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Brooklyn Public Library's TeleStory Video Visitation Program: A Process Evaluation

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Executive summary

A once unlikely use of the library, but one that is gaining traction, is that of a service provider to people affected by the criminal justice system and their families. The Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) has taken on a number of functions adjacent to the formal criminal justice system, including reentry services and programs for the families of incarcerated people. One of those programs is TeleStory, an initiative by which families can use video equipment in the library to virtually visit a loved one who is incarcerated in a New York City Department of Correction (DOC) facility. These visits provide a helpful supplement to in-person visitation, and they afford community members who are unable to travel to a correctional facility the opportunity to meet with loved ones nonetheless.¹ This report details a comprehensive process evaluation of TeleStory undertaken by Vera researchers at the request of BPL staff.

The evaluation draws upon three primary sources of data: (1) a review of program documents, (2) observations of TeleStory visitation in branch facilities, and (3) interviews with program stakeholders. Stakeholder interviews were designed to include a variety of people associated with the program: BPL leadership, Outreach Services staff, branch library staff, and visitation users (family members and friends of those who are incarcerated). Researchers completed a total of 29 interviews for the study: 12 interviews with BPL staff and 17 interviews with visitation users.

The evaluation's findings are organized into three areas: (1) areas of strength, (2) areas for internal improvement, and (3) areas for external improvement. Five strengths emerged from the analysis. BPL staff directly connected with TeleStory appear to be very supportive of the program and its mission. BPL has also invested significant resources in training and staff development, all toward improving service delivery and staff buy-in. As a result of these and other investments in the program, there appears to be significant support in BPL leadership for maintaining a high-quality and effective program. BPL's marketing appears to be successful, reaching users across a variety of platforms and in multiple ways. Finally, users report that TeleStory is a much better means of visiting loved ones than traveling to the DOC facility where the incarcerated person is housed. Overall, TeleStory appears to be a very effective program that consistently meets its objectives and has a high degree of satisfaction among users.

The evaluation also identified several areas for internal improvement. Some BPL staff seem to lack buy-in and appear to be apathetic about the program, perhaps leading to inconsistent program quality. Operational conflicts and limited space can occasionally prevent people from accessing services at convenient times, thus preventing optimal implementation. Some branches seem to offer a better experience than others, making the TeleStory program inconsistent across locations. Finally, technological glitches can make the experience stressful for some users and staff alike.

Although BPL is limited in its ability to negotiate changes with outside organizations, the evaluation identified some areas for external improvement as well. There are unfortunately persistent logistical problems within DOC that hinder program delivery. DOC constraints also make it difficult to schedule visitation at times that are convenient for users. Finally, the DOC incarcerated population does

¹ For a comprehensive discussion of video visitation and its implementation, see Léon Digard, Margaret diZerega, Allon Yaroni, and Joshua Rinaldi, *A New Role for Technology? Implementing Video Visitation in Prison* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2016) <https://perma.cc/LJD6-VJ3P>.

not appear to be broadly aware that TeleStory is available, perhaps leading to suboptimal take-up of the program.

In light of these strengths and weaknesses, this report articulates five recommendations for continued program effectiveness and improvement. First, BPL should work to improve branch librarian buy-in among those branches where staff are not sold on the value and importance of the program. BPL should continue to invest in physical space for TeleStory, identifying opportunities to dedicate space to TeleStory programming, so that time slots can be expanded and users can have privacy for their visits. The TeleStory experience should be standardized across branches where possible, so that users can use multiple locations without having to navigate differences. BPL should continue its investment in technology, so that stressful glitches and connection problems will continue to be minimal. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, BPL should continue working with DOC to improve program delivery. Many of the areas for improvement noted by users stemmed from difficulties with DOC facilities.

Overall, this evaluation finds that TeleStory is a useful and effective service for families of people who are incarcerated. It is part of a growing investment in services for those who are affected by incarceration and thus represents an important strategic priority for the library. TeleStory is a model program that has been adopted by other library systems across the United States and worldwide. Although there are areas in which BPL might work to further improve TeleStory, it appears to meet the needs of a number of New York City families and their loved ones behind bars.

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Introduction

The role of public libraries has shifted over time and continues to change in response to technological, social, and economic advances. While the library's primary goal was once to serve as a central location for people to access books and reference materials, it has evolved over time to serve as a multifaceted community center. For example, public libraries now provide a hub for community groups to meet, a place for people to search and apply for jobs, and a repository of information about social services. They can also be one of the best places for residents to access the internet and other technology that may not be available in their homes. These services can be particularly important in large urban areas where the infrastructure of social service support is sprawling and difficult to navigate.

A once unlikely use of the library, but one that is gaining traction, is that of a service provider to people affected by the criminal justice system and their families. People who leave jail or prison need a variety of services that are rarely housed in one place. Libraries are able to offer a cadre of reentry services, including assistance with employment and applications for public benefits, in a way that streamlines the experience of the returning community member. In some cases, libraries have begun to also offer opportunities for families whose loved ones are incarcerated in jail or prison.

The Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) has taken on a number of functions adjacent to the formal criminal justice system, including reentry services and programs for the families of incarcerated people. One of those programs is TeleStory, an initiative by which families can use video equipment in the library to virtually visit a loved one who is incarcerated in a New York City Department of Correction facility. These visits provide a helpful supplement to in-person visitation, and they afford community members who are unable to travel to a correctional facility the opportunity to meet with loved ones nonetheless.² This report examines BPL's TeleStory program through the lens of a process evaluation. The process evaluation examines how a program or policy has been implemented, the experiences that relevant stakeholders have had with it, and changes that might be made in order to improve it. The following section describes TeleStory's development and purposes, followed by information about the methodology used in the completion of this report. The report then describes some of the key findings about TeleStory's implementation, followed by a series of program recommendations.

² For a comprehensive discussion of video visitation and its implementation, see Léon Digard, Margaret diZerega, Allon Yaroni, and Joshua Rinaldi, *A New Role for Technology? Implementing Video Visitation in Prison* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2016) <https://perma.cc/LJD6-VJ3P>.

About TeleStory

BPL launched its TeleStory program in 2014 with the goal of increasing child literacy and providing a safe environment in which children and other family members can connect with an incarcerated loved one. BPL's Chief Librarian, Nick Higgins, created the program after working for several years as a librarian in New York City's largest jail complex on Rikers Island. TeleStory was funded early on by the Knight Foundation, an organization that promotes excellence in journalism and success of the communities in which the founders, John S. Knight and James L. Knight, worked. The New York City Council has also provided funding for TeleStory, in addition to investment from the library throughout its implementation and growth. TeleStory provides families with a free, one-hour video visit with an incarcerated loved one in a safe and comfortable environment. With an estimated 105,000 children in New York with an incarcerated parent, TeleStory aims to mitigate the harmful effect of having an incarcerated parent by providing a way for children to maintain a close relationship with their incarcerated parent.³

TeleStory has grown significantly since its initial iteration. In 2016, the New York City Council supported the expansion of TeleStory into the New York Public Library and Queens Public Library systems. TeleStory is now available in all New York City Department of Correction facilities, and, through the Osborne Association, it is beginning to expand into the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. People who have an incarcerated loved one can do a televisit at 23 library branches across all five boroughs. Traveling to Rikers Island and passing through the security clearance process can be a long, arduous, and stressful ordeal, especially for families with young children, so TeleStory aims to be a more convenient and accessible way to stay connected to loved ones incarcerated on Rikers Island. Visiting rooms are semi-private, and BPL provides families with books, toys, puzzles, and craft supplies to engage children and to destigmatize the feeling of having an incarcerated loved one. Each library branch that facilitates the TeleStory program compiles a tailored book collection for the families who participate in the program. These books aim to provide age-appropriate material that can help explain the varied emotions felt by families with an incarcerated loved one. During visiting sessions, families are encouraged to read together. Although video visits cannot replace in-person interactions with a loved one, TeleStory has the potential to improve communication and relationships in families.

In addition to facilitating televisits, BPL also engages in participant outreach and BPL staff engagement. Participating families receive welcome packets, which include information on BPL's programs and community resources, children's books, library goodies, and a questionnaire for families to identify any additional areas of need (such as housing, immigration and employment assistance). BPL can provide referrals to outside agencies who can provide assistance to families. Staff engagement is a vital

³ Data available at Office of Children and Family Services, "Children of Incarcerated Parents," <https://on.ny.gov/2SAyGtL>.

component of the TeleStory program, so program staff gave presentations and emailed information about TeleStory, including brochures and other marketing materials, to library staff system-wide. Program staff also created materials including FAQ sheets, how-to guides, participant feedback forms, and resources for families to help staff promote the program.⁴ Additionally, separate trainings were held for staff in the library branches that host televisits, and some staff at participating branches have joined the outreach teams to recruit participants at Rikers Island.

The TeleStory program aligns with the BPL's 2018 Strategic Plan (the most recent strategic plan), which is composed of five core principles and three focus areas for future action.⁵ The BPL's first core principle, to foster literacy and the love of learning, is consistent with TeleStory's goal of increasing child literacy, achieved through encouraging families to read together during televisits. BPL's second core principle is to supply trusted, up-to-date resources and guide patrons to the ones they need. Under this core principle, the BPL provides free library services to incarcerated people in New York City Department of Correction (DOC) facilities, including a book delivery service with a four-week literacy program that teaches incarcerated parents reading and storytelling tips and records incarcerated parents reading their favorite children's books. Further, the BPL provides additional resources as needed to families, either through programming the BPL provides or through referrals to outside organizations. The Strategic Plan mentions the TeleStory program directly under its fourth core principle: to strengthen relations between residents and promote civic engagement. TeleStory accomplishes the endeavor to strengthen interpersonal relationships between residents by providing a way for families to maintain contact with loved ones who are incarcerated. Lastly, one of BPL's focus areas for future action is focusing on community. The TeleStory program engages members of the community who are often neglected: incarcerated people and their loved ones.

TeleStory is ultimately a strong alternative to other visitation options typically provided to those who are incarcerated. The traditional method of visitation—the in-person visit, otherwise known as a “contact” visit—is the ideal means of connecting incarcerated people with friends and family members.⁶ Particularly for children of incarcerated parents, being able to touch and hug is a valuable means of preserving relationships. However, in-person visits often are not feasible. Many families, especially those in large urban areas, do not have transportation to state prisons, which are often located in rural areas throughout the state. Many prisons limit visitation hours, often to only the weekend, when caregivers may be working and unable to travel. As noted above and in our analysis below, it is especially difficult for

⁴ More information about TeleStory, including many of these materials, can be accessed via the BPL website at Brooklyn Public Library, “TeleStory,” <https://perma.cc/3JKQ-UB5K>.

⁵ The strategic plan can be accessed via BPL's website at Brooklyn Public Library, “Strategic Plan 2018,” <https://www.bklynlibrary.org/strategicplan#>.

⁶ See Branden A. McLeod and Janaé Bonsu, “The benefits and challenges of visitation practices in correctional settings: Will video visitation assist incarcerated fathers and their children?,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 93 (October 2018), 30-35.

many New York City residents to get to Rikers Island, the primary location for incarceration in the Department of Correction.

Video visitation is therefore preferable for a number of those seeking to visit incarcerated loved ones.⁷ The approach to video visitation varies across jurisdictions. In some cases, there are video visitation booths on the premises, with visitors on camera in one part of the facility and incarcerated people on camera in another part. In other cases, those who are incarcerated can pay to use a kiosk located in their unit to visit with friends and family members who connect from home via a website. Finally, other facilities allow incarcerated people to purchase tablets that include a video visitation function, through which they can connect to family at home via a website. Given the cost of these connections, often on both the incarcerated person and community sides, many video visitation options provide significant profit opportunities for for-profit firms and correctional facilities.⁸

BPL's TeleStory provides a video visitation experience that is superior to these in several ways. First, it does not require family or friends to travel to a correctional facility, but rather to a library branch. BPL library branches are located throughout the borough and are conveniently accessible via subway or bus. Second, it does not require the incarcerated person to purchase time on a kiosk or a tablet, two things that may be cost-prohibitive for many people who find themselves in jail or prison. Third, TeleStory does not require users in the community to have access to the internet at home, which is too expensive for a number of families who want to visit with an incarcerated loved one. Finally, TeleStory provides a therapeutic environment for children, access to toys and books, and a more welcoming physical space than would be otherwise available. TeleStory is therefore a unique video visitation opportunity that provides easier access than an in-person visit but none of the costs typically associated with video visits.

TeleStory has been influential in the development of similar programs, both domestically and abroad. The TeleStory name and model have been implemented by the University of Wisconsin and are currently used in public libraries in Ashland County, Wisconsin.⁹ The Free Library of Philadelphia offers Stories Alive, an opportunity for incarcerated parents to spend an hour reading a book with their kids via video link to the library.¹⁰ The District of Columbia Public Library offers video visits with those incarcerated at the DC Jail through two of its branch libraries on select days of the week.¹¹ The Borisov Central Regional Library in Belarus has implemented a visitation program modeled after TeleStory, the

⁷ See Prison Fellowship, "The Upside (and Downside) of Video Visitation," <https://perma.cc/JJU2-DMGT>.

⁸ See Patrice A. Fulcher, "The Double-Edged Sword of Prison Video Visitation: Claiming to Keep Families Together While Furthering the Aims of the Prison Industrial Complex," *Florida A&M University Law Review* 9 (Fall 2013), 83-101.

⁹ See The Literacy Link, "TeleStory," <https://theliteracylink.extension.wisc.edu/our-strategies/telestory/>.

¹⁰ Philadelphia's program is described at Free Library of Philadelphia, "Stories Alive," <https://libwww.freelibrary.org/programs/prisonservices/storiesalive.cfm>.

¹¹ More information about the DC program is available at DC Public Library, "D.C. Jail Video Visitation Program," <https://perma.cc/JM2U-UUF7>.

concept for which was awarded significant government funding after winning a national competition for new social welfare projects.¹²

Other library systems—Denver, Colorado; the New Jersey State Library; and Hennepin County, Minnesota, to name a few—offer a portfolio of services for those who are reentering their communities after incarceration, but they do not yet host video visitation for incarcerated people.¹³ A number of library systems offer support that would be relevant for those who are recently released but do not specify reentry or incarceration by name. These include job skills programs, services for people who are houseless, and assistance with cover letters and resumes. Given TeleStory’s success in replicating itself in other areas, there is tremendous opportunity for libraries to consider augmenting services to include televisitation and broader family supports.

It is important to note that TeleStory is one piece of a multifaceted approach taken by BPL in providing services to friends and family members of those who are incarcerated, as well as those who are reentering the community. BPL offers family events that allow TeleStory users—adults and kids alike—to come to a library branch for a hot meal, activities for kids, and a support circle for adults. The events often include an informal discussion with organizations like the Fortune Society and Osborne Association, two key reentry nonprofits in the New York City area. BPL has also developed a network of social organizations that provide services that may be helpful to TeleStory users. BPL staff engage in phone outreach to connect users to those services where possible, providing a “warm handoff” that facilitates take-up of available supports. BPL also provides extensive services to those who are reentering the community after incarceration, serving as an information hub for relevant services and providing virtual programming in support of effective reentry.¹⁴

Methodology

This evaluation includes three primary components: (1) a review of program documents, (2) observations of TeleStory visitation in branch facilities, and (3) interviews with program stakeholders. These activities took place from June 2019 through June 2020 and were funded by BPL. The recommendations listed at the end of this document stem from all three of these sources, taken holistically. A number of quotes from

¹² See Borisov Central Library, <https://perma.cc/EF6L-7TWV>.

¹³ For more information, please see Denver Public Library, “Resources for Ex-Offenders,” <https://perma.cc/J4PB-V8H4>; NJ State Library, “Reconnecting Returning Citizens,” <https://perma.cc/X5QA-Z5YT>; and Hennepin County Library, “Freedom Ticket,” <https://perma.cc/X7LA-L9PP>.

¹⁴ For more on BPL’s reentry services, see Brooklyn Public Library, “Reentry Services,” <https://perma.cc/WT3T-57Y6>.

stakeholder interviews are also included throughout the report to illustrate how both users and staff members describe their experiences.

Stakeholder interviews were designed to include a variety of people associated with the program: BPL leadership, Outreach Services staff, branch library staff, and visitation users (family members and friends of those who are incarcerated). It would have been ideal to also interview incarcerated users and DOC staff to get their perspectives on the program, but these interviews were not approved by DOC within the time period allotted for the evaluation. Where possible, Vera researchers probed friends and family members to understand the experience of those who are incarcerated as well. Vera is unable to speak to the views of DOC staff.

Interviews took place in person at the library or, in some cases, by Zoom. Data collection for the project took place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, limiting Vera's ability to interview friends and family members in person.¹⁵ All interviews lasted between approximately 30 and 90 minutes and all were transcribed, either professionally or by Zoom transcript. These transcripts were then analyzed using an open-coding scheme that alerted researchers to the primary themes that emerged in each of the areas of interest to the study—program strengths and areas for improvement, both internal and external.

Researchers completed a total of 29 interviews for the study: 12 interviews with BPL staff and 17 interviews with visitation users. Interviewees were diverse along most demographic dimensions (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status), though Vera interviewed far more women than men. This likely reflects the number of women employed in library occupations by comparison to men, along with the high number of men who are incarcerated compared to women. Staff interviewees reflected a number of different roles, levels, and physical locations within the library. The report does not typically identify the source of any quotations, and in order to protect interviewee anonymity, does not attribute quotations to any particular demographic characteristic or occupation within the library.

¹⁵ Vera's original evaluation plan called for in-person focus groups with TeleStory users. Rather than conduct focus groups, Vera interviewed a sample of users via phone, Zoom, or other online mechanisms.

Findings

This section describes the key findings from our data collection, organized into three primary sections: (1) areas of strength, (2) internal areas for improvement, and (3) external areas for improvement. The report considers issues under the immediate control of BPL to be internal issues—things like staffing, facilities, and technology—while it considers things outside BPL’s control to be external issues (e.g., New York City Department of Correction rules and regulations).

Areas of strength

Vera identified five areas of strength: (1) BPL staff directly connected with TeleStory are supportive of the program and its mission; (2) BPL has invested significant resources in training and staff development; (3) there is significant support in BPL leadership for maintaining a high-quality and effective program; (4) TeleStory is reaching users across a variety of platforms and in multiple ways; and (5) users report that TeleStory is vastly superior to visitation offered by the DOC. Each of these will be described in more detail below.

BPL staff directly connected with TeleStory are supportive of the program and its mission

The various interviews with BPL staff illustrated that the TeleStory program was held in high regard among BPL staff who work directly with the program, as well as a number of those who work at branches where TeleStory is offered. A common theme gleaned from these interviews is that these staff noted that they are committed to one of the core functions of public libraries: to serve the community. One way this was reflected is that BPL staff indicated that, overall, they understand the purpose and intent of the program, as well as its alignment with the mission of the BPL.

One staff member commented that “this is what a library should be, you know, it really should be a place where people can get the kind of help they need from their community. It’s not always something the government or a company or whatnot can provide, and these are sometimes people who need help the most. There are lots of parts of my job that bring me joy . . . this is one of them.”

Another staff member suggested that “the library is forward-thinking, in my opinion, doing things like this. We need to think about our patrons as . . . not just people who come in and want to meet here or check out a book or access a computer. We need to think about the people who get forgotten, who get left behind [in prison or jail]. Those are the ones that need us. And this gives families a chance to see the people they love and miss. And the children, it’s important for the children.”

These opinions mirror those voiced by a BPL leader, who noted that “the responsibility of a library now is no longer what it used to be, but rather what it can be to those who need a community of support. Whether it’s those who are behind bars or the families that miss them, it’s our responsibility to assist in building that community, however we can, even if it’s virtual.”

For family users of TeleStory, the library’s commitment to them is clear. One user said of family support events: “I like hooking up with the other families . . . it’s helpful for me to see who else is dealing with this and what their challenges [are]. We’re in this same boat, we should learn from each other.” Another user noted how helpful BPL staff had been in connecting her with services: “I don’t always know what I’m doing [when it comes to accessing relevant services], but [a library staff member] has helped me a couple of times figure out what I needed to do and who I needed to call.”

BPL has invested significant resources in training and staff development

In preparation for the rollout of TeleStory into BPL branches, an array of resources was provided by Outreach Services to general BPL staff to prepare them for hosting patrons for TeleStory visits. Staff at TeleStory branches participated in an initial training session that informed them of the program, its purpose, how to facilitate TeleStory visits, and how to work with the technology. As part of the ongoing efforts to educate BPL staff on how to facilitate TeleStory visits, Outreach Services staff hold training sessions periodically to expand the number of staff who have the knowledge needed to facilitate TeleStory visits. As a supplement to the training sessions, Outreach Services created a training manual that is made available to all BPL staff on the system’s internal wiki.

A branch library staff member confirmed that “training was good. It was thorough and I think all of us know how to do what we need to do.” A second staff member also agreed that training was “what it needed to be,” but also said that she had access to Outreach Services staff “pretty much every day, in case I have a question or something goes wrong.” All of the interviewees indicated that they had the support and training adequate for providing TeleStory services.

There is significant support in BPL leadership for maintaining a high-quality and effective program

A variety of staff noted the support and encouragement of BPL leadership and those who work in Outreach Services. Although the project was funded largely by external funds and philanthropy, there has been a significant investment on the part of BPL to ensure that the program continues to function at the highest possible level. The program is now baselined into BPL’s permanent city funding allocation. One of the Outreach Services staff said that “[w]e have a true champion in [our director]. He has been

instrumental not only in getting this program up and running, actually, but has continued that support after he has moved on to other roles within the library. I feel comfortable that this is a program valued by the library and that it will get the kind of attention it needs to be a success.”

Library staff across branches also noted support from central library staff, notably those working in Outreach Services. For example, one branch librarian commented: “I can call them whenever I need to, and they’ll respond to my questions. If I have a problem, I can go to them, there isn’t a sense of, I don’t have time for you, I don’t want to walk you through how to solve this or that problem.” A second library staff member said that “I really rely on [Outreach Services staff], I really do. Things go wrong with this, you know, they always do with technology, but we can get the help we need to get things up and running. Now it may not actually *fix* the problem, but they try their best, and pick up the phone, and that’s what I want from them.”

Finally, a third branch staff member commented on the initial phase of implementation: “When I say it was a little bit of a struggle at first, I mean as far as implementing the program we already have. We weren’t sure as far as what day or time would be ideal to set aside for the TeleStory, but once we were able to establish that, we had no problem doing it on a regular basis. Again, Michael [the TeleStory director], he was very instrumental in providing information for us. He did have a few guides for us to . . . read over and to . . . be more aware of how to implement the program with what we already do, and it’s helped us a lot in integrating that program.”

TeleStory is reaching users across a variety of platforms and in multiple ways

Users who were interviewed reported having learned about TeleStory across a number of different platforms. There appears to be positive word of mouth that is contributing to the user base. Among the comments:

- “My son is in [jail] right now, and his friend in there told him about it, and so he told me to look into it. I found the information pretty quickly once I knew to look for it.”
- “My son was visiting his father in the jail where he was, and there was a sign on the wall about it. And so he told me about it. And I looked it up . . . and that’s how we found out about it.”
- “It was kind of an accident, actually, that I learned about TeleStory. I was just in the library because I needed to use a computer, and I saw a poster thing just hanging there, and I was honestly too embarrassed to ask about it then, but I looked it up online and called them and got the information.”
- “I was talking to someone [visiting an incarcerated person on Rikers], while we waited, and she told me that there was a video option.”

- “One of the ladies working [at visitation on Rikers] mentioned it to me. She didn’t give me anything to go on, but I was able to track it down myself.”

These comments suggest that marketing materials may not be reaching potential users as much as informal, word-of-mouth communication. Several interviewees mentioned hearing about the program, either from others in the community or from their loved one who is incarcerated. As noted below, however, there appears to be a general lack of knowledge about the program among those who are incarcerated, suggesting that DOC should work to advertise the program more broadly.

Users report that TeleStory is vastly superior to visitation offered by the DOC

For those who had visited their loved one at a DOC facility, the TeleStory experience was viewed as being far more enjoyable than that of visiting someone at Rikers Island or elsewhere in the DOC system. Those who had been to Rikers Island’s facilities, in particular, described how visiting someone in the facility for just one hour is a demoralizing, time-intensive, and generally unpleasant ordeal.¹⁶

The geographic location of Rikers Island was mentioned consistently as a primary reason that people use TeleStory. “Could they have picked a worse place to put a jail? I guess if they want their own Alcatraz over here, off to itself, then that’s fine, but what about me? What about people like me and my kids? We don’t have a car, we take the train and the bus, and let me tell you, those do not get you to Rikers on any kinda schedule. I’m serious. It will eat up your whole day.” Another user noted that “[Rikers] is honestly designed to keep people away from everybody else. And what happens is people like me get kept away from [those who are incarcerated]. Is that fair to me? I didn’t do anything. But I have a responsibility to my kids to see their daddy, and what am I supposed to do?” A third person said that “I guess they can’t help where the jail got built, not now anyway, but they could make it easier to get there and easier to get through once you’re out there.”

Several users also noted the difficulties that those with children or elderly parents face in visitation. One person said that “without going through the whole search and for some families that lived in the neighborhood getting . . . just getting the kids to pack them up and in some cases it was the mom packing the kids up, schlepping over there—we’ve had one person who was in a wheelchair and for her getting from Brooklyn to Rikers was a challenge.” Another noted that “I have [multiple] children. So the more [that] we can visit the better. And when we went to visit [our loved one] in person . . . only three

¹⁶ Many of the issues uncovered in these interviews reflect broad trends described in a report issued by the New York City Jails Action Coalition in 2018, available at “‘It Makes Me Want to Cry’: Visiting Rikers Island,” New York City Jails Action Coalition, January 2018, <https://perma.cc/7ATA-ZX78>.

people can visit at the same time. So over here in the public library, all of us could go in and it was me and the five kids.”

Some saw TeleStory as a way to improve upon a subpar DOC experience, as a supplement to on-premise visits. One of the users said that “I like to do both, go to the library and go to Rikers. Well I actually don’t like to do any of it, but if I am going to do it, I might as well do both. I take my kids to the TeleStory visit and I go by myself to the other one. If I didn’t have the library, I’m not sure I’d take my kids at all. Rikers is such a mess.” Another noted that “getting myself to the library on a regular basis is way easier than getting myself to the jail on a regular basis. I make myself do the trip sometimes, but it’s nice to be able to see [name of incarcerated relative] more often. I’ll take it on camera, I’ll take it.”

Areas for internal improvement

Our interviews and data collection suggest four areas in which BPL might work to improve its approach to TeleStory: (1) some BPL staff lack buy-in and appear to be apathetic about the program; (2) operational conflicts and limited space prevent optimal implementation; (3) implementation at BPL is not consistent across branches, with some providing a better experience than others; and (4) technological glitches can be tough for both families and staff to navigate. Each of these will be described in more detail below.

Some BPL staff lack buy-in and appear to be apathetic about the program

The BPL staff interviewed, who, as noted above, all had direct experience with administering and facilitating TeleStory, were all proponents of the program to one degree or another. Yet, their narratives also reflected their perception that there are other BPL staff members—even some who work at TeleStory branches—who are less enthusiastic about the notion of TeleStory for one reason or another.

BPL staff respondents reported that some BPL staff are not strong supporters of the program because they see it as an operational hassle for themselves and a hindrance to the broader set of services that BPL branches provide. “Some people are a little bit lazy, I think, to be honest, and they don’t want to step outside their little box, because that box wound up being a little comfortable for ‘em. And you know, when you work in a branch like this, you have lots to do anyway, and different demands on your time. So this can get in the way of other things, but you have a family in front of you needing you to help them with it, so you can’t put it off.”

In addition, it was noted that other unsupportive BPL staff have an aversion to engaging with the justice-impacted population, both those who are incarcerated as well as the family and friends associated with them who visit the branches to use TeleStory. One staff interviewee noted that “[p]eople have lots of experiences, and sometimes that means having a family member who isn’t on the right side of the law all the time. And so that person may have a prejudice against people who get caught up in jail, and they may

have negative feelings about those folks and helping them out. But I tell ‘em it’s the family they are helping.”

Yet another cited reason that some BPL staff are leery of being involved with TeleStory is that they are intimidated by the visit facilitation process, especially with regard to working with the audio and visual technology that is used within the branches, and they have trepidation about botching a patron’s visit. “It’s a hassle, everything, you know, especially when the video doesn’t want to cooperate and we have to find a solution. It can get annoying, I’m not going to lie to you. They [Outreach Services] do what they can, but sometimes it’s still a problem.”

Potentially most telling was the idea that some Neighborhood Library Supervisors (NLS), the general managers of BPL branches, were among those who were either opposed to or ambivalent about the TeleStory program. And, according to some of the BPL staff who were interviewed, this view exists among NLSs who lead some of the 12 TeleStory branches. One suggested explanation for this was that some of the NLSs, and perhaps by extension their staff members, see the facilitation of TeleStory at the branch-level as also being the responsibility of Outreach Services staff. One staff member said that “Actually, I just spoke to somebody at another branch. The [branch], and I asked [my colleague] if [they] responded to the survey . . . she said, ‘Well no, because we don’t really get involved. We don’t have enough staff to deal with that. Outreach does it all.’”

Operational conflicts and physical space limitations prevent optimal implementation

The result of this evaluation also demonstrated that, even BPL staff who were philosophically in favor of TeleStory had concerns about how the program conflicts and competes with other programming that is provided within BPL branches. As a result, some TeleStory branches are able and/or willing to allot only one or two time slots per week to TeleStory visits. In some cases, this makes it tough for patrons to get into the branch of their preference, making them choose between visiting another branch and waiting for a spot to open. These options have the potential of turning patrons off the program, especially if they have subpar technology experiences when they are able to get on the schedule.

One branch librarian said that “we do what we can, with the space we have and the [staff] we have, but this is tough to do when you’re a branch that is this size. We can really handle only a few visits a week, and sometimes those are too much for us, when it comes to juggling all of these other things that we have to try to accomplish.” Another commented that “I guess for the most part a lot of the branches just really support the program so they try to block off . . . as many time slots as they could because you know, there’s other programs that happen within the branch.”

Implementation of BPL is not consistent across branches, with some providing a much better experience than others

BPL staff and community patron respondents alike routinely noted that the delivery of TeleStory visits varies significantly depending upon which of the 12 BPL branches one visits. This divergence in service delivery was attributed to aspects of staff-patron relations, programmatic capacity, patron composition, and differences in technology.

One staff member commented: “[e]ach branch has its own culture, its own way of looking at things, you know, and some people connect and some people don’t. So I think it really is hit or miss for some . . . alright I’m all into this, I’m going to talk about it, I’m going to care for these people, I’m going to ensure that this works before they come in.”

A user mentioned different experiences at two branches, saying “I really like to take the kids to [branch name]. The lady there is real helpful about everything, you know, and will talk nice to the kids, and makes it really feel like a positive experience. Like customer service, real customer service. But then if I go to [other branch name], I don’t get that experience at all. I get somebody looking at me like I am messing with their day, and they rush us in and out of there, and the room is just ugly and not nice at all, and it’s not a good experience.”

Scheduling appears to differ across branches as well: “I can’t get into [branch name] at a time that I want, even though it’s close to my house and easy to get to. I wind up going all the way to [other branch name], which is farther away, you know, but I can go when I need to go. It’s just easier.”

A related issue is marketing of the program, which also appears to vary across library branches. Outside of informing incarcerated people in DOC facilities about TeleStory, the primary mechanism used by Outreach Services to disseminate information about the program is the TeleStory information pamphlets and program-advertisement posters—each of which is intended to be prominently displayed in BPL branches. The reality, however, is that many BPL branches lack both of these marketing tools. And for those that had them, they were often buried among a set of other fliers and pamphlets for other types of services or announcements, thus obscuring the TeleStory marketing materials from potential service users.

When asked about promotional materials, one library staff member said: “No we’re running low on that and I don’t think we have any posters upstairs that’s promoting the visits right now. I think the primary promotion is coming through a librarian or a staff that’s visiting Rikers and promoting it to them there to say that this is a way that you can maintain those contacts with your family members. So I think the majority of the promotion is coming from that end and I think we’re, I’m not sure if that’s what they’re doing.”

Technological glitches can be tough for both families and staff to navigate

Some staff noted that there are persistent equipment issues. This appears to reflect two things: (1) equipment that is often faulty and (2) lack of staff ability to operate equipment. In both of these cases, staff rely on technological support that may not be sufficient to solve the problem. One branch staff member commented that “actually, there have been times where we’ve called the outreach support number we had, there was nobody there...And that’s not their fault. I mean, they’re spread real thin...We would need somebody on the phone to describe the situation and somebody else to actually handle everything...‘The camera on the [TeleStory] unit is adjustable.’ How? ‘You can change the direction and also the level of zoom using the remote.’ How do you use . . . I looked at them . . . It was like there was like 25 hieroglyphics. It’s not user-friendly.”

One of the Outreach Services staff member’s sentiments appear to square with those above: “The sound never works at this one branch and it is like . . . we keep saying that it would be great if something was done about it.”

Another person noted that sometimes it is necessary to talk with the DOC facility, but it is often tough to get through: “while calling a facility, they are really hard to get in touch with, sometimes they will put you on hold for like, forever. Um, you are calling back and forth with them about when can we expect someone to come down. Um, yeah people in the room are feeling impatient, but you don’t totally have control over how to, like, get things into motion.”

A staff member with more direct knowledge of the technological details of TeleStory described the problems related to the BPL-DOC connection and remarked that there was a divergence in thinking between the IT divisions of both agencies: “We had that one interaction with a test and that type of stuff, we haven’t had really any real sit-down, like, okay what are you guys using? What are you guys want to like, so, and that’s the biggest piece that I think is missing.”

Areas for external improvement

Several external areas for improvement emerged across interviews: (1) persistent logistical problems within DOC hinder program delivery; (2) DOC constraints make it tough for users to schedule sessions at convenient times; and (3) the DOC-incarcerated population is not broadly aware that TeleStory is available. Each of these will be described in more detail below.

Persistent logistical problems within DOC staff, facilities, and policies hinder program delivery

Both patrons and BPL staff consistently noted difficulties in working with DOC on TeleStory. One of the primary issues noted stems from the inherently transitory nature of jail incarceration, which often includes abrupt changes in housing and movement. This can lead to significantly delayed or even last-minute cancellations of TeleStory visits. One staff member said that “[t]hey love to cancel a visit on their [DOC’s] end. They have all kinds of reasons they do it, the [incarcerated person] got moved, he is in with his lawyer, he can’t come to the visit because of some sort of lockdown, and sometimes they don’t even tell you the reason or you get the impression they’re not being straight with you. They’re in charge. They have the [incarcerated person]. What can we do?”

Another staff member said that “lately I’ve been having really, a really rough time like when the incarcerated person is being transferred . . . So, I don’t have an update on that. I don’t find out until like, let’s say, the morning of the visit or if the family member gets a call from the incarcerated person [who] informs them, and then, [community patrons] reach out to me and say, ‘He got moved, is that going to affect my visit?’” Even when visits are not canceled, they are often delayed. One user noted that “[t]hey never started on time. Never, right, if your visit was an hour long and they brought the person at 45 minutes late, the visit was now 15 minutes . . . I just thought that is absolutely disrespectful of this program.”

These last-minute changes can make for an exasperating experience for users. One family member said that “it’s so very difficult when I bring kids up to the library and talk about how they’re going to get to see their daddy and talk to him, and then we get there and he’s not there and nobody can tell us anything at all about why he isn’t. Why did they cancel his visit? I mean, this is like jail, period, they never tell you anything about what’s going on and you honestly have to just wait, you know, wait until they can call you on the phone and tell you what happened. But then it’s like, do I just go home? What do I tell the kids about this? It’s not fair.” BPL should perhaps consider offering some sort of alternative programming or activity when visits do not happen, though resource limitations may prevent this in many branches.

A second user echoed these sentiments about DOC operations: “Look, I don’t know what all they deal with in there, and I’m sure it’s hard to keep all of those [incarcerated people] organized. But you know, I come down here with an appointment, and everywhere else in my life when you have an appointment, you go in at that time, and if you get backed up, they’re like, I’m sorry, ma’am. Not these folks. They do not care. They act like they are doing you a major favor just letting you talk to your person in there.”

Consternation about the shortcomings and deficiencies of the technology used in the program exists among the patrons just as with staff. The majority of community patrons interviewed have experienced at least one TeleStory visit having been affected because of IT issues. However, for the

patrons, the problem was nearly universally seen as the fault of the DOC. Poor quality of monitors and/or cameras, low sound, and the unpredictable ending to TeleStory visits were all cited as drawbacks to the TeleStory experience.

DOC constraints make it difficult for users to schedule sessions at convenient times

The video feed used to facilitate the program is not dedicated to TeleStory; it is also used to hold adjudication proceedings, which ordinarily occur until mid-morning on weekdays. This, combined with constraints in many of BPL's branches, makes for a very difficult scheduling experience.

A user said, "I really wish I could do this from home, because then it wouldn't be so bad to schedule it right before work or right after work or something else. You know, but going all the way to the library, and it's not even that far, but there's a lot of time you spend getting there and getting all set up. If the jail would let us do the call another time, that would be easier."

Others said that not being able to talk on the weekends made it hard to use the program. For example, one user asked, "Why can't they do these on Saturday and Sunday? Weekdays are tough for me, because of my work schedule and everything. I would much rather come on a Saturday." Another said that "[s]omebody doesn't want this to work, and they are doing everything they can to defeat this."

The DOC incarcerated population is not broadly aware that TeleStory is available

Notably, despite multiple community user respondents noting that they had been informed of the program's existence via someone who is incarcerated, nearly all of them also said that the information that they received was either incomplete or inaccurate. Among the comments:

- "The bureaucracy of, you know, the criminal justice system, but neither one of the social workers knew about it. They had two reentry specialists. Neither of them knew about it. And these are professionals who work in that field."
- "[T]hey can advertise it a little better . . . to let the people know that is there because like I said, without word of mouth, I wouldn't have known."
- "Ok, you know the folks down there [at Rikers] are not letting people know about this. They don't want those visits anyhow. It's more work for them. Do you think they care about us? No sir."
- "You would think this would be less work for [the DOC], but I guess they would rather process folks when they go up there. The people who I've seen on there aren't very nice."

Program Recommendations

This evaluation uncovered a number of program strengths. It also identified several opportunities for BPL to consider some programmatic changes. The following five recommendations may be taken by the library to bolster its program and improve user experience.

Improve branch librarian buy-in

Several interviewees noted inconsistent staff support for TeleStory and, more broadly, reentry services as an area of focus for the library. This lack of support may also explain why several staff chose not to participate in interviews. BPL may wish to work with an outside organizational-change consultant to develop training and messaging that reaches TeleStory skeptics. If funding is not available for this level of engagement, BPL might consider identifying a program champion within each branch whose mission is to encourage others to buy into the TeleStory and reentry objectives. If opposition appears to be operational and not philosophical—staff are not opposed to these services in principle but do not feel they have time to properly implement them—then solutions may need to be found at the branch level. Supervisors can then work with employees to identify ways to spread work differently across staff, prioritize tasks differently, or otherwise creatively respond to concerns.

Continue to invest in physical space for TeleStory

Many BPL branches do not have sufficient space for TeleStory, and the space that is available in some may not be conducive to visitation. In most cases, there will not be an opportunity to add space to the library, and for smaller branches, the space that is available may have many competing demands. Solving this issue is therefore likely to be a long-term goal for the program. TeleStory would ideally make use of a room that is dedicated only to visitation and is well appointed with books, toys, and other items to make the visit as enjoyable as possible. These rooms should have as much privacy as possible, so that patrons on a visit are not distracted by others passing by. Users report that some spaces currently in use for TeleStory satisfy these concerns, while others do not. BPL should prioritize developing dedicated, well-appointed TeleStory space in branches that are frequently used for the program.

Standardize the TeleStory experience across branches

Several users commented that their experiences varied across BPL branch locations. In order to maximize user experience, BPL should work to streamline the TeleStory process such that it is as identical as

possible across physical locations. This is difficult, given the limited number of available rooms and competing uses for library space. However, for a program like TeleStory, there is already a good bit of uncertainty about whether a session will take place at all, start or end on time, or get interrupted by technological glitches. BPL should work to make TeleStory as consistent as possible, given what is under its control.

Continue to invest in technology

Technology can fail in two ways: (1) the equipment itself may be faulty and unable to be repaired, and (2) users may not be trained to operate equipment or troubleshoot when it falters. Both of these issues were noted in the interviews, and BPL is in a position to address them. It can continue to invest in new equipment, working to replace older items that are nearing end-of-support—the time at which equipment is no longer supported by warranty—and prioritizing TeleStory appropriately among other technology demands. It can also invest in technology support that is well-equipped to handle concerns. Although branch librarians reported that staff were eager to assist and available to help when problems arose, they also noted that the quality of assistance was not always ideal. In addition to improving the quality of technology support, BPL might work with branch librarians to produce better, easier-to-use guides to equipment. This might promote problem solving at the local level.

Work with DOC to improve program delivery

Interviewees—users and staff alike—routinely blamed DOC for problems in program delivery. There appears to be a perception that the DOC does not value the program and is not working to make it a success. The DOC-BPL relationship should be as strong as possible, and efforts may need to be undertaken at the highest levels of both organizations in order to improve service delivery. It is likely the case that the DOC will always cancel some appointments with relatively short notice when incarcerated people are moved or otherwise unable to appear at the scheduled time. However, BPL might be able to work with the DOC to (1) identify a dedicated video source for visitation that is not used for other purposes (e.g., adjudication); (2) work with DOC to standardize communication about canceled appointments; and (3) advertise the program more consistently to incarcerated people. Every person who is incarcerated in a DOC facility should be aware of TeleStory, and it should therefore be included as a matter of course in orientation or other intake processes.

Conclusion

This evaluation demonstrates that BPL provides an important service to the community, and it is noteworthy that it is the only way for families to participate in remote video visits. As a part of BPL's cadre of reentry and family support programs, TeleStory offers an opportunity for families to connect with their incarcerated loved one over video that is highly valued by those who have used it. Interviewees from both BPL and the community praise BPL's staff for its dedication and investment in TeleStory, and users note that it is far superior to the visitation experience offered by the DOC. In light of the logistical challenges associated with in-person visits and cost challenges often associated with video visitation, TeleStory provides a particularly effective third option that is easy to access and free to all who use it. Other libraries in the United States and abroad have patterned similar programs after TeleStory, an additional testament to its quality and innovation.

There are several areas in which BPL might also work to improve the TeleStory program. BPL should seek funds to continue its investment, both by expanding the space that is available for visitation and making it more amenable to patrons. BPL can work to improve branch buy-in so that staff are unified behind TeleStory as an important part of the library's mission. Where possible, BPL should standardize the user's experience across branches, as this consistency will offset some of the uncertainty associated with technology and DOC operations. BPL can continue to invest in technology, technology support, and guidance for branch staff who operate TeleStory. Finally, BPL should continue to work with the DOC to improve the TeleStory partnership, specifically seeking to identify a dedicated source for visits, standardizing information about canceled appointments, and more consistently notifying incarcerated people about TeleStory.

Reentry services are needed more than ever, especially in New York City, amid the planned closure of the Rikers Island complex and the move towards a system that will have less overall capacity.¹⁷ TeleStory could play a role as a source of information for those on the inside—and provide continuity of care and serve as a resource to foster family reconnection once a person has been released from a DOC facility.

Of course, at this point in time, any discussion of the future of TeleStory and other Department of Outreach Services programming requires an examination through the lens of a COVID-19 society in New York City. At this time, the lasting effects of this public health crisis are unknown, but COVID-19 may continue to restrict access to jails and prisons for families and others for quite some time. Thus, the need for video visitation programs that provide effective and efficient access among members of the community and those who are incarcerated shows no signs of abating. Correctional departments are increasingly

¹⁷ The city's complete plan for closing Rikers is available at City of New York, "A Road to Closing Rikers," <https://perma.cc/2W66-3PTN>.

reliant on virtual technology to provide many services that are offered to those who are in their custody, including educational instruction, court proceedings, and as a means for visitation. Thinking long-term, the idea of regional and national coalitions of library/corrections department partnerships could allow for interagency visitation across jurisdictions, as people—including New Yorkers—are routinely dispersed to corrections facilities across the country, far from their homes and families.

Despite the strong benefits that accrue from programs like TeleStory, it is vitally important that video visitation serves as a *supplement* to in-person visitation, not a substitute. Facilities should continue to allow friends and family members to have contact visits as often as is feasible with those who are incarcerated. Video visits are appealing for several reasons, chief among them the easier movement of those who are incarcerated and, when contracting with private firms to deliver the services, a potential profit motive for the department.¹⁸ However, research demonstrates that in-person visitation allows for a deeper connection and promotes familial ties more effectively than meeting via video, particularly for children and their parents.¹⁹ In the case of Rikers Island, which is particularly difficult to access geographically, video visitation offers those who are unable to travel an opportunity to meet with loved ones who are incarcerated. However, as the DOC shifts its jail population to smaller facilities in the boroughs, this impediment will no longer be as significant. It will be important that the new jail facilities offer both in-person and video visitation, with BPL continuing to play a role in the latter.

Now, more than ever, is the time for libraries, in conjunction with corrections departments, to take the lead in expanding the public's access to video visitation services, as well as for reentry programming that centers family reunification and literacy. This bodes well for the future of TeleStory and similar programs, as BPL Chief Librarian, Nick Higgins noted: “And I think that TeleStory . . . it’s a program that connects kids with their parents who are incarcerated and separated, but there’s a real power in getting people together, like just really going through walls, having other people talk about shared experience, and figuring out how you face this injustice together as a community.”

¹⁸ See Bernadette Rabuy and Peter Wagner, “Screening Out Family Time: The For-Profit Video Visitation Industry in Prisons and Jails,” Prison Policy Initiative, January 2015, <https://perma.cc/UUH4-BVEZ>.

¹⁹ See Allison Hollihan and Michelle Portlock, “Video Visiting in Corrections: Benefits, Limitations, and Implementation Considerations,” National Institute of Corrections, December 2014, <https://perma.cc/D4H3-FECM>.

Credits

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