Creating and Sustaining Collaborative Partnerships:
The Eugene Public Library's Nonprofit Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Collection

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In response to the pandemic-related closure of library locations in March 2020, the Eugene Public Library Foundation created a microgrant program to jump-start creative service ideas from library staff. These "Innovation Grants" were offered in amounts of $1,200 or less with the stipulation that funds should be used for programs and services for underserved patrons.

The Pilot Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Program
The first of these grants was awarded to staff at the Bethel Branch Library in West Eugene for the creation of a pilot Wi-Fi hotspot lending program. Using information gleaned from the Public Library Association (PLA) Hotspot Playbook (American Library Association, 2019), this collection of 12 hotspot devices was designated for use by local nonprofit partner agencies.

The initial decision to lend to nonprofits, as opposed to a pilot program for public use, was driven by a need to accelerate the process of evaluating a completely new service, while creating opportunities for measurable outcomes. By reaching out to a select number of partners, Eugene Public Library (EPL) was able to:
- test the signal strength and usability of the chosen service provider and hotspot devices;
- receive targeted feedback on the user experience from partner organizations and their clients; and
- temporarily avoid the process of exploring lending policies, packaging, and cataloging for these new lending items.

In the midst of pandemic uncertainty, the EPL nonprofit pilot program was successful in offering a valuable resource to partner agencies, while serving as a beta test for a larger public lending program.

Potential partner organizations were identified and sent communications outlining the details of the pilot program. Of 10 potential partners, three responded with interest in joining the program. Eugene nonprofit organizations St. Vincent de Paul's First Place Family Center, White Bird Medical Clinic, and 15th Night borrowed Wi-Fi hotspot devices from the pilot collection to share with their clients and for internal operational use. These partners serve hundreds of unhoused families and young adults with meals, shelter, pre-kindergarten education, and harm reduction supplies. By offering a valuable resource at no cost to the agencies, we hoped to not only help bridge the digital divide for underserved patrons but also create collaborative long-term partnerships with these community organizations.

The pilot project was instructive in identifying potential challenges and opportunities associated with expanding the nonprofit hotspot collection to serve a larger number of partner organizations. From the start of the pilot program in November 2020, it became clear that through the process of managing partner relationships and providing IT support for hotspot devices, the library's connection with these agencies was becoming stronger and more collaborative.

For instance, EPL staff were in regular contact with St. Vincent de Paul's First Place Family Center staff throughout the pilot project to support their efforts to provide broadband access to unhoused children and families. When a device failed to connect or experienced service interruptions, EPL staff offered technical assistance to get First Place Family Center clients reconnected in a timely manner. In addition to collaboration related to hotspot use, our partner agencies began referring clients to the library for other information resources and reaching out to branch staff for help with library-related questions. This two-way collaboration drove the creation of new library users and deepened EPL's relationship with St. Vincent de Paul.

In exchange for participation in the pilot program, partner organizations agreed to track usage data and provide feedback on usability. This data provided insight into user satisfaction, information needs, and potential improvements to the program. From the start, the pilot program generated specific examples of how clients use mobile Wi-Fi hotspots to access employment resources, educational opportunities, and virtual healthcare appointments (see Figure 1). The EPL marketing team and EPL Foundation collected these stories and shared them in video advertisements for a public fundraising effort in April 2021 (Eugene Public Library Foundation, 2021).

The Connecting Community Campaign—a month-long fundraising effort led by the Eugene Public Library Foundation and the Friends

Figure 1. St. Vincent de Paul client demonstrates how to use the Wi-Fi hotspot device at the First Place Family Center.

of the Eugene Library—was overwhelmingly successful and resulted in the purchase of 500 Wi-Fi hotspot devices with one-year service plans. Three hundred hotspot devices were allocated for public borrowing, while 200 were designated for use by nonprofit partners. Using lessons learned from the pilot project, in October 2021 EPL opened the hotspot lending collection for use by area nonprofits.

Partnership Maintenance

Library partnerships with outside organizations can be tricky. Competing priorities, staff turnover, lack of consistent and clear boundaries, and a myriad of other obstacles can impede long-term collaboration and healthy partner relations. With the creation of Eugene Public Library's 200-device hotspot lending collection for nonprofits, such obstacles were carefully considered in the early phases of program design. With experience from the pilot program, we set out to design a large-scale partnership model that fits the needs of busy nonprofits while adding value to their organizations. By offering valuable resources to strategically chosen partners, EPL has created meaningful and collaborative relationships with over 20 local nonprofit stakeholders.

A nonbinding memorandum of understanding (MOU) (see the sidebar on the next two pages) was drafted, which outlines the roles and responsibilities of both the library and partner agency. In addition to this document, agencies also complete an application for an institutional library card, which is used to check out Wi-Fi hotspots. The MOU document serves several purposes:

- defining the library's offer of free high-speed internet devices at no charge to the organization,
- setting communication standards for the partner agency in the case of loss or theft,
- outlining the loan period and expectation for allowed uses,
- clarifying who is responsible for the hotspot devices both for the library and the partner organization, and
- encouraging partner agencies to share impactful stories of how hotspot devices help Eugene citizens.

After an institutional library card is issued and the MOU document is signed by both parties, the partner organization may borrow hotspot devices for use with clients and staff. EPL's inventory of 200 devices allows for generous distribution of devices. Most organizations use between one and five devices, while others employ as many as 20. The City of Eugene's Safe Sleep Sites—city-funded vehicle and tent camping sites—use 17 hotspot devices to provide high-speed broadband service to over 150 residents.

Partner organizations are also allowed to use hotspot devices to support internal operations. Community Supported Shelters (CSS)—a Eugene-based nonprofit offering no-cost temporary housing—employs hotspot devices for shelter residents as well as for staff working in the field or those who simply need a fast Wi-Fi connection to work from home. Partners—especially start-up organizations with budget constraints—appreciate this flexibility and in-kind support to boost their bottom line.

EPL's hotspot project manager maintains these partner relationships, troubleshooting issues and fielding requests for new partnerships. In all, the EPL hotspot project manager spends around 5–10 hours per week working on this initiative. The project manager is

Eugene Public Library

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

This Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is entered into by and between:

Eugene Public Library   Friends of the Eugene Public Library
100 W 10th Ave.   AND   100 W 10th Ave.
Eugene, OR 97401   Eugene, OR 97401

A. Purpose

The purpose of this agreement is to outline the roles and responsibilities of the Eugene Public Library (EPL) and **FRIENDS OF THE EUGENE PUBLIC LIBRARY** for the purposes of maintaining a Mobile Wifi Hotspot lending agreement. This agreement also establishes the allowable uses of the Mobile Wifi Hotspot devices and defines the liabilities of both parties.

By entering into this agreement, the Eugene Public Library seeks to provide free broadband access to **FRIENDS OF THE EUGENE PUBLIC LIBRARY** and their program participants. The Mobile Wifi Hotspot lending program is an attempt to enhance the capacity of partner agencies in the area of digital connectivity. By agreeing to support the ongoing costs related to internet service, the Eugene Public Library seeks to narrow the digital divide in the Eugene community, which overwhelmingly affects underserved and at-risk populations.

B. Roles and Responsibilities

EPL will provide 5 Mobile Wifi Hotspot devices with unlimited high-speed data plans to **FRIENDS OF THE EUGENE PUBLIC LIBRARY**. The cost of Mobile Wifi Hotspot devices and internet service will be covered in full by EPL.

During this period, **FRIENDS OF THE EUGENE PUBLIC LIBRARY** will lend Mobile Wifi Hotspot devices to their program participants and staff. When lending to staff, **FRIENDS OF THE EUGENE PUBLIC LIBRARY** will ensure that Mobile Wifi Hotspot devices are used primarily for business purposes.

FRIENDS OF THE EUGENE PUBLIC LIBRARY will be responsible for ensuring the care and return of Mobile Wifi Hotspot devices. In the event of a lost or damaged Mobile Wifi Hotspot device, **FRIENDS OF THE EUGENE PUBLIC LIBRARY** will contact EPL at their earliest convenience to report the loss or damage. EPL will turn off data service to the lost or damaged Mobile Wifi Hotspot device. EPL may not be able to replace the Mobile Wifi Hotspot device immediately or at all.

Lost or damaged items will not be charged to **FRIENDS OF THE EUGENE PUBLIC LIBRARY**.

C. Reporting

EPL encourages **FRIENDS OF THE EUGENE PUBLIC LIBRARY** to share anecdotes or stories demonstrating the impact of the hotspot lending program. For instance, a program participant who uses the Mobile Wifi Hotspot device to connect to job seeking resources could be asked for feedback on how the Mobile Wifi Hotspot device has helped with their job seeking. Sharing

such stories is not required but helps EPL demonstrate the success of the hotspot program to donors and stakeholders. Such stories and anecdotes can be collected anonymously.

In addition, **FRIENDS OF THE EUGENE PUBLIC LIBRARY** also agrees to report all lost or damaged Mobile Wifi Hotspot devices or accessories at their earliest convenience.

D. **Timeframe**

The lending period for hotspot Mobile Wifi Hotspot devices will last three months. When the three-month lending period expires, EPL will contact **FRIENDS OF THE EUGENE PUBLIC LIBRARY** to discuss whether the Mobile Wifi Hotspot devices will be renewed – for another three-month period – or returned to EPL.

This MOU is the complete agreement between the Eugene Public Library and **FRIENDS OF THE EUGENE PUBLIC LIBRARY** and may be amended only by written agreement signed by each of the parties involved.

EUGENE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Authorized Official: _____   _____
                              Signature   Printed Name and Title

Address: _____

Telephone(s): _____

Email address: _____

FRIENDS OF THE EUGENE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Authorized Official: _____   _____
                              Signature   Printed Name and Title

Address: _____

Telephone(s): _____

Email address: _____

Mobile Wifi Hotspot contact: _____

Email address: _____   Phone: _____

an essential component of this model as they serve as the single liaison between partner organizations and the library. When library-related questions and information needs arise for clients of partner organizations, the project manager is often the first point of contact for service providers.

Creating a Bridge with Area Service Providers

Long-term collaborative partnerships with community organizations are an excellent way to connect with non-library users (Molyneux, 2004; Willett & Broadley, 2011). Such partnerships offer library professionals access to valuable insight into the information needs of non-users from the perspective of case workers and social service providers. An in-depth needs analysis of underserved populations can be an expensive and time-consuming endeavor. Meaningful partnerships with local agencies connected to underserved populations can provide a shortcut to much-needed information regarding the needs of the whole community (Provence, 2018).

Offering a resource of value for loan, in our case Wi-Fi hotspots, to partner agencies which serve hard-to-reach populations (i.e., unhoused populations, previously incarcerated individuals, victims of domestic abuse) offers the opportunity to foster powerful relationships with service providers. Educating service providers on the process of obtaining a library card as well as the multitude of resources available creates a bridge between the library and non-user populations (Willett & Broadley, 2011).

For instance, Community Outreach through Radical Empowerment (CORE)—an EPL hotspot lending partner—serves unhoused teens and young adults in the Eugene area. As a result of the hotspot partner relationship, CORE staff regularly contact the hotspot project manager with questions related to library use and card eligibility policies. Information needs are identified by CORE staff and then communicated directly to library partners as a result of our collaborative relationship.

Collaborative Partnerships and Your Library

At Eugene Public Library, the success of our community campaign to fund the purchase of Wi-Fi hotspots put us in a position to share the devices with the broader service provider community. But your library does not need 300 Wi-Fi hotspot devices to create meaningful long-term partnerships. Creating and managing nonprofit relationships require intention, strategic planning, and staff time, but can also be tailored to fit your library's current staff and funding levels.

Start by asking what types of resources would be valuable to your local nonprofit community. Onsite programming, such as regular outreach storytimes or job-seeking assistance, can also foster collaborative relationships. Co-authoring a grant proposal—even for a very small dollar amount—is another excellent way to bring partners to the table for collaboration and sharing ideas. When exploring the acquisition of new lending collections, consider reserving 10–20 percent of the collection for a nonprofit lending collection. For instance, the purchase of 10 laptop computers for public use could be reimagined as eight devices for public use and two set aside for lending exclusively to local nonprofits.

Of course, replicating the Wi-Fi hotspot lending model used by EPL is also a possibility. Hotspot service providers like Mobile Beacon, Mobile Citizen, and T-Mobile's government accounts department offer deeply discounted Wi-Fi hotspots and service plans to libraries.

As mentioned above, the Hotspot Playbook (American Library Association, 2019) is an excellent resource for planning a hotspot lending program. In addition, Vercelletto (2019) offers practical steps for establishing a new hot spot collection. If your library already lends hotspot devices to the public, consider adding a small number of devices that are exclusively for nonprofit lending.

Choosing the right staff to create and foster these relationships is also an important consideration. Many nonprofit organizations operate on small budgets with little extra staff time for collaboration and meaningful partnership. Library staff who communicate with outside organizations should expect to be patient, understanding, and flexible with the needs of nonprofit partners. While setting clear boundaries and expectations with a written agreement is an excellent start, fostering relationships with partners will also require a staff member with excellent communication skills and the ability to accommodate the changing needs of partner organizations.

Conclusion

The pandemic landscape of 2020 changed library services in countless ways. With physical locations closed to the public and low-income patrons experiencing significant challenges related to digital equity, Eugene Public Library seized the opportunity to narrow our local digital divide. In response to community need driven by pandemic-induced hardships, EPL is leveraging an abundance of digital resources to support the operations and boost the capacity of a diverse group of partner organizations. These partnerships have been essential in reaching non-library users and creating a window into the information needs of underserved populations.

Meeting potential library users at their point of need—be it a food bank, homeless shelter, place of worship, or Head Start preschool—creates a bridge between the library and other trusted social service agencies. When trust and confidence is created between library staff and the staff of agencies working with underserved populations, the likelihood of client referrals between both entities is greatly increased. Intentionally offering a resource of value to local agencies is an excellent way to begin building dialogue and collaboration.

Public libraries seeking to replicate this partnership model should consider these options:
- Co-author a grant proposal with a local nonprofit agency.
- Offer regularly scheduled on-site programming at a partner agency location.
- Create a collection of resources reserved for nonprofit use only.

Designate a staff member or team to focus on creating nonprofit relationships. Organizational budgets and staff capacity will limit the size and scope of any partner lending program. Smaller libraries can scale their efforts by adjusting collection size, number of partners, and overall program goals to fit the capacity of the organization. Starting small with an option to increase program capacity is an excellent way to get started without overcommitting staff or financial resources.

As partnerships with local agencies deepen and mature, the benefits for libraries can be enormous. Nonprofit organizations have access to valuable insight into the information-seeking habits of hard-to-reach patrons. Strengthening your local nonprofit ecosystem helps local agencies thrive and helps underserved patrons access information resources. It also spreads the work of the library beyond the library space and into the community at large.

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