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.”

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.

The LTC team believes this dual-track approach will build confidence among staff in working differently in their daily jobs and with the community.

“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.”

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 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.

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

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.