

INSTITUTE OF MUSEUM AND LIBRARY SERVICES

MS. WALSH: Good afternoon. I am Jan Walsh and I am the Washington State librarian and with me is --

MR. SIMMONS: Randall Simmons and I manage the library development program for the Washington State Library.

MS. WALSH: We probably want to talk to you mostly about a project that we call Hard Times in Washington. That project actually began when I was at a retreat with the public library directors and they retreat twice a year and I attend. They started pointing out to me how they were just being swamped and the people are just flocking to libraries, and how important it would be if the state library could help them in anyway. All of our library development money is in LSTA (Library Services and Technology Act) funds. We have no state funds that are state aid or for library development. I, of course, went to my folks in library development and Randall heads that program.

At the time, we decided the first thing we need to do is actually survey those public library directors and find out how hard it was. Was it universal? What suggestions did they have for how we as a state library could help them?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, the first thing, Jan, I think

we did was we looked at libraries statistics of June 2008 to November 2008. That was the most recent six-month period.

MS. WALSH: Right and that was the first survey.

MR. SIMMONS: What they told us was that attendance was up 7.5 percent. Circulation was up 11.22 percent. Virtual visits such as the visits to a library page up 20.21 percent. Reference transactions were up 4.41 percent. Percent of time, public, Internet, computers are in use up 9.74 percent and the number of public Internet computer users up 13.77 percent.

We also talked to them about the kinds of things they were seeing in their libraries, the kind of phenomenon that happens during hard times. Basically, they said people are in here looking for jobs and they are looking for jobs online. They may or may not have the skills to do that so they are needing help. They are having to apply for jobs online. Again, they may not have the skills necessary. They are needing to do resumes. Some people have not done a resume in 20 years and they find themselves out of work. So, it's not just a matter of putting the resume together but they want people at the desk to help them read the resume, proof it, see if it makes sense, and other things that are associated with the hard times -- trying to save a mortgage or trying to find a house to buy or trying to

start a new business, all of those things.

MS. WALSH: Or saving the business they already have. There are so many resources they were looking for and still are looking for. What was amazing to us is that so many people who were coming into libraries to use the computers had never used a computer. A lot of Washington is still rural. You may have seen a lot of the Puget Sound area where it is very more developed but not in all areas and so there were so many people coming in that had never used a computer. They had never put their hand on a mouse and there you have the librarian who has people at the reference desk with reference questions, people trying to check out books and then you have the folks at the computers who really need computer skills. They come to the one resource that actually is their emergency help is the library. This is a phenomenon we haven't seen in a long time.

MR. SIMMONS: In terms of how they said that we could help them, one way was they wanted us to bridge the gap between the library and work source, the employment people because they were getting so many people coming into the library that really needed the services of the employment people, the work source people. We have been working on that issue but it is two bureaucracies talking to each other and we haven't quite bridged the gap yet.

MS. WALSH: Well, I think part of the problem too is that work source is overwhelmed. That is our employment security department and they are totally overwhelmed with the unemployment rising. They don't have time to spend as much time with actual resources that could help them in the libraries.

MR. SIMMONS: Right. They also wanted to be trained. You know maybe technology topics or helping people use technology. They wanted training but they said the two things you have to understand is that our staff is just overwhelmed with the amount of work so the training needs to come to us. It either has to come to us online that we have been doing a lot of at the state library doing online training or you have to come to us in regional trainings. We don't have the money to send people to one point in the state so we have been working on that too.

They also said we need resources. We need resources to help us, to help people and people to help themselves. We immediately began to put together a Web site that were resources for library users which includes links to help library users develop resumes and job skills, find jobs, and get technical expertise and resources for staff, for staff training, patron training, and so forth. We also put a page out on WebJunction, which is an OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) product.

MS. WALSH: And this is great. I looked at that the other day. This is where libraries can put their suggestions and what they are doing so share with each other. Some of them have very good ideas and a wonderful thing to have a way for them to share with each other the various resources that they are using.

MR. SIMMONS: We were just starting to blog. We were joining the blog generation and we have a blog called serving Washington libraries and we began to blog like crazy and especially when the stimulus funding became available and all the topics related to that. That is one of the major things that we are putting a great deal of effort into is helping libraries track the stimulus money and how they can get a hold of it. Specifically, the broadband funding -- we have been blogging that like crazy.

MS. WALSH: You have been also doing a lot on the Hard Times as well though. What we are hearing from librarians is they are so overwhelmed with the difficult times, but then all of a sudden they hear about the stimulus funding and they can't keep on top of everything. They are actually blogging back to us 'thank you for being on top of this.' I can't keep track of it all. We need you to do that. If we do nothing else that has been very helpful to some of them.

We also have put out a number of press releases

and just talking about the increased use, the economic downturn, the financial struggles that libraries are having right now, which is really difficult to have increased use and then be cutting your budget at the same time. So many of these have come out from our communications office and the Office of Secretary of State and they have been picked up locally by so many newspapers. Then they follow through with the local library and spotlight a lot of what they are doing. I think that has been extremely useful in terms of people getting into actually know what is going on in the libraries and how difficult the situation is.

MR. SIMMONS: And raising visibility for the libraries. When we did the first study that showed the increase in usage, many newspapers around the state jumped on that and did local stories citing our information and then putting the local twist on it. That was really great to see. There was just an increase of visibility of how important libraries are to people.

MS. WALSH: Which probably drove more people into libraries. Just kidding. But it was definitely I think is very helpful. Then there is more that we are going to do. We have a grant cycle which will be unrolling and is called the Hard Times Grant Cycle. We have \$400,000 in LSTA money. When is that going to be open?

MR. SIMMONS: It is open now and I don't remember

the closing date, but it is open currently. We wanted to do some fairly big grants not small mini grants. So we are offering up to \$50,000. So, we could probably fund eight or so of those, but libraries are welcome to tell us how they could use the money to meet that phenomenon of the impact of people coming in because of the recession.

MS. WALSH: I know one of the things that you had asked us was how we are already doing as a state library and we still don't know what the bottom line but probably about a 20 percent cut. One of the things that we are very clear with our library constituents about is that we need to make sure we have enough funds to keep our maintenance of effort, to keep the LSTA, and, boy, the folks in libraries are feeling so much that LSTA is responding to their needs. We didn't have any problem in maintaining that. Thank goodness for LSTA particularly in hard times. I think that this showed us how important it is to listen to the libraries in our community and how important it is for them to just talk to us when they have needs and I think that we are responding to all their -- whenever they let us know that there is a need and it is something that we can use LSTA for. We are doing that.

This popped up not in our usual grant or usual annual plan and everything. It fits the annual plan but it isn't something that we had said, 'okay, in a year we are

going to have this Hard Times project. Nobody could have known how difficult it was going to be and so we were able to figure out that yes this meant what we had in our plan anyway but we were being responsive by shifting resources and finding various ways to meet the needs of the Washington Library community.

MR. SIMMONS: That is the most immediate thing that we have done is to put together a broadband stimulus funding response task force. I take responsibility for that long name, but the broadband task force that we are putting together is working with us to identify opportunities for perhaps even a statewide aggregated application to give broadband money. You know that is being supported largely by LSTA although it is pretty cheap. We just meet virtually instead of bringing people together. I think there has been a really neat bond created between ourselves and the libraries. They aren't hesitant to speak up.

MS. WALSH: No, they are not. They are not hesitant. But you know it is really exciting to be at the library at a time when everything you have always known about libraries. Libraries were responsive where it becomes visible to people. Libraries do bridge the digital divide. I think that this economic environment has given us all a spotlight for what libraries can provide but also how difficult it is with limited staff and limited resources to

fill such a huge need and I don't think that we could actually visualize how many people are coming in until I heard some of the numbers and I was just astonished that people actually had found libraries.

I think that the other part is that, aside from the whole job skills and looking for jobs, is that more people are using their libraries for entertainment now. Getting broadband to the libraries is extremely important. I look forward to the leadership so that we are not totally alone in the state trying to make sure that libraries are at the table and frankly in technology we have to push in that area because they don't typically see necessarily that libraries should be at the table. When they did their mapping for this they didn't include libraries at the table. I was glad to see that Microsoft sent somebody to testify and I was there at the first hearing and submitted written testimony. We are having another hearing tomorrow and I submitted written testimony and the deputy state librarian is going to deliver that testimony so they know how important we think it is that libraries are at the table.

We hope that partnerships are encouraged and frankly I feel we should be, just be, in a position to partner in any direction we need to. So again, flexibility for me is a key. If we can do it with the public libraries

all together that would be one thing but it may be that the K-12 backbone that we have in the state would be the best avenue to use, but we will have to see what the guidelines have.

MR. SIMMONS: I think we took a lot of encouragement from Microsoft's public comments both at the federal level and again repeated in Washington at the meeting at which Jan gave comments -- that every hospital, school, and library should be fiberized, that there wasn't enough money to do all the residents in the United States that half of the broadband money should go to hospitals, schools, and libraries and they would become hubs to which businesses and residential would link at a later time.

MS. WALSH: I think that libraries again do bridge divisional divide. They provide almost emergency resources for people in this tough time. Washington libraries are struggling but they are keeping that foremost and I was so glad that they were willing and able to reach out to us and that we were able to help and will continue to help. We are still developing this Hard Times project and we hope we are making an impact. We are grateful for LSTA so that we can do that.