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Evolution of an academic–public library partnership*

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A partnership to improve access to health information via an urban public library system was established in St. Louis, Missouri, in 2011. A multiyear project was outlined that included an information needs assessment, a training class for public library staff, information kiosks at library branches for delivering printed consumer health materials, and a series of health-related programming. The partnership evolved to include social service and community organizations to carry out project goals and establish a sustainable program that met the health and wellness interests of the community.

Keywords: Access to Information, Community-Institutional Relations, Consumer Health Information, Public Libraries, Medical Libraries

Access to health information and low health literacy are often cited as contributing factors to poorer use of health care and greater disparities in health outcomes among persons of all ages [1]. Public libraries are often the primary source for information and Internet access in underserved communities, and can serve as an important bridge to credible health information. But a lack of resources, expertise, and support can present significant obstacles to fulfilling that role [2, 3].

To help improve our community's access to credible health information, the authors formed an academic–public library partnership in the city of St. Louis, Missouri, in 2011. Our original partners included the St. Louis Public Library (SLPL), Bernard Becker Medical Library at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, and the Program for the Elimination of Cancer Disparities (PECaD), a National Cancer Institute–funded program of the Siteman Cancer Center, also at Washington University School of Medicine.

We outlined a project that included four components to be carried out in sequence: (1) assess the health information interests of the community through an online survey of SLPL staff, (2) develop a

hands-on training session for SLPL staff on health information resources, (3) deploy health information kiosks at strategic public library locations, and (4) develop a series of health-related programs to be hosted at SLPL.

Each partner brought a unique and critical element to meet the goals of the project:

- The St. Louis Public Library system included its Central Library and a network of sixteen neighborhood branch libraries across the city. SLPL provided the connection to the underserved populations that PECaD was trying to reach.
- Becker Library and PECaD staff provided training and support to enhance SLPL librarians' ability to provide credible and reliable health information.
- PECaD provided funding to support Becker Library staff in its work with SLPL to develop a needs assessment and librarian training class. PECaD also provided staff to evaluate the program and funding in the form of mini-grants to help SLPL acquire materials and support the expansion of consumer health information services.

Work began in the spring of 2011 as each component of the project was addressed in succession.

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1. *Assess the health information interests of the community:* An electronic survey of SLPL staff was conducted across all locations to gather information about the types of health questions received and to gauge staff interest in attending training on credible health information resources. The survey featured 14 questions and had a 95% response rate (60 out of 63 completed and useable surveys). Results indicated that over 86% of the SLPL staff believed their patrons would benefit from greater exposure to consumer health information, and an overwhelming number of staff was interested in learning more about current health information resources.

2. *Develop a hands-on training session:* In July 2012, two training sessions were provided for SLPL staff. The 3-hour training sessions focused on:

- credible, free resources for health information such as MedlinePlus
- free resources for cancer information from the National Cancer Institute
- subscription products already available via the public library

Twenty-three SLPL staff attended the sessions, and reviews were generally positive. Participant knowledge of accurate, up-to-date cancer and health information resources rose from 43% to 60% from the pre-survey to the post-survey. For the next training session conducted the following year, staff from Becker Library, PECaD, and SLPL designed a more hands-on experience, with participants working through sample health information questions in various online resources, comparing and contrasting the results, and sharing observations with the class. The information presented and the structure of the session received positive evaluations from all 15 participants.

3. *Deploy information kiosks:* In August 2012, kiosks named “Your Good Health Spot” were placed at each of the four largest SLPL branches. These branches are geographically distributed across the city and serve as regional information hubs for the community. The kiosks were stocked with pamphlets and brochures on a wide variety of health topics. The content was chosen by a collaborative ranking process among staff from the libraries and PECaD, along with results gathered from the initial needs assessment survey. In general, the materials chosen were free, were from federal or state agencies, or only required the cost of shipping.

4. *Develop a series of health-related programs:* Initially, decisions on topics for the speaker series were determined by data gathered from the needs assessment, feedback from staff training sessions, and data from the borrowing of printed materials at

SLPL. We identified seven potential topic areas: prenatal care, oral health, eye health, complementary and alternative medicine, mental health, bullying, and cancer.

Faculty from another local institution, the St. Louis College of Pharmacy, and a local expert in alternative medicine joined the group (now called the SLPL Consumer Health Information Speaker Series Committee) to broaden the scope of information presented on each topic and to enhance the network of local contacts for identifying speakers. We eventually agreed to focus on five topics for the initial series, which was to begin in the fall of 2013: the Affordable Care Act (ACA), cancer risks and prevention, cardio health, diabetes management and prevention, and oral and ocular health. We decided to include an ACA-related event to coincide with the public’s growing interest and the legislation’s impending implementation. With the exception of this presentation, each event would include, when possible, a physician, a pharmacist, a dietician, and an herbalist to provide different perspectives on a topic.

INITIAL EXPERIENCE

The speaker series began with 2 ACA presentations with over 100 attendees at each event. Attendance at subsequent events, however, was disappointing. While all of the programs received good evaluations, it was clear that, with the exception of the ACA presentations, the series was not reaching the audience levels that we had hoped. After considering explanations for the lack of attendance, we concluded that a combination of factors played a role. One factor was the time; another was the location. User traffic is not usually high on weeknights at the downtown Central Library. Difficulties in promoting the events to a wide audience were also considered.

Perhaps most importantly, we concluded that the didactic nature of the programs themselves (i.e., lectures followed by question-and-answer sessions [Q&A]) and the broad approach to the presented topics were just not compelling enough to attract a larger lay audience.

To broaden our perspective, we also invited representatives from the OASIS Institute and Research Engagement to Advance Community Health (REACH), a unit of the Center for Community-Engaged Research at Washington

Topics	Responses (n=517)	Demonstrations	Responses (n=517)
Exercise	278	Stress Relief	232
Budget-Friendly Nutrition	215	Healthy Cooking: Quick Meals	198
Food Myths & Safe Dieting	186	Healthy Cooking: Budget-Friendly Nutrition	194
Mental Health	177	Healthy Cooking: Local Foods	191
Sexually Transmitted Diseases	175	Tai Chi/Balance Exercises	171
Alcohol Use & Abuse	170	Yoga	153
Obesity	164	Cooking for Diabetes	148
Sleep Issues	164	Low Impact Exercise	146
Health Insurance	158	Acupressure/Pain Relief	142
Diabetes	152	Healthy Cooking: Other Foods	141

Table 1

Top 10 healthy living topics and demonstrations of interest to Saint Louis Public Library community members

University in St. Louis, to join our planning group in the summer of 2014.

NEW STRATEGY

We outlined a new strategy to create what we hoped would be a more appealing and sustainable model for future health education programming that incorporated the following ideas:

- *The focus would be shifted* from diseases and/or conditions to a greater emphasis on wellness and healthy living. We felt programs such as diabetes and cardio health might have been too broad and general to attract individuals who might have had a more specific concern or area of interest. At the same time, we also believed that people might be more attracted to receiving information with a positive and motivational message. Changing the emphasis to wellness and healthy living might have a greater appeal to individuals who are interested in being more proactive about their health.

- *The location of events needed to change.* While the Central Library was a recently remodeled and state-of-the-art facility, its location in the urban center of downtown St. Louis might not appeal to library users who preferred the convenience of a neighborhood branch library. Although none of the branch libraries could accommodate as many people, we believed the convenience of a neighborhood branch library would be more appealing. Developing “portable” programs that could be easily repeated at multiple locations would be a more efficient use of resources and might ultimately reach more people.

- *The format would change* from a combination of lecture and Q&A to one that incorporated more interactive experiences for attendees, such as live demonstrations and assessments. Based on experiences reported by managers at the branch

libraries, programs where attendees have an opportunity to see live examples, to actively participate, or to experience activities like a personal health assessment are much more popular than a traditional talk.

- *To gain a better understanding of what types of topics would be the most appealing*, a “Healthy Living @ Your Library” survey was created and distributed at all library locations in the summer of 2014. It was divided into 3 sections: health and wellness topics, demonstrations, and preferred days and times. Another concern about the original speaker series was that the time of day for each event (Tuesday evenings at 6:30 p.m.) might not be optimal for a majority of community members, and the committee sought input into preferences for each individual regional branch.

SURVEY RESULTS

The survey was distributed at library circulation desks during July and August 2014. There were 517 responses. Community preferences for health and wellness information were very clear and consistent across all survey sites (Table 1). “Exercise” generated the most interest at four of the five survey sites with “Budget-Friendly Nutrition” second. In the one exception, “Budget Friendly Nutrition” was slightly more popular than “Exercise.” Interest in other topics tended to be more evenly distributed, although several—such as “Mental Health,” “Food Myths & Safe Dieting,” and “Alcohol Abuse”—did receive interest across most sites.

Community feedback on demonstrations was equally clear. At four of the five survey sites, “Stress Relief” had the greatest interest, with “Healthy Cooking” and its subtopics—“Quick Meals,” “Budget-Friendly Nutrition,” and “Local Foods”—being the second most popular.

A NEW APPROACH

Planning for the coming year was conducted throughout the fall of 2014. Because the level of interest in exercise, nutrition, and stress relief was so consistent, we decided to focus on those three areas and design programs that could be rotated through the regional branches at different times throughout the year, with the possibility of including the Central Library in subsequent years. Our expanded committee membership increased our network of locally based community and nonprofit organizations with expertise in the selected subject areas. We approved six programs that would combine a brief presentation with either a demonstration or an activity:

- Healthy Cooking on a Budget
- Healthy Eating on a Budget
- Meditation for Stress Relief
- Laughter Yoga
- Beginner’s Exercise
- Exercise & Zumba

Regional branch managers agreed to serve as contacts for their locations, scheduling programs at the best time for their community members and handling any on-site issues that might arise. The creation of “portable programs” also made it possible to employ a coordinated marketing and promotion effort by SLPL and had the added benefit of easing the burden on regional branch managers who are normally responsible for creating their own programs.

Initial response to the first four events of the “Healthy Living @ Your Library” series has been positive. The “Healthy Cooking on a Budget” program was offered during March 2015 at two SLPL branches. A coordinator from an area food bank gave a presentation along with take-home recipe cards and nutrition tips. Approximately ten people attended each session, which branch managers felt was a very good turnout in comparison to other events they have hosted. The same organization also presented “Healthy Eating on a Budget” at a third branch library that included demonstrations of easy, nutritious recipes along with samples, recipe cards, and nutrition tips. Attendance for the other spring program, “Meditation for Stress Relief” was also better than expected with ten participants receiving a presentation and hands-on demonstration along with tools to reduce daily stress. At the present time, six additional “Healthy

Living” events are scheduled at other regional branches during 2015.

CONCLUSION

What began as a partnership between a public library system and two academic organizations has evolved over the course of four years into a more broadly based community effort to improve public access to health information as we responded to community input and transitioned from a focus on diseases and conditions to healthy living and wellness. Understanding the health information needs of a community is challenging, and to learn what we needed to know required a combination of methods and strategies including: staff questionnaires, user surveys, observational and anecdotal evidence, and a robust network of contacts within the academic and social service community. Each approach provides valuable insight as we continue to learn more about the interests of our community and how best to deliver the information they desire.

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