Support Library of Congress Autonomy in Subject Heading Determinations

In late March of this year, after an extensive process consistent with long-standing library principles and practice, the Library of Congress proposed to replace the subject heading classification “Aliens” with “Noncitizens,” and “Illegal aliens” with two headings: “Noncitizens” and/or “Unauthorized immigration.” Similar, but not identical, changes previously had been requested by Dartmouth College and endorsed by the American Library Association.

In mid-April, the Legislative Branch Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee adopted language that would, in effect, countermand the Library’s professional judgments and reverse the proposed reclassifications noted above. (The Report adopted by the Subcommittee states: “To the extent practicable, the Committee instructs the Library to maintain certain subject headings that reflect terminology used in title 8, United States Code.”) The full House Appropriations Committee will meet in mid-May and has the power to undo the Subcommittee’s action.

On April 28, the Presidents of ALA and ALCTS (ALA’s division of members expert in cataloging and classification) wrote the attached letter to the Committee’s leaders and members on April 28 asking that they do so. Its principal points and specific requests follow on the reverse.
KEY POINTS: “LIBRARY LETTER” TO HOUSE APPROPRIATORS
BACKING PROPOSED LIBRARY OF CONGRESS RECLASSIFICATIONS

- The Library of Congress has a long-established, often used process for reviewing and updating outdated subject headings and establishing new ones as needed that preserves all prior versions of updated headings.

- The Library’s process in this case was rigorous, transparent, and consistent with the highest standards of professional cataloging practice.

- Decisions to update a subject heading are based on many considerations, including “literary warrant:” the frequency with which a term is or is not used in print and other dynamic resources that, by their nature, change with and reflect current social structures and norms. For headings that refer to groups of people, special attention is paid to: popular usage; terms used by members of the group to self-identify; and avoiding terms widely considered to be pejorative toward the group being described.

- The Library reasonably and properly concluded in this instance that, when used in reference to people, the long-used terms "illegal" and "alien" have in recent decades acquired derogatory connotations, become pejorative, and been associated with nativist and racist sentiments. Particularly in recent years, referring to undocumented persons (as opposed to forms of conduct) as "illegal" increasingly has been widely acknowledged as dehumanizing, offensive, inflammatory, and even a racial slur. This shift has been plain and pronounced:
  - in recent years many national news organizations (including the Associated Press, USA Today, ABC, Chicago Tribune, and Los Angeles Times) categorically have stopped using the word "illegal" to describe human beings as a matter of editorial policy; and
  - the Pew Research Center compared use of the term “illegal aliens” in U.S. newspapers during the same two-week period in 1996, 2002, 2007 and 2013 (all times when immigration matters were much in the news). It found that use of that phrase declined precipitously over the most recent 6-year period surveyed, appearing in 21% of news reports in 2007 but just 5% in 2013: a 76% reduction in use and all-time low.

- The Library of Congress’ recent proposed reclassifications discussed above are fully consistent with accepted professional cataloging standards and practices. Indeed, a compelling case can be made that the proposed changes are required by them.

- ALA and ALCTS, its division of experts in cataloging, urge the Committee to accept the Library’s apolitical subject heading judgment and, thus, to strike language from any piece of appropriations legislation that would modify or countermand the Library’s recent determinations pertaining to the terms “Aliens” and/or “illegal aliens,” and to oppose any other legislation that would have similar effect.