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# **Strength in Cooperation: Two Agencies Working Together in the Inner City**

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## **Introduction**

In a time of decreasing funding from federal and state sources, community agencies and organizations are discovering that one of the most cost-effective ways to reach their targeted populations involves cooperation across agencies. In an ongoing effort to expand services to inner city youth beyond neighborhood branch libraries and the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library (IMCPL) Extension Service's two bookmobiles, IMCPL began a pilot program with the Wheeler Unit of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Indianapolis in 1993.

The Boys and Girls Clubs of America is one of the more positive secular forces in inner cities. Its purpose is to give children an alternative to gang violence and improve limited education. Children ranging in age from seven to 18 can enroll and participate in various educational and recreational programs. The Boys and Girls Clubs of Indianapolis began in 1893 and recently celebrated its 100th anniversary. There are now six units operating in the city.

## **The Problem to Be Solved**

The Wheeler Boys and Girls Club is located about 10 blocks from the IMCPL Brightwood Branch Library. Wheeler's service area is similar to that of the Brightwood Branch Library, which was the focus of the article "Striving for Success: Breaking the Barriers in an Inner City Library" (Perry).<sup>1</sup> Adjacent to the Club's property is Blackburn Terrace, a HUD apartment complex recently reported by the local news media as having both poor management and inadequate conditions, as well as being the site of a vicious gang shooting.

Beginning in the fall of 1993, a series of meetings was held between IMCPL and the Wheeler Boys and Girls Club to discuss the needs of the children and the Club's library. The old shelves at the Club were full of old donated material with copyrights dating back to the 1950's. Dark paint on the

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walls was peeling, and lighting was poor. The two agencies established a set of targets for improvement and a timeline for their implementation.

### **Details of the Project**

In the spring of 1994, IMCPL assisted in the renovation process by offering the Wheeler Library used, unprocessed library materials that would have otherwise been discarded. IMCPL also donated used shelving, posters, and bookdumps. The IMCPL Summer Reading Program and a bookmobile cite at Wheeler began in June. A weekly film series was shown in Wheeler as part of Brightwood's outreach program. Throughout the course of the year, the Brightwood Branch Library and the bookmobile formed a liaison between IMCPL and the Wheeler Club. Brightwood offers programming, supplemental collections, and other services throughout the year. The bookmobile (through IMCPL Extension Services) continues to provide a permanent rotating book collection that was established in the summer. It makes stops at Wheeler on a weekly basis during the summer as part of the Summer Reading Program. Donations of new and gently used materials continue to be made by both IMCPL Extension Services and the Brightwood Branch Library.

Wheeler's efforts to renovate their library included discarding all old books from their shelves, removing broken or inappropriate items such as games with missing pieces and old equipment, painting the entire library with the help of United Way "Day of Caring" volunteers, beginning a new system for in-house circulation using Wheeler Club memberships cards, and receiving donated materials from friends of the Wheeler Boys and Girls Club.

Staffing concerns at the Club's library are now being met 20 hours a week by a retired library worker who is paid by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). Two volunteers from the community come in for two to three hours each to read with the youths. Full-time staff are utilized for an additional five hours per week and for special programs. As a result, the library is now open more hours during the week and is available to children for homework, tutoring sessions, and research.

Wheeler now offers special programs, including "School Is Cool," a homework help session; "Young Authors," a creative writing program; "Town Meetings," opportunities for resolving conflicts and decision-making processes in a democratic setting; and movie programs throughout the year.

### **Results**

Does any of this work pay off? Do the children at the Wheeler Boys and Girls Club use the library more now than before? To answer these questions,

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Wheeler began collecting statistics at the beginning of the Summer Reading Program in June. (These statistics are collected in units of time to satisfy reporting requirements.) In three short months, more than 4,525 child/hours were logged representing 288 children signed up for service. This meant that each child spent an average of 15 hours in the library over the course of the summer. (Quite a bit of time when you consider how quick an adolescent's visit to the library can be!)

These beginning efforts are resulting in increased usage of the library at Wheeler, more children obtaining and using library cards in the IMCPL system, and better grades on schoolwork. Parents in the area are becoming aware of the improvements in the library, and it is now featured during the orientation tour for prospective Boys and Girls Club members.

### **Evaluation**

This cooperative project is now in the evaluation stage. Being considered is the expansion of this successful joint venture between IMCPL and the Boys and Girls Club to include other Boys and Girls Clubs. The Wheeler Unit is looking into additional funding sources to expand their programming.

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### **Sources**

1. Perry, Michael. "Striving for Success: Breaking the Barriers In An Inner City Library." *Indiana Libraries*. 12, no. 2 (1993) :12-13.

