Libraries Supporting Dementia Friendly Communities: Project Overview

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ABSTRACT

Alzheimer's Disease (AD), an incurable neurological disease with an unknown cause, is not only a global health problem. It is increasingly an economic, fiscal and social burden, and it is expected to grow since the world's population is ageing (Alzheimer Disease International, 2019; Alzheimer's Disease International and World Health Organization, 2012).

Although librarians have not generally been recognized as professionals caring for persons with AD, recent research and best practices from across the world indicate that public libraries can contribute to the development of dementia friendly communities i.e. environments that are responsive to the needs of people with dementia, where they are understood, respected, and supported (Alzheimer's Disease International, 2016; Howarth, 2020; IGARD, n.d; Erdelez,, Howarth, & Gibson, 2015; Dickey, 2020; Faletar Tanacković, Petr Balog, & Erdelez, 2021).

Although AD causes progressive cognitive impairment, authors will outline how library programs such as storytelling, reading programs (in particular reading groups, shared reading and reading aloud) and reminiscence therapy can be used to reduce agitation of people with dementia, increase their engagement, improve cognition and slow down the development of the disease. Libraries can also provide support to informal caregivers (CGs) of people with AD who face immense physical, psychological, emotional, social and financial impact through careful collection building (and acquisition of materials aimed primarily for CGs), community building and programming (Erdelez, Faletar Tanacković & Petr Balog, 2019; Petr Balog, Faletar Tanacković & Erdelez, 2020; Baker, Rimkeit & Claridge, 2018).

In this paper, special attention shall be given to the description of the project entitled *Building Dementia-Friendly Public Libraries: Theoretical and Practical Implications* (https://demencija-pnk.ffos.hr/) that builds upon findings of our earlier project (https://arhiva.ffos.hr/projekti/alzheimer/) which explored information needs and behavior of people with AD in the city of Osijek and its surroundings. Current two-year project, funded by

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at University of Osijek in Croatia, gathered an interdisciplinary team of LIS researchers, librarians, health professionals and civic organizations to understand how public libraries can promote and support development of dementia friendly communities. Apart from the scholarly studies (exploratory studies into knowledge about AD among librarians and LIS students, in-depth studies into librarians' experiences and attitudes toward dementia library programming etc.), the project activities include popular and educational activities aimed at raising awareness about dementia, removal of social stigma connected to that disease, and social inclusion and cultural engagement of persons with dementia. Last but not least, one of the project outcomes will be the publication of the first book ever, in Croatian language, that will be adapted to the needs of people with AD.

The proposed project seeks to contribute to the general understanding of this complex problem on theoretical level. Also, the project aims at the efficient transfer of knowledge, through the inclusion of all interested stakeholders and the application of the acquired new knowledge, in solving socially recognized challenges. Hopefully, the project will fulfil its ultimate mission and contribute to the raising of the quality of everyday life of this vulnerable group.

KEYWORDS

Alzheimer's Disease (AD), dementia, public libraries, dementia-friendly libraries, Croatia

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