

Educational Services & Research



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The impetus behind this paper comes from the work of over 500 small and rural libraries across the United States that engaged their communities through the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC): Focus on Small and Rural Libraries project. From 2020 through 2022, the project awarded approximately \$2 million in funding to 567 small and rural libraries to help them address issues of concern in their communities.

A project of the American Library Association (ALA), supported by a private funder, and offered in partnership with the Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL) and the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD), LTC: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries was part of ALA's longtime commitment to preparing library workers for the expanding roles of libraries.

Since 2014, LTC has re-imagined the role libraries play in supporting communities. Libraries of all types have utilized free dialogue and deliberation



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1: Find Out What Your Community Needs

An essential prerequisite for effective community engagement is finding out what a community's needs are. Small and rural libraries do this in a variety of ways. Sometimes, they convene meetings where residents are given an opportunity to openly talk about issues of local concern. For example, at the Kilgore Memorial

the experience of the Crittenden County Public Library, located in Marion, Kentucky. Here, library staff began by holding a community focus group. Those who attended this represented a **great cross-section of our community**, and were **brave and honest** about how the library could best serve their needs. After realizing that some community voices were missing from this discussion, library staff developed a questionnaire, and during a local holiday parade, they took to the streets to ask attendees how they wanted to see the library evolve and grow. Next, they posted these questions on a whiteboard set up in the library's lobby, and asked visitors to leave responses on sticky notes. As a result of all of these efforts, the library now has **pages and pages of community feedback** that they will use to craft a new strategic plan with the library board.

In order for libraries to accurately and comprehensively identify community needs, they need to do much more than simply schedule events and gather the feedback of those fortunate enough to attend them. Beyond this, they need to be the eyes and ears of their communities, using time and other available resources to develop strategies for acquiring data about local needs in less formal ways—for example, by paying attention to local media, or by simply listening to what people in their neighborhoods are talking about. For example, Owls Head Village Library in Owls Head, Maine found that the town's residents were in need of factual information regarding a contentious topic: plans to rebuild and expand the town's regional airport. With LTC funds, the library hired an external moderator and joined a panel of experts to discuss the expansion. Owls Head Village Library recognized a pressing need for fact-based information and someone trained in facilitation to moderate what otherwise could have been a very difficult conversation. The result was that 140 people showed up to the event and cemented the library's reputation as a reliable place to go for factual information and civil deliberation.

These additional strategies have been particularly relevant in the context of COVID-19, which has presented countless obstacles to individual mobility and community interaction. While causing death, sickness, and devastation on a

massive scale, the pandemic has helped libraries be more proactive in their approach to identifying community needs—some of which may escape notice, be difficult to speak about, or otherwise not naturally arise during community conversations. At North Liberty Library in North Liberty, Iowa, for example, library staff saw a pressing need for conversations about several community topics, including back-to-school COVID safety. Because the library anticipated a heated discussion on the topic, one of the staff took the ALA facilitation course and engaged in a series of coaching calls to sharpen her skills in moderating difficult conversations. They ended up hosting a successful conversation with a panel of school administrators, parents, and students.

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Conversation and direct engagement offer additional means of raising awareness. After completing an LTC facilitation eCourse designed to impart skills for facilitating difficult discussions, library staff at one public library decided to host an event focusing on two key topics: the impacts of multi-day power outages due to climate change, and food vulnerability within the community. As they put it, this led to *an hour of reading common ground, awareness-raising, and community-building.*

The process of raising awareness is an ongoing one. Particularly when dealing with difficult topics such

as systemic racism, racial disparities, or implicit bias, small and rural libraries recognize that it often takes multiple conversations to impact local residents' hearts and minds. But gradually, through a multi-faceted program of *education, raising awareness, and providing opportunities to learn* (as one library worker put it), they are making positive change within their communities. And as this happens, members of the public come to see libraries in a new light. Speaking of

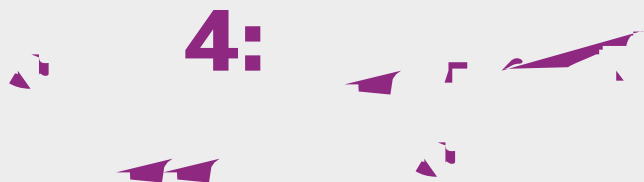
become more transformative for its community as it takes on new roles and partnerships. Instead of being seen simply as *a place for books*, the process of raising awareness is giving small and rural libraries a new reputation: as critical community hubs that provide *a bastion of hope against stagnation.*

3: *Engaging the Community*

The process of identifying community needs and raising awareness often shines a light on various forms of exclusion—that is, assumptions, norms, and practices that devalue particular individuals or groups and put up barriers around their access to all manner of public and private institutions. Effective community engagement work means removing those barriers. It means fully welcoming the excluded into civic life, and helping all members of the community feel a sense of belonging.

Small and rural libraries are making significant strides in the direction of more inclusive communities. Through talking and interacting with members of the community, they learn about those individuals or groups who are not present in community conversations, and who are not attending events. With this knowledge, they can then work to bring excluded populations more fully into community life. For example, after realizing that they were having difficulties reaching senior citizens, the Tryon Public Library in Tryon, Oklahoma launched a program dedicated to exploring available resources for those facing food insecurity and hunger—which affects many elderly members of the community. After bringing attention to this important local concern, the library succeeded in helping seniors become active members of the community. Describing the program, one library worker noted how *more seniors are now coming to the library once a month to pick up sacks of food*, and how in other cases, *we are delivering food to them.*

and refugees, those seeking political asylum, and non-English speakers. Small and rural libraries are also making great strides in seeking input from people with disabilities. For example, at Parker Memorial Library in Sulphur, Oklahoma, library staff made a concerted effort to integrate the town's Deaf community into library and community events. Since Sulphur is home to a school for Deaf children, the library recognized a need to reach out to this community and to make sure that accommodations for their participation were included in all outreach, publicity, and information-sharing efforts. Another library, which attempted to integrate residents from outside its immediate area, wrote that, *We continue to reach people in our immediate community who don't often participate in library programs, as well as attracting people from outside our service area.* Often, these efforts have helped libraries better meet patrons' needs. For example, in a presentation at the Association for Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL), Parker Memorial Library's staff indicated that prior to receiving an LTC grant, there was very little representation of the Deaf community in their collections. Receiving LTC funds enabled them to expand on the materials they have for Deaf patrons, and to include more non-fiction and fiction books by and about Deaf people.



A key component of effective community engagement for libraries is making both their physical facilities and event programming accessible. Importantly, this means not only ensuring that all patrons can easily navigate library spaces, but also, that people have the ability to participate in programs in ways that reflect their diverse needs, circumstances, and abilities. In other words, accessibility means both accommodation and flexibility.

For example, at the James A. Tuttle Library in Antrim, New Hampshire, a focus group held during the early stages of the pandemic demonstrated that many local residents *desperately needed laptops to access Zoom calls, job interviews, telehealth, and court appearances.* With LTC funds, they purchased two laptops, both of which patrons could check out and use at home. Along with two mobile hotspots that the library acquired, these have been used *from the first day we bought them.*

leading more controversial conversations that could bridge gaps.

partnered with the Literacy Volunteers of Wayne County, who helped promote the library's virtual conversation series across the county. In particular, Literacy Volunteers brought high school students and teachers into this program by creating a writing contest directly tied to the library's chosen books. Library staff were incredibly pleased with the results, so much so that they indicated they would *definitely partner with Literacy Volunteers again when doing other facilitations.*

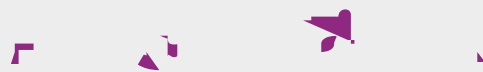
As this example indicates, the partnerships small and rural libraries are forging often promote intergenerational learning. At Algona Public Library in Algona, Iowa, library staff partnered with a group of senior citizens, who volunteered some of their time to participate in a "Virtual Reading Buddies" program with younger patrons. According to library staff, *this virtual reading buddy program would not have worked without the support and participation of partners and the community.*

in learning more about local Native cultures. Some began requesting information about new books written by Indigenous writers, and when library staff decided to put Marie Bertineau's *The Mason House* on their Bellaire Reads Fall 2021 list, they received a call from the author (who is a member of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community) asking how she could help promote the series. Bertineau actually

for more funding to continue and

located in a food desert. *When I saw the fruit trees, I just started crying,* one librarian recalled. Once a week she goes with a group of kids to tend the garden. And next year, she said, the trees will start bearing fruit.

Finally, Eagle Lake Public Library in Eagle Lake, Florida saw so much success with its LTC programming that its Board recognized the need for a new and larger library building. In light of several new housing developments, expanding library services has become especially important for the library, which anticipates an influx of new residents seeking their services. *Because of our activities in the library,* a library worker told us, *It has occurred to the city commissioners that these new citizens will expect more than our library offers.* After recognizing this, commissioners sat down with library staff and asked them to *estimate what a real library will cost and what will have to happen.* In response, library staff created a budget for the future library, which commissioners considered. The library staff told researchers that they *give most of the credit to the funder for LTC grants for small libraries that we received.* Ultimately, they told us, *I don't know how much more that little grants could expect to accomplish!*



As small and rural libraries work to identify community needs, raise awareness, promote inclusion, ensure accessibility, mediate dialogue, build partnerships, and seek external support, their efforts are producing tangible social change within the communities they serve. Visible at both the individual and collective levels, these changes can be seen in everything from the adoption of new attitudes and perceptions through increased levels of civic involvement, the expansion and improvement of public services, new laws and policies, and renewed feelings

of community pride. In what follows, we highlight several examples of these changes, documenting the process of community growth libraries are fostering all across the country.

The community engagement work small and rural libraries are doing has been incredibly well received. Across the country, library workers reported that their efforts were met with *overwhelming gratitude, enthusiastic community support*, and *phenomenal* feedback. At the Jaffrey Public Library in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, a library worker explained how

community-centered, people are responding by launching initiatives of their own—many of which build off of library programs. After staff at the Spencer Public Library held a conversation on food insecurity, local residents decided to create the Clay County Hunger Coalition, which promotes use of the free food pantry library staff established. Similarly, at a different library, a conversation on children’s needs

Commenting on this, a staff member remarked on how the library's efforts *will pave the way to accommodate more long term housing opportunities* for local residents of this popular tourist site.

The end result of libraries' varied engagement efforts is the creation of more unified communities. As they develop stronger ties to those outside their immediate social circles, residents are broadening their understandings of community, and developing a deeper sense of pride and community belonging. At the Charles Whitehead Public Library in Wewahitchka, Florida, a library worker explained how a public history project called "Remembering Wewahitchka" led to *a small renaissance of pride and community spirit* among local residents, who appreciated how the library made them feel



When it comes to developing techniques for effective community engagement, small and rural libraries have much to offer. Though often assumed to lack the resources required to assume the mantle of community leadership, these libraries

