

# **SISKIYOU COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM**

## **SUMMARY**

Citizens of Siskiyou County are determined to have libraries in their communities. This report details the events following the 2010 loss of nearly all funding for county libraries. In 2010, Siskiyou County had twelve libraries, and in spite of many challenges, they are still in existence. The Grand Jury considers this story to be an example of inspirational democracy at its best.

Although it has been a challenge, individual citizens of Siskiyou County have rolled up their sleeves and provided the day-to-day organization, funds and work to keep their libraries open. However, the Grand Jury, and all those surveyed agree that this new model is not sustainable long term.

## **BACKGROUND**

In May 2010, the Siskiyou County Administrator's office (CAO) presented its recommended budget to the Board of Supervisors. The line item in this budget for the county libraries was zero. Citizens were very concerned; the CAO's office was receiving 20 to 30 calls per day regarding the plan to close all libraries.

By July 1, 2010, a much-reduced budget was enacted and eight library branches were closed. The branches that remained open were only funded for six months. The California State Library was contacted and began to assist Siskiyou County in creating a new model that would allow its library branches to remain open. The new model was based on community control and financing.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Grand Jury prepared and sent a survey to each library branch in the system for completion and return by a library staff member or volunteer. Interviews were also conducted with staff from various branches, and additional information was gathered from online research. Documents, specifically contracts and guidelines, were obtained.

## **DISCUSSION**

The new library model consists generally of the following: a main distribution center located at the Yreka branch, which provides circulation of books, DVDs and other materials, a computer network, purchase of circulating materials, vehicles for delivery between branches, a county library website and other countywide services.

There are twelve branches of the library: Yreka, Etna, Fort Jones, Happy Camp, Scott Bar, Weed, Mt. Shasta, Dunsmuir, McCloud, Montague, Tulelake and Butte Valley. Each of these libraries is supported by a combination of the city government and/or community groups where the branch is located, a Friends of the Library group, volunteers, and in one case, a contracted service that provides staff. Most of the library buildings belong to, or are leased by, the cities. Happy Camp

has the Happy Camp Library Association, which owns the library building. Three branches, Dunsmuir, Mt. Shasta and Weed, have passed a city tax to provide funds, and these branches have some paid staff. A few of the cities are paying one or more staff, and only volunteers staff some. Some are open 30 hours per week; others are only open four hours per week. All of these library branches serve everyone equally - citizens of their town, the county or of another town or county.

It is clear that all the Siskiyou County communities value their libraries, since all the original libraries are open today. This is true even though one library suffered damage and required repairs, (Happy Camp-new roof), and one burned to the ground (Weed). Libraries have been closed, repaired and reopened since 2010. In Weed, the entire library was replaced.

Among those working in the libraries there is deep concern for finances, quality of services and concern that the current model is not sustainable.

The Grand Jury sent an informational survey to the county library in Yreka and the 12 branches in November 2016. All branches responded promptly, and several had more than one staff member/volunteer complete the survey.

Information from the survey was very revealing, and the jury learned the following facts:

- There are no county employees at any of the branches. City government, tax revenue, Friends of the Library and/or some other arrangement, provides funding for paid branch staff. Three of the libraries function without any paid staff at all.
- The County Library Distribution Center in Yreka has four full-time staff and, along with Behavioral Health, helps pay for a part-time driver who delivers books and materials to the Tulelake and Butte Valley branches. This portion of the library system, provided by the county, is referred to as the Distribution Center. The Yreka branch library is one of the twelve branches, and is operated separately from the Distribution Center.
- The overall library system is dependent on volunteers to provide services to the public. Staff at every branch expressed difficulties finding and keeping volunteers. All surveyed, including the County Librarian, were concerned about volunteer training and consistency across the branches. Either volunteers or branches are expected to cover the cost for required background checks before volunteers can serve.
- Funding for individual facilities, utilities and maintenance is provided differently for each branch.
- Books and materials are provided by the county and through private donations, tax revenues Friends of the Library groups and grants. Individual Friends of the Library organizations and/or a local entity have applied for grants to benefit their specific branch, apparently with little

or no assistance from the Distribution Center. One grant was applied for by the Distribution Center for replacement of carpet at the Yreka Branch, since the building is a county building and maintenance and upkeep is provided by the county.

- The county provides internet, a network backbone and phone service for all branches.
- There were several complaints expressed about KOHA, the computer program that manages day-to-day tracking of books and checkouts, library card users and fines. Review of this program was beyond the scope of this report.
- The majority of the branches reported they were able to offer unique services to their community, such as art shows, summer reading programs, book clubs, public computer access, wi-fi . story time, book sales, public meeting rooms and literacy tutoring.
- Free individual tutoring for those 17 years old and up is offered at the Siskiyou County branch libraries through California. Library Literacy Services. This learning service can assist individuals in a variety of educational areas, including learning to speak English, reading, writing, math and preparation for General Equivalency Diploma (GED) testing. Trained volunteer coaches work one-on-one with students around the learner's personal schedule.

At the time funding was cut, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between each branch and the county. Each library kept its existing supplies, furniture and non-circulating materials as of the start date of the MOU. Ownership of the fixed asset items belonging to the county was retained by the county until disposal. Today, the county remains responsible for providing the following: technology backbone, network equipment and software, supplies specific to libraries, delivery of circulating materials and other items between facilities, website, training and management of programs and grants that would be applicable county-wide.

The twelve communities supporting their branch library are required to provide physical space, new furnishings, utilities, maintenance, cleaning and restroom supplies, janitorial service, trash removal, insurance and staffing (including background checks for those working in the space), re-shelving of circulating materials, packing materials for shipment, local magazine subscriptions and self-service checkout machines. Further, they must provide at least two computers and at least one printer. Maintenance and supplies for equipment, all other equipment such as copiers, additional computers or printers, fax machines, software and upgrades. The community branch retains any monies collected for fines and/or printing and copying. The community determines branch library hours. Volunteers and staff are required to participate in training as scheduled. The community agrees to share all the circulating materials with other libraries in the system, with delivery to be provided by the county.

Through the surveys we learned there are areas in the MOU that need further clarification. For example, there is controversy regarding what constitutes acceptable donated circulating

materials. Items are donated which do not meet the guidelines for circulating materials. One issue that has arisen is that those who donate books and the communities who receive the donations are not always willing to share those materials with other branches. You may donate books to your library because you love those books and want your neighbors to read them. However, those books might not become part of the collection. They may be given to the Friends of the Library book sale, or the books may become circulating materials, and therefore not available in the local branch. Apparently, among other requirements, the guidelines prohibit acceptance of any materials published more than a year previous, and any softcover books. Despite repeated requests, the guidelines were not provided to the Grand Jury.

Another issue has been responsibility for training volunteers. The surveys revealed that there is no uniform method for training branch volunteers. This results in inconsistencies in the way libraries are operated. All stated that each branch does its own volunteer training. However, the MOU clearly states that volunteer training will be provided by the county as a part of library operations. As noted by staff at the Distribution Center, there is no county training program, nor is there a county training manual at this time. It is not clear why this is so, but the Grand Jury was told that there has been a reluctance by those in the branches to be trained by the county and a reluctance by county staff to do the training.

Background checks for volunteers are also a significant problem. They are expensive. Each branch handles the issue differently; many ask the volunteers to pay, and background checks are a barrier to obtaining volunteers as some cannot afford to pay the cost.

Further, there seems to be an issue for the library communities regarding the purchase of computer equipment required under the MOU. The branch libraries are required to purchase two computers for use in each location to ensure effective communication between branches, the Distribution Center and other county departments. Generally speaking, branch library staff does not have the expertise to procure computers that interface with the county system. There seems to be a lack of communication from the Distribution Center about specifications for the purchase of required computers. In addition, branch libraries are not able to obtain the same purchasing power as the county. As a result, purchasing the necessary computers is expensive.

The overall county library budget allows for \$35,000 per year in new book purchases. However, in order to provide adequate numbers of new books across the system, it is estimated at least twice that amount is needed. This does not take into account annual cost increases. While the 2014 Boles Fire was devastating, the insurance payment resulted in a windfall for the branches. The books that burned with the Weed Branch library were part of the county collection; they belonged to all the branches. Insurance funds can only be used to purchase books, with the exception of the one-time purchase of bookshelves for the new Weed Branch location. Currently, the book purchasing funds are being supplemented with the insurance payment from the Boles Fire. Volunteer staff members at many branches expressed concern about how new books would be purchased when this one-time resource is depleted.

Information about Siskiyou County's library system is available online at the following website: <https://www.co.siskiyou.ca.us/page/siskiyou-county-library> . The information on the website was not always accurate or complete. One component of the library, the Siskiyou County Public Law Library, is not even mentioned on the web page. The hours stated for some of the branches were inaccurate as well.

During the 2016-2017 fiscal year, each library branch received a one-time payment of \$2,000 from the Siskiyou County general fund. The addition of these funds was critical for some branches operating in the red. Other branches used this money to replace aged computer equipment.

It was suggested to the Grand Jury that each library should be provided with funds for one paid staff member for eight to ten hours per week. This would provide some continuity in services across branches. The estimate was \$12,000 per branch per year for a total of \$144,000 per year.

One possible solution to library funding issues is to create a library special district. Under California law, a special district to finance library operations and facilities could be used to provide these services and could make the library system sustainable. Shasta County could serve as a model.

## **FINDINGS**

F1. Staff and volunteers at all the libraries are concerned that volunteer training is not standard at each library.

F2. There appears to be conflict and confusion regarding the donation, retention and circulation of library materials.

F3. Procedures and payment for background checks are handled differently at each branch and most involve the volunteer being required to pay for their own background check.

F4. Although each branch is required to have two computers for network communications, there is unequal access to effective communications across branches as a result of non-standard computer equipment.

F5. There is inadequate funding for new books, which will need to be addressed when the Boles Fire insurance funds are exhausted.

F6. The Distribution Center has not been applying for available grants, which the branch libraries are unable to apply for due to their non-governmental status.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

RI. Under the current MOU, the county is required to provide training for volunteers. A procedures/training manual should be created and updated regularly. Training should be provided regularly to all staff and volunteers, and each branch library should have copies of procedures/training manuals as specified in the MOU, in place by January 2018.

R2. The definition of what is, and is not, in the library system's collection and how donations will be handled should be discussed and the current MOU amended to state the resulting policies accurately by year's end.

R3. Under an amended MOU, the County should pay the background checks required by the County for staff/volunteers working in any branch.

R4. Under an amended MOU between the county library and communities, the two computers which branches are required to provide should be the responsibility of the County and should be purchased by the County, along with required software and upgrades. A replacement schedule should be created so all the computers do not have to be replaced in one year but through a five-year replacement schedule.

R5. The county should increase available funding to buy new materials when the Boles Fire Insurance money is depleted.

R6. More emphasis should be placed on obtaining funds for branches through grants applied for by the Distribution Center. These could assist individual branches to meet financial needs.

## **REQUEST FOR RESPONSES**

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the Grand Jury requests responses as follows:

From the following governing bodies:

- Siskiyou County Board of Supervisors please respond to RI through R6.

## **INVITED RESPONSES**

Siskiyou  
County Librarian  
is invited to  
respond to R1  
through R6.

