Virtual Reference and FDLP

A Partnership?

Past, Present and Future

- **A Past Model: GovXpress**

- **A Present Model: GIO**

- **A Future Model**

A Past Model

GovXpress at UF

- **Staffed by Government Documents Department at the University of Florida**
- **Viewed this service as our part of our mission as a Regional**
- **Funded by an LSTA Grant used to purchase software**
- **Sent an information packet to <u>every</u> library in Florida with link/logo**
- **Dismal failure!**

Why it failed in my opinion

- **Before it's time – libraries were not ready for something called chat that was not allowed on public computers**
- **Perceived need did not exist in Florida**
- **Patrons did not know they needed "government information"**

Current Model - GIO

- **38 Federal Depository Libraries**
- **OCLC's QuestionPoint software**
- **Chat and email**
- **Began August, 2004**

Links on libraries' homepages

Project's Purpose

The primary goal of the project was to see how a group of libraries participating in the Federal Depository Library Program might use the virtual reference software owned by OCLC, Inc.

GIO Statistics

August, 2004 - December, 2004
   Chat – 73
   Email – 60

January 2005 – December 2005
   Chat – 506
   Email – 702

January, 2006 – September 2006
   Chat – 73
   Email - 128

Positive Comments from GIO Participants

- **Workable model for a cooperative effort across state lines**
- **Only 2 hours per week – not a staffing problem**
- **Software was free**
- **OCLC offers good infrastructure**

Negative Comments from Participants

- **Low statistics**
- **Answer questions about other local or state governments**
- **Did not like software**
- **Links to service should not be on library web pages – should be elsewhere**
- **Needs more publicity**

Success?

- **Proves that a cooperative service using OCLC's software is feasible.**
- **What about the statistics? During its busiest period (2005) if 38 libraries shared the burden equally, it came to 14 chat sessions in one year with close to 100 hours of staff time for each library.**

Why Statistics are Low (in my opinion)

- **Like GovX, links are on library pages and this is not where people go for government information**
- **Patrons do not know they are looking for "government information"**
- **Patrons are now empowered by the web and would rather find it themselves using search engines**

A New Model

- **First question that needs to be answered:**

Is there a <u>need</u> for a national virtual reference service staffed by Federal Depository Librarians?

Survey of Regionals

- **Surveyed Regional Libraries on their participation in Virtual Reference services at their library**
- **Asked an open-ended question about the feasibility of a national service**

Regional Participation – 70%

Does your Library provide or participate in a Virtual Reference Service?   Response Total
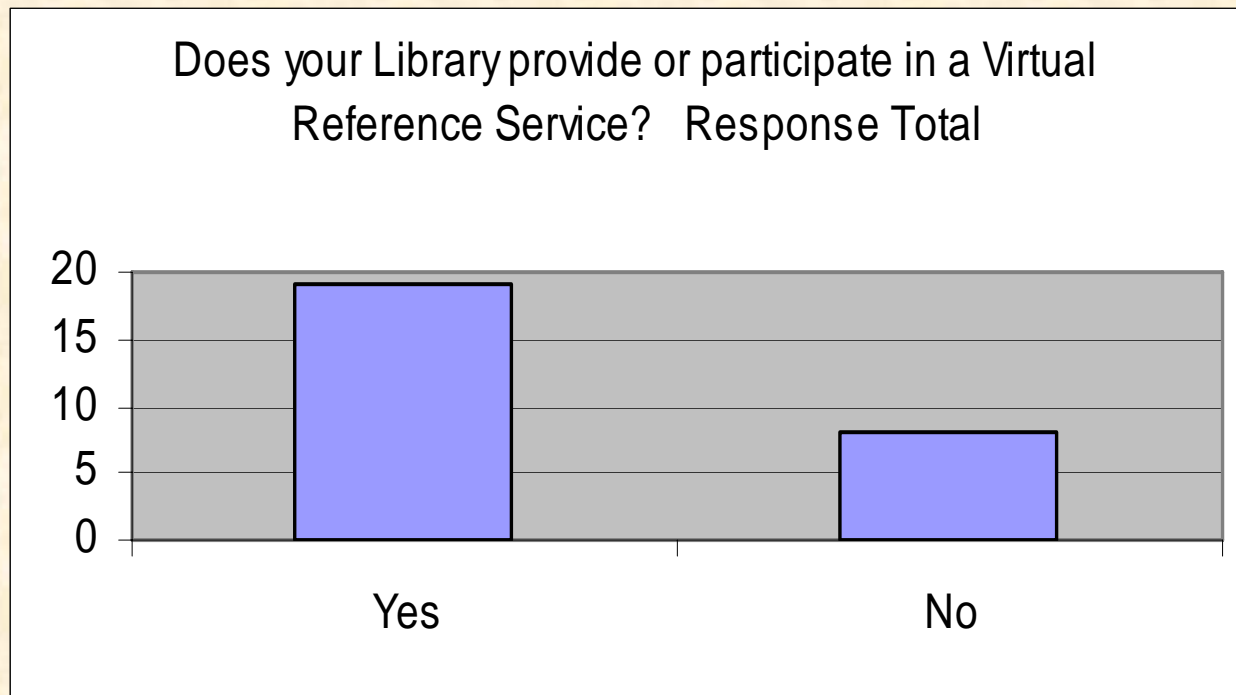
Willingness to Participate in a National Service – 72%

VR Software – 68% Use QuestionPoint

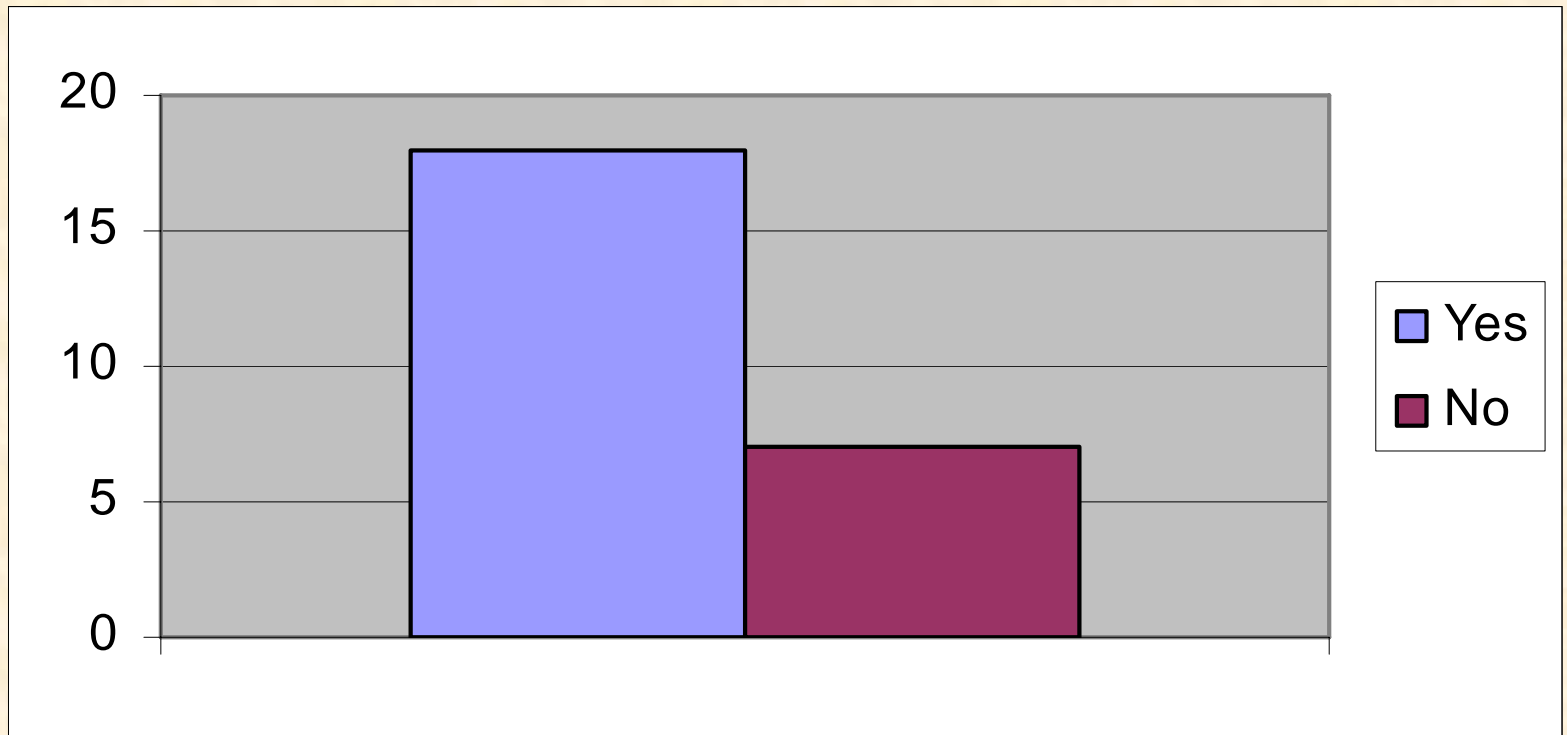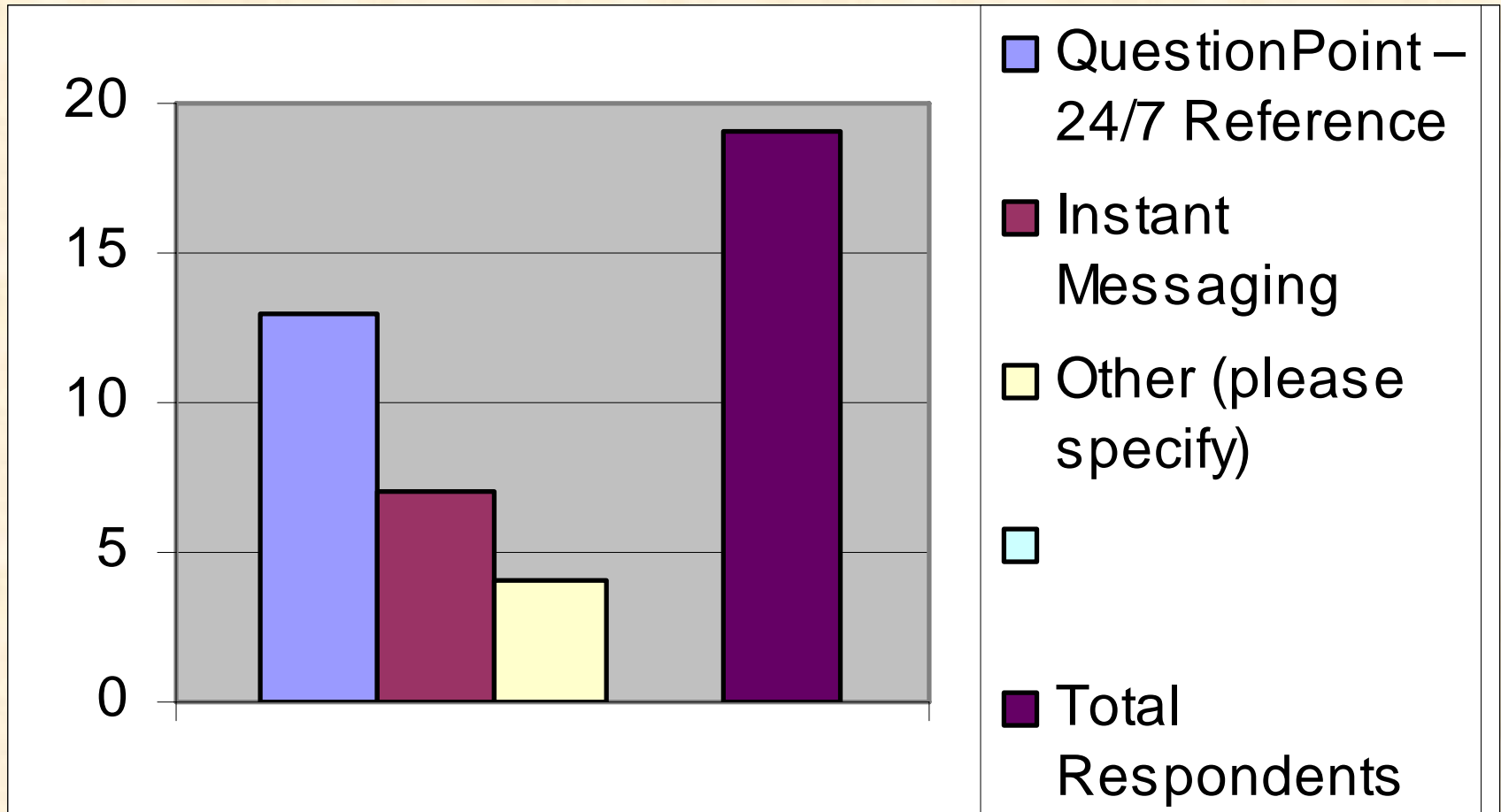# Where should links to this service appear?

- **GPO Website 77.8%21**
- **Federal Depository Library Websites 70.4%19**
- **Regional Library Websites 55.6%15**
- **FirstGov 51.9%14**
- **Google U.S. Government Search 44.4%12**
- **Other (please specify) 18.5%**

Survey Answers on the Feasibility of a National Service

- **Because of lack of traffic on the existing pilot project, I'm better off merging our departmental address into our central VR service and avoid confusing patrons with two different branded ways of contacting us**

Feasibility (continued)

- **Our experience with GIO is that there simply isn't a justifiable audience for this service**

- **The average patron has no idea whether their query requires government information or not….regular people don't think like that – librarians do**

Feasibility (continued)

- **Library administrations perceive it as "competing" with local chat services**
- **If links can't appear on Federal Agency web sites I'm not sure it would be worth it. I feel that's the most important place we could be of assistance**
- **I am not comfortable with putting an "official" government stamp on it and having it run by GPO**

Feasibility (continued)

- **The service would be most helpful if there were a well developed system for referring patrons to librarians with special expertise, such as in legal information or Census data**

- **We participated in OCLC's QuestionPoint virtual reference service and found that it cost too much and wasn't used enough to justify the cost**

Feasibility (continued)

- **The amount of time required would determine our participation**

- **If we participate what would my library get out of this?**

- **It's important to place the links where information seekers have questions or reach frustration – search engine and agency pages**

Feasibility (continued)

- **I fear being overwhelmed with questions if FirstGov or Google provide links**

- **I hope that GPO can coordinate with other consortia that are providing virtual reference**

What does this tell us/me?

- **Smaller number of Regionals than expected participate in VR**

- **Preference for concentrating staff time on local chat service**

- **GIO has not demonstrated a need for the service**

- **Links should be where patrons search; this came out in open-ended responses but not in the specific question about links**

A New Model – my ideas

- **Until the NEED has been demonstrated, GPO should not pursue a national VR service**
- **Avenues already exist to answer the questions of users of Government Information:**

FirstGov

FIRSTGOV.gov
The U.S. Government's Official Web Portal

Home   About Us   Site Index   Español   Other Languages

XML RSS Feeds from FirstGov.gov

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)   **Ask Your Question**   **FAQ Help**

Use the form below to submit any questions you have about the U.S. government. If you provide your email address, a member of our Citizen Response Team will respond to you within two business days. For **privacy and security** purposes, we recommend that you do NOT include any other personal information, especially Social Security numbers.

Please note: We currently can only accept and respond to inquiries in English or Spanish.

Please select one of the following categories: (required)

Select a category...

E-mail Address: (required only if you would like a response)

Zip Code: (optional, but will help us respond to your message)

Done

GPO Access

EPA

My Ideas continued

- **Do we really think these agencies and companies want our assistance?**
- **Why haven't they asked?**
- **Could we answer an EPA reference question better than an EPA staff member?**
- **Are we trying to justify our existence?**
- **Does it fit in with the mission of our libraries?**

My Conclusions

- **Federal Depository Libraries need to focus on thoughtful Web Page development to reach out to users of the Internet who seek information using search engines**

Specialize!

- **Web pages should focus on state and local resources and should have a VR component that will provide state and local experts to those who need that information**

Example of Specialized Search

Conclusions Continued

- **Depository Libraries should maintain accurate statistics of web page visits to justify their existence**

- **Depository Libraries not currently offering a VR service should consider chat via AIM and other services – it's free and the way young patrons and increasing older patrons communicate.**

GPO's Role

- **Provide a link to an alphabetical list of regional library web sites or state/regional chat services on the GPO Access help page**

- **Consider joining QuestionPoint as a library – many depositories are part of this already**

GPO's Role

- **Contact other agencies to determine if there is a need for a cadre of government information specialists to assist their staff; if the answer is yes, work with Council to develop a plan based on the GIO model**