

## Defending the YA Budget One Library's Experience

*By Audra L. Caplan*

All across the country libraries are facing severe budget cuts caused by the downturn in the economy and political priorities for reducing funds. At Harford County Public Library, our budget was reduced by 10 percent for fiscal year 2010, a combination of state and county cuts. I have talked to colleagues in several states that have had even larger reductions. Traditionally young adult services are a very small part of any library budget, so what happens when funding for them disappears? Is service to teens the first to go? Is it reduced at the same percentage as all services? Or is it considered a priority to preserve?

The first thing we did at Harford County Public Library was look at our core purpose, "to connect people with information and encourage the love of reading in the community." These were the two areas of library service that staff identified in the strategic planning process to preserve over all others and encompass customers of all ages. We held this mission before us as a guide when making the

difficult decisions necessary to respond to the budget reduction.

The largest portions of our budget are for personnel and materials. There was no way to absorb the cut without reducing these two budget areas. Initially we furloughed all staff for five days and froze positions, but this was not enough. We quickly realized that we would have to reduce staff. This was the first time in twenty years that we have had to lay off staff. We had prepared for this possibility a few years earlier by creating a policy that allowed us to lay off based on performance first and then seniority. This became very important because some of our young adult and children's librarians were our newest hires. Because they had documented good performance, we were able to retain them and lay off other longer-term staff members whose performance had not been as strong.

The first cuts that we made in the materials budget were in underused subscriptions and downloadable videos since relatively few customers would miss them. We also felt that it was important

that the cuts be visible to the community. Since the number of magazines published continues to shrink and much of their content can be found online, we decreased the periodicals budget by 25 percent across the board for all age levels. All areas of the collection were reduced, but we preserved most of the funding lines for popular new material, graphic novels, music, video games, and DVDs. These are our highest circulating collections and areas of great interest to teens. Standing orders, which included award-winning titles for children and teens, were reduced, but enough funds were kept to preserve core collections.

In the last ten years, Harford County Public Library administration and staff have made a concerted effort to improve and increase services to teens. We established young adult librarian positions and teen advisory groups in most branches, improved collections, and increased programming. We also applied for grants to provide new services to teens. While attendance at teen programs has been sporadic over the years, successful programs have had consistent components—a charismatic YA librarian, popular topics, and teen collaboration. As we look at consolidating services to address the reduction in staffing and increased services in specific areas, Adult and YA programs with low attendance have come under fire. It is likely that we will discontinue poorly attended programs and encourage joint programming among the branches. The programs that incorporate best practices will be preserved.

We have a very successful grant-funded teen after-school program in one of our branches that was started last year right before the economy took a nosedive. One of the requirements of the grant is sustainability, which was not a problem when the grant was awarded. Now we will have to look for other grant, partnership, and fundraising opportunities to keep the program alive at a time when it is needed

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more than ever. One strategy will be to work with teens who are participating in the program and involve them in fundraising efforts. We are also struggling to absorb other grant-funded initiatives, including a program focused on making science fun for children and teens. The Harford County Public Library Foundation has committed to donating funds for materials. We are also working with several scientists in the area who may volunteer to do science-based programs.

A new goal for the library system is to increase volunteer opportunities; this is in direct response to the reduction in staff. One of the populations we targeted for recruitment is teens. We have traditionally used middle school volunteers to help with the summer reading program and hired college students to oversee the program and supervise the younger teens. This year we could not afford to hire the college students, so we created a new volunteer “supervisor” position for returning teens. It has been very successful and gives the new supervisors a sense of accomplishment. We

will also expand opportunities for teens to volunteer in computer training and programming assistance.

Those of us who are YA advocates have always had to defend YA services. The best way to do this—whether the economy is booming or not—is to create excellent, well-used programs and prove their return on investment to administrators, boards, and elected officials. These are criteria that should always be used to justify serving the teen population. Having measures and documentation in place before facing a budget reduction makes it easier to preserve these efforts. Here are some strategies that can be used:

- Policies should be established to keep the best staff safe from lay offs, and then make sure that YA librarians are among the best staff.
- Keep careful statistics on circulation, program attendance, and the number of teens who use the computers each day.

- Collect success stories and use them when you have to defend the service.
- Ask your teens to give testimony.
- Make sure your supervisors are willing to go to bat for your programs.
- Create press releases and send them to local media.
- Invite the media to attend programs and interview the teens.
- Look for alternative funding sources and partner with other youth-based agencies in the community.
- Use current research to build your case—there is a great deal of it available on the YALSA website.

Finally, don’t be afraid to reinvent the way you provide services and involve the teens in the process. As painful as budget cuts are, the positive unintended consequence is that we get to evaluate all the things that we do and figure out ways to do them smarter and more effectively. This allows us to give up what isn’t working while we save and improve our best and most effective services. YALSA

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