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# Availability of Public Library and Community Support for Patrons with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Survey of Coastal Mississippi Libraries

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# Availability of Public Library and Community Support for Patrons with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Survey of Coastal Mississippi Libraries

By Tammy L. White

Master Research Project

April 27, 2018

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## INTRODUCTION

The American Library Association (ALA) Bill of Rights (1993) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) provide guidance on how public libraries can provide services for individuals with physical handicaps, mental disorders, and various other disabilities. With this topic becoming an ever-growing area of concern, there has been an outreach by librarians to create and provide services to patrons who have been classified within any of the previously mentioned categories (Akin & MacKinney, 2004). One such group include those who are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), one of six neuro-developmental disorders (Frazier-Robinson, 2015), in which the individual can show signs of impaired social communication skills, unusually intense interest in an object, or difficulty is forming friendships with peers (Autism Spectrum Australia, 2018).

Libraries should have a concern when it comes to serving their communities and their stakeholders, and while a growing number of libraries are beginning to provide programs for individuals with ASD, there is still a need for more. Furthermore, there is a need for staff to become more aware of the types of behavior that are associated with ASD so as provide a better understanding of how to create programs. The Illinois State Library (2016) has commenced working on increasing "ASD awareness, education, and support services" and the Matthews Branch of the Public Library of Charlotte Mecklenburg County ran a successful program developed by Tricia B. Twarogowski (2009). While librarians in other regions of the United States have created programs, there is still a need to expand these programs (Suzanne, Patti, & Mary, 2016).

According to the report by the Mississippi Autism Advisory Committee (2015), which was presented to the Mississippi State Legislature in 2015, the number

of children in Mississippi that have been diagnosed, with ASD, was 4027 in the year of 2014. With the numbers increasing every year (MAAC, 2015, p. 4), this shows an opportunity for community outreach within the public libraries of the state of Mississippi. With that being stated, the underlying goal of this article is to provide the needed information, via a research questionnaire, to assist with ASD awareness as well as the need for library programs that will provide community support for not only those individuals with ASD but their family members and caregivers as well. The goal of this study is to provide insight into further studies and potential needs-assessments that can be utilized in creating or expanding related programs within the public library system. After all, the role of a library and its staff is to assist all patrons in the community it serves.

## Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the availability of ASD programs and community support among public libraries in Mississippi's coastal region.

## Research Questions

- R1. How many libraries in this study provide services for children, adolescents, and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder?
- R2. How many libraries display books or other resources that assist parents of children or other patrons who have questions or concerns about ASD?
- R3. What type of training, if any, is provided to members of the library staff in working with individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder?
- R4. How many libraries were awarded funds to enable programs for patrons with ASD?

## Definitions

*Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)*: a group of neurodevelopmental disorders, with onset during what is known as the preschool years. It impairs a child's or an adult's ability to communicate and interact with other individuals (American Psychiatric Association.,2013).

*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5, 2014): a manual used to help psychologist or psychiatrist diagnose clients or patients (APA, 2013).

*Neuro-developmental Disorders*: a group of conditions with onset in the developmental period. The disorders typically manifest early in development, often before the child enters grade school, and are characterized by developmental deficits that produce impairments of personal, social, academic, or occupational functioning (APA, 2013).

*Peer-reviewed*: For this study, all articles will be those reviewed by professionals in the same field.

*Qualitative Research*: Research which is generating information that cannot be reduced effortlessly to numbers; typically involves an in-depth examination of a complex phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015).

*Quantitative Research*: Research that yields information that is inherently numeric, or its numbers are quickly reduced (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015).

*Research Methods*: For this study, it is a specific way of researching a topic to learn new information from a respectable source (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015).

*Social Story*<sup>®</sup>: a story that is either written out or has visual guides and is used to teach various social interactions, behaviors, skills, or situations to individuals with ASD (Styles, 2011).

### **Delimitations of Study**

The required data for this study, obtained via an online survey, were collected from the public libraries, located within the four Mississippi coastal counties of George, Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson.

The library located in the city of Long Beach, although situated in Harrison County, is owned and operated by the city and one library situated within George County is under the jurisdiction of the Jackson County Library System. George County borders Jackson County on its northern side.

The data collection process did not extend to any academic, private, or school libraries, nor other counties. The study was also limited to collecting only that information related to the libraries of these four counties.

### **Assumptions**

It is assumed that questionnaire respondents answered accurately, thoroughly, and with up-to-date information.

### **Importance of Study**

The number of public libraries that offer programs and services to individuals with ASD appears to be increasing throughout the United States (Schriar, Foerster, & Pelich, 2016). Thus, data that provide insight as to which programs are offered or needed within the libraries of the coastal region of Mississippi would prove useful to librarians as well as other educators and various researchers. The information may also be of use to update collection policies as well as provide information to create areas that are designed for patrons with ASD.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

Autism spectrum disorder knows no boundaries. It is not gender-specific, nor does it only affect one ethnic group. It is one of six neuro-developmental disorders that affect the social communication and interaction skills of the diagnosed individual as described in the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) DSM-5 manual (APA, 2013). The individuals who have ASD can be lightly or significantly affected, hence the term 'spectrum disorder.' In simpler terms, those with autism can be on either end or even in the middle of this 'spectrum, which affects their ability to communicate with others or how they handle many social situations. For example, their ability to make eye contact, start or hold a conversation, or know what behavior is expected for various conditions.

Some individuals can even become greatly upset if touched and back away or reach out and not let go of the person they are near (Frazier-Robinson, 2015).

The "Library Bill of Rights," as published by the ALA (1996), clearly and simply states that "Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves" (American Library Association, 1996). This statement calls for outreach to those individuals who have disabilities, illnesses, and disorders as well as all other individuals who wish to use the library and its services. This lack of programs and resources is where librarians can make an impact.

No two individuals with the Autism spectrum disorder are alike, with each one having their personality as well as having symptoms that range anywhere from mild to extreme, hence the term, spectrum disorder. For many individuals with ASD, they have difficulty relating to people or exhibiting many desired social skills, which leads to various challenges in how to deal with many real-life situations. Many individuals with autism need set patterns or routines as they do not adjust to sudden or un-announced changes in activities (Farmer and Sykes, 2008). Something as simple providing an everyday tactile environment or books (Social Stories) which are read or sung to the group, trained library staff can make all the difference. However, not many libraries have programs that provide or meet the educational or social environmental needs of children or adults who fall on the autism spectrum. Creating such programs with the assistance of local research could help provide not only the programs that would make a positive difference but assist the libraries with making a lasting and respected connection with the community that the library serves.

### ***Programs for Patrons with Autism***

Akins and MacKinney (2004) explained autism as a developmental disorder that affects an individual's ability with language and communication, social skills, and sensory modalities. The article provides some great insight as to what programs work best for these individuals and how to implement it into the services of a library. However, while it allows for information

to help understand autism, it does not provide any surveys that were used to collect data as to whether any libraries offered any or if the library educated their employees how to help patrons who have ASD. Leon (2011) discussed how "creating story times" for those with ASD can make a noteworthy difference in how children with this disorder can enjoy the library... Again, this article does not use quantitative data or have collected data from surveys. It does, however, provide bases for the research survey by giving insight into the importance of having programs for patrons with ASD.

Farmer and Sykes (2008) describe the various challenges that individuals with ASD encounter in life as well as in educational settings. They explain the variety of stimuli and which ones would encourage more in-depth interactions with others since those with ASD tend to think more literally. The authors provide valuable insight as to how to make libraries more enjoyable to those with ASD and include discussions on technology and how to incorporate programs that build upon the need for sensory needs for educational and social growth.

### ***Importance of Autism Awareness Training***

Librarians in the state of Illinois and Florida (Schriar, Foerster, & Pelich, 2016) are being trained in how to assist individuals with autism as well as being educated about the various services and programs that are beneficial to those with ASD. Winson and Adam (2000) examined those programs and how the librarians have adjusted the way in which the programs are presented to ensure that the staff is aware that they have children or adults with autism and that the need to understand those patrons is of great importance if the library is to create programs and services that will be of value to their community.

Barack (2014) discussed the services for children with autism and how librarians can have a better understanding of the tools and training that are available to help develop the communication skills of patrons with ASD. One such tool is titled "Project Pals" and is a part of the Florida library autism project. These online modules (four in all) assist with training librarians so they will understand how to work with those with autism. Barack also discussed

the use of sensory-based tools and social stories that are designed to explain to the patron what they will be doing while at the library.

### **Survey Research**

One of the most important papers that influenced the layout of this research project was completed by Schriar, Foerster, and Pelich (2016). The information was gathered via a statewide survey conducted by Waymark Systems, and the data were not only from the librarians and library staff but all autism stakeholders and was made possible due to IMLS National Leadership Grant, *“Targeting Autism: A National Forum on Serving Library Patrons on the Spectrum.”* Its results showed that overall, there was an “agreement on the need for libraries to form sustainable partnerships with community stakeholders” (pg. 3) and the importance of the need for libraries to provide access to programs and reliable information about ASD. The article also conveyed the importance of administering a community needs assessments and providing training to librarians so that they could better assist and understand their patrons who have ASD. The article does provide a link (<https://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/library/libraries/pdfs/asd-stakeholder-align-data.pdf>) to the research questions, which also includes a copy of the invitation letter. The paper also presents a breakdown of the total number of participants, their age, and experience with ASD. While the results of this paper offer valued information and give a reliable format in which to use, it only covered the State of Illinois. No similar study for the State of Mississippi or its coastal region could be found in the Scholarly LIS literature.

Another survey mentioned by Schriar et al. (2016), was the survey completed in 2013 by the Illinois State Library. The goal of this survey was to evaluate the importance of the library and librarians to those with ASD as well as considering the importance of needed training for librarians. There were 202 respondents from various libraries in the state of Illinois, and the results showed that only 27.1 percent offered any programs to their patrons with ASD. While the questions in the survey were not shared, this survey

was instrumental in the state creating a forum in which to discuss the importance of this topic.

The literature review for this research provides background information on the topic of Autism Spectrum Disorder, the need for programs and community support, as well as the importance of educational training to explain the thought process as well as what will help the librarian connect with the patron. The research and surveys conducted by the State of Illinois and the projects that have been created by other libraries such as the one in the State of Florida were instrumental in the design of this research. However, while there are studies on how public libraries are adding programs for individuals with ASD, there is a limited number that involves surveys for local areas to determine if the libraries offer programs, community support, or educational training about ASD for the librarians.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Sources of Data***

The information for this research was collected by using an online questionnaire that consisted of nine questions concerning services, training, and funding as it related to each library. These questionnaires were completed by each branch manager or the lead librarian who works at the twenty-two branches (Appendix A).

### ***Data Collection Process***

The Library Director for each county and city library system was provided a link to an online questionnaire with a request to send the information to each manager or head librarian of the branches within the director’s jurisdiction. The email included a link to the survey and a recruitment letter that explains the purpose and description of the research

The online questioner also provided an online consent form to explain the meaning and description of the study as well as the confidentiality procedures to everyone who had completed the questionnaire. The research proposal was submitted to and approved by the University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board (Appendix C).

It should be noted that while all library districts participated, there was not a completed survey for each branch. Harrison County has nine libraries, which are under the direction of four head librarians, and the four completed surveys were considered a representation of all libraries in within Harrison County. Hancock County has five libraries, and four questionnaires were completed, thus leaving one with no representation. Jackson County has eight libraries, and four questionnaires were answered, leaving four libraries with no representation. The City of Long Beach has one library, and their questionnaire was completed.

### ***Organization and Analysis of Data***

The underlying goal of this research was to provide information, via a survey questionnaire, to assist with ASD awareness as well as the need for library programs that will provide community support for not only those individuals with ASD but their family members and caregivers as well. After obtaining approval from the IRB, a set of questions was sent to the directors of four library systems-via an email with a link to the online survey. After the questionnaires were completed, the information was gathered, and the data were sorted and analyzed to address each research question. Tables and figures were used to illustrate the results.

### ***Questionnaire survey***

The questionnaire was designed to collect information from the twenty-three libraries, and the results provide feedback on which branch, the title of the person completing the questionnaire, and other relevant information as it pertained to programs, training, and funding related to ASD and library programs.

### ***Analyzing of Answers***

The answers were collected, reviewed, and grouped by the different library districts as well as by individual questions so that the data could be appropriately analyzed. This task was completed with careful consideration since notations were made as to which libraries replied, which library managers were answering for all branches under their care, and to validate that all replies were from the libraries listed in Appendix B.

### ***Limitations***

Since the proposed study only collected data on public libraries in Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson counties located in Mississippi, findings are not generalizable to public libraries of all sizes or all locations. It should be noted that while all library districts participated, there was not a completed survey for each branch.

## **RESULTS**

The results of this research were based on the number of responses that were collected based on the feedback of twenty-three libraries. However, as mentioned in the methodology section, there was not a completed survey for each branch. The reasons for this vary for each district, as either the librarian did not reply or did not see the emailed invitation as in the case of Hancock or Jackson County. Or in the notable case of Harrison County, where the answers from the four Head Librarians represented all libraries that each manages (Table 1). Thus the number of total responses received were 18 of the 23 libraries (78% response rate).

**Table 1. Participating Libraries and Number of Responses**

Library Systems Contacted for Research	Number of Libraries Contacted	Number of Responses	Number of Libraries Represented
Hancock County Public Libraries	5	4	4
City of Long Beach Public Library	1	1	1
Harrison County Public Libraries	9	4	9
Jackson/George County Public Libraries	8	4	4
Total Number of Libraries	23	13	18

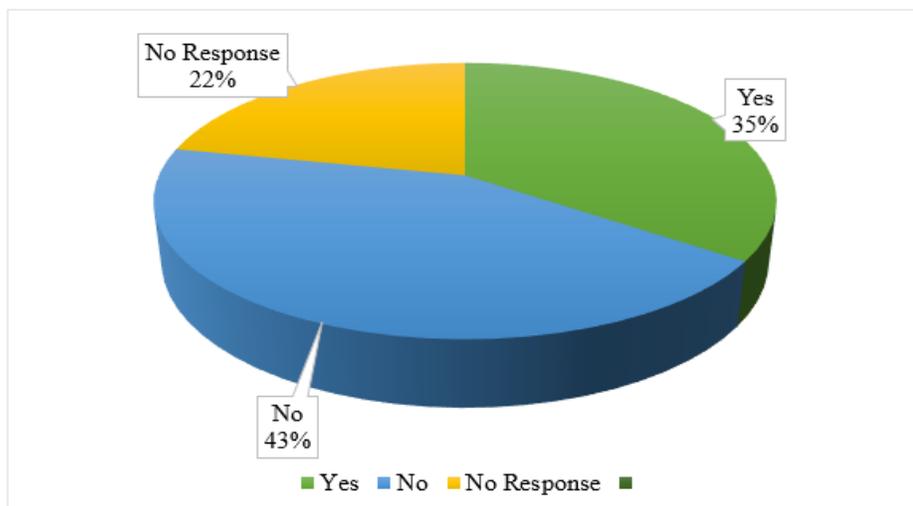
**R1. How many libraries in this study, provide services for children, adolescents, and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder?**

When the question “Does this library have services or programs specifically for those individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder?” was presented in the questionnaire, the results showed that none of the libraries provided services. However, when asked if the library offered parent workshops, guest speakers, or finding resources within the library that were related to ASD, four of the responses were yes (22%), with the remaining replying that they did not. It should be noted that the question did not give them a chance to state which service was provided. This question did not require any further information on how each district answered.

**R2. How many libraries display books or other resources that assist parents of children or other patrons who have questions or concerns about ASD?**

The results from this question were split almost equally within the different library systems (Figure 2). Displays of books or other resources for any topic will depend on upcoming events, new releases, or community events. However, sometimes a random display has the potential to generate new interest or make a patron feel welcome in the library. The results from this area do show some potential for growth and if promoted, may attract more patrons and increase community support.

**Figure 2. Display of Books or Materials for ASD Parents or Patrons**



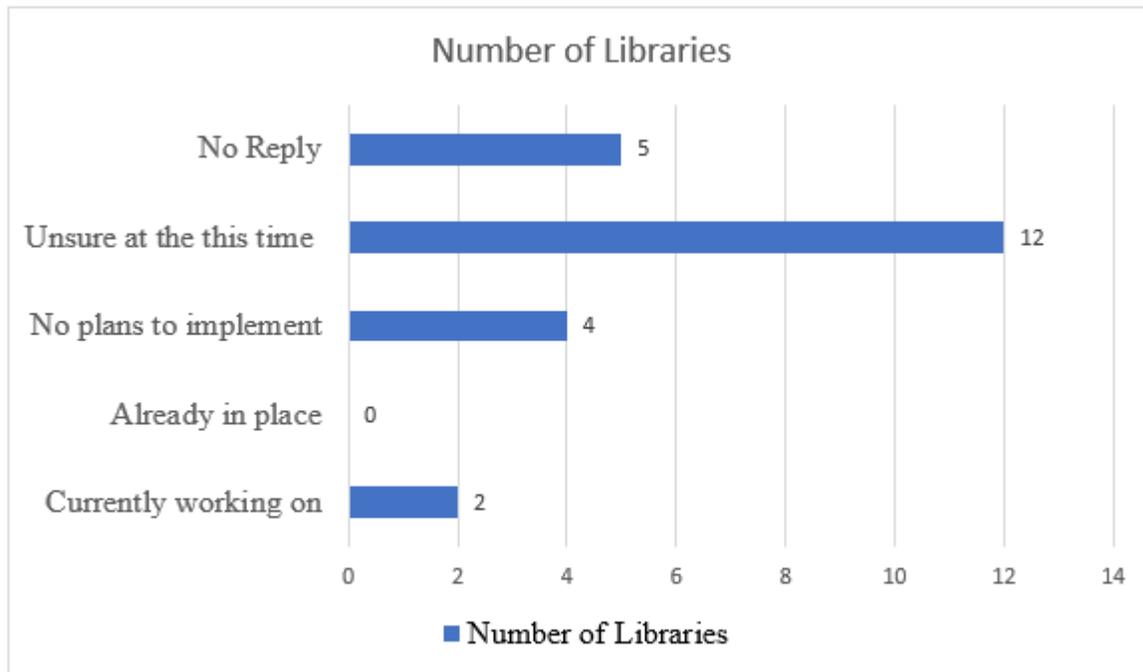
**R3. What type of training, if any, is provided to members of the library staff in working with individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder?**

The results of this question show that there is a need to implement some form of educational training that will involve insight about those individuals with ASD as well as what programs work well in providing educational and social development. Knowing when an outburst is due to a sudden change in a scheduled activity or that reading time could be more of an educational moment if sensory learning was involved, could make all the difference in a patron's or their parent's library experience. However, with two out of 18 libraries (11 %) currently working on an educational plan, these potential plans could promote a model for other libraries to follow (Figure 3).

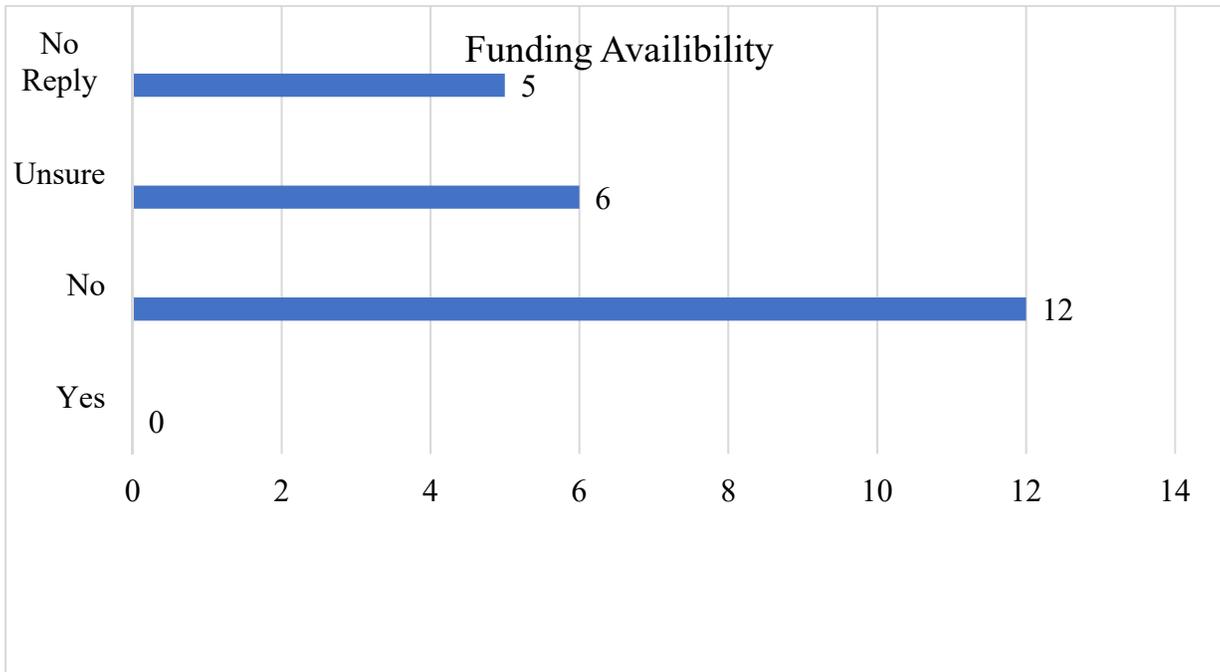
**R4. How many libraries were awarded funds to enable programs for patrons with ASD?**

The overall results had shown that no funds were available according to six respondents and six others stated they were unsure if there were any funds. Harrison County Libraries and Long Beach City Library district were specific that there were no funds available when the results were divided by library districts. Three out of four responses for Hancock County Library district also stated that no funds were available with one being unsure. Jackson county repeated the same results as Hancock county (Figure 4). Overall, the results provided insight to suggest that there is a need to provide information for the availability of grants and funding through various organizations as well as possibly training on how to research and apply for these grants. With funding becoming an issue as states and cities look for items to remove from the budget, grants and other funding are essential to the survival of many libraries.

**Figure 3. ASD Training for Library Staff**



**Figure 4. Library Program Funding for ASD Patrons**



## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This research provides insight into the need for libraries within a coastal region of the state of Mississippi to provide various programs and services for those patrons who are diagnosed with ASD. While it is a start, when compared to the programs that are being created in the Illinois public library system and the Florida public and school library systems, the results presented in this research, indicate how a community ‘needs assessment’ could further develop many necessary support programs within the libraries in this study. The need for ASD awareness and support services as well as plans to implement these programs could begin with a community meeting or invite an autism support group to hold a meeting at the library. Small progressive steps could lead to a well-designed library program that could prove to be beneficial to all stakeholders.

Another issue that is of concern would be the funding of the programs and services that would be of great value, not only patrons with ASD but to parents or caregivers of these same individuals. The results show that 53.85 percent of the libraries in question stated that there was no funding available and 46.15 percent were unsure if there was any funding

available. There are various organizations that would be instrumental in providing or finding grants such as the Mississippi Autism Advisory Committee or the Institute of Museum and Library Services. However, more research that would cover broader areas would be needed.

The state of Florida provides the means to acquire educational training on how to better-handle settings that involve patrons with ASD for the librarians and staff of its public and school libraries. Illinois Public Libraries hold forums and provide surveys for anyone who is a stakeholder, such as patrons, staff, and community members. These surveys have indicated that patrons feel it is vital that they have access to ASD information and that generally, libraries “should provide resources and access to information that is pertinent to the ASD population” (Schriar, Foerster, & Pelich, 2016. p. 9).

While this research offers insight into the public libraries of coastal Mississippi, there are still more questions that can help provide more insight into the need for programs, books, and community support. The survey that was offered presented generalized questions so, therefore, could be subdivided further to provide more detailed results. It could also serve

as a basis to expand to both the school and private libraries in the same geographical location. Overall, the results of this study could assist in promoting services to all members of the community in which a library serves, as directed by the American Library Bill of Rights.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Public Libraries in Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson Counties**

#### ***Hancock Country Libraries***

- Bay St. Louis-Hancock County Library and Administrative Headquarters  
228-467-5282  
312 Highway 90, Bay St. Louis, MS 39520
- East Hancock County Library  
228-255-4800  
4545 Shepherd Square, Diamondhead, MS 39525
- Kiln Public Library  
228-255-1724  
17065 Highway 603, Kiln, MS 39556
- Pearlinton Public Library  
228.533.0755  
6096 First Avenue, Pearlinton, MS 39572
- Waveland Public Library  
228-467-9240  
345 Coleman Avenue, Waveland, MS 39576

#### ***Harrison County Library System***

- Harrison County Libraries Administration  
228-539-0110  
12135 Old Hwy 49, Gulfport, MS 39503
- Biloxi Public Library  
228-436-3095  
580 Howard Avenue, Biloxi, MS 39530 - Local History & Genealogy (228-435-4613)
- Gulfport Public Library  
228-871-7171  
1708 25th Avenue, Gulfport, MS 39501
- Jerry Lawrence Memorial Library  
228-392-2279  
10391 Auto Mall Parkway, D'Iberville, MS 39540
- Margaret S Sherry Memorial  
228-388-1633  
2141 Popps Ferry Rd, Biloxi, MS 39532
- Orange Grove Public Library  
228-832-6924  
12135 Old Hwy 49, Gulfport, MS 39503

- Pass Christian Public Library  
228-452-4596  
111 Hiern Avenue, Pass Christian, MS 39571
- Saucier Children's' Library  
228-539-4419  
24014 Church Avenue, Saucier, MS 39574
- West Biloxi Public Library  
228-388-5696  
2047 Pass Road, Biloxi, MS 39531
- Woolmarket Public Library  
228-354-9464  
8455 Woolmarket Road, Biloxi, MS 39532
- City of Long Beach Library System  
(228) 863-0711  
209 Jeff Davis Ave, Long Beach, MS. 39560

#### ***Jackson-George Regional Library System***

- East Central Public Library  
228-588-6263  
21801 Slider Road, Hurley, MS 39555
- Kathleen McIlwaine Public Library  
228-497-4531  
2100 Library Lane, Gautier, MS. 39553
- Lucedale/George County Public Library  
601-947-2123  
507 Oak Street, Lucedale, MS 39452
- Ina Thompson Moss Point Library  
228-475-7462  
4119 Bellview St., Moss Point, MS 39563
- Ocean Springs Municipal Library  
228-875-1193  
525 Dewey Avenue, Ocean Springs, MS 39564
- Pascagoula Public Library  
228-769-3060  
3214 Pascagoula Street, Pascagoula, MS 39567
- St. Martin Public Library  
228-392-3250  
15004 LeMoyne Blvd., Biloxi, MS 39532
- Van Cleave Public Library  
228-826-5857  
12604 Highway 57, Vancleave, MS 39565

## Appendix B

### Public Libraries of Coastal Mississippi: A Study of the Availability of Library Services and Community Support for Patrons with Autism Spectrum Disorder

#### Library District \*

- Hancock County Library System
- Harrison County Library System
- Jackson County Library System
- City of Long Beach Library System

#### Title of Individual completing this form?

---

\*Please note that ASD will be used in place of Autism Spectrum Disorder

1. Does this library have services or programs specifically for those individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Yes

No

2. Does this library display books or other resources that assist parents of children or other patrons who might have questions or concerns about ASD?

Yes

No

3. Has this library offered parent workshops or guest speakers to discuss topics related to reading, social & sensory skills, or finding resources within the library that relate to the topic of ASD?

Yes

No

4. Does this library have times allocated for story time or other activities for children?

Yes

No

5. Does this library plan to or has it already developed an action plan that will help with the following:

Increase ASD awareness.

Education and support service for ASD.

Notify Autism support groups that they may use the library for meetings.

6. In this library, are staff members trained to assist a patron who has been diagnosed with ASD?

- Currently working on implementing
- Already in place.
- No plans to implement training.

**Contact Information:**

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Appendix C



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**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**  
118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001  
Phone: 601.266.5997 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | [www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board](http://www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board)

**NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION**

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.  
Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 18020103  
PROJECT TITLE: Public Libraries of Coastal Mississippi: A Mixed Methods Study of the Availability of Library Services and Community Support for Patrons with Autism Spectrum Disorder  
PROJECT TYPE: New Project  
RESEARCHER(S): Tammy White  
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education and Psychology  
DEPARTMENT: Master of Library and Information Science  
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A  
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Exempt Review Approval  
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 02/23/2018 to 02/22/2019  
**Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.**  
**Institutional Review Board**