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Urban Libraries Take a Leading Stance to Advance Equitable Data Governance and Literacy in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

The Urban Libraries Council launches initiative to expand the role of North American public libraries in promoting democratic digital citizenship and educating communities about artificial intelligence.

WASHINGTON — Artificial intelligence has emerged as a revolutionary force in the modern world. The transformative power of this new technology has already been seen, and is expanding at a rapid rate, across nearly all areas of 21st-century public life – including education, employment and civic engagement. While AI promises to enhance our communities in remarkable ways, it also poses significant threats to the prosperity, privacy and security of individuals who do not understand these new technologies and their data rights.

The Urban Libraries Council has launched a new initiative to empower North American public libraries to stand at the forefront of the movement for an equitable and inclusive future for the storage, privacy and application of data as AI technology becomes more ubiquitous. This initiative began with a working group meeting held January 9-10 that convened library leaders from across the U.S. and Canada to discuss opportunities for libraries to collaborate in order to get ahead of the potential risks presented by AI and to maximize the technology's potential for public good.

The working group session included top-level leaders from:

- Anythink Libraries (Colo.)
- Baltimore County Public Library (Md.)
- Boston Public Library (Mass.)
- Broward County Libraries (Fla.)
- Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (Pa.)
- Charlotte Mecklenburg Library (N.C.)
- Chicago Public Library (Ill.)
- DC Public Library (D.C.)
- King County Library System (Wash.)
- Los Angeles Public Library (Calif.)
- Milwaukee Public Library (Wis.)
- Roanoke County Public Library (Va.)

- Toledo Lucas County Public Library (Ohio)
- Toronto Public Library (Ontario)

Participants in the working group meeting were also joined by Paul Kihn, Washington D.C.'s Acting Deputy Mayor for Education. Kihn offered a perspective on how public libraries can serve as valuable partners in advancing informed digital citizenship in cities and counties, and how they can serve as models for equitable public data policy and processes to their local government partners.

Following this initial meeting, ULC and its members will work together to develop AI definitions, terminology and frameworks to best position libraries as trusted public institutions for equitable access to AI information and education. ULC will also develop new tools, educational programming and research to share best practices and insights generated from this initiative with library field leaders.

“As our digital footprints become increasingly intertwined with the pursuits of our dreams, we face enormous challenges to social equity brought on by careless or biased handling of public data,” said ULC President and CEO Susan Benton. “As beacons of trust, innovation and information, public libraries are perfectly positioned to lead this work and to establish blueprints for how AI can augment our futures without sacrificing our core democratic values.”

About the Urban Libraries Council

The 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 also 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. And by serving as a forum for library leadership, ULC produces innovative ideas and best practices that ensure community impact.

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