

WORCESTER PUBLIC LIBRARY

BACKGROUND

The city of Worcester is located in central Massachusetts, 40 miles west of Boston and 50 miles east of Springfield. The Worcester Public Library ("WPL") is a large municipal library consisting of one main library located in downtown Worcester, six branches (4 School Branches and 2 neighborhood branches) and two mobile libraries with total holdings of 830,143 items. As part of an initiative called One City One Library "OCOL" four of the WPL branches are located inside public schools located in each quadrant of the city. The Main Library also houses the Worcester Talking Books Library. The Library serves a population of 184,211 while also attracting patrons from other CWMARS member libraries. In the city of Worcester, the median income for 2013 - 2017 was $45,869. Of the city's population, 21.8% are persons living in poverty. In 2017, 55% of students in Worcester Public Schools spoke a language other than English as their first language.

WPL offers a variety of collections and resources for its patrons and community members, including print, audiovisual, and digital materials for all ages and interests; local history and genealogy materials; small business resources; and world language, English learning, and citizenship materials. It is also the largest selective Federal depository library in Central Massachusetts. Furthermore, WPL circulates Wi-Fi hotspots, ereaders, telescopes, tablets for kids and teens, and more. WPL provides programs and services for all ages, such as access to social services with its community partnerships. WPL also provides spaces to encourage community collaboration and foster lifelong learning for its diverse population. Collections, programs, and services designed specifically for kids, teens and families contribute to the education and literacy efforts in the city.

The most popular services offered by WPL include material lending, especially DVDs, books, and Wi-Fi hotspots. WPL offers holds pick up at any branch including the mobile libraries. Also popular are the library's resume and employment services; social services; services for New Americans; early literacy and other youth and family programming; and summer reading initiatives for all ages. WPL also provides regular library service to all elementary schools in the city through either its mobile services arm, or through its unique OCOL initiative.

Since Project SET began in 2015 the Worcester Public Library has had four staff members participate in the program - Rebecca Folb (2015), Rachel Moir (2016), Amy Klein (2016), and Alex London (2017).



ISSUES FACED

Worcester Public Library saw an opportunity for their staff's participation in Project SET. From the beginning, the program sounded like a great learning opportunity for young professionals to participate in. Project SET provided participants with skills and practice in presentation and training. The project format allowed the Worcester staff to research areas of interest to them and the library, and the "real life" experience provided a professional development opportunity for the participants that was also useful for the sponsoring library.

Prior to their participation in the program, WPL recognized a need for training in public speaking skills for their staff. Communication and public speaking had become an essential skill for all librarians, especially for staff who just entered the profession and had not had time to develop those skills. For example, while a Children's Librarian is typically comfortable presenting a program to children or teens, confidence in presenting information to a group of peers had been a different challenge. WPL is a large library, and it is often important that the one or two people who attended a workshop or conference be able to share something from the experience with their colleagues. The WPL values the opportunity to support its staff in the pursuit of professional development and is always looking for ways to help staff build their professional skills, particularly in ways that are meaningful to them. This culture of support benefits the library by developing staff who are comfortable presenting, training, or advocating for the library. When teen librarian Rachel Moir was part of the Project SET cohort, she was able to look into online privacy attitudes among teens, a timely topic that was of interest to her. That effort then informed her work with the teens at WPL. Another example is when their reference librarian Amy Klein participated in Project SET, her project focused on the hot topic of lending non-traditional materials; this research has been helpful to the WPL as they look at what materials they might add to their own collections.

Over the course of their participation in this program the WPL has gone through many staff and administrative changes, but support for professional development has remained a constant value for Worcester.

ACTIONS

Accommodating a staff member's participation in Project SET can be a challenge. For the Worcester Public Library, that challenge was scheduling. The WPL supported staff participation in the program by accommodating the time needed to attend required meetings at the MLS office. These changes impacted other staff at the library who were called on to change their schedules and to assist in covering additional branch locations. In some cases, the WPL had to go without. For example to accommodate another staff member's participation at Project SET meetings, the library had to run their bookmobile without a degreed librarian onboard. Even the library's usual programming schedule had to be adjusted for the day of the annual meeting.

During the program, supervisors at WPL took an interest in what their staff was learning and engaged them in discussion. In one example, a supervisor agreed to be interviewed for one of the assignments. In another example, one participant was able to share the research on their project topic with their supervisor and passed on their knowledge of the subject.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES

For the staff who have participated in Project SET and their supervisors, the experience in this program has been a positive one. Worcester has seen their staff members grow both during and after participation in the program. They have demonstrated more confidence when giving a presentation or speaking to a group. Participating in Project SET also gave them a better perspective on what was trending in Massachusetts libraries as well as the challenges other libraries and librarians were facing. They gained professional confidence from the experience and connected with librarians from across the state.

Being able to attend the Annual Meeting and to see their staff members present their project to a room full of professionals was a deeply satisfying moment for WPL supervisors. The confidence and poise each participant demonstrated was a showcase of the skills they had developed over the course of the program.

After Project SET, several of the WPL participants have used their public speaking skills and knowledge of library trends. Since their participation, they have represented the library by advocating for libraries at the state house, conducting effective community outreach, and running successful library programs and classes.

NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

In the first couple of years during Project SET, last minute schedule changes added additional challenges for the Worcester Library. The staff at the Massachusetts Library System acknowledges the extra challenges these changes caused in the first year or two of the program and has since selected all meeting dates in advance of accepting applicants to allow time for schedule planning. For some, presenting was a challenge that proved nerve-wracking, but the fact that they were able to do so successfully is a testament to the program goals.

LESSONS LEARNED

As a result of this program Worcester has learned that despite the challenges presented by having to readjust the library's staffing schedule, participation in the program reinforced the value delivered by investing in staff members' professional development.

The information from this case study was collected from several sources including interviews with staff members at the Worcester Public Library Cynthia Bermudez, Paula Korstvedt, Pingsheng Chen, the 2017 ARIS report, and the US Census.