

## Yacolt Library Express: A model for unstaffed library service

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### Introduction

An unstaffed library is much the same as a staffed one, with some key differences. First, 'unstaffed' does not mean 'never staffed.' It means that patrons can complete all the parts of their visit without staff being present, including: entering the building, locating materials, checking them out, and checking them in again. Patrons can access the internet via library computers or wifi. Patrons can connect with staff remotely via phone or online chat.

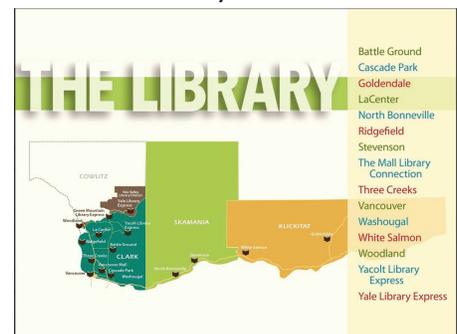


To make all these aspects of library service available and useful in a mostly self-service library, a lot of little things need to be in place. Each aspect presents its own puzzles to solve, and some things will prove more difficult than others to implement.

The Yacolt Library Express has been very successful so far, circulating as many materials each year as some of our fully staffed libraries in larger towns. While the people of Yacolt haven't given up on having a larger, fully staffed library of their own, there is one thing they can get with an unstaffed library that would be very hard for the library district to deliver in Yacolt with a fully staffed library: 68 open hours per week over seven days.

### Background

Our library district covers three counties in Southwest Washington state, with a service area of 4,200 square miles, and a population of about 475,000. About 440,000 people live in Clark County, and about 35,000 live in Skamania and Klickitat Counties. We have branches in most cities and towns, and bookmobiles serve the smaller communities in Skamania and Klickitat Counties. We used to have a bookmobile in Clark County, but it was discontinued in 2012 - which brings us to Yacolt, and the Yacolt Library Express.



The town of Yacolt is about 15 miles from the nearest full service library in Battle Ground. There are about 1,200 people within the city limits, and 3,000 more living within a few miles of Yacolt. The town has an elementary school with an enrollment of over 800 K-5 students each year. Middle school students go to another small town to the north, and high schoolers go to Battle Ground in the south. Until 2012, library service in Yacolt was limited to bookmobile service once per week, at the elementary school. There were a few regular adult patrons and community members who used the bookmobile, but most of the use was by students.

When the decision was made to stop bookmobile service in Clark County, I was asked to determine what kind of installation we could put in Yacolt that would replace bookmobile service and be useful to the residents. I had about nine months to have something operational. I went to Yacolt to talk with people there about it, and determine what we could do in its place. People were not very happy to be losing their bookmobile, even though few of them used it personally. People were worried that talk of providing service in another way would be 'just talk' and nothing would actually happen.

I started connecting with a variety of people in Yacolt, which helped me stay in touch with local concerns. Many people in this initial group went on to form a library Friends group once the facility was up and running. Working with the city, a location was identified in a city-owned building that had been vacant for a couple years and was just being used for storage.

The building was the old town hall, which had been the old fire department, which had been the old jail. The space we could use amounted to about 450 square feet in two rooms and a closet. One room was the library, the other room was staff space, and the closet was used for telecom and computer stuff. There was one bathroom on site that our patrons could use, at the end of the hall past the old jail cells.



It wasn't immediately 'move-in ready,' but it didn't take long to freshen it up. We brought in new shelving and counters, computers, and a materials display area. We installed a 'through the wall' book return for 24/7 returns, and an indoor book return for people checking in their own materials.

### **Access Control**

Initially, we had planned to have the library open and staffed two days per week, for about 12 hours, similar to another small branch in our district. The problem was that the time when staff could most easily go there was the time when many community members couldn't go there - a lot of adults leave the town during the day to work elsewhere.

I learned about an unstaffed library branch in King County Library System, in a residential community called Redmond Ridge. People scan their library barcode at the door, and it unlocks for them. Inside, there are about 500 books, mostly paperbacks, and a computer where they can check out materials. Outside there is a book return bin. I started thinking we could do the same thing in Yacolt, but with a few more services. In order for the library to be open to patrons when staff aren't around, we needed some kind of access control on the front door.

We contacted Telepen, the UK company that provided access control at Redmond Ridge. Their device can read barcodes and then unlock doors. Their software can connect with ILS software to confirm the barcode is a real patron. This was our ideal for access control, but we looked at a wide range of options. Most access control systems are designed to allow access to a small number of people, using magnet cards or biometrics. What I liked most about Telepen's system was that it wouldn't require anyone to get a new or unique card just to use the library.

During open hours, patrons scan or punch in their bar code, and the door unlocks. During closed hours, the door doesn't unlock. At the end of the night, there is nothing to force people out of the building except that the Internet computers shut down. For the most part, people don't abuse this system. There's always a few people straggling out in the last hour, but never very many. We haven't had any reports of people staying the night. Once we had an incident that could have gone wrong, but ended up just giving everyone a hearty laugh.

It was the end of the day on a Saturday, so the library shut down at 6pm; however, a group of three teenage boys stayed around in the building and didn't leave. They had the place to them-

selves. In the hallway leading to the bathroom, there are three original jail cells from when the building was a jail. These cells have barred doors, and old locks that need big skeleton-type keys to open them. One of the boys used his car key and managed to unlock one of the doors. As a joke, they shoved another boy in, shut the door, and locked it. Then they tried to unlock it again and couldn't.

They really didn't want to call anyone because they knew they'd get in a lot of trouble, but eventually one of them called 911. There is no local police or fire department in Yacolt – those services come from the county, and it can take a while for responders to arrive if there is an emergency. Instead of sending a fire truck or a police cruiser, the dispatcher just called the Yacolt public works guy at home. He lived near the library, so it was no problem to just amble across the street, use his key to open the front door, and ask the boys what was happening.

"Looks like he's locked in there," Mr. Public Works said.

"It was an accident!"

"Yeah. How'd it happen?"

"I used my car key, but now it doesn't work and he's stuck!"

"Did you try it again?"

"Yes, but it won't work!"

"Wow. That is a pickle. He might have to stay in there until morning."

The Public Works guy has a good sense of humor. Eventually he took the keys out of his pocket and opened the cell for them. According to his report, they were out the door, in their car, and driving away before he got the cell closed and locked again.



## Security

The access control device also acts as a part of our building security, in that it logs which card numbers were used to open the door, and when. This information isn't super helpful by itself, which is why we also have security cameras.

We have four security cameras on site, which can be accessed from any computer on our library servers. Staff at Battle Ground will often take a peek before heading up, just to get a sense of what it looks like inside. Sometimes there are books on the floor, but they're also looking to see if anything major has happened, like a burst pipe or something (so far that hasn't happened). If patrons call in to complain about other patrons, we can take a look with the cameras, and even take freeze frames. We can also go back up to two weeks and look through footage, if need be. The cameras are motion activated, so they only record when people are in the building. Here's a fun game called "Where's the little girl hiding?"



## Circulation

Patrons can check materials out and check them back in. This is different from our other libraries, where patrons can only use self-check to take materials out. Our ILS (Sirsi/Dynix) allows the option of self-check-in, so we thought we'd try it out here. Patrons using the self-check station can opt for checking out or checking in. The screen displays information and instructions that walk them through either process, and allows them to print a receipt at the end if they would like. When a patron checks something in, it is removed from their account, allowing them to check more materials out if they're at their limit. When our staff visit, they check everything in again to capture any holds or transit items, and also scan for damage.

Patrons putting books on hold can choose Yacolt as a pick-up location. One of the ways we were able to keep operating costs down was to not add Yacolt as a location for our courier drivers. Currently, our couriers have very full routes, and there isn't a way to add Yacolt to a route without adding at least an hour of driving – it's not on the way to or from any other location. So, all Yacolt items are delivered to the Battle Ground Library, and then staff transport the materials to Yacolt when they visit. This means that patrons of the Yacolt library get new holds delivered five days per week, on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday.



We have a floating collection in FVRL, and Yacolt is no exception. This means that any materials checked in at Yacolt will stay at Yacolt. Staff will monitor the materials they check and hold back any items that they know won't fit on the shelves, or that are older or more obscure, returning those to the Battle Ground Library at the end of the day. The collection gets read through very quickly – there is space on the shelf for up to 4,000 volumes, and the library checks out over 4,000 items per month. Staff use Collection HQ to help ensure that popular authors and titles are available.

## Book Returns

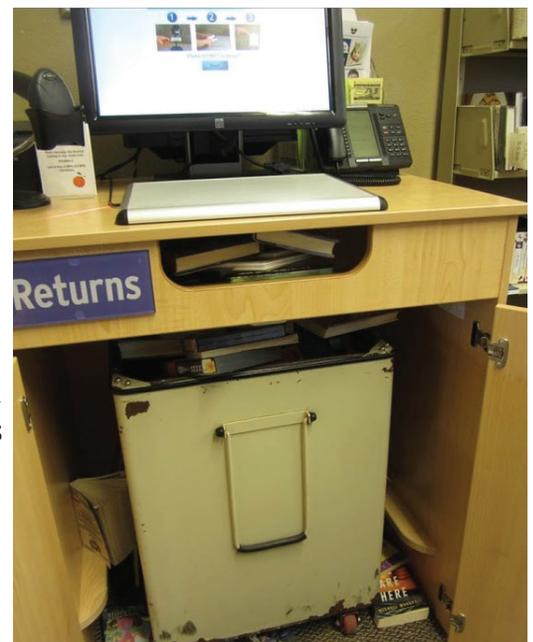
We have two book returns – one inside the library, and the other as a 'through the wall' book return from the outside of the library into the staff work room. The returns can get pretty full, even after one day. The people of Yacolt are enthusiastic library users, and are happy even to have a place close to home to return their materials. It helps that we check everything in almost every day, and that we keep the place looking good.

## Staffing

In Yacolt, the library is accessible to patrons 68 hours per week, with hours available all seven days. Staff are at the facility five days per week, for about 3 hours each day. To make staffing manageable, there are only two days where the times are 'official' posted hours. The other days are more flexible, and allow staff to adapt to changing schedules, vacations, and programs.

When staff are on site, they check materials in, shelve them, tidy up the library, put holds out for patrons, and run reports for materials to pull for other libraries. They weed the shelves if they are too full, sending overflow materials to other libraries in our district.

In general, there is one senior level assistant at Battle Ground that visits Yacolt nearly every day, with a second staff person along to help out. Instead of having two part-time people specifically assigned to



Yacolt, this method allows for a great deal more flexibility and safety. Although there is one person that goes to Yacolt more than others, everyone at the Battle Ground library is capable of visiting and operating the location. If someone is sick or on vacation, it's easy for someone else to step in and keep Yacolt going. Two people visit each day, which is great for a remote location, both for security and for getting all the work done while also helping patrons. The staff space is very well used by our staff, as there are a lot of materials to sort each day.

### **Computers and Internet**

We had to bring a T1 connection to the building to make the access control work the way it needed to in relation to our ILS, so the building has enough bandwidth for a lot more internet access than we can put in it.

There are two internet access computers available during all open hours, as well as a printer. The computers can be used for one hour per cardholder, per day. Patrons can print up to ten pages for free every day, and can now add money to their account to print more if they need to, through our library website. The building has wifi access, which some people enjoy at all hours of the day and night, parking in their cars outside or across the street. In 2014 we added a laptop bar in the foyer so patrons could have a more convenient place to use their wireless devices when the library was open.



In the staff workspace, we installed a counter. Twice per week, staff bring laptops to Yacolt, and while they're on site, patrons can use the laptops as additional means of accessing the internet, without as strict a time limit. Patrons can schedule to use the laptops for things like online testing that might take longer than the one-hour limit on our other computers.

### **Reference**

Patrons have 24/7 access to reference support via our website. During open hours, there is a phone in the library that can dial two numbers: 911 and our library's Telephone Information services, through which patrons can get help with reference or account related issues. This phone has helped solve some pretty interesting problems over the last three years. My favorite story took place only a couple months after we had opened, in late 2012.

Most things were running smoothly at that point, but there was a glitch in the self-check system that caused it to stop working, somewhat randomly. The solution was very simple, and part of it could be handled remotely, but the final step required someone onsite to turn the computer off and on again. Late one Friday afternoon, a patron called Telephone Information to say that the self-checkout wasn't working. Telephone Information contacted the IT Department. It's a two hour round trip for IT staff to get to Yacolt and back, and no one was looking forward to that trip so late on a Friday if they didn't have to make it. Plus, asking patrons to wait an hour for someone to get there seemed excessive. We checked the security cameras and saw there were about five people in the library, all of them walking around with armloads of books they wanted to check out. After a bit of brainstorming, we came up with a plan.

IT staff remotely took over the computer screen, and put up a Word document, which anyone looking at the monitor in Yacolt could see. Typing in huge letters, they wrote the message "In a few moments the phone will ring. Pick it up and dial this code: XXXX#. Our IT staff need your help to fix the self check-out machine." (To accept incoming calls, you have to have a code.)

Then we checked the security cameras, and waited until someone was standing in front of the computer. After a few tense moments, a young woman stepped up to the computer. We could see her reading the message, then talking to another patron, who came over to have a look.

With two people looking at the message, we called the phone. In the camera image we watched both ladies turn to look at the phone, then look back at the screen, then look back at the phone.

She couldn't hear us, but we were all shouting encouragement to her from forty miles away: "Pick it up! Pick it up! Okay, now dial the code! You can do it!"

"Hello?" she said.

We all cheered, and then our IT staff walked her through the process of restarting the computer. She remarked later that it made her feel like she "was on 'Mission Impossible' or something."

## **Friends**

The group of people who helped the project stay on track in Yacolt from the very beginning eventually formed a Friends group, which has remained active and enthusiastic. The Friends of the Yacolt Library Express (FOYLE) set up information booths at local events, and often have at least one of their members attend city council meetings to listen and sometimes say something positive about the library during the public comment period. They raise money for the library in traditional ways, and have used the money to buy things like benches and seating. They're working on buying a little awning to go over the front door, so people don't get wet when they're trying to use the door access device. They've gotten the city to add bollards in front of the door so people don't park right in front of it, and bike racks so people don't park their bikes inside the library.



With the help of the Friends, the entry area has been turned into a second laptop bar, available for patrons to use their own devices any time the library is accessible. We have to balance the desire to provide a great space for library users with the concern that if it's too comfortable people will camp out there.

## ***"What if things go wrong?"***

There are a lot of little things that help make the unstaffed library in Yacolt work. There are a lot of things that could go wrong, too. Every time we do a presentation about Yacolt, at least one person in the audience thinks of a new scenario where everything goes wrong. What I often tell people is that any number of things could go wrong, but so far they haven't. So far, we have no indication that people are stealing stuff from us. So far, no one has broken any windows or spray-painted graffiti. We have no reason to believe the bathroom is being used as a drug den, or that teenagers are making out in corners, or that homeless people are sleeping in the lobby. The reason for this, I believe, is that the library is well-used. There are people in the building most open hours, so it's never a viable place for illicit activity. It's fairly central in the town, so nearby residents can see what's happening there without going out of their way. The Friends are all also library users, and keep their eyes open for anything that looks strange. One of the reasons I think the library is well used is that it is taken care of nearly every day. I think people see that we care about it, we keep it tidy, we get all their materials checked in every day, we bring new materials for them almost every day. Our staff are helpful, friendly and consistent. It's mutually reinforcing, and based on a lot of trust.

## The Unstaffed Library Model

Can this model work other places? Absolutely. Just like any library, there will be some unique factors to be considered with any potential location. However, I think there are a few things to look for that would give this model the best chance of success.

**A great space:** A library facility needs a building or a place that people can access. Sometimes a city or county has buildings or parts of buildings that aren't being used. Maybe a community center has space that can be allotted to library services. A 'library express' can function in a very small amount of square footage. It could be as small as a walk-in closet, or as big as a large meeting room. High visibility is best – both for the facility and for the interior of the facility – a glass door can do wonders for patrons feeling safe walking into a building. If the building or room is near other services, look at the hours of those services and consider matching them.

**Enough services:** How many of these pieces can you fit in a little space and support with regular staff upkeep?

- Book return
- Hold Pickup
- Checkout
- Checkin
- Internet computers
- Wifi

Every piece you can add to the model increases the use of the model, and creates a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. By itself, a book return is just a book return – some people will use it, but unless that's the only thing they need to do, they'll probably wait until they're heading 'into town,' where they'll return their materials at their nearest library.

**Few barriers:** Often, we create barriers to use in the interest of security. My theory with the unstaffed library is that until you have a reason to lock it down, leave it open. If you have a space available in a room in a community center, maybe consider just leaving the door unlocked for anyone to come in and use the space. It'll be a lot cheaper than buying access control hardware and software, and it'll feel friendlier to users. One of the reasons we went with the level of access control we have in Yacolt was a concern expressed by many stakeholders that people without an interest in the library would use it for non-library activities.

**Mutual trust:** Unstaffed libraries can be a great addition to a remote community. They require mutual trust to succeed. You need to trust the community to treat the library well, and they need to trust that you'll keep it up-to-date, fresh, and ready to use. It's important to remember, and to remind your community, that unstaffed doesn't mean 'no staff.' These facilities require the regular and dedicated attention of library workers in both public service and behind the scenes.

## Conclusion

While some may view an unstaffed facility as a way to cut costs, I believe it's a viable model for purposeful expansion into low-service areas of a library district. Libraries everywhere are looking for solutions like this; while one-time money isn't exactly easy to come by, the thing that stops many library districts from opening new facilities is the ongoing operating costs of a new facility. Instead, districts are deploying things like hold pick-up lockers and book vending machines. I think installations like that can be useful, but they're generally expensive to purchase, require regular staff time to maintain, and only provide a small amount of service. In addition, they produce many barriers to use that keep patrons from taking advan-



tage of them. For similar start-up and operating costs, and with a little trust in your community, an unstaffed library like Yacolt's Library Express would provide a more traditional feeling library environment for your outlying communities, with fewer barriers to use, and a lot more versatility. After all, when that vending machine is down, no one is getting a book out of it. At Yacolt, if the computers are down folks can pick up the phone and our Telephone Information staff will check them out manually.

"Just read me the number on the back of your card, okay?"

"This long number?"

"Yes."

"Okay... 2... 3... 2... 6..."

"Great, is this Jennifer?"

"Yes it is."

"Alright, now look at the barcode on the book. It has a long number too. Just read it to me."

"The whole thing?"

"The whole thing."

"All right... 3... 3... 2..."

"You're all checked out. These books are due back in three weeks, alright? Have a great day."

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