

Colorado Institutional Library Model

Created by the Institutional Library Development unit, 2020

Institutional libraries in Colorado exist in:

- Department of Corrections
- Division of Youth Services
- Mental Health Institutes
- Veterans Community Living Centers
- School for the Deaf and the Blind
- Fort Lyon Supportive Residential Community

Like any other library, Colorado institutional libraries are driven by the missions of their parent agency or organization, and they support the communities they serve.

Institutional residents usually cannot leave or get library services elsewhere. Their lives are controlled and regimented. They have limited autonomy over where they can go and what they can do.

Libraries in institutions are most important to their users as a physical space where they can go to a dedicated “third place” separate from their homes, cells, or living units, as well as their places for work, school, or recreation. Institutional libraries can and should be the hub and heart of an institution’s community and culture.

Institutional libraries must be safe environments where staff are familiar with principles of trauma-informed care: choice, collaboration, trustworthiness, and empowerment.

The role of institutional library staff is complex and demanding. Not only do they support residents in using the library, they are learning guides and links to the outside world. They collaborate with stakeholders and seek innovative community partners to bring the world into the facility. Library staff also communicate and market the services and programs they provide. Above all, institutional library staff advocate to meet the needs of the vulnerable populations they serve.

Because institutional residents’ liberties are so restricted, they especially require user-centered services at their point of need, so they can get what they want, when they want it, at the place where they are.

Like most library users, institutional library users need:

- Lifelong, self-directed, informal learning
- Information and reference services
- Support for job seeking and career building
- Instruction in information literacy
- Books and the promotion of reading

More than in any other type of library, users of institutional libraries need:

- Rest, relaxation, and fun
- Opportunities to connect with others
- Access to technology and the digital world
- Real-world skill-building and opportunities to apply those skills
- Support for formal career and educational programs in the institution
- Intellectual freedom and protection from censorship

Ultimately, in institutional settings that are structured and restrictive by definition, institutional libraries are drivers of the future, forcing evolution and change benefitting Colorado residents who need it most.