CASE STUDY

# Belén Public Library

## Accessible Small and Rural Communities

**Location**
Belén, New Mexico

**Staff Size**
7

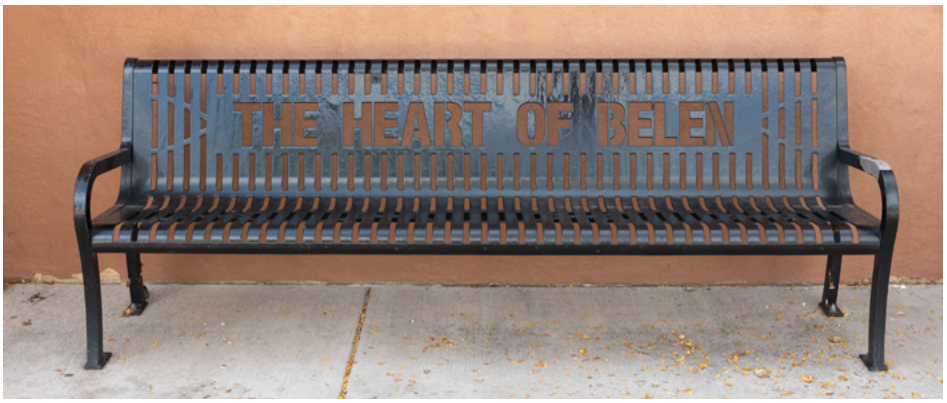
**Population**
7,360

The Belén Public Library is one of several municipal buildings in the center of the city of Belén, New Mexico (population 7,360). *"It's a small town, so we don't have a lot of services,"* says library director Dr. Kathleen Pickering. To build on its reputation as *"ground central for resources and connections,"* in recent years, the library has committed itself to becoming more accessible to patrons with disabilities. Through two rounds of LTC: Accessible Small and Rural Communities funding, the library has made significant progress toward their goal of becoming *"a safe place"* where everyone can *"come and get information"*—including people with mobility disabilities, low vision or blindness, hearing loss, or who are neurodivergent.

### GETTING STARTED

Pickering first became aware of the LTC Access initiative in 2023, just as the library was working on a new strategic plan. At the time, she recalls, accessibility *"wasn't really being discussed in our city in general."* Her thought was that by taking the lead on this issue, the library would not only better serve the community, but also *"raise the consciousness of others."*

To learn more about existing accessibility barriers, Pickering began attending events featuring members of the local disability community. She and her staff also began engaging library




A bench outside the building refers to the library as "The Heart of Belén." As director Kathleen Pickering notes, the library is *"ground central for resources and connections"* throughout the area.

patrons with disabilities, asking what would make their facilities and services more accessible. A number of these individuals (along with staff members who identify as disabled) soon became part of an official Accessibility Task Force, which was given the job of *"dissecting our different programs and asking, 'Well, what about this program might be a barrier'?"*

After receiving their first LTC grant, the library built on this positive momentum by hosting a community conversation. In addition to hearing from local residents with disabilities, the library also received input from a number of organizations with expertise in the provision of disability-related services—including the New Mexico chapter of the National Federation of the Blind, the Adelante Development Center, and the Special Orchestra (a nonprofit music organization). The process of gathering formal input helped the library hone in on patrons' specific needs, and got them moving beyond square one. Speaking to the event's impact, Pickering remembers that *"When I first got involved, I was very much thinking about ADA compliance."* After the community conversation, she and her staff began to realize that adherence to legal standards is only one part of what it means to be an accessible institution. Armed with community input, the library then launched a multi-pronged campaign designed to enhance accessibility along a number of different fronts.

## IMPROVING PHYSICAL ACCESS

Many of the ideas shared during the library's first community conversation had to do with physical access. A first step was improving what Pickering calls *"the entrance experience,"* which sets the tone for visitors coming in and (on a more practical level) communicates the library's hours. The New Mexico Federation for the Blind helped the library update the braille on the entryway sign. Upon entering the building, patrons have the ability to pick from a variety of tools meant to help with accessibility, such as book holders (made on the library's own 3D printers), bookmarks with magnifying strips, grips that can be used with knitting needles and other tools, and other items like calculators with large buttons. Pickering regards these changes as one of the library's major LTC accomplishments. And patrons agree. *"When I first came in," one says, "I was amazed."*

Improved wayfinding is another way the library has sought to reduce physical access barriers. With LTC funding, the library installed large, high-contrast signs throughout the building—including in the stacks. These signs have received positive feedback from patrons, who feel empowered to explore the

With its new large-print, high-contrast signs in place, the library has empowered patrons to more easily find books on their own.

library's collection, and staff, who say that the new signs make it easier for people with hearing loss to find materials on their own (rather than needing to interact with a staff member). These changes are also helpful to staff who have mobility disabilities or are otherwise not able to walk with a patron to their area of interest.

The library's collections manager, Jo Anne Gallegos, notes that large print books are definitely circulating more since the new signs were installed—something that has inspired the library to invest more in this collection. They have also been purchasing more books that center disability, including graphic novels for teens. Examples of these include *The Impending Blindness of Billie Scott* by Zoe Thorogood, *A Pros and Cons List for Strong Feelings* by Will Betke-Brunswick, and *Sensory: Life on the Spectrum, an anthology edited* by Bex Ollerton.

These upgrades were just the beginning of the library's effort to improve physical access. With LTC funds, staff have also purchased adjustable-height tables with reading lamps, easily accessible cubicles and chairs, and book stands that make sitting and reading more comfortable than before. The library also offers seat cushions and weighted lap pads, which can soothe, help improve focus, and provide weight and pressure (something that is often beneficial to those with sensory sensitivities).

Along with these improvements, the library's computer stations now feature high-contrast keyboards and easy-to-handle mice. Patrons can also make use of a number of new assistive technologies, including:

- Cuffs and grip aids that make it easier to hold everyday objects like silverware or hairbrushes;
- C-Pens, which read scanned text aloud (in English and in Spanish) and are helpful for dyslexia and other related learning disabilities;
- Personal amplifiers that make it easier to participate in

One of the many assistive technologies now available at the library are EaZyHold grips, which make it easier to hold everday objects.

As part of an effort to add more assistive technologies to the library, staff purchased a ClearView optical magnifier.

conversations by boosting the volume of nearby speakers and reducing background noise;
- Blue light glasses, which help reduce eyestrain when using a computer;
- Writing aids, which help people with limited hand mobility write more comfortably; and
- LED-lighted magnifying lenses, which eliminate shadows, improve contrast, and make objects and text easier to read while reducing eye strain.

The library also purchased software that provides screen magnification, screen reading, and visual enhancements, and an optical magnifier that can be used on books, photos, games, and other everyday objects. Staff have embraced using the magnifier personally, for things like magnifying a cross-stitch pattern, and have assisted patrons with activities like enlarging the coins in a personal collection.

Adding these assistive technologies has encouraged staff to step outside of their comfort zones. Speaking about the optical magnifier, Sherry Baca (Belén's Children's Librarian) shares that *"I have to learn how to help them use it to make it more accessible."* As Pickering notes, *"You can't just say, 'Oh, bought it. Check.' You've got to keep up with this."*

## TRAINING, PROGRAMS, AND PARTNERSHIPS

As the library's experience with assistive technologies indicates, the process of becoming more accessible has facilitated considerable organizational learning. While their own personal experiences with ADHD, dyslexia, and neurodivergence have helped staff understand and respond to the needs of disabled patrons, training has also been a critical part of the library's accessibility work. *"Everyone's been very supportive of the idea,"* Pickering says. To help staff learn and keep up to speed, the library used LTC funds to invest in resources like Transparent Languages, which staff members have used to complete ASL training.

These efforts have filtered into the programs Belén offers—along with the different resources made available throughout the library. The ASL alphabet is now posted in the children's area, where Baca hosts an ASL for Toddlers program. And as staff have become more comfortable with signing, more people from the Deaf community have begun showing up. *"They get very excited when they come in,"* one staff member says, *"and I can talk to them about what they need to do and they're like, 'Oh, you sign!'"*

The LTC grant has also made it possible for staff to take advantage of other professional

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development opportunities. After completing a training course, Jessica Rodgers (Belén's Lead Librarian & Teen Librarian) began regularly scheduling "sensory days" for neurodivergent teens. On these days, she communicates rules (for example, "keep voices to a whisper") on a whiteboard, dims the lights, and uses a combination of visual materials (including posters) to gather information about the types of programs patrons want. Here too, the library is seeing increased usage. Before the grant, Rodgers notes, only a few teens would come to the library most afternoons. Now, the average is closer to 20.

Some of the library's new programs have come about through partnerships. Connections with the Adelante Development Center (which runs a day program for people with disabilities) have led the library to host a variety of musical programs every month. One example of this is Tony DeNardo's PopUpShow, which offers underserved residents in Belén and the surrounding area opportunities to witness *"the intrinsic magic of live music."* *"It's a community party,"* one patron says: *"they invite you to participate!"* During these events, Pickering often passes out shakers to program participants who are not partnered up dancing, and even takes a spin herself. Speaking to the importance of coming together to enjoy live music, one participant says that *"the library is essential for our community."*

## IMPACTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Receiving an LTC grant has been hugely beneficial for the library. Internally, LTC funding has strengthened staff relationships and organizational cohesion. *"This was an awesome project because it really helped us learn how to work as a team,"* Pickering says. *"The whole library staff knows what's going on, what's their piece of it, and how we can diffuse accessibility through*

Participants dancing during a live music program hosted by the library and the Adelante Development Center.

*everything we do."* Through their training and programming experiences, Baca says, staff *"are more accepting"* and *"aware."* As Pickering puts it, *"It's more of a mindset that we have now that we didn't before. It's really about building relationships with people so they feel comfortable,"* she adds. *"Once you start thinking about it, it's not that hard!"* Indeed, as they gained confidence and new abilities, the library's accessibility work *"started being really fun."*

The library's new perspective on accessibility has filtered into all of its work—including things well beyond the scope of its LTC grant. Through conversations with blind and low vision patrons, staff have learned how important it is not to move furniture around. Another small adjustment has been to make sure that the library's lights flash whenever an alarm goes off in the building, so deaf patrons also become aware of the emergency. Broader messages about inclusivity can be seen throughout the building—from a banner in the children's area emblazoned with the words "Everyone Belongs" to a desk in one area of the library with a coloring sheet, colored pencils, and a sign that says "Stressed? Take a break! Try our Community Puzzles."

All of these changes have garnered significant support from the community. As an example of this, Pickering discusses another music program improved through the library's new partnerships and perspectives on accessibility: guitar lessons. After seeing all the library was doing for patrons with disabilities, a mother decided to enroll her autistic son in the program. As Pickering explains: *"He felt safe here, so he participated."*

Experiences like this have become common at the library. *"I love the new communities that are being built among people in and out of the disability community because of the library,"* Pickering says. *"We have people now using the library that weren't regulars before we started on the grant,"* she continues, reflecting on how through community networks, people have learned they *"can come here and be supported"*—instead of having *"any of those visceral reactions that might make people feel uncomfortable in a space. So, I really take that as a big measure that we've done*

Pickering and her team are transforming the library into a fully accessible institution, where all visitors feel safe, valued, and able to participate in the life of the community.

*"If we can support our community and help them become more resilient,"* Pickering adds, *"then when anything happens, people already know how to work together and they've already got a good sense of the support that's here."*

*a good job and that we're going to keep working towards doing better,"* she says.

Efforts to improve library accessibility have also gotten the attention of other organizations in the community and led to an even broader shift. Another town department, for example, lowered their countertops after learning about the improvements the library had made to their service area. In addition to improving the library, Pickering says, she and her staff are helping to *"raise the consciousness of other departments."*

## NEXT STEPS

In the coming years, Pickering and her team are planning to build on the positive momentum they have created through their LTC grants. Some of the biggest future opportunities will be helping improve access through new and improved technologies. "*Young people with disabilities want to be part of the technology [of] today,"* Pickering explains, *"not the technology of 20 years ago."*

Baca adds that *"sustainability and resilience are [also] important issues"* for rural libraries like Belén. *"We have a lot of natural disasters here, floods mainly, but also high winds and heat stroke and everything else. This affects everyone."* Agreeing with this, Pickering notes that in the case of a disaster, the library would be a critical resource in helping people to seek the information and technology assistance they need.

The library also intends to continue growing its network. *"So many community members are supportive of these other organizations and so the synergy just keeps growing,"* says Pickering. Now that they have made considerable progress building partnerships, they are unlikely to stop. *"If we can support our community and help them become more resilient,"* she adds, *"then when anything happens, people already know how to work together and they've already got a good sense of the support that's here."* That is her vision for making the library an accessible institution for generations to come.

### ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

Written by Knology, a non-profit research organization that leverages social science to drive positive change. Knology's approach to research is not just theoretical—we work alongside highly networked organizations (including professional associations, media creators, libraries, museums, game developers, and community groups) to simultaneously study and solve real world challenges in real time. Through research, evaluation, convenings, and capacity building workshops, our transdisciplinary team of social scientists, writers, and educators helps professionals improve their ability to facilitate understanding and advance public conversation. Our work empowers education and communications professionals through research-based insights, tools, and resources that can be used to amplify impacts and generate shared community understandings that open new pathways to action.