***ICMA Community Partnership Award: Innovation in the Sumter County Library System***

**Problem assessment, the challenge or need that prompted the local government to develop the program**

One of the fastest growing counties in the United States for over a decade, Sumter County, Florida is a community with unique challenges, needs and resources, many of which are driven by an aging population; it has the oldest median age by demographic of any county in the country. To meet the challenge, Sumter embraced innovative strategies to both provide high-level service today and plan for the future. Leaders such as County Administrator Bradley Arnold must balance the rural character of the county with the growth in serving the county’s 118,000 citizens. Sumter includes the largest portion of The Villages® development, a premier active adult community that boasts an 80+% turnout rate in recent elections.

Arnold with the support of the elected county officials invests time and resources in long-term planning, looking out five years operationally and 30 years on strategic capital projects. In the last decade, Sumter County succeeded in building public-private partnerships that improved efficiency, lowered program costs and embraced technological advancements. One such partnership is a program that has transformed the library system into a modern, accessible culturally-rich information and technology hub.

The Sumter County Board of County Commissioners took an aggressive approach to providing library services centered on high-quality professionals and technology implementation. The result is a partnership between the county and Library Systems and Services (LS&S), a library operations company with 80+ public libraries across the United States.

**Program implementation**

As Sumter County began its negotiation with LS&S on a contract, the County Commissioners and Arnold identified the top implementation priority as increasing the level of service at or below the comparable costs using in-house resources.

LS&S embraced the county’s priority and worked with the county to build the program based on a partnering mindset where both entities invest in its success for maximum impact. A public process included input from citizens even during the negotiation phase that included hearing the concerns from citizens opposed to the idea of outsourcing the library services. This communication led to a greater understanding of the concerns so modifications to the contract to address almost every concern raised. The county retained a professional librarian to administer the contract and to maintain control over policies such as materials purchases.

Another reason Sumter County chose LS&S was the company’s forward-thinking use of technology and data management, which allows for a much larger presence in the community without a larger physical footprint. The contract called for specific technology advances, metrics, expectations, and timelines for the goal of continued improvements in the delivery of service.

**Tangible results or measurable outcomes of the program**

Sumter County considers the library program an overwhelming success. A few statistics underscore how:

* The number of visitors increased 11% since 2010
* Program attendance increased 53% since 2010
* Average number of hours per week is up 6% since 2010
* Circulation increased more than 100% since 2010, much of it due to eBooks
* It costs only $5.97 each time a patron visits the library, considerably less than the $7.44 average for libraries serving the same size population
* Average of $211 operation cost per hour compared to $315 average for other libraries in the state

Technology contributes significantly to this via eBooks, eBook reader loans, digital music downloads, e-games, e-comic books, e-magazines, and e-self-publishing. Because of the expanded Internet presence, circulation rates have gone up exponentially without a dramatic increase in foot traffic that allows the library to make the most of its existing footprint with more computer access and events. In the long run, this will save money because the county won’t have to expand the brick-and-mortar library.

Another important aspect of a larger digital footprint is the ability to provide better service to underprivileged patrons. LS&S helped Sumter County reach these residents with programs for books-by-mail, braille book access, and online accessibility services.

**Lessons learned during planning, implementation, and analysis of the program.**

As Sumter and LS&S developed the new library program, they made certain to include The Villages® Friends of the Library group as a non-contractural partner. The influential Friends was skeptical of having a private company operate a public library and what the group’s role would be. The dialogue clarified how the arrangement would work and reaffirmed the importance of the Friends, and strengthened its involvement. The group has a dedicated space in two of the county’s libraries, and the group has donated over $22,000 to support county library programs this year.

Sumter County officials stress the importance of an open process that focuses on the strategic vision of the community. This vision incorporates how residents, The Villages® Friends of the Library, and opponents can help play a role in achieving the higher level of service at or below the projected in-house costs.

**How the program raises awareness of the contributions of Local Government Managers**

While the partnership with LS&S allowed outside expertise to improve the delivery of service in Sumter County, the county remains the face of the library as residents noticed the continued library service improvements. Since implementation, metrics show a higher level of patron involvement and satisfaction, and the monthly customer feedback summary reports show a continuous stream of positive comments about the improved services.