

NEWS RELEASE

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Libraries, Labor Partner to Give Youth Experience as Digital Literacy Coaches

Levi Burklund, 17, is just finishing up his summer job as a digital literacy coach at the Caldwell Public Library where he offered one-on-one help to library patrons with questions about how to use computers and what online education, job search and training programs are available.

At a time when it is notoriously hard for teens to find work, Burklund and 11 others were placed for the first time in libraries throughout Idaho as digital literacy coaches. The national unemployment rate for young people 16 to 19 was more than 25 percent in August. Hosting a digital literacy coach benefits libraries and the public, especially in small communities where the libraries have a single librarian trying to serve patrons who rely on the library as the community's central cultural and educational resource.

Over 70 percent of Idaho's public libraries are the only free source of Internet access in their communities. This year 56 of Idaho's least connected libraries are participating in the Idaho Commission for Libraries' "online @ your library" project, which includes computer upgrades, faster access to the Internet and online resources, free access to job skills training and adult basic education and informal learning resources for children.

When the Grangeville Centennial Library replaced "two old clunkers" with nine new computers, the news made the local papers, librarian Edie Lustig said. But as the library's single staffer, she juggles budgeting, cataloguing, keeping up with new releases and organizing library programs. She is not always able to answer all the computer questions asked by the 100 library patrons who visit on an average day.

"And if they can't get on the computers, they can't do job searches or even fill out unemployment forms," Lustig said. Digital literacy coaches offer a potentially invaluable resource for a library like hers, she said.

Elise Tuma, literacy coordinator at the East Bonner County Library in Sandpoint agreed. Coach Tabitha Stewart - now a student at North Idaho College - helped patrons learn to use email and write résumés using Microsoft Word templates. Those are simple tasks — unless you have never done them before and are not comfortable around computers.

Burklund, who, like many in his generation started learning computer-keyboarding skills in elementary school, recently earned his GED. He will start taking college classes soon. His library job in Caldwell helped him save for tuition, he said. Beyond the practical aspect, he likes the work.

"When a new question comes up that no one has asked before, it's a challenge. Everyone who visits the library is different," Burklund said. He will recommend the program to his friends.

The digital literacy coach program is part of Idaho's Summer Youth Corps, which provided jobs for more than 140 young Idahoans this summer. In addition to libraries, young people worked for private businesses, the U.S. Forest Service, state parks, farmers markets, school districts, and other organizations.

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The wages for the digital literacy coaches were paid with Idaho Department of Labor Workforce Investment Act funds and a federal Broadband Technology Opportunities Program grant received by the Idaho Commission for Libraries. The digital literacy coach program is open to students from low-income families. In addition to earning the minimum wage, students learn workplace skills like punctuality, initiative and strategies for developing good relationships with coworkers.

The feedback from local librarians has been positive, specifically when it comes to the "patience and care" young workers show library patrons, said Teresa Lipus, Idaho Commission for Libraries public information specialist.

Other programs funded through the partnership include workshops to introduce Idaho's librarians to Labor's job search services and the development of an online job search workbook and a series of video tips on how to look for work. The online module will be accessible from the department's website, labor.idaho.gov/jobsearch and on public access computers in libraries across the state.

"The goal of providing digital literacy coaches is to aid the unemployed as they work to increase their computer skills," State Librarian Ann Joslin said. "They help library users make the most of available training and e-government resources and serve as valuable assistance to local staff."

Morgan Sweener, the digital literacy coach at the Peck Community Library, became an integral part of the library this summer, librarian Doreen Schmidt said. Peck sits on the Clearwater River between Lewiston and Orofino. Its library has become a satellite of the town's one-room school, which serves 28 students in kindergarten through sixth grade. Many of those kids spend their afternoons at the library.

Sweener, 17, who recently left her job to start her freshman year at Lewis-Clark State College, not only helped kids with computer skills but also used the computer to broaden their cultural horizons.

"Many of the children in this community grow up never planning to go to college," Schmidt said. "Because Morgan was going, she helped them to start thinking about that as a possibility for themselves. She would click on the LCSC website, for example, and show students the classes she was going to take or where they could take practice tests to prepare for standardized tests."

Sweener was closer to being a peer to the students than a teacher, and that was an advantage, Schmidt said. Older adults would see Sweener working with young kids on computers and get inspired to do the same with their own children.

Without the program, the Peck library would not have had the resources to hire Sweener, Schmidt said. She hopes she will be able to find a new coach to continue Sweener's work. Organizers have extended the program through mid-November.

Students interested in serving as a digital literacy coach should contact their local Idaho Department of Labor Workforce Investment Act youth coordinator. A directory of local offices can be found on the upper right hand corner of Labor's website at labor.idaho.gov.

Librarians interested in hosting a digital literacy coach should contact the Idaho Commission for Libraries at (208) 334-2150.

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Editors / News Directors: Attached please find contact info for the libraries that hosted digital literacy coaches this year.

Idaho Libraries / Digital Literacy Coach Program Hosts

A list of libraries that hosted digital literacy coaches so far this year can be found below.

Clearwater Memorial Public Library, Orofino
Ellen Tomlinson; (208) 476-3411

Prairie-River District Library
Peck Community Library
Claudia Jones; (208) 843-7254

Twin Falls Public Library
Susan Ash; (208) 733-2964

Cascade Public Library
Robin Mayfield; (208) 382-4757

Garden City Public Library
Lisa Zeiter; (208) 472-2941

Burley Public Library
Julie Woodford; (208) 878-7708

Caldwell Public Library
Elaine Leppert; (208) 459-3242

Grangeville Centennial Library

Eddie Lustig; (208) 983-0951

DeMary Memorial Public Library, Rupert
Sharon Kimber; (208) 436-9719

Ada Community Library, Star
Mary DeWalt; (208) 362-0181

Wilder Public Library
Susan Waldemer; (208) 482-7880

East Bonner County Library, Sandpoint
Gina A. Emory; (208) 263-6930

Clearwater County Free Library District, Weippe
Terri Summerfield; (208) 435-4058