

Narrative

Across the globe there are very few organizations conducting business as usual in 2020 amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic. As of October 1, 2020 data from the United States Virgin Islands (USVI) Department of Health's website showed COVID-19 positivity at 1,245 per 100,000, and 20 deaths (6 deaths on the island of St. Croix with 3 of the 6 in a single family). There is overwhelming urgency for Libraries at the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI), the only institution of higher education in the Territory, to respond to the digital divide that is glaringly evident in the pandemic environment by pivoting to greater support for our core programming, and by extending support beyond its traditional clientele.

Statement of Need

COVID-19 has laid bare the extent of the digital divide for disadvantaged and rural communities. Regular reports from USVI Department of Education (VIDOE) during the weekly Governor's press conferences highlight the urgency for addressing the lack of digital resources and skills to achieve goals for teaching and learning at a distance, and speaks to the current significance of the project. Recent surveys by the VIDOE assessing school student capacity for online classes during the COVID-19 lockdown, showed that 18% of the households with school children had no Internet access at all; and 33% had only a cell phone or tablet for completing homework and class assignments (April 09, 2020 Governor's Press Conference). This data is applicable also to the at-risk and health-compromised individuals seeking safe access to effective healthcare and health information during a pandemic. Further, with 39% of the population reported to be over 50 years old (2014, Virgin Islands Community Survey), a known indicator of low digital literacy is clearly evident.

USVI Libraries/Community Innovative Collaboration for Training and Technology Project meets the UVI mission's commitment to community development. UVI Librarians joined forces with nine (9) community partners serving over 2,000 persons from a wide variety of service areas to informally assess challenges and identify opportunities for strategic collaborations with broad impact. Service areas include healthcare and wellness providers, family and educational, and civic and faith-based groups that observe challenges in using the tools for accessing services and for communal support. The challenges identified result from gaps in digital expertise and lack of digital and socialization experiences. Administrators at the medical centers point to Telehealth challenges revealed by patient reluctance to engage at a distance, limited smart phones and tablet skills for accessing critical health services and information. Youth and young adult members are affected by limited stimulation for development, and experiences with violent encounters in their environment. Faith-based groups have used digital media with mixed results that starkly illuminated the disparities in digital proficiency.

Building on foundations of practice

The Project builds on the practice of academic library/community partnerships for lifelong learning by creating a network of nine (9) agencies that will create/enrich a model for a learning community, and commit to sustained collaboration with the University library as a foundation for future partnerships. It employs the model of peer and inter-generational connection as an instructional strategy, benefiting not only the acquisition of learning, but also for exchanging traditions, documenting cultural heritage and explaining identity.

Project Design

The project goal is to develop digital and information literacy skills that support Telehealth and physical distancing requirements through the following objectives.

1. August 1, 2021-July 31, 2023 – Digital and information literacy training in use of smartphones and platforms such as Free Conference Calling, Zoom, Owl, and information sources for Telehealth communication and care; and provide incentives for train-the-agency trainer preparation and participation.

2. August 1, 2021-July 31, 2023 – Develop training materials and Helpdesk support services by: appointing an online librarian to develop materials and manage training and outreach in collaboration with community partners; appoint IT Technician for virtual helpdesk support and training; and appoint one (1) part-time librarian for project administration and training. Appointees and agency trainer will comprise an advisory team for project assessment and review to address challenges and engage partners for input.

3. August 1, 2021-July 31, 2023 - Implement technology support for users through a new virtual helpdesk solution; and provide agency stipends to encourage leadership and continuing agency support.

Budget summary

The total cost of the project is \$249,100 (no costshare required) to be covered through grant funds in the following categories: Salaries (\$113,000): one full-time online librarian, one part-time librarian, and one part-time IT technician for Year One; two part-time librarians and one part-time IT Technician for Year Two.; Fringe Benefits (\$20,303): full- and part-time librarians, and part-time IT technician; Contracted equipment and services (\$7,152); Other costs: community partner stipends (\$18,000); Indirect costs at 68% (\$90,645).

Assessing project and measuring success

The project team will deliver at least 20 training sessions to 2,000 project participants over 24 months. Participant learning will be assessed, and tool usage surveyed at four-month intervals. Health clinics will be surveyed to assess progress of expanding Telehealth to project participants. Measures of success will be identified for each activity and analyzed by the advisory team, and program adjustments made as needed. The project will be considered successful if 60% of target population demonstrate proficiency for using Telehealth services, if six of the nine agency trainers are active advisory participants, and 75% of the UVI students and community partners are using virtual helpdesk. Project materials and assessment results will be shared at professional conferences and made available through the libraries' website.

National Impact

The Project will model effective multi-type agency collaboration across a broad and diverse spectrum of the underserved population. Access to a virtual IT helpdesk that models professional IT practices and integrates Library IT with trained members of the project community for support is a novel networking approach. It integrates inter-generational users for peer-support, strengthens the community bond with UVI Libraries for information-seeking, and increases expertise for deployment within the partner agencies and beyond. Skills developed would support other systems such as banking, shopping, and school online activities. Organizational contacts will be maintained and developed for future partnerships.

Sustaining Benefits

Press releases will announce the award and promote project development. The Vice President for Information Services & Institutional Assessment will be the Principal Investigator, deploying resources as for project management, reporting and compliance, with experience and training that demonstrates expertise for the project. The integrated UVI Library and IT environment comprise experienced personnel and advanced technology tools for developing digital and information literacy skills effectively within the community. The librarians and technicians have expertise for classroom and videoconferencing support and will give technical support working with vendors and trainees to ensure success of the project. Through train-the-agency trainer sessions, community organization leaders will develop skills for sustaining support to targeted groups and support for community users through the virtual helpdesk. Community agency support for virtual helpdesk coverage expands capacity of these organizations for self-sufficiency. The project will strengthen the University's existing contact with community organizations and provide opportunities to expand such interaction to other groups. Through continued use of the virtual helpdesk for community support, UVI Libraries will be able to identify and guide ongoing community training needs.