

Evaluation Report

Extending Library Service to the Unserved Grant Program Library Services and Technology Act FFY 2012

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 22, 2013

Summary of Evaluation

During this third year of a three-year project period, Astoria Public Library and Seaside Public Library feel very positive about their successful collaboration 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. Their optimism and pride is well deserved. In addition to placing a ROCC! Library Card into the hands of every rural County child, this grant has expanded reciprocal borrowing among the participating libraries; garnered good will and public support; and helped set the stage for intergovernmental cooperative momentum needed to ensure sustainable, future cooperative services that could be supported by a diverse mix of local foundation funding (e.g., a *Cards for Kids* campaign) and in-kind government support. Although the objective of trying to pilot early literacy programming for families in rural areas of Clatsop County will not be achieved during this three-year project period (eliminated as a grant objective), a number of promising conversations about future bookmobile services that emphasize early literacy are underway. This three-year project is on track to serve an estimated 7,747 youth, birth through high school, that would otherwise not have access to library services in rural Clatsop County.

During this third year of grant support, measurable progress continues to be made in both direct service delivery and planning for future project sustainability: outreach visits have once again been made to all five school districts, but in this third year, the children's expectations are now high, thanks to the delivery on promises made to ensure that every child has access to the library; library cards have been issued to 656 children and their families mid-way through this third year; 7,069 people have attended 1,141 ROCC program events; and 21,112 items have been checked out to ROCC card-holders.

Although there was a change in key personnel due to the retirement of the Director of the Seaside Public Library, the new Director, Esther Moberg, has brought a high level of passion for and commitment to the project. Her new perspective and energy have helped to stimulate a number of new project developments during this third year, including: a shift in focus to joint automation planning designed to improve cooperative services between Seaside and Astoria libraries, made possible due to Seaside's exploration of migrating to cloud computing for its Integrated Library System; an expressed interest in possible project participation by the librarian at Warrenton Public Library; and a newly established quarterly schedule of gatherings by all of the coastal library leaders. Although a change to the courier services that facilitate interlibrary loans between Astoria and Seaside occurred when the volunteer who had been providing this service stopped, a short-term

solution has been put into place; Astoria is providing a staff person to drive a city vehicle until a longer term alternative can be found.

Project objectives: What was the project trying to accomplish?

The goal of the project is 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. This last objective has been formally dropped, although discussions about bookmobile services may prove a viable option in the future. Within the now three components of this goal, project staff have established milestones and benchmarks to measure their progress along the continuum of success and are on track to achieve (and in some cases, exceed) these targets.

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?

Project staff are carrying out their assigned duties aided by the substantial consultant service resources funding through LSTA. Grant tasks are distributed equitably between the two library leaders; Esther handles grant administrative report-writing with a streamlined process that gathers information and data at various levels, and Jane is responsible for bill paying and other fiscal matters.

All of the hurdles encountered during the earlier project years (e.g., lack of staff resources, limited access to classrooms, lack of support from city leaders, and misconceptions about the LSTA reimbursement process that affected cash flow) have become non-issues in year three, with one notable exception: the transportation barrier that prevents so many children from getting to the public library on their own. In a county where it can take two hours to travel by car from one town to either Seaside or Astoria, a lack of access to transportation and/or a parent willing to take a child to the public library has multiple negative consequences. For example, a child who does borrow library materials may be late in returning them. It can take only one late day to reach a point where borrowing privileges are blocked and fines accrue to become either a bone of contention between the parent and child or an economic burden among a rural population of high poverty. Each partnering library has different policies about fines and blocks. Future bookmobile services may help with access barriers, and a new idea about having *Amnesty Days*, to be underwritten by local corporate sponsors (e.g., Safeway) may prove successful in eliminating any fines that have caused library privileges to be canceled by a parent frustrated at a child's perceived "lack of library cardholder" responsibility.

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 successful statistical story about the numbers of families who have received their ROCC! Library Card; the numbers of programs and events that have been held; quantity of items that have been checked out by ROCC cardholders; and numbers of items that have been borrowed through the Seaside Astoria Share (reciprocal borrowing program). These outputs, while impressive, fail to adequately convey the many

outstanding outcomes of this collaborative effort to improve library services countywide. For outcomes, we must rely on other sources of evidence, such as the pictures taken of happy, smiling rural children participating in their first summer reading program; anecdotes about older children who have benefitted from the two previous project years and now confidently explain to their younger sibling how the library works, and recommend their favorite titles for checkout; the enormous benefits gained by an entire family, now able to visit and use the library together thanks to one little ROCC card; the responses to surveys that capture the project's impact; the changing (for the better) attitudes of city staff about the value of cooperation; the seamless, respectful way in which the project has been implemented (the only thing to distinguish a ROCC card from other library cards is an invisible special patron use code); and stories about how entire classrooms now erupt to cheer the announcement that the library visitor is here to talk about how to get a library card and/or summer reading. These are the true measures of project success that the partners are working so hard to sustain for the future.

"I don't ever want to go back to telling a child 'no, you can't have a library card'."

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 most important ROCC cards issued were to the children in grades K-3! With a little more time and support, we can make lifelong readers out of them."

The long-term significance of this project is its demonstration of the value of cooperative library services to taxpayers and elected officials. So much has been accomplished in this arena and a strong foundation for the future has been laid. The short-term impact of this is undeniable and this three-year cooperative effort has led to substantial gains for both libraries and a "new culture of collaboration." At a recently held sustainability meeting, the partners agreed they had proven the hypothesis that cooperation could work, and now was the time to "pay it forward" so future generations could benefit from the project's success. They discussed (and later analyzed with hypothetical budgets) what joint services could be continued without any outside funding. However, they agreed that the time is still not quite right to pitch ideas as costly as a tax measure put before voters to fund library services for county residents, or as radical as the formation of a library district, the purchase of a bookmobile to launch countywide services, or the politically challenging signing of a formal agreement to merge and/or consolidate library services. These possibilities still exist, but they are either still on the horizon or a twinkle in a library director's eye. A more modest undertaking is underway: the possibility of establishing either a private foundation or donor advised funds at The Oregon Community Foundation to "create a culture of education in Clatsop County."

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 give up just because the first two years are rough and the road to success seems long, winding, and exhausting. Managing a project like this is a lot like climbing a

mountain: In year one, you look up at the top and think you'll never do it. In year two, you are mid-way up, your legs hurt, you're suffering from altitude sickness and you're certain you're going to die. In year three, you are suddenly at the summit and exhilarated by the view. Hold out for that feeling of success; there's nothing quite like it.

- Forgive yourself for not being the perfect LSTA grantee. Lots of things won't go well, but don't beat yourself up about it. Communicate with State Library staff; ask for help; reconsider how the budget could be adjusted to support possible solutions to barriers; get permission to change approaches that aren't working; and celebrate the small achievements to keep forging ahead.
- Consultant expertise is critically important for libraries with small staffs. There's enormous flexibility in being able to assign human resources that are not subject to county job freezes or slow hiring practices.
- Focus on communicating the importance of tax-funded library services to the community residents as well as to the government leaders.