



The Computerworld Honors Program

Honoring those who use Information Technology to benefit society

Final Copy of Case Study

LOCATION:
Tampa, FL, US

ORGANIZATION:
Hillsborough County Library Services

YEAR:
2011

ORGANIZATION URL:
<http://www.hcplc.org/>

STATUS:
Laureate

PROJECT NAME:
Hillsborough County Electronic Libraries

CATEGORY:
Digital Access

PROJECT OVERVIEW

In 1995, a group of citizens approached the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners (Hillsborough County, Florida) with a request for library services. The group of citizens was from the community of Bealsville in Eastern Hillsborough County near the city of Plant City, Florida. Bealsville is a geographically isolated and rural area. Once thriving, the community has experienced a severe decline. There is little industry other than home-based agriculture. With no public transportation available and the nearest existing libraries in Brandon and Plant City, accessing common library services or other cultural and educational outlets is nearly impossible. With the all too real issue of funding, the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System was charged with the task of extending library services to this rural and remote community, a unique and challenging task. To that end the library developed a partnership with the Hillsborough County Park's and Recreation to select sites and provide space and staff to monitor and support the technology. The library provides the computers, network, set-up and on-going technical support. Initial funding for most of these locations were via state grants (FloriNet Connectivity & Services) to extend library and County information services to rural, distant, economically disadvantaged or otherwise under-served areas of Hillsborough County. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, after learning of these initiatives, provided additional computers and software. See appendix 1. An electronic library is best defined as a non-library staffed location where the majority of resources are presented electronically, using a web interface that provides straight forward access to the library. Information services are provided via phone, FAX or eMail. The design allows recreation center staff to interact with the children and adults to show them how to find books, place holds, initiate research and interact with e-mail, blogs and 2.0 technology rather than become PC troubleshooters and software designers. See appendix 2. Building a network to the remote sites and training have always been the most difficult hurdles to overcome. The remoteness of several of the electronic libraries had initially presented the library with high construction costs and lengthy build-out times. In working with our ISP, we were able to develop solutions after the first five



installs that benefited all by altering whether the site would be served by fiber, coax or dial-up. Overall, this “hybrid” approach to building the network allows the electronic library model to grow and expand into areas previously without broadband connectivity, further enhancing the lives of the customers to these facilities. The library has tested a variety of methods to reduce the training gap including pamphlets, on-site training, CBT, bookmobile visits and dedicated phones. Each of these have had varying degrees of success, but time has proven to be the great equalizer. As the library trained the children and the elderly, they in turn trained each other. These electronic libraries have become self-sustaining from the public (customer) perspective. By the close of 2010 the library has more than 70 electronic libraries throughout Hillsborough County via partnerships with Hillsborough County’s Parks and Recreation, the City of Tampa Parks and Recreation, Hillsborough County Senior Adult Day Care Centers, Hillsborough County’s Children’s Services and Sun City Center.

SOCIETAL BENEFITS

Customers in the communities served are exposed to services and resources of their public library, provided access to government resources, provided a forum to communicate with families and employers. They are bridged over the “digital divide” where they learn how to use technology and better themselves and the lives of their families in the process.

PROJECT BENEFIT EXAMPLE

According to the Lions Club of Keyssville, “many of the families have two working parents which make trips to the library few and far between.” Having the e-library with its computers and the Homework Collection, make accessing the library to do homework and general research much faster and easier. “It’s a great help for homework, we use it all the time.” - Terri, age 15 “Clients use it for games and to check their emails. Staff here use the computers to assist clients.” - Carmen – staff Plant City Senior Center “It’s cool, I play games on them with my friends.” – Jordan 10, Bealsville “Homework Help is used a lot, our kids use the room for all kinds of stuff.” - Glenda - staff Brandon Recreation Center “It’s cool having this room! I can surf the web, check my emails – because I don’t have a computer at home - and keep up to date with what’s going on!” – Carolyn, client at Brandon Senior Center “The kids love the games on there, teens come in and research a lot.” - Antoinette, Kenly Park. “I like the computers. I can go to the Internet for my homework now” - Monique, age 8 “The service is great, kids do a lot of homework help, Adults fill out applications, food stamps, the seniors do their Medicaid. Kids advance their reading in our “Power Hour” tutoring session, and staff can check web-work emails.” - Marcee, staff at Mort Park “I enjoy the convenience of this facility. I used to have to travel to Ruskin to do homework for HCC (Hillsborough Community College) or access my classes online. Now I can do it from my home, almost.” - Diane, age 21 Ken – a volunteer at the Ruskin Senior Center, helps teach clients on email, Microsoft Office and the Internet

IS THIS PROJECT AN INNOVATION, BEST PRACTICE? Yes

ADDITIONAL PROJECT INFORMATION

Every success and failure has been watched closely so as new locations are created, successes can be emulated and failures can be reduced. Internet access is filtered in accordance to preferences by the partner. For example the Children’s Services Haven Poe Runaway Shelter will want certain categories blocked that a City of Tampa recreation center may want



available. The electronic library concept has proven to be a low cost way to deliver library and local government resources and access to otherwise under-served areas of the County were factors like transportation or socio-economic conditions limit the ability of these users to interact with their public library or local government.

