



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“The average person who uses a public library doesn’t really know or care how the books get on the shelf.”

-Bart Kane, former State Librarian, Hawaii

Maybe you read about the famous (well, in public libraries) instance of out-sourcing in the statewide Hawaiian public library system. Outsourcing, which is defined by some as “the procurement of services from an external vendor,” can be used in many parts of a library system. Copy machines, for instance, are outsourced: the copy machine is actually owned and maintained by a company and the library sort of leases it. Janitorial services are another example: many libraries use a service rather than having staff members who are janitors.

These kinds of outsourcing are common and, because they are outside the mission of the public library, acceptable. But outsourcing of processing and materials selection are much more controversial.

The Hawaii story started in 1996 when Bartholomew A. Kane, the Hawaii State Librarian, proposed outsourcing the selection, acquisition, catalog-

ing, processing and distributing of books, spoken word audio, video and multimedia titles. The passing of this proposal and the ensuing \$11.2 million five year contract led to complaints of duplicates, inappropriate materials (one example is 61 copies of Newt Gingrich’s novel *1945*) and all sorts of task forces, meetings, press conferences and finally, Senate Bill 538, requiring materials selection throughout the library system be performed by public service librarians exclusively.

The Hawaii story is an extreme example of a subject that is at the heart of what a library does: Select materials. For many library systems, the question has become: Who should do this selecting? Should it be the librarians who are actually on the reference desk, answering questions and gathering information about what their community wants? Or should it be a collection development specialist, who has a background in reference

services, but is not affiliated with one particular branch? Or should it be outsourced, sent to a company that specializes in providing materials to libraries?

Some library systems have chosen to continue to have local librarians making the choices for their branch. This seems like a good way to make sure that a library is meeting the needs of its own library users. But knowing a collection and keeping it current and exciting is a time-consuming process and it can be difficult to do it as thoroughly as a library might wish.

A collection development department can be a good solution, if the department gets plenty of input from branch librarians. Having one or two or even three people who have an in-depth knowledge of the whole library collection and how to keep it up-to-date, while still maintaining a solid core collection, is a great idea. But is this better than the first option?

Outsourcing of library selection is the most controversial of these three choices. Susan DiMatti, the editor of *Library Hotline*, says: “The outsourcing issue, like the hydra of Greek mythology, has two heads. Should outsourcing be viewed with suspicion, as a threat to traditional library service, or is it a viable management prerogative? When it comes to outsourcing the truth probably depends more on your perspective than on professional values.” Out-sourcing is chosen because it can save money and time and give the library staff the opportunity to do other parts of their job.

And that leads me directly to the question that is most interesting to me: What exactly should a librarian be doing? That is, why are we librarians? If we aren’t actually involved in choosing the materials that are in our own libraries, are we still doing our whole job? What do you think?