

## **Propagating Models for Public Libraries to Address the Education and Workforce Development Needs of Low-Literacy and Low-Skilled Adults**

Providence Public Library (PPL), as lead applicant, with Chicago Public Library (CPL), Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL) and World Education, Inc. (WEI) requests \$529,790 and will provide an equal amount of cost share. As a result of this project, ongoing innovation and best practices for supporting the education and workforce development goals of low-literate, low-skilled adults will spread nationwide and public libraries will be equipped to offer evidence-driven, technology-supported services and be regarded as highly effective and welcoming hubs for lifelong learning, digital inclusion, and economic empowerment.

**National Need:** In the United States, 36 million adults have limited literacy or English proficiency, and US adults scored the lowest of 23 countries in problem-solving in technology-rich environments\*. The national adult education system that is designed to support these adults only has the capacity to serve about 4% of this population. Low-skilled and low-literacy adults need flexible, anytime, anywhere, free and accessible learning opportunities. The potential of public libraries to meet the needs of this underserved population has not been fully realized. While public libraries face constrained budgets and staffing, cost-efficient, high-impact, and scalable models that leverage technology are available to address the specific needs of the target population and can be utilized in public libraries across the country. By experimenting, learning from each other and diverse sectors, and documenting and sharing best practices, public libraries can be widely transformed into educational and workforce development leaders in their communities.

**Project Design:** The 3 libraries' models will be analyzed and documented in order to support the widespread adoption of these practices in libraries nationwide:

- Learning Lounges. Catalyzed by a previous IMLS National Leadership grant "Adult Lifelong Learning (ALL) Access" to PPL, Learning Lounges are technology enabled, staff/volunteer supported, welcoming learning spaces that offer "just-in-time" support for adults' education and employment goals. In the past six months, 449 adults have been served. Additional opportunities for how Learning Lounges can offer help to adults will be introduced and piloted;
- Mobile learning options. Adults need expanded access to 24/7 learning opportunities. Anytime, anywhere learning by phone is now accessible to most lower-skilled adults, with 95% of US adults having cell-phones, 77% of which are smart. LAPL is implementing mobile learning as part of the national Adult Literacy XPrize competition and PPL and CPL will also pilot mobile strategies;
- Digital badges and micro-credentialing. These credentialing strategies will shift library instruction and resources to emphasize the use of competencies and generate evidence of learning. PPL is experimenting with Mozilla's digital badges and will spearhead the effort to implement a digital badging system aligned to the learning needs of low-literacy and low-skilled adults. The three libraries will form agreements with educational institutions and employers to align adults' learning in libraries to next steps; and
- Peer to Peer University (P2PU) Learning Circles. CPL and PPL are implementing Learning Circles with low-literacy and low-skilled adults that offer peer supports and build a variety of skills.

A project Advisory Group (AG) will be comprised of Janet McKenney, Director of Library Development at Maine State Libraries; Nicolette Baffoni, Adult Services Coordinator at the Rhode Island Office of Library and Information Services; and Kristin LaHurd, Literacy Officer at the American Library Association. They will provide subject matter expertise on the needs and contexts of a diversity of public libraries particularly small and rural libraries, identify opportunities to further leverage resources and provide feedback on project activities.

WEI will serve as the project's evaluation, dissemination and technical assistance (TA) partner. WEI's US work focuses on building the capacity of the adult education and workforce development field and has developed numerous guides and toolkits for national replication. WEI's EdTech Center works to reach and educate more adults, accelerate their learning, increase their digital literacy and access, and empower them to reach their goals as workers, family, and community members. WEI's EdTech Center mobile learning experts will provide TA on mobile learning solutions. WEI will lead the documentation of best practices and development of an electronic toolkit. The toolkit will offer a menu of innovative, technology-enhanced and flexible options for public libraries nationwide to use to transform their services for low-skilled and low-literate adults. WEI will spearhead a tailored and robust dissemination, training, and coaching strategy to equip libraries to apply and adapt the strategies presented in the toolkit to their context.

**Evaluation:** WEI will utilize a developmental evaluation (DE) approach that is agile, highly responsive and sensitive to the diversity of needs of libraries. DE supports the development of innovation and adaptation in dynamic environments; helps to frame key concepts and underlying strategies; provides real-time feedback to enable new iterations and learning; and is focused on the value to end-users. A public data dashboard tracking the project interventions and outcomes will be utilized (number of Learning Lounge visits, Learning Circle participation, etc.) to inform the project and to build a strong record of achievement for securing funding such as through the workforce development system.

**Summary of Activities and Outputs: Year 1:** □ Convene the 3 libraries and AG to share and inventory promising practices. □ Launch DE. □ Develop mobile learning component at PPL. □ Deploy a competency based framework at the 3 libraries. □ Hold focus groups with low-literacy and low-skilled adults and librarian stakeholders at 10 libraries nationwide for feedback on best practices and challenges. □ Create an online community sharing space for 3 libraries and AG. □ Create a data dashboard. **Year 2:** □ Document best practices at the 3 libraries. □ Develop first iteration of electronic toolkit. □ Test, get feedback and revise toolkit. □ Finalize toolkit. □ Launch a 3 national webinar series for libraries that features specific practices from the toolkit and advertise TA opportunity. **Year 3:** □ Conduct toolkits trainings at a minimum of 5 state, regional, and national library conferences and advertise TA opportunity. □ Select up to 10 libraries to receive customized, in-person and virtual TA to enable adaptation and replication of best practices. □ Offer TA to libraries and collect feedback. □ Promote toolkit in a variety of venues and publications. □ Complete the evaluation.

**Desired Outcomes and National Impact:** This project will allow over 500 library staff members nationwide to learn about state-of-the-art practices for serving the educational and workforce needs of low-skilled and low-literacy adults. Over 200 libraries will explore specific technology-enabled strategies featured in the toolkit (e.g., mobile learning, Learning Lounges, digital badges, Learning Circles), and 10 libraries will receive customized TA and implement these best practices. By reaching this critical mass of public libraries, these best practices will become part of many libraries' everyday "business". Thousands of low-literate and low-skilled adults will benefit from increased educational and workforce opportunities.

**Budget Summary for 3 Years:** \$201,543 will be for salaries and fringe benefits for the PPL team; \$5,500 for supplies related to communication and dissemination; \$34,500 for travel for 3 libraries and AG Kick-off meeting, site visits and conferences; 3 libraries and AG will receive \$53,000 for their involvement in the project; and WEI will receive \$235,247 to document models, develop and deliver training and evaluate the project.