Montana Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) Pre-Planning Considerations

"Gathered Thoughts"

Overall

Following are some areas for consideration in the development of the Montana (MT) LSTA FFY 2023 - FFY2027 Plan. They are based primarily on feedback received from the evaluator-facilitated interviews, focus groups, and surveys.

Overall, the input the evaluators received regarding the Montana State Library's (MSL) implementation of the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) Grants to States program was very positive. A great deal of information was collected that documents the benefits that have been realized by Montana libraries and their communities because of the investment of LSTA funding.

The evaluation also used some innovative ways of capturing feedback using intercept survey data for two LSTA projects. Really kudos to staff who were willing to try new and innovative ways of capturing feedback!

Staff overall are valued and have close connections to library staff in the field with strong outreach and engagement elements.

The MSL has done a remarkable job of investigating and identifying technology challenges in the state and using that information to take actions to improve. The LSTA-funded Internet Speed Improvement project has prompted the creation of programs funded from other sources, including distribution of hot spots, wiring upgrades, and the non-terrestrial internet "Starlink" project. Since the MSL has already shown uncommon vision to take the successes of one project and build others, they should simply continue on in their current strategic fashion in relation to technology investments.

One area of possible improvement may be in "bringing along everyone together" by devoting more time and resources to libraries that are slower to understand key resources (including E-Rate) and need more time to adapt to improvement opportunities. MSL staff have already made significant efforts in paying attention to the need of "slower adopters" in the Montana library community, and may benefit from more staffing support for individualized library technology adoption needs.

Goal Structure Thoughts

The structure of the goals (or lack thereof) was a challenge in the Montana evaluation. Overall the goals in the Montana plan do not have a logic that is tightly holding together; the logic model behind the goals is not obvious and it is something that needs to be defined and built into the plan when the goals are being formulated (rather than asking for a logic model to be developed at the end of the strategic planning period, the LSTA evaluation should have the logic model embedded and explicit in the original plan when it is developed); basically,

LSTA Plan = Logic Model = Evaluation structure

- Montana's existing LSTA Goals are rather unconventional; not the typical INFORMATION ACCESS, INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY, LIFELONG LEARNING set. This is actually refreshing, but what's the unifying, overarching vision? The existing plan provides a good start but the tie between "helps all organizations, communities, and Montanans thrive through excellent library resources and services" isn't made on a goal by goal basis. Maybe it's because the connection seems obvious. Of course having Internet access helps people thrive, of course adequate support for libraries is a good thing, etc. It would help if there was a piece in each goal that showed how achieving the goal directly helps communities and people thrive.

Some more specific thoughts:
- The five goals seem a little disjointed. What seems to be missing is the "why." Why do we collaborate? Why do we want Internet access? What's the end result? Is Adequate Support the end or the means to the end?
- Goal 1 is Collaboration. Is collaboration really the goal or is collaboration how MSL achieves its goals? Isn't Goal 1 really an Information Access goal? Goal 1 projects really seem to fit together nicely.
- The Outreach/ Lifelong Learning goal (Goal 2) seems to be a bit of a catch-all. The two elements; outreach and lifelong learning are directly connected to the two major activities (Library for the Blind and lifelong learning initiatives, but are they tied together in other ways? Is the point of the talking book program lifelong learning? Is summer reading outreach? How do these two fit together and work together? Can MSL better leverage its limited LSTA funding if the projects under each individual goal are linked together more closely?
- GOAL 3 is pretty self-explanatory all by itself, but it's pretty closely related to the consulting role in Goal 5. Would these goals be better together?
- GOAL 4 (Internet Access) seems like an Institutional Capacity Goal. You can also make a case for it being an Information Access goal.
- One of the primary stated desired outcomes from Goal 5 is "increased support from local government officials." The activities look more like they are focused on building library capacity rather than having an impact on local officials. The connection is there, albeit rather indirect. Is more local money the measure of success?

- Can we find good clues for how to evaluate progress toward the goals by examining and refining the Measuring Success focal areas and intents?
- Montana made a really notable effort in their existing plan to come up with some ways of determining whether progress was being made toward their goals. To be hyper-critical, many of the desired outcomes are really more like surrogate indicators of success… not really the outcome, but if we see such and such happening, then we're getting closer to the real outcome we're after. There is a good framework here to build on.

Additional suggestions for the next plan (focus groups and interviews):

- Provide access to a robust set of licensed research oriented electronic resources to state government employees; this set of research resources could strengthen the collaboration between the state library, public libraries, and the academic libraries in the state represented by the TRAILS (Treasure State Academic Information & Library Services) consortium.
- Staffing limitations and capacity.
- Recruit schools into the Lifelong Learning programs.
- User experience studies of the website resources (especially the dashboards).
- More technology support for small libraries.

Looking Forward (web-survey)

Survey respondents were then asked to think ahead to the next five years and provide suggested changes in the way that LSTA funds are invested. Suggestions mentioned more than twice include extending the shared catalog to all libraries in Montana, access to databases like EBSCO, continuing the partnership with the public school systems and libraries, marketing library services to communities, and continued and additional funding to electronic resources and digital books. Below are a list of other recommendations as well as selected comments from respondents.

- Invest in the courier services
- Connectivity in rural Montana
- Hotspot program
- Expanding individual library collections
- DEI initiatives focused on staff recruitment/retention, public service, and collection development
- Additional staff