

Community Development Model for Manufactured Housing Communities

National Leadership Grant | Project Category: Community Catalyst | Funding Category: Planning

Summary

Libraries Without Borders (LWB) respectfully requests a one-year, Community Catalyst Planning Grant for \$99,829.80 to develop a capacity-building model for public libraries and nonprofits to promote digital inclusion and meaningful broadband adoption in manufactured housing communities (“mobile home parks”). In partnership with the Anoka County Library, Minnesota Department of Education, ROC USA, and regional organizations, LWB will set-up a Digital Literacy Lab in the storm shelter of Park Plaza Cooperative, a manufactured housing community in Fridley, Minnesota. Through this informal learning environment, residents of all ages will have an opportunity to access information technology, broadband internet, and digital literacy training. Beyond capacity-building, this project will provide public libraries and nonprofits with a best practices toolkit designed to foster the expansion and sustainability of digital inclusion efforts in manufactured housing communities across the country. LWB will disseminate this toolkit and key learnings from the pilot at the annual ALA Conference, Net Inclusion 2020, and other digital equity-focused events. In turn, to bolster the impact evaluation ecosystem for library public programming, we will solicit feedback from our library and nonprofit partners, namely the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, to complement the foundational research conducted by the National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment (NILPPA) initiative.

Statement of National Need

Homeownership, long considered a staple of the American dream, has been falling since the 2008 financial crisis. Stricter lending standards, mounting student debt, a shortage in single family homes, and the inflation of home prices among stagnating incomes have contributed to this decrease. To make matters worse, an affordable housing crisis is plaguing the country, with the shortage disproportionately affecting extremely low income renter households (i.e. those with incomes at or below the poverty level or 30 percent of their area median income). For these families, manufactured homes (“mobile homes” or “trailers”) offer a pathway to homeownership that is within reach. However, poverty persists in the 6.6 million households that live in these communities. Of Americans living below the poverty line, one in ten reside in a manufactured home, where the median income is 43 percent lower than for traditional households. The demographics of these communities also reveal a population that is, by a large margin, less educated and poorer than most Americans. 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 Anoka County Library, local nonprofits, and residents of Park Plaza will test, iterate, and improve upon an innovative outreach model for public libraries to promote digital inclusion in the hundreds of manufactured housing communities that stretch from coast-to-coast. The project will also generate a living toolkit of best practices for informal learning in vulnerable communities that face social stigma and marginalization.

Project Design

This project will develop a replicable model for public libraries and nonprofits intending to expand digital inclusion programming to manufactured housing communities. Building upon LWB’s early assessment of digital literacy rates, broadband adoption, and technology access among Park Plaza residents, the project will employ a two-pronged approach to promote digital inclusion in manufactured housing communities. The project will begin with a month-long series of interactive trainings focused on building the capacity of librarians and nonprofit partners, enabling them to effectively deliver digital inclusion programming at Park Plaza. Led by LWB’s team of experts, these activities will give librarians and our nonprofit partners the skills to better assess and respond to the needs of residents. Over the next three months, the pilot will shift focus from facilitators to participants. At this time, LWB will hire a local Project Coordinator who will act as a liaison to the Anoka County Library, as well as to the Park Plaza Cooperative. The Project Coordinator will work closely with librarians and nonprofit partners to design the Digital Literacy Lab and carefully plan on-site programming that increases public access to information, the internet, and related digital literacy training, and ultimately, lays the groundwork for meaningful broadband adoption in Park Plaza. In the month that follows, the Project Coordinator, the Anoka County Library, local implementing partners, and leadership of the Park Plaza Cooperative will set-up the Digital Literacy Lab in the storm shelter. Shortly thereafter, the project will officially open to the public and begin offering facilitated digital literacy activities. After two months of continuous programming, the Project Coordinator and Anoka County librarians will solicit community feedback through surveys and focus groups. Based on these findings, the Project Coordinator, librarians and nonprofit partners will adjust the type of activities and programming schedule to better

align with the interests and availability of residents. The Project Coordinator will also convene a mid-year check-in with implementing partners to outline a monitoring and evaluation plan for the last three months of the pilot, and discuss next steps for the project. During the final phase of the pilot, the LWB team and Project Coordinator will transition out of leadership roles, allowing the Anoka County Library and its partners to fully take charge of digital inclusion programming at Park Plaza. Although LWB and the Project Coordinator will continue to support this project, their focus will shift toward securing funding to run the program for a second year.

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 storytime, 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.

Diversity Impact

This project seeks to identify best practices for conducting outreach and delivering services to majority very low- and extremely low-income residents of manufactured housing communities. These communities are as a whole more racially and ethnically diverse than the homeowner population, and span across various age groups, with the majority of residents between the ages of 18 and 29 years old. Compared to the national population as a whole, residents of manufactured housing communities are also more likely to have disabilities, with 15 percent of them unable to work because of a disability.

Program Outcomes and 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 practices 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. LWB will disseminate the toolkit of best practices to libraries and other interested parties by presenting on the project at national and regional conferences, showcasing the pilot's results in print and digital media, and sharing project reports along with supplementary materials via open source platforms that expand beyond the reach of traditional library and museum networks.

Budget Summary

The proposed two-year budget of \$99,829.80 includes \$73,000.00 in personnel for the Project Coordinator, Project Management, and library staff; \$14,266.00 in tech equipment; \$3,369.00 for furniture; \$1,800.00 for materials, including books, print media, arts and crafts supplies, and other educational resources; as well as \$7,394.80 for indirect costs.