



SUSTAINABLE
COMMUNITIES

Leadership Brief: Libraries Leading Civic Engagement

ABOUT THIS LEADERSHIP BRIEF

This Leadership Brief highlights the essential roles public libraries play in advancing civic engagement in the communities they serve. It identifies five leadership roles to help libraries broaden their impact as go-to resources for building a culture of informed, engaged and empowered residents and provides examples of how libraries are strengthening civic connections.

OVERVIEW: Civic engagement is a cornerstone of democratic society representing promise, opportunity and responsibility. During these increasingly fractious times, strengthening the foundations of civic engagement — volunteering, voting, participating in civic and social organizations and engaging in activities that strengthen community and seek common ground — is particularly important. Promoting and supporting successful civic engagement requires deliberate, consistent and purposeful outreach to:

- ▶ Encourage people to contribute to their communities in meaningful, productive and sustained ways
- ▶ Create an environment in which people of all ages and from all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds feel they have a voice, a role and a valued place in their communities
- ▶ Build capacity to tackle challenging or controversial issues, heal community wounds when needed and embrace community change
- ▶ Strengthen democracy and build strong communities

Research and experience show that engaged residents generate optimism about the future, contribute to good decisions on tough community challenges and enhance local economic vitality, public safety and community stability.

Public libraries, with their stature as trusted, inclusive, venerable and enduring community resources — “welcoming places where everybody is somebody” — are ideal resources to forge strategies that strengthen civic life and respond to emerging challenges.

“There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the Earth as the Free Public Library, this republic of letters, where neither rank, office, nor wealth receives the slightest consideration.”

— Andrew Carnegie



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LIBRARIES AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Public libraries bring substantial assets to support civic engagement and community action including:

- ▶ Access to the entire community
- ▶ Physical space in neighborhoods to reach people where they are
- ▶ Technology resources to broaden access and create connections
- ▶ Knowledgeable and skilled staff
- ▶ A reputation as a source of factual, unbiased information
- ▶ The ability to attract diverse partners and create alliances
- ▶ A history of successful and valued performance in the community

Perhaps most important, libraries are already at the heart of the community, and civic engagement is at the heart of the 21st century public library. “People view their public library as this democratic place where opinions are heard, resources are universally available, everyone is welcome and programs are offered about things that matter in the community,” said Matthew K. Poland, director and CEO of the Russell Library in Middletown, Connecticut.

The following sections highlight five leadership roles for public libraries to broaden and deepen their contribution to civic and community engagement.

CIVIC EDUCATOR

To be active participants in civic life, people need a combination of knowledge, skills and motivation. Libraries serve as civic educators by:

- ▶ Increasing awareness of civics, civic engagement and civic responsibility
- ▶ Maximizing access to information about opportunities and resources for civic engagement
- ▶ Creating, collecting and distributing reliable information about the community and its residents, emerging issues and challenges, political decisions and whatever is on the minds of residents

- ▶ Conducting forums and workshops to support both voter and candidate education
- ▶ Bringing civic education and resources into the community to reach audiences not connected to or able to get to a neighborhood library

CONVERSATION STARTER

Democracy happens when interested people engage in informed discussion about issues affecting their lives and their community. More than hosts for events, libraries can be conversation starters by bringing emerging and controversial issues forward in a safe, unbiased environment where all opinions are valued and heard. Libraries initiate, shape and sustain community conversations by:

- ▶ Embracing a leadership role as a community convener
- ▶ Creating systems and processes for identifying issues that affect the community’s long-term health
- ▶ Knowing all of the community stakeholders and their interests, issues and concerns and creating partnerships that foster productive dialogue
- ▶ Facilitating community conversations through in-house expertise or strategic partnerships
- ▶ Being active and visible in the community where issues surface and channeling informal conversations, community buzz and incidents into productive discussion, problem solving and collective action

COMMUNITY BRIDGE

Libraries regularly serve as a bridge for civic and community connections by offering a range of easily accessible services and opportunities for diverse populations. From programs for the homeless, youth-at-risk, the unemployed, senior citizens and immigrants to strategic partnerships that connect residents with state and local elected leaders and vital community services, libraries demonstrate that everyone is part of the community. In today’s fractious environment, libraries can expand their community bridge role by:

- ▶ Being intentional about finding people who feel isolated and disconnected from the community

- ▶ Engaging people who don't have a voice in the community
- ▶ Connecting individuals and groups who have little in common to build new relationships
- ▶ Serving as a safe refuge for residents in need
- ▶ Creating and maintaining a visible environment of tolerance

VISIONARY

When diverse people are enlisted in the work of shaping a community vision, they become optimistic about the future and more committed to supporting community action. Visioning processes engage people in defining their future, contribute to civic health and build stronger communities.

Libraries can lead the way by:

- ▶ Promoting the importance of community vision as a vital component of successful civic engagement
- ▶ Leveraging community conversations as a foundation for shaping a longer-term community vision
- ▶ Refining the library's vision to support community building and civic engagement
- ▶ Offering to support, lead and facilitate broad community visioning efforts
- ▶ Creating opportunities to get people involved in broader conversations about community issues and challenges

CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

Becoming a center for democracy in action requires moving from hosting events that support civic engagement to leading a coordinated strategy to achieve active and purposeful engagement that promotes civic health. Being successful as a center for democracy in action requires:

- ▶ Ensuring that the library's role as a civic engagement leader is widely communicated, understood, accepted and valued
- ▶ Committing to civic engagement and community building as a core library priority

- ▶ Modeling civic engagement including encouraging staff to be actively involved in community work both in their library jobs and their personal lives

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN ACTION

The following examples highlight the exciting work of public libraries carrying out their civic engagement leadership roles.

Civic Educator

Wichita Public Library's *City 101* is a series of classes held in library branches to introduce community residents to how local government works and how they can get involved in neighborhood and community action. Sessions taught by neighborhood leaders are designed to increase knowledge of city government and create stronger government-community relations. Candidates for the Wichita City Council and Wichita School Board were among the first to attend the training series.

Kansas City Public Library offers free classes to residents who are on a path to citizenship. The 12-week program is designed to teach the tenets of democracy and information needed to pass citizenship tests while also building bonds of fellowship among people from different backgrounds.

Conversation Starter

Fort Vancouver Regional Library District hosts quarterly community conversations on topics of local importance to provide an opportunity for residents to share differing viewpoints in a spirit of respect and discovery. *Forum @ the Library* uses a citizen planning committee to identify issues and a partnership with a local university to train library staff and students as facilitators. To broaden its impact and reputation as a hub for open conversation, the library shows social justice documentaries monthly at one of its branches followed a week later by a discussion about the issues raised in the documentary using a structured format. Topics have included racial inequality, the political divide, the environment and troubled youth.

Palo Alto Library's *Being Different Together* series is designed to engage the community in thought-provoking conversations as a path toward building and nurturing a community that models respect for differences. The library

is working with the city's Office of Human Relations and the Human Relations Commission to carry out the community conversations.

Community Bridge

Nashville Public Library launched its *New Faces* program to tell the story of the city's increasing diversity and create relationships with people who might not be comfortable sharing with a government "authority." The library collected 67 oral histories from immigrants, refugees and first-generation city residents to increase understanding of diverse cultures in the community, break down barriers and create new connections.

Montgomery County Public Libraries became a vital community bridge after an explosion destroyed an apartment building leaving many low-income, immigrant residents homeless and disconnected from services, family and friends. The library branch nearest the apartment building became a space to meet, obtain the latest news and get essential services. The library's response to the crisis led to sustained connections with a previously disconnected group.

Skokie Public Library's *Neutral Zone* offers a weekly talking circle for teens from different backgrounds and social groups to openly share feelings, learn how others cope with teen challenges and celebrate their successes. Through *Neutral Zone*, teens explore tough issues, improve listening and communication skills and build bridges among teens who wouldn't otherwise get to know each other.

Visionary

The County of Los Angeles Public Library hosted a series of community visioning sessions to encourage open conversations among customers, community stakeholders and library staff about their vision for the library and how it can fulfill community aspirations and needs. More than 1,000 people participated in the discussions. The process produced new ideas about the library's role in the community and established new trusting relationships.

Center for Democracy in Action

Baltimore County Public Library established "be an instrument of democracy" as an objective in its strategic plan and provides a range of programs to carry out that objective including two successful community justice

forums following racial violence in the city in 2015 and a *Voices of Government* series leading up to and following the 2016 presidential election. The library is launching a new series, *Voices of Our Community*, to build a better understanding of common ground among different religions and cultures.

Libraries Standing Tall

In an environment of decaying trust in public institutions, libraries remain a trusted and respected public resource, which makes them ideal civic engagement leaders. Libraries have embraced that role by providing leadership, information, tools and a safe place for informed conversations on tough issues. With many aspects of democracy under attack today, libraries can play a powerful role in providing reliable information and confronting new community challenges such as inclusion and tolerance, race and social equity and preserving the foundations of strong democracy.

Urban Libraries Council, founded in 1971, is the voice for public libraries and the force that inspires them to evolve. ULC creates the tools, techniques and ideas to make ongoing improvements and upgrades in services and technology. ULC speaks loudly and clearly about the value public libraries bring to communities, and secures funding for research that results in the development of new programs and services. By serving as a forum for library leadership, ULC produces innovative ideas and best practices that ensure community impact. For more information, visit UrbanLibraries.org.

¹ Reported in multiple research sources including America's Civic Health Index 2009, National Center on Citizenship Making Local Democracy Work: Municipal Views About Public Engagement, National League of Cities, 2010; A Tale of Two Cities 2010: Civic Health in Miami and Minneapolis-St. Paul, National Conference on Citizenship, and Connected Communities: Local Governments as a Partner in Civic Engagement and Community Building, Alliance for Innovation, 2010.

² Gerry Meek, Promoting Civic Literacy and Community Building: Civic Engagement Matters at the Calgary Public Library," in Public Libraries and Civic Engagement, National Civic Review Special Issue (Denver, Colorado: Winter 2012, page 41).

³ For more examples of libraries carrying out their civic engagement leadership roles, visit the ULC website at www.urbanlibraries.org and click on Innovations and Libraries Stand Tall under Initiatives.