Coos Bay Public Library

With funding from the American Library Association’s Libraries Transforming Communities: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries initiative, Coos Bay Public Library in Oregon held conversations and worked with local community partners to break barriers related to food and nutrition.

Coos Bay Public Library serves the city of Coos Bay, Oregon (population around 16,000) as well as the wider rural community of Coos County. Compared to the state of Oregon as a whole, Coos County has an older population, higher rates of chronic conditions, and greater mortality from cancer and heart disease. Sixteen percent of Coos County residents live below the poverty line, and a similar percentage experience food insecurity.

Reference librarian Paul Addis has long been aware of these issues and tried to help address them through library programming, including hosting a nutrition coach for educational sessions and a monthly Zoom “cook-along” where a staff member from the local food co-op demonstrates simple and healthy recipes. However, he explains that “even though I was doing work around these topics, I still felt like I wasn’t taking it to the next level.”

AMPLIFYING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AND OUTREACH

In order to reach that “next level,” he participated in the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC):
Focus on Small and Rural Libraries initiative. The LTC grant was only the second that Addis applied for and implemented with the help of Library Assistant Joshua Whitty. Through discussions with the Coos Bay community, Addis and Whitty gained a deeper understanding of the barriers residents face related to food and nutrition, and how the library could improve its services.

Although the Coos Bay Public Library provided a wide variety of public programming (including technology classes and Spanish and ASL conversation sessions in addition to food/nutrition-focused events), the LTC grant facilitation training helped Addis identify one change to make even before holding his first community conversation.

Components of the facilitation training included an online e-course and the free LTC Facilitation Guide that features topics such as how to make people feel welcome, how to set ground rules before beginning a group discussion, and how to manage group dynamics. The LTC Basic Facilitation Skills e-Course, an asynchronous six-module course, is available for free online.

From taking the course, Addis realized the term “food insecure” could sound patronizing and have negative connotations. He was concerned this could prevent community members from attending the conversations. He chose to promote the grant activities as building food literacy and food security rather than addressing a deficit.

“I heard some librarians talking about setting up the conversations to make people as comfortable as possible. And I was like, wait, I need to back up and change my terminology. Because I’m starting this out with a negative term, food insecurity.”

In preparation for the community conversations, Addis reached out to the network of local partners the library was already working with for nutrition programming, including local grocery stores, universities, and a health clinic. Representatives were able to attend both conversations and to introduce the library to new partners. Addis thinks that the community partners would describe the library as essential.

Quotes have been edited slightly for grammatical clarity.
A staff member at a local co-op was able to connect Addis to a group that created a guidebook of food and nutrition resources available to Coos Bay residents. The library was able to print copies to distribute them for free to residents and to build a relationship with this group which will continue into the future.

The library’s existing partnerships with local organizations also made it easier to engage with community members. Leading up to the community conversations, the library held three classes with a nutrition coach from Natural Grocers, a local store, and continued the monthly “cook-along” livestreams in collaboration with Coos Head Food Co-Op. The LTC grant funding allowed the library to offer vouchers to cover the price of ingredients for the cooking events, making them accessible to a wider range of residents. Over the course of 3 months, community members applied for a total of 50 vouchers. The library promoted these events through local print and TV news as well as social media channels. Addis was able to directly invite community members who attended cooking events to also join one of the conversations. To accommodate different schedules, one conversation was held on a weekday evening and another on the weekend. The library and Co-Op collaborated to provide free meals for everyone who attended—as the conversations were held virtually due to pandemic conditions, attendees picked up their meals from the Co-Op in advance.

**INVESTING TIME AND ENERGY TO RESONATE WITH THE COMMUNITY**

Addis was particularly excited about the involvement of young people and other youth-focused community organizations, which helped the library’s work as part of the LTC grant expand into new—and unexpected—territory.

“We had a 12-year-old take advantage of one of the vouchers and cook two or three meals all by himself. I actually got him to participate in one of the conversations too, it was just really awesome. So by the time we had our third voucher event in September, we had him cooking, we had really young kids with the staff from the Boys and Girls Club come... We also had a lot of young adults, like, you know, teens and early 20s attend via the vouchers from a local group called Q&A of Coos County, which is a subgroup of our local pride group. These were young, local gay pride members, LGBT+ members. So it really just turned it into this generational community engagement thing I hadn’t even envisioned.”

Hearing directly from the community greatly expanded Addis’s understanding of the
barriers Coos Bay residents face, and what the library could do to help. Going into the conversations, he anticipated that the major issues would be "people just didn’t know how to eat healthy, or maybe thought they didn’t have the money to do it." While these were certainly barriers, a community member brought up a third major issue—confidence and comfort. Knowing that the Co-Op sells affordable fresh food is of less use to someone who feels they will stand out shopping there because they don’t know how to use the bulk bins, or who thinks they may not be welcome because they haven’t purchased a membership.

In response, the library and Co-Op worked together to make healthy cooking more accessible to residents with varying levels of experience, through signs in the Co-Op and printed materials distributed at the library. While the library had been posting ingredient lists for the month's recipe online, levels of comfort with technology vary and some community members prefer to have printed instructions. "That was one of the most important parts [of the conversations], was learning that confidence was a barrier and that we need to be more sensitive to people’s needs, whether it’s just having something in print, or needing a tour of a library or a co-op," Addis said.

Having invested time and energy in the process and feeling such ownership over it, Addis was pleased when the idea resonated with community members. Through the LTC grant process, Addis has felt an increasing bond with library program participants. The community engagement work has allowed for deeper and more meaningful interaction between the library and those it serves, as well as better insight for library staff into community needs.

“I didn’t really get to know what these people were doing about food until we had the conversations. You know, like, suddenly I realize these people have taught kids how to make community gardens in other communities, they work at food kitchens, they serve free meals at the church on the weekend, it was just really enlightening. To engage with these community members I already knew on a more personal level... was just
really awesome. Just to get to know my community better. That was probably the best thing about this engagement was I really got to know my community better, and how they view local community health.”

INVESTING TIME IN YOUR COMMUNITY

All LTC grantees went through the LTC Basic Facilitation Skills eCourse, something Addis found especially beneficial due to its emphasis on real-world examples from other libraries. He explained, “The examples from actual libraries are very important. As librarians... we have to rely on each other. Nobody’s reinventing the wheel... I come up with creative inspirational things, but I also use what’s been done before, and so that type of support is really important to me.” He clarified further by adding that examples of failure could be just as instructive as highlighting successes. “I want both, I want the good and the bad. Because...one of the most important things for me in being a librarian is admitting your wrongs or your mistakes.”

When asked about the skills needed to do community engagement work effectively, Addis reflected on the many ways he personally has gotten involved in events around town and the time he’s invested in building relationships. This foundation gave him a distinct advantage when it came time to invite people to join library events and discussions. Addis says, “You have to put yourself out there, you have to be willing, you have to be fearless sometimes, and just walk into an organization, or just call somebody up.”

Coos Bay Public Library will continue its work to improve food security and literacy in the community, expanding its programs with existing partners and new connections to local organizations formed through the grant activities. During the grant application process, Addis was in touch with researchers at Oregon Health and Science University. Addis, in his role as a library representative, ended up being paid for his work with the university. He then turned the money earned back into free vouchers that would further expand the impact of the grant. Addis sees additional support from ALA for small and rural libraries being vital—especially guidance on partnership building for less experienced library workers. He anticipates that providing this support will have an amplification effect—as a library and its partners provide mutual benefits to each other.