



**WESTERN NEW YORK  
LIBRARY RESOURCES COUNCIL**

Airport Commerce Park East  
4950 Genesee Street | Suite 170 | Cheektowaga, NY 14225-5528  
ph 716.633.0705 | fax 716.288.9400 | www.wnylrc.org

**Western New York Library Resources Council  
Civic Switchboard  
Final Project Report  
September 15th, 2019**

1. What was the challenge/problem your project addressed?

Our project was initiated to begin to examine and assess the open civic data environment in the Western New York region. What we observed is, while the region has experienced some developments in raising awareness of and addressing issues of open civic data, the efforts to date have been rather dislocated and have not really involved the library community. We observed that of the several government and non-government entities involved in creating, managing and using open civic data, that none have extended an “invitation” to libraries to participate in their work, and none have taken the lead in trying to establish a broader coalition of entities to address issues of open civic data and their potential impact in our communities. Our project goal was to try to identify and describe the open civic data environment in the region so that we could begin to develop a sense of direction for the involvement of libraries in growing awareness and use of open civic data in our communities.

2. What contextual information is important for someone to know for understanding your project and story?

The Western New York region encompasses roughly seven counties including Allegeny, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie, Genesee, Niagara and Orleans counties. Although not geographically large in area, it is very diverse in many ways. There are extremes of wealth and poverty, racial and ethnic diversity in some areas, rural and urban areas, and a complex web of municipal government entities throughout. The “Buffalo-Niagara” metro area has a poverty rate (33%) almost twice that of the poverty rate of the region overall (15.7%). The City of Buffalo – and to a similar extent the other urban areas in the region (Niagara Falls, Lockport, Jamestown, Olean) are very segregated. Statistical data from the Partnership for the Public Good report Buffalo-Niagara as the sixth most segregated metropolitan region in the nation, with 64% of people of color living in concentrated poverty, compared to 14% of white people. Low-paying jobs, disability, unaffordable housing and lack of public transit are all identified as significant factors contributing to poverty in the region.

In addition to these factors, language is another barrier. Between 2000-2010, the Buffalo-Niagara metro area experienced a 33% rise in foreign born population, and it continues to grow. The main reason for the increase in immigrants to the area comes from the number of resettled refugees. Erie County receives slightly over one third the total number of resettled refugees coming into the State of New York. Poverty, segregation, language barriers: these obstacles make it difficult for many people in our communities from gaining the literacy skills necessary to be able to improve their quality of life. These obstacles also negatively impact the ability of people in our communities from becoming active and informed citizens. Without basic literacy skills and, without access to the digital tools and resources to access data that could be quality of life changers, a great number of people in Western New York are at a distinct disadvantage. The one institution found in nearly every community where there are some resources to help overcome these obstacles is the library. Not just public libraries, but academic and school libraries are also where access to information is provided equally.

3. Briefly describe the main activities of your project (who, what, when, where...) Was the role played by your library a new one?

The first and foremost task of the project was to initiate an environmental scan of the region to identify sources of open civic data, types of data and possible gaps in coverage; identify key stakeholders in the local civic data ecosystems; help raise public awareness of and promote greater public engagement with open civic data and; develop training for librarians to become “open civic data intermediaries” for their communities.

Jamie Bono, Managing Partner for the analytics firm, rprt, LLC, was hired for the first phase of the project. He was able to develop a series of queries that produced the attached report “Municipal Website Analysis.” Through his research, we came up with some general observations about the potential open civic data ecosystem in the region: namely, that the amount of open civic data is potentially infinite – it is limitless and growing. As a definition, “open civic data” means almost any data that has value for our daily lives and that is free to access, use and reuse. In that context, we identified not just data that is currently being created or managed in electronic formats, but also any historical open civic data that is in collections across the region. For example, data collected in the nineteenth century about schools in Erie County that was recorded and preserved in paper format is a source of open civic data.

This example also relates to the second observation we made: open civic data can be obscure and hard to find. Not just because a lot of it is in historical collections or indifferent formats, but also because discovery tools and standards do not necessarily capture everything. There is no single source of compilation for all open civic data and there is a large amount of data that has never been curated or indexed in any manner. The final general observation we made is that open civic data (and any corresponding descriptive systems) is not heterogeneous. There is no single standard for indexing, describing or governing the use of open civic data, making it difficult to reuse.

Heidi Ziemer convened a small group of librarians as a next step in identifying who are the major stakeholders in the region regarding open civic data and, to discuss and begin to lay out a way to raise public awareness, promote public engagement, and enhance the role of librarians as open civic data intermediaries. The group met in April 2019 and from the discussion, a planning document was started as a way to move towards the goal of creating a training module for librarians on open civic data. In addition, Heidi was able to connect, through the Civic Switchboard network, with Jeff Lambert from the Queens Public Library, who is also developing training for library staff on open civic data. He shared his templates with us, and the plan is now to tweak them and offer a one-day or possibly day and a half training here in Spring 2020. In the meantime, Heidi will try to widen the group of people involved in the initial discussion.

4. If anything changed from your original proposal, please explain what prompted the change.  
The funding for the project had an impact to the extent that we were only able to accomplish the first steps of the overall goals with the award. Most of the funding went into the analysis and reporting of the current open civic data ecosystem in WNY. The other significant factor that changed the scope of what we accomplished came from the fact that we did not fully grasp the complexities of the situation. Our initial thoughts of the open civic data ecosystem as finite and easy to identify were incorrect! Also, the idea of launching activities to promote public awareness and engagement with open civic data were premature – that would be a step better taken after training of librarians and after trying to reach out to the key stakeholders of the region’s open civic data ecosystem.
5. What were some successes or things that went well for you in this project?  
Just having the analysis and identifying the key features (which are also key challenges!) of the open civic data ecosystem is a success for us. Making the connection with the Queens Library was also a tremendous help because it gave us the tool we needed to conduct training in our region for librarians, as well as a beginning of a statewide network!
6. What were some challenges or barriers that you faced in this work? How did you approach them?  
The biggest challenge to our project thus far has been the lack of any central leadership in the region for addressing open civic data initiatives to benefit the region. Neither municipal nor private entities have taken the lead in forming a coalition of interests and resources to address the issues shared by all. Western New York politics and government have historically been very “siloeed”, and this is just another instance. I am reluctant to have libraries “take the lead” at this point since we do not have the knowledge base to do so.
7. What impact or effect did your project have on your designated audience? Can you include specific evidence -- quotes, stories, before/after, etc.?  
The biggest impact so far has been on myself and the group convened to discuss training for librarians. This is such a “new” concept for so many in the region, and I feel as if we are behind so many other states, cities and regions in dealing with open civic

data. At the state level, there has been virtually no support for open civic data initiatives – the state portal is a “bare bones” version of open civic data put up through Socrata – with very little done to enhance the site and make it more user friendly. Our state leadership has been very vague and largely absent in planning for the 2020 Census – a significant example of the absence of state leadership in preparing its citizens for 21<sup>st</sup> century information access.

8. How have you approached getting the resources (time, funding) and institutional buy-in you need to support and sustain your project beyond this funding?

I have to say that so far, we have been very cautious in approaching any government or non-government institutions for “buy-in” on the topic of open civic data. Since most librarians in our region lack skills in locating and using open civic data, we are not able to take the lead in any regional initiatives. Our hope is that once the training takes place, we will have a core group of librarians who will be able to reach out to stakeholders in an informed way to start building networks.

9. What did you learn about your library's participation in civic data from doing this project? What could other libraries learn from you? If you started over, would you do something differently?

Our organization is not actually a library, but an “umbrella organization” for libraries and library systems. As a regional organization, we have the communication network to be able to learn what the types of libraries in the region may be doing in relation to open civic data. We can also help disseminate information about ongoing activities. If we can successfully organize the librarians in the region – despite differences in systems or types – to come together on the topic of open civic data, we might be able to serve as a model for the region’s municipal and private entities that are stakeholders in open civic data.

10. What has this project positioned you take on next?

Our focus at this point is first, to continue with the health literacy grant from NNLM and disseminate information about the outcomes with open civic data stakeholders. Our goal is to connect the importance of health information literacy with the availability of health information data in the region. Second, to finalize work on the open civic data training modules and offer that training to librarians in Spring 2020. Thirdly, we will continue to encourage people, both librarians and other people from the community, to join the small group created around the topic of open civic data. With these three activities underway, we can look at trying to go forward with the other aspects of our original project that we were not able to address to this point: namely, the launch of focus groups throughout the region to help us build awareness and support for making open civic data known and accessible and, creation of a single regional coalition around the topic of open civic data.