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Serving Every Child

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Certainly the most difficult OLA *Vision 2010* goal to meet will be to “serve every child.” The OLA Vision 2010 Committee, which I was privileged to serve on, used this goal statement to tackle two objectives. We wanted to highlight the importance of library service to children, in school libraries and in public libraries. We also wanted to highlight the problem of Oregonians, children and adults, who do not have public library service.

It is the latter problem that makes this goal to serve every child so difficult. The State Library was founded in 1905 to bring public library service to every Oregonian, but unfortunately, nearly a century later, about one out of ten Oregonians lives outside the boundaries of a public library service area. Public library services in Oregon are provided by cities, counties, special library districts and a few school districts. In 2002 there were 325,772 Oregonians in 11 of Oregon’s 36 counties without a public library, because they lived outside of one of these jurisdictions providing library service.

You may be surprised to learn that 88 percent of “unserved” Oregonians reside in a cluster of five counties in the Willamette Valley. The largest number reside in Marion County (99,418), and the second largest number reside in Lane County (87,475). Other large numbers of unserved Oregonians reside in Polk County (34,698), Linn County (34,305), and Yamhill County (29,440).

There are historical reasons why these five counties have the vast majority of Oregon’s unserved. At the turn of the 20th century they were among the most densely populated counties, with rapidly growing cities that were ripe for the establishment of public libraries. The first public library-enabling legislation, passed by the Legislative Assembly in 1901, only allowed for cities to establish tax-supported public libraries, this being the predominate governance model for public libraries at that time. It was only through the visionary leadership of Multnomah County Library

director Mary Frances Isom that the Legislative Assembly was persuaded to amend the public library law in 1903 to allow Multnomah County to establish what was then only the third county library in the country. But the amendment only applied to Multnomah County. By the time the State Library Commission was established in 1905, many city libraries had already been established or were in the process of being established. Even though the first State Librarian, Cornelia Marvin, was, like Mary Frances Isom, a great believer in “larger units of service,” it was too late to change this initial direction in all but Multnomah County.

All it took was one city library to be established in, say, Eugene in 1904, or Salem, also in the same year, or Albany in 1907, to set the model for public library development in a particular county, and we have been struggling with the unintended consequences of this ever since.


What will it take to serve every child in the 11 counties noted above? At least in the five counties that account for 88 percent of the problem, it will take nothing less than some fundamental changes to public library governance and funding patterns that go back nearly a century. Are we up to this challenge? The State Library Board is certainly committed. They were asked by the Oregon Library Association to strongly support all the goals of *Vision 2010*—in effect, to make them our primary goals as well. The Board agreed to this, and we are very mindful of this commitment.

The State Library has made a major commitment of LSTA funds to plan for bringing library service to every child and every adult before the end of the decade. We have funded grassroots organizations in Lane County and in Linn County to spearhead these efforts, and we meet with these groups regularly. In 2004 we will use LSTA funds to support planning efforts in Lane, Linn, Clatsop, Columbia, Jefferson, Wheeler, and southern Marion counties to bring public library service to all. The *See Serving Every Child page 28*



according to a unique population ... [with] more emphasis on local character and needs." Newport Public Library is well positioned to build on the local character of the library and Newport's unique population. While implementing new services, we will keep what we do best. Personalized service will trump buying another computer. Staff will continue to learn and grow with the library and bring excellent service to the public. We will use

what we have and who we are to create and insure the future.

In Rita Dove's poem *The First Book*, she says of opening a book for the first time, "it's not like it's the end of the world—just the world as you think you know it." This is why libraries are worth saving. In libraries our task is to make it easy for all to open those doors, one after another, to worlds that alter lives, inform vision, and inspire change in the universe. 

Progress Along the Road

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Oregon Statewide Database Licensing Program, 2003. <http://www.osl.state.or.us/home/libdev/osdlp/index.html>

Schepke J., 1995. Update on the Oregon Information Highway: Oh, What Tangled Webs We Weave. *OLA Quarterly* 1(1): 7. <http://www.olaweb.org/quarterly/quar1-1/schepke.shtml>

Senate Interim Task Force on Library Cooperation, 2003. Final Report http://www.leg.state.or.us/comm/commsrvs/librarycooperation_report_final.pdf

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Board also has granted LSTA funds to the Salem Public Library for some public opinion survey work that will assist them in planning for a library district election this November. A new Salem area library district would serve an estimated 44,000 unserved children and adults in Marion and Polk counties, in addition to the City of Salem residents who are already served.

I am encouraged that the Oregon library community's commitment to "serve every child" is higher than I have ever seen it in my 18 years at the State Library. It's not

just librarians, but hundreds of dedicated citizens, in organizations like the Lane Library League, the Linn Library League, the Friends of the Fossil Public Library, and "Yes for Libraries" in the Salem area, who are devoted to achieving this goal.

As the State Library looks ahead to our centennial in 2005, I can think of no better commemoration than to be on our way to finally finishing the work that began 100 years ago, a goal that we wholeheartedly share with the Oregon Library Association. 