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## PUBLIC LIBRARIES RESPOND TO THE OPIOID CRISIS WITH THEIR COMMUNITIES: CASE STUDIES

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# Case Study: Blount County Public Library

Through a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, OCLC and the Public Library Association have conducted research into how public libraries are supporting their communities through the opioid crisis, and how libraries are partnering with organizations to meet local needs. This profile was created through interviews with eight individuals: three staff members at the Blount County Public Library, two staff members with their partners at the Blount County Recovery Court, a library board member, and two community members who participated in training at the library. Their thoughts and experiences may not be generalizable to all of the staff of the library or their partners.

*This is one of eight research-based case studies highlighting varying opioid response efforts across eight locations in the US. Additional information about the project can be found online at [oclc.org/opioid-crisis](https://oclc.org/opioid-crisis).*

## Community and Library Overview

Blount County Public Library (BCPL) has a service population size of 128,670 and operates with one central location. It has an operating budget of \$2,197,819 with 13.9 librarian staff and 29.13 other staff, totaling 43.03 personnel. The library reported approximately 390,000 visits per year.<sup>1</sup>

Blount County, Tennessee, is comprised of predominately White populations (94%). About one-quarter (23%) of its citizens hold a bachelor's degree, and 89% have at least a high school diploma.<sup>2</sup>

The median household income is \$51,172 and 13% of its citizens are living in poverty.<sup>3</sup> Blount County's unemployment rate is 3.1%,<sup>4</sup> and about 10% of the population does not have health insurance.<sup>5</sup>

The library is located in an area with a shortage of primary care and mental health care

professionals.<sup>6</sup> Blount County has an opioid prescribing rate of 80.2, which is the number of retail opioid prescriptions dispensed per 100 people. The number of general drug overdose deaths for Blount County was 121 per 100,000 people during 2015 through 2017.<sup>7</sup>



**1 LIBRARY LOCATION**



**SERVICE POPULATION, 128,670**



**UNINSURED RATE, 10%**



**OPIOID PRESCRIBING RATE, 80.2  
(per 100 people)**



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“The purpose of going to the library or health department is empowering for our people because they’re welcome there. It’s just another place in the community where they have an open welcome and that’s really what recovery is about. It’s finding your place back in the community.”

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—Community Partner Director

## Blount County Public Library’s Opioid Response

Blount County Public Library is working to address the opioid crisis in its community by partnering with the local Recovery Court to provide the Life Skills Curriculum to Recovery Court participants. Recovery Court is an alternative sentencing program offered to nonviolent offenders with a history of drug and alcohol abuse with the goal of lowering habitual criminal activity by providing treatment, monitoring, random drug screens, required employment, community service, education, and payment of fines.

The library collaborated with Recovery Court to develop the Life Skills Curriculum program, which teaches participants the skills necessary to succeed as a contributing member of the community. Participants attend a regular schedule of classes at the library, with each two-hour session combining education and counseling into a single meeting. The curriculum covers communication, finance, social health, physical health, nutrition, personal appearance, and career development. Participants typically take three to four years to complete Recovery Court, and, as a result, experience the 15-month Life Skills Curriculum program twice.

To optimize success, BCPL staff continually refine the curriculum to meet the diverse and unique needs of the participants. Participants can also schedule time with the Life Skills Curriculum coordinator for

help connecting to resources introduced in class, such as enrollment in school and employment assistance.

BCPL and Recovery Court program staff also conduct outreach to key service organizations and community stakeholders addressing recovery and addiction education to continue to build community connections and supports for participants. Recovery Court participants will often speak at schools or at local events to share their experiences with the program, increase community awareness, and break down stigma often associated with substance use disorder.

Direct, intentional marketing of the program to the public is limited because the participants come directly from Recovery Court, and not from the general public.

## Funding

The BCPL director has championed the Life Skills Curriculum program and made it a priority. As such, it is financed and maintained with library funds, and there is a designated library staff person to maintain and implement the Life Skills Curriculum. The city council and mayors provide the library with its budget, and the Friends of the Library group is also available for additional financial support if it is needed.

## Partnering for Success

Blount County Public Library’s Life Skills Curriculum program relies heavily on relationship building and community-based

supports to foster growth and reintegration of participants into the community. The decision to hold the sessions at the library was intentional—to encourage the participants to develop a sense of ownership in the library and to aid in the transition to life after Recovery Court.

BCPL's primary partner in the Life Skills Curriculum is the Recovery Court. However, each module of the curriculum presents an opportunity to engage a different community partner with expertise in that topic. For example, the health department contributes to the health modules. Some partners, like the Pellissippi State Community College admissions counselors, help participants move into higher education by pursuing two-year or technical degrees.

Partners like the American Job Center assist with job placement. There are also individual community volunteers who provide guidance on topics like banking or résumé building, while local realtors explain the differences between renting and owning and how to find housing with a felony offense.

The library has developed partnerships for this project organically. As other community organizations learn about the program and seek to engage, BCPL staff are ready to listen to how those organizations want to contribute. The library director's perspective on partnership and success is that "Every bit of it just narrows down to relationships. This has been grassroots, relationship-driven, flexible, a let's-do-this kind of project. There's been no territorialism. Everything is freely available. It's very transparent."

## Local Conditions Leading Up to the Library's Response

Several local factors and conditions led to BCPL's response to the opioid crisis with community partners, including:

- a "creative collision" between the library and Recovery Court staff



Life Skills Curriculum class being held at the library.  
*Photo courtesy of Blount County Public Library*

- alignment of Recovery Court needs with the library's services and resources
- the increasing negative impact of the opioid crisis in the community

The idea for the Life Skills Curriculum developed during a chance meeting in 2015 between the BCPL director and a staff member from Recovery Court. During the conversation that followed, the Recovery Court staff shared their need to offer soft skills courses and physical space to hold classes. The library director offered both; BCPL already provided instruction in soft skills to the public and had the facilities and resources to support the training in-house. This, in combination with a growing opioid crisis in Blount County and a desire to support the community, led to the development of the Life Skills Curriculum program.

## Reactions and Experiences of Library Staff, Board, and Community Members

Overall, the reactions and experiences of BCPL staff, the media, and the broader community have been mixed while the reactions of community partners and impacted community members are positive of BCPL's opioid response activities.

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“The need is there. The crisis is there. We always ask ourselves, ‘So what can the library do? How can we, within our mission, contribute to this? And who do we need to partner with?’ “

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—Blount County Public Library Board Member

## **LIBRARY STAFF AND BOARD**

There have been some mixed reactions from library staff and board members, particularly when the program started. This is largely based on preconceived notions about people who have been formerly incarcerated and people in recovery. To address this, library leadership has focused on transparency and relationship-building to help break down stigma. For example, BCPL has made the Life Skills Curriculum available online for free to the public and regularly shares updates internally to staff about how the partnership and work is proceeding.

A library board member shared their supportive view of how this program is an example of the library continuing to meet local needs, “We’ve moved from being a wonderful, beautiful building with nice books to being really a community center. We are very much plugged into every element of this community in mission-appropriate ways.”

## **MEDIA**

Generally, the local newspaper publishes information about the opioid crisis occurring in Blount County, but has not covered the partnership between the library and Recovery Court, and generally does not promote much of the activity at the library, even though it is often requested.

The library does pay for an insert of their newsletter into the local paper, and that represents the bulk of the media engagement. The Recovery Court itself, however, has received some media coverage about their efforts. The nature of this partnership and programmatic efforts also does not require external promotion to garner attendance because they are focused

on a specific segment of the population and is not open to public participants.

## **COMMUNITY PARTNER**

Recovery Court staff are highly supportive of the library’s Life Skills Curriculum work. They particularly appreciate the new partnerships that have resulted from working with the library and the consistency and stability the library staff and Life Skills Curriculum programming provide to Recovery Court participants. Other stakeholders in the community who are aware of the details of the program tend to respond positively. For example, interviewees shared that many government officials, including all three of the mayors (two city and one county) support the work.

## **COMMUNITY MEMBERS**

Interviewees felt that many community members are unaware of the library’s involvement in Recovery Court but are pleasantly surprised when they learn of it. Generally, those that are aware of the library’s work with the Life Skills Curriculum program have not pushed back on it. Those directly engaging with the program speak very highly of it.

One community member enrolled in Recovery Court shared, “I love it. I love that we can go to the staff with anything. To be active in this community that is very hampered with opioid addiction is huge. I think once the word really, really gets out, I think that it’ll really help the community.” However, library staff have heard some rumblings about whether taxpayer money should be spent on helping people with felony offenses. The library administration and staff have taken a strong line that library services and resources are for everyone, and everyone deserves access to their programs.





Participants in the Life Skills Curriculum learn to purchase food and cook healthy meals.  
*Photo courtesy of Blount County Public Library*

## Outcomes of the Library's Response

Many positive outcomes have occurred as a result of BCPL's Life Skills Curriculum, including:

- reduced recidivism rates
- increased awareness of the role of the library in the community
- development of new partnerships
- improved lives for Recovery Court participants

BCPL staff document the number of Life Skills Curriculum classes held and the number of attendees. They do not track additional information because of privacy concerns. Over 90 participants are engaged in the program currently, and over 50 have completed it to date. The estimated recidivism rate is just over 50% percent, a rate that is comparable or higher than other similar programming.<sup>8</sup>

Anecdotal stories indicate participants in Recovery Court have improved their lives significantly since participating, including building confidence and gaining employment. Since joining the program, participants feel more connected to the community as a result of the relationships they have built with the library and the other community organizations involved.

One community member shared their experience with the program and the value it is bringing to their life, "Being a recovering drug addict isn't always the most confident thing. So being able to utilize the tools that they gave us and the patience to use some direction in our life versus just winging everything gives you a different level of confidence to take on everyday life."

Local organizations and community members have become more aware of the impact of the opioid crisis and the library's role in addressing it. Though most of the community is still not

aware of the collaboration between the library and Recovery Court or the opioid crisis, the Recovery Court director discussed the shift she has seen in the community, “The awareness that the community has of this program and of addiction and the effects addiction has on people has exploded.”

Working on the curriculum has provided BCPL new partnership opportunities with a variety of organizations in the community who are helping to deliver aspects of the curriculum along with the library. Developing and strengthening relationships with agencies like the health department and higher education institutions enables library staff to connect with these partners to support individual participant needs and other help that may be needed in the future. Employers in the area also now contact the Recovery Court seeking potential job applicants.

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“I’ve had students who have realized what an asset a library can be in terms of employment. For example, they can take practice tests for career exams at the library. One of the students applied for a job at a local manufacturer. She needed to take a mechanical and spatial test, so we got her set up with a practice test at the library. She got the job. It was the connection for her that you can find other resources you need to make a life at the library.”

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—Blount County Public Library Frontline Staff

## Challenges, Needs, and Opportunities

Through the course of developing and implementing the Life Skills Curriculum, BCPL experienced challenges, needs, and identified opportunities for the work moving forward.

### CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

- The work can be emotionally draining at times because relationships are developed with Recovery Court participants who have difficult life experiences. Participants have also died while in the program.
- Engaging a diverse group of Recovery Court participants at different stages in life with the same curriculum is challenging.
- There is stigma present in the community against individuals with felony offenses or those struggling with substance use disorder.
- More library staff and Recovery Court counselors are needed to help prevent burnout and keep up with the demand for the program.

### OPPORTUNITIES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The following are ongoing and future needs to support efforts to best address the opioid crisis:

- **Jump in, learn along the way, and be flexible.**
- Recognize how your community might feel about the issue and **meet them where they are.**
- **Provide opportunities to engage** while also allowing for ways for community members to see the success of the program naturally.
- **Collaborate with partners**, particularly those working directly with the issues of addiction and recovery.
- **Show up** in the community in other ways outside the primary programming to demonstrate support and help understand the needs of the community.
- **See the person first**, before their issues with substance abuse or misuse; this includes asking them what they need versus telling them.
- Continually **develop relationships** with allies.

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The views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this case study do not necessarily represent those of the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

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## NOTES

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