

Meeting People Where They Are

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Tuesday, April 25, 2023 10:46 AM

Topic(s): Outreach, Partnerships

As rural librarians we understand all too well the mantra of doing more with less, but never has this been truer than in our post-COVID world. As the world began to return to its “new normal,” staff at the Southern Oklahoma Library System (SOLS) wasn’t seeing the return of patrons into their libraries that they would have liked. SOLS serves a population of approximately 97,000 citizens across more than 3,300 square miles, and they do this with thirteen full-time staff and eight part-time staff. SOLS has eight library branches across five counties in Southern Oklahoma.

SOLS staff have always prided themselves on meeting people where they are, but this adage took on a whole new meaning when SOLS decided to *meet people where they are* not only location-wise, but also, where they are in their life. SOLS sought to communicate the importance of its public libraries to the communities it serves by showing that they not only provide “standard” library services, but also a multitude of other programs and services geared to benefit the community in a variety of ways. It did this through several avenues.

The first was to partner with Murray State College (MSC), which is the local higher education center in SOLS’ service area. Through this partnership, every current MSC student receives a SOLS library card and access to a full collection of resources and databases. By doing this SOLS instantly gained over 2,000 new cardholders. This partnership allows SOLS to *meet students where they are* as many students are virtual and rarely use the physical library, but regularly use the online resources.

SOLS also implemented its first StoryWalk at a local city park. They did this in partnership with the city’s Parks and Recreation Department. This was a great addition to the *meeting people where they are* campaign as it allows SOLS to reach an average of 500 people a month outside of the library building. Additionally, on the main StoryWalkpanel, SOLS shares bookmarks with information about upcoming programs and has seen an increase in people signing up for programs and library cards from this on-site marketing. In 2023 SOLS hopes to install four more StoryWalks in communities throughout its service area. Funding for this is provided through grants and funding from local businesses and individuals.

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SOLS was also part of a pilot grant program with the Oklahoma Department of Libraries to provide Excel Online High School to its patrons. Excel Online High School is a program geared to adults interested in earning their high school diploma. The program is completely online and allows students to work at their pace and at times of the day that work for them. If students don't have access to the internet or a laptop, SOLS provides them with devices so they can complete the program. SOLS currently has seven active enrollments and has graduated two students from the program!

To *meet people where they are* physically, SOLS has implemented home delivery and lobby stops. Since COVID, many SOLS patrons no longer felt comfortable in public places. To still provide these patrons library services, SOLS now provides home delivery services to them. SOLS branches also offer lobby stops with library materials at local nursing homes, correctional facilities, food banks and the Oklahoma School for the Deaf. Collections are rotated to these facilities monthly. Furthermore, while visiting nursing homes, branch managers host programs or book clubs to engage residents.

This past year, several SOLS libraries partnered with their local health departments to provide vaccine clinics in their libraries. As stated earlier, most SOLS libraries are rural and do not have a local health department office where they are able to get their annual flu shot or COVID vaccine. SOLS staff saw an opportunity to meet a community need that was not currently being met. Additionally, three SOLS branches provided COVID testing for patrons through a grant opportunity made possible by the Association of Rural and Small Libraries.

Through these, and other new services implemented, SOLS has seen a significant increase in the number of people in their buildings, items circulated and programs attended, which has significantly reinvigorated library staff to be creative and try new things. In 2023, staff are working to build more partnerships in local communities with local businesses and civic organizations.

One of the major things that this campaign taught staff was to look outward. This took on two different meanings, from looking outward from traditional library services and thinking outside the box, to looking outside of the library building to see how SOLS can serve patrons out in the community. *Meeting people where they are* is an ongoing theme for how SOLS defines its services, and it will continue to use this when planning any future endeavors.

[Return to Outreach & Programming](#)
[Return to the Rural Routes Hub](#)