



Kristen Sorth

Director, St. Louis County Library

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Kristen Sorth wants to turn your idea of the public library on its head. The avid reader, lover of books knows that the library is not only a source of information and great literature, but because of its accessibility to everyone, can be a center of the community.

“I really believe I have the greatest job ever,” says Sorth, who celebrated 20 years with the St. Louis County Library in 2018. “All I have to do is walk into a branch and see the level of engagement between our staff and the community to know that all of our efforts are worth it.” When Sorth became Director in 2013 – the first woman to hold the title for the library system – she took over management of its more than 650 employees and \$50 million annual budget and faced an enormous task ahead – a \$120 million capital improvement project to renovate or replace 19 of the library’s 20 branches. (The project is on track for completion in 2022.)



While a huge step, Sorth felt capable and prepared. Many of the employees she now led were ones she had hired in her 15 years as Senior Manager of HR for

the Library and she placed a great deal of trust and value in their contributions. “Our employees are very creative, committed people with deep connections to the neighborhoods we serve,” Sorth says, adding that the average tenure of an employee is 12 years. “We rely on their feedback and also give them the opportunity to apply for

grants for initiatives they would like to see piloted.”

There have been several initiatives developed under Sorth’s leadership, with an emphasis on opening doors for the under resourced through community partnerships. One example is the Summer Free Lunch Program Sorth spearheaded in collaboration with Operation Food Search at branches in school districts serving a high percentage of students living at or below the poverty level. The program received an Innovation Award from the Urban Libraries Council in its first year and has since been extended to grab-and-go after school meals that coincide with free chess lessons provided by the Saint Louis Chess Club. “We’re not only ensuring children have a nutritious meal, but introducing them to new learning experiences and their parents to the many resources we have for the whole family,” she says. Those resources range from public access computers and computer classes to free tax preparation services.

In 2018, longtime corporate partner, Citi, brought the notion of teaming up with The Little Bit Foundation to Sorth. The idea was to create an in-library closet stocked with hygiene items by Little Bit that would be accessible to children in the Summer Lunch Program. “I really didn’t have a good sense of what this could mean until I visited Little Bit and saw the magnitude of their mission,” she says. The program was piloted during the summer at the Lewis and Clark branch in Moline Acres and provided over 1,350 items, a good indicator of the need, says Sorth, who hopes the concept can be replicated at additional branches next summer.

When inquiring about Little Bit's greatest need, Sorth received an immediate reply: socks and underwear! "Our response was to organize a socks and underwear drive across our branches," she says. The result was more than 5,200 pairs of socks and underwear collected during the summer-long drive, which culminated in a special children's event with Dav Pilkey, author of the *Captain Underpants* series. "With about 50,000 people involved in our summer reading clubs, we've had good success with drives for various organizations and we were really pleased to come through for Little Bit students."



Sorth says she tries to never say no to exploring new programs that impact literacy and education – from infancy to adulthood. Through the 1,000 Books before Kindergarten Program, the Library hopes to encourage parents to help build their child's language and vocabulary skills early by reading aloud to them beginning at birth. For the estimated 90,000 adults in St. Louis without a high school diploma, the St. Louis County Library joined public libraries across the country in offering scholarships for an online high school program, in partnership with Career Online High School. Every student is paired with a certified teacher that they can consult with online. In October, the first graduating class received their diplomas during a ceremony at the Library's headquarters.

"It was absolutely thrilling to see those 10 people walk across the little stage and know that we'd helped them achieve a lifelong dream," says Sorth.