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Grants and Peer Groups

Every program grant awarded is unique, but in most cases the grantor simply makes the award, maybe asks for periodic updates on progress, and often requires a final report at the end of the allotted time period of the award. Not so the 2022-23 Digital Literacy and Workforce Development Awards from the PA Department of Labor and Industry. An additional essential component is building peer group interactions so that the whole is greater than just the sum of the parts. I'll tell you about that.

“Digital Literacy and Workforce Development grants provide funds to support effective programs that prepare individuals for improved job search capabilities and greater access to employment postings, to gain access to employment with family-sustaining wages, and to increase communities' infrastructures for providing foundational digital literacy skills. Acquiring these skills will prepare Pennsylvania job seekers and employees for success in the 21st Century labor market.”

There were 20 award recipients statewide for Round 2 of the project in 2022 (2022-2023 project implementation). Five were Libraries or Library collaborators. Delmont Public Library (DPL) with Greensburg Hempfield Area Library (GHAL), in collaboration, was one of the five. Other awardees represent various other initiatives such as Literacy/Education Councils, Workforce Development Boards, and Offices serving immigrants. Only two grantees are focused on K-12, which is a longer range perspective for workforce development; one of those is the DPL/GHAL collaboration, and the other is a non-profit school serving underserved high school students in Allegheny County.

Representatives of each participating institution are expected to meet virtually every month with grantor leadership. Attendance is taken at the outset. This is a time for sharing activities, successes, and resources that may be of interest to others. For example, for those outside of the Library world, who may have previously not known of Power Library, an informed and powerful on-line search tool, its values were made known to all. That now shared information came from DPL.

In turn, DPL and GHAL are getting the benefit of the practical experiences of others working with adults with immediate needs for advancing workplace skills. It is this cross-fertilization that holds so much promise for the peer group approach that the Department of PA Labor and Industry is taking.

In addition, the grantors have engaged third-party evaluators who are visiting awardee sites, gathering information from that and the monthly meetings, assimilating it, and highlighting for everyone what they find as valuable, instructive, and maybe even unique.

It is hard to overstate the value that this peer group approach portends, above and beyond the awarded grant money. Delmont Public Library and Greensburg Hempfield Area Library are early in this engagement process, and, like the other awardees, are still

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getting acclimated. But, from my perspective as a secondary participant (grant writer and budget keeper), the peer group possibilities are promising enough to want to tell you about the initiative. This is a model that almost certainly merits replication elsewhere going forward.

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