With funding from the American Library Association’s Libraries Transforming Communities: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries initiative, Essex Library Association in Connecticut developed a plan to focus on better serving the underrepresented populations within its commonly perceived “affluent” community. The library hosted book discussions and conversations on a variety of topics that affect the elderly and working class communities of Essex.

Until August 2022, Deborah Smith was the Executive Director of the Essex Library Association in Essex, Connecticut, which has a population of about 6,700 people. According to Deborah, the library was founded in the late 1800s, right above the office of a doctor named Willis Russell. Russell gave 50 of his own books to start the library’s collection, which then grew as other town residents gave additional books. When Deborah joined the library in 2019, what most attracted her was the role the library clearly played within the Essex community. “Neighbor helping neighbor” is how Deborah describes it.

HOW TO BETTER SERVE A GROWING WORKING CLASS POPULATION

Deborah also told us that paying attention to the needs of the local community is an integral part of the library’s ethos. Essex Library Association has been “the center of the town.” Upon receiving its first round of Libraries
Transforming Communities (LTC): Focus on Small and Rural Libraries funding, Essex Library developed a strategic plan that focused on how the institution could best serve underrepresented populations within its community. Although, Deborah explained, Essex is typically thought of as a relatively affluent community, the town is actually much bigger than what people tend to think, and some of the areas it encompasses are not affluent at all, but rather home to a growing working class population that works in the service sector and provides its services to Essex’s wealthier residents. With a growing service sector comes increases in income inequality and barriers related to culture and language. The Essex Library Association’s strategic plan is focused on identifying populations that wouldn’t normally come to the library, but who might most benefit from the services and resources it has to offer. With their first LTC grant, Essex Library used funds to focus on addressing income inequality in the town. And the income inequality plaguing Essex tended to be age based. With a growing elderly population, Essex was seeing more and more senior citizens with small, fixed incomes. When Deborah and her staff looked at the town statistics, they found that a shockingly high percentage of residents were living at or below the United Way’s ALICE line. ALICE is an acronym which stands for ‘asset limited, income constrained, employed’ and is a measure that reflects a wider view of economic disparity than a poverty rate alone. Off the top of her head, Deborah
estimates that the percentage of the town's ALICE population is somewhere around 32%. When the pandemic hit, the situation grew even more dire as more people struggled to meet their basic needs. In response to this growing problem, Deborah and the library staff used part of the first round of LTC funds to host a series of discussions, utilizing a book club structure they already had in place. They assigned books that specifically addressed the issue of income inequality, like “Grapes of Wrath” by John Steinbeck, “The Other America” by Michael Harrington, and “Caste” by Isabel Wilkerson, and held conversations to discuss the books and their relationship to the Essex community.

**ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE IN UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES**

For the next round of LTC grant funding, Deborah and the Essex Library took a cue from the aftermath of tropical storm Isaiah and decided to focus on the relationship between climate change and inequality. Deborah understood that underserved communities often suffer more from the effects of climate change than do wealthier populations, and brainstormed with staff. The result was another series of book club discussions to address this relationship. The events were successful, according to Deborah, and garnered similar interest and participation that the previous discussions had.

In addition to the small group discussions, the Essex Library also hosted an event using the One Book, One Community model, which assigned a book to the entire town of Essex and, subsequently, hosted an event to bring community members together in a town-wide conversation. For the One Book, One Community discussion, residents were asked to read the book Our Towns by Deborah Fallows and James Fallows and...
were encouraged to watch the associated documentary on HBO. Offering both the possibility of a book and a film turned out to be a good idea, and the event saw 45 community members participate.

**LIBRARIAN ON-THE-GO**
In response to feedback from the community, Essex Library recently developed a program they call "librarian on-the-go," in which librarians like Deborah take turns going outside the library and circulating within the broader community. When Deborah was assigned to be the librarian on-the-go, she partnered with a group called Sustainable Essex and host a table at a “Repair Cafe,” where she had DIY books and equipment available for loan. Since receiving LTC funding, the Essex library has also purchased WiFi hotspots, Google Chromebooks, and a range of pricier household items (such as tools like electric drills) and lends them out to community members who need them. This model of reaching out to the community, and of refusing to limit librarianship to the confines of the library building, is one Deborah defines as the opposite of "passive." Instead, it’s a way of letting communities know that libraries are more than just buildings and books.

**THE LIBRARY IS THE “CENTER OF THE TOWN”**
When asked what kind of skills are important for librarians to carry out this kind of community-centered work, Deborah says that customer service is essential. In particular, librarians who go “above and beyond” to provide library patrons with excellent service are best suited to cater to community needs. Deborah also mentioned that participation in LTC has helped her to improve her own customer service skills, especially as they relate to facilitation. Facilitating conversations, especially when they involve sometimes touchy issues like class, climate, and inequality, can be challenging, even for experienced moderators. Deborah recalled conversations she had with the library’s Assistant Director of Public Services, an experienced moderator, who said that she picked up several important tips and lessons from the free online facilitation training. The skills that she and Deborah gained from the training, they’ve been able to "pass on" to others in the library. "**We’ve encouraged other staff members to do programming themselves,**" Deborah told us. Developing skills in customer service and facilitation are, for Deborah and her staff, important. They enable the library to maintain and expand its role as “the center of the town.”

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Written by Knology. Knology is a nonprofit research organization that produces practical social science for a better world. The organization pursues this goal to help professionals in a variety of sectors build inclusive, informed, and cooperative societies that can thrive together with the natural systems on which we all depend. As a transdisciplinary collective of over 30 social scientists, writers, and educators, the organization’s work process is built on equity, transparency, and deliberation.