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Stitching Service Gaps Through Innovative Programming

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Stitching Service Gaps Through Innovative Programming

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SUAD MOHAMED is currently in the role of Time Partner with Multnomah County Library's Human Resources. Prior to that she specialized in project management, qualitative research, programming, content creation, collection management and served on committees tasked to bridge service gaps. She is the first OLA-Leadership Development Scholarship recipient. One of the most rewarding aspects of her job is being able to move communities she's a part of forward.



LISA TAYLOR is delighted to be starting a new chapter in her library career as a youth librarian for Happy Valley Library. She worked for Multnomah County Library for five years, including most recently as a member of the Central Library Information Services team, and as youth librarian for the Albina branch. In addition to co-leading the MCL Sewing Project, she served on MCL's Intellectual Freedom Committee. She earned a B.A. *cum laude* from Pomona College, and her MLIS from Emporia State University. She serves on the Board of the Oregon Library Association Children's Services Division.

Members of Multnomah County's Somali-speaking community frequently asked Somali-speaking library staff about the possibility of a sewing class at the library. Multnomah County Library's Diverse Audiences Committee reported that other immigrant communities were asking about sewing classes as well. Sewing in libraries? Many library systems were already doing it. It was possible, but how could a complex library system make this simple request a reality?

In response to community feedback, staff with an interest in equitable programming wrote a grant proposal, *The Sewing Project*, to create a sewing lab and offer a sewing program for the Somali-speaking community. The proposal was submitted to *Curiosity Kick!*, an annual Multnomah County Library (MCL) grant for creative staff ideas. In 2017, library staff voted *The Sewing Project* the first-place *Curiosity Kick!* grant winner. This was a unique year for MCL, as *Curiosity Kick!* funded two projects that both directly responded to immigrant needs.



Program Development

After being awarded \$10,000 through the competitive annual innovation program, library staff Suad Mohamed and Lisa Taylor co-lead a small team of staff from across the system to develop a mobile sewing lab and a pilot sewing course for the Somali-speaking community. The team conducted a community needs analysis that confirmed a strong interest in sewing amongst the Somali-speaking community. They created a project proposal and charter to clarify the project and its goals, and maintained a project timeline. The team developed desired project outcomes to measure the impact of the program. In addition, members selected sewing machines and supplies, and created a storage and travel system for the equipment. The group looked at traditional Somali clothing, determined the scope and goals for the classes, recruited and interviewed sewing instructors, and chose the best neighborhood library locations for the programs based on county demographics. One consideration was space—there was no dedicated space within the system that could be devoted permanently to a sewing lab. Could meeting rooms handle 8 to 10 sewing machines, tables for cutting and ironing, as well as the students and instructors? And, would the library's electrical infrastructure be sufficient to run ten sewing machines and two irons? The team spent time measuring and arranging rooms, and engaged county facilities staff to inspect the circuits at branches to make sure they could handle the power load required.

Connecting with Communities

The team built upon MCL's work with immigrant populations to create a program that responded to the needs of the Somali-speaking community. MCL's We Speak Your Language (WSYL) workgroup had laid a strong foundation for this program. The mission of WSYL is to "connect immigrant and refugee communities to the information and resources they need to be successful in the United States" (MCL, 2018). The WSYL group provides bilingual and culturally competent staff, programs, and collections to reflect and serve diverse communities of Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese and Russian speakers. The Somali-speaking community is a smaller percentage of the Multnomah County's population, yet one with great need. MCL began to address this gap with a community needs analysis in 2012 (Seon). Thereafter, a Somali cultural competency position was created, and the library hired its first Somali bilingual staff. By the time of the grant, Mohamed had already spent several years building relationships with the Somali-speaking community. The library had regularly scheduled programs, such as *Family Time*, and computer classes in collaboration with Free Geek and the library's Digital Inclusion Fellow. Without culturally competent bilingual staff and previous outreach efforts, The Sewing Project would have required extensive partnership with community organizations already serving these refugee and immigrant communities.

Having culturally competent staff meant that changes to standard library program procedures were implemented to better serve our target community. For example, the team did not use the library's online program registration system, choosing instead to register participants via phone. Conducting registration online would have created a barrier in a community where the dominant mode of communication is via phone. In addition, a direct extension was used on flyers, so that participants would reach a Somali speaker instead of a contact center. "A key ingredient is library staff," states the *Guidelines for Outreach to Immigrant Populations* (EMEIRT, 2015, p.4). In this instance, bilingual staff had the motivation, skills, and knowledge to market the event, sign up participants, and work with contractors unfamiliar with standardized application processes.



In addition to removing language barriers, other steps are necessary to create a welcoming space for immigrants. For instance, in order to create the safest possible environment for vulnerable populations, a “No Photography” policy that includes internal and external communications is recommended. For this particular sewing program, an exception was made with consent from participants to share photos for internal reports due to the personal relationship Mohamed built with the Somali-speaking community. The community needed to trust that the library would not be publishing photographs that could put them or their families at risk. Working successfully with vulnerable communities requires dedicated and culturally competent staff, flexible policies, and a supportive administration. The team’s experiences throughout this process reaffirmed the conclusion of the EMEIRT *Guidelines for Outreach to Immigrant Populations*, “Making the commitment to serve immigrant populations affects every dimension of a library operation” (2015, p. 4).

Working Outside the Dominant Culture

As the library is part of Multnomah County, instructors need to be hired as county contractors. While the Somali-speaking instructors were qualified, they did not have the skills or experience to navigate the paperwork required by the county. Mohamed spent considerable time with potential instructors to assist them in creating the required résumé and program proposal. If your library does not have the means to work with immigrant instructors on an individual basis, are there ways to connect with existing community partners and refer applicants for résumé and application assistance?

The sewing project revealed that the county application process was an unintentional barrier to offering diverse programs at the library. The library was able to hire two Somali-speaking instructors, both of whom had extensive experience teaching sewing. Neither had a résumé or spoke English, and one of them was unable to read. Imagine such a person, highly qualified for the job, navigating your library system. What would it take to include such a person in the workings of your library? What assumptions are present in your employee and volunteer application process? Is your application process accessible to non-native English speakers and other world language speakers? How about those who don’t have access to the Internet or prefer oral to written communication? Is library programming truly being driven by community needs or merely by virtue of who has the skills and privilege to navigate library systems? Sonja Ervin, MCL’s Equity and Inclusion Manager, encourages libraries to examine intentional and unintentional exclusions, and to ask, “Who are we not serving, and who are we serving the least?” (S. Ervin, personal communication, June 17, 2019).

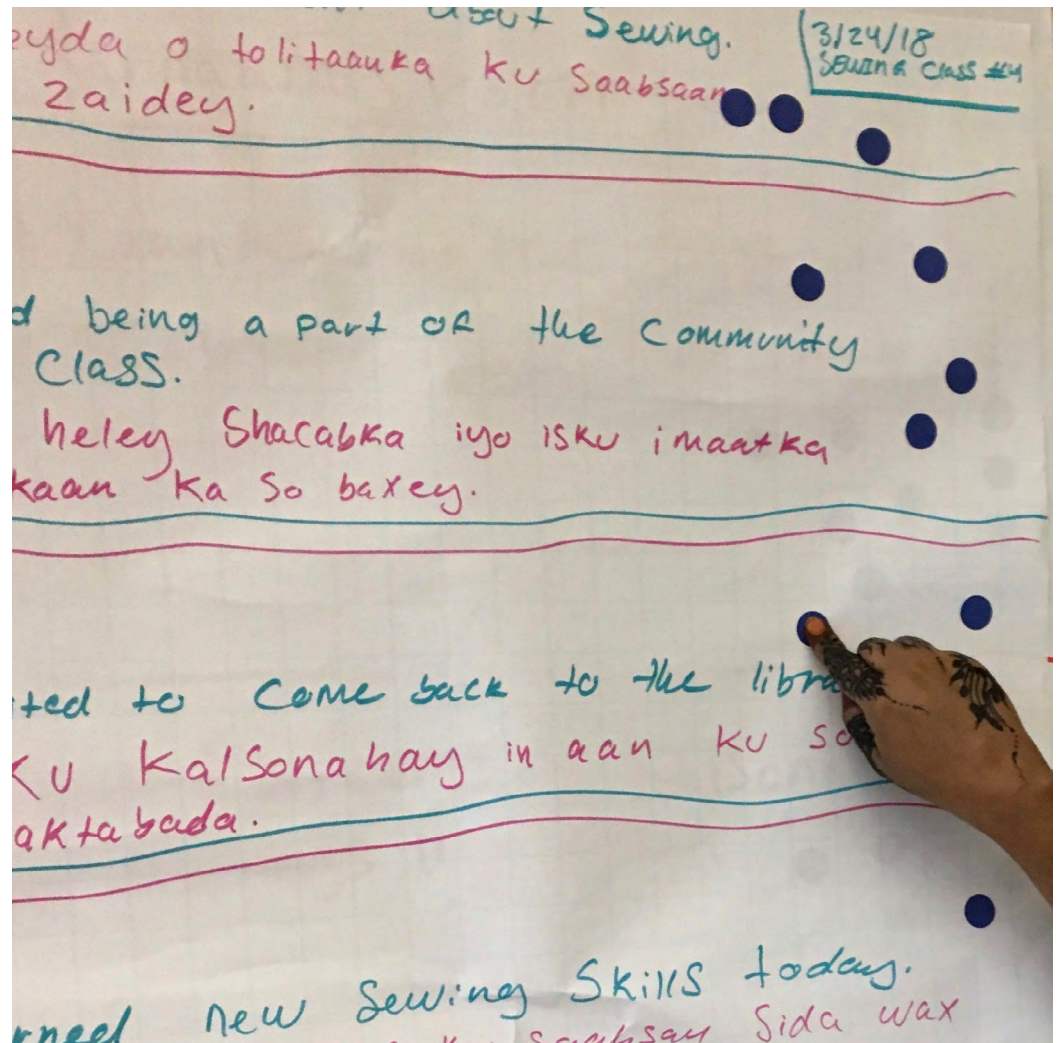
Outcomes

Hiring an instructor from the target community was key to the program’s success. The sewing instructor hired was a local Somali-speaking tailor who owned a small business in the Capitol Hill Library neighborhood. Program participants felt comfortable with him, and loved his classes. One participant commented, “The teacher was incredible, funny, and invested in my learning.” Students learned how to use sewing machines, and basic sewing skills. In addition, they learned how to make simple garments, and traditional Somali outfits. Participants signed up for library cards, reported feeling a sense of community and welcomeness at the library, learned about library services, and gave feedback about future Somali-language programs. One participant told the staff, “We felt very welcomed,” and another remarked, “I’m excited



to come back to the library.” After the program, the staff observed that class participants came more frequently to the library and participated in other library programs.

In order to gather this feedback from participants, the team created posters with phrases written out in Somali. Each participant was given four stickers per program and was able to indicate which of the outcomes statements resonated with them for that program session. The most popular statements were: “I learned new sewing skills;” “I feel welcome and comfortable at the library;” “I enjoyed being a part of the community of this class;” and “I feel more confident about sewing” (see Appendix). The goal was to measure not only sewing skills learned, but also how well the program fulfilled the library’s mission and priorities. The evaluation reflected that this program not only responded to community needs, but also created a space for women who usually don’t feel safe or comfortable using public institutions due to language and cultural barriers. By providing an instructor that shares the same language and culture, that barrier was reduced.




Gathering feedback to measure program outcomes.



Sustainability

Even with a system as innovative as Multnomah County Library, the team discovered that sustainability would be the biggest challenge. The major hurdles to sustainability for the team were identifying a department and staff to take responsibility for maintaining and storing the equipment, and funding the program beyond the one year grant period. MCL was able to continue offering sewing classes in Somali for one year after the grant ended by tapping into other funds. The library also dedicated a portion of its Programs for Diverse Audiences budget to incorporate sewing classes into the regular programming cycles. Hosting a community-specific sewing program on a regular basis involves a heavily involved staff advocate, as well as an instructor that is engaged with the target community. Additionally, library systems would need staff with authority and vision, as well as a corresponding budget for equipment and programming. Institutional support is required for sustainability in order to provide staff and resources for such a program.

Conclusion

The Sewing Project created an opportunity to provide services to an underserved community in direct response to community feedback. It created opportunities for learning and community building at the library, and empowered new voices to shape and deliver library services. It is a testament to the community desire for this program that all the sewing classes were filled and had waiting lists before the first course had even begun. For the opening session at Capitol Hill Library, an additional eight people from the waitlist showed up just in case a spot became available. For MCL, not only was this a marker for success, but it also set up a framework for ongoing progress. Initiatives like *Curiosity Kick!* open doors for programs that benefit not only the communities they're intended for, but also create lasting change as the library deepens its commitment to access for all. Moving forward, a critical question for library systems is how to build upon one-time diversity initiatives like this to make sustained, systemic changes that remove structural barriers to diversity, equity and inclusion. 

Recommended Resources

American Library Association. (2017 December 14). Services to new immigrants LibGuide. Retrieved from <https://libguides.ala.org/new-immigrants>

Ndumu, A. (2018). Toolkit for library services to black immigrants [website]. Retrieved from <https://blackimmigrantsinlibraries.com/>

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Appendix—Project Outcomes and Outputs

Outcome	Library Priority	Indicators: patrons	Number of positive results
Empowering our community to learn sewing skills.	We enable creation and learning. We support learning and literacy across the full spectrum of interests, ages and backgrounds. We assist educators, families and caregivers. We offer programs, materials and tools of creation to people who have limited access or opportunity.	I feel more confident about sewing.	34
		I learned new sewing skills.	47
		I am inspired to learn more and try new projects.	26
Reflecting an inclusive and welcoming space (for the Somali-speaking community)	We reflect and serve a diverse community. We serve every patron with respect and dignity. We offer resources that advance opportunity and equity. We hire and support talented staff members who reflect the community we serve.	I feel welcome and comfortable at the library.	46
		I am excited to come back to the library.	24
Increased opportunities for community building	We re-imagine library service and spaces. We put people first as we design our buildings and online services to offer the best possible experience. We continually adapt to provide the best service possible to the people and the community we serve.	I enjoyed being a part of the community of this class.	36
		I worked with others during this program.	26
		I plan on telling other people about this library program.	19

Goal	Priority	Output
Increasing library services and programs for the Somali-speaking community	We reflect and serve a diverse community. We serve every patron with respect and dignity. We offer resources that advance opportunity and equity. We hire and support talented staff members who reflect the community we serve.	Number of programs: 16 (four series of four classes)
		Number of patrons served: 32
		% of Somali-speaking community as participants: 100%

