

CASE STUDY

Hewitt Public Library

**Location**

Hewitt, Texas

Staff Size

7 FTE

Service Area

22,000

With funding from the American Library Association's **Libraries Transforming Communities: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries** initiative, Hewitt Public Library in Texas provided resources on mental health and invited community members and local mental health experts to participate in conversations on the topic.

The Hewitt Public Library serves around 22,000 people in the Central Texas area, including the city of Hewitt and neighboring communities. It is part of the [Family Place Libraries network](#), an initiative where libraries become centers for early childhood education in collaboration with local resource professionals and connect parents to community resources. Library director

Waynette Ditto and librarian Caitlin Miller engage with the community through Family Place and other programs and are always looking for more ways to reach out.

TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Through their interaction with patrons, the library staff are aware of the issues their community is

facing. *"During the pandemic, I knew a lot of people were struggling, especially with their mental health. And not a lot of people can articulate that,"* Miller explains. She has long been passionate about destigmatizing mental health. With a grant from ALA's Libraries Transforming

Quotes have been edited slightly for grammatical clarity.

Communities (LTC): Focus on Small and Rural Libraries initiative, Miller hoped to open a dialogue with the community and connect them to professional resources.

"It was a way for us to say, hey, we're here. We're listening. We have resources and technology to be able to connect people together," Ditto elaborates. To her, community conversation was a natural extension of the Family Place model, providing a welcoming space and support from both library staff and trained professionals.

"The things we need [for effective community engagement] are compassion and empathy. The rest we can learn," Miller says. To learn the skills specific to facilitating community conversations, she participated in a series of optional cohort calls with other grantees as well as completing the [LTC Basic Facilitation Skills e-Course](#). The course, available for free online, is an asynchronous six-module course created with small and rural libraries in mind.

Miller found that the online materials were very helpful in breaking down broad topics into specific questions, and presenting strategies for dealing with potential challenges. *"From planning and logistics, to actually*

"These conversations are going to change our community like no other program we've ever offered can."

- WAYNETTE DITTO, LIBRARY DIRECTOR, HEWITT PUBLIC LIBRARY



Waynette Ditto, Library Director; Caitlin Miller, Program Planner and Teen Services; Hewitt (Texas) Public Library

facilitating the conversation, it was a very well-rounded e-course," Miller said. While she found the course sufficient to prepare her as a facilitator, she valued the opportunity of the cohort calls as a way to learn from the experience of other grantees and discuss ideas for improving future programming. Library director Ditto said that Miller's participation in LTC meant that the conversations she facilitated were *"professional"* and *"well thought out,"* giving Ditto greater confidence in those programs.

GAINING COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR SENSITIVE TOPICS

Miller was able to use what she had learned from the LTC training to plan conversation programs. For the conversations themselves, Miller and Ditto realized it would be important to have a mental health professional present to ensure that the information being presented was accurate and to provide advice as needed. They reached out to a licensed counselor, but faced some difficulty in setting expectations for the partnership

as this was a new type of program for the library. Once they were able to clarify that library staff would be leading the discussion, the counselor agreed to participate, attending the initial conversation and providing advice and insights from their professional experience.

Gaining the support of city leaders was also a challenge—while support for the library has been and remains strong, it was unclear to some *“why a public library would be this involved, you know, in a community?”* As library director, Ditto advocated for the library as a safe setting for people to discuss difficult topics and why the community needed such a space.

“I have a well-prepared, trained staff to be able to handle [the potential liability]...I feel very comfortable with [Miller] facilitating these conversations, because they’re not always happy...So when there is a big political issue that we need to discuss as a community, we will have already done the groundwork as being a safe place to voice your opinion, whether others agree with it or not. A place where your privacy is respected...I think it is a community changer. And I’m just happy to be a part of it.”

The fact that the grant funding came from the American Library Association, a nationally recognized

organization, also helped in adding credibility and legitimacy to the library’s planned activities.

The conversations themselves (a total of three) were held virtually on Zoom and went very smoothly. Attendance was not as high as hoped for, but the library staff anticipated this since mental health is a difficult subject for many to talk about. However, important community stakeholders and Hewitt residents of varying ages were present. Ditto and Miller were also able to apply their experience with the first conversation to encourage further participation, learning that it was helpful to personally invite stakeholders in addition to



advertising to a broad audience and to hold multiple sessions at different times to better align with would-be attendees' schedules.

Despite the sensitive nature of the issue being discussed, conversations were well-received by community members. Says Miller, *"I've not heard any complaints. I've never heard any pushback about any of these. I've definitely heard, if anything, positive feedback. It's like, 'I'm really glad you're having these, this looks like it'll be really good. At the very least, it's thought-provoking.'"*

Using her existing knowledge of mental health and the Hewitt community, Miller assembled

self-care kits for library visitors to easily take home. The kits contained a variety of materials such as journals, sensory tools, coloring books, and seeds and pots for gardening all to help people find the self-care tools that worked for them. Kits also included cards listing professional mental health resources available to the community. Library staff placed the kits on a table where visitors could privately take one without having to ask.

MOVING FORWARD WITH NEW CONNECTIONS

In addition to hosting conversations focused on mental health issues, library staff reached out to parents and caregivers of

young adults with disabilities. Because these families were regular visitors of the library, staff members had formed social relationships with them and were aware that parents and caregivers were facing high levels of stress. The library plans to create programming to support youth with disabilities in their transition to adulthood and provide them with a community outside of school. During a planning conversation, parents and caregivers were able to speak frankly about what they would need from such a program. *"It was really, really good practical advice,"* Miller says. *"And we were like, Okay, this is something we can definitely build off of and develop a program for."*



Library staff were also able to identify potential community partners from the local school districts and a mayoral task force. Through these connections, they learned that ***"There's a lot of resources out there, even within the central Texas area that we just didn't know about,"*** and are taking these into consideration as they think about what would be feasible to offer in a library program.

Participating in LTC has transformed her professional practice, explains Miller:

"It's helping me structure my programs that I'm doing for teens. And, really, just as a library professional, it has been great professional development. Also with these conversations, being able to provide a safe place and able to keep it structured in a way where everybody is safe... and able to not feel judged, and feel welcome. That has been a really big deal for me."

Ditto echoed this transformation in library operations, citing risk-taking as the biggest factor in prompting meaningful change in the community. For her, participating in the grant more than accomplished "return on

investment"—a critical indicator for those supporting the library financially. Being part of LTC has changed people's perception of the library, including the Hewitt city leadership and police department, especially following the conversation about young adults with disabilities. Ditto says that conversation ***"put [the library] on the radar"*** as an important partner in the community ecosystem.

"Looking at the big picture of programming, and the library budget, I have to really make sure that our return on investment is there....I'm always talking to the

staff about taking risks, because some of our most successful programs have come because we have taken a calculated risk....And from what I have seen so far in this limited time that we've done [the LTC grant], it is unbelievable the return that we have gotten on a few hours and a few thousand dollars. These conversations are going to change our community like no other program we've ever offered can."

The library has also applied for—and received—a second round of LTC funding to continue addressing the needs of young adults with disabilities. ■



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