

# **Free to Learn: your life, your community, your library**

## **Denver Public Library**

### **FY 10-11**

#### **Project Purpose:**

Free to Learn is a Denver Public Library outreach program designed exclusively for women who have served time in prison. The overarching goal of the program is to use library resources to improve outcomes for these women. In service of that goal, Free to Learn teaches and supports participants in three primary areas: Computer and Internet skills, Job search skills and readiness, and Library awareness and understanding. Although leaving prison is something these women want and welcome, they often stumble in their quest to create a free life for themselves, in part because of the limitations of their own backgrounds and in part because of a societal bias against people with criminal records. Many of these women have poor computer skills, low education levels, mental health and substance abuse histories, and little or no work experience. Sadly, few of them realize that the library exists as a free resource to help them cope with many of these issues. In addition to directly working with this population of women, Free to Learn also seeks to create best practices for the Denver Public Library in helping these women. By developing a more sophisticated and complete understanding of this population – and by making connections with other community organizations serving these women – Free to Learn has created and will continue to create training programs and resources for DPL employees to use when working with women who are former prisoners. Free to Learn also seeks to be a model for other libraries throughout Colorado and the nation in creating a sustainable and adaptable program for this underserved population. For example, in October 2011, Free to Learn librarians presented a session at the Colorado Association of Libraries conference discussing the program's successes and failures – and the strategies that have emerged as being the most useful ones for a library to adopt when working with these women.

#### **Project Activities:**

**One-on-ones:** Free to Learn librarians and volunteers conducted one-on-one teaching sessions with program participants, focusing on the following skills: basic and intermediate computer skills, social networking skills (for example, Facebook and Twitter), writing a resume, searching for a job online, applying for a job online, writing a cover letter, completing job applications, preparing for job interviews, explaining their felony background, using the library website (for example, to download music and eBooks), using the library for themselves, and using the library for their children. Although instructors drew from the same materials and curriculum, the one-on-one format allowed instructors to individualize their teaching and to hone in on the specific needs of each participant.

**Group computer labs:** A continuing problem for women in this population is access to computers. Although they theoretically have the same access as everyone else to DPL computers, a fear of public places combined with restrictions placed by halfway house case managers or parole officers often prevents these women from being able to come to the library. To deal with this issue, Free to Learn also included (and continues to include) a staffed computer lab every Wednesday from 10:30 to 12:30. Women can come to the lab and use the computers for whatever they need – and they can also receive individualized instruction from the staff. This lab satisfies the requirements of the halfway houses and the parole officers because it is staffed and supervised. It also alleviates the fears of the women because it is held in a classroom that is exclusively reserved for them.

**Community connections:** In creating the program, Free to Learn librarians sought out and connected with other community organizations that serve this population to learn more about these women and how best to serve them. Primary among these organizations were the Empowerment Program, a Denver nonprofit organization that provides assistance to disadvantaged women (in particular women who have been involved in the criminal justice system), and the Gathering Place, a Denver daytime drop-in center for women and children experiencing homelessness and poverty.

**Department of corrections connections:** Free to Learn librarians also developed important working relationships with the Department of Corrections – in particular with the librarian at the Denver Women’s Correctional Facility and with the DOC’s re-entry program and parole programs.

**Halfway house connections:** Librarians developed important relationships with two Denver halfway houses where women serve sentences after being released from prison – Independence House and Tooley Hall.

**Prison connections:** Librarians made several visits to the Denver Women’s Correctional Facility to educate the inmates and prison library staff about the Free to Learn program in particular and the library in general.

LSTA funding allowed the library to hire an outreach librarian that was assigned to the Free to Learn project. This funding also provided computers and peripherals for the training center used exclusively for ex-offender training.

### **Project Outputs:**

- As of September 21, 2011, Free to Learn served 40 women.
- The librarians and volunteers conducted 57 one-on-one sessions and 13 group computer labs.
- Although attendance at the labs varied, generally speaking there were eight to ten women at each lab.
- Of those women who attended one-on-one sessions, 10 completed surveys before and after the one-on-ones to assess whether their computer skills improved as a result of the instruction.
  - The women were asked to rank how they felt about various technology tasks – for example, using a computer and browsing the Internet – based on a scale of “1” to “4,” with “1” meaning they had no experience, “2” meaning they were familiar but not experienced, “3” meaning they felt comfortable but would like to know more, and “4” meaning they felt confident and did not need any additional instruction.
    - Prior to starting the sessions, none of the women said that they were confident using a computer, but after the sessions, three said they were confident.
    - Prior to starting the sessions, none of the women expressed confidence about using the Internet, but after the sessions, four said they were confident.
    - Similarly, prior to the sessions, none of the women felt confident using Word, but after the sessions, four felt confident.
- At the group computer labs, the women were asked to complete a brief survey, which included the following questions: How did you find out about Free to Learn? How many times have you come to a Free to Learn session? Why did you come today? What did you accomplish today? How much did you learn today?
  - Thirty-eight women responded to the survey, with the following results:
    - Nearly all (36) learned about Free to Learn from their case managers or halfway house, indicating that the outreach performed by Free to Learn staffers was effective. The other two learned about the program from a friend.
    - More than a third of respondents (14) had attended at least six Free to Learn sessions, and another 10 had attended four or five sessions. Returning to the program suggests that participants found it useful.
    - More than half of the respondents (21) came to the session specifically to search for a job. Women also came to use the computer (22), use the library (7), and to learn new computer skills (3).
      - Seven participants responded “other” to this question: six of these then wrote in job-seeking activities (e.g., work on cover letter), and the other reported “school applications.”
    - More than two-thirds of the session participants (26) completed a job application during the session. Participants also created resumes (4), set up email accounts (2), and obtained library cards (5).
    - On a scale of 1 to 5, all participants rated their learning at the session at least a 3, with most of them (28) rating it a 5.

- Free to Learn created a webpage on the DPL website to provide greater access to its materials for librarians, ex-offenders, and the public: [www.denverlibrary.org/free-to-learn](http://www.denverlibrary.org/free-to-learn).
- All 40 participants received a “goodie bag” (funding for books provided by LSTA and all other materials provided by matching cash funds) consisting of materials designed to assist them in their job search and daily lives. The bags contained the following items:
  - water bottle (with the DPL and/or Free to Learn logo)
  - book on writing resumes titled “The Everything Resume Book”
  - book on surviving in Colorado after leaving prison titled “Getting On After Getting Out: A Re-Entry Guide for Colorado”
  - book with advice for people searching for a job with a criminal record titled “The Ex-Offender’s Job Hunting Guide”
  - dictionary
  - personal planning calendar
  - pen
  - legal pad
  - folder with plain white paper for printing resumes and cover letters
  - folder with copies of all of the program materials (for example, handouts on how to search for a job online, how to answer the felony question, and how to obtain a copy of one’s criminal record), and
  - flash drive.

### **Project Outcomes:**

All 40 participants left the program with a resume and a personal email account. In addition, all participants were given the opportunity to obtain a library card. However, some could not actually activate their library account because of fines or lost books incurred before they entered prison.

Of the 40 women who participated, 31 could be reached for follow up to see how they were faring. Of those women:

- 24 had found jobs
- two were taking classes at Community College of Denver,
- four had been sent back to prison (two of the women who found jobs went back to prison), and
- three had not yet found jobs.
- The types of jobs the women obtained vary greatly -- from telemarketing to fast food to home health care. One woman is now working as a car salesperson, and another woman got a job in a culinary program. One woman got a job through Denver Green Jobs, and another is working at Comfort Dental. Two women got jobs housekeeping – one for a church cleaning service and another for La Quinta Inn.

In addition, Free to Learn librarians made important connections with the Department of Corrections, local halfway houses (Tooley Hall and Independence House), parole officers, and community organizations like the Empowerment Program and the Gathering Place. Not only do these connections help inform people about Free to Learn in particular, they enhance the stature of the library in general.

### **Other Results:**

The Denver Public Library sought grant money for Free to Learn because ex-offenders were coming into the library for assistance, and librarians felt that they were not providing these patrons with the best possible service. Although the outputs and outcomes described above certainly show the difference the program made in the lives of the 40 participants, just as significant is the increased understanding the library now has of this population and how to serve them.

**Diffusing shame:** Most participants described a reluctance to talk about their criminal backgrounds or to seek assistance with issues related to their criminal record because of shame and embarrassment. However, librarians

cannot effectively help ex-offenders if they do not know about these issues, especially in the context of a job search. By creating a space and curriculum specifically targeted to this population, Free to Learn diffuses much of the shame that an ex-offender might feel in seeking assistance in a library setting. As one Free to Learn participant said, "Having a felony record is hard to talk about. It's embarrassing. But I'm not embarrassed to talk to you because you are trying to help me."

**Providing supervision:** Librarians were surprised to discover that many halfway houses and parole officers would not let ex-offenders actually go to the library because of a lack of supervision in the building. By connecting with these individuals, Free to Learn was able to educate them about what the library could do for ex-offenders – and provide a supervised space for the ex-offenders to use that satisfied the halfway house/parole concerns.

**Offering group computer labs:** Although the one-on-one sessions were wonderfully helpful in educating the women and assisting them in obtaining jobs, it quickly proved to be a model that was not sustainable for a library in these tough budget times. The group computer labs, in which fewer librarians could help more individuals, proved to be a more sustainable approach. In them, people can still receive some individual attention when they need it, but they also get access to a computer on their own even when they don't need one-on-one instruction.

**Spreading the word:** Consistently throughout the program's outreach efforts, librarians heard from community agencies, individuals, and ex-offenders that they were unaware of all of the services that the library has to offer. As one Free to Learn participant said after a tour of the library, "You mean all this is free?" The library now knows that a key element of serving this population is outreach and marketing – through visits to prisons, halfway houses, and other agencies; through fliers and pamphlets left in places frequented by ex-offenders and those who work with them, and through word of mouth among the ex-offenders themselves.

### **Anecdotal Information:**

Without exception, the women who participated in Free to Learn expressed a strong appreciation for the program and an appreciation for being treated with respect and kindness. The customer service/helpfulness culture that exists in a library came as a welcome respite to these women, many of whom are used to a very different treatment in prison and on the outside.

Consider the following quotes from participants:

- "I was really afraid to be released from prison, but this program has given me hope."
- "I appreciate the patience and the overall kindness shown to me here. I felt very uncomfortable when first released."
- "I was scared to come here today. I'm not comfortable in groups of people – I feel like people can just look at me and know that I was in prison. But I feel so much better now that I am here and you are so helpful and supportive."
- "I feel like people look at me and all they see is a criminal. Every Sunday I go to church and I pray to God that someone will look at me and see a human being."
- "I really enjoyed all the information I was given. My instructor was awesome and patient and really cared about helping me."
- "I really enjoy coming here and using the computers. The people that help out are amazing. Thank you."
- "It was super fantastic!"
- "I love it here. I come faithfully every week. The ladies are awesome. Thank you."

### **Budget:**

LSTA Funding: \$16,066