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## Outreach and the Public Need

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by  
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Memphis/Shelby County public library system has been offering traditional bookmobile services since 1935 (with a break between 1951 and 1965 due to budgetary constraints)—making neighborhood stops, serving people in institutions, and driving to remotely populated areas in places where we did not have one of our 22 branches.

Two very specific studies got our staff to look at mobile services in new ways. One was a 1989 facilities study of all of our locations. In that study, we determined where we needed new branches, which ones needed renovation and rehab, and started planning for a new central library building. We also noted that all the places that we had thought of as “rural” just 10 years ago were booming incorporated areas with a higher per capita income than most of the city residents—and these were the ones who were receiving door-to-door service!

A few months later, we hired a marketing research firm to help us plan for the future and determine our priorities. Among the suggestions made by the public was that we “focus” our branch collections. They said things such as “I want to go to a branch and KNOW that they have material for a third grader to do her homework,” “I’m willing to drive a greater distance if I KNOW that I can find all the business material at a location,” “Even though I live in the city, I have no transportation, and live in a housing project of 5,000 residents. I want you to bring services to me.”

Some of the most creative and talented library professionals work at Memphis Public Library, and in 1990 we put many of them to work on an External Services Task Force to brainstorm ideas for our future. In particular, we wanted them to think about the information we had recently gathered from the two studies I just mentioned. They too realized that the library system services needed mobility, but we had to re-think the service patterns of what we called “bookmobiles.” The recommendations from this group included:

1. Expand the present bookmobile fleet with smaller, multi-purpose vehicles;
2. Make mobile services units available to child care centers;
3. Provide mobile units to visit the residents of Memphis Housing Authority properties; and
4. Provide mobile services geared to literacy training.

With the information from these three studies, we were ready to make a decision about the purchase of new mobile units. We were heavily influenced by the idea that people wanted specifics— they wanted to know what we offered, in particular, not in general. We also realized that, if we received funding for an additional mobile unit, we would need to use existing resources, people, and collections. While we were meeting about these issues, the mayor of Shelby County, William Morris, announced a huge initiative called “Free The Children,” a program that was to offer information, job skills and training to targeted inner city neighborhoods. This was just what we needed as a starting point for our new thinking about mobile services!

We knew the library already had resume books, job test manuals, information on interviewing, and we had the staff in both our business and sciences department and our information and referral services ( LINC) that were already offering their expertise. I can remember at one meeting that we started thinking about an entire fleet of mobile units that all used our most recognizable name -LINC. We came up with JOBLINC, KIDLINC, (a preschool library), LITLINC (literacy training on wheels), POPLINC, (a popular library on wheels full of fiction), and several others. We knew that if we could take what we already had in our permanent facilities and spread it around the county on wheels that we'd have a real winner of a mobile program.

So, we applied to Shelby County, along with many, many other social service and job training agencies, for a \$100,000 grant to purchase a new mobile unit that we called JOBLINC—and it was completely funded by the Free The Children project. In addition, the United Way agreed to fund a portion of materials purchased and some staffing costs, and a LSCA grant provided funds for additional resources.

JOBLINC is a mobile service which helps job seekers locate employment opportunities. It also helps employers find workers. It is designed to help residents find jobs by providing listings of available jobs, aid in locating training opportunities and one-on-one assistance in conducting job

searches and preparing for interviews. A 35-foot unit, JOBLINC has books, videotapes, audiotapes, and computer programs for job seekers and employers. It is also on line with the library's LINC information and referral files as well as the online human services directory. Although the service has been well received, the library has had many examples of "serendipity" relating to JOBLINC that has given us an even higher profile in our community.

As a result of going to a jobs fair, a representative of the Tennessee Department of Employment Services came to the unit and began talking with our staff about cooperation. In particular, he was concerned about the fact that so many people who were unemployed had to sign up for a profile, get a number, and then sit at the employment office all day just waiting to see if a job came open. When we found out that the state offices in Nashville were downloading all available jobs overnight to the local West Tennessee office, we told them that we had the equipment to have the information downloaded as well. The state donated the necessary equipment to the library and also annually funds a part-time staff member who edits the information each evening. The job availability information is broadcast twice a day on the library's cable TV channel, and is put on tape early each morning for our mobile services.

Originally, JOBLINC made stops at food stamp offices, employment offices, neighborhood fairs, mall parking lots, the post office, and right in front of the main library ( which amazingly is a very busy stop for them). The staff soon found out, however, that by the time people left the food stamp office, they weren't interested in staying around any longer—so JOBLINC went where they were going— the grocery store!

Other cooperative efforts that benefited JOBLINC and the community resulted as well. Although we had hoped that some job counselors would volunteer their time, very few did. However, when Memphis was one of the cities hard hit with military base closings and the Defense Depot, one of the largest warehouse operations for the military was closed, we immediately volunteered to take JOBLINC on site and asked for other agencies to join us. Library staff did workshops on interviewing and resume writing, some of the churches in town sent volunteers to teach stress management and other coping skills. One of the best things that happened was that local employers started calling us and wanted to know if they could set up shop along with JOBLINC at the sites we were visiting since there was such a ready pool of potential employees. Since that one contact, recruiters from Kentucky Fried Chicken, several fast food chains,

Manpower Employment services, a number of warehouses, temporary holiday employers, and Williams Sonoma have all joined with JOBLINC staff to recruit and hire people to work in Memphis.

Recently we tried an experiment with our regular mobile services (the more traditional library on wheels) and JOBLINC. Both units went to public housing project areas as a team. JOBLINC staff helped people with questions and information about jobs, and the mobile services staff did story hours for children who came with adults who were looking for work. JOBLINC staff recommended items to check out about job searches, while mobile services staff gave them a library card and checked out the resources to them. We quickly discovered that combining these services targeted a whole new set of people.

We have discovered that other organizations recognize the value of job services on a mobile unit. For instance, when the City of Memphis' Housing and Community development department was writing a federal grant for \$4M, they included the library in the funding so that we could bring JOBLINC to the job training sites. The grant funds that are coming to Memphis for military base re-use also includes funding for job training through JOBLINC.

Finally, as a result of seeing just how many people in our region were in the job market, the LINC department planned a "Jobs in July" jobs fair at the main library. The results were tremendous and almost beyond our ability to offer a quality fair. Over 4,500 people came to the jobs fair in one day, to visit with 45 companies in the morning and 45 different companies in the afternoon, all of which were looking for good employees. Many of the employers said it was the BEST jobs fair they had ever attended because of the diversity of the people who attended. Of course, those of us who work in public libraries have always known that we're the best place to meet the wide range of community residents. It's very nice to know that area businesses (and potential sponsors and supporters) now know it as well.

We had such success with our JOBLINC service that we began to explore ways to expand our mobile services, especially focused on children. I've often said that if the public library were in the for-profit business, we would have been in big trouble 10 years ago when we began to notice the lack of attendance at pre-school story hour. Although we have spent years providing programs for young children with the idea that they would grow up, have families of their own and bring those children to the

public library, the increased numbers of two-wage earner and single parent families meant that more and more young children were in day care settings. Our library staff decided to tackle the issues of public library services to preschool children in day care settings.

Spurred on by the America 2000 program, a federal program that listed its number one goal as “getting every child ready to learn” as he or she entered school, we decided to design a “pre-school door to learning” on wheels and take story hour and professional children’s librarians to day care settings. Because we had learned so much from our experiences in working with the community and changing the focus of JOBLINC as our users demanded, we brought together three focus groups to help us plan what we were tentatively calling KIDLINC. Library staff presented our plans to day care providers and owners, staff from Nashville (the state capital) who granted licenses to daycares, faculty from the schools of social work and medicine at the University of Memphis and University of Tennessee medical school, the Parenting Center, and other social services organizations. Although they liked our ideas, they had some words of advice they said that there were a good many resources for pre-schoolers in our community. The greater need was for training and hands-on experience for the day care workers and teachers. In addition, we learned that each day care worker was required to take 12 hours of training per year—a difficult requirement when you are working long hours at your job. Thus was born TRAINING WHEELS—a 40-foot mobile service with tricycles and bicycles with HUGE training wheels as the logo. Its mission—to provide quality on-site training for those who work with young children, with particular emphasis placed on emerging literacy and the importance of reading. Launched just over a year ago, we had high hopes, big plans and missionary zeal in taking preschool demonstration projects and services to the 700 licensed day care centers in Shelby County.

Funded once again by Shelby County government as part of their program to improve the education of very young children, TRAINING WHEELS is managed by the staff of the main library children’s department with the already existing resources that they have. Staff comes from the children’s department, plus the children’s librarian from the nearest branch location to the site stops.

Designed by our staff as a demonstration library and classroom, the back of the mobile unit has a carpeted area that can hold about 15 children for story times, movies, puppet shows, and fingerplays. This area also includes space for a video player, screen, and storage and equipment to

play music cassettes. The front of the mobile unit is a classroom and observation area where our staff and day care workers can observe the demonstration program. The librarians talk with the day care staff about why we've chosen certain stories or songs, why they are presented in a specific order, and how to hold and use books as well as tell stories. In addition, the classroom setting is designed with fold down tables, VCR, chairs, and a white board so that classes can be held on the unit for parents and teachers.

We thought we could provide tailored training to meet the needs of each group—we can, but we ran into some unforeseen problems. We thought we could leave many of the very attractive items (dolls, puppets, manipulatives) out and visible during the story time. That proved to be a real distraction. Our children's services staff tell me that children who are not often used to a visually rich environment are easily distracted by the availability of so many books and toys, so now the staff puts out on display only what they need to have at the time.

We thought we could visit day care centers that were doing a "pretty good job" and help them refine and enhance their services. With over 700 licensed day cares in Shelby County, we quickly found that there was a desperate need for our services, and too, too few resources to meet demand. Many centers have minimal lighting, unsafe and inadequate furnishings and toys, no books, bare walls, and a "sit down and sit still" philosophy. Because the staff at many day care centers were unaware of the deficits that our library professionals saw in parts of their program, we had to begin the delicate task of introducing suggestions for improvement without disparaging the good efforts that were already taking place. Fairly quickly, the library staff found that they had to concentrate more and more on those day care centers that had the least resources and limit our visits to those which were already doing "pretty well."

We thought we could visit two centers a day, but found that this idea didn't work. In order to see each class in a small group and to have an opportunity to meet with teachers during the children's lunch or nap break, [we found] that the best way to visit was "all day," i.e., 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

One part of the demonstration program was that we had invested money in resources that would circulate in kits to the day care centers. We thought we could quickly develop kits that would be left at the center after the demonstration program was done on TRAINING WHEELS. The idea was that the library staff would do a story hour around a theme—frogs, for

instance—and then would leave a kit with a frog puppet, an audio tape of frog songs, some books about frogs and some art work ideas. As the project developed and the staff gained more of a sense of what would be actually useful, the kit project grew. After a year of developing complete, scripted storytimes, and putting together fingerplays and props, bibliographies, songs, art, recipes, gross and fine motor skill activities, ordering puppets, realia, videos, book/cassette pairs, containers, and of course books, we are finally putting together 40 kits, cataloging them and getting them ready for circulation.

Staff thought that the refrigerator was a luxury but soon discovered that, when you do five storytimes and five training sessions in a five-hour period, you tend to lose your voice! They have been very grateful for a place to store cold drinks to alleviate vocal stress.

We thought that we would need lots of publicity and found that the demand for this type of service far exceeded the resources and the one mobile unit that we had to offer.

In addition to local funding and in-kind support, the library once again found that, because we had focused our mobile services, other organizations partnered with us to seek grant funds. The most significant grant that we have received so far is part of the “Born to Read” project funded by the Prudential Insurance Company through the American Library Association. In conjunction with Le Bonheur Hospital—a pediatrics hospital in Memphis—the library is providing services to adolescent mothers and their babies as part of a Healthy Families program.

What do we have planned for the future? Just recently I sat in on a mobile services meeting where staff was brainstorming about future mobile services as well as refinements of our present ones. Here are some of the ideas that were batted around:

a mobile homework center in conjunction with the various school systems or privately funded by a group interested in education issues,

a mobile service to kids in day camps and summer parks programs that would concentrate on after school programs during the school year in conjunction with the park district,

a mobile service to GED sites, training programs for ESL classes, services to immigrants, foreign populations, and “trapped” populations (jails, training centers, etc.),

a mobile service geared to families, especially through hospitals, churches, homeless shelters, and clinics,

a mobile service for seniors, especially those in residential homes, nursing centers, and congregate meal sites,

a mobile technology training center which would take computers, software, and trainers to many areas of the city where the library does not have a nearby branch.

Of course, we don't have any firm plans or even the possibility of funding for any of these new targeted mobile services. But based on our past experience of finding out what people wanted, designing to meet their needs and interpreting the need to funding sources, the Memphis/Shelby County Public Library and Information Center has a strong track record and credibility in providing these kinds of focused mobile services to county residents. With the changes in the welfare system, block grants, and the desire of communities like ours to help people better their lives, I am certain that funding sources will be available to help the library meet these needs.

Staff at Memphis Public Library is using the philosophy of the "great one," hockey player Wayne Gretsky in their planning. When he was asked how it was that he was so successful at hockey, it is said that he replied, "I don't skate to where the puck was or is, but where it's going to BE."

That's a good philosophy for those of us who are designing the future of mobile services as well.

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