



### **Digital Equity Report submitted by Liz Lynch, Executive Director**

Despite the pandemic, Lake Agassiz Regional Library (LARL) has had an unusually successful year. Never before have we had an opportunity to slow down, evaluate and rebuild as we have over the last ten months. In addition, LARL received unexpected funding to assist with digital inclusion efforts. We have embraced this time and have used it to determine how to best meet the needs of our community members by providing the tools, resources, and services needed to succeed during a pandemic and beyond.

On March 17th, all 22 LARL locations closed their doors to in-person services. Within the first couple of weeks, we reinvented the library by focusing on how to serve customers as safely, conveniently, and remotely as possible. Under great pressure, we were suddenly able to find solutions to problems that had been on the back burner for years. During this phase of service, we were able to create an online library card application which allowed hundreds of new library customers access to online services; we shifted funding to eBooks, eAudiobooks, and other online subscription services to work towards meeting the demand of online customers; and we opened our lines of communication by providing extended hours of online, phone and chat services to customers to assist with questions relating to library services, account information, computer/mobile device troubleshooting, reference and referral, etc. While this was a move in the right direction, we realized that it wasn't enough. If ever there was a time that people needed library services, it was during a pandemic.

Beginning in April, we were able to move to our next phase of service, which meant providing curbside pickup for books and print jobs. This quickly transitioned to Express Library Service which includes allowing customers to spend 20 minutes in the libraries to browse the shelves, use photocopiers and other services, and up to 45 minutes to use the public computers. This was a very eye opening time for us. When customers started to enter the library again, we heard again and again how much library customers missed the library facility, library staff, and the public computer access. Some library customers reported that they had not had the opportunity to communicate with friends and family for weeks during the pandemic without the use of the public computers and internet access. In addition, customers thanked us for providing computer service so they could work on their taxes, file for unemployment, check on benefits, pay bills, apply for jobs, work on assignments and more. Closing the doors for a period of time and then reopening them again was an exercise in learning just how vital of a role we play in our communities. In our rural communities, the library serves as the only source of entertainment, computer access, internet access, printing, photocopying, notary service, communication and more.

As conversations continued with customers, staff, and librarians around the state, we learned that we still had work to do to better meet the needs of our residents. As an organization, we decided to focus on how to support workforce/economic development, education and equity in our region. This prompted a three tier approach to assisting the residents of the seven counties served by LARL. We started with serving only remote customers, or those who have access to computers, mobile devices, and the internet. We then opened our doors to those who had been accustomed to using our in-person and in-house services in the past and who had knowledge of our services. But, it was time to reach out to those who need our services, who might not know we exist. It was time to explore new partnerships to ensure that the residents of LARL knew that our doors were open and that we had the resources and services to assist during this time.

We reached out to the CareerForce office serving the Crookston and Polk County area. After an initial meeting, we found that while our libraries were open, CareerForce Offices were only offering remote services. We created a plan for LARL and CareerForce to promote each other's services to each other's client lists. CareerForce began to promote the open hours, computer access, Wi-Fi, Wi-Fi hotspots for checkout, printing and more to their clients. The first week, seven people responded to our marketing messages by visiting a library specifically to gain access to CareerForce staff and resources through LARL computers. We continued this partnership by providing CareerForce training to all LARL staff, so that they would be equipped to share CareerForce services with job seekers. Northwestern Mental Health and Adult Literacy/ABE have joined our partnership, and together, we are working to ensure that the employees of the various organizations/agencies are in a position to refer people to our resources and make sure people get the tools/access they need to succeed.

The momentum from the Polk County partnerships led us to reach out to schools and families to ensure they are aware of library services. While we do not have enough Wi-Fi hotspots for all students in need of Internet access, we have worked to make sure families in the hotspot queue have the proper contacts in the schools to get the services they need. Parents who have felt that the library is less intimidating than school administration, have come to the libraries first. It is then up to the local librarian to assist and encourage the parent to communicate with the school. We have also allowed distance learners to reserve space in the library for the whole day in order to gain access to online classes. Regarding marketing tactics, we have created a new online eNewsletter and print flyers for teachers, students and families highlighting resources available to students and their families, in addition to encouraging the local librarians to reach out to their schools to learn if there is more the library can do to assist students during this time.

We are also partnering with Legal Services of Northwest MN, who chose to use their CARES Act Funding to place dedicated public computers, scanners, printers and webcams in six of the LARL locations to offer free remote legal services.

Moving forward, the LARL organization will continue to concentrate efforts on COVID recovery in our seven county service area, focusing on workforce/economic development, education and equity. This pandemic has allowed us to slow down and participate in meaningful conversations with both partners and residents to determine their needs. Almost all of our new resources and services will be carried forward, including curbside and homebound delivery, online library card

access, Wi-Fi hotspots for customer checkout, remote printing, space dedicated in each location for those working and attending school remotely, and of course continuing our partnerships with key organizations/agencies that share our same mission. We know that we were on the right track to meeting the needs of our residents in 2020 with the changes we have made, and we look forward to continuing to find new ways to improve digital equity in 2021 and beyond.