LIBRARIES
COMMUNITIES
ACCESSIBLE SMALL AND
RURAL COMMUNITIES

# This Guide's Purpose

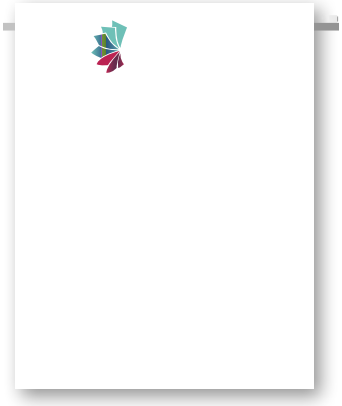
This guide for facilitating conversations on accessibility has been created to help you navigate the process of planning for and facilitating conversations. This is a supplement to the *Libraries Transforming Communities: Leading Conversations in Small and Rural Libraries Facilitation Guide*, and o□ers a more detailed approach to the considerations to be made in creating more inclusive community conversations about accessibility.

This guide is intended to help you carry out conversations that are inclusive of all populations; especially members of the disability, neurodivergent, older adult, immigrant, unhoused, veteran, caregivers, and other communities that frequently face barriers when it comes to accessing or making the most of the library.

The guide will cover tangible details in planning and carrying out conversations on accessibility issues that matter to the community, and are o□ered in a manner and format that all people can access and participate in fully.

Our hope is to provide you with the tools and guidelines for creating more accessible conversations, and to help you feel empowered to host engaging community events.

Check out the **Libraries Transforming Communities: Leading Conversations in Small and Rural Libraries Facilitation Guide** for a comprehensive look at conversation planning and facilitation skills!



# Accessibility: What Do We Mean?

What do we mean when we talk about creating inclusive and equitable community conversations by prioritizing accessibility?

By emphasizing accessibility, you can create community spaces and events that are inclusive of all people. Historically, our social systems have been created by and benefited non-disabled, neurotypical, and privileged people, and this has shaped our community spaces and events to the point where people with di□erent needs or abilities have been marginalized or excluded. Accessibility is not automatic; it must be intentional, and it must be designed for.

Accessibility refers to “a site or facility, work environment, service or program that is easy to approach, enter, operate, participate in and or use safely and with dignity by a person with a disability”.[1] Often, institutions look to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) for guidance on how to create accessible spaces. However, just because something is technically ADA compliant does not mean that it is actually able to be accessed. ADA compliance often addresses only minimum accessibility needs. To create accessible community engagement opportunities, we must go beyond ADA compliance and take into consideration

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the multiple additional impacts on a participant's experience, such as physical and social logistics.

## Why Accessible Spaces Are Important

Designing accessible environments goes beyond brick and mortar. You must also take into consideration how you communicate with library patrons, website and digital accessibility, programmatic accessibility, resources and tools.

The Americans with Disabilities Act outlines the benefits of accessibility, mLang 62 Q31MCIDe

# Improving Accessibility Requires Community Involvement

Addressing and improving the accessibility of your library space, resources, tools, and programs improves the library for all community members. To do this most e□ectively, the populations who will benefit from these improvements need to be a part of the planning up front. Without their involvement and input, the library may be making assumptions about what is needed or wanted, or how to best serve the community.[4] This could lead to tools or services that are not utilized because they do not best meet the needs of the community.

**"Nothing About Us Without Us"**

A term coined by disability rights activists highlighting the need for full and authentic engagement with all members of the community.

The best way to address accessibility in your library is to engage the population you would like to reach, ask which of their needs or desires would be best served by the library, and explore together how you may address these opportunities. Through these conversations you can identify how to make the most of the library while creating new community relationships.

Libraries are well suited for this work because they are often seen as one of the more accessible or welcoming spaces for your community. By creating an environment that is accessible, this allows greater participation in community building and more opportunities to connect with those individuals who were previously disconnected. It provides an opportunity to think creatively about how to make the library more accessible, more supportive, and more fun for everyone. And by creating more accessible spaces at the library, you will help strengthen the community, as well as the library's ability to serve the whole community.

4 "Nothing about us without us," James Charlton, 1998. https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520224810/nothing-about-us-without-us

# Foundations for Community Conversations

## Co-Creation with the Community

One of the key foundations of community conversations is to co-create engagement e□orts WITH the community. As part of the library's commitment to making itself more accessible, it needs to actively include community members who will be directly impacted by those programs or measures.

Co-creation allows the whole community to determine its needs and how to address them. While the library may be in a position to implement, the community can help to determine the most e□ective approach to implementation. The community might also know of other resources or other organizations that can partner with the library. What starts as a conversation can open doors to further dialogue and greater access to and use of the library. More information about co-creation is included in the following pages and in the Additional Resources section.

### What Does Co-Creation Look Like?

- Genuinely building on-going relationships with diverse people and groups within the community (not just created for the sake of planning an event).
- Working with community organizations and institutions currently serving the disabled, aging, unhoused, neurodivergent, and or other historically marginalized populations to plan your event and boost attendance/ participation.
- Working directly with disabled, aging, unhoused, neurodivergent, and/or other historically marginalized community members to help shape the conversation you are wanting to have.
- Working with all of the above populations in identifying the needs of the community, and generating ideas for how to best address these needs.
- Collaboratively working on next action items, getting feedback on actions taken, and more.

## Taking a Trauma-Informed Approach

Another foundational consideration is taking a trauma-informed approach to planning community conversations.[5] It is helpful to understand and be cognizant of the fact that people do have trauma in their lives, significant trauma in some instances, and that can impact how people show up and participate.[6] By taking a trauma-informed approach, you take this into consideration during planning and engagement e□orts, and in pursuit of wider community building.

Engaging community members around conversations of accessibility, and the potential lack thereof, can bring to the surface experiences of discrimination, humiliation, and pain. In community conversations, you may be working with participants who may have been harmed in the past, including being excluded, discriminated against, and or verbally or physically attacked. Bearing witness to these experiences can be challenging yet important. You can be sensitive to these realities when working with the public in your conversations, and ensure further harm is not unintentionally inflicted. More information about taking a trauma-informed approach is included in the Additional Resources section.

## Addressing Biases and Assumptions

work to understand those assumptions and how they can influence your work with the community.

It is important to recognize the unconscious assumptions you make about others or biases you hold and how they may lead you to exclude, cause harm, or simply not do your best public-facing work. You can take action to get a better understanding of your own biases and be proactive in addressing how they manifest.

Consider the biases that are designed into your organization, unintentionally or intentionally. Organizations are created and maintained by people, and so their structures reflect human biases. Consider how the structure, culture, or history of your organization(s) have resulted in inequitable outcomes, and work to proactively mitigate those impacts.

As library sta looking to convene the community and explore accessibility, it is important that you identify biases and assumptions in language and facilitation practice to create a welcoming and safe environment. It is important to be more mindful as you work to build a more accessible library and ultimately a more inclusive community.

### Be Wary of the "isms…"

- **Racism:** the systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another.
- **Sexism:** prejudice or discrimination based on sex.
- **Ableism:** discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities.
- **Ageism:** prejudice or discrimination against a particular age-group and especially the elderly.
- **Classism:** the systemic oppression of the lower class and middle class to the advantage of the upper class.

Be mindful that these forms of oppression show up in a lot of ways. As you work on your community conversations, ask yourself whether these are showing up in your language, logistical choices, outreach, etc. Be mindful of ways to ensure everyone has the opportunity to participate, and is not being excluded.

**definitions from Merriam-Webster*

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## Location

Hold your conversations where people will be most comfortable and feel safe to attend, such as community spaces where people already convene (whether that is the library or another location). Consider the accessibility of the space, for example: does the building have ramps, elevators, automatic doors; accessible bathrooms that are functional and spacious enough for wheelchair users or other mobility device users; bathroom handlebars at user-appropriate levels? Are there gender-neutral bathrooms (sometimes called “family bathrooms”) available for individuals who feel safer using non-gendered facilities? Are there bathrooms with changing tables, ideally adult-sized changing tables which can be utilized for all ages? Can you allow for some social distancing in the space you select?

## Partners

What community leaders, trusted community-based groups, and or local organizations, such as schools, churches, service groups, patrons or other supporters, can help you out? Consider who already has relationships with the population(s) you are hoping to reach and contact them to discuss partnership. It may be helpful to learn from them how best to reach community members, as well as to learn what work they are already doing. This may provide the opportunity to support one another’s e□orts and avoid any unnecessary duplication of e□ort.

## Equipment

What additional equipment may you need? Will you need microphones, visual aids? Interpretation equipment, for instance, will help with allowing for multilingual conversations. Check that interpretation equipment is regularly tested to confirm it is functioning properly, and have extra batteries available as backup for your event.

## Language Access

Is there language translation for materials and or events, and interpretation provided for monolingual speakers? In multilingual settings, are monolingual English speakers given access to interpretation equipment so that non-English speakers are not singled out? When translating materials, best practice is to vet translated materials with people who are confident

or Latino/a, or Latinx, or Chicano/a/x (someone specifically of Mexican descent). If you are unsure how a person identifies racially or ethnically, consider politely asking what the most appropriate word(s) would be to use.

A note on utilizing person-first or identity-first language: Person-first language is a way to emphasize the person and view the disorder, disease, condition, or disability as only one part of the whole person. This framing describes what the person “has” rather than what the person “is”. Person-first language avoids using labels or adjectives to define someone, e.g., a "person with a disability" not "the disabled". Some communities, however, prefer identity-first language because they consider some characteristics as inseparable parts of their identity. The deaf and autistic communities, for example, often show a strong preference for identity-first language.

You may need to “create the table” with the community where they are, as opposed to the traditional idea of the community coming to the table. Especially around conversations of accessibility, some populations have been historically excluded from conversations around access, so there is a greater distrust. Bring the e□ort TO the community and do not expect people to come to you, especially if access may be an issue in the first place. See the Additional Resources section for more information about Targeted Universalism, an approach which helps to address this dynamic.

Examples of a few potential questions:

- How can we make the library more accessible for our community?
- How can we best address accessibility in the library's physical spaces?
- How can we improve library programming for our elder patrons? Neurodivergent patrons?

# Conversation Structure

Good conversation structure includes a series of questions which help participants explore the topic and identify potential actions to take

## Questions to Follow Up

Good follow-up questions transition naturally from the opening question and help participants explore the topic and get more specific.

Examples:

- What limitations, if any, have you experienced using the library?
- How might we make the library more accessible for all?
- What would you like to see at the library? Any particular services or programs?

## Questions to Go Deeper

Questions that dig deeper help participants get into the details of the subject. They examine a topic from all

## Questions to Identify Action Items and Wrap Up

As you reach the end of the conversation, it can be important to gain clarity on the outcomes of the conversation, reflections, and any actions or next moves which have been identified. These questions will help to bring closure to the conversation.

Examples:

- What surprised you, enlightened you, or was otherwise memorable/ notable for you?
- What have you learned in discussing this topic?
- How might we prioritize the actions identified?
- What are our action items?
- In what ways would you like to continue to be involved in action items moving forward?

# Logistics

In thinking about logistics, you want to consider how to make the conversation as accessible as possible. The format and the location of these conversations will play a large role, which is why it is important to learn how to integrate innovative approaches to community conversations that best increase accessibility for as many people as possible.

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## Accessibility of materials

As you prepare materials, both for outreach and for your event, be mindful of the accessibility of those materials. PDF documents, for instance, are often less accessible for those who use screen-readers, unless you adjust settings for accessibility. Microsoft Word and PowerPoint have accessibility checks built into their software and can help you to make your materials more accessible. There are also resources to help you navigate web and print material accessibility. Webaim.org is one such resource, with trainings and materials for helping you think about how to make your content more accessible.[7] In addition, you may have organizations in your area who may be able to o□er you suggestions or support in making sure materials are accessible.

7 WebAIM, https://webaim.org/

# Follow-Up

Having these conversations with the community cannot be a one-time event. Do not have the conversation, thank people for their time, and then go about your business. You need to keep in touch with the community, to let them know what you have heard and what you are going to do. This creates immediate feedback—“thank you for participating, we have heard this, and so therefore, the library is going to do XYZ”. This follow-up practice also creates a communication loop between the library and community members going forward.

It is important to create the feedback loop within a conversation, particularly if the conversation is not happening live and synchronously. Think about ways to share what you have heard with the community, so that people can understand how their input was utilized and what potential action items you are exploring. Keeping the community informed about the impact of their input and any outcomes helps to build a sense of trust

# Conclusion

Prioritizing accessibility for all in your community engagement e□orts allows everyone to feel welcome and able to participate with dignity.

This guide has explored what we mean by accessibility and how to design community conversations that are inclusive of all populations. We've provided practical ways to enhance inclusivity and improve accessibility of community engagement e□orts from start to finish. By creating opportunities to engage with your community in accessible and inclusive ways, you will further create a welcoming space for all at the library. This will in turn strengthen the library's ability even more to serve the whole community and allow libraries to continue to be vital community hubs for all people.

The following pages provide prompts to help you in planning your community conversations on accessibility, followed by additional resources to help you learn about some of the terms and practices mentioned in this guide, as well as read stories about libraries who have done the work.

# Accessible Conversations Planning Tool

## Planning Checklist

# Planning your conversation

Use the following prompts to help you plan for your conversation on accessibility.

1. **Write down the population(s) you are aiming to reach in your conversation about accessibility.**

2. **What are the goals of this conversation?** Writ&ÜÞ2Ø&oa ccorpl95.9 (i82.7 (s)5.7 h b

2. **What format will your conversation take? Will it be in person or virtual? Synchronous or asynchronous?** Consider what option(s) will help people participate.

3. **What platforms or tools will you use to support participation? Will you use a social media platform, survey tool, video conferencing, etc.?** Consider what accessibility features they o□er and what you will need.

4. **What do you need to learn before using these platforms or tools? What features do you need to learn? What testing might be helpful in advance?** Outline what you will need to do before your event to make sure you are prepared and comfortable with the tools chosen.

5. **What additional support do you need to provide to make the space accessible? Beyond the accessibility features of any chosen platform(s), what additional accessibility needs do you need to address? Do you need ASL interpretation, alternate or accessible formats of materials, a space that is ADA compliant, etc.?** Write down your needs and your ideas for how to address them.

6.

2. **How will you report back to participants? Do you plan to share the notes from the conversation? Will you send information on the outcomes or decisions coming from your conversations?** Outline a communication plan below for what you will share, how, and your timeline for each touchpoint.

3. **What is your follow-up plan with anyT0 0 i2Spam on t2 2 (o)2 (e)4. (on)0 2 1002**

# Additional Resources

The following resources provide additional materials for conversations about related topics and information for addressing accessibility.

## Stories of Libraries Addressing Accessibility

### Programming Librarian, Fighting for Accessibility in Small and Rural Libraries

https://programminglibrarian.org/articles/fighting-accessibility-small-and-rural-libraries

Parker Memorial Library in Sulphur, Oklahoma, was a 2-time grant recipient of the Libraries Transforming Comm-erriem:aacen, Omrrarad ie Librarie4 (f)5 ( )]TJETEMC /P <Lang (en

## Institute for Human Centered Design

## Strategies for Trauma Awareness & Resilience (STAR) Resources

https://emu.edu/cjp/star/

“Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience’s (STAR) framework integrates

# Resources from Footnotes


1. District of Columbia O ce of Disability Rights, https://odr.dc.gov/book/ada-101-ada-glossary-legal-and-practical-terms/ada-101-ada-glossary-legal-and-practical-terms-b#:~:text=Accessible%3A%20Refers%20to%20a%20site,a%20person%20with%20a%20disability
2. Americans with Disabilities Act, Title III Regulations, https://www.ada.gov/law-and-regs/title-iii-regulations/
3. On Intersectionality: The Essential Writings of Kimberle Crenshaw. 2019, The New Press.
4. "Nothing about us without us," James Charlton, 1998. https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520224810/nothing-about-us-without-us
5. Programming Librarian, A Trauma-Informed Approach to Community Engagement—listed in first section “Stories of Libraries Addressing Accessibility”.
6.

# About the Authors

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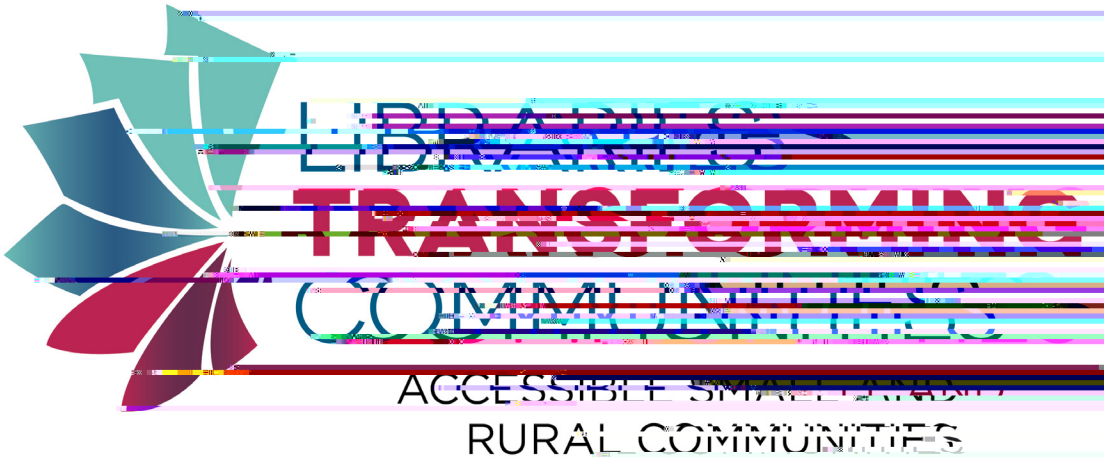
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