

Case Study
El Paso Public Library (TX)
Dionne Mack, Library Director
By Alison Saffold

In a candid conversation with Dionne Mack, Library Director at the El Paso Public Library, we learn that the city of El Paso serves a community where one in three people lack internet access at home, there are specific challenges with broadband connectivity and education, and residents turn to the public library for their technology needs.

The City of El Paso is located in far west Texas and on the border with Mexico and New Mexico. It is the 22nd largest city in the United States with more than 649,000 people. Census statistics show a poverty rate as high as 25% and up to 29% not having a high school education within the region. The general lack of access to the Internet and other computer resources is compounded by a lack of transportation in the poorest sections of El Paso, making it difficult for many residents to travel to EPPL facilities and other locations that offer access to computers. This data is essential to the public library and informs the work that Dionne and her staff are doing to meet the needs of their patrons.

In 2012, the El Paso Public Library joined the Edge Initiative and assessed the technology services provided by the library and used by its citizens. The library did quite well in relation to the Edge Benchmarks, and Dionne credits that to having the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) grant. Now that the grant is over, she and her staff are working closely with her City Manager and local leaders to ensure the library maintains a high level of service for El Pasoans. And, when she completes the Edge assessment again, her goal is to be able to respond to the survey in the same way or even better. She's already working towards that goal. Read how in the following interview:

You had a unique experience because you had the Broadband Technology Opportunity Program (BTOP) grant at the time you were invited to join Edge. Tell us a little about what you hoped to gain from Edge and how the BTOP work complemented the Edge work to impact your library.

As a new director and a recent recipient of a Broadband Technology Opportunity Program grant, I was very interested in a tool that would: 1) help me benchmark El Paso against like sized locations, and 2)

receive assistance with formulating advocacy messages for stakeholders who would ultimately assist with resources to sustain the BTOP investment.

Edge was a great complement to the BTOP program because we needed to talk about sustainability and how to leverage more income and resources to the library once that grant ended. BTOP helped us provide equipment and classes for our patrons, and Edge helped us with pointing to concrete examples of what we've been able to accomplish through the grant and help our stakeholders understand why we need to continue to build on those initiatives.

Because of the questions asked by the Edge assessment, we were able to talk about things that I never considered like creating digital content for teens. After we read the Edge benchmarks as a staff, I said we can use our remaining BTOP funds to implement some of the benchmarks. So, we've added a teen creation lab here at the library, we've expanded our reach with internet radio with one of our partner sites, we have integrated AV technology in 17 computer rooms with 80" monitors that allowed our users to do video editing, and all of that came from thinking and asking the questions of ourselves as we were filling out the assessment. For me, that was the most important part - the "aha" moments of all these things I hadn't even considered and are now trying to implement. Some we can't do right now and some will take more resources and finding the funds to implement them, but Edge gave us the ideas for what we could be reaching for.

I found the assessment to be such a dynamic instrument that can aid planning, measure success, and engage staff on so many levels.

So, what would you say has been the greatest impact the Edge Initiative has had on your library?

Although we've done some really cool projects as a result of Edge, I really think the greatest impact of going through the process has been on our staff. They are delighted that our efforts to improve technology and technology access in our community are reflected in our results! It's nice to know hard-work pays off, and it was refreshing to know that despite economic challenges we are STILL making a difference in measurable ways. Sometimes our work is so unique in our communities that we don't take the time to see our work in the context of the greater library world.

Has there been any direct result from Edge in improving the services your library provides to the community?

Part of what we realized as a team was that had we not had that \$8 million grant from BTOP, we would not have been able to meet so many of the Edge benchmarks. How would we as an organization make sure that we are having the capacity and the financial and staff sustainability plan to actually be able to maintain that level of service? So, that really has been my focus over the last year. When we talked about all the things we were doing, we were doing them because we had 35 people who were BTOP committed – we had technology trainers, we had all these folks who were add-ons who were going away in 30 days. So, how would we make sure that we kept that momentum going. We want to make sure that when we take the assessment again, our answers would be the same.

So now my staff is fully trained, we've thought about the classes and services we are offering, we've hired a youth and family services coordinator and expanded on a position that we previously had which works with our children and now includes a teen component for digital creation. We are trying to make sure that not only are we using Edge for things we want to consider in the future, but how do we make sure that we continue to have the resources that we know helped us to do so well on our assessment.

Even with our declining budget, we're holding on and we're thinking about ways to complement the services that we have and partners that can help us do that. We are utilizing volunteers in any way that we can because we know that the programs and services we measured through the Edge assessment are core services for our organization - technology is no longer an option for us, it's a critical need! We must have technology to help our community become better, and it helps us understand how to best provide services for our community. And nowadays, children need to be immersed in technology from an early age to succeed as an adult. This is a core and critical aspect of how we approach our work at the public library.

What changes do patrons see in your library now that you've taken part in Edge?

Since the summer 2012 when we completed the Edge assessment, we have expanded our accessibility equipment. In seven locations, we have full accessibility stations and we did a lot to advertise those. We did posters and trained our staff to be able to train people to use them. We have upgraded all of our locations with increased digital capacities, so 17 community rooms now have whiteboards, 80" monitors, surround sound and we can now provide classroom training for people. One of the things we

learned from Edge was the importance of giving your community access to come into the library to have small group study or community meetings, and so now we've created that as a result.

In addition, for our teens, we've added MACs for media creation and cameras and we have expanded our gaming environment. We didn't just install new equipment and created the space. We actually asked our teens what they would like to see based on what we learned from Edge. We told them 'these are the realm of possibilities' because they may not know these things either, and they chose the things they wanted. That teen media creation space will become the model for all of our locations.

In order to do all of this work, you must have total support from your City Manager and local government officials. Talk about the importance of having that good relationship with your local government officials.

I've been here in El Paso for two and a half years now, and it's refreshing to work with a City Manager and leadership team that knows and understands the needs of our community. They come together to make things happen in a way that I've never experienced before coming to El Paso. Because of their enthusiasm for helping to meet community needs, we are able to get great things done in a very short window of time. Our City Manger literally said to other departments this is a priority and we're going to do this for our community. And that has always been Joyce's (Joyce Wilson is the City Manager for the City of El Paso) attitude. She breaks down barriers and road blocks to help us to do the things we need to do. I don't have to deal with the politics of things. If I have a good business plan, she finds the resources to make sure they can be matched. IT, Purchasing, Financial Services – who ever needs to come to the table to get it done, she does it. And so we would not have been successful without the support of the city manager and her leadership.

I've been able to position the library as a "can-do" organization although our funding has gone down by 13% since I've gotten here. Circulation is up, our usage is up across the board is up, and hours are up 23%. Over 45% of the population is active card holders in a community where 34% of the population is illiterate.

We also used Edge to help position the library with our leaders because we were able to share meaningful scientific metrics. The conversations and dialogue we are able to have using a professional product really helped us tell our story even more powerfully. So much of what we do is about the ideas

we bring to the table, and grabbing these ideas from Edge and talking about where we got the ideas really broadened the horizons of what's possible for libraries. We're certainly not just about books anymore. All the things that our community needs for lifelong learning and training and our ability to be a critical partner for economic development is really shaping how our stakeholders are thinking about our work. We're in a very good place to keep pushing for the things we want and need.

How has the Edge Initiative impacted your strategic planning?

El Paso Public is slated to participate in a citywide Managing For Results effort beginning in October 2013 where each department has to work with a facilitator to determine performance metrics and benchmarks for evaluation. That process starts for my department in October, and the Edge benchmarks will be our jumping point. They've asked us for documents that we wanted to share to start the process, and for me, Edge certainly is one of those documents that we are using to compare us on a national level. So much of what we gather are output metrics for other organizations like IMLS, where this is really talking about where we want to be, how do we compare, what are the things we want to do, and what are the things on this list that we need other departments to help us with. I'm planning to have the majority of our metrics be around technology and the things that we learned from Edge because as we saw we can have a broader conversation – we have such an issue with infrastructure. We don't have enough broadband, we're not keeping up. You know we can have all the equipment we want, but if we can't get online or our bandwidth is slow, we're not moving our organization ahead and that's where I'm really struggling. We've lost so much circulation this year because our system has been up and down. Without that we can't do anything. We're so dependent on technology to move our organization forward, and we think that Edge will be one of the things that will be a part of the strategic plan.

How can libraries of your similar size benefit from Edge?

There is no such thing as too much useful data! And Edge is so much more than that. The executive tools assist with the development of customized advocacy in the way that no other tool developed for the field has done.

What would you say to other libraries about the value of this Initiative?

JUST DO IT!