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Public Libraries and the Immigrant Community

By Stephen Podgajny

Public libraries have a unique reputation as democratizing and community-building forces that, at the core, rest on being open and welcoming institutions. Though rules exist concerning borrowing, the use of library materials on site, both in print or digital form, is encouraged and facilitated by the library regardless of cardholder or residency status. It is from this vantage point that public libraries welcome all segments of society including immigrants (or those increasingly referred to as *New Mainers*).

Maine is commonly called the whitest and oldest state in the nation, and in terms of the general population this is a fair statement. Urban areas of the state such as Lewiston and Portland, with their significant immigrant populations, differ from the overall state profile. These cities face a host of challenges not found elsewhere in the state in providing public services. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 5.7 percent of Lewiston's population is foreign born while in Portland it is 10.6 percent. In Portland more than 60 different languages are spoken by students in the public schools. In a state with slow population growth, New Mainers increasingly are recognized as a significant asset as Maine attempts to position itself as a participant in global economic, cultural, and educational activity.

The Lewiston Public Library (LPL) and Portland Public Library (PPL) have common strategies in serving the immigrant community. Some examples include collections that address language

learning that are provided in both digital and print form. These libraries also offer public computers, classes, and support services to address digital literacy, and a variety of programs and services to promote financial education.

At both LPL and PPL, the emphasis is on supporting New Mainers' "integration into American life," as articulated by the LPL 2008 long-range plan. The Lewiston Public Library has done outreach with partners to either host or support the library's efforts, including citizenship classes for adults, library-orientation sessions, and recruitment of representatives from the New Mainer community to serve on the library's board of trustees. The Portland Public Library hosts a United States Citizenship and Immigration Services Immigration Corner. It also holds various cultural events that celebrate and promote the diversity of Portland's population such as quilts from Zanzibar and other cultures (Inuit Art). The children's area offers Family Place™ programs that are heavily attended by New Mainer families. The majority of those served by the AARP tax services held weekly for three months at PPL are New Mainers. The Portland Public Library's most visible welcome sign is the main library's façade windows on which are etched the word "library" in 16 languages.



Multilingual sign on the façade of the Portland Public Library.

Maine's public libraries are resource challenged. However, their unique community role enables them to leverage resources through partnerships with schools, businesses, and other nonprofits to help fulfill some of the potential that each New Mainer inherently possesses and has to offer to our communities to enrich our global understanding and economic and cultural creativity. 🐟



Steve Podgajny has served as a public librarian for 35 years, the last 32 as a director. Since 2006, he has served as the executive director of the Portland Public Library, Maine's most heavily used cultural institution with more than 666,000 visits each year.