LibPAS State Library Case Study
Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners

Interview with Dianne Carty, Head of Data, Technology, Construction, and State Aid

The Challenge: Easy Access to Public Library Data

The Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners (MBLC) is the oldest state library agency in the country. As with other state library agencies, MBLC captures, processes and prepares data for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) as part of an agreement for the MBLC to administer certain Federal grant funding.

To gather the necessary statistics, MBLC administers the Annual Report Information Survey (ARIS) to capture staffing and collection information. Each fiscal year, public libraries are required to submit a completed ARIS in order to receive State Aid to Public Libraries and to meet the Minimum Standards of Public Library Service.

MBLC has been collecting statistics from public libraries since 1890. Up until about twenty years ago the 370 independent public libraries in Massachusetts were submitting statistics using paper forms and MBLC staff keyed in the data. About ten years ago MBLC moved to a static electronic format from a commercial vendor but found it wasn't flexible enough to respond to their needs. According to Diane Carty, Head of Data, Technology, Construction, and State Aid, MBLC couldn't get ongoing access to the data in the format they needed. "We collect a lot of data, including data about staffing and salaries. The system we'd purchased couldn't deal with that and we couldn't get the information out. Also, we had to reinvent the form every year, creating a significant amount of work for staff."

Carty said the way they were managing data was time-consuming and inefficient. MBLC was running an in-house legacy system into which they were importing data from the electronic system they'd purchased. Since some libraries were still using paper forms to submit data, MBLC staff also had to enter that information into the in-house system. One person was responsible for data entry and another for programming, resulting in a dangerous reliance on too few people to manage such a mission-critical operation.

In addition, the commercial software they were using collected only data required to meet national reporting demands and MBLC data collection is far broader than that.

The LibPAS Solution

Carty was introduced to Counting Opinions and LibPAS at a State Data Coordinators Conference and immediately saw the potential. "We could see that it would be much easier to collect data and add new data points if we needed to, without re-programming. For example, we had tried previously to collect adult and young adult holdings and circulation statistics separately, but it was too difficult. Now, with LibPAS, we offer libraries the option to track adult and YA separately and to benchmark against other libraries that do so, too."

MBLC currently captures output measures from ARIS and library financial data in LibPAS. Carty says LibPAS gives her the flexibility and access she needs to respond to data requests without having to go through a programmer to get what she needs. "We get a lot of questions like how many Massachusetts libraries have foundations, how many libraries have friends groups, or how many trustees are there throughout the state. It's invaluable for me to be able to go in and pull up this information."

Carty points to the following benefits of using LibPAS for Massachusetts public libraries as well as for MBLC:

- **Real-time data access.** LibPAS provides immediate access to data in one location. As soon as data is entered into the system it is accessible. Among other advantages, this enables state aid specialists to answer questions without delay. "With this real-time access to data we can provide much better service to our libraries."

- **Superior report creation capabilities**. LibPAS has eliminated the manual creation of reports. Libraries can download their data in Excel format to create reports locally or they can simply click on one (or more) of the report templates (currently twelve) that MBLC has developed. And if an individual library wishes, it can modify a template report(s) (or create custom reports) and save it/them as their own and come back and re-run/update at a later

time. Carty says MBLC no longer distributes print reports—they simply publish the reports online and give libraries access to the data. This makes it much easier to share data among stakeholders. "Report creation was huge for us and probably the biggest selling point for LibPAS," said Carty. "Prior to LibPAS, the person who created the system was programming all the reports we needed. Now we provide the report templates so that even our smaller libraries that are uncomfortable producing reports can get what they need just by clicking on a template."

- **Current data always available.** MBLC publishes templates with a URL link. If a library changes any data, that change is automatically reflected in the reports. This dynamic updating means data are always current and there is never a need to publish errata sheets.

- **Flexibility.** Carty says LibPAS offers libraries the opportunity to look at data they did not previously collect. For example, libraries across the state participated in Snapshot Day. On this one day they collected information in particular areas (e.g., how many reference questions did they have on immigration) and took photos. Statewide data could be cumulated for that one day to tell a compelling story about libraries. If they do the same project again they could compare year to year. Carty said the libraries did mini-surveys previously, but the data weren't gathered in one place.

- **Eliminates possibility for error.** Data verification is part of the LibPAS system. Edit checks pop up automatically when the system recognizes a potential discrepancy or anomaly. Prior to LibPAS, all of the mistakes were reported to MBLC and staff had to follow up on them. The ability for librarians to check their own work as it is entered reduces the need for manual oversight.

- **Ease of use.** During the first year MBLC let libraries decide whether to contribute data using the online form or continue to use paper forms. Now libraries are required to participate in ARIS and even the smallest libraries are eager to do so because it's so easy.

- **Benchmarking and tracking trends.** Each library has access to the state collection data which they can use locally to do peer benchmarking. In addition, MBLC data in LibPAS goes back to 2000 which allows libraries to look at themselves across time. Prior to LibPAS there was no way for individual libraries to produce their own trend reports. Now, with templates produced by MBLC, libraries can quickly produce the reports they need.

- **Return on investment.** Carty says MBLC has definitely realized a return on the investment they have made in LibPAS. "With Counting Opinions, the reporting system and the survey data collection are all in one package, unlike with our previous system. LibPAS eliminates manual data entry, freeing up staff to do other things and reducing human error. It empowers librarians to create their own reports to meet their particular needs—they can combine data and look at their own library as well as at peer institutions. The data they look at is always current."

Finally, Carty says, "For me, it is all about having data in one location, the ability to create reports and provide easy-to-use report templates for our libraries, and the flexibility to do data collection on the fly. We simply did not have these capabilities before we had LibPAS."

About Counting Opinions

Facing constant competitive and fiscal challenges, libraries and library organizations need better tools to enhance advocacy strategies, (e.g., being better able to compete for ever more scarce resources), and at the same time, increase staff productivity. Counting Opinions provides organizations with innovative, comprehensive, cost-effective ways to capture and manage their metrics (qualitative and quantitative), including open-ended customer feedback management, tracking trends, benchmarking (internal and external) and the availability of real-time, on-demand, self-managed report outcomes. For more information, visit **www.countingopinions.com/states**.

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