

They are the least valued members of American society. They are shunned, ignored, sometimes reviled. Rare is the public servant who champions their cause. They are the inmates of state correctional facilities and psychiatric hospitals. They are a diverse group of humanity with one commonality. Most will return to a society that does not welcome them. And who cares? As it turns out, many do. Among them is a small group of dedicated library services providers—under the leadership of Laura Sherbo.

Laura Sherbo joined the Washington State Library's Institutional Library Services (ILS) team in 1982 as librarian of the McNeil Island Corrections Center Library. She came from Illinois where she served as librarian at the Larch Corrections Center. She brought prior experience with penal authorities and a vision of providing a safe and welcoming place for inmates. She managed to form strong partnerships with her host institution while also forming strong bonds with her colleagues in other institutional libraries. She was a vital member of the management team and encouraged collaborative efforts in collection development and procedures. Since 1982, the ILS division of Washington State Library has suffered budget cuts that closed branches and laid off staff. Despite such devastating setbacks to library services, Laura Sherbo inspired her division team to re-prioritize library functions to meet the most critical needs of the institutionalized. Those changes included uniformity of branch library procedures, and emphasis in collection development in parenting, substance abuse recovery, job training and employment. The library users themselves are encouraged to provide feedback about their opinions and suggestions for library services. Laura has encouraged her staff to receive training and pursue projects that would benefit host institutions and library services in general. Training included classes, webinars, conferences, as well as regular staff meetings and conference calls. Projects included presenting at library conferences, hosting visiting institutional services librarians, volunteering at host institutions (reading programs, historical preservation efforts, etc), a library sponsored book club, and a pilot law library program.

Not all realize their youthful vision, but Laura Sherbo has and led her division team to achieve goals that exemplify the best virtues of the Library Bill of Rights—privacy protection and access to the interests, information from various viewpoints, and enlightenment for all persons of the library community.

*Submitted by Kathleen Benoun, Washington State Library, Western State Hospital Branch*