

## Libraries strive to serve multilingual patrons

*By JAMES HART - The Kansas City Star*

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When people who don't know English -- usually new immigrants -- browse the Westport Library, searching for anything familiar, Magaly Vallazza knows how they feel.

Vallazza manages the Westport and Ruiz libraries. Years ago, she moved from Bolivia to Kansas City without knowing English.

Even as she practiced the new language, Vallazza loved the luxury of a novel written in the old one.

"When you are a new immigrant, and you are in the process of learning a new language, you still need to read in your own language," Vallazza said.

As Kansas City has grown more diverse, so have its libraries. Officials are trying to offer books, magazines, videos and recordings in languages other than English -- usually Spanish, but there are also requests for Vietnamese and other tongues.

The Kansas City Public Library plans to bulk up its collections of Spanish and Vietnamese materials because those are the languages in highest demand, according to a monthslong study by an employee committee. The cost has not been determined yet.

Nobody knows how big the foreign language collection is now, but a couple of branches already have quite a few books. About 30 percent of the books at the Ruiz branch are in Spanish, according to one estimate.

The Northeast branch has several items in Vietnamese.

The Ruiz branch will continue to house the deepest collection of Spanish material, and the main and Northeast branches will hold onto high concentrations of the Vietnamese books.

Other locations, such as Trails West, will begin to add books and videos in languages for people from Somalia and more countries.

"The library eventually is going to add all the languages we can," Vallazza said.

Most of the new acquisitions will be fiction and children's books, at least at first.

Serge Danielson-Francois is the children's librarian and assistant branch manager at Trails West. He said the amount of Spanish material there has grown, and items for other languages are on order.

Another reason to offer a diverse collection, he adds, is so patrons -- especially children -- can see their culture captured in the pages of a book.

He tells about a time recently when a Samoan boy at Trails West asked to borrow a book about people who looked like him. There were none, Danielson-Francois said.

The committee also recommended providing a card catalog in Spanish and mailing overdue notices in Vietnamese. More materials that teach English were also recommended.

And the library buildings should be easier to use, too. Signs in Spanish or Vietnamese could be a big help, the committee said.

Around the metropolitan area, other large libraries are trying to fill the need for multilingual collections:

- The Kansas City, Kan., Library has owned a Spanish-language collection for more than 20 years, Assistant Director Teresa Garrison said. A handful of computer resources are available in Spanish, such as an Internet-based encyclopedia.
- The Johnson County Library slowly is building its assortment of books in Spanish, said Mary Anne Hile, collection development manager.

For many years, only Cedar Roe Library in Roeland Park had any Spanish books -- about 1,500. Starting this year, Johnson County is spending more money to send books in other languages to the De Soto, Oak Park and Antioch branches.

- The Mid-Continent Public Library has a smaller collection of Spanish materials, which are focused at the Antioch and North Oak branches.

"We sort of rely on our individual librarians to know their own collections and their own branches," library Director Paul White said.

Many libraries keep books in other languages on their shelves, but few have put up card catalogs and signs in languages other than English, said Clara Chu, an associate professor at the University of California-Los Angeles in the information studies department there.

The big problem, Chu said, is a lack of resources: a lack of money for new computer databases and signs, and a lack of time to train employees.

The Kansas City, Kan., Library has instructions in Spanish on using its card catalog, but translating the entire catalog -- which contains more than a million individual records -- is daunting, Garrison said.

Buying the books from other countries can be tough, too, area librarians said. Some staff members, Garrison said, return from Mexican vacations with armloads of books for the library.

Finding Spanish books is fairly easy compared with finding something from Somalia, for example. (Translations of books originally written in English can usually be bought domestically.) Librarians said they are contacting special vendors to locate the right books. That was one of the top recommendations from Kansas City's multilingual committee.

Libraries, Garrison said, serve the entire community, and serving community members means getting them information they need in a medium they can use. Speaking a different language should not be a bar to anyone.

"You come in the door," Garrison said, "you get service."