Kill a Watt Energy Meters Program: A VALLA Initiative

by Judith Rodriguez

Cohorts of the first Virginia Library Leadership Academy held in April 2010 were challenged to develop a project that would enhance their leadership skills. I decided to establish a program that would provide a new service to library patrons that, while reflecting Prince William Public Library System's desire to provide timely services to our public, would support their interest in saving money and resources. The "Kill a Watt Energy Usage Meters" project was born.

Providing meters to our patrons in 2010 would be both serendipitous and timely, as concern about depleting the earth's resources and the cost of using resources greatly interested many people. This service is not unique; other libraries in the country already provide energy usage meters for their patrons. How wonderful it would be if our system could provide tools to patrons so that they, too, could make educated decisions about how to leave a smaller carbon footprint upon the planet. Energy usage meters are devices that measure the energy usage of a wide variety of household appliances. The Kill a Watt meter was designed to measure the electricity consumption of stereos, TVs, air conditioners, fans, toaster ovens, microwave ovens, refrigerators, computers, space heaters, electronic games, and other machines that consume electricity. Library patrons would use this information to conserve household energy and save money on their electric bills.

Development of the project began in June 2010. The program was publicly launched on December 1 of the same year. The concept of the "Kill a Watt Energy Usage Meters Program" generated excitement among the staff, who collaborated wholeheartedly in the project.

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Here was an idea that came from me, a part-time librarian II; was approved by the director; and then was supported enthusiastically by library staff. As project leader (and VALLA student), I pledged to manage, coordinate, and oversee the program for one full year.

The idea for providing meters came from colleagues. They put me in touch with other libraries that have this service. Once the idea was developed, it was reviewed by my branch administrator and then presented to our library director. With his approval, the resources of our system's library divisions could be employed. The involvement of many of our divisions would be needed. First stop: the library's public relations manager. She had lots of ideas and knowledge and shared with me how to seek monetary support from one of the local electric utilities, how to publicize the project, what my next steps should be, and what I could leave in her hands. The project was off and running, however, before either local power company made a commitment, because the library was determined to provide energy meters as a new service to patrons.

I bought one sample meter and took it around to the departments that would be involved with this new service. The materials management staff was excited by the challenge of the new Kill a Watt materials to box, catalog, process, and route to the full-service branches. One of our circulation managers helped me draft procedures for checkout: we brainstormed about the length of checkout, fines, which branches should carry the meters, and how to move them amongst the different branches of our regional library system. Computer and web services staff were recruited to add the Kill a Watt kits to the library catalog and website. I continued to work with the Marketing and Development Department

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as they designed and distributed flyers and sent out press releases to the local media. On November 24, 2010, I sent out an email to all staff to bring awareness of the project and encourage them to talk it up to our patrons:

> Subject: Kill a Watt Energy Meter Program
>
> I am pleased to announce a new service for our library patrons. On December 1, 2010, PWPLS will release Kill a Watt energy meters for a checkout period of three weeks. Energy meters are devices that measure the amount of electricity an appliance uses. The Kill a Watt meter measures the electric consumption of stereos, TVs, air conditioners, fans, toaster ovens, microwaves, refrigerators, computers, heaters, games, washing machines, and more. If you've been thinking about replacing your dryer, for example, you can measure how much electricity your existing machine uses and compare it to the new models. If you've been having an ongoing argument with a roommate about whether or not to unplug the coffee pot when it is not in use, you can use data from the Kill a Watt meter to reinforce your point. The Kill a Watt meters have all sorts of useful applications!
>
> The meters will be available through our full-service branches. Holds may be placed. They will go out for a three-week period and can be renewed. They will be packaged in a case, and shouldn't be returned in a bookdrop. The meters will come with printed instructions that will be included in the case. There are no batteries to replace. Late-returning meters will have fines, just like other materials in our collection.
>
> I hope you will give them a close look when they come through your branch and try them at home.

The first dozen meters arrived and were cataloged, processed, and packaged. Public services staff circulated the meters and promoted them directly to patrons after being briefed about the project, which in turn generated more interest and increased circulation. At this point, nearly every department of the library was involved: my initiative truly became a team project, and taught me how to work with other departments in my library system.

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The results were immediate! The meters began to be reserved before their official release date of December 1, 2010, thanks to advance publicity. By the end of the first month, all meters were checked out and more than forty patrons were waiting for an opportunity to use them. The popularity of this program was so encouraging that the Prince William Public Library System bought an additional twelve meters for the program.

The program was underwritten by Dominion Virginia Power, a local utility company that had an interest in educating our shared customer base about energy usage and cost. They provided funds to purchase the original twelve meters and containers for them; and, because patron interest was so strong, they funded an additional twelve meters in order to satisfy all the requests.

The energy meters cost approximately $20 each; with the purchase of twenty-four, $480 was spent. The containers for each meter were less than a dollar apiece, yet there were additional costs in processing the kits to prepare them for circulation. These included labels, staff processing and cataloging time, and the distribution of the kits through the courier system to the branches. Staff time was needed to prepare the project parameters, research the type of meter to be purchased, prepare press releases and information for the webpage, produce flyers, and manage various aspects of the project through meetings and emails. In all, there were about 250 hours of staff time invested in this project. For Prince William Public Library System, the costs were staff time only; Dominion Virginia Power paid for the energy usage meters and the boxes we put them in for circulation purposes. Measurable results included the number of patrons reserving the energy meter kits and the number of times each kit circulated. Cost savings for library patrons became tangible as amounts of energy use could be measured and calculated for individual appliances. Consider the example of a personal computer. Was it turned on all day? Was it turned on only when needed and then turned off when not in use? Was the sleep mode utilized? What was the cost difference between the three modes? One patron who habitually left his computer on used the data obtained from one of our meters to determine that it cost him $145/year to run his personal computer, and he cheerfully reported this information to me.

The Office of the County Executive for Prince William County took an interest in this initiative

and promoted the meters on the county's local cable television station. The "Kill a Watt Energy Usage Meters" project paralleled county initiatives to become involved in the careful use of resources, educate enterprises to build green, and increase recycling. The meters would be an excellent tool to help citizens embrace those initiatives and could also be used by students, scouts, and teachers to demonstrate the actual amount of energy used for appliances. Data obtained by any of these groups would be useful in comparing and contrasting ways to more efficiently use electricity. My small VALLA project had now been noticed at the highest level of county government.

It was exciting to initiate the "Kill a Watt Energy Meters Program" and witness the collaboration it generated among the staff. The success of the program may spark other employees to channel their ideas and creativity into new innovations for the Prince William Public Library System, which in turn will benefit the county's citizens. It was wonderful to be able to provide patrons with a tool to be used to gather needed and beneficial information. We hoped that, one household at a time, people would become more conscientious of the energy usage and turn off or unplug any appliances that were not in use. I would have done none of this had I not attended the VALLA workshop and been challenged to lead and learn. That the project was so successful was due to the support of our library community (local, VALLA, and other libraries in the country) and the timeliness of the subject matter. But even if the project had not met with success, I still would have led, learned, and met my VALLA goal. This little idea—buying twelve energy usage meters for the public to borrow—became seamlessly absorbed into our library's collection. And it brought our library system welcome attention in the community. It could happen to you!

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*—**Editor's note:** Following the composition of this article, Prince William County received a 2011 NACo (National Association of Counties) Achievement Award for the Kill a Watt program.* VL