

LIBRARY SERVICES AND TECHNOLOGY ACT (LSTA)
GRANT PROJECT EVALUATION OF
OPEN THE DOORS WIDER:
SERVING THE UNSERVED OF EASTERN LINN COUNTY

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I have been asked by the Oregon State Library to complete a peer evaluation of the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant given to three Linn County libraries—the Lebanon Public Library, the Scio Public Library, and the Sweet Home Public Library for a project entitled, “Opening the Doors Wider: Serving the Unserved in East Linn County.” The anticipated length of this grant is three (3) years, and this report will cover year #1.

In many respects, coming back to Linn County felt very comfortable and familiar. I was returning to an area with which I became acquainted in the mid-2000s when I did four LSTA peer evaluations for the Linn Library League. The Oregon State Library funded an LSTA project for creating a library district in Linn County during the period from 2004 to 2007. So, many of the issues and individuals involved in this current project were familiar to me in 2011 because of that experience.

On June 14, I met with Lebanon Public Library director, Denice Lee, and May Garland, a Scio resident, a member of the LSTA Advisory Council, a coordinator of the Linn Library League, and a member of the committee overseeing this project. I appreciate the time Denice and May gave me to explain their project and to help me better understand what they are attempting to accomplish with “Opening the Doors Wider.” The hour I spent with Denice and May gave me a much better understanding of their project.

PROJECT PURPOSE

The project has two goals:

- Goal #1 is to develop new non-resident library patrons by offering them a discounted card for three consecutive years, with the discount decreasing over three years from 90% to 75% to 50%. During that time each library will use grant funds to complete the cost of the card (minus \$1 per card as an in-kind contribution).
- Goal #2 is to bring east Linn County librarians from Lebanon (Library Director Denice Lee), Scio (Library Director LaVonne Murray) and Sweet Home (Library Director Leona McCann) together on a regular basis to establish and maintain regular meetings that will insure that the project is on target. These meetings will help to establish a professional relationship among the three librarians that will extend beyond the grant period. (Note: Leona McCann retired shortly after the grant began.)

- **PROJECT OBJECTIVES**

There are approximately 35,000 people in Linn County who are not currently served by any library. There is currently no countywide library district. The unserved do not live within the city limits and do not pay city property taxes. The city property taxes go to underwrite the expense of operating the town's public library. Therefore, non-residents of the city are not eligible to receive a free library card and must purchase one if they wish to use the library. While children's cards may be free in some cases, this benefit does not allow use of the library by other family members. The objective of this project is to get these families to make libraries a part of their lives—a habit that will extend far into the future.

The Scio library cards for those residents living outside of the city limits normally sell for \$30.00 per year. During the period of the LSTA grant, the Scio cards will sell for \$3.00 in year #1, \$7.50 in year #2, and \$15.00 in year #3. The goal in Scio was to distribute 50 cards in year #1.

A Sweet Home card for non-residents sells for \$35.00. During the three-year grant period, that card will cost \$3.50 in year #1, \$8.75 in year #2, and \$17.50 in year #3. The goal in Sweet Home was to distribute 200 cards in year #1.

Lebanon non-resident cards currently cost \$50.00. In year #1 of the grant cycle, that card will cost \$5.00, \$12.50 in year #2, and \$25.00 in year #3. The goal in Lebanon was to distribute 300 cards in year #1.

LSTA grant funds and an in-kind donation will subsidize the cost of the cards.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Residents of east Linn County adjacent to the cities of Lebanon, Scio, and Sweet Home who live outside the city limits of these communities and, therefore, are ineligible for free library cards.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES FOR THE FIRST QUARTER (December 15, 2010 to March 15, 2011)

To accomplish goal number #1—to develop new non-resident library patrons—three meetings were held to plan a strategy for distributing discounted non-resident library cards and a strategy for publicizing the availability of the new cards. The meetings were also used to develop the associated documents needed to track the distribution of the cards and to publicize the availability of the cards. A logo for the project was designed by a graphic artist. The logo was incorporated into all the publicity posters and handouts. Additional publicity was accomplished through press releases in the local newspapers in all three cities. Another facet of publicity was the distribution of flyers to targeted groups such as the Friends of the Library, Friends of the Library book sale customers, Head Start parents, and students in the local schools. Decisions were made about who qualifies for a grant-funded card (anyone who hasn't had a card since

Dec. 15, 2009), how to notify card holders of renewal process (libraries created a spreadsheet that can be mail merged with renewal letter and sent to card holders one month before their card expires), and possible activities to promote the cards should there be cards available at the end of the first grant period (send letters through schools “Tuesday folders” as the end of the school year approaches; contact newspapers again to report progress; and consider redistributing cards to libraries with more demand than supply). MaryKay Dahlgreen of the Oregon State Library assisted the group by creating a timeline.

Specific first quarter activities related to goal #1 included:

- met twice with MaryKay Dahlgreen of the Oregon State Library to develop strategies and documents to facilitate the distribution of the non-resident library cards
- completed grant orientation training with Ann Reed of the Oregon State Library
- developed the process for distributing the cards
- developed the documents for publicizing grant-funded cards
- publicized card availability through local newspapers, library websites, in-house flyers and posters, Friends of the Library, Head Start groups, and the local schools
- developed the documents for tracking the distribution of the grant-funded cards
- started distributing cards December 15, 2010
- press releases were sent to the *Lebanon Express*, the *New Era* (Sweet Home), the *Albany Democrat-Herald*, and the *Scio News*, as well as to local radio stations

To accomplish goal #2—bringing East Linn librarians together—a five-hour meeting was held February 15 with the purpose of monitoring the progress of the project and discussing relevant library issues faced by the public libraries in Lebanon, Sweet Home and Scio. Areas of discussion included:

- ways to break down barriers to people using public libraries (e.g., Do due dates and overdue fines really work? How can we help patrons establish a routine of using the library?)
- details of planning, funding and implementing our Summer Reading Programs
- the role of the Friends of the Library at each library
- a discussion of costs and value of Library2Go
- current status of our reference collections (e.g., Are they being used? How are reference services changing at our libraries?)
- finally, a discussion of current circulation/cataloguing software systems at each location

The discussions are valuable to the librarians for evaluating current programs and policies and exploring ideas for improving library services in the future. Also, having a current understanding of the way each of the libraries operates can potentially create opportunities for sharing resources and collaborating in the future.

Specific first quarter activities related to goal #2 included:

- Met two additional times to monitor the process and discuss relevant library issues for the libraries
- Had a quarterly meeting February 15th for the purpose of monitoring grant progress and in depth discussions of current library management and organizational ideas

PROJECT ACTIVITIES FOR THE SECOND QUARTER (March 15, 2011 to June 15, 2011)

There have been three meetings of the East Linn County librarians and other committee members. The purpose of the regular meetings (March 8 and May 24) was to monitor progress on the grant activities and discuss library-related issues. The meeting on April 11 was the quarterly meeting used to orient Pat Gray, the new Sweet Home contact person and acting head of the Sweet Home Public Library, on the grant purposes and processes and to hear her report on the intensive plans she has designed to increase the publicity and distribution for the remaining non-resident household cards in Sweet Home. The librarians also discussed relevant activities to be included in the second-year grant application, the renewal process, and a survey of patrons who have received the grant-funded cards.

Specific second quarter activities related to goal #1—to develop new non-resident library patrons—included:

- continued to distribute grant-funded cards
- increased publicity in the Sweet Home community regarding availability of grant-funded cards
- developed spreadsheets for use when sending renewal letters
- began the design process for letterhead and envelopes for renewal letters

Specific second quarter activities related to goal #2—bringing East Linn librarians together—included:

- prepared first quarter report to the Oregon State Library
- developed, prepared, and submitted application for second year of grant funding
- made contact with Steve Skidmore, peer evaluator for our grant, and scheduled a meeting with him for June 14th
- discussed library-related systems and processes
- made the transition from Leona McCann to Pat Gray from the City of Sweet Home

PROJECT RESULTS

First quarter (December 15, 2010-March 15, 2011)

- Lebanon has a goal of distributing 300 cards during the first year of the grant to people who live outside of the city limits. 226 cards were issued in this quarter.
- Sweet Home's goal is 200 cards issued to new patrons who live outside of the city limits, and 40 cards were issued in this quarter.
- Scio hoped to issue 50 cards and have distributed 42 during this quarter.
- There were four meetings of the librarians during this period; 15 attended.

Second quarter (March 15, 2011-June 15, 2011)

- Both Scio and Lebanon have reached the maximum number of cards for which they have funding—50 and 300, respectively. After a slow first quarter start, Sweet Home has issued 121 cards, still short of their goal of 200.
- There were three meetings of librarians during this period, attended by a total of 11 people.

SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENTS AND PROJECT IMPACT

It is very obvious that there is a demand for library services for non-residents of the three communities—the maximum allotted number of cards were issued by early in the second quarter in Lebanon and Scio. Distribution of non-resident cards has moved quickly at the Lebanon and Scio libraries. Sweet Home non-residents have not been as eager to take advantage of the grant-funded cards. Early in the grant cycle, the “Opening Doors Wider” group met to determine a reason and possible solution to the Sweet Home situation. One possible explanation for Sweet Home is that Librarian Leona McCann retired on April 30 and her successor for administering the grant, Pat Gray from the City of Sweet Home, has had a period of transition.

There were significant efforts made to increase the distribution of cards in Sweet Home. These efforts included newspaper articles, two in the *New Era* and one in the *Democrat-Herald*; sending flyers to all children in the Sweet Home School District for inclusion in “Take Home Folders”; publicity by the Friends of the Sweet Home Library in their bookstore; more aggressive promotion of the cards in the Sweet Home Library by library staff and through visual displays in the library. The efforts have been successful with twice as many cards (81) distributed in the second quarter as the first (40).

The three librarians have reported that people applying for the grant-funded cards are single adults, adults with children, couples, first-time library users, and patrons who have been away from the library for awhile. There have been a few people who just like the idea of a good deal.

In the second quarter, it was determined that several items in the budget were overfunded while others were underfunded. A budget modification will be pursued.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS AND ACTIVITIES

As this is year #1 of the three-year project, an application for year #2 has already been submitted. This application outlines the following steps to insure success of the project in year #2:

- develop and implement a process to track renewal of the first year, grant-funded non-resident cards as they expire
- develop documents to promote card renewal
- extract patron demographic information for analysis
- develop an in-house survey for grant-funded card holders to determine their response to their library experience
- create a summary of information gathered from patron demographics and the survey to be included in year-end report
- continue quarterly meetings of the three librarians and other interested parties to review data, develop the summary, discuss any program issues, and seek other ways to collaborate

FINAL THOUGHTS

I am quite impressed with the thought and planning that went into this project and the success that it has turned out to be. In hindsight, the “Opening the Doors Wider” team could have issued more cards if they had had the resources. It will be interesting to see how many of the cards are renewed in years #2 and #3.

I watched the development of the Linn Library League back in the mid-2000s and was in hopes that the work of the League would lead to the creation of a library district. But political and economic obstacles proved too substantial to overcome at that time. As the economy improves and people learn of the benefits of a public library to a community’s well-being, my hope is that successful grassroots efforts such as this one will some day lead to the creation of a special district in Linn County.