

 CASE STUDY

Parker Memorial Library



Location

Sulphur, Oklahoma

Staff Size

1.5 FTE

Service Area

5,000

With funding from the American Library Association's *Libraries Transforming Communities: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries* initiative, Parker Memorial Library in Sulphur, Oklahoma focused on two specific segments of their community. The library increased the accessibility needs of the town's Deaf and hard of hearing community and later provided resources and hosted conversations to address the rise in the local homeless population.

Jennifer Lindsey has been the Branch Manager at Parker Memorial Library in Sulphur, Oklahoma for three years. Parker Memorial is one out of eight branches in the Southern Oklahoma library system, and serves a town of approximately 5,000 people. Lindsey, up until recently, was the library's only full-time staff, but the library just hired a

part-time assistant to help her with some of her larger tasks. Even so, the day-to-day functioning of the library is essentially up to Lindsey.

REACHING OUT TO THE DEAF COMMUNITY

When COVID hit, Lindsey took a few months to reflect on the library's—and the community's—

needs. What she realized is that the Deaf community in Sulphur was essentially excluded from many of the town's events, which were not, in general, accessible for hard of hearing people. She knew then that there was a need which was not being met. *"I just figured that, we're not doing anything right now and this is the perfect*

opportunity,” she told us. But Lindsey had never applied for a grant before. She talked to some other library folks she knew who had successfully applied for grants, which encouraged her to write a proposal for Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC): Focus on Small and Rural Libraries. When she was awarded not one but two LTC grants, she was surprised. Then she got to work.

For the first LTC grant, Lindsey started thinking about accessibility and how to include the town’s Deaf community in events “from the get-go.” She talked to staff at the Oklahoma School for the Deaf (OSD) and they agreed to bring the students over to the library. The OSD students then began to have weekly and monthly visits to the library after school. Lindsey also had a big group of teenagers coming to the library, so she started a teen advisory group and invited the deaf students to join as well. That event ended up with deaf and hearing teens all working, crafting, and socializing together.

ADDRESSING A RISE IN LOCAL HOMELESSNESS

For the second LTC grant, Lindsey decided to focus on the issue of homelessness within the Sulphur community. The community had experienced a rise in homelessness, due to the pandemic. Even so, Lindsey found that there was little information



about resources and services for the homeless in town, and that there was very little public transportation and no way for them to get to another town. Yet people were coming to the library to apply for assistance, renew their food stamps, and file for unemployment, all using the library’s computers. Lindsey explained that she often helps older people who come into the library and are unsure how to fill out the forms using the computer.

The new grant project, then, was geared toward providing resources for people in need. The first step, Lindsey explained, was making pamphlets that listed all the resources and services in town available for people who are struggling (like public assistance). Lindsey obtained video equipment to make videos

(instead of pamphlets) in ASL for the Deaf community.

With regard to the library’s programming on homelessness, Lindsey said that they held some conversations but that not many people from the community came. She had wonderful attendance at the first grant conversations, but the second round did not. Lindsey thinks this is because the topic she chose to discuss did not generate as much interest among the community as did the first. But she did the second round event anyway, and someone from the Department of Health showed up, which earned the library a new partner.

CONTINUED SUPPORT TO ALL SEGMENTS OF THE COMMUNITY

As part of her efforts, Lindsey also used some of the grant money to

enroll in an ASL course; she has seen positive reactions from many of the deaf adults that come into the library, as she's learned how to sign library terms in ASL.

Lindsey says that response to the work her library is doing has been positive. The younger deaf population is especially excited about the teen advisory group. Although some adults are still hesitant about coming to the library, Lindsey explained that public perception of the library has shifted since they received the LTC grants. The LTC training, in particular, was helpful. The thing she liked the most were the worksheets, available for download in the free LTC eCourse, that guided through how to plan a conversation. She keeps PDFs of those worksheets and still uses them for most events and conversations she hosts. The worksheets have been especially helpful for her during the teen advisory group meetings because they have helped her navigate and moderate bilingual conversations.

The LTC training also allowed Lindsey to start a homeschool group, where her assistant works with the kids and Lindsey works with the parents. There, they

are filling a new need because homeschoolers often feel lonely. The library ***"is there to know about them and befriend all of them and their families."***

"As a librarian, I can see what's happening in the community... and then I can use the LTC stuff to host conversations to address it."

Since receiving the LTC grant, Parker Memorial Library has become the "central hub" where isolated people can come and meet one another. Lindsey gave us the example of craft classes, where the most important outcome isn't the crafts but rather the connections that attendees make when they are mingling and socializing. She emphasized the importance of libraries offering in-person programming to patrons and explained that when she tried to take her book club online during the pandemic, it didn't work. The reason patrons were coming into the library in the first place was to meet people in-person. As Lindsey explained, ***"Our library is the place to meet in person, to make connections with others. The LTC stuff has helped facilitate events along those lines."*** In particular, she

said that the teenagers adore the teen advisory club because of the social benefits. That is, they get to meet kids from other schools and kids who use different languages.

Lindsey says that the skills that are most necessary for someone pursuing community engagement are facilitation skills, such as those which the LTC training helped her develop, and the skill of being able to follow the patterns of needs and interests of different groups within one community, and to attend to those needs.

She explained that the connections she has made being involved with ALA and the LTC grant have really helped her—especially the chance to talk to librarians from other places has enabled her to bring new information and ideas back to Sulphur and to implement change in her own community. For example, she heard that some librarians are involved in their local Chamber of Commerce, so she went ahead and joined the Chamber of Commerce. And now the Chamber includes the library's events and programming in their newsletters. ■

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