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BLIND AND LOW-VISION INDIVIDUALS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES: A TRANSITION FROM SEGREGATED SERVICES TO AN INCLUSIVE OPERATIONAL MODEL – AN ANALYSIS OF ACCESSIBILITY CONDITIONS

OSOBY NIEWIDOME I SŁABOWIDZĄCE W BIBLIOTEKACH PUBLICZNYCH. OD
SEGREGACYJNEGO DO INKLUZYWNEGO MODELU FUNKCJONOWANIA –
ANALIZA WARUNKÓW DOSTĘPNOŚCI

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest omówienie warunków dostępności bibliotek publicznych dla osób niewidomych i słabowidzących w Polsce. Rozważania historycznoprawne obsługi bibliotecznej tej grupy (analizy aktów prawnych, danych statystycznych, piśmiennictwa naukowego i praktyk wdrożeniowych) pozwalają ukazać, że dominujący przez ponad 50 lat segregacyjny model funkcjonowania bibliotek publicznych ulega zmianie na rzecz modelu inkluzywnego. W artykule omówiono warunki dostępności konieczne do spełnienia przez biblioteki publiczne, aby ten model urzeczywistnić. Umożliwi to uprawomocnienie zapisów zawartych w ustawie o bibliotekach: „powszechnego prawa do korzystania z zasobów” oraz „powszechnej dostępności” dla wszystkich czytelników, również z niepełnosprawnością wzroku.

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Słowa kluczowe: dostępność, biblioteki publiczne, osoby niewidome, osoby słabowidzące, ustawy o dostępności

Abstract: The aim of this article is to examine the accessibility conditions of public libraries for blind and low-vision individuals in Poland. A historical–legal analysis of library services for this group (including an examination of legal acts, statistical data, scholarly literature, and implementation practices) demonstrates that the segregation-based model that dominated public library operations for over 50 years is being replaced by an inclusive model. The article discusses the accessibility requirements that public libraries must meet in order to implement this model in practice. Fulfilling these conditions will enable the effective implementation of the provisions outlined in the Library Act regarding the “universal right to access resources” and “universal accessibility” for all users, including those with visual impairments.

Keywords: Accessibility, public libraries, blind individuals, low-vision individuals, accessibility legislation

Introduction

According to recent statistical reports, Poland’s network of public libraries comprises 7,570 institutions and branches that collectively hold over 124 million volumes (Public Libraries in 2023, Statistics Poland 2024). The Library Act of 27 June 1997 (as amended) establishes the fundamental mission of these institutions by stipulating that libraries “organize and provide access to the achievements of Polish and global science and culture,” while the “right to use libraries is universal.” Public libraries are therefore mandated to support the educational, cultural, and informational needs of society and to contribute to the dissemination of knowledge and cultural participation. Library resources encompass a broad spectrum of materials—printed, graphic, cartographic, musical, audiovisual, and digital—representing diverse forms of recorded human thought. In 2023, 5.3 million users borrowed books from public libraries, and, as shown in the National Library’s 2024 report, 15% of surveyed readers obtained books through borrowing (Chymkowski, Motrycki, Zasacka, Koryś, 2025).

In recent years, public libraries have increasingly confronted the challenge of integrating readers with disabilities, including individuals with blindness and visual impairment, into regular library use. This obligation arises directly from the Act on Ensuring Accessibility for Persons with Special Needs of 19 July 2019 and the Act on Digital Accessibility of Public Sector Websites and Mobile Applications of 4 April 2019 (with subsequent amendments), which classify public libraries within the group of institutions required to satisfy minimum standards in architectural, digital, and information–communication accessibility.

Users with profound or severe visual impairments constitute a group with distinct perceptual needs that differ fundamentally from those of sighted readers. Blind readers depend on non-visual formats – tactile, auditory, or electronic – while low-vision users require, in addition to audio and digital materials, printed formats adapted to reduced visual acuity (large print, increased contrast, improved typography). Furthermore, both the physical environment and the information-communication infrastructure must be appropriately adjusted to facilitate independent and safe use.

The purpose of this article is to examine the accessibility conditions of public libraries in Poland for blind and low-vision individuals. The analysis includes a historical and legal overview of library services for this group and traces the transformations that have occurred in recent decades. These developments illustrate a broader systemic shift – from a segregated model of service provision, historically assigned to specialized institutions, toward an inclusive model embedded within mainstream public library practice.

A Segregated Model of Public Library Functioning: Historical and Legal Determinants of Library Services for Persons with Visual Impairments in Poland

In Poland, the operation of libraries has been shaped by several key legal acts adopted in different historical periods. The earliest of these is the Decree of 17 April 1946 on Libraries and the Protection of Library Collections (Journal of Laws 1946 No. 26, item 163), which introduced state supervision over library institutions reconstructed after wartime devastation. It was followed by the Act of 9 April 1968 on Libraries (Journal of Laws 1968 No. 12, item 63), the first comprehensive post-war regulation defining the functioning of libraries. The currently binding framework is the Library Act of 1997, which replaced the earlier legislation and remains the principal legal basis for the organization and operation of libraries in Poland.

The 1968 Act primarily emphasized the role of libraries as state institutions responsible for the acquisition, preservation, and protection of collections. It did not, however, address issues related to alternative reading formats or the provision of services to users whose access to standard materials was restricted due to visual impairments.

Library services tailored to the needs of people with visual disabilities emerged mainly through bottom-up initiatives. From the 1950s onward, the Polish Association of the Blind played a central role in shaping the organizational structure and the scope of publishing, library, and reading activities dedicated to blind users. In 1952, the Central Library of the Polish Association of the Blind – established a year after the Association itself – was founded,

followed by the creation of six regional branches between 1953 and 1955 (in Bydgoszcz, Chorzów, Kraków, Łódź, Poznań, and Wrocław). Beginning in 1952, the Association's Typhlographic Department initiated the production of Braille textbooks for primary and secondary school students. At that time, Braille publications constituted the principal reading format for blind readers, complemented from the 1960s by talking books – initially recorded on tapes and later on cassettes – which required specialized preparation and production (Czerwińska, 1999, p. 65).

Specialized institutions involved in Braille publishing, librarianship, and readership also included school libraries operating within residential educational centres for students with visual impairments. Among these initiatives, the Braille Department of the Society for the Care of the Blind in Łaski assumed a particularly prominent role, shaped by its sustained editorial and pedagogical engagement. A distinct category of institutions comprised specialist libraries established by the Section for Reading Services for the Sick and Disabled (since 1981; previously the Section of Hospital Libraries within the Polish Librarians' Association). Examples include the Centre for Reading Services for the Sick and Disabled at the Provincial Public Library – Copernican Library in Toruń, among many others. These facilities provided comprehensive services to people with disabilities and maintained alternative collections, including Braille materials and talking books, thereby supplementing mainstream library resources (Kruszewski, 2009; Fedorowicz, 2010).

A clear separation historically existed between mainstream librarianship and the specialized branch dedicated to serving blind and low-vision readers, as well as other groups with disabilities. This division persisted for decades and shaped both professional practice and the organization of services.

It was only with the enactment of the post-transition Library Act of 27 June 1997 (as amended; Journal of Laws 2022, item 2393) that the principle of universal access to library resources and the obligation to meet the needs of the entire population were formally articulated. Nevertheless, the practical implementation of this provision continued to reflect a segregated model. The Act included a separate Chapter 9, titled "*Services for Special User Groups*," which consisted of two articles: Article 25, specifying that the "Central Library for the Blind" was responsible for providing library services to blind readers and for coordinating the activities of related institutions, and Article 26, addressing services for other specific user groups.

In effect, this legislative arrangement implicitly "released" public libraries from direct responsibility for servicing readers with visual impairments. Notably, although the Act refers

to a “Central Library for the Blind,” no institution under this name has ever existed. Instead, services for blind readers had been carried out by the Central Library of the Polish Association of the Blind (established in 1952), which operated within the Association until 2012. Following an administrative decision of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy in 2013, the library was incorporated into the Main Library of Labour and Social Security as the Department of Collections for the Blind (DZdN), which continued the mission of the former PZN library while initiating new forms of development.

This situation created an inconsistency between the statutory provisions of the Library Act and the actual administrative and organizational framework: neither the former BC PZN nor the current DZdN fulfils the coordinating role assigned in the legislation. Despite several amendments to the Act (in 2012, 2018, 2019, and 2022), Chapter 9 has remained unchanged. Another significant legal act that formally separated services for blind readers is the Postal Law of 23 November 2012 (Journal of Laws 2023, item 1640; 2024, item 467), which replaced the 2003 Postal Law. The Act introduced the category of “mail for the blind,” exempt from postal charges for both senders and recipients. A ministerial regulation established an official register of libraries and organizations operating in the field of reading services for blind persons, making them eligible for these exemptions. The list is updated periodically. According to the 2023 annex to the regulation of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy and the Minister of Culture and National Heritage (Journal of Laws 2023, item 1902), it includes 18 libraries whose statutory mission is to serve blind or visually impaired users, as well as 45 organizations representing blind persons or working on their behalf under Article 26 of the Postal Law.

This formal classification of institutions supporting blind readers stemmed from a positive intention to recognize their need for alternative reading formats. However, it also reinforced the marginal involvement of public libraries, which were not systematically required to ensure equal access to their collections. As demonstrated in a nationwide study conducted by Małgorzata Fedorowicz-Kruszewska (2010) – still the only comprehensive assessment of disability services in Polish public libraries – library preparedness at the end of the first decade of the 21st century was generally inadequate. Public libraries rarely possessed assistive technologies. Only a small number offered speech synthesizers, Braille displays, magnifying devices, or reading machines, all of which are essential for blind and low-vision users. Initiatives supporting users with disabilities were sporadic rather than institutionalized. Library websites commonly failed to meet accessibility standards, and librarians reported limited competence in assisting blind, low-vision individuals, or other readers with disabilities.

Thus, although persons with visual impairments were acknowledged in legislation, public libraries were, for more than fifty years, effectively excluded from the duty of providing dedicated services to them. Only in recent years has a substantial shift taken place. This shift is linked to the emergence of a human-rights-based approach to disability, which emphasizes accessibility as a precondition for exercising rights inherent to all citizens. This paradigm is reflected in the accessibility laws referenced earlier. At the same time, technological progress has expanded the range of library materials available to visually impaired users beyond Braille formats, enabling public libraries to develop digital collections and to offer assistive equipment – such as magnifiers, Braille embossers, and screen-reading technologies – that support access to materials not originally adapted for visually impaired readers.

Although monitoring of changes within public libraries is not yet systematic, recent statistical reports include a dedicated section on “facilities for persons with special needs”. As of the end of 2022, public libraries in Poland had 605 workstations adapted for users with disabilities. Blind and low-vision readers, as well as older adults, had access to devices enabling the playback of talking books, including specialized players (Czytak), of which libraries possessed 1,337 units. Public libraries held nearly six million items classified as special collections, including 3.4 million audiovisual materials (Public Libraries in 2022, Statistics Poland 2023).

In summary, the long-standing segregated model of library services for blind and low-vision readers – historically delivered by specialized institutions – is undergoing transformation. This shift requires public libraries to meet clearly defined accessibility standards to ensure equitable service provision.

Inclusive Model of Public Library Functioning: Accessibility Requirements for Users with Visual Impairments

Ensuring that public libraries are accessible to blind and low-vision individuals requires an integrated approach that encompasses the design of physical space, the availability and format of library materials, and the provision of assistive technologies. Equally essential are accessible websites, digital resources, and online catalogues, as well as procedures governing library services and lending systems (Fedorowicz 2010; Czerwińska 2017, 2018; Śmiechowska-Petrovskij 2024, Mishra 2023; Xie, et. al., 2023, Abutayeh, García-Orosa, 2021).

Accessibility must therefore be conceptualized as multidimensional: it involves not only material resources and technology, but also organizational practices and user-oriented service models.

Physical Space Accessibility

For blind and low-vision readers to use a public library independently, the building must meet essential architectural accessibility standards. Circulation routes within the building should be free of horizontal and vertical barriers to allow safe and autonomous mobility with a white cane or with a guide dog. Libraries are also required to provide information on the building layout in both visual and tactile or auditory form. Individuals with special needs must have access to all non-technical areas of the building, must be permitted entry with an assistance dog, and must be able to evacuate safely in case of emergency.

Many public libraries have installed tactile boards presenting typhlographic floor plans. Another increasingly used solution is the implementation of short-range navigation systems. These systems, installed at key points in the library, emit signals that are detected by a receiver used by blind or visually impaired users and converted into voice messages. Radio beacons (beacons) serve a similar purpose: they transmit signals captured by smartphone applications when the user is in proximity. NFC and QR codes may also function as navigational markers, provided that their placement is indicated with tactile labels enabling users to locate and scan them. Such technologies support spatial orientation and facilitate safe and independent movement inside the library.

Accessible Library Materials

Providing access to information for blind and low-vision users requires that materials be prepared in formats suited to non-visual perception (for blind readers) or tailored to the visual functional needs of people with low vision. These needs may include reduced visual acuity, field-of-vision loss, sensitivity to glare, altered colour discrimination, depth-perception challenges, or specific lighting requirements.

Library materials accessible to users with visual impairments may include, among others:

- Braille publications
- Analogue talking books
- Digital talking books
- Digital text formats (e-books)
- Large-print materials

- Combined print-and-Braille editions (transparent print)
- Other specialized tactile or auditory materials

Table 1. Library Materials Accessible to Users with Visual Impairments

Type of Accessible Material	Description
Braille materials	Publications printed in raised Braille dots are typically three to four times larger than standard-print books, which contributes to their high cost and limited availability in public libraries. The largest Braille collection in Poland is held by the Department of Collections for the Blind (DZdN, GBPiZS), with over 6,000 titles. Selected public libraries – e.g., the Raczyński Library (approx. 500 volumes) and the Provincial Public Library in Kraków – also maintain Braille holdings. Many non-governmental organizations donate Braille books to regional libraries through publicly funded projects. Interlibrary loans facilitate broader access to this format.
Analogue talking books	Recordings of books read aloud by narrators were originally distributed on vinyl records and reel-to-reel tapes, later on cassette tapes. Although no longer produced, they remain valued by older readers with visual impairments who have limited digital literacy. Collections of analogue talking books are held by DZdN, specialized libraries, and numerous public libraries.
Digital talking books	Audiobooks, which are stored as digital files, were initially distributed on CDs. Today, however, they are accessed via servers, online libraries, publishers, and streaming platforms. Recordings may be produced by human narrators or generated through speech synthesis. Standard formats include MP3, WMA, MPEG-4, and OGG. Specialized formats – DAISY and CZYTAK – offer structured navigation (chapters, pages, paragraphs, footnotes). Organizations such as the Larix Association and the Klucz Foundation provide materials in these formats. Increasingly, non-profit initiatives (e.g., Wolne Lektury) offer works in MP3, OggVorbis, EPUB+audio, and partially DAISY.
Digital text formats	Files such as TXT, RTF, DOC, DOCX, PDF, and ODT, can be displayed on Braille devices or read using screen-reader software. Blind readers also use EPUB and MOBI formats. Digital libraries – such as the Academic Digital Library and the Zielona Góra Digital Library – play a significant role, as does the national IBUK Libra service, which complies with WCAG 2.1 AA standards.
Large-print materials	Publications adapted for readers with low vision feature enlarged fonts (minimum 14 pt), sans-serif typefaces, increased spacing, suitable contrast, and enlarged margins. Commercial series such as “Wielkie Litery” and “Duże litery” respond to this need.
Combined print–Braille materials	Transparent-print editions containing both enlarged black-print text and overlaid Braille, facilitate shared

	reading among sighted, low-vision, and blind individuals. These materials, are frequently produced within reading-promotion projects (e.g., Fundacja Szansa – Jesteśmy Razem)
Other specialized materials	Tactile cartographic collections (maps, atlases), raised-line drawings, audio-described films, children’s books combining Braille with tactile graphics, music materials, and other resources support tactile or auditory perception.

Source: own work based on: Śmiechowska-Petrovskij 2024.

Assistive Technologies in Libraries

Assistive technologies constitute a crucial component of accessibility for blind and low-vision users, as they enable access to materials that have not been adapted into Braille or large print. Although many visually impaired individuals rely on personal devices – such as Braille notetakers, portable magnifiers, or mobile applications – public libraries should provide at least one fully equipped accessible workstation to support independent use of library resources.

A comprehensive workstation for users with visual impairments should include:

- a computer with screen-reader software for blind users and screen-magnification applications for low-vision users, together with a speech-synthesis module for reading aloud text displayed on the screen;
- a refreshable Braille display;
- a high-speed scanner paired with OCR software, enabling conversion of print materials into readable digital text;
- software for translating print text into Braille;
- a Braille embosser;
- optionally, a tactile graphics embosser for producing raised-line illustrations;
- stationary and portable magnifiers, electronic loupes, and other magnification devices enabling low-vision users to enlarge printed materials;
- reading (or “lector”) devices capable of scanning printed text and reading it aloud in real time.

Such technologies not only enhance the functional independence of visually impaired readers but also broaden the range of materials that can be accessed without requiring direct adaptation by the library.

Digital Accessibility of Websites and Online Catalogues

As public institutions, libraries are legally required to ensure the digital accessibility of their online interfaces. The Polish Act on the Digital Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications of Public Sector Bodies (2019) transposes the key principles of the WCAG 2.1 standard and sets out minimum requirements for accessible online communication.

For blind readers who navigate webpages through screen-reader software, clear and consistent structural hierarchy is essential. Headings must be logically ordered, navigation elements must be possible to reach using keyboard shortcuts, and all visual content must be supplemented with meaningful alternative text. Interactive elements – including forms, buttons, and links – must be labelled in a manner that enables their accurate interpretation by assistive technologies.

For users with low vision, digital accessibility involves the ability to increase font size, modify contrast between text and background, adjust spacing, and identify which element is currently selected during keyboard navigation (e.g., via a visible focus indicator). Meeting WCAG 2.1 AA standards therefore ensures that library websites, catalogues, and online services can be used independently by a broad range of readers with diverse visual needs.

Library Service Provision for Users with Visual Impairments

Library staff may experience uncertainty or apprehension when assisting users with disabilities, particularly if they have had limited contact with individuals with visual impairments or have worked in environments historically designed without their participation. Strengthening librarians' knowledge, practical skills, and social competencies is therefore essential to creating an inclusive service environment (Fedorowicz 2010).

Although public libraries fall within the scope of the 2019 Act on Ensuring Accessibility for Persons with Special Needs, they are not formally required to appoint accessibility coordinators. Nonetheless, many institutions choose to do so voluntarily, especially those serving large populations. The designation of such roles remains at the discretion of local governments.

According to Śmiechowska-Petrovskij (2024), accessibility coordinators in public libraries most commonly undertake the following tasks:

1. supporting users with special needs in accessing library services;
2. preparing and implementing accessibility action plans;
3. monitoring compliance with accessibility requirements;
4. publishing coordinator contact information in the Public Information Bulletin;
5. preparing reports on accessibility activities;

6. informing library directors about ongoing accessibility measures.

In recent years, numerous free training programmes for librarians have been offered in Poland – many of them financed through the national Accessibility Plus programme – aimed at enhancing staff competence in working with readers with visual impairments.

Equally important are the methods by which libraries provide access to materials. For blind and low-vision readers, access may occur through:

- onsite borrowing,
- off-site lending, such as home delivery services, postal circulation, or digital access (online loans),
- bibliobuses, which function as mobile library branches, providing both materials and access to assistive technologies closer to users' homes.

These diverse service models strengthen the inclusion of visually impaired readers in mainstream library use.

Conclusions

The analysis presented above demonstrates that, for many decades, public libraries in Poland were not required to develop systematic accessibility frameworks, particularly with respect to users with visual impairments. Specialized libraries – such as those affiliated with educational centres, hospitals, or the Polish Association of the Blind – fulfilled this role within a segregated model shaped by the high cost and technological complexity of producing Braille and audio materials.

Technological and sociocultural change, however, has fundamentally altered this landscape. Today, public libraries are expected to function in ways analogous to inclusive education: as community-based institutions accessible to all residents, regardless of health status or functional ability. This requires meeting the accessibility conditions outlined above, including the provision of digital resources readable through individualized assistive tools, which in turn necessitates large-scale digitization efforts. The implementation of online lending systems is an additional priority.

Importantly, full compliance with WCAG 2.1 AA eliminates the need to create separate, disability-specific digital platforms; well-designed mainstream services are inherently inclusive. Meanwhile, access to Braille materials need not rely solely on costly acquisitions – interlibrary loans and the postage exemption for “mail for the blind” offer practical solutions within existing legal frameworks.

By drawing on best practices and collaborating with organizations representing persons with visual impairments, public libraries can effectively transition towards an inclusive model of operation. In doing so, they give tangible material and symbolic meaning to the principles of “universal access to collections” and “universal availability” embedded in the Library Act.

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