

Evaluation Report

Extending Library Service to the Unserved Grant Program Library Services and Technology Act FFY 2011

Project title: Libraries ROCC! (Rural Outreach in Clatsop County)

Grantees: Astoria Public Library & Seaside Public Library

Evaluator: Sara T. Behrman, Freelance Writer & Consultant

Date of Site Visit: March 2, 2012

Summary of Evaluation

During this second year of a three-year project period, Astoria Public Library and Seaside Public Library continue to collaborate 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. In addition to placing a ROCC! Library Card into the hands of every rural County child, this grant is expanding reciprocal borrowing among the participating libraries; garnering the good will, public support, and intergovernmental cooperative momentum needed to sustain future cooperative services with local funding; and piloting early literary programming for families in rural areas of Clatsop County. This project is expected to serve an estimated 7,747 youth, birth through high school, that do not have access to library services in rural Clatsop County.

During this second year of grant support, measurable progress is being made: outreach visits have been made to all five school districts; library card applications in English and Spanish have been given to 3,500 students; a pre-summer reading outreach promotional campaign is slated to take place at 10 county events; outreach has begun to early literacy providers (e.g., Knappa has agreed to collaborate on an early literacy programming pilot); SAS – Seaside Astoria Share (their reciprocal borrowing project) is immensely popular; and initial conversations about intergovernmental agreements (IGAs) to sustain the project beyond its third year of funding are underway.

Despite a number of noteworthy successes, there remain some barriers and ongoing challenges to implementing a project of such ambitious scope. It is often a daunting task for a small staff to push out into more rural areas of the County while carrying out the daily operations of a city library. There have been some staff changes (e.g., retirement of Seaside's Children's Services Coordinator) that adversely impacted roll-out of anticipated programs due to personnel policies that allow staff to carry forward unused sick time and vacation time; when long-term staff retire, their positions cannot be filled until the payroll liability has been met, resulting in several months of a vacant position before a new hire can be made. Project communications to all levels of staff are a challenge for a library that relies on part-time staff who cannot be easily scheduled for all-staff meetings. Lastly, although the project was able to secure the services of a highly qualified and capable Children's consultant (Multnomah County-Hollywood Branch staff librarian), the travel time from Portland to the coast has somewhat limited the availability of this person to easily handle outreach commitments to more remote rural areas of the County.

Project objectives: What was the project trying to accomplish?

The goal of the project was to provide every child in rural Clatsop county who wants one a library card; expand reciprocal borrowing; win local sustainable funding for cooperative services; and provide early childhood literacy programming for rural families. Within the four components of this goal, project staff have established milestones and benchmarks to measure their progress along the continuum of success.

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 continues to be a lack of library staff capacity to handle the project activities. To overcome this barrier to success, staff amended the budget to continue to contract with consultant Ruth Metz of Ruth Metz Associates to assist with project implementation and SAS-related technology consulting. The project team was also expanded to include a children's services consultant from Multnomah County Library. There are still some issues regarding how Astoria handles grant funds and processes reimbursements to project partners and consultants, with some cash flow challenges. Sharing materials throughout the County was unexpectedly complicated when the Northwest Educational Services District was forced to suspend their courier services, due to budget shortfalls.

From July - December 2011, great progress was made, especially in the areas of library card registrations and reciprocal borrowing. The first quarter of 2012 was challenging as other demands on the project's two library directors — such as their city's budget preparation process — temporarily stalled momentum and delayed gains in conversations about project sustainability and the planning of early literacy programming. March 2012 brought renewed optimism as conversations about future planning and talk about "a library legacy of cooperative services" as these two exemplary library directors begin to consider succession planning options. To deal with the need to maintain consistent liaisons with each school district, the library directors will explore whether Title I Reading Specialists can be recruited for this crucial role in year three.

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 be seen in the future?

The LSTA quarterly reports filed by the partners tell the statistical story about the numbers of families who have received their ROCC! Library Card; the numbers of programs and events have been held; quantity of items that have been checked out by ROCC cardholders; and numbers of items have been borrowed through SAS. It's too bad these output measures don't include the increased luminosity of a happy child's smile when she uses the library for the first time, or the depth of a parent's relief to finally access a public library's collection. These are the true measures of this project's success.

The next quarter promises to bring a boiler template for an IGA between the cities and their libraries, as well as between the libraries and school districts to facilitate their larger role in the project. At least one pilot early literacy program will be tested in the rural community of Knappa. The success of SAS has opened the door to future collaborative conversations, including the potential of establishing universal borrowing privileges - perhaps to the community college's library cardholders as well. Further, although Astoria does not presently offer interlibrary loan

(ILL) services through OCLC, the success of SAS has triggered the future possibility of funding a part-time position to handle ILL.

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?

The long-term significance of this project is its demonstration of the value of cooperative library services to taxpayers and elected officials. IGAs are a promising first-step to a regional solution that may extend services to those unserved. New ROCC! cardholders are presently being surveyed to gather stories of impact; a survey of those students who opted not to obtain a library card will also be launched to find out why and, potentially, explore ways to overcome those barriers to library use.

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?

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

- Don't think you're going to get volunteers to do the outreach needed for this type of project. This is not a project for volunteers - only projects with a structure and history of operational success seem to work with volunteers. This is an innovative, start-up project, so be sure to put plenty of funds for staff in the grant.
- Before applying, make sure your city finance department understands how this grant will work - reimbursements, etc. - and address any policy issues (like credit limits or venue barriers) before you begin.
- Make time to bring all staff onboard with regular project updates and ongoing communication.