USMAI Changes Display of Subject Heading "Illegal Aliens"

Proposal Made by Metadata Subgroup Follows Request by Librarians, Staff at Towson University

On June 18, 2020, the Council of Library Directors (CLD) approved a proposal made by the Metadata Subgroup to change the display of Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) containing the term "illegal aliens" in the USMAI shared catalog.

Beginning July 1, 2020, the term "illegal alien" in subject headings will display in the catalog as "undocumented immigrant," and the term "alien," when in reference to human beings, will display as "noncitizen."

The initial request for these changes was made by a group of librarians and staff at Towson University (TU): Sara Arnold-Garza, Elizabeth DeCoster, Rick Davis, Julia Caffrey-Hill, Allison Fischbach, Shana Gass, Claire Holmes, Hannah Krauss, Clare Kuntz Balcer, Norma Urbina, Elisabeth White, Cynthia Baker, and Miriam DesHamais.

In their January 2020 proposal to the Metadata Subgroup, the authors note that the Library of Congress itself recommended the term "illegal aliens" be replaced in 2016. However, the Library of Congress was not able to implement the recommended changes, after the Legislative Branch Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee intervened, taking the unprecedented step of instructing the Library of Congress to retain the original heading in April 2016.*

"Changing the displayed subject heading will demonstrate USMAI's commitment to inclusion and respect for a vulnerable and often marginalized population," write the petitioners from TU's Albert S. Cook Library.

Enacting the desired changes required significant technical expertise and creativity. Systems Librarian Linda Seguin, who serves as Consortial Library Applications Support (CLAS) liaison to the Metadata Subgroup, developed the solution ultimately proposed by the group.

Under the approved proposal, CLAS will virtually add the new preferred terms as a local heading and hide the original heading. "By virtually adding a field rather than replacing the original, we ensure that users can still search with either heading," the Metadata Subgroup explains in their proposal to CLD.

In a June 9 email to USMAI Library Consortium Executive Director Chuck Thomas, Metadata Subgroup Co-Chair Katherine Ryner (SMCM) writes, "Credit for the Subgroup’s iteration of the proposal goes largely to Linda Seguin (CLAS) who came up with various solutions to effect the change in Aleph, and Aimee Plaisance (UMBC) for communicating with multiple communities of practice about this and drafting the Subgroup’s proposal."

FY 2020 Metadata Subgroup: Kat Ryner (SMCM, Co-Chair), Maria Pinkas (HS/HSL, Co-Chair), Aimee Plaisance (UMBC), Audrey Schadt (SU), Neil Frau-Cortes (UMCP), Linda Seguin (CLAS liaison)