

**Community Needs Assessment:  
Library Services for Under-Served Communities  
(Executive Summary)**

**Prepared for the St. Paul Public Library  
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**By the St. Paul Community Literacy Consortium**

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## Introduction

**“We read stories ranging from newspaper articles to novels that just hit the shelves, so often not taking a moment to think of how fortunate we are to have had someone in our lives share with us the gift of literacy. As we flip through the pages and search for information to learn more of what we are seeking, it would be only right to give to another the ability to take a trip in the mind. Most of all, it's free at your local public library.”<sup>1</sup>**

**Over the past several decades**, St. Paul has become a prime resettlement destination for refugees and immigrants from around the world. Among the largest groups are Hmong, along with other Southeast Asians from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma; Latinos; Russians; refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia, and other parts of Africa; and various other groups. At the same time that new arrivals have increased, the age distribution patterns of the city as a whole have also changed –increases in the number of school-aged children and youth are striking.

**Recent census data illustrate these changes.** With a total estimated St. Paul population of 287,151, specific changes from 1990-2000 include:

- 14% of St. Paul residents (nearly one in seven) were born outside the United States; 7% of St. Paul residents came to the U.S. during the 1990s
- Of all city residents born outside the U.S., 57% were born in Asia, 22% in Latin America, 11% in Africa, and 8% in Europe
- 22% of city residents speak a language other than English at home; 12% of residents did not speak English ‘very well’
- The Asian population increased from 7% to 12%, the Black population from 7% to 11%, and the Latino population from 4% to 8%; the White population decreased from 81% to 64%
- The number of school-age children (5-17) increased 28%, to 56,080; 68% of St. Paul public school students were children of color (2002-03), and English was not the primary language spoken at home for 41% of all students
- The number of older adults (age 65+) decreased 21%, to 29,647.

**New arrivals** influence the city in many areas, including cultural and religious practices, education, politics, and cuisine. Educational, social service, political, and other St. Paul institutions continue to be transformed by the needs and perspectives of ensuing waves of new arrivals. Rapidly growing and changing native-born communities, including African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos, contribute to the continued transformation of the entire community. Many others, including elders, youth, those with disabilities, and low-income persons, also lay claim to greater participation in the larger community.

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<sup>1</sup> Library staff member

**The St. Paul Public Library (SPPL)** has been a leader in seeking to identify and respond effectively to the needs of refugees, immigrants, and other underserved groups. As a primary source of information for the community, SPPL is committed to adapting services and service delivery to effectively meet the information needs of all city residents.

**In early 2004**, SPPL received a Library Services and Technology Act Federal (LSTA) grant from the Minnesota Department of Education to conduct a community needs assessment of underserved populations. The project was proposed to “allow SPPL to work closely with community organizations and individuals from diverse communities in Saint Paul to assess their needs as they relate to the library system.” Immigrant and refugee communities were identified as the primary target population for the study. SPPL proposed to “work closely with underserved communities in order to learn what their needs are and how best to meet those needs through programs and raising awareness of library resources.” Project results would provide information to help develop a multi-year strategic plan for SPPL.

**Through a competitive RFP process**, the St. Paul Community Literacy Consortium (SPCLC) was selected to complete the needs assessment. SPCLC, formed in 1994 to improve the quality and availability of adult literacy services in St. Paul, provided more than 916,000 hours of ESL and other literacy services to over 16,000 adult learners through 14 community based nonprofits and St. Paul Public Schools Adult Learning in FY 2004. The primary researcher for the study was Tom Cytron-Hysom, SPCLC coordinator/facilitator, assisted by SPPL staff, SPCLC member agencies, community organizations, and many members of the target communities.

## Summary Findings and Recommendations

**Common themes emerged** in extensive data collected directly from the target communities, service providers who work with these communities, and library staff and administrators. SPPL provides essential information resources for the target populations – library services are not a luxury, but a lifeline for St. Paul residents with limited financial, language, and educational resources. SPPL provides a crucial role in helping New Americans obtain both skills and specific information needed to build functional, effective lives in a new country. The library also fulfills other important purposes not as readily apparent – for instance, many individuals talked about the feeling of welcome and acceptance they experience in SPPL facilities. Nearly all of those interviewed had a very positive attitude toward the library, both as a community resource and in more personal terms. SPPL, as an institution, plays a tremendously important and positive role in the lives of New Americans, youth, and other underserved communities.

**A number of general themes** recur regarding ways in which SPPL could further enhance and extend services to underserved communities, building on existing efforts and initiatives. These themes include: 1) implementing more or different outreach/marketing; 2) providing education about library services, as well as personalized assistance in learning how to actually use the library to obtain information; 3) expansion of many different types of materials in different languages, that are representative of diverse cultures; and 4) employing staff that speak languages other than English and/or are even more culturally competent. An underlying theme was that continued development of community engagement initiatives, such as collaborative projects with the public schools, community organizations, government employment services, and nursing homes, as well as greater use of community volunteers, would be helpful. A number of more specific access issues, such as different hours, were also suggested. Finally, the desire and need for significant expansion of computer resources for patrons (see below) was striking across all populations.

### Summary Findings Regarding Underserved Communities

**Each community group** communicated distinct needs, detailed in the body of this report. Summary findings and recommendations, related to themes common among most or all target groups, and augmented by data collected from participants from the broader community as well as library employees, include:

- √ Individuals from other cultures, especially those with limited English skills, sometimes find it difficult to use the library effectively. They also have difficulty communicating in English, and express the desire for staff that speak their languages. The library should continue efforts to diversify staff to include different cultures and languages, to provide translators, and to sensitize all staff to the needs of non-English speakers. The Urban Library program, a collaboration between Saint Paul Public Library and the College of St. Catherine providing the education, training and experience needed for initial entry into a library career, is a very promising step in this direction.

- √ The inability to read is a major barrier to accessing library services for many members of underserved communities. At the same time, the definition of literacy is expanding to include a much wider variety of skills than reading and writing. The ways in which people access information is also changing to include many non-print resources. SPPL should address literacy barriers by continued expansion of audiovisual materials; consider partnering with literacy providers to address limited reading ability among some library patrons; and explore other potential strategies to ensure those with limited literacy are able to access needed materials.
- √ Communities of people who do not speak English as their first language consistently express the desire for access to more print materials in their native languages. Preferences expressed include basic texts that incorporate English and their own language, to help them learn English; native language children's books, to help teach children their culture and native language; a broader selection of adult books in their native languages; and books on technical subjects related to employment skills. It is recommended that the library expand access to informational resources, such as those listed above, in Hmong, Spanish, Russian, Somali, and other languages.
- √ Computers available through SPPL provide a crucial resource for underserved communities that include many low-income members who cannot afford their own computers. Participants express great appreciation for the library computers. They also express concern that library computer resources are inadequate to meet demand – we heard frequent stories that overall demand severely limited individual computer time, and that children and youth could sometimes not access computers to complete their homework. It is recommended that the library place continued priority on expansion of public computing facilities, taking into account differing utilization of such resources at various locations.
- √ Focus group members consistently related that they do not know about some SPPL services, but expressed strong interest in knowing more about such services. Traditional means of communication, such as flyers and brochures, are not always the most effective means of outreach to such communities, which tend to have their own communication networks. The library should develop culturally specific outreach programming and marketing to acquaint different communities with available services. Sources of information identified as commonly used by the various populations, summarized later in this report under Community Focus Groups, provide a basis for designing such outreach.
- √ Parents who take their children to the library may be unsure how to access information for themselves. They may be afraid or hesitant to ask for assistance. SPPL should ensure that New Americans receive the individualized assistance they need in learning what services are available, how to use these services, and how to access needed information.
- √ Elders often take children and grandchildren to public libraries for story time, homework assistance, etc. However, many of these elders are not aware of library services that they themselves might access. The library should explore ways to more directly communicate with elders regarding their informational needs, and develop culturally specific ways to meet these needs through library services.
- √ Library Homework Centers are heavily utilized by children and youth from underserved communities needing help with their schoolwork. They also provide an important

resource for adult learners, especially those studying English as a second language. The help provided through these centers can provide an important resource to help close the achievement gap involving students of color. It would be helpful for SPPL and the Saint Paul Public Schools to work together to leverage additional resources to strengthen these centers, as well as enhancing the partnership between the Centers and SPPL.

- √ Refugee and immigrant communities utilize the library not only as a source of information, but as a means of learning *how* to access information. For instance, adults are interested in learning how to operate a computer, or how to use search engines to find web-based information. SPPL should proactively develop means of identifying and teaching relevant information access skills to New American communities.
- √ While underserved communities are often defined as communities of color, many other groups of people may be considered underserved. Those identified in this study included teenagers, seniors, the homebound, and persons with specific disabilities, including those with impaired hearing. SPPL should continue efforts to broaden and deepen definitions and awareness of underserved communities.
- √ Teens and youth attending a variety of public and private schools, as well as those who are home schooled, view SPPL as a crucial resource. The sources of information commonly used differ somewhat from other groups, with a strong focus on the Internet and relational sources (teachers, parents/relatives, and friends), as well as the library. Materials borrowed from SPPL included print, graphic, and aural resources, while the Internet, library webpage, and Homework Centers were commonly used services. SPPL should emphasize technology and interpersonal communication when designing services for youth and teens, and in further developing outreach efforts.
- √ Programs requested by teens had strong recreational and interpersonal focuses, including game groups, writing circles, poetry slams, book clubs, and discussion groups. It is important to integrate recreational and interpersonal elements as central components of youth programming.
- √ A variety of respondents noted that they value the ‘quiet’ provided by the library. For many persons, it appears that the library is one of the few places in hectic, noisy lives where they can experience a restful, quiet atmosphere – described as a refuge. The desire for calm and quiet is an important aspect to consider as SPPL designs facilities and develops programming.
- √ Community-specific organizations, such as social service agencies, provide crucial resources to underserved communities. These organizations are identified as a major source of information and resources by these communities. SPPL should identify and implement means of continuing to increase collaborative activities with such organizations to further meet the information needs of those they serve.

Please note that appended to this report (Appendix A) is a more detailed set of findings and recommendations relating specifically youth.

### **Recommendations Regarding SPPL Resources**

**It is also clear** that SPPL resources are stretched thin. There appear to be few extraneous resources within the system available to implement recommendations enhancing and strengthening services for underserved populations. Several years of constrained budgets have adversely affected the maintenance and development of organizational infrastructure (even as various community initiatives have expanded, and planning for a the new Rondo branch has been completed); a related hiring freeze (now lifted) has limited the ability of SPPL to make significant changes requiring staff resources. A current internal study of branch staffing, roles, assets, and needs is a promising administrative effort to assess what is needed and how to use resources in an optimal manner. While this report assesses the needs of underserved communities, SPPL is mandated to serve the entire St. Paul community, with finite resources.

Given these realities, SPPL continues to meet expanding community demands for Library services. Year-end 2004 SPPL statistics indicate users visited SPPL facilities over 2,254,000 times in 2004, checking out over 3.2 million items. This translates to an 11 percent increase over 2003 in visits and a 5.5 percent increase in circulation.

The following recommendations are offered:

- √ SPPL facilities and other resources should be expanded and revamped to meet community needs. Facilities are already utilized to their maximum potential and beyond - complaints among both community members and staff regarding inadequate computer facilities is one example of limited capacity. Some staff perceive that they have inadequate time to meet client needs. Top management, Friends of the Public Library, and other leaders should continue to help advocate for expanded resources.
- √ There is significant room to expand and strengthen volunteer recruitment and utilization. In addition to enhancing basic capacity, volunteers could provide a rich source of language capacity to help non-English speakers better access SPPL resources. Youth and teens express a strong interest in community service, and could help provide strengthen links with the larger youth community.
- √ Current SPPL staff and management need support and encouragement. Some staff perceive that morale is rather fragile, and fear burnout. As employees of a public institution open to all, SPPL staff must deal with difficult and demanding clients in a respectful manner, while working to maintain a trusting attitude toward the public they serve. Staff are also stressed by limited opportunities for communication, planning, and reflection, and have been affected by the reassignment of staff necessitated by the hiring freeze. Management resources have been significantly limited, complicating efforts to respond proactively to changing circumstances. At the same time, there is tremendous potential and ability among staff and management to respond positively to emerging needs, given adequate resources and support.
- √ Collaborative relationships between SPPL and other community entities should be significantly expanded. For instance, local job counselors could provide employment services, Adult Basic Education (ESL) providers might be able to meet English language instruction needs, and St. Paul Public Schools staff could help students in Homework Centers. Such changes would free SPPL staff to provide other needed core library services. The ability to develop and enhance creative collaboration with other community institutions will be a crucial factor influencing the ability of SPPL to better meet the

needs of underserved populations.

- √ Unrecognized institutional barriers that limit access should be identified, reviewed, and addressed as needed. As an example, the use of fines for materials not returned in the past prevents a high percentage of underserved youth from checking out materials; while SPPL cannot afford to continuously replace such materials, active education of customers about the need to responsibly care for materials might be helpful.

## **Links to Strategic Planning**

**The strategic planning process scheduled for 2005 will be crucial in determining how well SPPL is able to enhance service to underserved communities.** There are many areas of common agreement among underserved communities, organizations serving these communities, and library staff regarding how SPPL can proactively respond to the information needs of rapidly evolving and diverse community groups.

During the strategic planning process, the hopes and desires of underserved communities will need to be balanced with a variety of factors and other stakeholders. While this report assesses the needs of underserved communities, SPPL is mandated to serve the entire St. Paul community, with limited resources.

SPPL is in many ways a large, complex business facing realities common to other similar organizations: finite resources, a socio-government environment characterized by retrenchment, growing demand for services on the part of the public, and increasing accountability requirements from funders, government, and the public. Within this context, issues that will require planful consideration include:

- √ Many of the needs identified by underserved communities are labor-intensive, such as individualized assistance in accessing needed information. How can balance be attained between library services that have traditionally been ‘high touch,’ characterized by significant interaction between staff and clients, with the need to develop self-service initiatives and increase self-help skills among those served?
- √ How can the many important needs of underserved communities be prioritized within the limits of available resources? This may require some changes in current services, in order to free up resources for new initiatives.
- √ Underserved communities request a wide variety of materials in languages other than English. Library staff report, however, that existing materials in other languages are not always well utilized. How can SPPL develop a consistent philosophy of focused acquisition and collection development given these conflicting realities, during a time of limited resources?
- √ Underserved communities voice a variety of requests related to the physical design and resources of library buildings. These include significantly enhanced computing facilities, quiet space, rooms for classes and meetings, and separate areas for different collections. At the same time, most of the library facilities were built and designed many years ago, are of limited size, and cannot easily accommodate all of these needs. How can SPPL

best prioritize and balance community desires, given both the physical limitations of facilities, and limited resources for purchasing computers and providing other resources?

- √ Various communities suggest an array of hopes and dreams for library services, some of which may not be possible to fulfill. How can the public best be educated regarding the links between desired services and available resources, including the need to set priorities and make tradeoffs?
- √ The ability to innovate, develop, and grow as an effective public institution requires a strong administrative and organizational infrastructure. ‘Hands-on’ staff supervision, staff development, acquisition and management of collections, and planning are directly linked to overall service effectiveness, but are not themselves included in the definition of direct service. However, public and private funders often designate that funds be used only for direct service initiatives. How can organizational maintenance and development needs be addressed in a manner that facilitates enhanced direct services?
- √ St. Paul communities are continuously changing. Much of the outreach/marketing identified as important require work outside the traditional ‘four walls’ of library buildings. What is the best balance between services focused within SPPL facilities, and broader community service initiatives? Where does outreach/marketing lie in the hierarchy of SPPL tasks and purposes?
- √ Library staff tend to be highly dedicated individuals who emphasize direct service contact with those using the library. They are being called on to manage increasingly difficult situations involving individuals suffering from homelessness, serious mental illness, and other problems. Priorities set during the strategic planning process may require further alterations in the use of staff time. How can staff be assisted to set appropriate limits with high-need clients, as well as successfully implement changes in how their time is used?

As these issues are addressed, the strategic planning process can be used to build institutional momentum, develop additional resource streams, and eliminate institutional barriers, facilitating better service for the entire St. Paul community.

# Project Design

## Target Population

In consultation between the primary researcher and SPPL staff, the following under-represented groups who would be primary users of St. Paul Public Library services for the purposes of this study were identified:

- Primary groups: Hmong; Somali and other East African; Latino; Russian<sup>2</sup>
- Secondary Groups: African American (native born); American Indian; youth

As the process developed, the list of secondary groups expanded, including people with disabilities, elders, youth, and low-income persons. Given limited resources, however, the decision was made to focus the study primarily on the primary and secondary groups initially identified.

## Project Philosophy

The project was designed to obtain data in a sensitive manner, respecting the cultural and communication norms of each group in the target population. In order to accomplish this, the project employed a ‘cultural broker’ from each group to act as a liaison with group members. The roles of cultural brokers, their names, and affiliations are listed under *Project Staff*, below.

## Means of Obtaining Data

A variety of information gathering mechanisms were identified and selected, consistent with project purposes and available resources:

- Focus groups, utilizing translators, for primary populations
- A focus group for library staff
- An online survey completed by a wide variety of community representatives working with the primary and secondary populations, including social service agencies, educators, and city/county staff
- An online survey completed by library staff

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<sup>2</sup> Consistent with the requirements of the project grant, identifying non-English speakers as primary populations for the purposes of this project

- An online survey completed by youth who utilize library services, such as Homework Centers
- Meetings with SPPL staff and administration

Copies of selected tools used to obtain data are included in the Appendices to this report.

## **Project Staff**

The coordination team for the project included:

- Tom Cytron-Hysom, primary researcher (SPCLC)
- Ginny Brodeen, Community Outreach Librarian (SPPL)
- Debbie Willms, Administrative Services Manager (SPPL)

A primary value of the project was to obtain data in culturally sensitive contexts, which minimized language barriers. This led to the decision to utilize ‘cultural brokers’ – members of the target populations, working for local educational and human service organizations – to assist in obtaining information. Their roles included identifying and contacting focus group members, as well as helping to coordinate focus groups; providing assistance in reviewing data collection tools and methods to ensure cultural sensitivity; identifying community representatives to participate in the online survey; and reviewing preliminary study results for accuracy. Cultural brokers included:

- Hmong – MayTong Chang (Hmong Cultural Center)
- Somali/East African – Kaltun Deriye (Lifetrack Resources)
- Latino – Alejandra Reyes (CLUES)
- Russian – Yulia Shteyn (Jewish Community Center of the Greater St. Paul Area)
- African American - Lori Roberson (Keystone Community Services)
- American Indian – Alicia Smith (American Indian Family Center)

The project utilized professional translators for non-English speaking groups to ensure optimum participation of participants in focus groups and other aspects of the project.

Editorial review and assistance was provided by Gayle Saeks.