Connecticut State Library: Designing and Implementing a Replicable Regional Digital Navigator Sharing Plan

Project Overview:

    The CT State Library (CSL), as the lead SLAA in a collaboration with 8 public libraries, requests $247,000 with $93,000 provided in cost share by partners (Project Type: NLG-Implementation) to design and implement, over a 2-year grant cycle, a replicable model for regional sharing of digital navigation services to low-income underserved residents. The Regional Digital Navigator Sharing Plan will build upon the Salt Lake City navigator model duplicated this year by four CT State Library-administered Digital Navigator Pilot Projects, and it will enrich that model to facilitate the participation of smaller libraries via a regional collaboration, simultaneously demonstrating efficiencies of scale. The Regional Navigator Sharing Plan will be designed to engage with 2,000 residents in need, meaningfully distribute 400 computers, create a toolkit for replication of such regional library collaboration, and expand the layer of library staff with digital inclusion service experience. Finally, the implementation of this model can be expected to inform those responsible for Digital Equity Act projects of ways to introduce centralization and efficiencies into the smaller navigation project models with which they are familiar.

    This proposal responds directly to the National Leadership Grant Goal 2, Objective 2.1, in that it enhances replicable library models and tools to engage communities and individuals of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds in digital inclusion activities that will increase the capacity of participants to move forward to access employment, health services, legal services, social benefits, and civic life, and in this way advance the effort to achieve social equity. Further, this digital navigator model depends on effective partnerships, of the type supported by Objective 2.2, as this ensures that navigators will be trusted mentors in the communities targeted. In addition, this project fulfills Objective 3.1 of Goal 3, in that the results include an increase in the number of residents connected, technologically supported, and with the digital literacy skills to accomplish their life goals.

Project Justification:

    As the authors of "A Human Approach to Closing the Digital Divide" noted in their June 2022 article, one reason that the digital divide remains so wide is that "a key driver of the problem—adoption—has gone largely unaddressed." They point out that the investment in digital adoption measures is falling far behind the investment in broadband infrastructure and programs to advance affordability. To close the adoption gap, the navigator models developed by towns and community organizations must be scaled up and more robustly funded. As state governments struggle to envision multi-year Digital Equity Act plans, digital navigation advocates are looking to demonstrate how more centralized and efficient navigator deployment can move the needle on the number of under-connected residents served.

    Libraries, beneficiaries of the IMLS-funded Salt Lake City Public Library Digital Navigator Program, have been able to copy and build upon that model. The model has been most useful to large urban libraries with numerous staff and robust community partnerships. Smaller libraries without adequate library space for navigator desks, lacking town approval for hiring navigators on a contractual or temporary basis, or with community partners without sufficient capacity, have been left behind. It is critical that the library community enrich navigator models in a way that will allow libraries with proven capacity for navigation to collaborate with libraries in smaller, adjacent communities. A replicable model for sharing a multilingual and diverse pool of navigators among libraries and their partners on a regional basis is a necessary step on the road toward universally available navigation funded by the state.

Project Work Plan:

    The CT State Library is well-positioned to administer a program of subawards from an IMLS grant for digital equity work. CSL has just completed the administration of four $100,000 Digital Navigator Pilot Project grants to libraries funded by the American Rescue Plan. Each library hired or contracted part-time digital navigators, carried out successful publicity campaigns to connect with their target audiences, collaborated with community partners, distributed devices, signed up residents for the Affordable Connectivity Plan, and helped residents reach their personal internet use goals. The Regional Digital Navigator Sharing Plan will build on the workflow, number of residents engaged, and budgets tested during these 13-month pilot programs.

    Christine Gauvreau, the digital inclusion consultant at the CSL Division of Library Development, will serve as project facilitator and administer a program of subawards to public libraries in Hamden, New Haven, Bridgeport, West Haven, Woodbridge, Wallingford, and Naugatuck. The subawards will fund a part-time project coordinator to be hosted and supervised by the director the Hamden Public Library, Melissa Canham-Clyne, who administered one of the local pilot projects; a multilingual pool of 4 regional navigators; the cost of 400 refurbished laptop computers; and local travel for navigators.

    This project coordinator will work with the regional library group to consolidate community needs assessments and partner information, coordinate outreach to unconnected residents, receive requests from library staff for navigator appointments, deploy navigators, and ensure effective data collection that highlights the ways that distinct

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communities were served. The navigator pool will include individuals hired specifically for regional work and those already employed by several of the larger libraries. The libraries not hosting the project coordinator will provide staff time to see that the needs assessments, partner and targeted community outreach, referrals to navigators, laptop purchases, device distribution logistics, and allocation of space for navigator appointments are all carried out collaboratively under the direction of the project coordinator.

The timeline for the 2-year grant cycle will be based on the previous pilot project experiences. The first six months will be devoted to consolidating community needs assessments, connecting with partners to integrate them into outreach and navigator deployment, hiring navigators, training navigators and relevant library staff in digital inclusion practices and principles, and coming to agreement on best practices and precise workflow. During the second six-month period, regional navigators will be deployed in collaboration with partners, and this period will culminate in a data analysis and qualitative assessment that will guide the next six months of navigation cooperation. The final six-month period of the 2-year cycle will be devoted to data analysis, a collaborative assessment process with libraries and partners, and the authoring of a draft final report and a toolkit useful for replication of a regional sharing plan.

Diversity Plan:

Six of the 8 towns involved are ranked by the CT Department of Education wealth ranking in the lowest 20%. The communities with the greatest need in the area in which the Regional Navigator Sharing Plan will be implemented have substantial numbers of residents of color whose communities have been weakened by digital discrimination. A significant number of residents speak Spanish, Haitian Creole, and Cape Verdean Portuguese as their primary language. The regional sharing plan will employ navigators capable of speaking to residents in these language groups.

Project Results:

The Regional Navigator Sharing Plan will measure results by adapting and enriching the hiring, training, implementation, and data collection model first developed by the Salt Lake City Public Library and the National Digital Inclusion Alliance. This model includes the collection of standard information including the number of residents who asked for help, the number of navigation appointments held, the number of individuals served via navigation appointments, the number of laptops distributed, information from NDIA-crafted intake forms which include referred partners, preliminary skills assessments per resident served, progress notes for each resident served, and exit interviews that measure the levels of personal goal achievement for residents. Qualitative measures of individual satisfaction will be captured in oral narratives in various media. A data analysis will allow a comparison and contrast with the recently completed digital navigator library pilot projects carried out by single libraries. These results will, ideally, demonstrate the effectiveness and actual capacity of a regional navigator sharing initiative that might be later sustained by municipal, state, or philanthropic funding. A toolkit for regional library collaboration to meet community needs for digital inclusion will be available for national use and for state distribution via CT Libraries & Partners for Digital Equity, a project of the CT State Library. This report can begin to normalize regional navigator sharing among libraries in CT and nationally. Additionally, data that makes plain the special needs of the Haitian Creole and Cape Verdean Portuguese-speaking communities will be shared with stakeholders.

The Regional Navigator Sharing Plan, based on numbers from the pilot projects, is designed to reach 2,000 individuals and distribute 400 home computers, offering individual and repeated meetings averaging 30 minutes or more to help residents meet their personal digital goals. The successful regional sharing of digital inclusion services in the designated region will conclude with a regional symposium that brings libraries, partners, and stakeholders of the 8 towns together in a setting where all participants can be challenged to collectively chart a path toward continued advancement in the area, enhancing stakeholder support.

Budget Summary:

Out of a total budget of $340,000, CT State Library seeks $247,000 for a 2-year grant cycle. Approximately $140,000 is requested in salaries and wages for 4 part-time digital navigators, and $40,000 for a part-time project coordinator. The sum of $60,000 for supplies and equipment will purchase 400 refurbished laptop computers for distribution to program participants who need devices. The remaining $7,000 in grant funds will cover navigator travel around the region. Cost share funds provided by the participating libraries include salary and wages of $50,000 for library directors and staff, and an evaluation consultant, and $43,000 in materials to promote the program across the region.