

 CASE STUDY

# North Liberty Library



## Location

North Liberty, Iowa

## Staff Size

4 FTE

## Service Area

18,000

With funding from the American Library Association's **Libraries Transforming Communities: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries** initiative, North Liberty Library in Iowa hosted a conversation series focused on topics such as food and wellness inequities and returning to school during the COVID-19 pandemic.

North Liberty Library, in North Liberty, Iowa, has long seen community engagement as a vital part of its mission. Local artists' work is displayed on the walls, librarians are active on social media, and the library provides both quiet study spaces and areas where children aren't required to keep quiet. However, until Kellee Forkenbrock, the Public Services Librarian, applied for LTC funding,

the library had never hosted conversations around important community issues.

Forkenbrock and her colleagues established a quarterly conversation series, "[Lighthouse in the Library](#)," with a focus on topics relevant to North Liberty. Forkenbrock has led two discussions, the first in April 2021. The discussion was around food

and wellness inequities, featuring a panel with representatives from a local food pantry, a yoga studio, the county's Department of Health, and the North Liberty Recreation Center (a longstanding partner located in the same building as the library). Despite the event being held virtually and in the evening, after many people would have been online all day, 25 people attended. Community

feedback was very positive, and Forkenbrock was interviewed for a story about the event which was published on the front page of the local newspaper.

While she served as the facilitator for both events, Forkenbrock was clear that community engagement efforts like the “Lighthouse” series are team efforts and require the support of coworkers. ***“I have a small team of colleagues at the library who have helped me put this together, handling everything from logistics, to marketing and promotion of the event. So I don’t do this alone... It’s quite the undertaking.”*** Forkenbrock reiterated that learning just how much effort goes into such an event—and how vital teamwork is—has been one of her main takeaways from the grant.

She shared what she was learning as part of LTC with her team. For example, using the [Facilitation Guide](#) as a personal reference and as a tool to teach her coworkers. The Facilitation Guide, a free resource, teaches basic facilitation to small and rural libraries. Forkenbrock calls the incredible support she received from her library director fundamental to the grant’s success.

The next conversation, just before the start of the school year, was focused on back-to-school safety

during the pandemic and included school administrators, parents, and students as participants. The conversation had not been held yet at the time we interviewed Forkenbrock, but she anticipated that it would be a highly contentious topic and one she and many attendees were personally invested in as parents of school-age children. She recognized that it would be important to emphasize kindness and listening to opposing opinions as ground rules for the conversation, and

elaborated that being a good listener was an essential skill for library staff to lead community engagement: ***“You can’t assume that [you know what people want] no matter how long you’ve lived in the community.”***

She felt the [LTC Basic Facilitations eCourse](#) taught her how to listen appropriately, specifically as a way to broaden the conversation and make it more inclusive of different voices. Forkenbrock credits the free eCourse, an asynchronous

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Kellee Forkenbrock, Public Services Librarian, North Liberty (Iowa)

six-module course created with small and rural libraries in mind, with helping her *“learn how to listen in and get to the real heart of the matter, and then possibly use that as a way to expand the conversation and make the*

*experience more engaging.”* Forkenbrock explained that she and the library staff were planning to continue quarterly “Lighthouse” conversations after the grant ended, but that the combination of grant funding,

the facilitation e-course, and the coaching calls she participated in were key to the success of the initial event. She did not believe that completing the modules would have been nearly as effective without the opportunity to put the lessons into practice with other grantees: *“You can’t have just the facilitation course and not have the coaching calls, and you can’t have the coaching calls without the facilitation course.”* In particular, the most valuable aspects of the calls were holding mock conversations and discussing concerns and experiences with other grantees. She suggested that some of the time spent going over the content of the online modules could have been used for these types of interaction. *“It seemed like as soon as we would get into the groove, we would get the notification on Zoom that the room was closing in a minute.”* Despite describing herself as “very extroverted,” Forkenbrock felt that the opportunities she had to practice facilitation before her library’s community conversation were very valuable.

In addition to helping change the way libraries approach community engagement, participating in LTC can be meaningful for trainees on a more individual level. Providing evidence of this, Forkenbrock



says that going through the training has made her a better listener in her personal life and helped her push through her fear of public speaking and be more proactive about reaching out to people. Her experience with the grant has taught her that *“courage is not the absence of fear, it is pushing through the fear and still getting it done.”*

Forkenbrock said that *“establishing the Lighthouse program is the first step in kind of revitalizing [the library’s] image”* as a resource for the whole North Liberty community. In particular, while the library values its family-friendly image, Forkenbrock hopes to position it as a provider of resources for residents without children as well. In addition to hosting more programs aimed at adults, she is representing the library at community events such as open houses, and hopes to create a co-working space within the library. *“This grant has given us an opportunity to create something lifelong for this library [...] It has given us a platform to empower our patrons to speak to us about different issues,”* she said. ■



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