

**Eugenija Koveckienė**

Deputy Director, Klaipeda City Library (Lithuania)

**Bronė Lauciuvienė**

Director, Klaipeda City Library (Lithuania)

**THE LIBRARY AS A CULTURAL AND INFORMATION CENTRE  
FOR ELDERLY PEOPLE: THE EXPERIENCE OF KLAIPEDA CITY  
LIBRARY**

*В библиотеках Литвы модели в организации системы услуг для людей старшего возраста раньше ограничивались традиционными библиотечными формами. Создание информационного общества меняет потребности в информационных, культурных и самообразовательных услугах для этой группы. Услуги Клайпедской публичной библиотеки ориентированы на потребности членов общины. Пожилые люди составляют 18 процентов всех жителей Клайпеды. Для этого и учрежден центр для пожилых людей в одном из подразделений библиотеки. Цели центра: сконцентрировать актуальные информационные ресурсы – печатные и цифровые; организовать курсы компьютерной грамотности; создать бесплатный доступ к интернету; культурными и образовательными мероприятиями улучшить качество жизни пожилых людей.*

The goal of the public library is to provide access to information for the society. One of the latest concepts of serving the readers is based on the idea to provide services based on the needs of the community members, by taking into account the individual interests and wishes for information. Public library becomes the centre for local social life and the centre for access to information.

We try to ensure that services provided by the library would be equally accessible for every member of the community and would meet their needs, but these needs differ and resources of the library are limited. We might face the situation where no bodies needs might be satisfied because of the fact - what fits everyone, doesn't fit anyone. For the very long time libraries have divided their clients into the following groups - children, youth, working people, other.

We have a lot of experience providing services for children and youth. There are specialised libraries established in order to meet their needs. Despite that we face difficulties while providing services for adults, because their needs are very much diversified and individualised. By accepting the requirements set for the modern libraries – to increase the social cohesion and access to information– the biggest difficulties are met while serving the elderly people and people with special needs (handicapped). These people feel isolated because of their health problems, tense economic situation, change of psychological climate, and insufficient lack of attention from the society. The

introduction of new information technologies makes their situation even more difficult because the elderly people lose their competitiveness in the labour market much earlier, their access to the latest information resources are limited.

Although the age is often considered as spiritual status more than physical stage it has its specific characteristic features. From the soviet times Lithuania has inherited the early age of retirement on the pension for women and men respectively 55 and 60. According to the latest legislation the retirement age is raised up to 60 for women and 62.5 for men. The demographic situation of the country is changing – the number of active participant of the labour market is decreasing and the number of pensioners is increasing. The number of pensioners has started to grow since 1973 and it is foreseen that after 10 years the elderly people will drive economy. In order to get ready for the changes and the upcoming challenges set by the demographic situation, libraries have to participate in the education of the elderly people more actively. In the statement of the continuous adult education (approved in 1995) it is stated that, the goal of informal education is to provide opportunities for people to perform continuous education by using accessible information environment (libraries, mass-media, internet, museums and other) and by shearing life experience with other people.

In the beginning of 2003 there were 864 thousand (25 percent of the total number of inhabitants) pensioners while in Klaipėda city – 35 thousand (18 percent of the total number of inhabitants). The further we get by solving the problems of elderly people the better we become in handling age problems.

The experience of Lithuanian libraries providing services for elderly people usually limit within the framework of activities related to completion of book funds meeting the needs of the readers. There is a stereotype that elderly people read only easy content books devoted for leisure time. Despite this attitude, the need for information within this group is as different as in any other group. Many experts propose to single out even several age groups:

1. 55 – 65 years of age – active, capable of working which have motivation to obtain new skills related to their work. Actual economic situation according to the statistic data of 2002 is difficult. The rate of employment within the age group of 50-64 was almost 8 points lower than general employment level and constituted 51,8 percent. On the 1st of July 2003 17,4 thousand men older than 55 were registered as unemployed and looking for job in the labour exchange. They constitute 11,4 percent of all registered unemployed people. (In Lithuania 10,3 percent of all inhabitants are within the age group 55-65).

2. 65 – 75 years of age – pensioners who have much time for leisure activities. For this age group the library might become one of the places to spend their free time. ( In Lithuania 8,9 percent of all inhabitants are within the age group 65 – 75).

3. 75 and more years of age – for the people within this age group external help is needed because of the health problems, they are not capable of using services of the library in full extent. Very often they are not strong enough to come to the library either

because of the health problems either they can use only special information resources and services. (In Lithuania 5,4 percent of all inhabitants are within the age group 75 and more).

It would be reasonable to analyse the need for information of every age group in detail, to establish views, knowledge and skills measurement system and models for organising and introducing services.

Activities carried out by Klaipeda City Municipality Public Library for the elderly people are based on both - theoretical background and demand in the society.

In 1997 the library had very limited financial resources. It was sad to observe the readers standing in row and waiting to read the newspapers. Usually elderly people constituted the majority of the rows. We had to do something about it and solve the problem. There we came-up with the idea to launch the negotiations with the newspapers and their editors in order to get discounts and incentives. We have come-up to the conclusion that prescription, which would be delivered to the library instead of being delivered to private subscriber, will be free from delivery fee and it will be excluded from the subscription fee. 1372 subscribers of our library used this service in 2001. Everyone who has used the service has saved 115Lt (total amount reached 157 thousand of Litas), further more, newspaper and their editors have provided 79 subscriptions free of charge for the library amounting to the total value of 27.1 thousand Litas. In this case the most important is not the financial aspect of saving, but the increased accessibility to latest information in newspapers for elderly readers. The introduction of this service also increased the number of service users of the library and made the communication with the community more active. This encouraged us to develop services for this target group further.

Having decided that digital information will be accessible to the elderly people as well in 2002 we prepared and implemented the project “Friendly internet for elderly people”. In the newly renovated department of the library “Kauno atžalynas” we have established computer literacy and information centre for elderly people. With the help of various charity providers and our financial resources for special expenditures we have renovated the premises, purchased new furniture and introduced security measures. With the support of Open Lithuanian Fund we have purchased three computers for this centre and we have started implementation of the main goals of the project:

- To collect information resources interesting for elderly people (printed and digital), create “friendly“ gates to the Internet environment.
- To organise the computer literacy courses.
- To organise cultural and educational events by increasing the quality of life for elderly people.

### **Accumulation of information resources is a long process**

We have set ourselves the goal to accumulate and provide the information interesting for elderly people in one location. First of all we have examined the available resources among printed materials, which have been enlarged. We have started to accumulate an important printed information in the form of files on certain subject: “NGO activities for elderly people”, “Important legislation”, “Economic food preparation recipes”, “Tips about the health”, “Elderly people in the EU” and other.

#### **Internet website – [www.biblioteka.lt/seniorai](http://www.biblioteka.lt/seniorai)**

In Lithuania elderly people can't enjoy broad Internet resources, first of all there is small number of Lithuanian resources available and second there is a low level of elderly people computer literacy. Although there is much information on elderly people life available on-line, but it is inaccessible because of the language barrier. While establishing the information centre for elderly people we have set ourselves the goal to create the Lithuania internet content on our own, collect, systemise and deliver already available information in acceptable for elderly people form. The background for that is community problems there fore we have focused our attention on the problems relate to Klaipeda which could be interesting for this target group by covering the issues of legislation, help and support telephone services, social help, healthcare, leisure activities (clubs, societies, art groups and other). There is a systemised index of links leading to Lithuanian and foreign Internet websites available on-line in the website. We plan to provide the webpage with more interactivity by creating an opportunity for the people to express their problems, propose or search for services, sent posters and other.

It didn't take much time before we found out that people lack the service of legal advice. Due to the fact that legal services are very expensive, people try to find their own way through legislative labyrinths; therefore they turn to the library. In 2003 next to the information centre for elderly people there has been Legal Information Office of the Ministry of Justice established together with the Ministry. Its' goal was to create more opportunities for Klaipeda city inhabitants to obtain legal information free of charge from printed materials and digital files. The centre assembles legal literature and periodic publications. The centre has a subscription to the database LITLEX on legal documents, which is available for use. In the website of the library there is a webpage created for Legal Information Office. Our Internet website users are given advice via this website by the specialists of the Ministry of Justice. Elderly people expect that they will get a concrete consultation in the centre, therefore every month we organise meetings with lawyers.

Services on Computer literacy training are provided free of charge and have started after the establishment of the information centre. We have been afraid that the service will not be popular. We knew that elderly people look to the modern information technology from the distance. Never the less, after there has been an announcement published in the press about the training courses, 180 “students” have registered themselves during the first days. 57 people have graduated the course in full extent since the opening of the centre (on 5 December) till the end of the year. Having regard to the

large number of people willing to obtain the background knowledge of the computer all employees of every computerised department of the library has been involved in training at the very beginning. After we understood that elderly people have different abilities to perceive new knowledge and that it is different from the abilities of young people (elderly people need personal attitude which is impossible in organising the training in bigger groups). Having regard to the limited and insufficient human resources of the library we have addressed the Council of City Schoolchildren with an invitation to join our initiative and help us out with the lack of human resources. The Council with our support has prepared a project "Search for knowledge is the way to the future". Under this project we have trained 6 schoolchildren to train elderly people. Young teachers have had a training course of 22 hours on methodology of training, specific feature of elderly people psychology and other. After the training was completed we have started the education process of elderly people. Every lector was responsible for training two people at a time for two hours per day. The oldest "student" was 88 of age. The popularity of the service showed that need for education of this age group on computer literacy has been underestimated. Elderly people saw the internet as a measure to be active and informed about the processes going on in the society, e-mail was a measure to keep the contact with the family members, it also was a tool to spend free time, pay taxes, evaluate education opportunities and other. Nowadays elderly people are able to use the Internet in the information centre free of charge.

#### **Activities within culture and education are community-building activities**

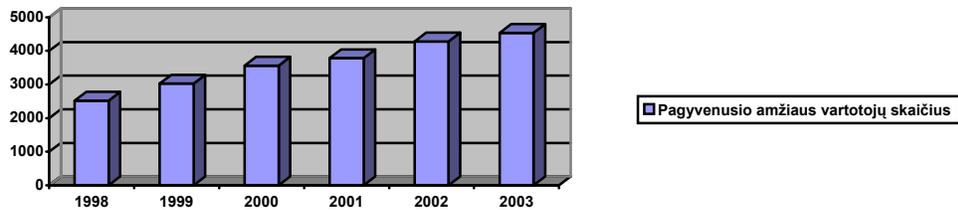
With the project partners "The University of the Third Age" we have opened the centre with series of lectures called "Active long-living". Elderly people had an opportunity to listen to the lectures on the following subjects: "How to overcome the age", "Prophylaxis of age neurosis", "Secret of the long-living", "The sense of life in the early age" and other. At the end of the first year of the activity we have organised a big festival for the elderly people. The „students“ who have graduated the computer literacy courses have been nominated with the informal certificates of graduation, with the help of supporters we have organised the evening of entertainment and joy for elderly people.

In 2003 library has implemented the project "Europeans, closer to Europe", the goal of it was to present to various age groups the experience of the EU member states integration to the EU and the changes aftermath. One of the target groups of the project was elderly people. Their attitude in regard to membership of Lithuania in the EU was very important, therefore in the information centre all the year long every month the representatives of this target group had an opportunity to learn the lifestyles, culture, and customs of the elderly people living in different EU member states. Klaipeda university lecturers, students and Klaipeda city NGO information centre have provided us in the project with necessary expertise knowledge. While organising the computer literacy training, we presented the opportunities to find the information about the EU on-line. Under this programme we have trained 109 people by giving them sufficient knowledge in computer literacy.

Societies of elderly people, pensioners' community took an active role both as the observers and as the participants in the events presenting the EU countries. Over 590

people in total have participated in the events of the Information centre. Next to the project events” Europeans, closer to Europe” there were various events organised by the societies of the elderly people. Events covered various subject from ethnographic festivals to exhibitions of artists belonging to elderly generation and many more. All these events were held in the information centre.

Consecutive measures implemented by the library have determined the constant growth in number of elderly people using the library:



The elderly people using the library services constitute 12,8 of all pensioners in Klaipeda city.

We plan to follow the strategy and develop library services for elderly people further on as we see, we can do much to improve life of our parents and grandparents.