

Together We're Stronger

Helping Missoula's Families All Under One Roof

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Together we're stronger. As a community hub, libraries are the place to go for information and entertainment. So joining forces with other community partners allows libraries to reach a larger and more diverse population.

Knowing this, the Missoula (MT) Public Library (MPL) embraced the opportunity to collaborate with the Missoula Food Bank and the University of Montana (UM) spectrUM Discovery Area, with its parent organization at the university, the UM Broader Impacts Group, to create a dynamic learning center, EmPower Place, at the Missoula Food Bank's expanded facility.

Missoula is considered one of the urban centers of Montana. It is situated at the confluence of two rivers and at the hub of five valleys, with nearly seventy thousand people living in the city limits and an additional forty-three thousand residents in our service area.

spectrUM Discovery Area received \$391,000 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to be used over three years to create and sustain EmPower Place with the help of MPL and the Missoula Food Bank. The center is designed to enhance the quality of life for Missoula's children, with science exhibits, books for children and young adults, career and higher education role models, and literacy and STEM programming. The aim of the center is to serve children who are hungry not only for food but also for learning experiences provided by caring role models, a library of favorite books, interactive science exhibits, and, for some, simply the chance to be a child for a few hours and to forget the troubles of the day.

This exciting "all under one roof" partnership model allows the three partner organizations to collaborate and contribute



Grand opening of EmPower Place in Missoula, Montana.

their unique strengths in the creation of this shared space. Throughout the development process, partners received guidance from Glenn Paige, the evaluator on our IMLS funding. He helped us define roles and develop the communication processes that enabled the organizations to work well together to realize the project's goals.

After many months of hard work, the EmPower Place's grand opening was held in July 2017, and we had more than two hundred visitors. Local neighborhood members and food bank clients were thrilled to have a fun and inviting space to bring their families.

EmPower Place is open during normal food bank hours—weekdays from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. and late afternoons/early evenings on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday. To maximize the impact of the project and reduce the stigma that some clients and community members perceive in using the food bank, EmPower Place serves not only food bank clients but also children and families of all socioeconomic backgrounds.

spectrUM provides science activities and exhibits enriched by interaction with visiting career and higher education role models through We Are Montana in the Classroom, a partner



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Missoula Public Library's reading nook.

organization alongside spectrUM in UM's Broader Impacts Group. MPL provides a book selection for the space's own private library, a twice a week Books and Babies program, and twice-monthly visits from its Web on Wheels Bus. The Missoula Food Bank hired an educator to help its volunteer coordinator recruit and train retired and future K-12 educators to guide activities, create a hangout for kids to do homework, and promote the Family Learning Area to clients and the community. Through the food bank's existing federal funding, free healthy snacks are always available at EmPower Place. During the summer, the Missoula Food Bank offers free lunches Monday through Friday, and EmPower Packs (backpacks filled with healthy meals and snacks) are offered for the weekend. All meals are also funded through the existing federal funding received by the food bank.

As of January 2018, we offered the EmPower Place After School Drop-In Clubhouse from 2:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. Both school busses and public transit have drop-off points close to EmPower Place. Offering children a place to go and have a healthy snack and play with others or to do homework instead of going home to an empty house was a priority.

The collaboration continues to flourish as we learn and grow with the experience of making this shared space a community hub. When EmPower Place opened, we offered storytime two mornings a week. At first the attendance was low, but as the word spread, we saw attendance rise. We also saw that the ages of the children coming in for the program were more suited to our Books and Babies program, so we switched gears accordingly. Now we offer the Tiny Tales program two times per week with an average attendance of fifteen children and caregivers for each program. spectrUM Discovery Area also made programming changes based on attendance. Initially, they held science activities on Tuesdays and Saturdays but put the Saturday program on hold until the overall attendance in all of EmPower Place programming increased.



EmPower Place: ball wall and gathering space.

Not only is EmPower Place an example of successful cooperation and implementation of community partnerships, it also serves as an incubator for MPL's shared vision to build a new library in partnership with spectrUM Discovery Area and Families First Children's Museum Missoula. MPL has been functioning in a smaller than adequate space for many years, with plans for a new library underway for about ten years. In November 2016 a bond issue was passed to fund our new library building. Voters were very excited about our plans to have a children's floor that housed the library, spectrUM Discovery Area, and Families First Children's Museum Missoula. Both of these organizations will offer free programming and services for a one-stop, family-friendly cultural and learning experience. In addition to the bond, MPL agreed to raise \$6 million with a capital campaign that is still ongoing. Each of the partner organizations will contribute funding as well. We broke ground on our new building in spring 2018, with a projected opening in early 2020.

The lessons we have learned from EmPower Place will serve us well as we move forward in creating our new community hub. We hope that with multiple organizations under one roof, Missoula will have a larger, more vibrant, and more encompassing community hub, and families, who may have had time and financial restraints that precluded them from visiting the partner organizations, will enjoy services from all of the partners free of charge. In addition, we believe our partner organizations' strengths will enhance and provide depth to the library's programming.

With the success of EmPower Place, MPL and its partners have every confidence that this collaboration will continue to affect change in our community and provide the best environment for lifelong learning for all ages and from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

It's time to ask yourself which organizations are currently making an impact on your community's quality of life. Is there a way your library can collaborate with those organizations to enhance your efforts? 🐾