

Digital Equity Response – Literacy Minnesota

Great River Regional Library (GRRL) system serves patrons and communities across six counties in central Minnesota. GRRL, along with most other Minnesota businesses and organizations that provide public accommodations, closed all 33 locations on March 16, 2020. The closures prompted people throughout the region to begin brainstorming ways we could continue to provide library services and stay connected within our communities.

While many new ideas formulated and kinks started getting worked out for ways to help families and especially distance learners, we were able to move forward with another project.

In the year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, outreach efforts included attending several meetings with other community members and leaders at the Community Outpost (COP) House in St. Cloud. As a community oriented policing program, the Outpost houses police officers, and provides access to social services, homework and other learning programs, ambulatory services, and healthcare services. From this networking effort, the Activities Director for Whitney Senior Center ultimately contacted Jade Lauber about doing classes over Zoom on library and other tech- topics in an effort to keep our vulnerable elderly population connected during the closures.

The first phone conversations took place April 6, and the first Zoom session with the senior patrons just two days later, on April 8. The “Tech Talks” have covered topics including using eBooks, downloading and streaming digital content, using social media, and brain fitness. In one of the most highly attended and interactive sessions, we discussed games and other fun things to do with friends and family over video chat. Since the initial April 8 sessions, we have held these talks once or twice each month, totaling 14 meetings in 2020. Attendance has been steady, as we’ve seen regulars and usually a new face each time. For the immediate future, the Tech Talks with Whitney Senior Center will continue, and will begin being offered regionally through GRRL in January as well.

During this time, GRRL staff also prioritized internet connectivity for those living in our communities. Minnesota public libraries receive funding under the Regional Library Telecommunications Aid (RLTA) program to pay for things like phones and internet. However, when the legislation was originally drafted, Wi-Fi capabilities did not yet exist. Over the past several years, advocacy at the state level, coupled with the pandemic reality of schools moving to distance learning models, led to changes to the legislation in 2020. Additionally, Governor Walz issued an executive order expanding the ways RLTA funds can be spent, including improving internet access and access to technology. The idea behind the legislation is that once basic expenses have been met, the funds can be used to provide Wi-Fi outside the library buildings. Through this expanded RLTA funding and an IMLS grant, both administered by the Department of Education, the library was able to expand on a Wi-Fi hotspot project – a long time goal.

In early 2019, through a generous donation, GRRL’s Pierz location was able to purchase Wi-Fi hotspots for patrons to check out. The expansion in 2020 was based on that pilot project. The major goal was to place Wi-Fi hotspots into the communities that were most in need. GRRL Director Karen Pundsack and Associate Director of Collection Development Jami Trenam worked on identifying those areas with the greatest need for internet connection. Utilizing data from the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) as well as data related to free/reduced-school lunch rates, areas with the greatest overlap between availability of high-speed internet and poverty rates were identified as possible target communities.

After identifying the communities most at need, our city partners were approached with the project. There was a need to make sure that there wasn't any duplication of efforts across organizations, and to determine the practicality, and even security, of introducing the Wi-Fi hotspots to those communities. Throughout this process, our partners were also contacted about the feasibility of expanding the Wi-Fi signal into the parking lots of several branch libraries. While some locations did refuse to expand the signal, typically due to security concerns, several branches did expand, giving people access to internet 24 hours a day outside the building.

Through research, Jami Trenam determined T-Mobile had the lowest rates and good coverage in the GRRL service area. The first hotspot order was placed in March, however due to the product's backorder status the hotspots were not ready for patrons until June. Before making the hotspots available to patrons, the devices were prepared for the checkout process. Each device was uniquely labeled with identifying information and a barcode linked to its associated mobile line as well as its GRRL location. To make these units the most accessible, the network names were changed to be easily identifiable as the library, and the passwords were updated to be recognizable. Finally, the devices were placed into inexpensive plastic containers with GRRL branded labeling.

Because the grant funding is intended to assist students with distance learning and to bridge the digital divide, the hotspots are available to check out by patrons of all ages. Unlike most GRRL material that is shared regionally, the hotspots do not travel from branch to branch but check out only from their intended branch. Patrons can ask about checking out hotspots at their circulation desk or by calling their library, only staff can place holds on the hotspots.

Additionally, through an existing partnership with Partner for Student Success and the United Way, Promise Neighborhood of Central Minnesota became a candidate as a potential partner with a need for Wi-Fi capabilities. Promise Neighborhood is a community led organization providing services, support, and opportunities for families on the southeast side of St. Cloud. The activities and programs at Promise Neighborhood provide a safe place for the community to learn and communicate, and always provide a meal. Volunteers are regularly seen helping students with homework, distance learning, or reading practice.

An agreement was reached between GRRL and Promise Neighborhood, and they were provided with five hotspots that their staff and volunteers are able to use with students and families. These devices are utilized inside the building for both homework and distance learning support, as well as being used out in the community. Staff and volunteers are able to take the devices for use remotely with families, in their homes or on porches, for everything from support with benefits to distance learning help.

We have had many success stories and positive feedback related to the hotspot project. Several families that homeschool their children or have children distance learning, have voiced how grateful they are to have access to internet through the hotspots. One family was traveling to their church to access Wi-Fi on school days, now they are able to check out and take the hotspot home.

While waiting for the hotspots to arrive, one mom let us know that she appreciated having the extended signal in the library parking lot, but with two children trying to attend class in the car, without bathrooms or lunch, things got stressful fast. She was so grateful when the hotspots became available. Another mom told us she used the hotspots to help her children with their distance learning while she

was also caring for an elderly parent. Whether at home, the park, or grandma's house the girls could attend class.

In another branch, a student has been continuously checking out a hotspot, his only internet access for distance learning. Another student uses the hotspots to complete schoolwork in the car when having to drive to appointments. We've even had a teacher check out the hotspot on his own account so that his students could be successful.

Patrons with poor internet connections have been checking out hotspots in order to work from home, and one patron told us how terrible his phone connection was, so he picks up a hotspot so he can video chat with his children and grandchildren. Another family used a hotspot so the children could attend class while on a family ice fishing vacation.

During a recent visit to Promise Neighborhood, an excited mom was showing everyone her phone. It was a picture of her daughter's report card, "I am so proud of her," she was saying. A little boy just said the hotspots were, "good," but nodded that he was getting his schoolwork done.

Overall, this has been a very successful project. There are people relying on these devices for school and work, and there are others using them for recreation purposes. One organization is physically taking these hotspots to families in need. Whatever the reason, people are enjoying the availability of these devices, leading to the question of whether to expand even further. After starting with a small, five-hotspot project in one location, the library system now has over 144 devices circulating. While it may appear through the data that the areas of need have been satisfied, many staff are reporting that the demand for hotspots is high, and in some cases not being met, as shown through long hold lists in some locations.

These efforts highlight a few of the ways GRRL has been addressing digital access and keeping our communities connected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether through digital literacy Tech Talks with the seniors in our community, or keeping kids connected to internet for homeschool or distance learning, these projects have been successful because of strong partnerships with city partners and other community organizations.