

New Jersey State Library, an affiliate of Thomas Edison State University

Reconnecting Citizens with their Communities at Public Libraries

Proposal Summary: The New Jersey State Library (NJSL) seeks \$656,066 in funds for a two-year project for public libraries in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, in collaboration with government and nonprofit organizations, to provide services to citizens returning to their home communities after being paroled or maxed out of prison. The project will develop a toolkit of best practices for libraries to participate in the reentry process following prison and meet the needs of this significantly sized population in local communities. Project partners include New Jersey State Parole Board (SPB), New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (LWD), Long Branch (NJ) Public Library and the Free Library of Philadelphia. NJSL, its partners, and the seven participating libraries will provide cost share of \$656,066.

Statement of National Need: As a project in the IMLS Community Catalyst category, *Reconnecting Citizens* aims to develop a national model of collaboration among public libraries and multiple government agencies, such as workforce development and parole boards, and social service nonprofits, for providing services to the significant number of formerly incarcerated individuals who return to reside in their home communities. (In 2015 in the U.S., 4.5 million individuals were under community correctional supervision, such as parole. Another 1.5 million individuals resided in federal or state prisons or county jails. Ninety-five percent of these persons have returned or will return to their home communities upon release. [Bureau of Justice Statistics]). Returning citizens who quickly acquire employment and housing contribute to community well-being, the local economy and public safety. Unsuccessful reentry, however, contributes to a national rearrest rate of 67.8% within three years of release and the subsequent draining of community resources towards the costs associated with imprisonment, estimated at an annual average taxpayer cost in 2010 of \$31,286 per inmate in the U.S. (Vera Institute of Justice, 2012). Reentry research (Scott Johnson, "3 Attributes of Successful Reentry Programs," *Social Solutions*, January 12, 2016) confirms that returning citizens typically need assistance to overcome personal barriers (an estimated half of all jail inmates lack a high school diploma) and societal barriers (such as policies excluding felony convicts from public housing) to living successfully in their communities, and that the work of reintegrating these returning citizens is "built on partnerships and collaboration." As a partner with NJSL on *Reconnecting Citizens*, the New Jersey State Parole Board acknowledges the capacity of public libraries to aid the SPB's mandate to ensure former prisoners return to society as law-abiding citizens. Libraries participating in the project and libraries that model their own programs based on the resulting project toolkit of best practices will help a population recognized by the American Library Association's Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services as needing "library and information services designed to assist in their successful readjustment to society."

Project Design: *Reconnecting Citizens* seeks to scale-up a locally tested collaborative model developed by the Long Branch (NJ) Public Library to assist formerly incarcerated individuals in that community. To reach a significant number of individuals, the project will rely on the SPB to advise returning citizens about available assistance at participating libraries in Paterson, Newark, Trenton, Long Branch, Atlantic City, and Bridgeton (all in NJ) and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (located across the Delaware River from New Jersey). Serving returning citizens at the libraries during this project will center on two approaches: community resource fairs with a two-year goal of reaching 1,200 returning citizens and individualized assessments and services for another 675 returning citizens. A Project Coordinator and two "circuit rider" social workers hired by NJSL will initially focus on building relationships with social service organizations, government agencies, and businesses open to hiring so that these organizations will attend monthly community resource fairs at the seven libraries. At Newark Public Library, for example, returning citizens at a monthly session could meet and receive services from the division of Housing Assistance of Newark's Department of Economic and Housing Development, the Essex County One-Stop Career Center, and the local office of the Salvation Army in one visit. After the monthly community resource fairs are established, the social workers will then also provide one-on-one assessments

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with individual returning citizens. Depending on their needs, individuals may enroll in the literacy, workforce development and basic education classes offered at the participating libraries (most of which are LWD-designated "Career Connections" libraries). Topics may include computer skills, GED preparation, and resume writing, and "soft skills," such as time management, and communication. With LWD as a project partner, New Jersey returning citizens may enroll in occupational skills training for industry-recognized credentials in such areas as building trades, health care, or information technology.

A Project Advisory Committee, including representation from Monmouth University (NJ) School of Social Work, and libraries with their own experiences serving incarcerated individuals and/or returning citizens, including DC Public Library, Denver Public Library, and San Francisco Public Library, will meet quarterly to review the project's progress. With experience in helping to meet the employment needs of returning citizens through an element of its IMLS-funded *Pascalville Partnership* project, the Free Library of Philadelphia, like Long Branch Public Library, will both provide services to its own returning citizens and provide project feedback through the Advisory Committee. NJSL will additionally contract with an evaluation consultant for a review at midpoint and at its conclusion. Based on the experiences of the participating libraries, feedback from the Advisory Committee, and the evaluation consultant, NJSL will develop a toolkit of best practices for public libraries (addressing libraries both with and without staff social workers) to serve returning citizens in communities across the United States. Presentations at the American Library Association annual conference and at regional reentry conferences, and posting on the project website will disseminate the project toolkit.

Diversity Plan: State incarceration data reveal racial and ethnic disparities between the prison population and the general population. In NJ and Pennsylvania, African Americans comprised 60% and 48.7%, respectively, of the state prison populations in 2014, although making up less than 15% and 10.6%, of their respective overall populations. Hispanics comprised 16.1% (NJ) and 10.7% (PA) of the state prison populations versus 18.9% and 6.3% of their respective overall populations. This project then will serve primarily African American and Hispanic individuals who are returning to communities with majority African American (Newark, Trenton, Atlantic City, and Philadelphia) or Hispanic (Paterson, Bridgeton) overall populations. To solicit feedback from the communities, the Project Coordinator and social workers will attend monthly meetings of the Reentry Task Forces based in the counties of the participating libraries. Convened by the SPB, the Reentry Task Forces are comprised of community organizations that share the goal of providing services to returning citizens.

National Impact: The approach to community reentry varies widely from state to state. This project aims to provide a model solution to community reentry by centering libraries as a linchpin that connects services provided by both the library itself and other community organizations and agencies to a population that faces personal and societal barriers to being productive members of society. The resulting toolkit with the set of best practices for a library's participation in the reentry process will help public libraries develop programs that will meet the needs and impact the lives of citizens returning to their own communities. The community relationships developed to assist returning citizens will build the overall capacity of libraries to assist this population and potentially other underserved populations with similar needs in their communities.

Budget Summary: The proposed two-year budget of \$656,066 in requested grant funds includes \$385,233 in salaries/benefits for the Project Coordinator and two social workers; \$9,600 for their local travel; \$130,000 for supplies, materials, and software for the classes and GED practice tests offered by the seven libraries; \$78,000 in participant support costs, particularly GED testing fee subsidies for returning citizens; \$13,000 in project marketing supplies for the libraries; \$10,000 for a project evaluation consultant, \$5,000 in conference registration and travel for dissemination of project results and \$25,233 for indirect costs. Cost share of \$656,066 will be provided by in-kind contributions of training and staff time by the New Jersey State Parole Board, New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, NJSL and the participating libraries.