



Healthy choices happen in public libraries



Anne Marie Madziak is the Service Development Director at Southern Ontario Library Service. She is an award-winning author and experienced trainer, consultant, facilitator, and coach who uses conversation to help people expand their thinking. She can be reached at ammadziak@sols.org.

In Canada, municipal governments spend less money on health care than other orders of government. Nonetheless, municipal leaders make important decisions about programs and services that influence the health and wellness of their citizens. In fact, a quick scan of municipal websites from coast to coast indicates that municipal staff and elected officials are very committed to building and sustaining healthy communities where, among other indicators, residents have access to a variety of programs and services that help them choose a healthy lifestyle. It might mean affordable access to a personal fitness trainer or nutrition counsellor (similar to what the City of Edmonton offers its residents). It might mean, as it does for the City of Winnipeg (with its vision “to be a vibrant and healthy city which places its highest priority on quality of life for all its citizens”), that important infrastructure includes several large parks throughout the city, as well as pedestrian and cycling corridors as alternatives to driving. It might mean having “healthy and inclusive communities” as a strategic focus, similar to the Region of Waterloo in rural Southwestern Ontario, with “Health and Wellness” featured as a prominent section on its website. (The subsection on “Healthy Living” includes practical information about food skills and healthy eating, physical activity, and mental wellness.)

Clearly, a growing number of municipal governments are concerned with the health and wellness of their citizens, and are developing strategies to help adults, children, and families make healthier choices.

It is in this context that the local public library can – and should – be viewed as an invaluable asset. Health literacy is a crucial component of making healthy

choices and living healthy lives. And this literacy happens at the public library! In the words of one elderly user of the St. Marys Public Library in St. Marys, Ontario, “using the public library means I can speak intelligently to my doctor.”

A Source of Invaluable Information and Materials

Defined by the World Health Organization as “the cognitive and social skills which determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand, and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health,” health literacy requires citizens to have free access to health information in a variety of formats at the moment of need. The moment of need might be a diagnosis, a warning that leads to the desire to quit smoking, a sudden anxiety attack, or the prolonged stress of caregiving for a loved one with Alzheimer’s. The public library has resources that can help in each of these situations (and any number of others) where people of all ages and walks of life want to understand something related to their health – or the health of someone close to them.

For example, in an unusual collaboration with the Grand River Hospital and its Foundation, Kitchener Public Library opened a branch in the Grand River Cancer Centre. The move was made in response to patient feedback that praised the care being provided, but identified patient information as an area needing improvement. With this feedback in mind, the goal of the Cancer Centre’s library is to empower cancer patients and their loved ones by providing current information about their diagnosis and options for treatment, as well as leisure materials for distraction and relaxation during treatment and recovery.

In recent years, technology and electronic publishing have allowed even the smallest public libraries to expand their collections, meaning that those looking for health information are far more likely to find it than in the past. The added benefits of electronic databases include the frequency of their updates, and the fact that they can be accessed 24 hours a day, seven

days a week. Some would argue that Google is just as helpful; but, the reality is that Google search results are a mix of credible resources with not-so-credible, ill-informed, self-appointed “experts” who have no end of bad advice. Libraries, on the other hand, offer citizens credible resources and help them recognize legitimate sources of valid information that are available online; furthermore, library staff

Ontario parks day passes, the knapsacks encourage families to spend time together while being active and exploring nature. Other items currently being circulated by public libraries include pedometers, fishing poles, life jackets, snow shoes, croquet sets, and even blood pressure cuffs and light therapy lamps. Circulating such items allows people to experiment with new ways of being active and healthy.

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have the skills to ask the right questions that will help people navigate their way to the right information that meets their needs.

Of course, print collections – books and magazines – still have their place. Libraries continue to invest in books on a wide variety of topics related to health and wellness, books that circulate, and remain in the library for consultation. In a unique partnership, doctors in a family practice in London, Ontario are working with London Public Library and Middlesex County Library to ensure that the books they recommend to their patients are available in their local libraries. Recognizing that the cost of books is a barrier for some patients, doctors approached library staff proposing they work together. Currently, the project is focused on mental health, but it’s expected to expand to other aspects of health as well.

In addition to reading and audio-visual materials, libraries have recently ventured into lending non-traditional items, some of which are very relevant to pursuing a healthy lifestyle. Rideau Lakes Public Library, in an award-winning project, has created and is lending MAPsacks (Movement and Play knapsacks) to the public. Filled with books, activities, gadgets, trail maps, and

Community Engagement Leads to Better Learning

Library programs are another important way in which libraries contribute to healthy individuals and healthy communities. While informative programs and events such as health fairs have long been the norm for public libraries, recent trends in health and wellness have seen an upsurge in contemporary topics for library programs. A leader in the field, Halifax Public Libraries offers an impressive array of health-related programs, including: Chair Exercises; Discover Peace Within (meditation); Music for Wellness; Put a Lid on Your Stress; Managing Persistent Pain; Yoga Flow; Physical Activity and Your Brain; and Family Matters in Mental Health.

Smaller libraries than those in Halifax have also ventured into providing a variety of lectures, workshops, and author readings that contribute to health literacy, empowering citizens to make healthy choices for themselves. Examples, taken from public library websites, include: Yoga; Tai Chi; Sound Therapy for Autism and Other Learning Difficulties; Brain Games; Mind, Body & Soul Lecture Series; Babysitting and CPR courses for teens; Vegetable Gardening in Containers;

Environmentally Friendly Lawn Care; Reflexology; Understanding Mental Health for Teens; Heartfulness Meditation; Healthy Aging; and Why Being Happy Matters: An Author Reading with Peter Jennings.

When it comes to library programs, the content matters, but so does the social capital that is created when people with shared interests gather at the library to learn together – and to possibly even develop friendships. In an era when loneliness and social isolation have been identified as leading contributors to mental and physical illnesses, especially for seniors, the social opportunities that libraries provide should not be underestimated in impact or importance.

In addition to their own programs and services, libraries are also successful as platforms for the work of other organizations. Public health units have long recognized public libraries as a really effective way of reaching the general public. In addition to using the libraries' bulletin boards and pamphlet racks to disseminate important health information, public health nurses have

also held programs and special events in libraries as a way of reaching more people than they would otherwise reach. This is particularly true for marginalized populations, such as at-risk teens, teen moms, seniors, and socially-disadvantaged families.

More recently, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and the Canadian Mental Health Association have partnered with public libraries as a way of extending the reach of their services and providing much-needed assistance to individuals in distress. A number of libraries across the country now have mental health workers providing help on a set day or half-day every week. In many cases, library staff has also been trained in mental health first aid, as well as how to de-escalate difficult situations.

Another important partnership initiative having significant community impact is the Health Kids Community Challenge Niagara, where Niagara Region Public Health is partnering with municipalities, public libraries, and other community organization (such as the YMCA). With a

four-pronged approach to growing healthier children, the initiative calls on the Niagara public libraries to be champions and community hubs for the fourth strategy: Power off and play! Libraries, with their varied collections, resources, and programs, can teach children and families fun and engaging playtime alternatives to television, video games, and other screen-based pursuits.

Against a backdrop of ever-growing numbers of serious illnesses and mental health challenges, and rising costs of healthcare, humans are living longer than ever before. Each in their own way, all three orders of government will be looking for ways to create healthy communities and support healthy lifestyles. Increasing health literacy at every age and stage of life will be a necessary part of any successful strategy to encourage people to lead healthier lives. Public libraries can continue to play a crucial role in helping people understand their options and the related consequences. Their capacity to help citizens make healthier choices makes public libraries a wise investment in every community. **MW**

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