

Submission to The Working Group for the Status of Libraries in Vermont
Re: Programming
November 3, 2021

Public library programming combines socialization, education, and empowerment in ways only the public library can offer. Bennington Free Library's programming for adults focuses on exposing people to opportunities and services in the community and includes a variety of partnerships. We began offering workshops co-hosted with the Bennington Department of Labor office five years ago. Programs included offering a Job Club encouraging community members to drop in the library to meet with a Job Center Specialist, (The library's downtown location is easier to access than the local DOL office.), hosting a CCV Job Hunt Helper in 2018, and presenting an annual "Model Employees" event featuring a fashion show demonstrating interview and workplace attire, conversations about professional behavior and soft skills, and an opportunity to connect with other jobseekers. In addition to economic development, our programs have supported public health through a RiseVT grant-funded community walking initiative in the summer of 2019. Walks featured downtown recreational facilities and businesses, the farmers' market, local history, and a dietician sharing healthy snack ideas for busy parents during a stroller-friendly walk. Our library also secured funding through RiseVT to begin our snowshoe collection, which we are increasing for the 2022 season with support from a local snowshoe manufacturer.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our operations and services significantly, we've leveraged relationships with community partners to offer new services to seniors. We began a monthly online book club in collaboration with Green Mountain RSVP in October 2020 which is still going strong. Additionally, we are offering a book delivery service to homebound seniors with support from Green Mountain RSVP. Adapting is our "new normal," so when our library was closed to visitors we expanded our outreach and distributed books for all ages at Shires Housing food distribution events in August and December of 2020. We took advantage of flexibility offered by a longtime programming partner, the Vermont Humanities Council, and extended our Vermont Reads 2020 programming through June 30, 2021. Making use of a generous donation, we purchased Chuck Taylor Converse sneakers for Southwest Tech graphic arts students to design, using art to relate to the themes of Angie Thomas' Vermont Reads 2020 book, *The Hate U Give*.

Like many things in public libraries, adult programming changed significantly to adapt to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many people, I've struggled to find footing as I transitioned from a very successful, first-ever library mini golf event inside our library at the end of February 2020 to closing our doors less than one month later. I moved events online, offered adults creative outlets through take-and-make activity bags, and I am again offering small programs requiring masks with limited attendance. These adventures in adaptation allowed me to appreciate the uniqueness of public library outreach and programs. Most recently, over the Labor Day holiday weekend and the return of Bennington's beloved Garlic Fest celebrations, one of our youth services librarians and I hosted a table at our local farmers' market. We've done this for several years so the venue wasn't new, but on a whim we decided to give away a collection of Beanie Babies and small stuffed animals donated to the library. It's difficult to put into words how much joy this small act brought everyone who visited with us. Some of the sincerest

expressions of wonder and gratitude came from adults; those who preferred to “leave a toy for someone else to enjoy” regaled us with nostalgic memories and struck up conversations with others nearby. It was just one morning, and all the tiny critters had found homes within three hours, but for each person we met there was a moment of connection. It can’t be easily distilled to hash marks and quantifiable data, but it speaks to “community identity and resiliency” very clearly.

Respectfully submitted,
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