

Northwest Kansas Works to Create Fine Libraries in Struggling Rural Region

by Leslie Bell, System Director, Northwest Kansas Library System

The seven regional library systems in Kansas represent a diverse group of libraries and populations. Within the regions surrounding the larger population centers there are many small rural communities. In the Northwest Kansas Library System all the libraries are in communities of fewer than 6,000. The challenge of effectively serving multi-type and multi-sized libraries generates an interesting future.

The mission statement of the Northwest Kansas Library System is to improve library service where it exists in the participating counties and to provide library service where it does not exist. So where does that fit into the future of regional library systems? Libraries are ever-changing, as is the society they serve. In our area of Kansas the population is aging and declining. Small towns everywhere are struggling to keep jobs and services. Where do libraries fit into this mix?

With the population of the ten-county area of the Northwest System falling below 40,000, the opportunities and demands of small communities are foremost in our planning process. The concept of collaboration is fundamental to the operation of regional library systems. Individual libraries become stronger by utilizing shared resources, information and technology.

Communities look to their libraries to provide a meeting point, whether it be as a physical presence or a focal point for online library services. This is vital for small communities. What better place than the library? The regional library systems must provide leadership and support for local libraries. In visiting with librarians and boards, the most expressed need in the Northwest System is for help with new services and trends. They want information and training to provide better library service to their patrons.

The regional library systems and the Kansas State Library are emphasizing the creation of an even stronger alliance to assist all Kansas libraries. Several areas of focus have been discussed. Continuing education will increase in importance across the state. The educational opportunities will multiply with the availability of online classes, tutorials and workshops. Of increasing importance to patrons are the online databases. The selection, training and marketing of these databases are important services of regional library systems. Library materials must be made seamlessly available to all citizens of Kansas with statewide automation and delivery. It is essential for libraries to become more visible to the citizens of Kansas. The regional systems are vital in providing leadership and training for advocacy efforts locally, statewide, and nationally.

Libraries have changed dramatically over the past few years. No longer is it possible to expect people to flock to our doors to do research, check out a book, or bring children to a story hour program. Libraries must reach out with programs and materials. Regional library systems are committed to continue providing the leadership and support to help with the changes.