

American Library Association: Rural and Small Libraries Accessibility Grant

Due February 28, 2023

1. Describe your library and the community it serves, including demographics, dynamics, and key issues or challenges it faces. What should reviewers know about your library and community in order to understand your proposed project?

The library primarily serves the town of Charlotte. With 3800 residents, it hosts working farms and forests and serves as a bedroom community for the education, healthcare and tech industries in Burlington. The town is home to the villages of East and West Charlotte with corner stores, Grange, and senior center. The town's unemployment rate stands at 1.6% and most people travel to other towns for their jobs. Demographics for Charlotte do not vary much from our neighbors: whites are the largest ethnic group at 93% of the population. Our highest populations by age group are those under twenty (25%) and those 50 years of age or older (49%).

Post-COVID, we've seen a resurgence in attendance and involvement and we will exceed our pre-pandemic figures for library use and engagement. Our budget from the town for FY2023 is \$285,000, which covers a staff of six and a half as well as collections, programs, and operating costs. This is supplemented by grant funding from the Friends of the Charlotte Library to boost our collection budget.

Even in relatively homogenous Charlotte, Vermont, contrasts can create division. The library should not be barrier to equity but an open door to access, both figuratively and literally. The reputation of Charlotte is one of wealth and prosperity but there are families in need, as indicated by the increase in food shelf activity and the establishment of summer lunch programs here at the library. With no community center and recent consolidation of services in our school district, the library's role as a community hub, information source and activity center is increasingly important. Our town's small size makes the library the go-to place for a variety of activities, from book groups to baking sessions. Rather than feed on division, we hope that our library will be the center around which our community can continue to come together; the future promises more diversity and opportunity for our town to embrace it and accessibility is key.

2. Primary Audience*

Describe the primary audience for your project. Why did you choose to focus on this audience? How, if at all, do you currently serve this audience? What are your plans for outreach efforts to engage this audience throughout the project? What are your overarching goals for engaging this audience with your project?

We seek to engage with the mobility-challenged populations in our community. This includes anyone from preschool to senior with mobility disabilities and/or low vision or blindness. Whatever the age or stage in life, access to the library is a barrier to these people. Whether

they struggle to enter the library or decide not to come to the library at all, the struggle contrasts with our library's mission to create a welcoming space and provides the motivation for our grant application.

With help from state and local organizations, such as the Vermont Association for the Blind & Visually Impaired (VABVI) and the Vermont Center for Independent Living, we have developed some service actions and created some workarounds. These include highlighting the vision-support services available through the Department of Libraries, offering assistance as people enter the library and use the facility, providing online access to library programs, and delivery of library materials to people's homes. However, none of these measures facilitate independent access. We would like people to be able to come in to the library and enjoy on their own terms.

Development of an ad-hoc committee to maintain momentum and will allow us to address needs as they arise during the project. Currently, we plan to invite community members and staff from the local schools, senior center, and daycare center. In addition, we will call on advisors from VABVI, VCLI and the Community Skills faculty at the local high school. Learning from this audience about how to make the library more accessible and what programs and services can bring us all together. Conversations and consultation previously have helped to identify barriers. Maintaining this communication on a regular basis will help ensure that accessibility strategies remain up to date.

3. Rationale*

What challenge or opportunity does your project seek to address for the primary audience? How was it identified? Describe how you used relevant information from reliable sources to define the need, challenge, or opportunity you seek to address.

1. What challenge or opportunity does your project seek to address?

Access to the library begins with opening the door. If you are unable to open the door, the library is not the welcoming place that we aspire to be.

2. How used relevant information from reliable sources to define the challenge?

Libraries have a universal reputation as welcoming and accessible spaces for all ages and interests. When we planned our recent expansion, we sought to meet the demands and desires of our small town for increased meeting space, additional collection areas and a dedicated work hub. These goals drew on the library's principles to foster lifelong learning and expand library use for all in our community. With time to assess and evaluate our new and renovated library spaces; we have discovered that while our new library spaces are hospitable, they are not universally accessible. Those who need assistance walking with a cane or walker as well as those who use a wheelchair would not find it easy to enter the library or to find comfortable, usable seating. With this realization, we scheduled professional evaluations with Mobility VT and the Vermont Center for Independent Living. Following their professional guidance and consultation visit from the Vermont Center for Independent Living, our board and

staff developed an accessibility plan. As mentioned earlier, this project includes the fundamental accessibility needs to make the building easier to enter, attendance at programs more welcoming and moving around the spaces more navigable. All of these improvements bring the library closer to its goal of universal accessibility and becoming the welcoming and inclusive place it is meant to be.

4. Project Plan*

Describe your preliminary plan for addressing the challenge or opportunity identified. What activities will you carry out to execute the plan? How has the input of the primary audience influenced this plan? How will the perspectives and input of the primary audience continue to be incorporated throughout the project? How will you share information about the project and its outcomes? Do you have any community partners in mind (existing or new) that you plan to engage in the process?

Access to the library begins with opening the door. Once inside, the library should feel like a place of belonging where everyone can move about the entire building and access materials with as few barriers as possible. Our role as a community warming and cooling center makes this access all the more essential. When we planned our recent expansion, we sought to meet the demands of our town for increased meeting space, additional collection areas and a dedicated work hub. These goals drew on the library's mission to foster lifelong learning and expand library use for all in our community. With time to evaluate our renovated library spaces, we discovered that while our new library spaces are hospitable, they are not universally accessible.

We continue to hear from community members who have difficulty accessing our building. Those who need assistance walking with a cane or walker as well as those who use a wheelchair do not find it easy to enter the library, navigate some collection areas or to find comfortable, usable seating. With this realization, we scheduled evaluations with Mobility VT and the Vermont Center for Independent Living. This collective feedback helped us outline this accessibility plan.

If we get the grant, we will start with a facilitated conversation, reviewing the proposed design and inviting suggestions before we begin. An accompanying survey, available through the town's online community forum and ongoing committee will ensure greater feedback. A dedicated spot on our website will enable additional attention to accessibility-related matters.

Upon completion, a community open house will introduce the new accessibility features. In addition to personal outreach, the library will also launch a media campaign with articles in our local newspapers, posts on social media and flyers at local businesses, churches, schools and other points around town. We plan for this to be an ongoing project, with long-term feedback and support.

5. \$20,000 Budget Plan*

Describe your plans for the grant funds. What will you use the funding to purchase or

support? Please be specific (e.g. \$10,000 will be spent on staff time to support the development and implementation of the project, \$6,000 will be used to purchase and install an automatic door opener, \$2,000 will be used as incentives for conversation participants). The total amount of this section should add up to \$20,000.

We propose an upgrade to be not only compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act but also conform to the concepts of universal design, adapting the space to be usable by all people.

Our seven-point plan includes the following:

Entry & Navigation:

- A pedestrian crossing from the senior and children's centers across our rural roadway
- Automatic door openers for the main and program-room entrances
- Enhanced signage throughout the library collection rooms
- Barrier-free pathways
- Expanded doorways

Use:

- Mobility-assisted seating
- Movable book carts

6. \$10,000 Budget Plan*

Please describe what your plans for the funds would be at the \$10,000 level. What will you use the funding to purchase or support? Please be specific (e.g. \$5,000 will be spent on staff time to support the development and implementation of the project, \$3,000 will be used to purchase and install an automatic door opener, \$1,000 will be used as incentives for conversation participants). The total amount of this section should add up to \$10,000.

The adjusted plan would include partial funding for the automatic door openers and the pedestrian crossing:

Entry & Navigation:

- A pedestrian crossing from the senior and children's centers across our rural roadway
- Automatic door openers for the main and program-room entrances