

EVALUATION SUMMARY – KOOTENAI-SHOSHONE AREA LIBRARIES
FROM YOUR LIBRARY

PEER EVALUATOR: JENNIFER HILL
TWIN FALLS PUBLIC LIBRARY

Grant: T07351-00

Evaluation Summary:

The “From Your Library” grant was conducted by the Kootenai-Shoshone Area Libraries from May 2007 through June 2008. Interviews with Library Director John Hartung, Outreach Coordinator Twylla Rehder, and Children’s Librarian Karen Yother, as well as reviews of the grant documents, assisted in the creation of the evaluation. Overall, the grant was successful in creating an outreach service that increased the library’s impact on the youngest at-risk members of its population, building relationships with families who need the library’s facilities the most, and creating a foundation for future outreach possibilities.

Project Objectives:

The grant’s intent was to develop an outreach service that helped to connect with underserved children through age 18 who were unable to utilize physical libraries in the area. Requests for outreach for this group had steadily increased from the branches of KSAL, which serves a large rural population. The project recognized that branches needed resources and support to conduct such programs, so three smaller goals were created to handle this: the development of deposit collections and book giveaway programs by a project coordinator, the creation of a network of partners that would serve as facilitators of the project, and a marketing strategy to help promote the project. The

result would be a program that helped the libraries connect to families and motivate children to read.

Project Method:

Library staff began by identifying geographical areas in which services for children were needed. Branches were asked to locate two potential partners within their service areas, including daycare providers, after-school programs, detention facilities, shelters, and other organizations who worked with families in need. It was preferred that facilities had a population of at least 8-10 children so that a greater number of children would be affected and so that the money invested in the program would be spent efficiently. Facilities that dealt with families as a whole were also preferred because library staff recognized that most underserved families had young children.

Two vehicles were purchased and modified for delivery of materials and programs. The two essentials of the main program – the deposit collection offered for borrowing and the books that would be given away free at programs – were also purchased. Most of the books were geared toward younger children, but a few materials appealing to older teens and adults were included as well.

A part-time coordinator was hired to satisfy the demands of the project's proposal. The coordinator would help develop the special borrowing collections, generate a series of programs that could be conducted at the different partner sites and at special events in the service area, and to coordinate the scheduling of the program with the main outreach program (which offered bookmobile service), the branches, and the partner sites.

Finally, a marketing strategy was established. Library staff wanted to appeal to children, so marketing materials were created especially for them. To that end, an animal was chosen to represent the outreach project. A kangaroo was chosen for its "pouch",

which could hold books. Posters, programs, banners, and other materials were produced and distributed within the area, advertising the new services and promoting the library.

Project Results:

According to answer C of the grant's Project Narrative, the outcomes for this project were to see an increase in the motivation of children to read, especially children who did not have easy access to the library. This outcome was to be seen in the number of children who received library cards and the number of children who attended programs and thus received free books. Although the idea of motivation is harder to measure in concrete terms, feedback indicated that the grant was successful in getting materials to a greater number of at-risk children in the area, as well as giving them access to other library resources.

The results were measured by feedback from families and partners, the attendance at programs, the numbers of new library cards, and observations and indirect interviews made by library staff. Although it is hard to determine whether or not the actual goal of increasing children's motivation was accomplished, library staff reported that they saw an increase in the number of children and families they saw over the course of the grant. Library staff also reported that they witnessed more interaction through reading among parents and children.

Among partners, response was also positive. As a result of the initial investigation into community partners, the branch libraries found more organizations willing to participate than they had resources for. There were often problems in terms of communication; partners sometimes looked to their local branch for information, rather

than contacting the central KSAL outreach coordinator. However, most sites reported that the programs and book giveaways were popular and appealed to the families they served.

Success for the program in terms of how families felt about the library was evaluated mostly by observation and anecdotes. Written surveys proved to be intimidating to some parents, especially those who had literacy issues of their own. The number of new cards issued was an indicator, as were updates of current information, since many at-risk families move often.

Success as determined by the branches has been mixed. Some appreciated the support and resources made available to them. Others felt that miscommunication and the added workload had more of a negative effect. Overall, most thought that the connections that they made with other branches, families, and partner facilities were positive.

The results are generally encouraging, but perhaps do not fully reflect the true objective of the project. The main goal involved more than just a subjective intent to motivate children to read. The outreach project definitely delivered programs and materials to more children than had access prior to the grant, and that, coupled with the relationships they built with KSAL, will help to build on this motivation in the future.

Project Impact:

Looking at the long term effects, the project has provided a foundation for future outreach. As a consequence of the program, more families from different geographical areas have come into the library, utilizing the cards they signed up for during the grant period. With just the bookmobile, the library was limited to the defined service area. The outreach project allowed them to go beyond this area and offer support and collaboration with branches. Branches can now offer a better understanding of their own communities

in identifying the areas that need service, providing a critical component to the outreach KSAL now does. These programs now continue on a smaller basis, thanks to the library Board, which has agreed to additional budget support. The outreach programs are growing; the numbers for outreach are increasing faster than in-house numbers, which means more children are now reached through the bookmobile and other outreach than inside the library.

Word of mouth has generated buzz in the community and given potential partners reasons to begin dialogue with the library. The programs created are still used by the partner facilities, which were allowed to keep some of the materials generated during the year. Marketing and publicity has also helped to build trust in library services as children are quick to recognize the library's branding and to tie that into the relationships they have with library staff.

Regionally, positive comments from partners within the community have inspired more people in the service area and beyond to call into local libraries for information on current programs. Library staff has also done presentations at conferences to share their experiences with other libraries and organizations. They report that they have had a number of requests for more information about the project, and are looking at ways to share with even more groups.

Project in Retrospect:

For the most part, staff involved with the grant have come away from the project with a feeling of success. Although they reported a big learning curve for the project in which their expectations and objectives had to be adjusted as the project unfolded, they

felt that the project met the original objectives. The priority was in meeting the needs of the population they identified as underserved, and changes were made as needed.

Some of the changes that they would have made to the project involved more planning at the beginning, including getting the marketing strategy started right away rather than toward the end of the grant. Difficulties also arose as the different parties (library outreach staff, branches, daycare facilities) felt unsure about whose responsibility it was to supervise the collection. They also mentioned that they would have strengthened the evaluation process, ensuring better pre- and post- evaluation feedback.

In terms of the free books, library staff reported that they would have liked to have purchased more materials, especially those that would have appealed to a wider age range. Although the giveaway program was geared for younger children, the project led to a focus on young adult books as well, with branches now growing their teen programming. Some children also struggled with the difference between the free books and the special borrowing collection. Staff would have liked to have managed that misunderstanding slightly better, but this dilemma started conversations about the purpose of the library with children and parents.

Finally, help from the Commission was not necessarily needed as they worked through the grant, but they felt that the Commission was responsive to their needs and concerns prior to the grant and whenever they were asked.

Evaluator

Date