

Data Equity for Main Street

Bringing Open Data Home Through Libraries in California and Washington

Category: Cross-Boundary Collaboration & Partnerships

State: Washington (in partnership with California)

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Executive Summary

Open data is a way for states to provide transparency and accountability of government, increase citizen engagement and promote economic growth. For these benefits to be realized though, citizens must have more than just access to data, they must understand how to make sense of that data. Washington and California have partnered to develop, deploy and promote a curriculum for libraries to become evangelists for open data. The project is called Data for Main Street: Bringing Open Data Home through Local Libraries, and it has launched in 26 libraries across the two states, providing anonymous but expert and detailed insights into what government data citizens most want and need.

Exemplar:

The project represents visionary and transformational use of information technology in state government. (20% of score)

Imagine that you are not part of a state CIO's office or that you are not an IT consultant, but you are an everyday citizen who can use open data to answer questions and solve problems, but you do not even know that your state has an open data portal, let alone know how to use it.

Together with a diverse team of public librarians and civic technologists, Washington and California have built a new ecosystem through which everyday citizens can find, use and give feedback on our states' open data resources – in more than two dozen rural and urban libraries.

More than 16,000 central and branch libraries dot rural, suburban and urban communities across the United States. These are more than buildings and more than places to check out a book. Often, they are inextricably bound to local civic life, offering a trusted space for digital literacy classes, community meeting spaces, job training, literacy programs, maker spaces and citizenship information and training. Of Americans 16 and over, [48 percent](#) have visited a library in the last twelve months. Today, [most](#) libraries offer digital literacy training that helps community members find and evaluate the information they discover online. In doing so, these libraries are responding to public demand: [80 percent](#) of Americans think that libraries should “definitely” “teach people, including kids and senior citizens, how to use digital tools such as computers, smartphones and apps” and roughly the same percentage believe that libraries should “should definitely” “teach patrons about protecting their privacy and security online.” Expanding the resources of libraries so that

Common questions from actual library classes

Which nursing home in my area should I send my parents to?

Which cities are dedicated to funding services that are important to me (e.g. schools, library, public transit)?

What were the voting patterns by county in the 2016 election?

What is the average price of X product/service globally/locally?

Where can I find first-time homebuyer data?

they can help patrons unlock the benefits of open data is a natural extension of the decades-long commitment by libraries to increase digital equity.

As the open data movement matures, it is critical that we do not create greater digital inequities by assuming that everyone and every organization will have the same time, skills and resources to invest in learning how to find and use this data. Because open data can have transformative impacts on communities and governments and can spawn new, profitable businesses, we must ensure everyone has the opportunity to participate in the benefits that it creates. Organizations with large budgets and individuals with advanced technical skills will know how to find and use this information to their advantage. Without a sustained effort to train those without skills in finding and using open data, we risk creating even greater information asymmetry than exists today between those organizations and individuals that are digitally included and those that are digitally excluded. Given that public librarians are the only group of information science professionals consistently embedded in urban and rural, large and small communities across the country, and that the public views libraries as trusted institutions, it makes sense to integrate open data training and knowledge in these important community institutions. By empowering librarians with the knowledge to find and use this data, and creating tools for libraries to teach everyone in their community to find and use this data, this project has built a foundation for communities in which everyone - not just a select few who are already knowledgeable and skilled - shares in the benefit and promise of open data.

Concept:

The project successfully addresses a need in state government (20%)

The states of California and Washington have partnered with civic technologists and librarians to create a curriculum for libraries and their patrons to use in making open data understandable and usable by all kinds of people in all kinds of communities – not just those who are already technically skilled or part of technology organizations.

Data offerings by government, as expected, have less impact if citizens don't know about them. Civic tech groups have made enormous strides in leading government to think differently and “default to open,” but these groups are largely made up of those who already have technical skills. This program was built to help anyone “open” open data, increasing the diversity of feedback that governments will receive and making open data more available to the general public. By making the public library a place where people can find, learn and



Figure 1 program participants

use government data for innovation, accountability and market intelligence, the Data Equity project hoped to create a direct connection between librarians – information professionals on the ground – and state and local IT shops, and also increase the number of people using and providing feedback on government open data resources.

With support from the Knight Foundation, the sponsors mobilized expertise from state IT departments, libraries, civic technology groups, education and international development to draft a curriculum. They launched a cohort of committed libraries from towns large and small that have tested, refined and delivered the curriculum in dozens of libraries across both states.

Soon the curriculum will be released as an open educational resource available to any library that wants to use, modify or offer it. City libraries offering the courses are encouraged to partner with city and state IT departments to share insights on the value of data and advise on the most effective data efforts for the future.

Significance:

The project is consequential, relevant and transformational for state government and/or constituents. (20%)

State Libraries and State CIO's are rarely in the same agency or on the same stage, but through this project we've discovered a natural partnership. Libraries are expert consumers and promoters of the information assets that IT departments deploy and support. We've found these two professional communities have very different skill sets but a shared commitment to public service, intellectual freedom, privacy, accuracy and transparency.

State governments have a responsibility to support and promote innovation and best practices across their entire territory and in each of their cities. Through this project we've been able to extend the library – IT partnership to cities, making the state a channel and facilitator for adopting innovation among cities. Without a mechanism to ensure that community members have an opportunity to find, use and give feedback on open data, that open data essentially exists in a closed loop of the data publishers and traditional stakeholders. With this program, open data publishers have the opportunity to expand their reach and also learn whether the type and format of data is useful to a broader range of community members. More importantly, community members are learning to use the critical data that state, local and federal governments are making available - answering questions that help them with important life decisions (Which assisted living communities have had violations and what are they?; Which schools have the highest 5-year graduation rates?) or to learn more about their community or state (What are voting patterns in my community? How are emergency response calls dispersed?).

This two-state partnership brings together professionals from the fields of information technology and information management to bring the assets from the data center all the way to the public. The key innovation here is that we are making sure that open data will center not just on researchers or civic tech, but also on everyday Americans.

In addition, this is truly an equal partnership between two states, both of which at the state and local levels are pursuing open data strategies in different ways. By leveraging the intellectual resources of both states, we have created a far better product than either one of us would have on our own and ensured that the project can work in any library in any state in the country.

Before the program, most open data publishers in state government had only data portal metrics like web hits for use in understanding the barriers that can limit a citizen’s understanding of open data. We knew where people went, but not what they learned. Today we have a cohort of experts on public data use and a growing body of evidence on actual barriers.

In 2016 the state of Washington’s performance management program focused on an impact measure for open data, researching known users of open data and how their work benefits others (<https://data.results.wa.gov/Goal-5-Efficient-Effective-and-Accountable-Governm/G5-3-1-OpenData-Impact-from-User-Stories/ram2-csby>). Representative results were shared with and published by the Open Data Impact Map (<http://opendataimpactmap.org/map.html>). However, resource limitations forced an end to the research after the pilot period, and the flow of insights was lost. Through this program the state has been able to re-establish a flow of trusted but anonymous user stories about the impact of open data on residents and communities. All without new state expenditures.

In California, discussions are taking place about how libraries can host state-sponsored hackathons or how individual classes can provide targeted feedback on new open datasets.

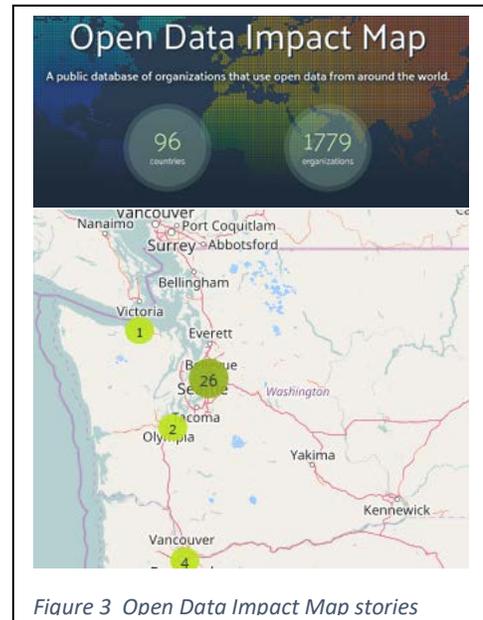


Figure 3 Open Data Impact Map stories

In the medium and longer term the states expect to see citizen engagement through data literacy become core components of many library missions in all kinds of communities, strengthening the local library’s position as the information booth of an intelligent community and an ally and partner with government open data projects.

Detail the immediate and longer term impact of the initiative. Address the financial and non-financial reasons why this project was worthy of the investment made.

The funding for this project was secured from private sources, and was provided to investigate and solve a specific civic problem: how to make open data relevant for communities across the US. The state contributions have been in-kind rather than in-cash, consisting of staff time, state agency name recognition, and reputation for creditable project execution. The return on the states’ investment of time and talent has been in outreach impressions (thousands of impressions for state data assets through libraries and conferences, plus a self-sustaining cadre of evangelists for open data at a local level. Serious city open data programs typically dedicate up to 5 FTE to outreach and evangelism; this program has built an evangelist network with zero state cash.

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Program website: <https://data-equity.org>

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