

Preparing for a Library Inspection

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Depository library inspectors, as representatives of the Superintendent of Documents, examine depository libraries for compliance with Chapter 19 of [Title 44, United States Code](#), which states: "The Superintendent of Documents shall make first hand investigation of conditions [in depository libraries] for which need is indicated ..."

Inspectors from the Depository Services Staff, which is part of the Library Programs Service of the Government Printing Office (GPO), accomplish this firsthand investigation. Depository library inspectors are always professional librarians with depository experience.

OBJECTIVES OF THE INSPECTION VISIT

During a compliance review, the inspector performs two important functions. The primary responsibility is to report on the condition of the depository. It is important to note that the library inspection is a snapshot of depository operations on that day.

The inspector's second responsibility is to act as a consultant to aid the documents coordinator in increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the depository operation. Inspectors are interested in helping the documents coordinator by offering suggestions and support. The inspector will ensure that the documents staff clearly recognizes the difference between a standard which must be complied with and a recommendation to enhance depository service.

". . . through this process, our mutual commitment to provide the American public with easy access to Federal Government information is reinforced. "

Inspectors do not get involved in disputes among library staff. The inspector's job is to identify operational problems, make suggestions, and also note positive aspects of the depository. If a problem is discovered during the course of the evaluation, the inspector will not fix blame on the staff. It is the task of the library administration to assign responsibility for deficiencies in the depository operation to personnel.

THE DEPOSITORY COORDINATOR'S ROLE

In order for the compliance review to be truly effective, there must be honest cooperation and communication between the inspector and the library staff. The inspector has only a few hours in which to evaluate the depository operation and no one knows the depository operation as well as the documents coordinator. That is why the degree to which the documents coordinator participates in the process is important. Responses given by the documents coordinator to the inspector form the basis of the inspector's evaluation. The accuracy of the Inspection Report is the highest priority of the inspection. If the response given is inaccurate, or as sometimes happens, incomplete, then that inaccuracy might be reflected in the compliance review.

The documents coordinator should not hesitate to ask the inspector questions or seek advice at any time

during the compliance review. Prior to the inspection, documents coordinators often compile a list of questions or concerns for the inspector to address. Preparing questions in this manner is a good way to involve the entire depository staff in the preliminaries of the inspection process. The on-site visit provides an opportunity for all those involved with the depository operation to interact with a representative of the GPO.

SCHEDULING

Libraries are generally inspected in chronological order by date of last inspection. For various reasons, the elapsed time between inspections is about seven years. Location and season are considered, e.g., Arizona is not visited in the summer nor Minnesota in the winter.

An inspector will usually visit about eight depositories during a two-week inspection trip. It is therefore common for neighboring depositories to be examined by the same inspector during the trip. Except for larger states, GPO tries to examine all the depositories requiring inspection within a state during the same calendar year so that GPO can more accurately assess inter-depository cooperation and also economize on travel funds.

If an inspection is deemed necessary, a library inspector notifies the depository staff by telephone of the specific inspection date from 4-6 weeks in advance. A letter accompanying the Self-Study Evaluation later confirms the appointment. The Regional is notified of the trip and invited to accompany the inspector. It is valuable for the Regional to be present because he or she can provide insights to funding sources, cooperative networks, disposal guidelines, etc. If one inspection is near other depository libraries, the inspector may also visit them as a courtesy.

SELF-STUDIES

From the 1970's to 1996 all depository libraries were inspected. Since 1996, the self-study has been the initial part of the inspection process and a major determining factor whether a library will have an on-site inspection. The self-study is excellent preparation for a possible on-site inspection because it addresses many of the same issues as the inspection. [Guidance on writing self-studies](#) can be found on the FDLP Desktop.

The first step in the inspection process is initiated when self-studies are requested from depository libraries in a region or entire state based on when previous inspections were last conducted. The trend has been that about one-half of the depository libraries submitting self-studies will be inspected. Other considerations such as previous probationary status, ratings on previous inspections, length of time as a depository library, and major changes in staffing or facilities are also determining factors on whether a library is audited.

Libraries often request an on-site inspection to document significant changes to the library or documents operations or to have the inspector confer with a new administration. The responsible Regional librarian for that area is also queried about that depository's performance.

PLANNING

In the intervening 4-6 weeks before the inspection, the documents coordinator ought to review the following:

- Self-Study Evaluation prepared by an inspector in response to the self-study
- [Self-Study template](#), if your library did not submit a self-study report
- Previous inspection reports

- [Instructions to Depository Libraries](#)
- [Federal Depository Library Manual and its Supplements](#)
- [Guidelines for the Federal Depository Library Program](#)
- [Superseded List](#)
- [List of URLs for FDLP/GPO Sites](#) (Appendix B of the Instructions)

The documents coordinator should also collect whatever materials would be useful, e.g., procedures manual, policies, annual reports, strategic plan, promotional flyers, etc. These items may already have been included with the self-study, but may have been revised since that time. Many depository libraries post their policies, operations manuals and guides on their Web sites. These can serve as models for other libraries.

Previous Inspection Reports may provide suggestions on upgrading depository services especially if they have not been acted upon. If you cannot find previous Inspection Reports, [contact Depository Services Staff](#) at GPO and we will fax or mail copies to you. The best preparation for an on-site inspection remains preparing a self-study based on the Instructions, Title 44, and GPO's evaluation of it. Using the self-study and GPO's evaluation, the inspector's findings can be anticipated and communicated to library administration. If any problems can be addressed before the compliance review, so much the better.

COMMUNICATING AND INFORMING

The period before the actual inspection presents an excellent opportunity for the documents coordinator to remind colleagues and the library administrator of the unique value, service, and challenges the depository brings to the institution and the community. As a result of reviewing the depository operation, the documents coordinator will be in a much better position to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their own depository operation. It is always better for the library director to learn of problems before the inspector arrives than at the time of the inspection visit.

"... there should be no surprise questions."

The inspector will be interested in inter-depository relations and the weeks preceding an inspection are a good time to meet with neighboring depository librarians. As mentioned earlier, there is a good chance that these librarians will also be preparing for an inspection. Depository libraries in the area should welcome an opportunity to exchange ideas and information. A State Plan assists state- and area-wide depository cooperation and should be reviewed regularly.

THE INSPECTION

The compliance review will occupy nearly a full day. The documents coordinator should plan on spending the entire day with the inspector. Arrangements should be made ahead of time to ensure adequate coverage of the documents operation during the compliance review.

Inspections usually begin about 9:00 a.m. and conclude late in the afternoon. If there are special arrangements such as appointments to meet with other staff members, lunch, etc. (a specific time, etc.), the inspector should be informed of them on the morning of the visit.

Before entering the library, an inspector checks outside the building for signage, handicapped ramps, and for the depository emblem on the entrance doors. The library inspector often brings extra emblems, copies of

order forms for promotional materials, and brochures.

After entering the library, an inspector looks for adequate signs and a floor plan or directory to locate documents in the building without having to ask a staff member. Some libraries have installed creative signage while others fail to mention the depository collection at all. Free access to Government information is the cornerstone of the Federal Depository Library Program. If the library has strict access policies, an inspector insures free access is not denied to anyone who wishes to use the Federal depository collection.

" A library that restricts access to the public will . . . be placed on probation automatically . . . "

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The inspector meets the documents staff and provides an update on GPO activities. This is a good time for the documents coordinator to ask any questions concerning GPO or the compliance review process and to inform the inspector of any changes in the depository operation since the Self-Study Evaluation. General issues relating to the depository operation, such as the mission and size of the library, the depository's primary patrons, and depository services are discussed.

After background information is gathered, direct questions begin. They are very similar to the self-study and there should be no "surprise questions." The inspection follows the workflow of the depository operation.

The inspector will want to see various aspects of the depository operation when their related areas are addressed. If depository responsibilities are divided among a number of people, then these individuals should be available. Any staff member that works with Government documents should be invited to meet with the inspector at some time during the day. If a significant portion of the depository collection is housed off site (e.g., map department, science library, selective housing site, storage, etc.), then these materials will also be examined. Most selective housing sites and off-site storage are seen after the inspection of the major depository collection. There is enough flexibility in the schedule to visit these sites at another time during the day if it is more convenient.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Usually about 2 p.m., or at the library director's convenience, the inspector and the Regional librarian will meet privately with the director, or in their absence, a representative. In some instances, the documents coordinator is the director. The documents coordinator should ensure that the inspector is scheduled in advance for an exit interview with the director. This is a good opportunity for the library director to ask questions about the compliance review and the library's depository operation.

When the oral exit interview with the director is finished, the inspector then summarizes the findings with the documents coordinator. Immediately after the inspection, the documents staff should review the verbal inspection summary. This ensures that the staff and administration are of one mind as to the inspector's comments. It is quite common for documents staff to think of additional questions for the inspector after the inspection visit. These questions should be faxed, e-mailed, mailed, or telephoned to the inspector at GPO. Telephone and fax numbers and e-mail addresses for depository inspectors, and their supervisor, Chief of Depository Services, are listed on the [contacts page](#) of the FDLP Desktop.

On occasion, the inspection will discover major deficiencies in three or more categories. If a library earns noncompliance ratings in three or more categories, which are about 3% per year, it is placed on probation for the legally mandated probationary period of six months. A library that restricts access to the public will receive a noncompliance in Public Service and be placed on probation automatically, regardless of compliance ratings in other categories. Libraries are asked to send a letter to GPO six months after receiving probationary status noting improvements to their depository operations. A re-inspection is scheduled at a

later date. The majority of probationary depositories makes significant improvements in the deficient areas and is removed from probation. Some others have voluntarily relinquished depository status.

INSPECTION REPORT

Usually within six to eight weeks after the compliance review, the Inspection Report and recommendations are forwarded to the library director, documents coordinator, and regional librarian. The Inspection Report should contain what the inspector had already summarized orally. The Inspection Report identifies steps that the library must take to comply with minimum standards for depository libraries as set forth in the Instructions to Depository Libraries. After the Inspection Report's summary is a list of recommended actions the library can take to improve its operation or services. These are good starting points for future improvements and goals. Questions about the compliance review may be directed to either the Chief of Depository Services or the Superintendent of Documents at GPO.

CONCLUSION

Inspections are one means in which GPO monitors depository libraries and their activities. This has also proven beneficial to GPO. Our investigation offers the documents coordinator a chance to exchange information and make suggestions for improvements at GPO. This can be cost-effective and valuable for GPO since continuing problems mean more taxpayer monies must be spent to resolve them. But most importantly, through this process, our mutual commitment to provide the American public with easy access to Federal Government information is reinforced.