Assessing community needs

Reliable data can be invaluable when implementing trans-inclusive practices. Since library card applications are not an appropriate data collection instrument for the reasons listed above, we suggest the following methods for collecting these data in a rigorous and respectful manner.

Surveys

Surveys can help identify speci c needs within your service area. Since libraries are \grossly underutilized as an information resource" by transgender communities (Beiriger & Jackson, 2008, p. 52), it is important to survey both users and non-users of your library.

Focus groups

Focus group is a well-established methodology for evaluating patron satisfaction and identifying unmet needs. It is important for a focus group facilitator to be familiar with transgender issues to ensure that this conversation is comfortable and productive.

Comprehensive community needs assessment

The National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) explains that a community needs assessment is \a big project and one that is most fruitful when you take the time to do it carefully and thoroughly. It can include[...] studying what information already exists about the community, talking to leaders for their input, using surveys, holding focus groups and conducting town meetings or community forums where people can address the issues." (2006) An excellent example is Oak Park Public Library's needs assessment of the transgender community (*Service focus committee: Transgender people report*, 2007).

Whenever assessing community needs, it is crucial to include voices from throughout the transgender community, including people of color, youth, elders, and people with a diverse range of gender identities.

Asking respectfully

If a library nds it necessary to collect gender data, the following guidelines can help to make these questions more inclusive:

Clearly label gender elds as optional.

Use the term *gender identity*, rather than *gender* or *sex*

Introduction

Some libraries collect information about a patron's gender identity or physical sex on their library card applications, or on other forms throughout the library. These types of questions put an unnecessary burden on transgender patrons and can exclude them from library services.

There are a number of reasons not to include gender on your library card applications or other forms:

• These questions out transgender patrons, which can lead to harassment or physical violence.

• Transgender patrons may need to make future changes to the gender information in their record, which can also disclose their transgender identity and lead to harassment or violence.

• Forms typically o er a very limited set of options for describing gender identities. A patron may not identify with any of the available terms, which may make them feel excluded.

• Reducing unnecessary data collection minimizes the potential harm of a con dentiality breach.

• Reducing unnecessary data collection creates a less time-consuming application process for all patrons.

Libraries often collect information about patrons' gender identities simply because they are accustomed to doing so. If this information is not truly needed for providing library service, this author suggests eliminating these questions from your forms altogether.

However, there may be some barriers to eliminating these questions, or compelling arguments for collecting the gender identities of your patrons. This pamphlet will describe these situations and suggest some solutions that are respectful of transgender patrons.

ILS limitations

Some ILS software requires sta to enter a patron's gender when adding them to the system. If your library does not ask for gender on library card applications, but the ILS requires this information, circulation sta may have to enter their own best guess about a patron's gender. Therefore, it is advisable to work with your ILS vendor or technical support contacts to remove these requirements before going gender-free on your forms.

If gender-related elds cannot be removed, establishing a clear policy about how to collect and enter patron gender data will simplify this process for circulation sta and patrons.

ILSs approach the gender eld di erently:

Certain ILSs, such as Polaris and Koha, require all patron records to include a gender eld by default. Note that Polaris also includes a \n/a" option in this required eld.

Certain other ILSs include an optional gender eld in patron records. Sta members can leave the eld blank in accordance with a patron's wishes or library policies.

A number of ILSs, such as Evergreen, Millennium, and Voyager, simply do not include any gender eld in patron records.

Some ILSs allow system administrators to modify elds in the patron record, while others do not. Koha is open source, so libraries can make a small modi cation to its code to remove the required gender eld. Libraries using other software may have to work with their ILS vendor to remove the eld.

Customer service implications

Some libraries use gender-speci c language when providing customer service. This includes terms such as *Ma'am* or *Sir*, or titles such as *Mrs.*