

Project Proposal for ARPA Grant Application
Oshkosh Public Library – Community Resources Navigator

Background

Enactment of the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) in March created an opportunity for Oshkosh Public Library to seek funds to address community needs for recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. In March, Library managers reached out to contacts in partner agencies in the Oshkosh area to ask for input on community needs and for ideas about Library service responses. At the same time, a new group eleven of Wisconsin city libraries – the City Library Collective (CLC) – began exploring a joint grant application for ARPA funds to be administered by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). ARPA funding is also being distributed to Wisconsin municipalities. The project proposal idea described here has also submitted to the City of Oshkosh for consideration for support from its ARPA allotment.

Need

Discussions with local leaders, Wisconsin DPI staff, and our statewide public library colleagues have identified a need to make it easier for people who are in crisis, or who have chronic life struggles, to connect to existing community support services. Winnebago County communities have a rich range of services and resources – governmental and non-governmental -- that are poised to help people in need. The Winnebago County Human Services Department and the Fox Cities United Way (which administers the 211 telephone hotline) are lead agencies in this area for connecting people with support services. Even so, there is consensus among our partners and contacts that more access points for referral to services are needed and would benefit the community.

Proposed Service Response

We are proposing a one-year pilot project to make the Oshkosh Public Library more capable of assisting patrons to connect with services for meeting psychosocial needs, especially in several key areas: financial, mental health, housing, substance abuse, medical or health-related, and employment-related. The Library's efforts to increase its capacity to connect patrons with needed services will proceed on three tracks:

1. Hire a limited term employee with social work education and experience to fill a position called "Community Resources Navigator." The person in this position would provide direct assistance and referral services to Library patrons, and would also lend advice and assistance with other projects to increase Library capacity in this area.
2. Increase the knowledge, skills, and confidence of all front-line Library employees to effectively connect patrons with community services that will help them. Provide appropriate training and coaching for Library employees as they work to gain knowledge, skills, and confidence in this area of service. Incorporate this facet of Library public service into a new customer service model which is currently under development.

3. Improve the Library's knowledgebase of information to be used in making informed, effective referrals to services that will help Library patrons in need.

Desired Outcomes

Several of the CLC Libraries are pursuing community recovery responses similar to the Community Services Navigator. A key opportunity arising from this collaborative approach is development of a common set of outcome measures. These may be used not only to assess results in multiple communities, but to demonstrate wider regional or statewide impact, and also to serve as benchmarks for other (non-CLC) libraries that may decide on a similar service response to COVID-19 recovery needs in their communities.

CLC libraries are working with a data analyst at WiLS to develop shared outcome measures for our COVID-19 recovery services responses. WiLS is a non-profit agency that provides consulting, project management, and other services to advance library service, primarily in the state of Wisconsin.

While the outcome measures are yet to be determined, we expect that they will focus on the value patrons receive from the Community Services Navigator and other public service employees – i.e., effective connection to community resources; friendliness and/or helpfulness of Library staff; and whether they would consider using the service again in the future. We also envision outcome measures for staff, focused on the increase of their knowledge, skills, and confidence in helping patrons connect to community resources.

Projected Costs

A preliminary estimate of Oshkosh Public Library's one-year pilot project, based upon salaries of similar positions that have been created by other Wisconsin public libraries (L.E. Phillips Library in Eau Claire, and Racine Public Library), is \$100,000.

We propose to seek half of that amount from ARPA funds administered by the DPI and half from ARPA funds administered by the City of Oshkosh. If those funds are secured, we would be interested in seeking additional funds to extend the pilot period to two years. While our initial proposal is for a one-year project, we believe that adding an additional year would give the Library a better test of the efficacy of the service.