OPINION

Each month, OPINION features contributions from invited guest writers. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Library and Information Association.

HAZARDOUS COMMUNITIES

When I was invited to write this Opinion piece, it was suggested that I may have an interesting viewpoint on community, given that I work for an organisation that deals with people who are often overlooked and may be considered 'hazards'. I interpreted this to mean the disadvantaged community.

If it is true, that some library clients are 'hazards' due to their being disadvantaged, then how do we accommodate this section of the community, stop them from being hazards? Do we minimise their impact and protect our staff and other clients? Or do we develop empathy and understanding?

I work for a not-for profit organisation (NFP) which was established in 1930 by an Anglican Minister, Fr Gerard Tucker. The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) advocates strongly in all political and private spheres towards our vision "An Australia free of Poverty". We work to improve the lives of the vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community. All BSL staff and volunteers do what we can to make sure these people are not overlooked and to enable them to build their own capacity to participate in our community. At times this is difficult work; some of our clients have suffered terrible experiences, and the fact that they survive is awe- inspiring. Working with these people is a privilege.

The Brotherhood focuses its work on those people at greatest risk at the four life transition stages: the early years, the transition from school to work, the shifts in and out of work, and retirement and ageing. Within the transition framework, there are communities of people who are severely disadvantaged, almost universally so – these include refugees and recently arrived migrants, our Indigenous population, those that suffer from mental illnesses, people who grow up in generational unemployment and poverty, both monetarily and educationally. People do not choose disadvantage; this needs to be understood by our society. Many of them have the same aspirations as the main stream community – stable housing and employment. They should not be blamed or shamed; they should be understood and respected.

People who work in the welfare sector today refer to the phrase, "place-based disadvantage". Place-based disadvantage can be seen in the Western suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney; remote Indigenous communities; some inner city areas of our larger cities – Redfern (NSW), Elizabeth (SA). They are geographic areas of long- term and often generational disadvantage. We know where place-based disadvantage exists and we know the areas at greatest risk of developing into place-based disadvantaged communities. Communities in the growth corridors (areas of rapid housing development), where development takes place without investment in public infrastructure – public transport, schools, hospitals, and cultural centres – are at greatest risk. Are we developing communities of tomorrow's disadvantaged? Hazardous communities?

Many staff and clients of public access facilities (libraries, galleries, shopping centres), may find themselves dealing regularly with the disadvantaged members of our society, in all their glory and splendour. For some of these people, a key service provided by these institutions, but perhaps not articulated in many of the service catalogues, will be simply a warm (or cool) safe place to sit and relax, clean bathroom facilities, fresh water, someone to talk to. For many of these clients, it is the place and the people (the friendly librarian, security guard), not the core services provided, that are key to their wellbeing, no matter how tenuous.

There are occasions when our fear, mistrust, and lack of understanding of and about some communities and their members leads us to positions of racism, sexism, elitism, and general ignorance. There are other times when all of us have had enough, we are tired, and it is a struggle to work in a customer service role. It is difficult dealing with vulnerable people, those suffering from mental illness or drug addiction, agitated persons, persons with poor personal hygiene, groups of youths who gather (and are noisy) without regard for anyone else, but deal with them we must – they are a part of our community, our client group – they belong.

Many of us in our profession consider ourselves egalitarian; I love my work because of this – libraries as the great leveller, equality for all we serve. If hazards exist in our work places, in our communities, we must make them safe. If the hazards are human, we must all try to understand. We should demand and display nothing less than respect, no matter how difficult. If at times we can't do this, for we are human after all, we must be mindful of the language we use, as language creates reality.

Louise Segafredo
Senior Manager
Knowledge Management and Information Communications and Technology
lsegafredo@bsl.org.au
Brotherhood of St Laurence - www.bsl.org.au