Changing Direction

The story of Riverside County’s historic partnership with Library Systems & Services
A library in need of an ally

In the mid-1990s, a California tax proposition mandated a drastic increase in funding for state schools, at the expense of other local municipal services.

This shift in distribution had a negative impact on libraries throughout the state, not the least of which was Riverside County’s library system. The county’s board of supervisors found that its new funding levels could not adequately cover the community’s existing library service needs.

Without a solution, the county would have been forced to scale back library operations, lay off workers, reduce service availability and quality, or potentially close branches.
Historic public-private partnership

Riverside County leaders refused to see their populace cut off from the library system that had educated and enriched the community for 85 years. Securing this important resource for the immediate and long term future was their priority.

So in 1997, they did the unprecedented – they solicited proposals from outside organizations for operational help. But they wouldn’t accept just any solution; their RFP stipulated that an ideal partner would provide the highest level of service possible within the library’s allotted budget. A low bid in and of itself would not meet their county’s needs.

At LS&S, we knew we could bring the capabilities necessary to sustain and grow Riverside County’s libraries. Our on-staff librarians, strategists, and finance experts carefully considered the needs of the county, and submitted a proposal that showed how we could actually expand Riverside’s library offerings while lowering their operational costs.

After Riverside County had assessed all proposals and narrowed the field down to three viable options, they ultimately chose LS&S to guide the future of their libraries.

This historic decision made them the first government organization in the United States to operate a library as a public-private partnership. It was a bold choice – one that would end up not only saving their library, but fueling its growth for the next 18 years and counting.
Putting library employees first

Libraries cannot flourish without the careful guidance of their librarians, and Riverside County was no exception. One of the first steps to sustaining Riverside’s libraries was restructuring the staffing model to control long-term spending while making sure experienced employees weren’t forced out the door.

We worked closely with county leadership to create employment opportunities for every existing Riverside staff member. These workers became LS&S employees, but continued to receive the same pay, vacation time, and vacation accrual rates they enjoyed as government employees.

Almost all of Riverside’s employees chose to stay on board, many for the better part of a decade. This was a great opportunity for their career advancement, and a welcome result for residents who relied on a familiar face to greet them during library visits.

new positions for 100% of existing staff

over 50 employees stayed with LS&S for at least 10 years
Immediate results

With our experts at the helm and Riverside’s experienced staff on board, we were able to begin modernizing and streamlining the county’s library system immediately.

Within the first year of the Riverside-LS&S public-private partnership, we were able to:

- Decrease operational costs by $900,000
- Increase library operating hours by an average of 34%
- Increase material circulation by 15%
- Schedule significantly more community events
- Secure employment for 100% of existing staff

These results, while impressive, were only the first wave of changes our management would bring to this library system. Our financial, technological, and social investments in Riverside County’s libraries yielded excitement and engagement that would have seemed impossible in 1997.

no new tax requests for 18+ years

first budget surplus in 85 years
Long-term results

Since 1997, we have operated the library system without once requesting an increase to the 1.15% ad valorem property tax dedicated to the library. Even better, Riverside libraries are able to set aside an increasingly larger portion of this revenue, establishing a formidable reserve budget unprecedented by anything in Riverside history.

While we have used various strategies over the years, our desire to live up to our initial proposal and deliver uncompromising service has never wavered. If the longevity of our partnership doesn’t speak for itself, we believe the results do:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>2015</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilities</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly operating hours</td>
<td>612</td>
<td>1,488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials circulation</td>
<td>about 1.9 million</td>
<td>2.4 million + e-books</td>
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<tr>
<td>Full time staff</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full time staff w/MLS</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book budget</td>
<td>$180,000</td>
<td>$1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual visits</td>
<td>1.9 million</td>
<td>4.2 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program attendees (all)</td>
<td>20,844</td>
<td>141,049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program attendees (adult)</td>
<td>1,082</td>
<td>66,028</td>
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With LS&S handling library operations, Riverside County’s libraries have done more than expand operations. They have invested in the programming and assets necessary to become vibrant community hubs.
Introducing modern technology

LS&S continuously upgrades the library system's technological capabilities, and always looks for new ways to streamline operations and improve the user experience of patrons.

We updated and increased the number of user computer terminals throughout the library system, while simultaneously boosting database performance to make librarians' jobs easier. We invested in faster internet connections with greater bandwidth, bringing a greater diversity of media offerings and improved internet reliability to library visitors. We also ensured the system's website remained up to date, with remote catalog capabilities, unique blog content, and more.

As new technologies emerged or reached reasonable efficiency, we sought to integrate them into Riverside's functionality. By 2010, Riverside County enjoyed a system-wide RFID self-service system, which helped prevent theft while allowing customers to check out their own materials. By 2015, Wi-Fi access was available at every Riverside County library, as were lendable e-readers and associated e-book subscriptions. Even our community programming, which included topics as common as knitting, had now expanded to 3D printing, with five machines available for public use.
When we signed up to create a public-private partnership, we knew we had to become a contributing part of Riverside’s community. Over the course of our relationship, we have prioritized investment in the educational and social development of the county’s citizenry.

In the first five years, this meant increasing library access throughout the county. We helped Riverside plan and build new libraries, as well as renovate structures that were no longer serving the needs of their local residents. During this time we also increased the reach of our mobile library service, and partnered with Perris Union High School District to drastically expand the breadth of materials available for students.

LS&S supported the next stage of community engagement by instituting a library-led English as a Second Language program which rapidly enrolled thousands of adults. Simultaneously we rolled out Leer Es Triunfar (Reading Is Succeeding), a Spanish-language initiative to encourage literacy in Riverside’s large Latino population.

To this day, these programs continue to enrich residents, and they are now run with the help of advanced teletutoring and digital collection tools.
From faltering to award-winning

Library System & Services has helped Riverside County turn its library system completely around. Instead of struggling with an impossible budget, our partner-operated libraries run on a surplus with more locations, resources, technology, and visitors than ever before.

The runaway success of Riverside County libraries was hard to keep quiet. The United States Green Building Council recognized our work creating the first county-owned environmentally friendly building. Our LEED-certified Woodcrest Library was lauded for using 22,000 fewer kilowatt hours a year than comparable branches – even though it was open for longer hours.

Our outreach work with Latino residents also garnered accolades. In 2005, we were awarded the prestigious John Cotton Dana Award by the American Library Association. And in 2008, our libraries received the Raul and Estela Mora Award for leading the way in a statewide celebration of Dia de los Niños/Día de los Libros.

With the help of LS&S, Riverside County libraries also drew significant grant funding – nearly $6 million – to fuel various internal and external initiatives. By securing these important sources of additional revenue, we simultaneously expanded library capabilities and generated excitement among constituents. We are now able to offer services like an enormous collection-sharing opportunity with nine libraries in the Inland Library Network.

More than 2,400 libraries nationwide have cut back their hours; many have had to close entirely.

In stark contrast to such sad statistics, our library hours, programming, and materials here in Riverside County have increased. Additionally, our efforts have been lauded—here in California and by national organizations.”

— Gary Christmas, MLS, Chief Deputy County Executive Officer (retired), County of Riverside, Executive Office
The success experienced by Riverside County could not have been possible without the passion, trust, and vision enabled by its partnership with Library Systems & Services.

Today, we remain committed to that partnership. We’re still expanding capabilities and opportunities for Riverside’s libraries and, in turn, for the residents we serve every day.