

BOOKMOBILE SERVICE  
IN THE EAST ALBEMARLE REGIONAL LIBRARY SYSTEM

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The East Albemarle Regional Library is a four-county library system located in the northeastern corner of North Carolina. The region stretches from Pasquotank County to the village of Hatteras. The land area is 1,104 square miles with a population of 60,761. A large portion of the region consists of water in the form of rivers and sounds, while the Atlantic Ocean borders the region on the east. The largest town in the region is Elizabeth City with a population of 13,000. Two of the counties in the region have no incorporated towns. Dare County's population multiplies during the summer months with two to three million tourists who flock to the beaches. The largest employer in the area is the U. S. Coast Guard with a facility in Elizabeth City. The region is largely rural, which accounts for the fact that hundreds of its residents commute daily to Virginia to work at the Ford plant and the shipyards. There are four libraries in the region: the Pasquotank-Camden Library in Elizabeth City which serves as the headquarters for the region, the Currituck County Library, the Dare County Library, and its branch, the Hatteras Library. Camden County does not have a library, but the county helps to support the library in Elizabeth City.

Three bookmobiles serve the region. The primary service

of the bookmobiles is the provision of books, although all of the services of the library are available upon request. The bookmobiles serve individuals who are homebound, communities, schools, day care centers, a Coast Guard station, nursing homes, retirement homes, and trailer parks. They also provide a monthly program for several nutrition sites for Senior Citizens which are located throughout the region. Most of the stops are served twice a month. Because of the geography of the region, the bookmobile is the only access to books for the geographically isolated. The people who live on the Outer Banks of Currituck and Dare Counties have to travel 123 to 130 miles respectively to get to the county library. One bookmobile stop can only be reached by going into Virginia and back down into North Carolina, and another stop is located on Knotts Island which can only be reached by ferry, unless one takes the land route requiring another trip into Virginia. Book return units are situated throughout Currituck and Dare Counties, and provide a valuable service to those persons who miss the bookmobile or who cannot get to the library when the books are due. If requested, materials are mailed directly from the library to bookmobile patrons.

I would like now to tell you briefly about the history and development of our bookmobile service as I have seen it progress in the past fifteen years. When I first came to the region in 1970, one bookmobile served all four counties. The first thing I set about to do was to replace the drab rebound volumes that made up most of the collection with some attractive popular books. Paperbacks were purchased to

provide current titles. The second move I made was to set up a locator file, since the collection consisted of books from each county which were checked out throughout the region. In order to locate a book presumed to be on the bookmobile, three different card files had to be searched--no easy matter since the files were in separate counties. The locator file was set up showing which books were on the bookmobile from each library. At the time, I was the most unpopular person in town for requiring this file to be set up, but today the file is taken for granted and saves many steps.

My dream at that time was to have three separate vehicles. Not only were the book collection and circulation control problems, but the bookmobile was driven by three different county employees and had to be delivered to the next library after one library had completed its schedule. In 1975, my dream came true. The library received a three-year LSCA grant for Dare County which provided for a vehicle among other things. I purchased two Dodge Kary-vans at \$7,000 each, had them customized locally, and we were in business. (The second van was purchased with funds from the vehicle replacement fund.) The bookmobilists were delighted until the yellow flies and inclement weather arrived. The vans were not ideal, but they were all we could afford at the time. Then the recession set in, along with the gas shortage, and I had to cut the schedule down to one trip a month. My total book budget for the region was \$13,000 in 1981, and my long-range plan for that year was difficult to write down since we were in such dire straits. Then the librarians

rallied and began to lobby for increased library support. To make a long story short, the North Carolina General Assembly voted to appropriate an additional three million dollars in State Aid to Public Libraries for the biennium 1983/84. This considerable increase enabled me to plan for the purchase of three new bookmobiles guaranteed to be temperature-controlled all year. I estimated that it would take six years to complete this effort, but through two strokes of good luck, it will be realized in a matter of months. The Dare County Board of Commissioners appropriated \$20,000 this FY toward the purchase of a new vehicle, while an LSCA grant and a local foundation grant will enable Pasquotank-Camden to buy a bookmobile this year. It has taken us a long time to rebuild the bookmobile program after the lean years, and we are still in the process.

The three bookmobilists are not professional librarians, although one is a college graduate with a degree in English. They have been trained to serve the people, and they have placed a high value on their service. It took a while to dispel the feeling that they were second-rate citizens, and I did this by working with them, going on their trips, providing them with materials and supplies, and promoting the bookmobile services.

For three years, I had a professional extension librarian who supervised the program closely. When State Aid was frozen, I could not replace her, so I had to devise some alternative methods of supervision and communication. I require monthly reports in addition to a log which is kept on

the vehicle. My main reason for this is to always have current statistics on hand, besides keeping abreast of maintenance. I am responsible for three bookmobiles and a station wagon, and I insist on accurate and daily recording of supplies used and maintenance service rendered.

The regional office provides assistance in preparing schedules, handbooks, and promotional items. Schedules are sent to the local newspapers and radio stations regularly. For a number of years, I provided posters to each bookmobile to be used for a display of books on a current issue. Gradually, they took on the responsibility themselves, and they do their own decorating and personalizing now.

The books for the bookmobile are taken directly from the library collection and are marked in pencil inside the back cover with the dates they were put on and taken off. Special requests for current titles are mailed as soon as possible so that the books will not sit on the shelf until the next trip.

I hold regular meetings with the bookmobiles to hear their concerns and gather information. All memos are routed to them, and they are encouraged to attend meetings and workshops.

They report to me monthly on a form of my own design, and I have found these reports useful for a number of purposes. We also use a number of volunteers to assist the bookmobile in Currituck County on her Knotts Island trip and the Corolla trip on the Outer Banks. Either I, or another regional staff member, go with her occasionally.

The bookmobile program is funded primarily through State Funds. With the exception of the salaries, the region pays for all materials and maintenance. This year, I have budgeted LSCA money to be used for three book rental plans for the bookmobiles which will provide the much-needed current titles. We also plan to increase the number of stops and make more frequent visits.

However, the three new vehicles and the additional books will not guarantee us that our program will be successful. This brings me to the subject that I was originally asked to address: what constitutes good bookmobile service? Good bookmobile service meets the needs of those people who depend upon it for their library materials and information. That sounds bland and general. However, obtaining that goal is not a simple process. First of all, you need to know who you are serving, and one way you can do this is through a community analysis. When State Librarian David McKay required every library in the state to submit a community analysis in 1977 or else forfeit all State Aid, I didn't consider him humane. However, my entire staff pitched in, and we had the completed document in seven months. Today I am glad that I have this document to use, and glad that I know more about the region and its library users. In researching data for my community analysis, I learned that 66% of the people of Camden County who are employed work outside the county. I also learned that very few young housewives use the bookmobiles now. These two facts tell me that we need to find out if these people are being served,

and if not, how we can serve them. We do not go out on weekends and evenings, but we are considering these options. In addition, Currituck County is the fastest growing county in North Carolina. Once purely rural, the county is fast becoming a retirement site for people from metropolitan areas who are accustomed to well-stocked libraries. We find that these people often use the bookmobile as well as the other libraries in the region in order to satisfy their interests.

Secondly, you need a plan, at least a five-year one, to be done annually. You never know when you will receive three million dollars in additional funds. Believe me, it takes careful planning to spend an unexpected windfall. A long-range plan is also a useful vehicle for seeing where you've been and measuring progress. Writing one requires a great deal of foresight and planning, and I am glad that it is a requirement of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.

Frequent surveys are necessary if you intend to meet the needs of your patrons. Surveys also provide testimony to the benefits of bookmobile service. In my region, there are several areas where professional and highly-literate people have retired. They would find no use for a bookmobile which did not bring their requested materials. It is not wise to assume the needs of library patrons, for if you do, you will not obtain new ones.

If you can afford one, I highly recommend a professional librarian to co-ordinate and supervise bookmobile service. They can facilitate the promotional efforts, as well as help

with scheduling and problem areas.

Finally, it is important to learn about bookmobile service in other areas. Bookmobile conferences are not frequent in North Carolina, so if I think we need one, I arrange a regional one. I find that providing an opportunity for bookmobilists to talk to one another is practical and rewarding.

And now, I have come to the perennial question: is bookmobile service necessary? Like many of you, I have had to justify bookmobile service to many trustees, lay people legislators, and grantors. I answer them with facts gathered from my surveys and statistics. One fact that quickly ends the conversation is that Rules and Regulations for the Allocation of State Aid to Public Libraries in North Carolina require that all systems provide bookmobile service or an alternative such as books-by-mail. Everyone understands an answer with the word "money" in it. However, I don't like to use that as a justification. I point out that the percentage of the total library budget expended for bookmobile service is only 7%, that we do not have the space nor staff to set up a post office, and that we cannot afford a branch library. Then I go on to tell them about the survey which revealed that the patrons in our region do not want a books-by-mail program. Why? Primarily, because they would not have the personal contact with the bookmobilists, nor have the opportunity to browse. I also tell them about the homebound patrons who rely on the bookmobilists to bring their large print books. I have long since quit trying to answer the



question, "How much does it cost to circulate a book on the bookmobile?", because in my estimation, you cannot accurately determine this. Besides, the patron has already contributed tax money for library service. Furthermore, I respond with, "How much does it cost to circulate a book in the library?" To me, both questions are irrelevant, because the return on the lending of one book which enriches someone's life, instructs them, or makes a child a library user, is significant. No other service offered in this country offers so much for so little money.