



HEALTHY,  
SUSTAINABLE  
COMMUNITIES

# Leadership Brief: Libraries as Cornerstones of Democracy

## ABOUT THIS LEADERSHIP BRIEF

This Leadership Brief focuses on the importance of public libraries as leaders in democracy and civic engagement, ensuring all community members have the ability to exercise their fundamental rights. It calls on library executives to embody the values of ULC's Declaration of Democracy and join a collective of leaders to educate the public about their rights and encourage active citizenry.

Assaults on freedoms and human rights basic to democracy are accelerating. Values we've held dear as library professionals, particularly around intellectual freedom and the inherent right to read within it, are being questioned. We are witnessing a rise of injustice evidenced by calls for book bans and program cancellations, a proliferation of misinformation and unchecked racism and threats to the LGBTQ+ community's right to exist.

Because intellectual freedom and equity are mutually reinforcing principles, and the targeting of vulnerable groups and petitions for censorship are attempts to marginalize the voices of equity-deserving groups, we must hold fast to protect the library's place as a cornerstone of democracy. ULC's [Statement on Race and Social Equity](#) reinforces libraries' commitment to eliminating racial and social equity barriers in order to create a more just, democratic society.

According to [Public Agenda's 2021 Yakelovich Democracy Monitor Report](#), most Americans think the country's democracy is in trouble. [In 2021, Pew Research reported](#) 66% of Canadians were content with the state of democracy in their country as opposed to 41% in the U.S. A year later, [Reuters reported](#) that an Angus Reid Institute Poll showed 78% of Canadians were concerned the "strife" in the United States could bring "danger at home."

The current rise in book banning through policy and legislation is the one of the most glaring examples of the challenges facing libraries, and thus, democracy. These efforts are meeting with increased success in some parts of the United States as lawmakers codify restrictions on reading material – and we stand firmly against the furtherance of such restrictive policy-making.

It is incumbent upon libraries to stand up against all efforts to impede the democratic process and to limit the full participation in civic life. We must do all we can to encourage civic engagement and the exercise of our fundamental rights.

We recognize the unique role each library plays and that actions they can take are going to differ according to their scope of influence and appropriateness for their community. We stand in solidarity with one another as we stand for democracy and for the fullness of human rights imperative to its realization for all.

*"Library leaders play an essential role in ensuring free access to information for all. The public library has a responsibility to cultivate a democracy grounded in respectful, yet robust, public engagement."*

— Brooks Rainwater, President and CEO, Urban Libraries Council



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## DECLARATION OF DEMOCRACY

The Urban Libraries Council's Declaration of Democracy identifies *five core areas* libraries can focus on to increase their reach in promoting a more democratic community:

1. Educating and informing the public about the rights afforded to them in the United States Constitution and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms
2. Encouraging an active citizenry where all are engaged in creating an equitable and just society
3. Serving as a convener for and facilitator of civic engagement and civil discourse
4. Increasing efforts to fight misinformation and disinformation
5. Leveraging programming, collections and other resources to promote human dignity, open dialogue and respect for diverse viewpoints, civil rights, and all other protections and freedoms fundamental to democracies

[Read the full Declaration of Democracy text.](#)

### LIBRARIES LEADING DEMOCRACY

By empowering their patrons through a variety of programs and services, and offering space for public use, libraries across North America play an important role in cultivating healthy democratic communities. They continue to respond in creative ways to build on this legacy.

#### **Intellectual Freedom Campaign**

##### **Prince George's County Memorial Library System**

branches have been vandalized and programs have been disrupted because of LGBTQ+ content and their commitment to Black Lives Matter. In response, the library developed "Rock Banned," a public awareness campaign, to inform customers about intellectual freedom and highlight the increase in book challenges. The campaign included digital content, a call to action and keynote event with Pulitzer-winning writer Leonard Pitts Jr.

#### **Let's Be Neighbors: Connecting to Civic Engagement**

**Salt Lake County Library** hosted a virtual series focused on timely areas of public concern, presented by local experts. The impartial sessions included multiple panelists who shared knowledge to address issues and elevate their community. The library developed a platform where individuals could be heard and get answers from knowledgeable experts. The library offered 15 community programs including 42 unique partner presenters, and received 1,555 views and gave away 3,175 community engagement take-and-make kits. Over 100 fleece hats, scarves, and mittens were returned from the kits and provided for individuals in need.

#### **Encouraging Civic Engagement through Voting**

**Calgary Public Library** saw a gap in trusted and accurate information in the lead-up to Calgary's 2021 Municipal Election and launched a digital vote planning tool to drive engagement among populations with historically low participation rates. Plan My Vote was developed in partnership with Elections Calgary to help people plan their voting process ahead of time. The app was used over 10,000 times, simplified the process, reduced barriers to participation and resulted in a new partnership with Elections Calgary.

#### **Civic Engagement through Community Conversations**

The **Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library** partnered with Cincinnati-based Action Tank, a civic engagement educational organization, to offer a community conversation entitled "What should we expect from our elected leaders?" in the election season of Autumn 2021. The library targeted voters from across the city of Cincinnati to convene to share their lived experiences and ideas, and to engage in conversation with each other. Action Tank facilitated the event. Approximately 20 community members from different neighborhoods attended, and a primary outcome was consensus that community members must be civically active in order to safeguard our local democracy.

#### **Confronting Censorship**

**Dallas Public Library** collaborated with PEN America to develop a series of Media and Information Literacy events. The library hosted a forum about book bans and the freedom to read featuring PEN America guests and local advocates. Events in the series included topics such as the psychology of misinformation, how to talk

with friends and family and strategies for finding credible sources. They created escape rooms to teach media literacy by using misleading clues, reaching more people than would likely want to come to a seminar.

### ***Prioritizing Civic Engagement through Staffing***

The **DC Public Library** received funding in 2019 to hire its first Civic Engagement Coordinator. In addition to being responsible for coordinating the library efforts to assist the Board of Elections with early voting and election day activities, the coordinator was charged with devising the library's strategy to increase civic participation among communities with historically low turnout. One recent and notable event was the "GoGo Vote Party" that lured residents with music and activities in an effort to increase voter registrations, recruit election workers and provide election information.

### ***Empowering the Community with Cell Phones***

The **Las Vegas-Clark County Library District** provided 400+ smart phones to low-income and homeless adult and teen residents through a groundbreaking Cell Phone Lending Program, in partnership with the Nevada Homeless Alliance and Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth. Each phone is pre-loaded with Library District apps that provide life-enriching educational resources and critical social and community services. The barrier-busting program provided internet connectivity to adults and teens who are low-income or experiencing homelessness. The phones were distributed to vetted clients of the partner agencies at an event that included a vendor fair with representatives from local social, health, and employment support agencies, a COVID-19 shot clinic, a mobile shower truck, a training session to educate recipients about the resources and apps and a cell phone tutorial.

### ***Promoting a Civil Society***

**Toronto Public Library** runs an ongoing series called On Civil Society, designed to take patrons deeper into the issues affecting our world today and encourage audience participation in conversations where they can expect to challenge their own perspectives and learn from one another through civil discourse. Conversations focus on local, national and international issues and perspectives featuring leading experts and thinkers from all over the world on the critical topics of our time. The library runs approximately 15 programs a season (Fall and Spring) which are available in-person, online and on demand.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS | CALL TO ACTION**

Libraries, and thus the communities we serve, benefit by **creating spaces where entering library doors is an act of participating in democracy, where people can freely learn from all points of view, make up their own minds and engage in their communities.** As proud leaders of these community cornerstones, libraries will continue to guard democracy's great promise and ensure all those we serve are included in its fulfillment.

Because Intellectual Freedom is a core tenet of librarianship, it's important to understand the principle itself is grounded in the [First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution](#), the [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom](#), and in [Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) which states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." Years of court rulings and policymaking have shaped the discourse and laws to this day. When libraries stand on the principles outlined in the American Library Association (ALA)'s Library Bill of Rights, they are standing on firm historical footing.

[According to ALA](#), there were 1,269 attempts to restrict library resources and 2,571 unique titles targeted in 2022, despite the fact that the vast majority of citizens oppose book bans. Libraries may demonstrate their resolve by signing the [Declaration of Democracy](#), joining voices around the world in standing for principles of freedom. We will design our services, programs and use of space according to the five areas outlined in the Declaration, including educating and informing the public, encouraging an active citizenry, serving as a convener, increasing efforts to fight misinformation and disinformation and leveraging all of our resources to promote human dignity, open dialogue and respect for diverse viewpoints, civil rights and all other protections and freedoms fundamental to democracies.

The **Urban Libraries Council** is an innovation and action tank of North America's leading public library systems. We drive cutting-edge research and strategic partnerships to elevate the power of libraries as essential, transformative institutions for the 21st-century. We identify significant challenges facing today's communities and develop new tools and techniques to help libraries achieve stronger outcomes in education, workforce and economic development, digital equity and race and social equity.