

## Library Services for New Americans: A Philadelphia Case Study

The Free Library of Philadelphia system is composed of 54 libraries serving 1.5 million Philadelphia residents.<sup>1</sup> Each library serves its own unique population within the city, and as such the libraries in the system are each unique. This paper looks at three of these libraries—the Independence Branch, the Ramonita de Rodriguez Branch, and the Lillian Marrero Branch—and focuses on their services to New Americans.

### Independence Branch

The Independence Branch, located at 18 S. 7th St., serves the neighborhoods of Society Hill, Old City, Queen Village, Washington Square West, and Chinatown.<sup>2</sup> Before you even walk in, you know that this is a branch with a bilingual focus: big letters above the door proclaim that this is the Independence Branch of the Philadelphia Free Library in both English and Chinese. As you move into the entranceway, on your left you see free newspapers in both English and Chinese and a bulletin board full of announcements, some of which are also in both languages. Inside the library, signs around the circulation desk are in English and Chinese, and you can see the words “Chinese Interest,” also in both languages, above an alcove in the back of the library. On one wall, a mural full of Chinese imagery indicates the children’s area, and the tables in this area also boast signs reserving them for children and teens in both Chinese and English.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that English patrons and materials are not an integral part of the library; the main room of the

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<sup>1</sup> Claire Shubik-Richards and Emily Dowdall, *The Library in the City: Changing Demands and a Challenging Future*, (Pew Charitable Trusts: 2012), 12.

<sup>2</sup> “Independence Branch,” Free Library of Philadelphia, accessed 29 October 2012, <http://libwww.freelibrary.org/branches/branch.cfm?loc=IND>.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 2 for photographs and a rough map of the library.

library is packed with English-language books, DVDs, CDs, and periodicals. Yet, when you reach the Chinese Interest alcove at the back of the library, you see that Chinese-speaking patrons have a stake in this library, too. The entrance to the alcove is sandwiched between a rack of Chinese newspapers and another bulletin board featuring Chinese-language signs from organizations such as the Alzheimer's Association. The alcove features three tables bordered by many shelves of books and 15 shelves of DVDs, all labeled in both English and Chinese.

Around 11am on Thursday, 4 October 2012, a man sits at a table in front of the information desk reading a Chinese newspaper. Five more Chinese patrons sit at tables in the Chinese alcove reading or, in the case of one patron, working on a laptop. Since storytime has just ended, there are still five strollers in the library, three of which belong to Caucasian mothers reading with their children in the children's section. There are also two Chinese women sitting at a table with their children. One reads a Chinese newspaper, while her two- or three-year-old daughter plays with origami birds and a little American flag.

Around 3:30pm on Tuesday, 16 October 2012, these mothers and children are replaced by 13 children and one adult swarming the children's area—all of which are Chinese. In the Chinese alcove, a woman is browsing the DVDs, a man is reading a Chinese newspaper, and three people—including one of the library's part-time staff members—work on their English with an ESL volunteer. While there are Caucasian and African-American patrons in the library as well, either browsing the stacks or on the library's six computers, the large presence of Chinese patrons is both noticeable and remarkable.

According to librarian William Irby, services for Chinese patrons have been in place at the Independence Branch since the library was opened in 2001, since Chinatown is one of the major neighborhoods served by the branch along with Society Hill and the Gayborhood. Currently, the Center for Literacy offers ESL classes at the library on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2pm to 5pm and classes on citizenship and ESL from 12 to 2 on those same days. Work-study students from Temple University run an additional conversation ESL group on Wednesday nights. On Fridays the library hosts a computer class in Chinese and a Chinese line dancing program. In addition, the library employs three part-time elderly Chinese women through the federal Senior Community Service Employment Program.<sup>4</sup> The library also has a version of the library card application in Chinese.

#### Lillian Marrero Branch

Lillian Marrero Branch, located at 601 W. Lehigh Ave., serves the neighborhoods of Central North Philadelphia, Fairhill, St. Edwards/Hartranft, and West Kensington.<sup>5</sup> Like Independence Branch, it is obvious that Marrero Branch serves a bilingual population as soon as you approach the building. The front of the library boasts a sign in both Spanish and English, and the hours on the door are also listed in both languages.<sup>6</sup> When you wander around the library, you see a large Spanish section as well as many sections which boast signs saying “Bilingual Collection English/Spanish Ingles/Espanol,” including the gay/lesbian, DVD, magazines, tests, computer books, and audiobook sections. The library is decorated with flags from different countries, and an “Information Center” with flyers about topics such as SNAP, birth control, and paying for college sits

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<sup>4</sup> William Irby, personal communication, 16 October 2012

<sup>5</sup> Lillian Marrero Branch,” Free Library of Philadelphia, accessed 29 October 2012, <http://libwww.freelibrary.org/branches/branch.cfm?loc=LEH>

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 3 for photographs and a rough map of the library.

on top of one a bookcase full of ESL books. If you apply for a library card, you will find that there are two different applications, one in Spanish and one in English.

The Marrero Branch serves a population that is 57.88% Hispanic and hosts the largest Spanish-language collection in the Free Library system.<sup>7</sup> Librarian Mary Marques speaks several languages including Spanish and works to educate Spanish-speaking patrons about what the library is and how it works, both through talking to patrons and through ensuring that materials about library policies are available in both English and Spanish. The library also offers ESL classes every Tuesday from 5:30 to 6:30 run by several tutors who teach to the level of each person in the class. There is also a program for English speakers who want to learn Spanish called *Dias de Cine*, where patrons watch a movie in Spanish and then discuss it.<sup>8</sup>

Around 4pm on Thursday, 18 October 2012, the library is full of kids, teens, and adults—almost all of them African-American. Out of seven adult computers and two kids computers, six are in use, almost all by kids and teenagers. An adult male listens to a kid reading a picture book, while three kids do homework in a corner nearby and another four do homework at the designated homework table, watched over by a white teen volunteer who also helps another boy with a craft. Two teens and adults sit talking in floor-level rocking chairs, while a man uses a laptop at a table nearby. A man browses the reference books, while another man browses the new books and a woman and two children check out DVDs at the circulation desk. At this same time, three girls stand around the printer speaking in Spanish, and one goes for the librarian for help. Another woman browses the Spanish fiction collection. After learning about all the services for Spanish-speaking

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<sup>7</sup> “Fact Sheet for Lillian Marrero Branch,” obtained from Mary Marques at the Lillian Marrero Branch.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Marques, personal communication, 18 October 2012.

patrons at the Marrero Branch, it is surprising to see how few of them there are in the library at this time.

### Ramonita de Rodriguez Branch

Ramonita de Rodriguez Branch, located at 600 W. Girard Ave., serves the neighborhoods of Olde Kensington, Kensington South, Ludlow, Yorktown, East and West Poplar, Northern Liberties, and Girard/Poplar.<sup>9</sup> The outside of the building is marked by a mural and the words “Ramonita d Rodriguez Branch,” and the inside of the building is shaped like a barbell, with one room for adult and teen materials and another room for children’s materials.<sup>10</sup> As you walk in past the circulation desk, there are flyers and pamphlets on your left, including Spanish-language pamphlets on birth control and paying for college; however, the rest of the flyers—including those for library programs—are in English only. The children’s section contains about a handspan of dual-language Arabic/English books, a shelf and a half of Spanish picture books, and half a shelf of Spanish older readers’ books. The adult section includes two shelves of Arabic books, 19 shelves of Spanish books, and two shelves of Spanish audiobooks. All the signs in the library are in English, including the one for the Arabic books, except for one that reads “Libros en Espanol.”

Around 4pm on Tuesday, 9 October 2012, the adult room contains two men playing chess, a couple of patrons reading newspapers, a teen charging a cell phone, and two kids and an adult on the computers. The children’s room is packed with children and teens of all ages doing homework, browsing the DVDs, and using the computers. A librarian tries to do a storytime, but only three kids follow her to the rug area and less

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<sup>9</sup> Ramonita de Rodriguez Branch,” Free Library of Philadelphia, accessed 29 October 2012, <http://libwww.freelibrary.org/branches/branch.cfm?loc=RGR>

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 4 for images.

than five minutes after it starts she stops reading and arranges craft supplies on a table for the kids. With the exception of most of the library staff and two white patrons, everyone in the library is African-American.

According to librarian Lisa Chianese-Lopez, Rodriguez Branch is located in a historically Hispanic neighborhood which is now transforming into a predominantly African-American neighborhood. The Spanish collection here is mostly residual; the people currently using the collection have been in the States for a while and go back and forth between Philadelphia and Puerto Rico. The branch manager is currently keeping an eye on the collection to see how it circulates and whether it is a collection that it makes sense to keep in the library, as the current immigrants to the area are Middle Eastern. The branch does not host any programs for New Americans.<sup>11</sup>

#### Free Library of Philadelphia's Online Offerings

The website for the Free Library of Philadelphia includes a section under "Programs and Services" entitled "New Americans" which includes links pertaining to immigration, booklists for about immigration, and a listing of ESL classes in Free Library branches.<sup>12</sup> However, this page—along with the rest of the Free Library of Philadelphia website—is available in English only. The New Americans Committee is working on converting some of the major parts of the website into several languages, including information about library cards and the catalog.<sup>13</sup>

There is currently no place on the website where one can find which libraries have large collections in what languages. An "Ask a Librarian" reference transaction about which branch had the largest Spanish language collection yielded the following response:

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<sup>11</sup> Lisa Chianese-Lopez, personal communication, 9 October 2012.

<sup>12</sup> "New Americans," Free Library of Philadelphia, accessed 29 October 2012, <http://libwww.freelibrary.org/newamericans/>

<sup>13</sup> Mary Marques.

The following branches have the largest Spanish language collections: Lillian Marrero, Kensington, McPherson, and Rodriguez branches. These branches have smaller collections: Bushrod, Frankford, Greater Olney, Lawncrest, Northeast Regional, Charles Santore, South Philadelphia, Whitman, Wyoming and the Philbrick Popular Library at Central. For locations and telephone numbers, please refer to our website. <http://libwww.freelibrary.org/branches/brnlist.cfm><sup>14</sup>

This response seems to put the Marrero and Rodriguez branches on the same level, while visits to the libraries shows that there is a large difference between their offerings.

### Library Service to New Americans Across the United States

According to the 2000 census, 18% of Americans speak a language other than English at home<sup>15</sup> and 20% of K-12 students are the children of immigrants.<sup>16</sup> As of 2008 approximately 12% of the population was born outside the US, and experts expect that number to rise to 15% by 2025.<sup>17</sup>

The Library Services to the Spanish-Speaking Committee of the Reference Services Section of the Reference and User Services Association has issued guidelines for serving multilingual communities in which they emphasize that providing materials for ethnic, cultural, and linguistically diverse groups is not an extra service, but rather is an integral part of serving the library's patron community.<sup>18</sup> According to the guidelines, libraries should provide a substantial collection for each ethnic, cultural, and linguistic group which consists of a balance of subjects and genres in a variety of formats.<sup>19</sup> The library should also provide literacy and language-learning materials, including computer software, in patrons' native languages. Library materials should be made accessible, both

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<sup>14</sup> AskALibrarian, personal email, 9 October 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Sylvia D. Hall-Ellis, "Subject Access for Reader's Advisory Services: Their Impact on Contemporary Spanish Fiction in Selected Public Library Collections," *Public Library Quarterly* 27 no. 1 (2008): 4.

<sup>16</sup> Susan K. Burke, "Use of Public Libraries by Immigrants," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 48 no. 2 (2008): 164

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Hoffert, "Immigrant Nation," *Library Journal* 133 no. 14 (2008): 34.

<sup>18</sup> Library Services to the Spanish-Speaking Committee, "Guidelines for the Development and Promotion of Multilingual Collections and Services," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 47 no. 2 (2008): 198.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 198-199.

through providing library forms, flyers, and signs in multiple languages and providing a multilingual library website and OPAC.<sup>20</sup> Reference services should be available in the most commonly used languages, as well as ESL and literacy classes and other programming in languages common in the community.<sup>21</sup>

The guidelines laid out by the Library Services to the Spanish-Speaking Committee are obviously not followed in all libraries, but the literature shows that some level of service to new Americans is offered in many libraries. In a 2008 survey, *Library Journal* found that 50% of libraries serving populations of 10,000 or more and almost all libraries serving 100,000 or more include collections in languages other than English, of which Spanish and Chinese are the most common languages.<sup>22</sup> Other common services mentioned in the literature include programming targeted at new Americans such as literacy instruction, ESL and citizenship classes,<sup>23</sup> as well as cultural programming. In addition, some libraries provide multilingual websites which allow users to switch the library website to the language with which they are most comfortable.<sup>24</sup>

A study of the Queens Public Library shows that library services such as these can be extremely beneficial to new Americans. As immigrants learn English through library ESL classes, improve their ability to navigate American life and gain self-confidence.<sup>25</sup> When they attend cultural programming, they make connections not only to their own cultures but to the broader American multicultural community.<sup>26</sup> Libraries provide a safe

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 199-200.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>22</sup> Hoffert, 34.

<sup>23</sup> Burke, 164.

<sup>24</sup> Hall-Ellis, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Karen E. Fisher, Joan C. Durrance, and Marian Bouch Hinton, "Information Grounds and the Use of Need-Based Services by Immigrants in Queens, New York: A Context-Based, Outcome Evaluation Approach," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 55 no. 8 (2004): 761.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

space for these processes, since the library is open to everyone and not in the business of checking its patrons' documents.<sup>27</sup>

### Barriers and Solutions

Barriers to library service for new Americans occur on both the patron's side and the library's side. Literature shows that there are many barriers to new Americans using the library, including language barriers, unfamiliarity with the concept of libraries, and mistrust of government agencies.<sup>28</sup> Librarian Mary Marques's practice of explaining how the library works to new patrons who walk in the door and translating library literature is one way to counteract these barriers. Libraries can also reach out to community leaders and community centers to educate the population about the services the library offers.<sup>29</sup> To offset the language barrier, some libraries with multilingual staff use name badges which indicate which languages they speak to help patrons identify staff members who speak their language.<sup>30</sup> Providing a library website with mirror sites in languages spoken in the library's community allows patrons to explore the library and its services from home.

Translating a library's website and providing patrons with staff members who speak their language require hiring multilingual staff, which can often be a problem for libraries. The Lillian Marrero Branch has been without a children's librarian for the past three years because they are having trouble finding a qualified applicant who speaks Spanish as well as English.<sup>31</sup> Organizations that already provide scholarships to minorities might consider creating scholarships for multilingual people who are interested

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 760.

<sup>28</sup> Burke, 166; Fisher, Durrance & Hinton; 759; Evette Berry, "Family Storytimes for New Immigrants Combine Learning and Fun," *Feliciter* 53 no. 1 (2007): 44.

<sup>29</sup> Library Services to the Spanish-Speaking Committee, 199.

<sup>30</sup> Hall-Ellis, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Marques.

in librarianship to boost the pool of qualified applicants at libraries which need multilingual staff.

Funding is also an issue, both in Philadelphia and across the nation. Up until this past July the Lillian Marrero Branch had computer training classes in both Spanish and English, but this position has been empty since July.<sup>32</sup> The Independence Branch used to have outreach to a community center during its weekly lunches for Chinese senior citizens, but it was stopped due to budget cuts.<sup>33</sup> Some libraries are unable to fund and create new positions for multilingual staff, and existing library staff may resent reallocating existing positions.<sup>34</sup> Research has also shown that budgetary issues are also a major reason why libraries don't create bilingual bibliographic records for their catalogs, despite having multilingual staff who are capable of doing so.<sup>35</sup> To fund bilingual staff, the library might make use of the federal Senior Community Service Employment Program as the Independence Branch currently does. For OPAC records, a library might instruct its catalogers to leave any foreign language bibliographic information already in the record provided to them by OCLC or the vendor and add the English information to that, rather than replacing the foreign language information with the English.<sup>36</sup>

#### Recommendations for the Branches

All three librarians mentioned that a library needs to adapt to the needs of its patrons. For the Ramonita de Rodriguez Branch, this means keeping a close eye on the population, possibly phasing out the Spanish language collection in favor of an Arabic

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<sup>32</sup> Mary Marquez.

<sup>33</sup> William Irby.

<sup>34</sup> Hoffert, 36.

<sup>35</sup> Hall-Ellis, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

collection. If either an Arabic-speaking or a Spanish-speaking population exists, the library should at the very least evaluate its signage, make sure that important notices are available in these languages, and look into offering ESL classes through the Center for Literacy as other branches do. In addition, as long as there is an Arabic section, the library should also make sure to place a sign in Arabic stating that the books are there, rather than relying solely on an English sign with this information. These are basic steps which will help the library serve all its patrons in an area where the new American population may be small.

The Independence Branch provides many services to its Chinese patrons, who seem to be utilizing them. However, since two Chinese mothers with children were in the library right after storytime, the library might consider reinstating the bilingual storytime that it had under its first branch manager. Even if the children's librarian does not speak Chinese, perhaps the librarian could team with one of the Chinese part-time staff to provide storytime together. This way not only could Chinese parents and their children participate together; adults can also practice their basic literacy skills.<sup>37</sup>

Like the Rodriguez Branch, the Lillian Marrero Branch might consider working on their signage. While the signs which indicate bilingual sections translate the languages into Spanish, the names of the sections themselves are not translated. Translating this would help patrons find the sections they're looking for. In addition, while it in no way makes up for the lack of a computer instructor, the library should consider translating its "Wireless Access" and "Ebooks from the Free Library of Philadelphia" handouts into Spanish so Spanish-speaking patrons can make use of these resources. Translating the

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<sup>37</sup> Barry, 44.

resume and cover letter guide would also help Spanish-speaking patrons who are looking for a job.

The Free Library of Philadelphia system should strongly consider making information about which libraries have resources for speakers of which language available on their website. Without this information, new Americans may go to their local library and give up when that library does not have resources for them without ever knowing that such resources exist. Ideally this information, along with other basic library information, should be available in the languages most commonly spoken in Philadelphia. In addition, the library might consider adding a section to its website indicating at which library branches a patron might find a staff member who speaks his or her language, so new Americans know that they can ask for help in their own language.

## Appendix 1: Bibliography

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Appendix 2: Images of the Independence Branch



Notices on the bulletin board in the entranceway



The signs over the circulation desk: a view from inside the library



The view from a few steps past the circulation desk



Flyers at the entrance of the Chinese Interest alcove



### Appendix 3: Images of the Lillian Marrero Branch



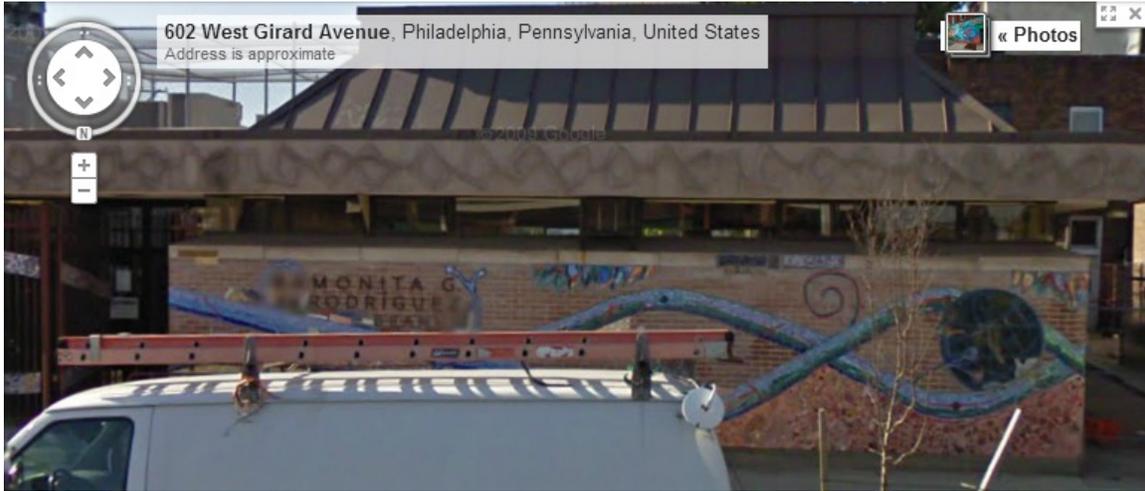
The sign in front of the library, and hours on the front doors, one language per door



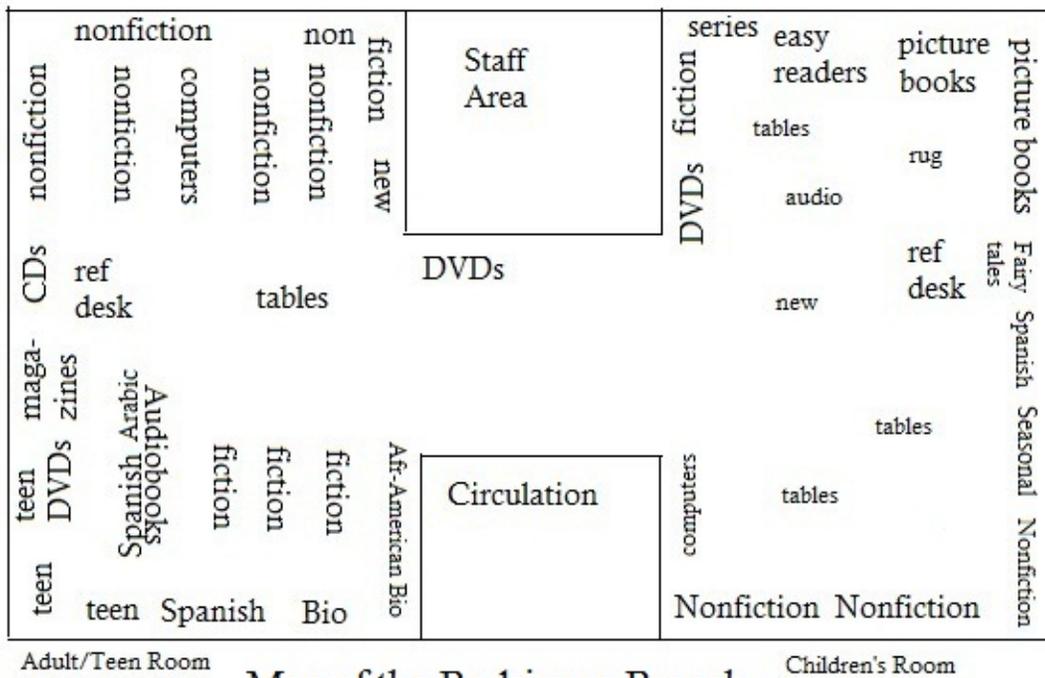
The Spanish language section



## Appendix 4: Images of the Ramonita de Rodriguez Branch



The front of the Ramonita de Rodriguez Branch<sup>38</sup>



Map of the Rodriguez Branch

<sup>38</sup> "600 W. Girard Ave, Philadelphia," Google Street View, accessed 29 October 2012, <http://goo.gl/maps/8hcin>. I was unable to take a picture myself because it was raining outside.