



## Literacy Volunteers of Maine

Creating hope and success through literacy

**“After I worked with a Literacy Volunteers tutor to get my Class B permit, I found a job driving a truck. Now I am studying to get my GED.”**

*George Heino, Cushing*

*Greetings to the good friends and partners of Literacy Volunteers of Maine,*

### **Are you a hedgehog or a fox?**

This simple and nonsensical question that divided the world into two parties was answered by Isaiah Berlin in his famous essay “The Hedgehog and the Fox.” Business strategist and author, Jim Collins, also explored this concept in his book *Good to Great*. Berlin writes in the essay, “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” Not unlike our nonprofit colleagues in Maine, we at Literacy Volunteers of Maine (LVM) have faced economic and organizational challenges that have tested our resolve and focus on mission. In this President’s Letter, I’d like to let you into the loop of where we’ve been and how we’ve answered the hedgehog and fox question.

#### The “Hedgehog Idea(s)”

The current global recession that is underway has pressured all organizations to effectively challenge existing methods of conducting business. Of course, each organization is affected at differing scales and success is determined by how they react to the challenge.

To continue the fox and hedgehog story, the fox and hedgehog are always at odds with one another. Each day the fox comes up with a plan to attack the hedgehog, but is thwarted by the hedgehog rolling into a sphere of sharp spikes that point outward in all directions. The fox sees the hedgehog’s defense and calls off the attack. The fox then retreats to the forest and devises a new line of attack. Every day, some version of this encounter takes place, and despite the greater cunning of the fox, the hedgehog always wins. The takeaway from the story is that Berlin surmised that foxes attempted to accomplish many ends at the same time, but are scattered and diffused in how their efforts mesh together. Hedgehogs simplify the world into one overall concept, principle or idea that reduces all challenges to simple “hedgehog ideas”.

LVM has used this daunting economic environment to challenge the way that we operate on a day-to-day basis. The LVM Board of Directors has asked each of our staff members to refocus around our mission of increasing access to literacy services for Maine adults who wish to acquire or improve their literacy skills. In order to adequately serve this mission, a reorganization of our staff efforts has been effected around two simple “hedgehog ideas” - affiliate support and advocacy.

The first “hedgehog idea” has Abbie Embry Turner and Kathy Kilrain del Rio supporting the 14 Literacy Volunteer Affiliate programs in Maine. Their work has them reaching out to each affiliate and collaborating with affiliates to establish best practices in adult literacy and learner / volunteer management. By being more in tune with affiliates, LV-Maine is able to be proactive in responding to challenges and opportunities. Additionally, Abbie and Kathy are taking our “hedgehog idea” at LV Maine to the next level by mapping out how literacy needs are being met (or not) within the state across all providers. This will enable providers that include Literacy Volunteer affiliates, Adult Education, and others to:

- Track the level of literacy in the community;
- Use that data to help identify what, and how much, literacy assistance is needed;
- Assess the extent to which community literacy programs are meeting the need, including how well existing literacy programs are doing;
- Coordinate use of outcome information to help identify successful practices; and
- Provide assistance to literacy programs to help them both track and improve effectiveness.

The second “hedgehog idea” has Elaine Tselikis focused on advocating for Maine learners and affiliate organizations at the State level. Elaine’s role will be centered on forging partnerships at the state level that will drive learners, tutors and volunteers to our affiliate partners. As part of that effort, Elaine will continue to build awareness of the full and positive impact the Maine Literacy Volunteers Network has in addressing low literacy levels here in Maine.

In addition to working with service providers that daily reach potential learners in the state, Elaine has developed an advocacy project entitled *Faces of Literacy, Voices of Courage* (or FaVo as she likes to coin it!) This innovative exhibition of 20 photographs and accompanying commentary depicting literacy learners and tutors exemplifies our mission, as the state office of the LV affiliate network, to raise awareness of and increase access to literacy services for adults. The portraits humanize the fact that one in seven Mainers struggles with reading; is aimed to reduce the shame and stigma of low literacy by emphasizing success; and shows that Literacy Volunteers offers life-changing solutions. The exhibition is currently touring the State and will effectively reach new parties that would like to help someone achieve their literacy goal, or need literacy assistance themselves. Please see the following link for an updated schedule:

[http://www.lvmaine.org/favo\\_exhibits.htm](http://www.lvmaine.org/favo_exhibits.htm)

### "With a Little Help from My Friends"

The above line is originally the name of a Beatles (and later, Joe Cocker) tune. I would be remiss if I didn’t thank a few parties that have and are helping Literacy Volunteers of Maine as we develop and execute on our “hedgehog ideas.” First, Common Good Ventures (CGV) selected, with **Maine Community Foundation**, LVM as a partner for their **Nonprofit Effectiveness Program**. From this program, we’ve been extremely lucky to have

received a financial benefit in addition to the expertise of CGV's Managing Director, Barbara Irish. Barbara has been crucial to the board and staff in focusing our efforts and assisting in the strategic and tactical planning of the organization. Second, Maureen Keeley at the Institute for Civic Leadership is working hard to provide us highly skilled and passionate committee members so we can strengthen the efforts of our staff and accelerate our efforts.

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Every day, the Maine Literacy Volunteers Network teaches adults the literacy skills they need to change their lives, as thousands have already. Literacy Volunteers of Maine is committed to strengthening our Network so it can reach out to serve the 200,000 Mainers living with low-literacy. Elaine, Abbie, Kathy and the LVM Board of Directors are energized to make a difference in this statistic, and after reading this letter we hope that you are, too.

Thank you for your continued support of Literacy Volunteers of Maine.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Benjamin J. Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "B" and "S".

Benjamin J. Smith  
Board of Directors Co-Chair  
Literacy Volunteers of Maine