

## **An Evaluation of Current Outreach Services at Calvert Library and Its Future Outlook**

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**Abstract.** For more than nine decades public libraries have used bookmobiles and Outreach services to connect with and serve their customers, visiting such diverse populations as daycares, nursing and retirement homes, public schools, and prison inmates. Calvert Library, a rural public library in southern Maryland, was the main focus of this study, which examined the Outreach Department to determine its strengths and weaknesses. It analyzed the effort to reach and serve customers who do not have access to library services. Microsoft Excel was used to compile and analyze surveys and outreach statistics from 2008 to 2010. The benefit provided and the future of the service was identified in the conclusion.

**Keywords.** Bookmobile, customer survey, librarians, library, Maryland, mobile services, outreach, outreach librarian, outreach services, outreach van, public library, rural community

### **1. Research Questions**

This study attempted to answer basic questions of the Outreach services in the Calvert County area to evaluate current and future services.

- R.1) How does the Outreach service fit into the mission of the library?
- R.2) What services are offered by the Outreach Department?
- R.3) What is the amount of work (man-hours) a staff member completes on a daily and weekly basis to provide materials for its customers?
- R.4) What is needed to make Outreach services equitable to all library services?

### **2. Importance of the study**

The increased concern about costs incurred and value received for the allocation of limited resources places Outreach services at risk. This study will

accomplish several main objectives. First, it can serve as a model for future development of Outreach services. Second, it can give the management of the library a picture of how the current staffing addresses the needs of the Outreach population. Third, this analysis can foster a greater interaction and understanding between the Outreach librarians and the public service librarians to facilitate greater communication. Finally, it can serve as a foundation for further studies to provide the best tools available for the Outreach Department.

### **3. Literature Review**

Despite the inherent value that Outreach can offer to a library's community, there are not sufficient studies done to examine these services. A search of peer and professional journals yielded few studies treating the subject of Outreach services in public libraries. This study reviewed articles published in 2000 or later that related to bookmobile services.

Bashaw (2010) wrote a historical review of bookmobile service in the United States that emphasized a definite need for bookmobiles. She pointed out how bookmobiles gave greater choices to residents who were unable to travel to a library. Bashaw stated that Vavrek's 1997 survey cited convenience as the main reason for using bookmobile services. In the survey, respondents felt the bookmobile improved their lives and that of their children (p.34). Bashaw concluded that bookmobile services are still vital to the community and funding should be equally allocated to sustain them and library branches

Borman (2009) published a study about the obstacles and challenges in providing services to rural libraries. Borman sent members of the Association of Rural and Small libraries (ARSL) his questionnaire. He found that rural areas had difficulty recruiting qualified staff and noted that these libraries should look within their staff to develop quality library service to remote areas.

In Hawk's 2008 study on bookmobile service in rural America, he observed that the role of the bookmobile librarian continues to be "an intimate relationship with the residents, bringing them reading material based on their likes and dislikes, providing them with human contact with the outside world (History of Bookmobile Services, para.9)." Rural residents were often not able to access online resources due to location or expense. Hawk concluded that bookmobile services need to provide internet and online resources (2008).

Fain's 2007 study surveyed members of the Association of Bookmobile and Outreach Services (ABOS). In the survey, 75 percent of respondents saw their services increase in the past five years and expected a continued increase (2007). Forty-six percent of the survey respondents believed that without the bookmobile, customers would have no access to library services at all.

Davis, Harnish, Walker and Wallace (2000) published research on bookmobile service in Indiana. They sent a questionnaire to state libraries to describe their bookmobile service. Their conclusion was that Indiana libraries will continue to provide an Outreach service due to the dedication by library administration and staff to provide library service to all of its community (p.4).

Bashaw, along with Krake (2007) concluded the need for continued Outreach service to the community. Borman and Fain sent surveys to library

staff to find information about Outreach services. No recent survey of Outreach customers was found in academic literature. The most current survey conducted on this subject was Black's 1998 research "Outreach Services for Older Adults at the Wadsworth Public Library," the basis for the customer questionnaire used in this study to determine the state of Outreach services in Calvert County.

Hawk and Borman both found that convenience was the response from patrons for their use of bookmobiles in Alaska and Ohio. Hawk noted that patrons enjoyed the relationship the librarians developed with them. Both discussed future trends for bookmobiles in providing Internet access and online access. (Hawk, 2008, Conclusion para.).

#### **4. Methodology**

This study focused on the public library service for the citizens of Calvert County who do not visit the library due to inability to travel to a branch. The research method used was an analysis of primary data obtained from the Outreach Department on their completed visits for the past three years. The August 2011 three-week rotation schedule was used as an example of the customers visited. Data was compiled using Microsoft Excel software to calculate the number of customers, materials and the amount of time spent with each customer. Google Maps was used to calculate the amount of time needed to deliver these materials.

Leedy and Ormond (2010) recommended a self-administered questionnaire be given to current customers who received Outreach services to determine if adequate service was being provided. A questionnaire was given out by the Outreach staff during the visits and those customers received a self-addressed stamped envelope to return the completed questionnaire by mail. The time spent in acquiring materials and organizing the deliveries was analyzed through observing tasks performed at the library building (Leedy & Ormond, 2010).

#### **5. Results**

Since 1959, Calvert Library's bookmobile was an essential part of establishing connections to the surrounding community. The bookmobile was driven across the county to reach its citizens (Gardner, 1989). Its role changed over the years, eventually focusing on "delivering materials to the homebound, senior centers, nursing homes, and agencies (Hammett, 1999, p. 15)".

By 2001 the Outreach librarians began taking story-time programs to licensed daycare providers and engaging the children with compelling stories, songs, and crafts, just as they would receive at the library if they had access (Hejl, 2009). These programs promote the library's mission to promote reading and encourage the use of library resources.

Shut-in customers are provided informational and entertaining materials, all of which are selected by the Outreach librarians. Large print books, DVDs, magazines, and CDs are resources that can be used for entertainment, personal growth and life long learning.

Calvert Library's mission statement of providing a community gathering place does not apply to Outreach customers as they cannot physically come in to

the library to make use of its meeting spaces, participate in programs, and interact with the public. The Outreach librarians strive to provide a sense of community on a smaller scale to these customers. The Outreach Quality Standards state, “often for shut-ins, the Outreach Staff are the only people they will have to speak with during the day (Calvert Outreach Operating Standards, 2010, p. 20)” and the staff make a point of conversing with these patrons.

Calvert Library has a close partnership with the county schools and promotes summer reading as well as the use of library resources for their educational needs. The Outreach staff gives the school or daycare centers an opportunity to join the summer fun by bringing the necessary reading materials to participate in the program and win prizes.

#### **5.1. Services Offered by the Outreach Department**

The two staff members of the Outreach Department visit licensed home daycares, shut-ins, nursing homes, institutions and schools on a three-week rotating basis. The schedule is set every fall and summer and arranged according to geographic locations to maximize efficiency (Calvert Outreach Operating Standards, 2010). Shut-ins are priority customers and are given requested materials and are interviewed at every visit to ensure their needs are being met (Calvert Outreach Operating Standards, 2010).

Daycare centers, schools and institutions are allocated 20-30 minutes for delivering new requested books and for checking returned materials (Calvert Outreach Operating Standards, 2010). In addition to the content chosen by the staff members for these daycare centers, there are four designated times they receive a story-time program. This 30 minute program is given by the Outreach staff to educate the caregivers in childhood literary enrichment and entertain the children (Calvert Outreach Operating Standards, 2010).

Institutions are provided a rotating temporary collection of library materials, each of which is tailored with the customers in mind (Calvert Outreach Operating Standards, 2010). These materials are from a special Outreach collection that is not bar coded or inventoried. These materials are sometimes not returned and must be replaced through donations or purchases.

#### **5.2. Daily, Weekly and Yearly Outreach Staff Work**

The Outreach Department consists of two librarians who work seven hours a day, five days a week. Daily visits average from four to six daycares, two to four shut-ins and a mix of schools and institutions. Based on a typical day in August 2011, the Outreach librarians spend half an hour to one hour loading the van with materials for customers before leaving the building. They spend an average of 67 minutes driving the van an average of 36 miles and an average of three hours at the stops picking up and delivering materials. When they return to the building, they have one to two hours to discharge the materials from the customers' records and answer any phone messages and reference questions they received from their customers.

In 2008, 2009, and 2010 the Outreach librarians made seven stops daily and spent an average of 15 minutes at each stop, below the stated time of 20-30 minutes in the operating standards. During this same period the number of stops decreased from 1,445 in 2008 to 1,376 in 2009. The decrease in the number of

visits can be attributed to the loss of personnel in the Outreach Department. The Department lost personnel in 2008 and continued to be understaffed in 2009. In 2010, the Department was fully staffed, allowing more time for visits.

Data for the three years reviewed in this study show a total of 2,619 daycare visits, 803 shut-in visits, 618 institution visits, 225 school visits and 10 other visits. Daycares were 67 percent of 2008's visits and 70 percent of 2009's. In 2008 there were 610 programs presented to daycare center customers; in 2009; 1,141 and in 2010, 1,038.

There was a decrease in the number of visits conducted in 2009 compared to 2008 or 2010 due to the understaffed Outreach Department. In 2010, there was a 5 percent increase in the total number of stops. The staff traveled 6,998 miles in 2008; 6,074 miles in 2009; and 7,566, in 2010; demonstrating an 8 percent increase in mileage from 2008 to 2010. The increase in 2010 can be attributed to the full staffing of the Outreach Department and the purchase of the SUV to travel to hard-to-reach customers.

There was a nine percent decrease in mileage from 2008 to 2009. The number of visits during the same period dropped from 1,454 to 1,376, the effect of having one staff member in the Outreach Department. The full staffing of the Outreach Department in 2010 resulted in a 16 percent increase in mileage and an increase of 78 visits to customers.

### **5.3. Equitability of Outreach Services to the Library**

To make the Outreach Department services equitable, there should be access to the internet for its customers and the ability to request and checkout materials instantaneously. The Outreach Department has a laptop computer with wireless capability to access the internet. It was purchased to maintain records but in practice has been found to be cumbersome. The staff handwrite requests and questions by hand and use the computer once they return to the library. There is no current link to the laptop computer and SiRSi Dynx circulation software at the library. A cell phone allows the staff to maintain contact with the library from nearly any location in the county.

### **5.4. Questionnaire Results from Calvert Library Outreach Customers**

The Outreach staff distributed 90 questionnaires during their visits. The questions covered limited personal data, evaluation of the services and staff, and suggestions or comments. Fifty-one percent of questionnaires were returned. Thirty-six percent of Outreach customers received services from one to five years, 29 percent received services from five to ten years, 27 percent received services for more than ten years and eight percent have received Outreach services one year or less. One hundred percent of the respondents reported that they used the outreach services to check out materials, 20 percent participated in story-time, 20 percent received recommendations, nine percent received answers to reference questions, and 18 percent received other additional services. One hundred percent of respondents felt that the materials brought to them were meeting their needs.

The majority of respondents indicated they used Outreach because of an inability to access library resources. Eighty-two percent of the respondents felt that Outreach services were outstanding while the rest felt that they were good

or fair. When responding to the consequences of losing Outreach services, each response commented on the essential role it has played in their lives.

#### **5.5. Association of Bookmobiles and Outreach Services Guidelines**

The Association of Bookmobiles and Outreach Services (ABOS), a division of the American Library Association, has created a comprehensive set of guidelines to help establish standards of operation for Outreach programs. The ABOS defines four major sections of operations: administration, public service, emergency procedures, and vehicle maintenance. These were used to compare the Calvert Library's Outreach Service Operating Procedures

Calvert Library's Outreach services are overseen by the Reference Administrative Coordinator. Funding for the Outreach Department is part of the annual library budget and the personnel and equipment are considered a department in the main branch. Collection development and management are overseen by the library administration in the same manner as all branches. The Outreach Department is researching avenues to purchase materials that will belong exclusively to the department. The ABOS criteria for establishing and maintaining bookmobile stops are guidelines used by the Calvert Library Outreach staff to create the most efficient routes.

ABOS states that "Bookmobile circulation services are comparable to services at branches" (2008, p. 3). Calvert Library Outreach customers are given access to the same materials as other library customers. In providing materials, the Outreach Department competes with the library's regular customers for materials. The small designated Outreach collection of materials was established for customers in institutions who do not return books.

The ABOS guidelines for marketing and publicizing Outreach services state they should be part of the overall library marketing program to reach customers throughout the library's service area (2008). Outreach vehicles are decorated with Calvert Library logos and serve as advertisements as they travel. A brief paragraph about the Outreach program can be found under the Services section of Calvert Library's Website. There is no detailed outline of the Outreach services available to the public and there is no current plan to add participation in public speaking or parades to Outreach programming.

The Outreach vehicle is regularly maintained and inspected, and the responsibility for maintenance is delineated in the operating standards. Emergency procedures are available in each vehicle and are reviewed annually by the Outreach staff. These procedures are comparable to those of the main library with the addition of the information necessary to insure the safety of the individuals and the vehicles. The vehicles used for Outreach services are functional and comfortable for the staff.

### **6. Conclusion**

Comparison of the Calvert Library Outreach Operating Standards with the guideline standards of the ABOS shows that the Outreach Department is operating at a high level. The Outreach Department can continue to maintain its current level of service if there is no increase in demand. An additional staff member could perform some of the administrative work which would allow

more visits to be scheduled. At this time, however, there is no plan to increase the number of staff. Another option could be to find a volunteer with library experience to assist with filling material requests for Outreach customers.

The current economic climate is steadily straining budgets and although the demand for Outreach services has increased, the funding has not. The services are appreciated and considered necessary. The results of the questionnaire and the demanding schedule of visits indicate the high use of the Outreach services and it is evident the services are well worth the cost. Creative and innovative procedures are required in finding ways to continue to offer the high quality services and using the limited staff and limited time available.

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