



Library Gives Kids Quality Connections to Parents in Jail

Brooklyn Public Library:

Size: More than 2.5 million residents

Industry: Public Sector

Location:

United States

Brooklyn, NY

Solutions

- Installed mobile screens in both jail facilities and main library branch
- Updated system wiring and network to support new video-conferencing solution
- Replenished learning materials in both library and correctional facilities

For More Information

To find out more about Cisco TelePresence, go to: <https://www.cisco.com/go/telepresence>

Challenge

Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) offers thousands of public programs, millions of books, and more than 1100 free Internet-accessible computers to the borough's 2.5 million residents. It is the fifth largest public library network in the United States. This independent nonprofit organization is funded by the city and state government, the federal government, and private donors.

BPL has a strong connection to the local community. For several years, it has hosted successful adult literacy programs for inmates at the Rikers Island and borough-based Department of Corrections jail facilities. As a result, the library has developed relationships with many of the inmates and has gotten to know their families. BPL has also come to realize that, for the young children of incarcerated adults, visiting a correctional facility can be an intimidating and sometimes difficult experience.

While most children grow up visiting the library with their parents, children of incarcerated adults don't have that same privilege. Often, children with a parent in prison don't have a stable family life, and are often stigmatized by their peers. These problems, and the lack of parental involvement in their lives, can

be detrimental to a child's education and emotional well-being—especially for those who are too young to understand.

In September 2013, BPL began brainstorming ideas for a technology solution to help children visit with their incarcerated parents in a comfortable, educational, and welcoming environment. To serve this purpose, the library developed a video conferencing program, called TeleStory, that connects children at the library to their incarcerated parents at the correctional facility. With BPL's program, children with parents in jail have the opportunity to interact with their mothers or fathers on both an emotional and educational level. This helps them develop like any other child.

Solution

BPL originally planned to launch its TeleStory pilot program during the holiday season of 2014. However, with support from Cisco and a good partnership with the Department of Corrections, the installment process was expedited, and the actual launch of the project took place after just nine months, in May of 2014.

The goal of BPL's program is to use technology to bring families together, hassle-

*With Cisco,
Brooklyn Public Library:*



Helped over 200 families connect to their incarcerated family member



Is working to reduce the percentage of recidivism in New York City jails



Is increasing childhood literacy rates and fostering healthy interaction between separated families

free, so that they can interact with each other in a playful and communal setting. If an inmate with young kids expresses interest in using TeleStory, the BPL staff reaches out and conducts interviews with the family. Once approved, reading sessions are scheduled in the late afternoon, when children are out of school. BPL designates a private room filled with books and toys for the family and supplements the jail with the same set of materials. Once connected using Cisco TelePresence® technology, parent and child can read together simultaneously. Families are able to freely interact and enjoy each other's company, sometimes for over an hour at a time, almost as if they were physically together.

"The TeleStory program creates a space with technology for reading books among family members. Simply put, it provides the opportunity for a kid to read a book with his dad," says Nick Higgins, director of Outreach Services at BPL.

Traditionally, when video conferencing technology is used in correctional facilities, it is in the courtroom for arraignments or in the jail cell for attorney visits. BPL's idea of using a video solution to connect children face-to-face with their incarcerated parents helps ensure that even children with a mother or father in jail can read and sing songs with them. Although this technology has been around for years, BPL is using a video-conferencing solution in an innovative and meaningful way to connect families and promote childhood literacy.

Other jail facilities across the United States have also begun to embrace video visitation

technology; some even eliminating in-person visitation altogether. However, many of the facilities that are leading this movement are also charging families to use the platform, which can be as expensive as \$20 for 20 minutes of time. For those in low-income areas, this cost makes it difficult to stay in touch with their loved ones. BPL created TeleStory as a free program, giving families of all income levels access to books and the opportunity to connect with their incarcerated family members.

"In any city across the country, there are populations that are segregated from the broader community," says Higgins. "People find themselves increasingly marginalized and placed in facilities where family visitation is difficult to maintain. If we can do something to help bridge these relationships and family connections in a very public, welcoming way, I think that we're doing what the public expects from their libraries. If a core value of a public library is to be as accessible and inclusive as possible, then leveraging technology to facilitate family connections for people who are incarcerated is right in line with our mission."

Results

With TeleStory, inmates who may have not been able to see their children now have the opportunity to read, sing, and grow with them. The frequent face-to-face contact with families motivates inmates to serve their time and be reunited with their loved ones as soon as possible. As a result, the inmates who participate are typically better behaved than other inmates.

Products and Services

- Video
- Software Licenses
- Cisco TelePresence SX10 Quick Set

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Perhaps the biggest beneficiaries of BPL’s program are not the inmates, but the children of incarcerated adults. With TeleStory, these children now have the ability to interact and learn with their parents on both an emotional and educational level.

“Just the waiting room [at Rikers] in itself for a child is ridiculous,” says Luz Maldonado, who brings her two children for TeleStory to visit with her incarcerated husband, Ray. “When you’re in the library, you have books, you have toys, you have markers, you have crayons. You can’t take that at Rikers.”

With TeleStory, Luz’s two children are visiting with their father about once a week, and are learning and having fun while doing so.

As a result of frequent visitation – including TeleStory’s virtual visitation – inmates are typically better behaved in jail. Based on a 2011 study conducted at the Minnesota Department of Corrections, frequent visitation significantly decreases the risk of recidivism, or inmates going back to jail once they have served their time. Specifically, each visit in prison reduces the risk of reconviction by 0.1 percent, and one visit each month decreases the risk of recidivism by 0.9 percent. BPL’s use of video technology is inspiring inmates to serve their time and return home to their families as soon as possible. In the meantime, the program is encouraging a productive environment that is keeping inmates and officers safer.

Reuniting families to help reduce recidivism also results in significant cost savings for the jails. According to a study conducted by the New York City Independent Budget Office in 2013, the average annual cost to feed,

house, and guard an inmate is \$167,731 per year. Since TeleStory makes it easier for families to connect more frequently, one family member visit through TeleStory over the course of a person’s incarceration could potentially save jails anywhere from \$150,000 to \$200,000 per year.

TeleStory has so far connected over 200 families in Brooklyn, with kids ranging in age from infants to elementary schoolchildren. The program has received a significant amount of positive feedback thus far, and both families and inmates have expressed their appreciation for BPL’s video technology solution.

“Once that monitor is flipped on, it’s amazing how invisible the technology becomes,” says Nick Higgins, the director of outreach services for BPL. “The moment that dad pops up on the screen—and I see this in almost every visit—once the families connect, it’s like everything fades away and it’s literally a conversation among family members. And it’s about the child, and about reading books together and singing songs.”

Next Steps

Although currently only in New York City, there is nationwide potential for BPL’s TeleStory program to give all children the opportunity to spend quality time with their incarcerated parents. BPL will continue to expand its program in the near future with help from the Knight Foundation, as it was selected as one of 14 winners of the Knight News Challenge on Libraries. The library will receive nearly \$400,000 to support its growth to 12 additional branches across the city, and one additional satellite location in Albany.