Evaluation Report

Extending Library Service to the Unserved Grant Program

Library Services and Technology Act FFY 2010

Project title: Libraries ROCC! (Rural Outreach in Clatsop County)
Grantees: Astoria Public Library & Seaside Public Library
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Date of Site Visit: June 8, 2011

Summary of Evaluation

During the first year of a three-year project period, Astoria Public Library and Seaside Public Library are collaborating on a rural outreach project to offer free public library cards to all Clatsop County children and library services to their families, regardless of where in the county they reside. For the first time, any of the estimated 3,450 students who live outside of Clatsop County's cities presently providing library service to their residents (e.g., Warrenton, Astoria, Seaside) will be allowed a library card to access the library of their choice for an entire year. In spite of a number of hurdles that had to be overcome (e.g., not enough staff to handle school visits to four public school districts and several private schools), and a few surprises about remaining challenges (e.g., parents who do not want to drive their children to any public library, no matter how near or far), the project is a success.

This year, class visits to promote the 2011 summer reading program started with the usual several dozen children slumped down in their seats. Their past experience with library visitors had prepared them for the standard disappointing news that they would not be eligible to participate in the exciting program because they lived outside the city limits of any area served by a public library. Imagine their surprise when library staff announced that "This year, everyone gets our free library card no matter where you live." One third-grader jumped out of his seat to say, "YES!!!"

Energized by success to date, the long-term vision of this rural outreach collaboration includes a number of possible scenarios: full reciprocity in borrowing privileges between Astoria and Seaside public libraries; integrated library systems for shared collections access; and/or a county-wide library district that serves all residents equitably.

Project objectives: What was the project trying to accomplish?

The goal of the project was to provide every child in the Seaside and Astoria school districts who wanted a library card with one; insure that collections were sufficient to absorb new users; and secure sustainable funding with local funds.

Project method: Briefly describe how the project set about to accomplish its objectives. What staff resources or other resources were employed? What plans or timelines were adopted to accomplish the project objectives?

One of the biggest hurdles to the project's initial implementation was a lack of library staff capacity

to handle the project activities. There was insufficient staff to handle all of the onsite school visits; design the library promotion campaign; and deal with the substantial paperwork burden that an awarded LSTA grant entails. To overcome this barrier to success, staff amended the budget to contract with consultant Ruth Metz of Ruth Metz Associates to assist with outreach and implementation, including the development of a "campaign in a box" library card campaign. The project team was expanded to include an outreach team to visit the schools - the ROCCOTS. Lesson learned: additional personnel is critical to success and a full-time staff person is needed to visit all of the schools.

School superintendents, teachers, and principals were recruited early in the project to ease the project team's way into the many schools. While most school personnel were welcoming, good relationships with school superintendents were vital when principals didn't want teachers to make time for library staff visits to their classrooms. There was some expressed concern about the loss of the last school librarian in Astoria School District at the end of this school year and the potential impact that loss might have on the project. The homeschooling crowd was much easier to reach as they tend to use public libraries extensively.

Plans are underway to deal with unanticipated barriers to a child obtaining a library card: some parents don't want to drive their child to the public library; some parents refuse to show the required identification; some children have fines from an earlier time in their lives that prevent them from applying now; some parents refuse to sign the library card application form; some families live a great distance (e.g., 12 miles each way) from the nearest public library; and Warrenton Public Library's refusal to cooperate has meant that many of their city residents are not eligible to participate in the project. The idea that "we serve families" and not just children has been a good selling point for the project. Second year plans include a "literacy in a box" effort - the idea of opening a tent with early literacy activities in various locations throughout the county to attract attention to library services and to encourage free library card sign-up. Other ideas being explored include an Amnesty period to forgive past fines or "clean slate" idea at a certain age (e.g., 16).

<u>Project results: What concrete results did the project generate during the grant period? How do these compare with the original objectives of the project? What additional results (if any) are likely to been seen in the future?</u>

As of last week, at Seaside Public Library alone, more than 165 new cards have been issued and more than 2500 items have been circulated to new cardholders. The schools have been phenomenally supportive and trust and the relationship between Astoria and Seaside staff has grown. "Seaside-Astoria Share" has been launched; this new reciprocity between the two libraries is being promoted on their websites and through online catalog links. Staff have discussing future plans to initiate intergovernmental agency agreements that could facilitate new borrowing privileges and shared collections. "We're glad we're doing this... it is one of the most important things we could do, despite the substantial grant reporting and paperwork burden on our small staffs. We are committed to the entire three-year period and hope to leave a legacy of cooperation that results in a high value for library services throughout our county." "We can't stand turning children away from the library; our heart breaks for the child denied a library card."

<u>Project impact: How do you assess the long-term significance of this project, both locally (i.e., at the project site, if applicable) and statewide? What can be learned from the results of this project?</u>

While the assessment of the shorter term significance of this project includes measures of success (e.g., the number of library cards issued to non-city residents), the long-term significance is likely to be measured in terms of cooperation between and among the existing independent public libraries in Clatsop County or by whether the voters approve the formation and funding of a county-wide library district. "If we make the people want this by giving them the benefits of having it now, perhaps we can create a groundswell of support and have a successful outcome in three years." This project promotes the idea of cooperation among governmental units; operating library services on a cooperative basis could lead to so much more. Alternatively, the results of this project might indicate that to truly serve the unserved, the State Library may have to provide bookmobile services through contracts with local libraries.

Suggestions for improvement: In retrospect, what (if anything) would have made this a stronger project (e. g., better management, more resources, more participation, more publicity, etc.) If the project will be continuing, what (if anything) would make this a stronger project in the future?

In retrospect, more time should have been spent during the first week to assess the barriers that were obstacles to non-city residents obtaining library services. A full-time project staff person should have been part of the project budget. More thought should have been devoted to publicity - the idea of a library card campaign seemed simple in concept, yet proved difficult and time-consuming to implement. In the end, contractual help provided a short-term solution. The cooperation of Warrenton Public Library would also have improved the project.

For those considering replication of this project, the following lessons learned or ideal situations are offered:

- It is crucial to have a governing body that believes in the importance of library services.
- Be sure to have your city's finance folks on board with the full understanding of how a reimbursable grant operates. You'll also require the authority to approve credit for payments of expenses that might be above your usual approval threshold. Cash flow can be an issue as you have to float a grant's expenses prior to reimbursement. Consider how the grant project period is aligned (or not) with your fiscal year.
- Library staff is not the only one that will stressed by this project - city and school staffing is at an all-time low. Joint appointments, staff cuts, layoffs, and reduced budgets make it challenging to gain access to decision makers and classrooms.
- Expect momentum to build over time, with the first year's promotional activities starting to make an impact during year two as the buzz builds. Plan now for the groundswell of demand in year three, just as the project funding ends. Have a plan to continue the project beyond its initial period. Use year two to plan for year four!
- Mend any chinks in relationships before you begin. Chinks in any critical relationships will be magnified by the pressure of the grant and in trying to provide service to those unserved, in addition to your daily activities.
- Learn from other cooperative examples in your cities. For example, the police and fire chiefs cooperate in our cities, so we must continue to dig deep to discover what makes it difficult for city officials to see libraries as a "shareable service."
- Leave behind a sense of cooperation. These activities are things that can and should be done.