



# Library Profile **WHITMAN COUNTY RURAL LIBRARY DISTRICT**

WHITMAN COUNTY, WASHINGTON

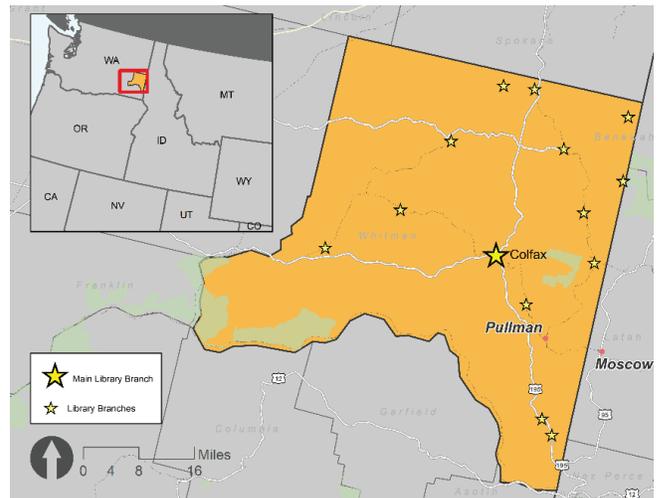
# Library Profile: Whitman County Rural Library District



## WHITMAN COUNTY, WASHINGTON

The Whitman County Rural Library District consists of one main branch and 13 satellite branches in southeastern Washington state. The main branch is in Colfax, and the branches are spread throughout remote rural areas of the county. The Whitman County Rural Library District employs 13 full-time staff, and in 2016, it had a total circulation of 132,813.

The library system promotes residents' wellbeing by connecting remote rural towns to the county's public health, nonprofit, and government infrastructure. The Whitman County Rural Library District's mission includes serving as the "educational, informational, and social commons for our rural communities" and "a catalyst for improvement for the communities within the district."



## WHITMAN COUNTY

Whitman County is a rural county with a population of 47,794 in southeastern Washington state. Nearly 70 percent of the population lives in the city of Pullman. The rest of the county is rural and agricultural. The Whitman County Rural Library District serves all of Whitman County excluding Pullman, which is served

by a separate city library system. The median household income in Whitman County is \$38,636, considerably less than the state median of \$62,848. The county is about 80 percent White, 2 percent Black, 6 percent Hispanic, 8 percent Asian, and about 5 percent other or more than one race.

	Population	% Change in Population (2000–2016)	% White	% Black	% Hispanic	% Asian	% Other	Median Household Income	% Families in Poverty
United States	318,558,162	13.2	62.0	12.3	17.3	5.2	3.3	\$55,322	11.0
Whitman County	47,494	16.6	79.8	2.0	5.6	7.9	4.7	\$38,636	11.7

Compared to other rural counties, Whitman County residents enjoy elevated levels of community health. Whitman County fell in the top quartile of the Community Health Index.<sup>1</sup> The primary industries in the county include

Educational Services, Manufacturing, Health Care & Social Assistance, and Accommodation & Food Service, which account for roughly 82 percent of adult employment in the county.

	Total Labor Force	% Education Services	% Manufacturing	% Health Care & Social Assistance	% Accommodation & Food Service
United States*	131,362,978	9.2	9.3	14.5	8.9
Whitman County	18,428	39.0	16.0	19.0	8.0

Data Sources: 2012–16 American Community Survey five-year estimates; U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD), 2017.

\*Continental figures for total labor force include the 48 lower states and Washington, DC.

<sup>1</sup> Data elements included in the Community Health and School Effectiveness Indexes, along with measures for Whitman County, can be found at the beginning of Appendix II. Pullman is home to 24,362 undergraduate students at Washington State University. Several interviewees noted that the presence of the Washington State University campus in the county skewed, particularly, the Community Health Index.

## SITE VISIT PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

In fall 2019, the study team conducted interviews with four current library staff and representatives from 11 different partner organizations. Site visit interviews conducted with the Whitman County Rural Library District's staff and partners focused on understanding the library system's programming and partnerships that support community health, and the library system's institutional approaches to sustainability.

In addition, the library system's staff provided the following data to create the network map included in this profile:

- Library system's newsletters from 2016, 2017, and 2019
- A list of all programs held at library branches in 2018
- Grant evaluation reports for several library programs
- Interview notes and related materials collected by the case study team

This site profile includes the following:

- A summary of select library programming and partnerships that support community health among patrons and throughout Whitman County
- Whitman County Rural Library District's institutional approaches to sustaining the contributions its efforts have in the local community
- A descriptive network map that illustrates the scope and variety of connections the library system maintains with local partners throughout the county and beyond

## PROMOTING HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN RURAL PLACES REQUIRES A PERSONAL TOUCH

Organizations partnering with the Whitman County Rural Library District valued the physical locations and personal connections that librarians formed, especially in the small, rural branches. The library system's buildings are some of the very few public gathering places and often the only source of reliable public Wi-Fi in many of the small towns in Whitman County. Branch managers get to know their patrons well and reported forming strong relationships. From this position, branch managers were able to serve as trusted, knowledgeable intermediaries between outside organizations and library patrons.

The Whitman County Rural Library District supports community health in Whitman County in three primary ways. First, the library locations served as sites where residents could receive

health care and health care information. Second, library branches also supported social service provision by making referrals, helping patrons fill out paperwork, and serving as a host site for regional nonprofit and government-led organizations. And finally, libraries supported food security by providing emergency food to patrons.

The Whitman County Rural Library District's branches are important, centrally located sites where residents of Whitman County's small rural communities can receive routine medical care and screenings. One librarian commented that for many rural residents, the biggest barrier to health care was not cost but access. Library branches host flu shot clinics and vision screenings, conduct mental health first aid trainings, and lead yoga classes. They were also

in the process of planning to host Washington State University's mobile medical unit for primary and urgent care and referrals.

Social service organizations rely on library locations as a place to connect with residents in need of their help. Both the Statewide Health Insurance Benefit Advisors (SHIBA) and the Whitman County Department of Health assist seniors with Medicare enrollment at library branches. Whitman Hospital Medical Center offers an array of programming at library branches, including health screenings, nutrition programs, senior fitness classes, and car-seat safety workshops. Pullman Regional Hospital conducts its Aging in Mastery program at library locations, teaching seniors how to eat well, prevent falls, and manage their medical needs. The Community Action Center (CAC) does outreach for its energy programs, including the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and the Low Income Rate Assistance Program (LIRAP), to ensure seniors and disabled residents can keep their homes warm and

utilities on during the winter. A staff member for CAC reflected:

*"[The library is] an obvious and the best option out there, especially for getting word out about services. Most of the time, we reach out to the libraries; but libraries will reach out to the CAC as well—communication goes both ways."*

Finally, the library branches serve as locations for residents to both learn about programs supporting food security and to receive emergency food. All branch managers are trained about food insecurity issues and where to access emergency food. The Whitman County Department of Health does outreach for Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) at library locations, and the Council on Aging and Human Services and CAC have brought bags of emergency food for librarians to distribute while publicizing food pantries and nutritional programs.

## **SUPPORTING WELLBEING IN RURAL COMMUNITIES MEANS PROVIDING MORE THAN BOOKS**

The Whitman County Rural Library District is a highly trusted institution in the communities it serves. This reputation is prized among library leadership, staff, and the partners that collaborate with different branches. The respect and trust that the library system has cultivated means that it can be responsive to emerging needs in the communities it serves—needs that often extend beyond informational needs or entertainment that can be met by checking out books or other materials.

For example, when branch librarians noticed patrons were requesting information on community resources or social services, including housing and health resources, they responded by bringing in new partners

to provide support in those areas. Partner organizations use the library to connect with patrons across a wide range of supports—from weatherization for the winter months to addressing food insecurity. In addition, the libraries also act as centralized access points for a range of technologies for county residents. All branches have free Wi-Fi access and computers for patron use, with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the state library system, and a one-time grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Partners described the Whitman County Rural Library District branches as important conduits for getting the word out about what the partners had to offer.

## CREATING AND STRENGTHENING NEUTRAL NETWORKS ENHANCES THE WELLBEING OF INDIVIDUALS AND THE BROADER COMMUNITY

The Whitman County Rural Library District operates within multiple overlapping formal and informal networks that directly meet the needs of county residents and organizations. Overlapping networks make the library system a center of connectivity, both of people and places, providing a level of social cohesion in a county with relatively few public institutions. Library staff reported viewing their commitment to neutrality as key to their ability to serve as a trusted member of the community. The library system saw its role as supporters of the community, not final decision-makers. The director shared that, "In a small community, things will frequently be controversial. It is important to stay neutral in a small town." The Whitman County Rural Library District leadership and staff noted that it was important that they were not perceived as government representatives.

The Whitman County Rural Library District staff strengthen formal regional networks by coordinating and supporting the Palouse Alliance for Healthy Individuals, Families and Communities—an organization dedicated to the development and promotion of public trust through community initiatives and participation. The Whitman County Rural Library District was central to the founding of the Palouse Alliance and hosts the group meetings at its community space at the Colfax branch. The group convenes monthly meetings of the region's social service providers to share information, coordinate care, and organize volunteers. Many of the participating agencies serve the same clients. The Whitman County Rural Library District staff perceived their involvement with the Palouse Alliance as an example of how they support

community while maintaining neutrality. Unlike other members, the library system is not a social service organization. This allows library staff to focus on facilitating and hosting rather than directing the Palouse Alliance's work.

Library staff emphasized the role the Whitman County Rural Library District plays as a hub in the community, creating its own informal networks. Many partners cited the main branch in Colfax as a community hub, a place to meet up with other residents and to get the word out about happenings in the community. The Colfax branch serves as an integral part of the region's civic infrastructure—it is a place where people stop by just to find out about local happenings in the community, either via the community bulletin board or talking with other residents. The most rural branches serve a similar purpose. Small, remote towns have few public spaces, and the libraries serve as not just a resource for Wi-Fi, information, and books, but a place for interaction with neighbors.

Staff described the library system's role as a community hub as positively contributing to the wellbeing of its patrons. Librarians keenly observed their patrons and were sensitive to their needs. As one branch manager observed, the craft-based programming offered by the library system provides an outlet to mitigate social isolation among seniors who would otherwise have few opportunities to connect with each other in rural parts of the county. The branch manager recognized the importance of these opportunities as moments for social interaction and fellowship among attendees and noted that this promotes the overall level of wellbeing in the community.

## **INSTITUTIONAL AND INTERPERSONAL NETWORKS ARE CRITICAL TO SUSTAINING SUPPORT FOR THE WHITMAN COUNTY RURAL LIBRARY DISTRICT**

The Whitman County Rural Library District sustains its work through timely identification of community needs and having the capacity to meet those needs through institutional and interpersonal networks. The Whitman County Rural Library District sustains its work financially through a county levy, supplemented by grants from the federal government and private donations. These funds were used to upgrade facilities or make other capital improvements, like Wi-Fi and computer equipment. Partner organizations reported that the library system was proactive in identifying new resources and opportunities for the community.

The Whitman County Rural Library District also makes use of the Washington State Library system to sustain its work. Branch managers not formally educated in library service can take advantage of training using the state's training library. The service was particularly valuable because the online videos were easily accessible at any time, from any place. The state library system also provided physical resources for the Whitman County Rural Library District. One branch librarian used a programmable robotics kit with her teenage patrons that the state system had made available.

A statewide network of library directors also supports the Whitman County Rural Library District's work. Through the group, the Whitman County Rural Library District's director has gleaned new ways to support the community, especially by adapting them to a rural context. For example, King County facilitated nurse visits to patrons' homes—that would be too costly to replicate in Whitman County, but it was the

catalyst for them to offer more delivery services of library materials.

The Whitman County Rural Library District staff valued and learned from their coworkers' varied life experiences and saw their relationships with patrons as integral to identifying community need. One branch manager knew that her deep connections to her community were appreciated by her colleagues. She felt her previous experiences in emergency management services and her extensive community connections, including a term on the City Council, positively contributed to her work with patrons. She also appreciated the literacy skills that she learned from a coworker who had previously been a teacher.

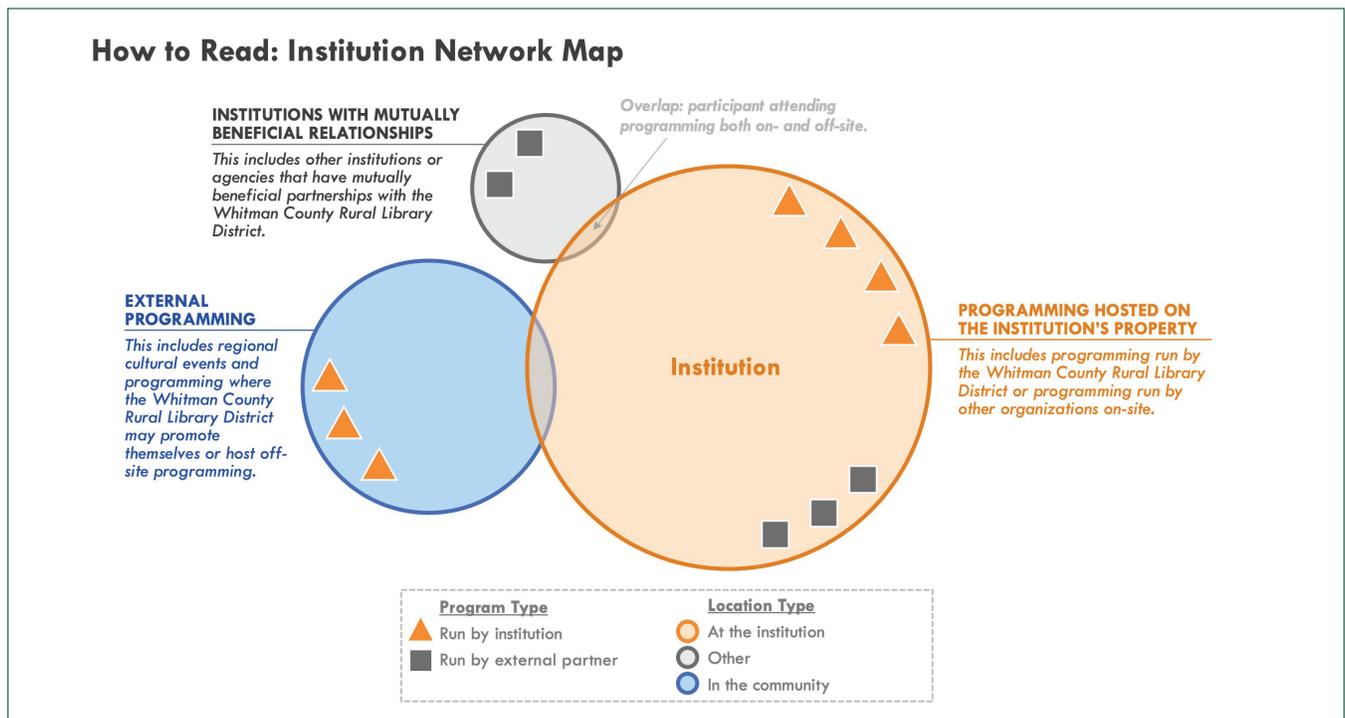
The Whitman County Rural Library District's sustainability depends on a web of formal and informal partnerships and networks. Formal connections include the strong state library system; widespread resident support to increase its county levy; and strong relationships to state, federal, and private grant-making institutions. Informal connections, such as statewide peer networks, a learning culture among staff, and an ability to attract community-oriented applicants for open positions, complement the formal connections. The power of these interpersonal and institutional relationships reflects the mutually reinforcing web of connections within a rural library system that is responsive to residents' needs in a way that promotes the wellbeing of communities throughout the county while also sustaining the library system itself.

# WHITMAN COUNTY RURAL LIBRARY DISTRICT NETWORK MAP

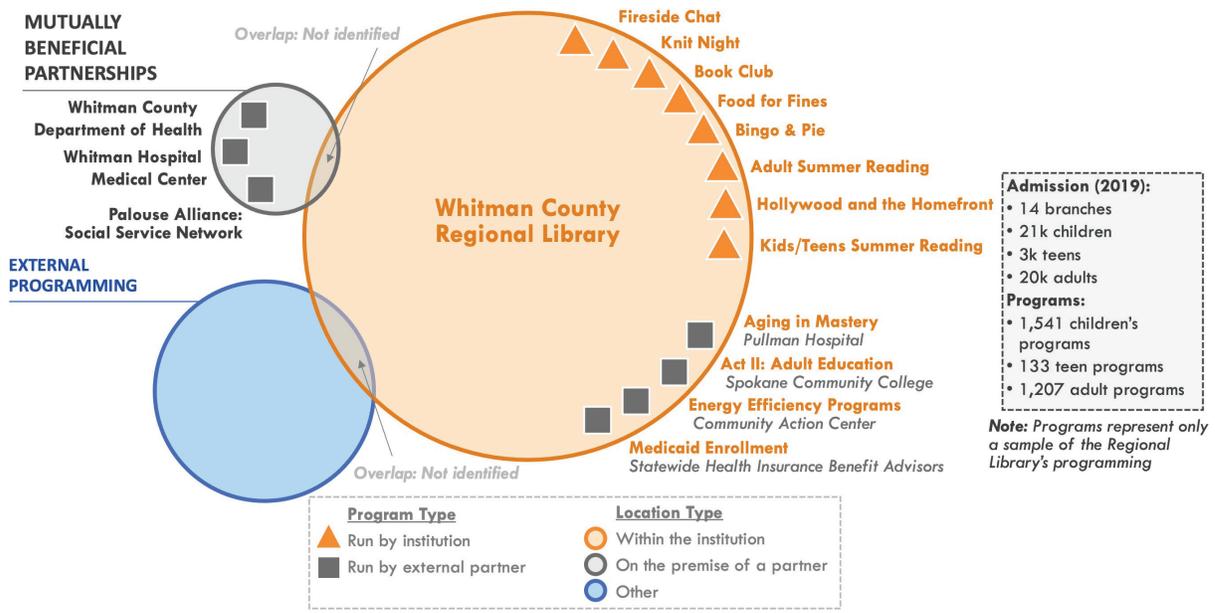
Using data provided by the Whitman County Rural Library District, the study team developed a descriptive network map to highlight the different types of connections the Whitman County Rural Library District maintains with other institutions in the local community. The map illustrates the relationships between the Whitman County Rural Library District and those entities that offer programming at the

library branches and those that support cross-marketing efforts or have reciprocal relationships with the library, and it includes examples of off-site, library-led programming. The map does not provide an exhaustive list of the Whitman County Rural Library District's programs but attempts to illustrate a subset of the relationships that the library maintains.

*NOTE: The network map is purely descriptive. The connections represented on the map do not necessarily, and are not intended to, provide estimates of the duration, durability, intensity, or broader economic impact of the relationships between the Whitman County Rural Library District and any single entity, or the broader network itself. The goal of the network map is to represent the range and diversity of different types of institutions that connect to the Whitman County Rural Library District in different ways.*



## Whitman County Rural Library District Network Map



The figure above illustrates a *sample* of the connections across the Whitman County Rural Library District. Within the orange circle is a sample of programs conducted on the physical property of the libraries—both programs produced by the libraries and those produced by others. Within the blue circle is a sample of programs produced by the libraries and offered off-site in the community. The gray circle represents a sample of connections with other regional organizations.