



# Case Studies





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# Introduction

As champions of lifelong learning, libraries offer a place to quench curiosities, access technology, and explore new ideas, hobbies and careers. They also provide a neutral space for people to meet their neighbors and discuss and resolve important issues – an ever-important need in our democratic culture. Increasingly, today's libraries are taking their role as cultural commons to the next level, leveraging their trusted, neutral position to bring people together to solve problems and facilitate community change.

In response to a growing call from the field for library-centric community engagement resources, the American Library Association (ALA) launched Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC), an initiative that sought to help public libraries become more focused on and skilled at engaging their communities on critical issues. Over the course of 2014 and 2015, in partnership with The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, a nonprofit that helps communities work together to solve problems, and with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, ALA created and distributed resources and training opportunities to help libraries initiate or deepen their community engagement practices. The resources teach the Harwood Institute's Turning Outward approach, which is based on the premise that if the library starts by talking with community members to find what they want for their community, this Public Knowledge will empower the library to truly reflect, serve and empower the community.

The LTC initiative included a rare opportunity to follow 10 public library teams in an intensive community engagement journey using this Harwood Institute approach. The teams, collectively known as the LTC Public Innovators Cohort, were selected to undergo extensive community engagement training and implement the Turning Outward approach in their cities and towns. The libraries—ranging from tiny Red Hook (N.Y.) Public Library to the sprawling Los Angeles Public Library—brought residents together for Community Conversations; worked internally to create library practices that would fully embrace change; and forged new partnerships to help tackle challenges facing their communities.

The following five case studies illustrate what LTC Cohort libraries learned throughout this journey. We hope you will find inspiration in their stories and gain practical insight into how you might use the LTC community engagement resources—all available, free of charge, at [www.ala.org/LTC](http://www.ala.org/LTC)—in your own library.

I would also be remiss not to point out the achievements of the five Cohort libraries not represented in the following case studies, which also have significant outcomes to share.

- ▶ **Knox County (Ind.) Public Library** took a new approach to its early literacy programming, bringing its programs to underserved communities that need them most.
- ▶ **San Jose (Calif.) Public Library** held a successful clean-up event that brought residents of the Seven Trees community together in support of cleaner, safer streets.
- ▶ **Springfield (Mass.) Public Library** partnered with the nonprofit Alternatives to Violence Project to promote conflict resolution and stop violence before it starts.
- ▶ **Suffolk (Va.) Public Library** is working to transform a library branch's yard area into a children's play space, filling a community need.
- ▶ **Tuscaloosa (Ala.) Public Library** created a partnership with the local fire department to promote fire safety in local homes.

Please read more about the accomplishments of the full LTC Public Innovator's Cohort in the LTC Blog at [www.ala.org/LTC](http://www.ala.org/LTC).

ALA and the Harwood Institute applaud the work of the Cohort libraries, as well as the hundreds of libraries and library professionals who have started their Turning Outward journeys after attending LTC conference and online learning sessions, or independently accessing resources on the LTC website, over the past two years.

ALA remains committed to supporting and spreading the word about this important work by America's libraries. Please share your stories, questions and feedback with us at [publicprograms@ala.org](mailto:publicprograms@ala.org).

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# Columbus

## Public Library

### *Innovative Solutions to Bridging Community Divisions*

**Location:** Columbus, WI

**Staff Size:** 6.4 FTE

**Service Area:** 15,000



For much of its history, Columbus was a rural community, but today it is quickly becoming a commuter town. Feeling the effects of this rapid change, the Columbus Public Library joined the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) initiative to learn how to add more value in the community beyond being a lender of books. Not only has Columbus Public Library built a stronger reputation as an institution that can help solve community challenges, but its director—a newcomer to the community—has become a stronger, more credible community leader in the process.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Columbus Public Library held Community Conversations to learn what kind of progress the community wanted to achieve.
- ▶ Through this engagement they saw that, despite divides in the community, people wanted the same things: a better-connected community with more trust, where people knew one another.
- ▶ Through the Root for Columbus initiative, library staff gathered people to help discover ways the library could help the community address problems and improve community cooperation, leveraging the reputation of the library as a neutral convener.
- ▶ Because the library has requested feedback from the community and used it to guide their work, they now enjoy greater community support, library card sign-ups are up, there is more community will to build a new library (something that wasn't possible before), and the library director is in a stronger position to support change in the community.

## Background

When Cindy Fesemyer joined the Columbus (Wis.) Public Library as director in 2012, she not only was stepping into a new profession but also into an unfamiliar community of 5,000 people.

A resident of Madison, about 30 miles southwest of Columbus, Fesemyer had worked in nonprofit administration for years before returning to graduate school for her MLIS degree. Spurring her midlife career change was the desire to connect to the heart of a community through its public library.

But for Fesemyer and her colleagues at the library, building these connections proved particularly difficult. "In rural America there is definitely an insider and outsider vibe," she said, "folks that have lived here for generations versus the 'newcomers' who have lived here for 10 years."

Once home to a thriving downtown, in recent decades Columbus has lost many small businesses and family farms. While the community remains small, it is changing; the town recently has seen an influx of Madison commuters drawn by strong public schools, as well as a sizeable community of Hispanic residents. Local leadership has been unable to bridge both

worlds and meet the needs of both the newer and longtime residents.

## Progress Made

For nearly two years, Columbus Public Library has been part of the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) initiative, a partnership between the American Library Association (ALA) and The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the initiative reimagines the role libraries can play in supporting communities, giving library professionals like Fesemyer training and resources to help them strengthen their roles as core community leaders and change agents.

In the last two years, the Columbus Public Library has redefined its mission and place in the community. At the same time, it has shifted from a provider of reading materials and meeting space into a leader in the quest to remake the physical and cultural landscape of the town. As part of its new role, the library has been working to bring Columbus's established and new voices to the same table, helping community members find common ground to work together on things that matter to the entire community. This work has made a tangible difference.

- ▶ The library has launched Root for Columbus, an initiative that began with engaging residents around their shared aspirations for their community



but has since led to a series of locally driven projects that are addressing challenges in the community, building a sense of civic pride, and creating more trust and stronger relationships among community members.

- ▶ The number of library card-holders has increased, as has the library's social media activity.
- ▶ The library has strengthened its position as an important player in helping the community move forward on things that matter to the people in Columbus. As a result, the City of Columbus is conducting a feasibility study to see if the municipality can support building a new community center with the library as an anchor tenant. The 102-year-old Carnegie library is simply out of space and can no longer offer all the materials and services it should.
- ▶ The library has become a catalyst for change across Wisconsin. Other libraries and communities have taken notice of the good things happening in Columbus and have invited the team to share what they've done with regional and state library groups.

Fesemyer herself, once considered an outsider, has built stronger relationships across Columbus and has strengthened her position as a community

leader. And while there is still work to do, the Columbus Public Library is at the center of getting things done in this once-rural, increasingly "bedroom community"—and building a can-do spirit in the process.

## Their Journey

Fesemyer learned about the LTC initiative in 2014, first through an email distribution list and then at an ALA conference. ALA invited public libraries across the country to be part of an 18-month cohort of 10 libraries that would learn from The Harwood Institute how to Turn Outward—that is, how to use deep knowledge of the community as the reference point for choices and actions.

Fesemyer applied for Columbus Public Library to be part of the cohort and assembled a project team of five people, herself included, from the library community. The team was trained along with other cohort members at a three-day Harwood Public Innovators Lab in spring 2014.

During the Lab, the team learned how to listen more effectively to their community and how to develop programs that would solve problems and improve the way people in the community work together. After the Lab they hit the ground running and began leading a series of small, informal, "kitchen table-style"



Top: Columbus LTC team members: Shawn Brommer, youth services and outreach consultant; Katrina Dombrowsky, youth services director; resident Mary Lou Sharpe; Cindy Fesemyer, library director; and Bruce Smith, community liaison/service specialist.

Bottom three photos: The Columbus team participate in LTC potlucks and pose with the Root for Columbus tree.



In one LTC-related project, the library worked with local artists to transform public benches into works of art.

conversations focused on shared aspirations for the community, using Harwood's Community Conversation model. They started with groups that were easy to reach out to, like a group of retired teachers and the Rotary Club.

"We started with the groups where we could just make the phone calls and get it on the

agenda," she said. "After the initial four conversations we started reaching a little bit deeper."

In addition to several invite-only gatherings, the LTC team hosted two open conversations, inviting anyone in the community to participate. The turnout for these conversations was lower than expected; as they tried various

approaches, the team found that some worked better than others. Church affiliation, for example, is strong in Columbus, and the LTC team initially identified several religious communities to include. Their overtures were not returned, though.

"What church you belong to really defines your place in the community," Fesemyer said. "These Community Conversations never happened. We tried and tried, but it just didn't happen. Eventually we had to let it go."

The team also had trouble getting others at the library involved. Fesemyer and Katrina Dombrowsky, the library's youth services director, were both part of the local LTC team, but the project never caught on with the other 10 members of the library's staff—all part-time employees.

Fesemyer tried different ways to engage the part-time staff, including Harwood's Turn Quiz, which allows people to assess the extent to which they are focused internally as opposed to focused outwardly to the community, and the Aspirations exercise, a quick tool that helps focus a discussion on the kind of community people want and the conditions needed to get there.

"We tried three or four different ways to pull them in and talk about what they wanted in their

community and see how the library could take part,” Fesemyer said. “They were getting frustrated. They felt like we were asking the same questions over and over and thinking, ‘This doesn’t apply to me.’”

Ultimately, the LTC team moved on, accepting that it was OK if the larger library staff wasn’t engaged initially in the Turning Outward efforts.

“It hasn’t dampened the project,” she said, adding that while they didn’t participate, she regularly updates them on the status of LTC. “It’s been kind of empowering to the five-person team to come to the realization that we could let it go.”

The team began to see some small wins as they harnessed the energy of working in the community differently. For example, the team hosted a Community Conversation between the chamber of commerce and the Downtown Economic Development Commission, thereby bringing together two groups that had not always worked well together. After the LTC team extended the invitation, the two groups met in a vacant storefront in the downtown they each aspired to reinvigorate.

Once the conversation started, they began to see how much they had in common. The LTC



*...the team hosted a Community Conversation between the chamber of commerce and the Downtown Economic Development Commission, thereby bringing together two groups that had not always worked well together ... Once people started talking, though, they realized they shared common ground.*

team heard many of the same themes they had heard in similar conversations around town.

“We all realized that they had shared aspirations and the groups had not been able to see them,” Fesemyer said. “They had a somewhat dysfunctional history, but they all heard each

other. There were some folks who wanted to take a chance on something new.”

Initially, Fesemyer thought the Community Conversations would rehash long-standing issues in town, such as dealing with flood plains, taxes and roads. Once people started talking,

though, they realized they shared common ground. They wanted to try new things to improve the community, like reinvigorating the downtown. All they needed was a neutral party willing to step up and help lead. The Community Conversations empowered Fesemyer, and others, to be those leaders.

“(People) can sit in a room for two hours and not argue about old stuff and aspire to create something cool in their community,” Fesemyer said. “That, in itself, is a shift.”

To augment what they were learning from the Community Conversations, Fesemyer and her team created a Root for Columbus tree. Residents of any age were asked to write their aspirations for the community on a tag and tie it to the tree, which was erected at town landmarks like the local hospital, a bank, the elementary school and the library. The tree served not only as a valuable way to solicit input from a wide variety of people, but also as a recognizable symbol of Columbus’ attempt to engage the community.

Fesemyer’s team took what they had learned from their conversations, along with the nearly 500 suggestions from the tree, and put them into a spreadsheet. They used this list as a guide to understand the kind of community people wanted, the

challenges they saw in getting there, and where people saw potential for common ground in moving forward.

Building from the concept of Root for Columbus, the LTC group decided to similarly brand their entire effort. To move from conversations to action, the group hosted a Root for Columbus Action Community Potluck.

Before the potluck, the five-member LTC team expanded, inviting 10 people who emerged during the Community Conversations as people who might be trusted by the community’s new and old guards. Seven of them joined the team, making a group of 12 available to organize and facilitate projects resulting from the tree and conversations. A perceived leadership gap in Columbus was beginning to close.

While Fesemyer and her team initially struggled to engage religious communities and the staff of the library itself, additions to the leadership team now include a Methodist minister and the library’s new adult services library assistant. These new additions speak directly to the benefits of keeping communication channels open despite initial difficulties. Other new leadership members include several other residents who vary in age and background.

The first Root for Columbus potluck was a facilitated night of talking, eating and committing to participate in different projects. Small groups brainstormed ideas and reported back to the larger group. Four projects were planned by participants in small groups. Three of the projects were later completed; the fourth required intervention from other government agencies that has delayed the project.

- ▶ One was the whimsical “Gnomes Away from Home.” During summer 2015, every few weeks garden gnomes appeared somewhere in town. Clues to the gnomes’ locations were posted via social media, and families and residents were encouraged to post their own shots when they found the gnomes. This was a seemingly small but tangible way for the community to begin building connections between and among residents and to explore the area while promoting the community with their social media efforts.
- ▶ Another project was the clean-up of a new park next to the town’s Amtrak station. The station, often considered the “front door” of Columbus, now has a more welcoming look.
- ▶ A third project involved various community groups coming together to transform public benches into works of art.

Unveiled at the annual Friday Night Out that kicks off the library's summer reading program, the benches were placed in public locations throughout town, a constant reminder that positive work is being done in Columbus.

- ▶ The final project, still in the works, started with what the group called "Community Reminisce," a gathering that brought community members together to share memories of life events in the Columbus Pavilion, a landmark in the center of town.

The various projects all include signage showing their affiliation with Root for Columbus. Those who take ownership of the projects resulting from the potlucks receive a yard sign that says "I root for Columbus." Yard and window signs are sprouting up all over town.

Marylou Sharpee, a retired Columbus teacher, 41-year local resident, library trustee and member of the Columbus LTC team, said she sees a big change. Residents now realize that they can be part of efforts that have a big impact around town. The beautification of the "front door" train station, for instance, has led not only to more pride in the town's appearance but also to an appreciation that things in Columbus can change.

"People are talking and coming up with ideas that help Columbus," Sharpee said. "They say, 'Hey, that looks good in Columbus, and if we can do that, we can do something else.' It gives people confidence, and that confidence is what I've seen, plus a really nice park around the train station."

As the dialogue has shifted, so has the perception of the library.

"It's a place where everybody is welcome," Sharpee said. "I guess you know that inherently, but it's never been put into words. The power of the library to be a place of innovation was not something that I thought about. That was exciting to me."

## Moving Forward

This isn't the first time people have tried to change things in Columbus—but in the past, more ambitious, larger-scale projects lost momentum and grew stagnant, Sharpee said. But with Root for Columbus, people can see the tangible results of small, successful endeavors, and that enthusiasm builds momentum to accomplish more. There is also an opportunity for new people to participate.

"I think this project has allowed new leadership to feel secure and supported," Sharpee said. "I thought Turning Outward was a lovely idea that had been tried before. It hadn't been."

For Katrina Dombrowsky, the library's youth services director, the work will continue to evolve as the town evolves. The LTC initiative gave the community some momentum to begin to change, and to embrace the library's role in that change.

"When this started, I couldn't really envision what the outcome would be, and I don't think I was the only one," she said. "It's really exciting to see what's come of it and be able to tell people Root for Columbus and the potlucks are the result of our Harwood training."

The skills learned through LTC are now spreading throughout Wisconsin.

"In the calendar year of 2015 I probably have worked with three to five other libraries using Libraries Transforming Communities methods," said Shawn Brommer, the library's youth services and outreach consultant. "I'm finding the methods, techniques and the process really work for many types of projects, whether helping libraries examine their planning documents or making smaller changes to their programming schedules."

Throughout the LTC initiative, Fesemyer has grappled with her own role in Columbus. A member of the Columbus Literacy Council and a Rotarian, she was already active in the community before

LTC. In this small town, though, she wondered where exactly she fit in.

"I felt like a little bit of a fraud," she said. "I don't live in Columbus and I won't be uprooting my family so we can. My biggest crisis was my ability to tell the community I served that I belonged at the heart of transformation."

Fesemyer has since come to realize that at the heart of the transformation is not her, but the institution of the library. By using her Harwood training to engage the community in a deeper way, she has come to know the town and its concerns. She could speak with authority and was willing to step in and help bridge the long-standing divide in town.

*"It doesn't sound radical now, but it's a very radical notion to have the public library reflect the community back in that way. To do it intentionally is very powerful."*

"It's the library and not me," she said. "I really do know a lot about the community. I see both sides in a way, and the fact that I don't have a vested interest because I don't live here, I don't pay taxes here, and my kids don't go to school here—that helped people trust me a little bit more."

While Fesemyer shifted her career to library administration because she wanted to connect with a community, LTC has transformed her.

"It's really clear to me how, over the last year and a quarter, my mind has just changed," she said. "I now can't imagine thinking you are serving the community through its library without knowing what the community wants. It has really just taken hold. It doesn't sound radical now, but it's a very radical notion to have the public library reflect the community back in that way. To do it intentionally is very powerful." ■

# Spokane County

## Library District

*Building an  
Organizational  
Culture that  
Puts Community  
First*

**Location:** Spokane, WA

**Staff Size:** 130 FTE

(10 branches)

**Service Area:** 255,000

Spokane County Library District joined the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) initiative in part to deepen the transformative work they had begun with a strategic planning process.

Staff at the library used their training through LTC to focus not only on how they could build stronger relationships with the community and add more value as a library, but also how they could embed in the library a culture that put the community at the center of decision-making. During the two years of LTC, library staff members have become involved in a variety of initiatives to improve the community based on what they have learned from engaging residents. Additionally, library leaders have taken important steps to embed this new way of working into their talent management efforts.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Nancy Ledebouer, Spokane County Library District's director, made an important decision to hit the ground running following her LTC training from The Harwood Institute, which kicked off the two-year initiative. She asked her 15 librarians to use what the LTC team learned through their training and host Community Conversations with residents.
- ▶ The library staff continued to use their training to make another important decision: to align their programming to not only solve problems in the community but improve the conditions that residents said were standing in the way of progress. This forced the library out of its comfort zone but led to a number of innovative programs, including park clean-ups and supporting town revitalization efforts.
- ▶ Ledebouer ultimately decided to require staff to engage the community in some way as part of their job—to make working with the community central to how they operate. Again, this represented a critical decision to ensure that the library would stay the new course, but one that also caused staff turnover.

## Background

When Nancy Ledeboer joined the Spokane County (Wash.) Library District as director in 2012, one of her first actions was creating a strategic plan that relied significantly on staff and community input.

With 10 branches, the library district serves a string of rural, urban and suburban communities (ranging in size from 600 to 91,000) surrounding the City of Spokane, which is served by a separate library system. Replacing a leader who had been in the position for more than three decades, Ledeboer felt that the library needed to go in a new direction, one that was closely aligned with the community's needs.

"We have to show we are focused on caring about our community," Ledeboer said. "It's not just about books; it's about connecting people to ideas or connecting people to one another."

Not everyone within the library initially embraced this approach, said Amber Williams, a librarian in rural Deer Park.

"I had been at the library six years at this point and worked with a lot of people who had been here a heck of a lot longer," Williams said. "When people heard, 'Hey, a new strategic plan,' I can't tell you how many people rolled their eyes. But Nancy set the

precedent that we were going to do this, and it was really going to affect our jobs."

## Progress Made

Three years later, after this strategic planning process and subsequent changes in how the library relates to and connects with the community, the skepticism has waned. The library is playing a stronger role in helping move the community forward.

Some signs of progress include:

- ▶ In their job descriptions, librarians and others within the system are explicitly directed to engage with the community in a way that the library had not previously required. This shift was not well-received by everyone, and in some cases, it caused staff turnover.
- ▶ Instead of just concentrating on the things it was known for in the past—lending

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Spokane County Library District LTC team members: Deputy Director Patrick Roewe, community member Ann Apperson, Executive Director Nancy Ledeboer, Librarian Amber Williams, and Managing Librarian Aileen Luppert.

popular materials, having good customer service, and being a sound steward of public dollars—the library is taking steps to work with the community, not just serve the community. Spokane County librarians are serving on local chamber of commerce boards, organizing park clean-ups and joining town revitalization efforts.

- ▶ Library staff members have prioritized integrating themselves into the community. The community sees the library as a vital player in addressing issues important to everyone. As a result, the library staff

members are now being asked to partner with other community organizations in deeper ways.

According to Ledeboer, much of this transformation can be attributed to the library's participation in the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) initiative, a partnership between the American Library Association (ALA) and The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, LTC helps libraries reimagine their role in supporting communities, giving them the skills to help communities come together to address challenges. The goal is to strengthen libraries'

roles as core community leaders and change agents.

During this initiative, The Harwood Institute trained and coached teams from libraries in 10 communities across the country to develop the practice of Turning Outward—using the community, not libraries' conference rooms and programs, as the reference point for choices and actions.

## Their Journey

Today, the Spokane County Library District staff is using this approach as the basis for planning and making decisions.



A Spokane County Library District employee helps a patron with a tablet computer.

The approach is not “top-down”; instead, the work is spreading throughout the organization, with front-line librarians leading the way.

They’ve come a long way in a short period of time. When Ledebauer arrived in 2012, she feared the library was becoming irrelevant as the world continued to change around it.

“When I first got here, I think the mission statement was something like, ‘We provide the stuff people want 24/7,’” she said. “It was very much focused on books and being a popular materials library. If people really want books, they can get them from other places today. If we want support from our communities, we have to show we are focused on caring about our community, not just about books.”

Library leaders believe the training and support provided through LTC will guarantee that the library district will play a central role in the community for years to come

“Central for us is the question of ongoing relevancy,” said Patrick Roewe, the library district’s deputy director and a member of the five-person LTC team. “The old model of libraries is not working anymore. What was really critical about Libraries Transforming Communities is it gave us a path to follow that was more intentional than we had

been before. It took some of the guesswork out of the approach.”

In 2014, back home after a three-day training with ALA and The Harwood Institute in Denver, the Spokane team scheduled some meetings to share what they learned with the rest of the district’s branch librarians.

community a reality. Each branch librarian was asked to lead 10 Community Conversations. While not everyone reached that goal, the district conducted 80 of these short, informal “kitchen table-style” conversations.

“We didn’t just want to do things that the library knew about.

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*“The old model of libraries is not working anymore. What was really critical about Libraries Transforming Communities is it gave us a path to follow that was more intentional than we had been before. It took some of the guesswork out of the approach.”*

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“We realized we needed to Turn Outward and be more a part of the community,” Ledebauer said. “But we couldn’t just have four people doing this in an organization of our size. We needed more people doing this proactively.”

To get more staff involved, the LTC team hosted conversations with the library’s 170 staff members, 131 of whom are full-time. They used a conversation format they learned from Harwood. The 15 staff librarians were then asked to go out in the community to learn more about the kind of community people wanted and the challenges people saw in making that

We wanted to do things the community cared about,” said Ledebauer.

In those gatherings, residents told the librarians that they felt disconnected from the community; they were concerned about lost jobs and businesses and worried about safety.

“Even though we live in this very spread-out community, people’s concerns and beliefs and aspirations were very similar from place to place,” Ledebauer said. “I expected it to happen, but it was eye-opening for staff and community members who think their issues are so different.”

Taking what they learned from the community, the librarians began to figure out ways to address issues people cared about while improving the way the community works. This new approach to making choices marked a fundamental shift in how staff developed programming.

“I’m certainly more deliberate in how I look at programs we offer,” Roewe said. “I apply a higher sense of scrutiny to make sure we know how this is benefiting the community, not just how this is benefiting the library.”

At the Deer Park Branch, the library focused its efforts on a trash-strewn park behind the library. Knowing the city lacked resources to clean it up, the library partnered with an Eagle Scout to organize a clean-up. Local churches solicited help from the park’s neighbors, and people spent a day hauling out 300 bags of trash and chopping wood. The city named the park “Library Park” as a result of the efforts, and now the library is organizing similar clean-ups in two additional locations.

“We could have just asked for money and hired a landscaper, but doing it the way we did created leadership opportunities for people to step forward,” Ledeboer said. “It connected a whole bunch of other people and gave [people] opportunities to socialize.”

“We did it with the community and not to the community,” she noted.



As part of the LTC project, the library hosted a park clean-up day. Volunteers hauled 300 bags of trash out of a park adjacent to the Deer Park Branch library.

As librarians were holding Community Conversations in the City of Medical Lake, a handful of community members were organizing into a group called “Reimagine Medical Lake.” The library was able to support this effort by sharing the knowledge they had gained from the community to inform the work of this coalition.

“We didn’t know about them, and they didn’t know about us,” Roewe said. “It’s a good example of community will for change. Libraries Transforming Communities gave us an opportunity to connect, share

what we already gained and find partners to help us solve the problems we heard about from the community.”

Librarians in the Valley Branch now visit an alternative high school every week to help students with résumé-building and interviewing skills.

“We packed up our computer labs and went over there,” said Aileen Lubbert, managing librarian in the Valley Branch. Librarians also started going to the local Boys & Girls Club to allow children to check out books and make crafts. “In some ways, this has already

*At a staff retreat for supervisors and librarians, Ledebouer asked the group to go around and share recent successes. Every one of them had a story to tell.*

become a way of life, particularly with the librarians' job descriptions changing," Luppert said. "I hope in five years we're in more high schools, [and] we're embedded in more agencies."

Not every effort has been successful. The library tried to build a program in its Spokane Valley Branch—its largest location, serving a population of 91,000—that would match teenagers looking for job skills with older adults looking to learn how to use technology. While the program seemed successful based on knowledge gathered from Community Conversations, the timing was off. The project started as school was getting out for the summer, so the library had trouble coordinating with students, and the plans stalled.

The shift to working in a new way has also led to some internal growing pains.

"It was a tough sell for some," Roewe said. "We did see some retirements when we adjusted the job descriptions. Whether that was directly due to a change in priority, I don't know."

Now, new librarians are hired

based on job descriptions that include Turning Outward.

"We're involving all the libraries in the process," added Ledebouer. "We're not just focusing it on one library, but we're trying to make this philosophy a systematic part of how we do business as a library."

To help spread the Turning Outward approach across the library system, more staff and board members attended subsequent Harwood Institute trainings. The LTC committee regularly reports to the district board and provides written and verbal reports so board members understand the process.

## Moving Forward

Ledebouer said she anticipates that staff members will continue to report to the board on efforts as they unfold, while continuing to expand what they have learned through LTC across their library system.

Nearly 18 months after her group attended the initial LTC training, Ledebouer said she believes

the Turning Outward approach has taken root throughout her organization's staff.

"Would they say this shift has come from Libraries Transforming Community or from the practice of intentionality? I'm not sure they would all have that language or that lens," she said. "But from my perspective, this is what we wanted to see happen."

At a staff retreat for supervisors and librarians, Ledebouer asked the group to go around and share recent successes. Every one of them had a story to tell.

One staff member shared that in the City of Medical Lake, the library had sought for more than 15 years to be included in the local school's annual reading night. They were finally invited. In another example, the newly reactivated Deer Park Chamber of Commerce felt it was vital to have a librarian on its board.

"This is why this [initiative] is so successful," Ledebouer said. "It engaged the community, it built leaders, and it connected people. If we want to replicate this or something like it, this is what we need to look for." ■

# Hartford

## Public Library

*Building on a Foundation of Success...and Going Deep to Go Broad*

**Location:** Hartford, CT

**Staff Size:** 129 (one main library and nine branches)

**Service Area:** 125,000

Hartford Public Library has a long history of community engagement. Through the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) initiative, the library has deepened that work. Using new training they received from The Harwood Institute through LTC, library staff members reached out to people in an underserved part of town where many people were disengaged. Based on what they learned from residents, library staff have undertaken efforts to improve relationships between residents and important institutions in the neighborhood. As a result, Hartford Public Library is playing an even stronger role as a critical asset to the community and trusted convener.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ An important first decision for the library was choosing where to begin putting their LTC training to use. The LTC team initially planned to work in one neighborhood, but after realizing there was already similar work happening there, they decided to look at another underserved part of town.
- ▶ In this neighborhood, library staff learned that there were trust issues between residents and other institutions, including the police department, and that often, people in the neighborhood didn't feel safe or supported. So the library brought together police and residents so they could share their concerns and perspectives and start a constructive dialogue.
- ▶ People felt there were some good things happening in the neighborhood, but they also felt the narrative of the community was always bad and that such a narrative was hindering the ability of people to make progress. So the library brought together North End residents and a member of the local media to brainstorm ways to positively change coverage and perception of the area.
- ▶ Having demonstrated some success in this neighborhood, the library is planning to train other staff members to work with other neighborhoods in a similar fashion.

## Background

Engaging deeply with the community has been a long-held commitment by leadership and staff at the Hartford Public Library. With 129 employees at one downtown and nine branch libraries, the library system serves 17 neighborhoods and averages about 833,000 visits annually. And for nearly two decades, the library has had a department specifically focused on community engagement.

According to Richard Frieder, community engagement director in the library's Cultural Affairs & Public Programming Department, the library's history of community engagement is long and deep.

"I've been here for 14 years, and when I arrived the community engagement program had already been created by the previous director, Louise Blalock," Frieder said. "She, like Matt [Poland, current director], was really a visionary, and she, like Matt, really understood the importance of the connection between the community and the library—that the library needed to be listening to the community and responding to the community's needs."

The Hartford Public Library sponsors and implements community dialogues on a wide variety of topics, some for the entire city and some for specific neighborhoods, Poland said.

The library is a longtime partner of Hartford-based Everyday Democracy, a national project of the Paul J. Aicher Foundation that helps communities discuss complex issues.

In 2015, the library hosted a series of candidate events during the election season, including an event specifically about the Latino vote, an acknowledgement of Hartford's significant Latino population. The library also sponsors youth forums and community dialogues that engage smaller groups of residents and are designed to enable people to act on specific public topics.

## Progress Made

The library's efforts to connect with the community on a deeper level took a different path through Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC), an initiative of the American Library Association and The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, LTC aims to strengthen the role of libraries as positive change agents for their communities, connecting more deeply with their constituents so they can respond to community needs, not just library needs.



Hartford Public Library LTC team members: former CEO Matt Poland, Multicultural Services Director Homa Naficy, Community Engagement Director Richard Frieder, and Public Services Director Corey Fleming. Not pictured: Chief Cultural Affairs and Public Programming Officer Brenda Miller.

For a library that was already deeply connected to its community, being part of LTC was a chance to deepen and accelerate the good work that was already underway.

“We didn’t really know what the Harwood approach was, but it looked very interesting,” Frieder said. “We all agree, no matter what we’ve accomplished, we can do more and do things even better. We decided to apply and were accepted.”

Over the course of two years, 10 libraries—members of the LTC Public Innovators Cohort—received training and coaching support in the Harwood Institute’s approach to change. Called

“Turning Outward,” this approach centers on being focused on the community first, as opposed to being internally focused. A core part of this approach is building a deeper understanding of the community through conversations and then using that knowledge to work on issues that affect the community in a way that makes the community itself work together better.

Using new tools and language to reach the community, the Hartford Public Library has embarked on several new projects in Hartford’s North End neighborhood:

- ▶ Working with community members, the Hartford Police Department and local media,

the library is promoting public safety and building constructive relationships between different groups that historically have had trouble communicating in this disadvantaged neighborhood.

- ▶ The library developed positive relationships between police and residents in an effort to both address the community’s concerns about public safety and to increase constructive dialogue between the community and the police.
- ▶ The library brought together North End residents and a member of the local media to brainstorm ways to positively change coverage and perception of the area.



Hartford Public Library held a series of three conversations bringing together police and residents from Hartford’s North End.

► In an effort to expand the reach of this community engagement work, the library is making plans to spread the approach across the library by training staff and bringing them together to help make decisions based on what the group is continuing to learn through better engagement with the community.

“Participating in this project has helped us to start to spread [a different way of working] more throughout the organization,” said Frieder. “I think that’s been important.”

## The Journey

When the library initially applied to be part of LTC, they intended to focus on improving their work in Hartford’s Asylum Hill neighborhood, where the library is involved with the neighborhood’s significant immigrant and refugee population.

The local United Way, however, had already been engaging residents in this neighborhood using the Harwood approach—the same approach the library was learning through LTC. At the time, the United Way and a local corporate partner were working with a broad cross-section of neighborhood leaders to share what they were learning and determine ways to improve the way the neighborhood worked together.

“We initially were looking to become Harwood-enabled so we could look at continuing a deeper dive in the Asylum Hill neighborhood,” Poland said. “As we began the process it became pretty clear to us there was a saturation level in Asylum Hill around community conversations, particularly those

community, the skills and approach learned through LTC caused them to rethink how they were engaging.

“I think what was difficult for us was the library already had a pretty significant reputation in the sphere of community engagement,” Poland said.

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*While the library had a long history of engaging the community, the skills and approach learned through LTC caused them to rethink how they were engaging.*

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following the Harwood practice. After consulting with the United Way we moved and developed the Harwood approach in a new neighborhood altogether.”

The new community was North End, a group of neighborhoods in Hartford with some of the lowest income levels in the United States. There, the Hartford Public Library LTC group hosted a series of small “kitchen table-style” conversations, a way for the group to better understand how the community could work together on problems, which started first with understanding people’s shared aspirations.

While the library had a long history of engaging the

“Our biggest challenge was the process. How do you take a library in a city that is used to having these conversations and change the language and the method? And I think we struggled internally with that significantly.”

Before LTC, when library staff engaged the community, they started with a discussion of issues and problems like poverty or health disparities, Poland said.

“It never started on a high note,” he said. “It started on a note of, ‘Oh my gosh, we’ve got a lot of problems here.’ By the end of meetings we had a list of 80 things that nobody could focus on.”

Through LTC, the team learned

the importance of focusing first on shared aspirations for the community. This allowed the library to better uncover opportunities to work with the community on areas where there was common ground.

In the North End, the team members anticipated they would be hearing a lot of concerns about public safety, and they were correct, Poland said.

people to dream and imagine a situation for them and their families," he said.

As the community began to share their thoughts about what kind of community they want to live in, Poland described LTC as "shaking a sieve."

"What are those pieces of gold that didn't penetrate the sieve?" he said. "Those are the areas we wanted to focus more on as we

unusual? Is this maybe too small to worry about? What do you think when you hear these things coming from the North End? There was lots of validation about what people felt were the issues."

For Frieder, sharing the community feedback with those in positions of power was something he was initially hesitant about as it was contrary to the traditional way he worked.

"I have built a lot of relationships over the last 14 years, and for the most part, I think people trust me, in part because they trust the library," he said. "If they were good enough to share with me their aspirations and some of their inner thoughts, I was concerned about going and sharing it with other people and possibly making them feel like we betrayed their trust."

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*...the team successfully committed to not starting the open houses with discussions about problems but about the kind of community people wanted to live in.*

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"This is not unique to Hartford, but it is real," Poland said.

"They were envisioning a city where those things worked better, where they would feel more comfortable."

Community Conversations were held throughout the North End in branch libraries, churches and community centers. Poland said the team successfully committed to not starting the open houses with discussions about problems but about the kind of community people wanted to live in.

"That became a very, very powerful tool because it allowed

went deeper into conversation with the neighborhood."

Ultimately, the Hartford LTC team decided to focus on public safety and improving the relationship between police officers and community members. They turned to the superintendent of schools, the police chief and city hall to share what they had learned and see if it resonated with those in positions of power.

"We wanted to get validation, if you will, about what we heard," Poland said. "Does this resonate with you? Is this something

That was not the case, he said, and being a deliberate steward of this new public knowledge worked out well.

"Part of that was the way it was done," he said. "We talked about ideas and concepts and not names. Public librarians inherently are trusted by the people we serve. It's hard to point out a more trusted entity in any community than a public library. Trust is one of those things that's easy to lose and hard to get. I'm protective of it, and that's why I was uncertain."

The police chief and other community leaders lent their support, and the LTC team then set up a series of “deeper dive” discussions in the North End around police, community relationships and public safety. Police lieutenants were assigned to be part of the conversations, and the larger group ultimately broke into three smaller groups focused on specific themes that emerged in the conversations. To do these particular conversations, the team used engagement tools provided by Everyday Democracy, which they felt were a natural follow-up to initial conversations based on the Harwood model.

The groups, comprising about ten residents and four or five police officers, met weekly for three weeks to talk about their feelings about the neighborhood, concerns about their relationship between the community and police, and ideas for improving community life.

The action teams focused on:

▶ **The media.** North End residents felt the mainstream news media portrayed life in their neighborhoods as worse than it actually is. They felt many positive stories did not get the attention they deserved. The group invited a longtime, well-known Hartford columnist to join them. He tasked them with writing story proposals about

things they wished were covered in the community. He then reviewed them and shared feedback, and the team sent story pitches to Hartford media outlets. Once the stories are published, they plan to extend the life of the stories by sharing them on social media. The team is also inviting more journalists and potential subjects of stories to meetings.

▶ **Joint learning experiences for the community and police.** The group came up with different ideas, including working with a local community theater group. “One idea is to have a performance about life in the streets, possibly to freeze the action and have discussions with police and community members in the audience,” Frieder said. “They want to ask, ‘Does this resonate with you?’”

▶ **Youth and teenagers’ relationship with police.** The group is working on a community event with the police department. The group hopes to organize a fun event for youth and families that also explains how the police department is organized and how decisions there are made. The idea is that the community will strengthen when police and those living in the North End jointly plan and participate in an enjoyable neighborhood event.

Some of the concepts and ideas from LTC were also adopted

by the library to help engage employees.

“It’s not just about us; it’s about Turning Outward and finding out from public knowledge how can we do what we do even better,” Poland said. “The theme resonated really well internally.”

Feedback from the North End Community Conversations was shared with the staff to help them understand community ideals beyond what they see in their day-to-day jobs. Library leadership also began to hold regular staff meetings using the Harwood Institute’s Innovation Space model, a concept and practice learned through LTC.

Eight to ten staff members gathered and shared suggestions and aspirations for internal topics such as the library’s website, improving wellness at work and services to families. They met in a specific room designed to enhance open and creative brainstorming.

“It’s being used not as a way to create new policy or solve problems but to explore what’s possible,” Poland said. “We are lifting them up, getting ideas and then having a deeper discussion later with managers and others in the organization. That has worked out really, really well.”

## Moving Forward

For Frieder, Turning Outward has deepened the commitment to community that has long been part of the Hartford Public Library's mission and actions.

"I think the program has been valuable to us," Frieder said. "I'm out in the community a lot building relationships and building trust, but to actually have the Community Conversations where we very intentionally set a time and invited a bunch of people to come, and have some pre-planned questions about what they care about and what they are concerned about was a bit of an eye-opener. It was different than what I normally do, but it's a valuable way to do it."

LTC has also transformed how Poland thinks about the library and his role in it.

*"I would describe our role not just as a place for people to come but for being a change agent and an agent of hope in the City of Hartford."*

"I think what it did for me as an individual was have me rethink the way I described how the library could be an effective and indispensable partner in the community," he said. "Part of my job is to do that anyway, but it added to the richness of my vocabulary."

While Hartford's library traditionally has been engaged with the community, LTC further shifted the institution into a role that is making it vital to the community in a much different way. Poland said his work through LTC helps him better explain the role of the library in Hartford and

the neighborhoods that make up the city.

"I would describe our role not just as a place for people to come but for being a change agent and an agent of hope in the City of Hartford," Poland said. "That has worked. I think the change that has made a difference is in being able to explain that a 21st-century public library is more important now than it has ever been." ■

# Red Hook

## Public Library

*One Small Win Creates Huge Ripples of Change*

**Location:** Red Hook, NY

**Staff Size:** 5.4 FTE

**Service Area:** 14,000

The Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) team from Red Hook Public Library used their training to engage residents in their small town. They learned people were frustrated that problems in their community—even obvious ones—often went unaddressed. The only stoplight in town, which didn't work properly, was emblematic of their concerns and came up in many discussions with residents. The LTC team took action and brought officials together to figure out how to fix the problem. This seemingly small act sent a signal to the community that it was possible to make things happen, which has led to people stepping forward to work together on other issues that are keeping Red Hook from being more livable and connected. The library is playing a central role in convening these groups and has become a model for how other organizations want to work in the community.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ By leading Community Conversations and listening to residents, the Red Hook LTC team realized they could address a problem and improve how the community worked together by fixing the town's stoplight. Choosing to act on this was a critical decision; it sent a signal that change was possible and that people's concerns mattered.
- ▶ People were so energized by the forward progress that they wanted to keep going. The library is now working with residents and other partners to establish a community center.
- ▶ The LTC team's efforts have inspired residents to get involved in ways they weren't before. The library is playing a convening role, but in many cases, residents are developing solutions to problems.

## Background

The Village of Red Hook, New York—population 1,961—sits about 100 miles north of New York City near the Catskills and Hudson River Valley. It is home to Bard College, a nationally ranked liberal arts college that is the town’s largest employer.

When the discussion around community aspirations began in 2014, most residents reported how much they loved living in this community. A couple of issues quickly rose to the top that needed to be addressed, including one iconic one: the town’s only stoplight.

Every day, 14,000 vehicles passed through the light, which sat at the intersection of two state highways. The light’s timing was off, leading to wait times as long as seven minutes. Seeking to avoid the long delay, drivers frequently chose to cut through residential neighborhoods, endangering kids and adults who were walking and riding bikes in the streets.

The light had been a problem as long as people could remember. Everyone knew it, yet the earliest it was expected to be addressed was 2017—three years after this story begins. For a small town, this little traffic light was a big issue. Everyone in town knew it was a problem, but the sense of urgency was never fully communicated to the state.



Red Hook LTC team members: Head of Circulation Shelley Herrick; Library Director Erica Freudenberger; Red Hook Deputy Mayor Brent Kovalchik; and Bard College Center for Civic Engagement Associate Director Erin Cannan—stand under Red Hook’s only stoplight, which frustrated residents for years.

So it sat near the bottom of a long line of state-funded public infrastructure problems.

But a seemingly small act—people coming together in 2015 to talk, share ideas and fix a problem—forged a new “can-do” narrative in Red Hook

in which residents take ownership of their community in a different way. This substantial change was made possible by the efforts of a small group of leaders, organized by Red Hook Public Library, a small community library with only 4,500 cardholders.



Kids take part in summer science programs created through the library's growing partnerships with local institutions.

## Progress Made

Today, years ahead of schedule, the stoplight is fixed, but that's just the beginning of this story. The work the library initiated to fix the light became a catalyst for a variety of changes in improving the quality of life in Red Hook, making this small community better mobilized, better connected and more prepared to tackle complex challenges.

Red Hook Public Library is now working in partnership with community groups, community leaders, Bard College and residents to take on a variety of issues.

- ▶ The library is working to establish a community center to give more people opportunities to come together.
- ▶ And, seeing the benefits of their work, the library is helping to make connections between groups and encouraging others to take on community engagement work so more

people can work toward the betterment of the community.

Being a part of changes like these also marked a big shift for the library.

"[Before, the library] was completely off people's radars," said Erica Freudenberger, who became library director in 2010. "It was this musty old building that was best to be avoided."

## The Journey

Freudenberger wanted to change the perception of the library and add more value to the community.

Shortly after being named library director, she started attending local Rotary and chamber of commerce meetings and joined a group of local leaders called Red Hook Together. Started by Erin Cannan, associate director of the Bard College Center for Civic Engagement, Red Hook Together met about every five weeks "as a way to address some of the 'town and gown' issues," Cannan said.

At the first meeting Freudenberger attended, several people said they wished the community had a gathering place to help residents stay more informed about local issues.

*The work the library initiated to fix the light became a catalyst for a variety of changes in improving the quality of life in Red Hook, making this small community better mobilized, better connected and more prepared to tackle complex challenges.*

"I said, 'The good news is we have such a place.' No one knew or believed me," Freudenberger said. "That wasn't their experience of the library. It was really about recognizing that we had to change the perception of who we were or what we were in the community. We started partnering with organizations and doing a lot of collaboration."

For this reason, the library jumped at the chance to be part of the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) initiative, a partnership between the American Library Association and The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. LTC aims to strengthen the role of libraries in helping communities solve problems and work together more effectively. As part of the initiative, Harwood trained and coached 10 library teams, made up of library staff and community partners. Over two years, teams learned to apply Harwood's Turning Outward approach, a practice or discipline of understanding a community in a deep way and then using that knowledge as a reference point for choices and actions.

Freudenberger said she and the rest of the Red Hook team, which included Cannan, "felt very smug" going into the LTC project, thinking they were used to working collaboratively, listening to the community and getting results.

"We thought we were outwardly focused, but we weren't," Cannan said. "We were willing to be partners with people because we wanted to get something out of the partnership. It was transactional."

After an initial three-day training with The Harwood Institute and ALA in May 2014, Red Hook's LTC team knew it needed to connect deeper with the community in a way that wasn't quid pro quo. The group decided to go door-



Team members went door-to-door talking to residents about their aspirations for the community. They used Harwood's Ask exercise.

to-door in the small town asking people four basic questions using Harwood's Ask exercise:

1. What kind of community do you want to live in?
2. Why is that important to you?
3. How is that different from how you see things now?
4. What are some of the things that need to happen to create that kind of change?

Brent Kovalchik, Village of Red Hook deputy mayor and a member of the LTC team, partnered with a Bard student to do most of the canvassing.

"When I'm up for re-election I usually go door-to-door," he said. "The really nice thing about the way The Harwood Institute set up this whole program is the questions for the Ask exercise were non-political. They've got nothing to do with any organization, specifically, like the library or the government. You've got the sense that people felt very comfortable speaking in their homes, a lot of times with their kids."

Residents welcomed the chance to share, Freudenberger said.

"People were really eager to let us know what they thought," she said. "To have someone ask them what they thought and

*"It wasn't about saying, 'We're leading the charge' or taking the credit. That's not the point. The point was to make it happen."*

listen to what they had to say—that was very powerful."

People shared many common concerns. They wanted a safer, better connected community. The town's stoplight surfaced as one concrete way to help make that kind of community a reality.

"The stoplight was a pretty popular response to these questions," Kovalchik said. "People wanted safe, walkable space and also a vibrant, economically viable village. The traffic light affected both the vibrancy of the village—people were just getting angry at the light—but also increasing the risks of conflicts with motorists and pedestrians."

"While the mayor and everyone knew it [the stoplight] was a problem, I don't think they realized to what extent people were really concerned about it," Freudenberger said. "When we made it clear it was a priority, it became an action item. The mayor's office got on it."

The library's engagement of the community resulted in laser-like attention to this issue. With

support from the mayor's office, the library encouraged people to contact their state representatives and the Department of Transportation and ask them to prioritize fixing the stoplight. The mayor made additional calls to accelerate the repair.

"It empowered people to take action and also encouraged us on the government level to put it up on a higher priority to address," said Kovalchik. "Now it's fixed."

The library never explicitly publicized its role in harnessing community momentum to repair the stoplight.

"It wasn't about saying, 'We're leading the charge' or taking the credit," said Freudenberger. "That's not the point. The point was to make it happen."

Freudenberger said while she thought she was Turned Outward because she had been engaging with the community since starting her role at the library, she was not.

"We had a very strong history of collaboration and working in the community, but it was at a very different level than what we've

done with Harwood tools," she said. "We were all looking at each other and saying, 'I need this and you need this,' but we were all primarily still thinking, 'How does this collaboration or this project help my institution? What are the needs of my institution? Who can I work with to help meet the needs of my institution?'"

She is asking different questions now.

"With LTC, we are looking beyond that," she said. "Instead of thinking of ourselves as separate institutions, we are thinking of ourselves as a large ecosystem and asking, 'What are the issues in our community? What really matters to people, and what should we be working on?'"

By the time Freudenberger and her colleagues met with other libraries at a gathering in January 2015, she realized a switch in her viewpoint had happened gradually.

"Outreach is when we go out and tell people about all the great stuff we're doing at the library,"

she said. "Engagement is going out and asking people what their dreams are for the community, then identifying what needs to happen in order to achieve those dreams."

She listened to other library groups describe their outreach.

"I realized that [what they were describing] was exactly where we were seven months ago," she said. "Our viewpoint had been changing, and it didn't occur to me until that point."

Putting the community first, as opposed to focusing first on how to promote the library, has, ironically, elevated the library.

"It's been very liberating in a lot of ways," Freudenberger said. "The more valuable we are to the community, the less I have to talk about the library, because other people do. When other people talk about how valuable we are, it's much more credible than me saying it."

Kovalchik said the experience of talking to residents through the Ask exercise "opened my eyes to

a lot of things. We make decisions on the village level based on what we hear on the streets, but there are also a lot of assumptions."

"When we are able to bring more people into the process, they feel they have more ownership in what is going on," he said. "It's a better way of working."

## Moving Forward

Buoyed by the momentum generated by the fixed stoplight, the LTC team is beginning to help with other issues, such as the development of a community center and offering more opportunities for young people.

Hearing residents' concerns about a lack of activities for teens and young adults in the community, the library, Bard College and Red Hook High School teamed up to provide science, technology and programming seminars in the high school, and then on a mobile program that took the program to rural areas without easy access to the library. Bard students host summer science camps for younger students at the Red Hook library, and the library pays their

*"Outreach is when we go out and tell people about all the great stuff we're doing at the library. Engagement is going out and asking people what their dreams are for the community, then identifying what needs to happen in order to achieve those dreams."*

stipends. The library and college were also part of a community art exhibit meant to appeal to Red Hook's young adults.

According to the LTC team, the library's knowledge of the community has become the lens through which they now evaluate their choices about how to support Red Hook.

The stoplight started a momentum that transformed the library into a critical player in solving problems throughout the community. They are continuing

their efforts to help Red Hook become better connected, including work on developing a community center.

At a Red Hook Together meeting in spring 2015, nearly a year after their LTC training and more than four years after Freudenberg started promoting the library at her first meeting with this group, the conversation was very different.

"Four and a half years ago, everyone was trying to imagine a place where everyone could go,

and now at least six or seven of the people [at the meeting] said they wanted their organizations to be more like the library," she said. "It was huge, a really significant shift that was a really, really cool and amazing moment. That signaled the biggest shift for our library, that the perception had changed that dramatically." ■

# Los Angeles

## Public Library

*Two Paths, One Destination: Culture Change in a Major Library System*

**Location:** Los Angeles, CA  
**Staff Size:** 1,630 employees  
 (1 Central Library,  
 72 branches)  
**Service Area:** 3.9 million

The Los Angeles Public Library, a massive library system with a service area of 3.9 million people, joined Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) to generate new ways to deepen their connection to community and help people in communities address issues that mattered to

them. The local LTC team started by focusing their work at the Van Nuys Branch, the idea being that if they could demonstrate the power and effectiveness of implementing their training through LTC, it would create a model that could be replicated in other areas of the system. The team saw initial success, but staff changes required them to reevaluate their plans. The team has been working on an alternative strategy that is built on training personnel at all levels across the system to plant the seeds of change and shift the institutional culture.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ This story highlights two distinct strategies for changing norms and culture within an organization. The LTC team started down one path—demonstrating a different way of working in one location, creating a replicable model for change in the process—then shifted gears when circumstances changed.
- ▶ To spread the training the team received from The Harwood Institute, they are now building a local training module to help staff members at all levels learn basic competencies to prepare them to engage in the process of Turning Outward. Experienced staff with expertise in community engagement will be trained in a separate track and will begin to conduct Harwood-style work in their communities.
- ▶ At the same time, the LTC team is also working on ways to support the good work that began to take off in Van Nuys before staff moved to other positions. The hope is that by seeding a different approach to working across various branches, a new model for community engagement will start to take hold.

## Background

The Los Angeles Public Library serves the largest population of any library system in the nation, more than 3.9 million people, through a Central Library and 72 branches. The library district serves a large percentage of non-native English speakers, as well as some of the United States' wealthiest and poorest residents.

While 80 percent of American public libraries serve populations of less than 25,000, the Van Nuys Branch in the Los Angeles system, alone serves 100,000. This branch was the epicenter of LA Public's work with Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC), a joint program of the American Library Association and The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation that aims to build better relationships between libraries and their communities, redefining the role of the library in the process.

Kelly Tyler was the Van Nuys Branch manager when the library submitted its application to be part of LTC. Tyler had participated in leadership training through the California State Library's Eureka! Leadership Program and thought the new opportunity could build on that experience.

"It was really exciting and progressive," Tyler said. "I already had some interest in doing community engagement work, and this was a different method. A very different method."



Los Angeles LTC team members: community member Penelope Meyer, Branch Manager Madeleine Ildefonso, Adult Literacy and Volunteer Services Manager Kelly Tyler and Training Development Manager Gloria Grover.

## Progress Made

LTC aims to strengthen the role of libraries as positive change agents for their communities, enabling them to connect more deeply with members and respond to community needs, not just library needs. Partnering with the non-profit Harwood Institute, the program trains libraries in Harwood's Turning Outward approach, which shifts the organization's orientation from internal, or library-focused, to external, or focused on the greater community.

Turning Outward means approaching work with the

community as the key reference point for choices and actions. When libraries operate this way, they are able to do more than serve as a lender of books and other materials; rather, they can bring groups together to address problems and improve the way the community works. The goal of LTC is to make 21st-century libraries an essential part of strengthening communities. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation supported the initiative.

Librarians and staff worked with this "very different method" for 18 months, during which they learned about the Turning Outward goals and processes and

experimented with using them in their community. They wound up with a different outcome than they expected.

During the life of the initiative, the local LTC team decided to shift their focus from the Van Nuys Branch to a new strategy: to spread the Turning Outward approach throughout the entire library system.

Even with setbacks — from changes in plans to the inherent challenges in creating change in such a large system — the library's efforts are starting to take hold and bear fruit:

- ▶ The LTC team is working to build a training module to teach junior-level staff members what Turning Outward is and how it can have an impact on their work and community. More senior-level staff members will be trained in a separate track.
- ▶ The LTC team exposed a new way of thinking in presenting the Harwood practice to employees throughout the system, across regions and across classifications. New approaches to working collaboratively using Harwood-style community engagement practices have been integrated into the execution of the Los Angeles Public Library's strategic plan.
- ▶ The LTC team is strategizing ways to expand the Turning

Outward approach to a broader group while also gaining momentum in Van Nuys. Additionally, staff trained in the Harwood style will begin to work in select branch communities with a focus on areas with a large Spanish-speaking population.

Why did the LTC team shift from a deep focus on one branch to broad action across the system? They changed course, in part, because of factors outside of their control, but also because of strategic choices guided by what they learned through LTC. Each path — working through a branch library or working through the bigger system — presented its own challenges and opportunities, as well as the need for different commitments and support from different people in the organization.

## Their Journey

"We were charged with figuring out how to make this work in a system with 1,600 employees," said Madeleine Ildefonso, a senior librarian and a member of the Los Angeles LTC team. "We need to get 600 people on board to make this meaningful in our system and, ultimately, we want to get everyone Turned Outward."

The Los Angeles LTC team thought it made sense to focus on their work at the Van Nuys Branch. Even as a branch library, Van Nuys serves a large

population; by comparison, the Hartford (Conn.) Public Library system has 10 libraries and serves the same number of people. Starting with a local branch aligned with a typical change approach encouraged by The Harwood Institute. The team was focused on where they had the best "sphere of influence" and could potentially demonstrate the benefits of working in a different way. Through communications and storytelling, those positive changes could then spread to other branches across the system, where perhaps there were greater challenges or more aversion to change.

The team had ambitious plans for Van Nuys and hoped to develop a model that could be replicated throughout the system's other branches plus the Central Library. The community faces unique challenges: More than 65 percent of Van Nuys residents speak a language other than English at home, and one out of five residents live below the poverty line. In a recent special election to fill a Los Angeles city council seat representing Van Nuys, only five percent of registered voters participated.

The physical Van Nuys Branch is also in a challenging location. The library sits in an enclosed government center pedestrian-only area, directly across from a courthouse. It's not an easy building to reach. In Van Nuys, the LTC team saw a community

*“The hardest part was just getting our foot in the door to talk about concepts not normally associated with traditional library work. People have a preconceived notion of what the library does.”*

where they could make an impact on a number of different levels, from greater access to their services to reaching people that might not be familiar with the library’s work.

The Los Angeles LTC team — made up of the Van Nuys Branch manager, a Van Nuys Neighborhood Council member as well as two members of the library system’s staff who focus on training and community outreach — went to work applying what they learned after they attended an initial LTC training led by The Harwood Institute. This included conducting 10 Community Conversations in Van Nuys using Harwood’s engagement tools. These gatherings were relatively small, “kitchen table-style” conversations that get people focused on their common aspirations for their community, what’s holding back progress and what it might look like to move forward together.

The conversations included both teenagers and adults and took place in locations such as the library and area schools.

As an incentive and welcoming gesture, pizza was served. The Van Nuys neighborhood council helped spread the word about the discussions, and the LTC team also connected with parent groups and other community groups.

While the team was holding conversations in Van Nuys, they did a presentation on Turning Outward to managers of the 11 branches in the Los Angeles Public Library’s Van Nuys region. Tyler said she struggled with explaining the concept to people unfamiliar with it.

“We worked closely with managers. Some asked a lot of questions, and some thought it was interesting and a good idea,” Tyler said.

Some Community Conversations were more difficult to set up than others because of attitudes around what the library does or should be doing.

“The hardest part was just getting our foot in the door to talk about concepts not normally associated with traditional library work, Tyler said. “People have a

preconceived notion of what the library does.”

They learned in these conversations that there was common ground among various kinds of people, especially among different age groups. They wanted a safer, more connected community that offered accessible and clean public spaces.

“We worked with teens and adults, and when I looked at their aspirations, many kids stated that people didn’t care about the issues they cared about,” said Gloria Grover, Los Angeles Public Library’s training development manager and the LTC team coordinator. “But their issues matched exactly with those of the adults in their community.”

Based on what they learned, the local LTC team decided to focus on creating events that would bring the community together in some of Van Nuys’ underutilized public spaces, like a lawn outside the library and a nearby park that was affected by gambling and public intoxication. The neighborhood council was enthusiastic, and the project was just starting to gain momentum.

“I think I definitely felt something shift in how the elected leaders (in Van Nuys) saw the library” following the Community Conversations, Tyler said. “I would hear ‘Oh, of course the library should be involved in that.’ I could feel that start to change.”

However, the project in Van Nuys was suspended before the next steps toward action could be taken. Tyler transitioned to a new administrative role at the library, and the other original team members moved on from the Van Nuys project as well.

“That made it a challenge for us to take the project, as it was, to completion,” Tyler said.

There were concerns about trying to replicate the approach in another branch. Staffing in the library system require a certain number and classification of employees at each branch at a time. The branch librarians were concerned that they wouldn’t be able to devote two people in a single branch to community outreach while still maintaining their staffing levels.

The LTC team spent months working on a way to use their training to support the larger library system. Believing in the value of what they had learned, they were determined to find a solution.

Among the core issues was dealing with a large staff, many whom they believed needed the skills to engage and connect with the community in the ways envisioned in the LTC initiative.

“With a staff our size, the training process needs to be as simple and straightforward as possible,” Grover said.

The library’s large staff has a wide range of skill sets, from longtime employees with extensive experience to newly hired employees who are gaining experience. The team found that it’s easier and faster for experienced staff to learn and apply the Harwood practice. The library has made a commitment and initiated training to help less-experienced staff gain the competencies needed to engage in the Harwood practice.

that people are doing, and it will be Turned Outward.”

Harwood-trained librarians and the initial team of Tyler, Grover and Ildefonso will be coaching staff on how to use the community engagement tools during actual community conversations.

The LTC team believes this dual-track approach will build confidence among staff in

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*“We want staff to feel supported in learning and training new skills and ideas. Turning outward is something that must happen at all levels of staffing.”*

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The group decided to provide two training tracks. One will expose as many staff as possible to the Harwood practices and new competencies. The other track will provide more in-depth training and opportunities for real-world practice with professional peers across Los Angeles.

“We’re not sure exactly what the training will include, but it will have a number of competencies that people will engage in, either through webinars or in-person training, before they even hit some of the Harwood tools,” Ildefonso said. “All of these things will be useful in the work

working differently in their daily jobs and with the community.

“We want staff to feel supported in learning and training new skills and ideas,” Ildefonso said. “It’s important that libraries are able to both support communities and learn powerful information to help the library make effective decisions about resources. Turning Outward is something that must happen at all levels of staffing.”

Because it is such a massive library system, the LTC team also is working on internal public relations to “sell” the Harwood approach to staff. They want to

be sure that staff sees the value of it and the library's investment in the process and its long-term commitment.

The LTC group is being assisted by a senior staff member who, while not Harwood-trained, championed the project from the outset and has supported the LTC team. This support has been critical, Tyler said, as explaining this new approach and how it impacts the role of the library is often difficult for people to grasp having not experienced the change themselves. Thus, having senior management endorsement became critical in opening people up to new ideas and ways of interacting with community members.

The LTC group wants to spread Harwood's approach to more people in the library system but at the same time, wants to ensure that efforts to plan internal training and development maintain the momentum and the community focus.

"How do we do this without totally losing the thread?" Tyler said. "It's not that people here don't want to do it, but we want to get it into as many hands as possible."

## Moving Forward

As expected at a large organization, change has taken time, particularly since the initial efforts of the LTC team were impacted by staff moving from Van Nuys and the need for a shift in strategy. While they don't know yet what the tangible results of their grant will be, the members of the LTC team believe the institution will continue to Turn Outward, for the better, on their own terms as a large institution.

"This process will inform a lot of decisions we make," Ildefonso said. "It will help us serve our communities better and, in a way, transform them—maybe not in the same way as (libraries in) smaller communities, but never say never. We have to focus on our work on community and in the library and see where that takes us."

She and others on the team also stressed that it will be important to figure out how to re-engage with people in Van Nuys, where initial efforts were starting to take off before the personnel changes.

"The one thing we felt is important is to continue on with Van Nuys," Tyler said.

What is clear is that the initiative has helped staff think differently about their jobs, their library

and themselves. In one way, they are already seeing changes in their workplace; employees are collaborating across library divisions in new ways, offering insights into how collaboration can work in a library system of this size.

Grover said the LTC experience made her rethink how the library views its place in the community, and the library's relationship to the community's needs.

"One of the things I realized during our training is that we need to keep asking communities what they need," Grover said.

She added that, while community engagement is a big part of librarian training, she felt the Harwood practice gave her solid tools to use to carry out theoretical ideas.

For Ildefonso, Harwood practices have helped her understand why some plans work, and why some are doomed to fail from the start. Harwood language helped her define the general feeling that libraries could be working differently, and that while it's not always obvious what is wrong or how to fix it, Turning Outward and critically examining current work and training are important steps for librarians navigating an always changing landscape. ■