
1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“LSTA grant funds have given us the tools to provide better, faster service. You gave us the ladder, and we climbed it.”—Library Director

1.1 Background

In January 2001, the Division of Library and Information Services selected MGT of America, Inc., to act as an independent evaluator for Florida’s federally funded Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant program. The evaluation is required by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and will be used by the Division to show the impact of funded programs. The results will also be used to improve future programs, policies and procedures.

1.2 General Assessment

This review shows that LSTA funds have been used effectively and in an appropriate manner. Our review of the Division’s strategic plan found that the Division has successfully attained all three of the plan’s primary goals. Additionally, the FloriNet and literacy programs have both accomplished their primary purposes.

The LSTA grant program has brought money and other resources to be utilized for community development and enhancement in unique and specific applications that were designed at the local level for maximum benefit. Few other federal grant programs have enjoyed the resounding success in meeting the desired outcomes as this program. Libraries, customers, patrons, and citizens in general have benefited directly or indirectly from these grants.

1.3 LSTA Program Impacts

LSTA funds have resulted in significant impacts on library operations, training, attendance, and, most important, end users. Most libraries used LSTA funds to provide greater technology access. This resulted in the expansion of access to greater amounts of information, much of which was provided in electronic formats. Among the types of information made available were resources held by other libraries, on-line databases, full text resources, and talking books. Topical information included county government information, parenting information, legal information, medical information, Spanish language materials, self-help items, and many other subjects.

In addition to new information provided to library patrons, LSTA funds were also fundamental in broadening many libraries' customer bases. Nearly all survey respondents indicated that LSTA programs had increased the number of library customers. Additionally, many respondents suggested that their customer base was changing and becoming more diverse. Previously underserved groups now making use of library facilities included tourists, winter residents, students, senior citizens, homebound individuals (via the Web), adult caretakers with preschool children, Hispanics, and individuals who were more likely to use library materials because they could now access the library on-line.

Children especially benefited from LSTA funded programs. Some libraries have used LSTA funds to make their facilities more child-centered, giving children a safe after school learning environment. As one library director put it:

A few years ago we interviewed children and staff at a local community center. There was little awareness of the library or how the community could use the library. In one instance, an eight-year-old girl received a failing grade because her mother could not bring her to the library to complete an assignment. Today, the center has a link to the library, a small collection of books for homework and

reading, but most important, those children fill the downtown library every day.

Another group that has particularly benefited from LSTA funded programs has been the poor. LSTA programs have served to offer access to information to individuals in the lower socioeconomic strata. One library director emphasized this fact by observing:

Over 70 percent of the children in our counties are eligible for free or reduced school lunches. We have a large population of migrant children. With additional staff, technology, and books provided by LSTA funding, we have enriched the lives of our families. Library circulation has increased by 25 percent since our literacy grant began.

From a customer perspective, programs funded with LSTA funds were highly successful. As a direct result of LSTA grant funds, the following have occurred:

- Florida's citizens have free access to computers, the Internet, and an increased amount of digital content.
- Libraries offer more programs for literacy for all age levels.
- Training for library staff and customers has been available to increase the technology skill levels for all that need training.
- Greater access to information has helped facilitate the growing information-based economy and provided additional resources to businesses.

LSTA funds have led to additional resource sharing and increased systemic efficiency. Partnerships with other libraries, businesses, school districts, and foundations have increased the resources available to libraries. One library director summarized this trend as follows:

LSTA-funded projects in past years have built a strong foundation for library resource sharing. This benefits the public and students by enabling access to information and materials to rural populations, inner-city populations, and all residents equally without regard to distance from a large and strong library.

In addition to resource sharing, LSTA funds have been used to leverage additional funding from secondary funding sources. A review of grant reports shows that 86 percent of libraries maintained their funding after LSTA grant funds ended, and that 60 percent of libraries used LSTA money to attract additional partners. Libraries leveraged LSTA funds to obtain additional funding, much of which came from state and local government and community businesses

In addition to leveraging other funding sources, LSTA-funded programs were frequently used as seed money for many local program experiments. In many cases, well-designed programs that fill communities' specific needs were initiated with LSTA funds and then picked up at the local level because of the benefits demonstrated to the community.

1.4 Primary Recommendations

Our overall recommendations related to the Division's LSTA strategic plan are fully discussed in Chapter 4.0. Our primary recommendations are listed below.

- We recommend that the Division shorten the current strategic plan by one year.
- We recommend that the Division provide a closer alignment of strategies, objectives, strategic directions, and goals in its next strategic plan.
- We recommend that the Division make the development of a Virtual Library a priority in its next strategic plan.
- We recommend that the Division focus its marketing efforts to build greater support in local communities.
- We recommend that LSTA money continue to fund literacy projects.
- We recommend that LSTA funds be used to improve access to electronic resources.
- We recommend that LSTA funds continue to be used as "seed money" for bold, innovative programs.

The Division has brought many tangible and intangible benefits to Florida's citizens with LSTA-funded programs, and should make every effort to ensure that LSTA funds remain available at present or higher levels. However, since the environment has changed dramatically in the past three years, the Division should survey the current environment and develop a new strategic plan that better reflects the challenges of today's environment. Many strategic directions and objectives in the existing strategic plan need to be updated and refined, and some issues that did not exist in 1997 must be addressed now. Fortunately, the Division is in a strong position to begin the next strategic planning process, and should move to have a new plan ready to put into place when the existing plan is completed.