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July 17, 2021

Teen Services Advocacy

Teens are valuable members of our community. Estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau (2019) suggest that teens are roughly 12% of the St. Louis County population. Teens and young adults are a significant number of our patrons. YALSA (2014) asserts that 25% of all public library users are between the ages of 14-24. Teens are our future library patrons, so it makes sense to continue to welcome them into our libraries with programming relevant to their needs, but to also take the opportunity to make them aware of the resources that are available to them at the library, in hopes that they will continue to use the library as they grow into adults and parents. As YALSA (n.d.) has pointed out teens will also be future voters and taxpayers, so again it makes sense to educate them as to what our St. Louis County Library (SCLC) system has to offer to them and the community.

Teenagers are in this tough spot; they are no longer children, but not yet adults. They want independence and control, but still need nurturing and guidance. This age group has specific needs that are different than adults and younger children. A few of these teen-specific needs: 1) free access to computers and internet; 2) safe places to be afterschool to study and socialize; 3) workplace skills training; and 4) volunteer opportunities. In St. Louis County, the U.S. Census Bureau (2018) has found that roughly 18% of our teens live in households that do not have internet access, and almost 12% of households don't have a computer. Teens in these households need to access computers and Wi-Fi to complete homework assignments and be successful in school. The Afterschool Alliance asserts that the afterschool timeframe from 3:00 to 6:00 pm are the prime hours for teens to commit crimes or experiment with drugs and/or alcohol. Thus teenagers need teen-friendly spaces to study and socialize. YALSA (2014) has

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stated that required skills in the workforce have changed but education through schools have not necessarily kept up. Thus, teens need a place to learn computer skills, practical job skills and career planning advice. And lastly, teens have requested volunteer opportunities from the libraries in their communities. (Lee, 2014).

Libraries are in a position to address all of those issues. Teen are already strong users of public libraries. A Pew Research study of American's relationships to its public libraries published in 2017 found that teens aged 16-17 were in the highest group of public library users -- 67% had a library card and 59% had visited a public library in the past year. (Zickhur and Raine 2014). With continued funding at its current level, our SLCL system can continue to address the issues facing the teenagers of our community. The SLCL branches provide access to computers and Wi-Fi that is necessary for many of our teens to be able to complete homework assignments and be successful in school. Our library branches offer teen-only spaces and/or rooms as safe place for teens to be after school. Our SLCL branches also provide computer skills training, job-seeking skills and other workforce development training. And lastly, the SLCL branches provide volunteer opportunities for our teenagers as summer reading program helpers, shelveers, and positions on our teen advisory boards.

Teen librarian Karen Jensen has written that "Teens need communities that care about them. They need to know that they are valued and understood and supported." This librarian's quote about what teens need is supported by the *40 Developmental Assets* put forth by the Search Institute. This document lists 40 building blocks or assets that are important to the positive development of healthy, caring and responsible youth. Relevant to the provision of teen services in a public library are the following assets:

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- support from other adults,
- a caring neighborhood,
- a community that values youth,
- non-parent adult role models,
- service opportunities within the community
- places to feel safe
- programming opportunities within the community, and
- reading for pleasure.

A well-funded library program targeting teens with teen-only spaces, teen-oriented programming, and teen-specific and teen-focused staff can provide these building blocks for teens and help promote positive development of the teens in the St. Louis County community.

Paramount to making sure that SCLC is meeting the needs of our teens is that we have teen-dedicated staff members. Because our teens and young adults have different needs than our other patrons, we must have dedicated teen librarians, who are devoted to learning about teens and young adults and their needs and issues as a whole, as well as getting to know the specific needs and interests of the individual teens that visit at their individual branches.

In making the budget decisions, please be reminded of the value of the teens in our community (both now and as future adults) and their specific needs. Cuts to the teen services budget would be detrimental to teens in our St. Louis County community as it would be cutting crucial service and access to resources that teens need for positive development.

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