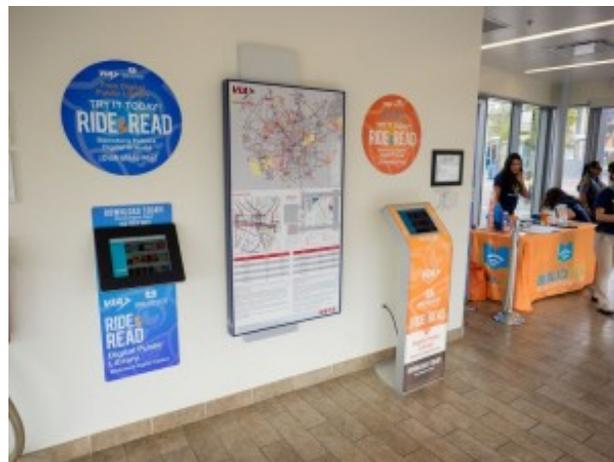


BiblioTech Building Ebook Access by Bus

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BiblioTech, the digital library of Bexar County, TX, recently added VIA Metropolitan Transit, which provides 39.6 million bus trips annually throughout the county, to a growing list of local partners that help patrons discover and access library ebooks and other content outside of the new system's two branches. The "Ride & Read" program was launched in September with a new kiosk at VIA's Centro Plaza hub in San Antonio, and five additional ADA-compliant, wall-mounted screens were installed at hubs throughout the VIA transit network shortly afterward. Using these kiosks, Bexar County residents can register as BiblioTech patrons and then immediately use VIA's free 4G LTE Wi-Fi—which was expanded to the agency's entire fleet last fall—to browse and download ebooks, movies, music, and periodicals.



"We created BiblioTech in 2013 with the mission of bridging literacy and technology gaps in San Antonio through our physical branches and online through our digital collections," Bexar County Judge and BiblioTech founder Nelson Wolff said in a press announcement. "Since then, we've taken the digital library to public housing communities, the courthouse complex downtown, public school libraries, three Joint Base San Antonio libraries, wounded warriors recovering at Fort Sam Houston, and to military service members serving around the world."

BiblioTech administrator Laura Cole discussed how BiblioTech works to establish these partnerships and how they've become a key to success for the library, which does not circulate print books, DVDs, or other physical media.

"You can't expect [a digital library] to function the same way as a traditional library," Cole told *LJ*. "In other words, you can't just have it available and expect people to come to it. If you do, you're really missing the...potential of digital content."

BiblioTech's small satellite branch at the courthouse, for example, proved to be a natural fit, both for raising awareness about the library and entertaining the captive audience of locals called for jury selection.

"In the jury room, we probably see 400 unique visitors per day," she said. "Some of them don't stay very long—they get dismissed within an hour or so. But others have to hang around all day, and they may not be prepared for that.... So the service is very popular."

Similarly, the new Ride & Read partnership attracts new patrons during their commutes. Paired with VIA's free Wi-Fi, "it couldn't be a more perfect marriage. They contacted us about putting some kind of a presence in their transit stations, and as we talked, we said, 'We can make this so much bigger than that.' It was about a year or so in process, but it came together quickly, and with the full support of their board and the [Bexar County] Commissioner's Court."



Partnerships have helped build the library's patron base in indirect ways as well, Cole said. When BiblioTech's second location opened at the Gardens of San Juan public housing complex in July 2015, library staff had two concerns. First, would the general public recognize that the branch was open to everyone, not just residents of the 600-unit complex? And second, unlike the library's original 4,800 square foot branch, the 2,100 square foot space did not have a community room.

"I thought, we're sacrificing a great deal," without a space to host classes, Cole said. "I quickly realized that it may have been an asset, because what it forced us to do was partner and engage with the other organizations around us, to host our events in their spaces," including local churches and arts organizations. "What that means, then, is that the community becomes a lot more cohesive. It's been very exciting to see that happen. We have seen a tremendous uptick in the past eight months or so, of daily use by the community and the general public. I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that we were forced to get out of the library.

"All you really have to do is look around.... I think libraries have a sense sometimes that they have to do [community literacy] by themselves—that we're the only ones who want to have a well-read community. And that's absolutely not true. There's so many other groups that have that common interest. We really need to take advantage of one another."

As examples, Cole cited BiblioTech's partnership with HEB, a major regional supermarket chain, and the company's [Read 3](#) early literacy program. Toyota manufacturing has partnered with the library to provide GED testing. And the library is working with AT&T locally on an anti-cyberbullying effort.

"Some of these aren't what you would necessarily think of as likely partners, but doesn't everybody who wants to see economic development have an interest in having a well-read community?"

Partly with the help of partnerships like these, BiblioTech has registered almost 100,000 patrons throughout Bexar County in just three years. Now, with Ride & Read available on VIA's 90 routes extending to every corner of the community, the library appears poised to continue expanding its reach.



"The beauty of Ride & Read concept is that it has totally transformed the idea of the bookmobile," Cole said. "You don't have to be in a specific location in order for the books to come to you. You can go about your daily life, and then travel with the books."