Århus Public Libraries

Danish library uses technology and training to support immigrant communities.

**Immigrants Struggle in Their New Home**

Denmark is known for its high standard of living, peaceful way of life, and early embrace of technology. But its sizable immigrant population, which includes people from Albania, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Turkey, and Vietnam, often has limited access to these advantages.

While immigrants make up almost 7 percent of Denmark’s population, they represent almost 12 percent of the 290,000 residents of Århus, the country’s second largest city. These immigrants tend to cluster in the Gellerup and Hasle neighborhoods, which have been plagued by social strife and illiteracy.

“It is so important that we go in and support people with the information they need so they can participate in community life,” said Lone Hedelund, librarian for the Gellerup and Hasle branches of Århus Public Libraries, which received the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Access to Learning Award in 2004. “We must be part of breaking the downward spiral of social heritage in this area.”

**Using Technology as a Way Out**

A main component of Århus Public Libraries’ mission is to help these immigrants integrate into Danish life and become productive “digital citizens.” Recognizing that living in Denmark relies more and more on having access to digital information, the libraries not only provide free access to computers and the Internet but also the basic skills people need to use these tools.

The Gellerup and Hasle branches recruit volunteers from the community to teach information technology (IT) to other residents. Most of these IT guides are immigrants themselves, having come to their new home with advanced degrees yet have been unable to find work. They teach everything from word processing to Internet research to online shopping to e-mail.

“When I came here the first time, I was completely blank,” said Reimaneh Afshar, a 31-year-old woman from Iran who has lived in Denmark for four years. “I knew nothing about computers—absolutely nothing. This is my third time here, and I can already write letters, send e-mail, and find my way around the Internet.”

**Social Services Come to the Library**

Besides offering residents IT access, support, and training, the Gellerup and Hasle branches have come up with a number of inventive ways to ease newcomers into Danish life. The Gellerup branch has reserved three of its 13 computer workstations for job searching, and library staff help patrons prepare résumés, fill out applications, and even practice for their interviews. The Health Center, located on the premises, provides access to health care specialists, dental therapists, and midwives. Another onsite service is the People’s Information office, which is part of the Department of Social Services, offering immigrants »
help in communicating with authorities, employers, physicians, and others. Århus Public Libraries includes a main library, 18 branches, and a Digital Library offering more than 50 services. One of these services is FINFO, an online resource for immigrants that provides information in 13 languages about such things as asylum, housing, work, education, politics, and culture.

Maximizing Resources
Århus Public Libraries has received 30 percent less municipal funding per resident since 1990, even though its circulation has increased by 27 percent. Despite this decrease in funding, Århus has managed to get 500 computer workstations, half of which are for library patrons, without any extra money from the municipality.

The system credits decentralization—allowing libraries to have complete control over their budgets—for much of its success in financing. The libraries also have been adept at garnering extra money from external sources through grants, development funds, and other types of donations. Forming partnerships with business and industry has been another way to find much needed funding.

Århus Public Libraries plans to use the Access to Learning Award funds for a variety of projects, including Computer Clubs for children in underserved areas; informal, unscheduled tech support for patrons in Åby, a neighborhood with a high percentage of immigrants; special technology initiatives targeted toward women; and equipment and training for the IT guides.

Imigrants make up about 12 percent of the population in Århus, Denmark’s second largest city.