, shooting and editing. On 8 November, our library joined the Hungarian Special Film Festival, the only national film event that raises awareness about the lives of people with disabilities. The event took place between 7 and 8 November in Budapest. On the same days, a selection of films screened during the festival was also shown in the Szombathely library.

We have been organizing special film sessions since 2016. These annual events are attended by an average of 100 young people with disabilities.

The Hungarian Special Films Association has been organising the Kőszeg Film Days since 2017. The two-day event is a mix of a conference, a filmmakers' camp and a film screening. Our library is represented by Ferenc Boros, as a professional implementer and as a member of the jury.

Our activities in the field of special films were awarded on two occasions.²⁷ The 10th Special Film Festival²⁸ took place from 26 to 28 November. On 5 December, a jubilee gala was held at the Uránia National Cinema Palace to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the festival and the Hungarian Special Films Association. The event was an opportunity to thank the partners and sponsors for



their help and support. Ferenc Boros, librarian and film specialist, received the certificate of the 10th Special Film Festival and the "Supporter" commemorative plaque for his support of the work of the special film community. Dr. Mónika Baráthné Molnár, library director, was awarded with a certificate and a Jubilee Medal for her support of the Hungarian special film community.

We support the work of the Vas County Division of the National Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing on a regular base. On request, we hold guided tours at the library entitled "From the basement to the attic" to present them our services (e.g. as a part of the Night of Libraries event). In 2016, we organized a computer training for the deaf and hard of hearing in our library.²⁹ The idea of the training came up at a sign language course attended by our colleague, Edit Szalainé Bodor.

Blind and partially sighted people have been regularly visiting the library since 1988 to listen to the audio books on cassette on premises and to read the Braille magazine "World of the Blind". A compilation entitled "Everything you need to know about the library – for blind and partially sighted" was produced by Edit Sisak and Marianna Zsuzsanna, it was made available in print and audio version (on cassette and CD). The library was presented floor by floor so that our blind and visually impaired readers could use our services independently. At the same time, we purchased discmans to lend to visually impaired patrons who did not have a CD-player. Sensitivity programmes for primary school children were organized on a regular base: such as guide dog sessions, sessions on everyday life, which we still run today, along with a craft session (basket weaving). On the initiative of Dr. Márta Pallósiné Toldi, director of the library, we developed library sessions for secondary school students under the title "Tandem", in the framework of which Marianna Zsuzsanna Nagy prepared the programme "Get to know the library through the glasses of the blind and visually impaired", which was later renamed "Volunteer blind" and Marianna developed it into a model programme in 2018 in the project "My library".³⁰ Participants of the "Volunteer blind" programme were blindfolded and guided through the library by their classmates and an audio guide. They can try out blind-friendly computers and get familiar with the blind-friendly websites. The biennial "Máské(p)" ("Differently") photography and film competition³¹ for primary and secondary school students, as well as college and university students, is also open to people with intellectual disabilities.

"In 2016, we organized a computer training for the deaf and hard of hearing in our library."



Fig. 2: "Volunteer blind" programme

"We have a well-documented and active relationship with other social institutions in the city to assist the people they support in accessing library services."

As part of the library's equal opportunities programme, we have planned to strengthen the relationship with the local Roma community, to achieve this we have signed a cooperation agreement with the local Roma National Self-Government to organize joint cultural programmes to promote Roma culture. We applied for the ROM-RKT-15 grant for the implementation of Roma cultural events, and we were awarded 600 000 HUF. In 2016, we successfully applied to the National Cultural Fund's College of Literature with the programme entitled "Roma Cultural Days in the Berzsenyi Dániel County and City Library".

Our annual report can give you an idea of our day-to-day activities in relation to library use by people with disadvantages.³² We signed and renewed a cooperation agreement with the Association of the Hungarian Blind and Visually Impaired of Vas County, the Vas County Division of the National Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and the Nonprofit Ltd. for the Disabled and Homeless. We have a well-documented and active relationship with other social institutions in the city to assist the people they support in accessing library services. The Pálos Károly Social Service Centre and Child Welfare Service, the city's pensioners' clubs, and social homes for the elderly and disabled are worth mentioning. We offer a discount on registration for people with disabilities. We promoted social inclusion through equal opportunities activities, we enabled children to meet people with disabilities through well-prepared programmes.

Goals for 2024–2029³³

"One of the main missions of a library is to meet the expectations, demands and needs of society" – says the Quality Performance Assessment System for Libraries, Part 8 on the results related to social responsibility. Social responsibility is a consciously developed, strategically important part of BDL's activities. We have used our resources and relationships in an optimal way, with empathy and full commitment, without interrupting continuity, to effectively deliver our vision. Our colleagues are sensitive to problems in society, especially those of the community they serve. We are proud of the work of our predecessors and build on this tradition by making equal opportunities in the library an important part of our vision.

Summary

BDL's practices related to people with disabilities go back decades. We are still active in this field, the continuity has not been broken. Our institution and its predecessors have always been committed to fulfilling a social function, to helping readers who are disadvantaged and have difficulty expressing their needs. The first steps must be taken by the library: providing an atmosphere of tolerance, acceptance, love and trust, helping to identify and express needs, organising and offering programmes. We must observe the work of our predecessors, follow tradition, so that we can learn, build and renew. The experiences we have gathered here can be useful for those who feel ready to help disadvantaged people and to sensitise the majority society. Each of our good practices is a feasible and plannable form of promoting equal opportunities. The usefulness of the efforts invested is unquestionable, and the future of these activities depends largely on the commitment of the colleagues who are involved in the tasks.



Footnotes

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- ⁷ 198/2018. (X. 25.) Kormányrendelet az olvasási képességet érintő fogyatékossgal élő kedvezményezett személyek javára végezhető szabad felhasználás részletes szabályairól. Available at: <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A1800198.KOR&searchUrl=/gyorskereso%3Fpagenum%3D12> (Accessed: 2025.02.03.)
- ⁸ Further information about the project is available at the site of BDL in Hungarian: https://www.bdmk.hu/Konyvtarhasznalat_es_szolgáltatások/konyvtari_foglalkozások.html (Accessed: 2025.02.02.)
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