

## **Digital Access at the Doorstep: Promoting Digital Inclusion in Manufactured Housing Communities**

Libraries Without Borders (LWB), in partnership with the Anoka County Library, Minnesota Department of Education, and ROC USA, respectfully requests a Community Catalyst Planning Grant for \$99,999.03 to run a one-year pilot project that fosters robust partnerships between public libraries and manufactured housing communities (“mobile home parks”). Building on the success of LWB’s Wash and Learn Initiative (WALI), which scales literacy programs to laundromats nationwide, this project will increase the capacity of Anoka County librarians to promote digital inclusion at Park Plaza, a resident-owned mobile home community in Fridley, Minnesota.

### **Statement of National Need**

Manufactured housing communities, pejoratively known by as “trailer parks,” have a long history of providing low-cost pathways to home ownership in the United States. Since World War II, travel-trailers – the name initially given to mobile homes<sup>1</sup> – have been a popular alternative for people hoping to achieve the American Dream.<sup>2</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, manufactured housing made up nearly half of all new single-family production. Although this number has declined over time, today an estimated 22 million people live in mobile homes,<sup>3</sup> making them the single largest source of unsubsidized affordable housing in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Amid housing shortages and reduced federal support for public housing, mobile homes are becoming an increasingly attractive option for low-income families and other cost burdened<sup>5</sup> individuals. By offering alternative financing arrangements, they provide a “healthy, inexpensive, environmentally friendly [housing] solution”<sup>6</sup> for millions of low-income and wealth-constrained families.<sup>7</sup> In light of stricter lending standards, mounting student loan debt, a shortage of single-family homes, and the inflation of home prices among stagnating incomes, manufactured homes are “perhaps the final means of home ownership for a staggeringly large percentage of working-class American families.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The term “mobile home” can be a misnomer since many of these manufactured homes cannot be moved once they are installed. In some cases, although they can be moved, doing so would cost thousands of dollars and pose a serious structural risk to the home. Despite this distinction, these terms will be used interchangeably throughout the proposal.

<sup>2</sup> Sears and other companies sold as many as 250,000 manufactured housing “kits” before and after World War II, according to The Department of Housing and Urban Development.

<sup>3</sup> See Daniel B. Kline, *Does the American Dream No Longer Include Homeownership?*, CNN: Money (July 24<sup>th</sup> 2017), [http://money.cnn.com/2017/07/24/real\\_estate/american-dream-homeownership/index.html](http://money.cnn.com/2017/07/24/real_estate/american-dream-homeownership/index.html). According to the 2017 American Community Survey, this accounts for 6 percent of the nation’s total housing stock.

<sup>4</sup> Ehrenfeucht, Renia. “Moving Beyond the Mobile Myth: Preserving Manufactured Housing Communities,” Grounded Solutions Network (August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016). <https://groundedsolutions.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/Moving%20Beyond%20the%20Mobile%20Myth.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Cost burdened is defined a household that spends more than 30 percent of its income on housing. Scally, C., Gilbert, B., Hedman, C., Gold, A., Posey, L., “Rental Housing for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Rural America: A Platform for Production,” The Urban Institute (October 2018). [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99045/rental\\_housing\\_for\\_a\\_21st\\_century\\_rural\\_america.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99045/rental_housing_for_a_21st_century_rural_america.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Margonelli, L. “How the Trailer Park Could Save Us All,” Pacific Standard (updated June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017, originally April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013). <https://psmag.com/social-justice/how-the-trailer-park-could-save-us-all-55137>

<sup>7</sup> Freddie Mac and the Center for Community Capital at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, “The Loan Shopping Experiences of Manufactured Home Owners: Survey Report.” (2018).

<sup>8</sup> Baird, S. “Mobile Homeland,” Curbed (September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017). <https://www.curbed.com/2017/9/13/16275948/mobile-manufactured-homes-clayton-trailers>

Despite their affordability, mobile homes are subject to “a kind of housing scarlet letter”<sup>9</sup> that continues to evoke scorn from cities and municipalities across the country. They have reputations as shoddy and substandard structures and have been widely denigrated as “havens of crime, perches for transients; flimsy rusting structures, dangerous during disasters – ‘blight’ that brings down neighborhood property values.”<sup>10</sup> This persistent stigma has led to various state and local regulatory barriers<sup>11</sup> prohibiting mobile homes from setting up in ‘traditional’ residential areas. As a result, localities *en masse* have pushed manufactured housing communities to the outskirts of towns, regarding them as “unwanted and obsolete uses of land,”<sup>12</sup> and thereby fueling the continued marginalization of the people who live in them.

Though they attract residents of every race and origin, with more American Indians and fewer African Americans than the population at large,<sup>13</sup> the demographics of residents who live in manufactured housing communities reveal a population that is, by a large margin, less educated and poorer than the rest of the homeowner population. While 38 percent of the national homeowner population has a bachelor’s degree or higher, only about 8.7 percent of manufactured homeowners achieve the same. Moreover, nearly 20 percent of manufactured housing households have a single head of household with no children in the home; for site-built homes this is true for less than 15 percent of households. Approximately 32 percent of manufactured housing households are headed by a retiree, compared to 24 percent for site-built households.

It is clear that manufactured housing communities are home to some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. From single women to recent arrivals in the country, and from young families to retirees on a limited income, manufactured housing communities are home to people with an average household income of \$28,400 versus a national median of \$52,250.<sup>14</sup> In fact, more than 22 percent of people who live in these communities have incomes at or below the Federal poverty line. Unfortunately, there are legal and financial drawbacks to living in most manufactured housing communities, which render residents vulnerable to exploitation. “When you buy a home there, you own the walls, roof and floor, but a private company or investor owns all the land under and around the house. Homeowners pay rent to keep their homes there [...but the] company can sell the land and kick out the residents and their houses whenever it wants, except in a few states that have given residents legal rights to resist.”<sup>15</sup> Due to these conditions, sociologists have described life in manufactured housing communities as “quasi-homelessness” and a “kind of serfdom.”<sup>16</sup>

Though often ignored, an estimated 22 million people live in mobile home parks, which represents the largest sector of non-subsidized affordable housing in the United States. By participating in this pilot, the

<sup>9</sup> Baird, S. “Mobile Homeland,” *Curbed* (September 13th, 2017). <https://www.curbed.com/2017/9/13/16275948/mobile-manufactured-homes-clayton-trailers>

<sup>10</sup> Margonelli, L. “How the Trailer Park Could Save Us All,” *Pacific Standard* (updated June 14th, 2017, originally April 22nd, 2013). <https://psmag.com/social-justice/how-the-trailer-park-could-save-us-all-55137>

<sup>11</sup> For example, a typical restriction requires that manufactured homes be located at least 25 feet from the property line unless the adjacent property is zoned residential, in which case the setback requirement doubles to 50 feet.

<sup>12</sup> Denvir, D. “The Other Affordable Housing Crisis,” *CityLab* (September 21st, 2015). <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2015/09/the-other-affordable-housing-crisis/406405/>

<sup>13</sup> Van Dam, A. “Why trailer parks are all over rural America, but not Iowa,” *Washington Post*. (December 29th, 2017) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/12/29/why-trailer-parks-are-all-over-rural-america-but-not-iowa/>

<sup>14</sup> Fannie Mae, “Duty to Serve Underserved Markets Plan for the Manufactured Housing Market” (December 20th, 2019). <https://www.fhfa.gov/PolicyProgramsResearch/Programs/Documents/Fannie-Mae-Modifications-122019.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Zwerdling, D. “When Residents Take Ownership, A Mobile Home Community Thrives,” *NPR* (December 27th, 2016) <https://www.npr.org/2016/12/27/503052538/when-residents-take-ownership-a-mobile-home-community-thrives>

<sup>16</sup> Margonelli, L. “How the Trailer Park Could Save Us All,” *Pacific Standard* (updated June 14th, 2017, originally April 22nd, 2013). <https://psmag.com/social-justice/how-the-trailer-park-could-save-us-all-55137>

Anoka County Library, local nonprofits, and residents of Park Plaza will test, iterate, and improve upon an innovative outreach model that public libraries nationwide will be able to adopt. In turn, this project will lay the groundwork for digital inclusion efforts that meet the needs of mobile home residents and result in the creation of a methodology to promote digital literacy and readiness in these communities. Rather than ignore their role in society, the Anoka County Library lead the way for other public libraries to that ensures this oft-forgotten swath of the population has access to digital tools and the Internet.

## **Project Design**

This project will pilot an outreach model that public libraries nationwide can employ to promote digitally inclusive manufactured housing communities. Building upon LWB's Wash and Learn Initiative (WALI), this project will similarly expand library services, namely digital literacy programming, to a traditionally under-served population by transforming a communal space into a hub for learning and connectivity.

Rather than meeting people at the laundromat, this project will bring digital tools and training opportunities to the doorstep of Park Plaza Cooperative, a 90-site, resident-owned manufactured home community in Fridley, Minnesota. In 2019, LWB hosted a series of programs and town-hall conversations with Anoka County Public Libraries and the residents of Park Plaza. During these conversations, librarians heard firsthand how roughly half of residents at a manufactured housing cooperative cannot afford Internet access or the technology needed to go online. Without equitable access to technology, the Internet, or digital literacy opportunities, these adults are unable to access job opportunities or find reliable information about health, finance or public benefits. Without technology, skills, and a stable internet connection, children cannot finish homework.

## ***Why libraries?***

Today's public libraries are technology hubs that millions of people from all works of life rely upon as their first or only choice to access the Internet and use technology. For more than two decades, libraries have grown their digital offerings from providing free public Internet access to hosting digital literacy training opportunities and allowing patrons to check out technology devices. Today, they teach technology-focused classes that range from taming your mouse to setting up email to customizing your Facebook privacy settings, creating a resume, or filling out online job applications. Beyond these critical initiatives, some libraries have forged unconventional partnerships with nonprofits, community groups, and local government agencies to ensure that hard-to-reach populations benefit from digital inclusion efforts.<sup>17</sup> By embarking upon these new projects, they demonstrate that proximity to information via the local library branch is not enough for communities facing multiple economic, social, and physical barriers.<sup>18</sup>

By leveraging the cooperative's newly built storm shelter, this project seeks to test the efficacy of a door-to-door approach to promoting digital inclusion in manufactured housing communities, which represent the largest sector of non-subsidized affordable housing in the United States. This approach relies upon the participation of public libraries, who are uniquely positioned to bridge the digital divide in manufactured housing communities like Park Plaza.

<sup>17</sup> The Kansas City Public Library system offers robust digital inclusion programming. <https://www.kclibrary.org/digital-inclusion>

<sup>18</sup> David Lee King, "Digital Inclusion at the Library," Emerald Publishing. [https://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/librarians/features/king\\_inclusion.htm](https://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/librarians/features/king_inclusion.htm)

## ***Project Timeline***

During the first month of operations (October 2020), LWB work with the Anoka County Library, Park Plaza Cooperative Board of Directors, and Minnesota Department of Education to recruit and hire a local Project Coordinator. This person will directly oversee the pilot project for the remainder of the grant period. They will also serve as a liaison between LWB and local partners.

Simultaneously, LWB will also host a month-long capacity-building training for librarians. Led by LWB's team of experts, the primary goal of this training will be to expand the capacity of the librarians to develop tailored digital literacy programming that aligns with the demographics and interests of Park Plaza residents. These interactive sessions will also equip librarians with the tools needed to conduct a follow-up needs assessment (similar to the one led by LWB in 2019), which will similarly inform the specific program offerings.

Six weeks into the pilot project, the Anoka County library will host a second town hall at Park Plaza. At this time, leveraging the skills acquired during the October training, the librarians will survey residents on the programmatic offerings they hope to see at the Digital Literacy Lab, which is the tentative name for the converted storm shelter space. Based on these survey findings, the librarians will work with the Minnesota Department of Education and the Project Coordinator to embark upon the content curation process, which will inform the creation of a digital literacy curriculum. The Minnesota Department of Education will commit to providing age appropriate educational content in a digital format. Based on these discussions, the Project Coordinator may also deem it necessary to collaborate with LWB's Technology and Social Justice Fellow to create bespoke digital resources for the Digital Literacy Lab. A draft of this curriculum will be presented to a focus group comprised of select Park Plaza residents no later than mid-November 2020.

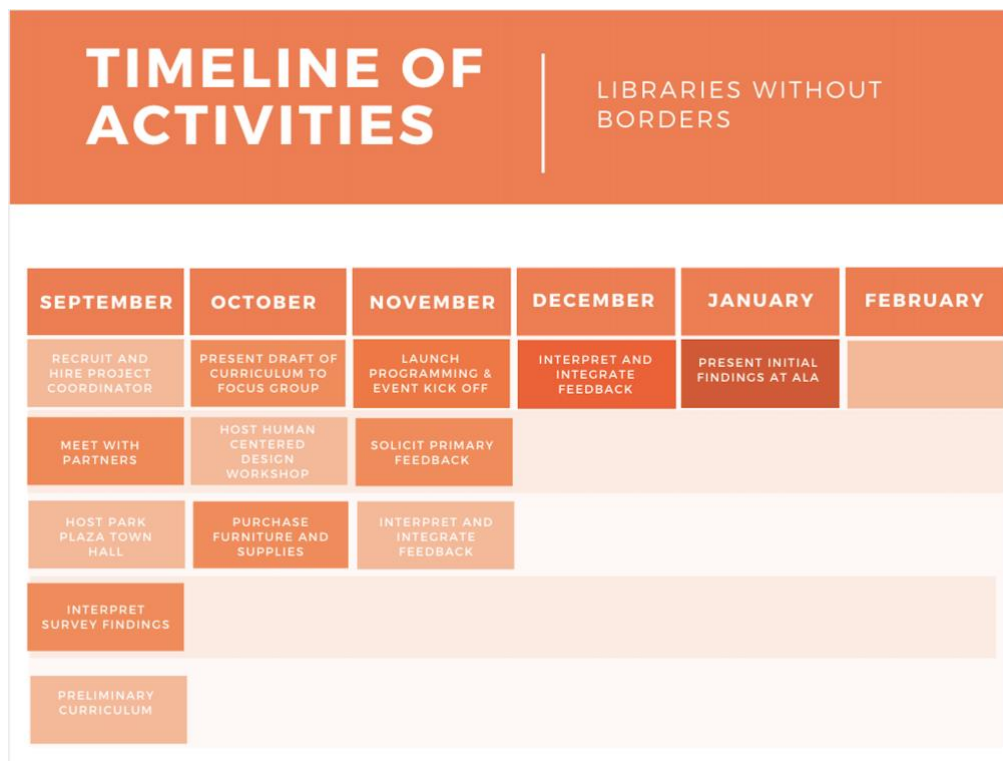
Over the next month (from mid-November to mid-December), the Project Coordinator will work with the librarians and LWB team to host a human-centered design workshop at Park Plaza. Based on the outcome of this discussion, the Project Coordinator and LWB staff will purchase the appropriate furniture and equipment to outfit the Digital Literacy Lab space within the storm shelter. As soon as the space is ready, the Project Coordinator will work with the librarians and Park Plaza leadership to host a kick-off event and ribbon-cutting ceremony inaugurating the community space.

Throughout the remaining months, the Project Coordinator will work with the librarians to devise simple strategies to solicit participant feedback. The Project Coordinator will also work with the LWB team to collect feedback from librarians in order to account for the facilitator perspective. LWB staff will present the initial findings from the pilot at the American Library Association's mid-winter conference, with the intent to further refine and improve the project in the months to come.

After four months of continuous programming, the Project Coordinator will convene a mid-year check-in with implementing partners to outline a monitoring and evaluation plan for the remaining five months of the pilot, as well as to discuss the project's future (Year 2). At this point, LWB and the Anoka County librarians will host another town hall for residents, during which they will administer a third anonymous survey. Based on these findings, the Project Coordinator, librarians, representatives from the Minnesota Department of Education, and other relevant nonprofit partners will work together to incorporate the community's feedback, as well as to adjust the program offerings and schedule as needed.

At the nine-month mark, LWB will begin to transition out of a direct leadership role. The Project Coordinator will similarly shift focus from programmatic matters to fundraising and development for the pilot’s second year. At this time, LWB will also seek to share reflections on the pilot project’s first year at the National Digital Inclusion Alliance’s Net Inclusion conference, tentatively scheduled for April 2021. The LWB team will also activate a communications campaign to raise public awareness of this initiative, with the goal of inspiring other library systems across the country to spearhead similar efforts in manufactured housing communities near them.

The Digital Literacy Lab will provide residents with access to user-friendly technology, digital literacy resources, and a reliable broadband connection. Situated within the Park Plaza Cooperative, the Lab will also serve as an extension of the Anoka County Library, complete with story time, STEM workshops, and digital literacy classes that are open to all. By forging partnerships with nonprofits and other anchor institutions like the Minnesota Department of Education and Minnesota Recreation and Parks Association, the Lab may also become a space for after-school homework help, ESL classes, a community food pantry, or legal services.



# TIMELINE OF ACTIVITIES

LIBRARIES WITHOUT BORDERS

MARCH	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUGUST
	COPRESENT AT NDI NET INCLUSION CONFERENCE	PUBLISH OP-ED & COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGN	OP-EDS & COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGN	OP-EDS & COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGN	INTERNAL EVALUATION OF IMPACT

## **National Impact**

Park Plaza is a 90-site, resident-owned manufactured home community comprised of 250 adults and 55 kids. Based on the feedback provided during the July 2019 town hall, we learned only half of all residents have an Internet connection of some sort. We also learned many children living in Park Plaza cannot access after-school or literacy programs, for various reasons. Given these facts, we believe that 50 percent of adults and 90 percent of children will be active participants in the program (125 adults, ~50 kids) during this pilot phase.

Specific outcomes for this pilot project include: increased digital literacy skills and familiarity with digital tools/technology; confidence navigating online content; improved STEM test scores for K-12 participants; intergenerational learning opportunities that improve social cohesion; improved parenting skills; greater sense of empowerment among participants and facilitators, particularly around workforce development; new, unconventional partnerships with local nonprofits, private enterprise/small business, government agencies, and other community-based organizations; and successful transfer of ownership to community members and the Anoka County Library. Specific outputs include: an official report on the impact and effectiveness of this pilot program, inclusive of data analysis and participant anecdotes; and a best practice guide for libraries and nonprofits that are interested in this type of community engagement.

This project will create a model for meaningful community engagement in manufactured housing communities by centering libraries as a linchpin connecting critical services (both those provided by the library itself and those provided by nonprofit and institutional partners) to a stigmatized and marginalized population prevented from fully participating in and contributing to society. The immediate goal is to bridge the digital divide and to connect Park Plaza residents to critical educational and employment opportunities. Much like LWB's work in laundromats, manufactured housing communities are oft-

overlooked, yet serve as a unique place to reach low-income, underserved families while amplifying the reach of an anchor institution – the public library.

