

Lewiston Public Library Services for New Mainer Population

by Joseph Houston

The Lewiston Public Library serves a population of nearly 40,000 people, many of whom are recent immigrants. Immigration has a particularly strong history in the city, with Irish and French-Canadian immigrants forming the bulk of the workforce building early infrastructure in the city. Generations of French-speaking families settled in Lewiston, Maine, joined by an influx of Somali and Portuguese-speaking immigrants beginning in the early 2000s. Designing services and resources to meet the needs of a multilingual community is an important guiding principle of the Lewiston Public Library.

The most common way in which the Lewiston Public Library serves immigrants and refugees is by supporting these populations with services that are found in all public libraries. Technology use, in terms of internet access, printing and copying hardware, and general computer use, constitutes an enormous portion of library use by immigrant populations. Many of the formal legal processes that New Mainers have to navigate require access to these resources. For example, naturalization paperwork often requires filling out online forms, copying documents, and faxing or scanning materials to accompany form submissions. As one small insight to the scale of this use, for the last three fiscal years, expected revenue for copier services at the library have been half or less than half of the actual revenue

generated by the service. Naturalization notwithstanding, free and open access to technology as provided by the library also facilitates applications for jobs, government assistance, housing, business licenses, and loans, all of which are critically important to any groups or individuals putting down roots in the community.

In addition to technology, access to physical spaces for advocacy, study, and research is in high demand. Meeting

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rooms are used often by local community groups and nonprofit agencies devoted to serving New Mainers through legal representation, financial advising, and social empowerment. Study rooms are used frequently by teens and adults doing educational courses without access to quiet spaces at home or work. Adding to this, many spaces in the library are devoted to information focused on naturalization, life in America, English language learner services, and contact information for community organizations. There are several bulletin boards and racks of brochures devoted to these topics, and the library maintains an extensive collection of

nonfiction and archival materials about the immigrant experience in Maine, covering both historical and recent migrations.

Another important service for New Mainers at the library is our language-specific resources, such as language learning software like Mango Languages, materials written and published in other languages, and programs and services focused on English language learners. The Lewiston Public Library has physical holdings in French, Somali, and Spanish. The library intentionally maintains a robust set of English language learner resources including books, audiobooks, and DVDs. Staff are also trained in effective ways to mitigate

language barriers such as by using interpretation-by-phone services for important transactions. Whenever possible, programs and surveys are promoted in multiple languages and interpreters are present for talks and presentations.

One area of service for immigrants that the library could improve is official community partnerships and cross-promotion of services with other organizations doing this kind of work. Many service organizations are understaffed and underfunded, which can lead to turnover that disrupts existing partnership work. The Lewiston Public Library has a history of strong partnership initiatives with immigrant-focused and immigrant-led nonprofits, but longevity has been a challenge for some of those relationships. One of the library's strategic long-term goals is to hire or cultivate staff who specifically focus on maintaining community partnerships to avoid stagnation and deterioration of important



Photo: Wood, Ellen. "Lewiston Public Library." DigitalMaine Repository, January 2007, https://digitalmaine.com/maine_library_images/114/

services. Aside from improving the quality of life in the city of Lewiston, the strengthening of such relationships would also increase the reach of both the library and the specific community partner organizations.

In the end, local immigrant and refugee communities most highly prize the services and resources that are already central to librarianship, which underlines the importance of robust library services throughout the state. For libraries or towns seeking to better serve immigrants, the best path forward is investing further in critical library infrastructure that also has broad appeal and usefulness to nonimmigrant users. Technology services, spaces for study and meetings, language learning resources, and community partnerships will go a long way towards making a better and more inclusive community for all.

Joseph Houston has worked in libraries for 19 years and has experience in public, private, and academic library settings. New to Maine, Houston is enjoying being close to the ocean (and fresh seafood!) for the first time in his life. In his spare time, he enjoys cooking, reading, and hiking.