

Engaging Local Officials on Democracy

Public libraries are critical cornerstones of democracy, and democracy's future is diminished when people's access to power, information, a diversity of voices and the ability to influence policy are restricted. As leaders of North America's public libraries, we are committed to preserving, protecting and advancing the highest hopes and ideals of democracy so all members of our communities may fully participate in the democratic process.

Library leaders in North America are leading the way in helping communities thrive, challenging the status quo and shifting what local governments do every day. The tips below provide a path for public libraries to connect and engage with their local government leadership and elected officials to share their commitment to democracy. We recognize everyone's experience is different and one size does not fit all. These tips are recommended for those who are looking to start or strengthen their connection with their local government leaders.

1. Build Relationships with Local Leadership

If you do not sit within your mayor's cabinet or report directly to your mayor or city/county executive, work through your direct supervisor to develop support for establishing a relationship directly with your mayor or city/county executive. Request standing meetings with them as well as a seat at the table with all county- or city-wide department heads. If your access to county commissioners, county supervisors or city council members is limited by standing policy and procedures, propose a method of communication that would open up doors for the elected officials to hear from you on a regular basis. Understand the data on your community and be ready to communicate the value of your library system.



TIP: Invite local officials to participate or speak at key library events. High-profile engagements can serve as an entry point for elected officials to get more involved with the library.



TIP: Ask for a regular rotation in presenting and updating directly to county board or city council members about the library's strategic plan, library-related declarations and presentation of awards.



TIP: If your library is a direct agency of a county, city, province or other government entity, library leaders should make a point to get to know other department heads to partner and to position themselves as their equal.



2. Be Persistent and Be Prepared to Have Difficult Conversations

Civic dialogue and direct engagement can lead to difficult conversations, where goals and values of the library might be at odds with those of other departments or leadership at large. We see this particularly related to ideas around censorship today. Take time educating them about the role of the library and the importance of libraries to democracy at large, and be sure they understand your views on First Amendment freedoms and Fourth Amendment protections and how they relate to your work. Be sure to reinforce the library's role as a trusted convener available to engage the public on pressing community issues.



TIP: Stay outcomes-focused rather than drilling into details, and use language about the library that is not divisive. Refer to the library as a “convener,” a “place of dialogue, civil discourse,” etc. Pay particular attention to terms that resonate in your community i.e. equity, democracy, rights, voting, marketplace of ideas and so on. Study your community and be sure to tailor your communication to your audience.



TIP: Be sure to shine a light on the range of work you are doing. Updating leaders on the library's critical role in early literacy and education in general are wins and will help you gain trust you may need to leverage when more controversial programs or collections issues arise.

3. Connect the Library's Role to Your Community's Strategic Priorities

Today, many local leaders on both sides of the aisle are looking to support their local small business community, address workforce issues and support economic recovery. Draw clear pictures of how the library is supporting the local economy by providing support for entrepreneurship and workforce development, for example, as well as any specific issues of local concern or of the specific official.



TIP: If you aren't included, ask for input in any municipal-wide strategic plan. Stay abreast of priorities of elected officials and municipal leadership. Tailor programming and add collections support for these.



TIP: Be prepared to provide data and research to prove your case that the library is instrumental and pivotal in these various roles.



Scan to read the Declaration of Democracy

or visit www.urbanlibraries.org/initiatives/declaration-of-democracy