



# FOSTERING CREATIVE COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## BACKGROUND

Funded by a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Public Library Association (PLA) launched a pilot project that supported four libraries in Knight Foundation communities to bring short stories to unexpected places via a machine called the Short Story Dispenser, a creation of French publisher, Short Édition. The project, Fostering Creative Community Connections (FCCC), aimed to increase public awareness for libraries, while renewing interest in literacy and literature, and increasing civic engagement through community outreach, partnerships and empowerment of emerging literary voices.

The grant funding was used to deploy the story dispensers and support a complementary writing contest, both of which were successfully completed in less than a year. PLA recruited a strong pool of applicants from Knight communities from which to choose four pilot participants: the Akron–Summit County Public Library (Akron, OH); the Richland Library (Columbia, SC); the Free Library of Philadelphia (PA); and the Wichita (KS) Public Library. More than 48,000 stories were printed in seven months across 12 dispensers in four communities—leading to more than 137,000 moments of literary joy. PLA exceeded its goal for submissions in the contest; and libraries in four Knight communities benefited from social and traditional media interest in the project.

Stories originated from Short Édition’s collection of 80,000 one-, three- and five-minute stories and was increased to include local stories. All libraries involved call the project a success, resulting in stronger partnerships, broadened community engagement, and a renewed understanding of the value of the public library by their communities.



The following summaries highlight the current status of each library in regard to the project, as well as specific thoughts on staffing, community partners, successes and recommendations.

## CURRENT STATUS

Library contacts report that the FCCC project was a success in all four pilot locations. All four chose to renew multi-year contracts with Short Édition to explore new and deeper partnerships, and increased impact on their communities. In some instances, the impact of the Short Story Dispensers had been so significant that libraries felt an obligation to their partners to continue—the Short Story Dispensers had become fixtures in their communities.

In 2020, COVID's impact on libraries ranged from staffing issues, including layoffs and furloughs, to determining new protocols for safe materials handling and building reopenings. The four pilot libraries also had to consider the future of their Short Story Dispenser investments.

Short Édition was quick to help solve that with the development of “Touchless Covers,” clear covers that affix over the story dispenser panel, allowing for motion-activated buttons on the dispenser.



Libraries then worked to re-define high traffic areas in light of local shutdowns, and subsequently relocate some of the machines. As these libraries work to reposition themselves long-term in a post-COVID environment, new questions emerge on how they can strengthen community partnerships and continue to be catalysts for community engagement.

## STAFFING

Representatives of the four participating libraries were asked about staffing the FCCC project, in terms of expectations, support and advice. Each took varying approaches with staff involvement to implement the FCCC projects in their libraries, with mixed results. Two used an “all hands on deck” strategy for the launch and then decreased involvement once installed. Two used a minimal approach both for launch and long term. Project management and communications functions were employed in every case, while only some employed IT staff, branch staff and management.

### >> Wichita Public Library

Wichita (KS) Public Library used eight to ten people to get the project underway with about three hours/week each devoted to it. This period lasted roughly 12 weeks and included set-up of new machines and related troubleshooting by the digital services manager, press events, contest promotion and social media outreach by the communications manager, and participation in grant meetings. Library director Cynthia Berner (now retired) wrote the grant and helped to get the project off the ground initially, but then handed off the project to Julie Sherwood, Education and Engagement Manager, who managed staff and also worked externally to liaise with community partners.

Once up and running, minimal time was needed: mainly from delivery staff who reloaded paper and checked on the machines. Sherwood says that beyond the launch, “there are weeks when almost nothing happens. If you average it out, it probably comes to a quarter hour a week. It’s been very manageable,” she adds, and is about the commitment they had anticipated.

“We were deliberately pretty passive once they were up and running,” adds Berner. Although the team contemplated doing additional promotion around the Short Story Dispensers, other projects took precedence. “But what I think what that showed us,” says Berner, “is that just having the installation creates value in and of itself. Anything above that is a value-add.”

## >> Akron–Summit County Public Library

Pam Hickson–Stevenson, Director, Akron–Summit County Public Library (Akron, OH), wrote the grant and served as point person for the project. She included several staff members on the as she prepared for the launch, including the IT department, used for set-up of machines, and a marketing director, who ran an initial press conference. All managers helped promote it via social media and other communications vehicles, and staff members were asked to maintain the machines. Once the Short Story Dispensers were up and running, about 1 to 2 hours weekly was required, with one location at a transit hub being most busy. Director Pam Hickson–Stevenson admits that in hindsight, she realized that she should have delegated her role to a staff member. She is hopeful that going forward, she will be able to select a point person suited to the community engagement aspects that the Short Story Dispenser commands.

## >> Free Library of Philadelphia

For the Free Library of Philadelphia (PA), staffing constraints proved to be the biggest challenge. Four staff members assisted with the launch, including communications staff, a library coordinator and a deputy director, each devoting three hours weekly. After the launch only two remained on the project: the deputy director and a library coordinator. While they admit that the machines are low maintenance and self-sufficient, they regret not having the capacity to involve staff. “On a programmatic front, I would like to give 10–15% of someone’s time,” said Andrew Nurkin, Deputy Director. “It should be on someone’s job description.” He adds that because the project was one of many the library had undertaken simultaneously, it did not get deserved attention in communities, despite getting a lot of press coverage.

## >> Richland Library

The Richland Library (Columbia, SC) also employed a small number of staff to implement the FCCC project. Tony Tallent, former Chief Program and Innovation Officer, served as the project lead and wrote the grant. The small team comprised the marketing director and programming staff, which functioned as an advisory team. Among the unique things that happened in Richland was the development of an “open lab, where both library staff and patrons could view and use the machines and ask questions. This created interest for library staff at all levels, as well as in the community. He suggests that libraries have a point person and he says “it’s smart to have a handful of staff who know how it works and also get the spirit of it.” An FAQ was created to help keep staff informed. “It’s so easy to teach,” he adds. “Basically, all you need to know is how to load the paper. You plug it in and about three minutes later, it’s ready to go.”

## COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND ENGAGEMENT

Representatives of the four participating libraries were asked if the FCCC project had allowed them to form any new collaborations or strengthen existing relationships.

### >> Wichita Public Library

Staff at Wichita Public Library has been wanting to reach local veterans to share services available in the area. Veterans were a group that proved difficult to reach, and previous attempts to work with Dole Veterans Administration Hospital had not been successful. The Short Story Dispenser concept changed that, and administrators there were enthusiastic about hosting a dispenser on premise. Unfortunately, this initial placement did not prove fruitful: instead of being showcased in a highly-trafficked area, the Short Story Dispenser was in a waiting room that was not often used. Additional issues were with visibility: some complained the type was too small. Finally, hospital hours, which did not include weekends, further limited usage.

Although Sherwood and her team eventually made the decision to relocate this machine, they are calling this a win. “All that aside,” said Sherwood, “it did draw us into a closer partnership with the VA community. “Since the introduction to the VA via the Short Story Dispenser, the library is now part of a community group of organizations that provide services to veterans. In addition, a representative from the VA has begun programming at the library.”

### >> Akron–Summit County Public Library

While Akron–Summit is most proud of the number of people the Short Story Dispenser impacts at their Transit Hub, it’s the Akron–Canton Airport location that has helped forge a new relationship. “This project enabled us to strengthen our community partnerships,” says Hickson–Stevenson. “The airport executives were thrilled with this collaboration, as were we. It’s not always easy to figure out how to collaborate with one’s local airport! Perceptions of the users have been very positive.”

### >> Richland Library

Richland made a key change in the direction of the project early on. “We didn’t anticipate such quick interest in the community, and found local companies and agencies requesting to be hosts for a Short Story Dispenser,” said Tallent. “Two locations in particular have been very successful—Drip Coffee on Main and The Mast General Store. Neither of these locations were on our original plan, though both have become great partners in this endeavor.”



## >> Free Library of Philadelphia

An impressive partnership that arose from FCCC was the “Philly Storied City” project in Philadelphia. A collaboration of the Free Library of Philadelphia, Short Édition, and a range of local writing and literacy organizations, as well as Temple University, Penn State University and the Knight Foundation, the project seeks to place short stories, poetry and creative non-fiction written by Philadelphia residents into the hands of Philadelphia residents via the Short Story Dispenser. Philadelphians are invited to submit works of 8,000 words or less through a website (<https://short-edition.com/en/contest/philly-storied-city-2020>) to be considered for publication online and in Short Story Dispensers placed throughout the city. The project focused on calling attention to diverse voices and connecting local organizations promoting social justice values.

## SUCCESSES AND BEST PRACTICES

Representatives were asked to share what they were most proud of during the project, as well as best practices for other libraries. In every case, participants felt that the FCCC initiative was a success, better connecting their library to hard-to-reach audiences and their communities as a whole, and showcasing their libraries in new ways to both new and existing audiences. Highlights include:

## >> Akron–Summit County Public Library

Pam Hickson–Stevenson of Akron–Summit cites a Short Story Dispenser stationed at the local Transit Hub in downtown Akron as a success of the project. “In a smaller, Midwest city like Akron, we are so car-intensive,” she explains. “Many of the people are riding the bus because they can’t afford a car. There is a disparity between people who take public transit and those who come to the library in cars.” Short Story Dispenser allows the library to meet this hard-to-reach segment of the population where they are—literally. “The fact that the library could provide three minutes of escape through reading—where you didn’t have to check anything out, or worry about getting it back, you didn’t have a special electronic device to read it. It was on a piece of paper. You could keep it, you could share it or you could throw it away—was a great way of reinforcing the importance of the joy of reading in a way that required so little of the people who used it.”



## >> Free Library of Philadelphia

Alex Bender, library coordinator at the Free Library of Philadelphia, focused on how the Short Story Dispenser takes the service of his library far beyond his city: "...our presence in the Philadelphia Airport means that someone getting on a plane to London can grab a story and be connected to the Free Library of Philadelphia. We're able to reach across the waters. This is a spin that maybe other libraries don't have."

His counterpart, Andrew Nurkin, Deputy Director for Enrichment and Civic Engagement, emphasizes that impact can be more meaningful than impressions. The Short Story Dispenser at Philadelphia's Department of Human Services (DHS) waiting room has the lowest usage of all three deployed there, but, it's reaching an important segment of Philadelphians: children in the foster system who are there awaiting stressful appointments, either supervised visits with their family of origin or to meet with social workers. Reports from DHS staff suggest the interactions around the stories have been very positive for youth and their families.

"Compared to the airport, we have seen a smaller number of interactions at DHS, of course—maybe we have had 30,000 at the airport, compared to only 2,000 at DHS," commented Nurkin. "Yet every time the button is pressed there, that story reaches the hands of someone who is in a challenging situation. For five minutes, the story transports them."

## >> Richland Library

In Columbia, SC, Richland Library's implementation of Short Story Dispensers has been so successful that there is now a waiting list of businesses and organizations waiting to host it, from a family health clinic to a dentist office. The waiting list has a wide range, says Tallent, noting that the local transportation center has ordered one independently of the library. "The Short Story Dispensers really offer us a chance for more experimentation. We are able to offer library service in a new way, almost as if we are showing up in unusual places."

## >> Wichita Public Library

Although the Wichita team initially decided to handle all maintenance issues with the dispensers, a change of heart proved an "accidental best practice," said Cynthia Berner. "We had promised those partners that we wouldn't be asking anything of them other than the space," she states. Staff would get notified when the machines were offline or out of paper and head out to the site, meaning that the machine was left not functioning for a certain amount of time. Eventually, they decided to see if the partners would be willing to take on small functions like paper reloading.

“That change actually created more ownership from our partners,” said Julie Sherwood. “We realized that we really want them to help promote it. If people see the Short Story Dispenser and don’t know what it is, we want our partners to be encouraging them to use it and to be telling people about it. I would say find a way to get your partners as involved as you can get them so that they can help promote what we’re doing.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants were asked whether or not they would recommend that libraries purchase a dispenser for their community. If so, and if resources were limited, what suggestions would they give to libraries with limited capacity and funds to achieve the greatest effect?



- Akron–Summit County Public Library: “If those libraries have the money or can find someone to fund it, go for it. It’s been a delightful quirky surprising thing that people discover and it adds to the surprised reaction that people have about so many things we do.”
- Free Library of Philadelphia: “It’s not an add-on, it’s a thing you should decide to do. Budget for it for the long term; and give time to it to make the most of it.”
- Wichita Public Library: “Before you start, find a partner who is absolutely passionate about literacy. That’s what we got with the owner of the coffee shop. And because he was so passionate, he was really proud to have this really cool tool to talk about something that was one of his core values for his business. It was that extra attention that is why this location has turned out to be such a high-volume place for us.”
- Richland Library: “When you’re working with a retailer, sometimes there is a lot of staff turnover, so the person onsite would not realize what was going on, if the machine was out of paper or offline. So we’d have to call and talk to them. It’s important to establish your key point people on the partner side.”



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## CASE STUDIES

# Case Study 1: Free Library of Philadelphia

## Short Story Dispenser Brings Scale and Impact to Philadelphia



“What tickles my fancy,” said Alex Bender, Library Coordinator at the Free Library of Philadelphia (PA), “is that our presence in the Philadelphia Airport means that someone getting on a plane to London can grab a story and be connected to the Free Library. We’re able to reach across the waters. This is a spin that maybe other libraries don’t have.”

Perhaps it’s this strategic location, or the proximity of Short Édition’s U.S. office in Philadelphia, that caused the Dispenser to not only take Philadelphia by surprise but possibly, the whole nation. “One thing that is still pleasantly surprising to me is the amount of attention this project received both in Philadelphia and nationally,” said Andrew C. Nurkin, Deputy Director for Enrichment and Civic Engagement at the Free Library of Philadelphia. “The impact is on each reader who encounters the Dispenser, and I think media outlets—including the New York Times and CBS This Morning—have recognized the power of those few minutes when a reader is delighted or moved by one of the stories.”

Philadelphia successfully launched the project in 2018 in three strategic locations. In addition to the airport, the South Philadelphia Health and Literacy Center—a co-located facility that includes the South Philadelphia Branch Library, a recreation center, and a pediatric care clinic operated by the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia—and a waiting room at the Department of Human Services (DHS), where children and families wait separated to have pre-arranged, often supervised meetings, or meet with social workers. All implementations were successful, thanks to a significant investment from partners and a large social media push on the part of the library, soft launches and press events.

While Nurkin cites this widespread opportunity for children and adults to access new reading material in surprising places as the most significant, quantifiable success for the library, he also acknowledges the unique opportunity for the library to create a ubiquitous presence. “[Short Story Dispenser] allows us to be present in places where people are not naturally thinking of us,” he says. “While catching a flight; when parents are taking their kids for a pediatrician visit, or a meeting at DHS, they’re able to see the library as a friendly presence and a multi-layered institution.”

The locations of the Dispensers were carefully chosen to balance visibility and impact. Only the Dispenser at the South Philadelphia Branch is accessible for the general public to walk in off the street. The airport Dispenser is located past security checkpoints, though given the number of passengers who pass through the Philadelphia International Airport each year, this Dispenser prints the highest volume of stories. The DHS Dispenser is in a waiting room that is not open to the public, though it is used frequently by the youth, families, and staff there. This makes Philadelphia’s numbers, an average of more than 1,500 stories per month, even more impressive.

## >> Balancing Scale and Impact

Although the Dispenser at the Department of Human Services waiting room has the lowest usage of the three, it’s reaching an important segment of Philadelphians, says Nurkin: youth who are involved in the child welfare, foster, or juvenile justice systems. The Dispenser’s location serves young people and families awaiting stressful appointments, often either supervised visits with their family of origin or to meet with social workers. Reports from DHS staff suggest the interactions around the stories have been very positive for youth and their families.

“Compared to the airport, we have seen a smaller number of interactions at DHS, of course—maybe we have had 30,000 at the airport, compared to only 2,000 at DHS,” commented Nurkin. “Yet every time the button is pressed there, that story reaches the hands of someone who is in a challenging situation. For five minutes, the story transports them.”

## >> Initial Hiccups

Nurkin states that the most significant challenge for Free Library of Philadelphia has been staffing. “The machines themselves are great,” he says: “They don’t require much maintenance just to print the stories on demand. But we learned that they also have an enormous potential for programs and other types of engagement that do require staff time we did not anticipate.” The library initially engaged four staff members to launch

the project, including Nurkin, Bender, and two members of the Communications Department. Librarians at the South Philadelphia Branch Library have also planned activities around the Dispenser there. Nurkin stresses that the machines are very self-sufficient, with time needed only for maintenance: paper refills or a periodic malfunction. “On a programmatic front,” he adds, “I would have liked to give 10–15% of someone’s time to make it a larger project.”

In addition, many of the initial short stories in the Short Édition collection were European classics, or literature that was translated from French. “The content initially was a little hard for our audience to engage with,” says Nurkin. “Short Édition did a great job of reacting to this and correcting it, but it took some time.”

## >> Moving Forward

While the grant ended in 2019, Free Library of Philadelphia has signed for another year of Short Story Dispensers, but they will need to consider a sustainable funding option for future years. “The subscription for the machines are more expensive than anticipated during a tough budget time,” says Nurkin. “They have become so important to the spaces where they are located; they’ve become defining features, so it’s very hard to disentangle them. On the one side, that’s great; on the other, it is a cost we have to absorb.”

He references a sense of obligation for each of the machines for varying reasons. The kids and staff love the one at the DHS facility, he says, and likewise, it’s become intrinsic to the South Philadelphia Branch Library. The airport Dispenser is not only very popular, it is hardwired into the airport network, making removal complicated.

“My other piece of advice would be to ensure you have sufficient staff time to manage this project. It does not run on autopilot—it needs a project manager who can handle maintenance, promotion, outreach, and content. With that commitment, though, the impact is worthwhile.”

Ultimately, Nurkin says, “the Dispensers are wonderful in and of themselves, and I would encourage other public libraries to use them. But it’s not an add-on; it’s a thing you should decide to do. Budget for it for the long term and give time to it to make the most of it.”

## Case Study 2: Richland Library

### Short Story Dispenser Sets Stories Free in Richland Communities



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“When the information [about Short Story Dispensers] first came out and before the PLA grant opportunity, I remember posting on my personal social network, saying ‘wouldn’t it be awesome to do this?’ A little over a year later, here we are. It’s almost too good to be true,” said Tony Tallent, former Chief Program and Innovation Officer at Richland Library (Columbia, SC). He may be Short Story Dispenser’s number one fan—both his enthusiasm and his creative strategies for integrating Short Story Dispensers into Columbia have proved fruitful. In their initial year, more than 34,000 stories were generated, an average of 93 per day.

“From the get-go, we proposed that we’d use the Short Story Dispensers throughout the whole community. We had two anchor sites, including the Columbia Museum of Art and Drip on Main, a popular coffee café downtown.” A third Short Story Dispenser “roams” to various locations around town including the delightful boutique hotel, Hotel Trundle, and a retail outlet, The Mast General Store. Although neither were in the original plan, both have become great partners in this endeavor. “We put one in the Mast General Store, which is one of the busiest stores in downtown Columbia,” says Tallent. “It’s a fun, old fashioned store, complete with squeaky wooden floors and to discover an incredible piece of technology there has been a great surprise to customers.”

#### >> Extra Steps Pay Off

Although Tallent did not anticipate that the community would take such a quick interest in the project, under his direction, the Richland team took some extra steps that may have generated the excitement.

“We have a microsite up and running on our website that mirrors everything available on the Short Story Dispensers themselves.” This online presence provides constant access to the Short Story Dispenser content. “It translates wonderfully onto your smartphone, so it’s like having 100,000 stories on in your pocket.



“Another thing I did early on was create a simple feedback board with sticky notes at the library, stating ‘Tell us what you think about the Short Story Dispenser!’ We received a lot of feedback, so I started answering people’s questions on a different colored note. Some of the questions were about the machine itself: how does it work? doesn’t it use a lot of ink? We could answer questions about the integrity of the machine and it really helped us understand the interests people had in this inventive offering.”

As part of the grant application to PLA, Tallent created a campaign called Set Stories Free. “We encouraged anyone who encountered a dispenser to take a photo of themselves, the machine, or their story, and put it on social media with the hashtag, #setstoriesfree. Tallent says the campaign became an even better way for Richland Library to promote and talk about this initiative. “Just doing a search for the hashtag on social media showed us that the project has gotten a lot of love and wonderful feedback.” The Set Stories Free campaign was so successful that PLA and Short Édition adopted it for its national story writing contest.

Richland Library now has local organizations lining up to host Short Story Dispensers, from a family health clinic to a dentist office. The waiting list has a wide range, says Tallent, noting that the local transit hub ordered one independently after being inspired by the library’s Dispensers. “The Short Story Dispensers offer us a chance for more experimentation. We are able to offer library service in a new way, almost as if we are showing up in unusual places.” Unfortunately, deployment was paused with the COVID outbreak.

## >> Going “Touch-Free”

COVID-19 has presented a number of challenges and reduced services for libraries. Fortunately, Short Édition has devised new “Touch-Free Consoles” that are being implemented in all of the pilot libraries, including Richland.

“We’re back up and running with two of the dispensers thanks to the touch-free consoles,” says Tallent. “You essentially pop the top off and replace it with the new touch-free one. Now, you simply wave your hand over it and a story dispenses.”

Short Édition also quickly responded to recent social unrest through a writing contest called “America: Color it in,” where writers were asked to submit works dealing with social equity. They’ve also created a catalog of materials that represent the African-American experience, for and about African-Americans. “Short Édition has responded so quickly to needs. The idea for the contest came out of a check-in meeting. I asked if they could do this, and within a week they had a date for the contest and for the catalog. What remarkable service!”

## >> Behind the Glass

Tallent says he has received calls from libraries across the country regarding the Story Dispensers. “They were very curious and they thought they’d be more complicated,” he explains. “It’s probably the least complicated, yet eloquent system of technology that I’ve worked with. It doesn’t take a lot of upkeep. It uses thermal printing so there’s no ink. It doesn’t require any wiring except a standard electrical plug. It prints anywhere from 400–600 stories before you need to replace the paper...and the paper is sustainably sourced.”

“The dashboard allows up-to-the-second details for activity on each dispenser. You can change out story genres via the dashboard, and program the machines to complement library programming. For example, for Women’s History Month, we selected to dispense stories by female authors only...you can help it complement library programming.”

Tallent served as project lead and wrote the initial grant. A small team was involved, including the marketing director and programming staff, all of whom functioned as an advisory team. He suggests that libraries have a point person and he says, “it’s smart to have a handful of staff who know how it works and also get the spirit of it.” An FAQ was created to help keep staff informed “It’s so easy to teach,” he adds. “Basically, all you need to know is how to load the paper. You plug it in and about three minutes later, it’s ready to go.”

In addition, an open lab was created where both staff and customers could learn about the dispensers and try them. “We did this and found it was a clever and fun way to inform. People are really interested in what’s behind the glass, so to speak.”

Once a Short Story Dispenser reaches a host location, partners maintain the machines. “We did training sessions with the key people at the locations, so they’d understand how to maintain it and share information about the initiative,” says Tallent. He notes a minor downside with this approach: “When you’re working with a retailer, sometimes there is staff turnover, so the person onsite would not realize what was going on, if the machine was out of paper or offline. So, we’d call and remind them. It was no real hassle, though created some brief downtime for customer use. It’s important to establish your key point people on the partner side.”

Overall, Tallent is beyond pleased with the initiative, which brings together both traditional concepts and innovative approaches to delivery. “With Short Story Dispensers, we are at a crossroads between service delivery, marketing, and a new type of outreach. They hit the sweet spot with it. All around it’s been a great experience.”

## Case Study 3: Akron-Summit County Public Library

### Short Story Dispenser Offer Joy of Reading in Akron-Summit County



When someone from the library visits the Short Story Dispenser located at the Akron Metro RTA Transit Hub, it's not uncommon for a crowd to form. "When staff stops there to replace paper, kids start dancing around the machine and adults come up to say, 'thank you for this service'," says Pam Hickson-Stevenson, director of the Akron-Summit County Public Library (Akron, OH).

She talks a bit about the people who travel there, often reliant on public transportation to take them on long commutes to and from work, and a socio-economic disparity that becomes apparent in a place like the Transit Hub. "In a smaller, Midwest city like Akron, we are so car-intensive. Many of the people are riding the bus because they can't afford a car. There is a disparity between people who take public transit and those who come to the library in cars." Short Story Dispenser allows the library to meet this hard-to-reach segment of the population where they are—literally.

"The fact that the library could provide three minutes of escape through reading—where you didn't have to check anything out, or worry about getting it back, you didn't have a special electronic device to read it. It was on a piece of paper. [The idea that] you could keep it, you could share it, or you could throw it away was a great way of reinforcing the importance of the joy of reading in a way that required so little of the people who used it." Branding at the footer of the story also reinforces the connection to the Akron-Summit County Public Library.

### >> Strategic Locations

The Short Story Dispenser at the Transit Hub has the highest use of the three strategically deployed in busy locations, including the Akron-Canton Airport, and the Akron Children's Hospital. "Our plans to place the Dispensers in high-traffic locations worked well," says Hickson-Stevenson. "The airport location has also generated unexpected excitement."

“Within the first 12 to 18 months of deployment, staff would find random tweets and posts on social media that showed a photo of the Short Story Dispenser and said things like ‘One of the highlights of my business travel is printing out one of these short stories at the airport.’”

The Short Story Dispenser proved an easy collaboration between the library and the airport. The two had yet to find a project that was mutually beneficial, but Hickson–Stevenson said the will to partner was there. “Akron is a very collaborative community. The Short Story Dispensers were just another example of ways that organizations work together here to support organizations and our communities.”

Despite a positive ribbon-cutting event at the Akron’s Children’s Hospital that generated press attention, use was not as robust as hoped in this location, possibly due to its placement in a fast-paced outpatient surgery area where there wasn’t much waiting time for the young patients. “The printed stories just did not have the same impact as a really great picture book with this particular audience,” Hickson–Stevenson stated.

In addition, the collection of stories available reflected a more European sensibility. “It wasn’t a significant challenge but certainly, an adjustment was needed,” says Hickson–Stevenson, “and an understanding that there are differences between French and American tastes and standards in subject matter.” Although the second issue was resolved, the library is still considering moving to a location with a potential for higher usage.

## >> Hindsight

Overall, Hickson–Stevenson feels that the project was a success, citing user engagement, strengthened community partnerships, and media attention as the highlights. A large team worked on initial implementation of the Short Story Dispensers, including Hickson–Stevenson, a marketing director, and the IT department, which set up and tested machines. Once deployed, just a few staff members work to maintain the paper supply and do occasional troubleshooting, for a total of one to two hours weekly, with most activity at the Transit Hub.

That said, Hickson–Stevenson said that staff capacity was a challenge. “I was guilty of not delegating this project,” she admits. Designating a single point person to shepherd and coordinate the project will be helpful going forward. She is already considering new partnerships with city offices, and has re-signed with Short Édition. “But in this COVID world,” she adds, “finding places where people gather is more challenging. One possibility is grocery stores.”

## >> Advice for Libraries

“Initial outlay could be considerable,” notes Hickson–Stevenson, “particularly for smaller libraries. It’s probably a good candidate for a foundation or for local benefactors. We were very fortunate that Akron was the original Knight Community and were able to apply for the grant. The initial outlay for the piece of equipment could lend itself to really good publicity for a funder. It’s fun and really promotes reading. The bigger challenge would be ongoing expenses.” She cites paper costs, especially for well-used machines, as well as overhead, which consists of electricity and a cellular connection.

“If libraries have the money or can find someone to fund it, go for it,” says Hickson–Stevenson. “It’s been a quirky and surprising thing that people in Akron have discovered. It adds to the surprised reaction that people have about so many things we do. There is such delight that people experience when learning something new, especially about an organization that they might not know very much about.”

## Case Study 4: Wichita Public Library

### Relationships Build Short Story Dispenser Success in Wichita



“It’s just so unexpected for people,” said retired Wichita (KS) Public Library Director, Cynthia Berner, “particularly for people who maybe never had a library connection or who had a lapsed library connection, to see something from the library that was pretty modern, easy, and so different than that mental picture of an old, dusty library.”

Building a library connection, as well as strengthening existing relationships, proved instrumental to the success of the Short Story Dispenser project in Wichita. Not the least important was the relationship with library staff, who were pulled together to assist in initial implementation. Roughly eight to ten staff members helped to get the project running at full speed, said Berner, including a communications manager, responsible for social media, press outreach, and collateral materials; a digital services manager, who handled technical set-up and troubleshooting; several delivery staff who were responsible for changing paper and any troubleshooting, as well as a project manager. Berner estimates that this peak time, including initial grant application and meetings, machine set-up, launch and associated events, lasted about 12 weeks, with staff time of about three hours per week.

Short Story Dispensers were implemented in three key Wichita locations: a pediatric medical clinic, a Veterans Administration Hospital and a third, intended to “roam” in various locations, beginning with the grand opening of their new library in downtown Wichita on June 16, 2018.

The Wichita team deems the grand opening a definite highlight, when thousands of visitors to the Advanced Learning Library were introduced to the Short Story Dispenser. A total of 234 stories printed that day—nearly one story every two minutes. Usage continued to be strong through the next two months, yet they stuck to the plan of keeping the third Short Story Dispenser roaming, calling on an existing partner to participate in the project.



## >> A Passion for the Project

Reverie Roasters, a local coffee shop, had a location within a library building, but the library team chose to move the Short Story Dispenser downtown. “We made the decision to move the Short Story Dispenser to their flagship store in downtown Wichita,” says project manager Julie Sherwood. “And once we did, it was so well-used and popular that we didn’t really move it around again. They’re really big on supporting literacy efforts.”

Sherwood offers that as a great quality to consider as you are contemplating partners for this project: “Before you start, find a partner who is absolutely passionate about literacy. That’s what we got with the owner of the coffee shop. And because he was so passionate, he was really proud to have this really cool tool to talk about something that was one of his core values for his business. That extra attention is why this location has turned out to be such a high-volume place for us.”

## >> Unexpected Ownership

Once the Short Story Dispensers were in place, they became virtually plug-and-play. “There are some weeks where almost nothing happens,” says Julie Sherwood, Education and Engagement Manager and project manager. “But if you average it out, it probably comes out to a quarter hour a week. It’s been very manageable.”

“We were deliberately pretty passive once they were up and running,” adds Berner. Although the team contemplated doing additional promotion around the Short Story Dispensers, other projects took precedence. “But I think that showed us,” says Berner, “that just having the installation creates value in and of itself. Anything above that is a value-add.”

Although the Wichita team initially decided to handle all maintenance issues with the dispensers, a change of heart proved an “accidental best practice,” said Berner. “We had promised those partners that we wouldn’t be asking anything of them other than the space,” she states. Staff would get notified when the machines were offline or out of paper and head out to the site, meaning that the machine was left not functioning for a certain amount of time.

“Finally,” continued Sherwood, “we decided to see if our partners would be willing to take care of these small functions themselves. And that change actually created more ownership from our partners. We realized that we really want them to help promote it. If people see the Short Story Dispenser and don’t know what it is, we want our partners to be encouraging them to use it and to be telling people about it. I would say find a way to get your partners as involved as you can get them so that they can help promote what you’re doing.”

## >> VA Partnership

“Dole Veterans Administration Medical Hospital (VA) was the first partner we contacted,” said Sherwood. “We had been wanting to develop a partnership with them and our contact there was very enthusiastic about working with us. They actually hosted a launch event at their site when we kicked it off at that location.”

“However, there wasn’t a lot of use at the VA hospital. We had envisioned that it would be in the main waiting room, but ultimately, the Short Story Dispenser was placed in an adjacent waiting room that didn’t get much traffic. Another downside was that we received feedback that the print was too small for many veterans.” Contacts at the VA then requested that at least a 14-pt type be used, an option not available on the machine. Although Sherwood and her team eventually made the decision to relocate this machine, they are calling this a win.

“All that aside,” continues Sherwood, “it did draw us into a closer partnership with the VA community.” Since the introduction to the VA via the Short Story Dispenser, the library is now part of a community group of organizations that provide services to veterans. In addition, a representative from the VA has begun programming at the library.

Since relocation to Wichita State University, in partnership with the university library, the Short Story Dispenser has seen a spike in usage, but that may be a result of additional availability: “We also hadn’t thought about the fact that both the clinics and the hospital are closed on weekends. So we lose two days of usage, per week,” says Sherwood.

## >> Pediatric Partners

Wichita Public’s third location for the Short Story Dispenser was the University of Kansas Pediatric Clinic, with which they’d already had a relationship through various reading projects. Despite an overall success, with strong usage and positive feedback, the team is seeking a new venue.

“We thought that we would try placing it in a place where the library might not be as well-known,” says Sherwood. Hunter Health Clinic is located in a lower income neighborhood that has yet to have a relationship with the library. Sherwood reports that the machine arrived in 2020, just prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, so no anecdotal data is available yet.

“One piece of advice I would give would be for a library to think about their goals and what they want to achieve before they do it,” says Sherwood. “If you want to maximize the number of stories read, then definitely go for high-traffic places like a coffee shop or airport. Those are going to get more views. But if you’re trying to really make a connection, for instance with lower-income kids, then putting it somewhere like Hunter Health Clinic is a way to use the Short Story Dispensers in a very specific but smaller way to connect with a particular community.”

“All of it has just been a great opportunity and experience for us,” said Berner. “We were all so thrilled to have been selected to be one of the original four partners.”

Although the Knight Foundation grant ended in April 2019, Wichita Public plans to continue with the Short Story Dispensers. “We signed on for another two years because we love the product and we believe in it,” said Sherwood. In August 2020, the Short Story Dispensers were retrofitted with touchless covers, enabling them to be accessible in post-COVID settings. Each machine has been redesigned with three new options: Short Édition Stories (for adults), Children’s Stories (from Short Édition), and Local Stories. The final category will come from stories written by area authors and submitted through the library’s new Short Story Portal.