

# 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."

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."

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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



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.

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"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." ■