With funding from the American Library Association’s Libraries Transforming Communities: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries initiative, Laurel Public Library in Delaware was determined to become more than just a library. Through community conversations, the library founded the “You’re Valued” initiative, a website and brochure which distributed information for community members about community partners and other useful information.

Wenona Phillips is the Assistant Director and Head of Circulation at the Laurel Public Library in Laurel, Delaware, a town of about 4,300 people. As Phillips told us, she has been at the library for 16 years, and is the staff member who’s been around the longest. Almost everyone who now works at the Laurel Public Library, Phillips had a hand in hiring. Until 2016, Laurel Public Library was “a traditional library,” a place where patrons came to read and check out books. But since 2016, the library’s role in the community has drastically changed.

Today, Laurel Public Library is community-facing. It is the host of several important community events and a place where residents can go for information, resources, and a wide variety of special services. This is, in part, thanks to the two Libraries Transforming Communities: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries grants that the library has received and thanks to a new director.
who questioned why the library couldn’t expand its reach out into the community. In response to the director’s question, Phillips and others began examining the community’s demographics, the census, and thinking more deeply about the town’s needs and what the library could do to address them. In the process, “We did this whole transformation from being the traditional library to being very much the untraditional library.” Upon making this change, the library’s foot traffic drastically increased by 15,000 patrons.

RE-DEFINING THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARY

Becoming an “untraditional library” was a process that Phillips describes as starting with small changes. First, library staff moved all the computers in the library upstairs, from where they had previously been stored in the basement. Next, they used a different grant the library received to develop after-school and summer activities for the school kids, 80-100 of whom would visit the library. She also began to learn more about her community. What she found out was that the town of Laurel is “the poorest town in the state of Delaware,” with a 35.2% poverty rate and where upwards of 46% of kids receive free or reduced meals at school. And COVID-19 has made issues even worse. The library team decided that something had to be done.

After receiving funds from the LTC grant, Phillips and the Laurel Public Library implemented a number of new services and programs. One of the most important was the hygiene stations, supplied by another grant and a donor, which supplied basic hygiene supplies for patrons and sanitary necessities specifically for young girls and women.

The library also began providing kids with free weekend food
bags, a program which was eventually expanded to food carts when the pandemic hit. The library turned a study room into a food pantry and added non-perishable foods. The You’re Valued bags, made with LTC funds, came about to help the adults and homeless population have something that didn’t require cooking—easy access foods along with the hygiene needs and resources.

When a storm hit the town in April 2019, the library became the central hub out of which media outlets worked and distributed information about storm safety to the community. And then the pandemic hit, which forced the library to close. Even so, Phillips and the library staff knew that people would still need those basic supplies and food they had previously been supplying. So library staff took turns driving to the library and filling up the food carts. They put out brown bags of hygiene supplies so those in need could still take and use them.

When the town implemented a uniform policy at school in 2019, the library stepped in to give kids sports bras, hoping to mitigate the costs associated with parents purchasing uniforms. They hosted free coat and shoe giveaways. Then, when the pandemic started to let up, the library was one of the first establishments in the town of Laurel (and in the entire state) to fully re-open.

**TRANSFORMING TO BETTER SERVE COMMUNITY NEEDS**

The LTC grants Phillip’s library received enabled her to expand on several of the services and programs the library began establishing during its “untraditional” transformation. The first program Phillips developed was a series of community conversations focused on asking Laurel residents about their needs and concerns. Though few people showed up to the first conversation, the following two received a better turn-out, in part due to advertisements that Phillips had placed in the local newspaper and to residents who shared the event on social media. The conversation was an active one, and the library served all participants a continental breakfast.

Phillips explained to us that the third conversation her library hosted was a difficult one, and that the library decided to administer a town survey after the conversation to verify what they thought they were hearing at the conversations. They then made the survey data public to the community and put together statistics, which they shared with town leaders. Phillips gave library staff a script, something she learned to do in LTC training, with helpful tips to “redirect a conversation” should the need arise.

Out of the survey, the library staff identified 16 unique needs and created the “You’re Valued” initiative, which distributed information for community
members about community partners, how to reach them, and other useful information in the form of a brochure. They also distributed information for the partners about the community’s key areas of concern and created a website, with the different needs of the community and websites of community organizations that attend to those needs laid out for all site visitors to see. The library also created a partners’ only database with the organization’s information, the areas they covered, and the special services they offer outside of the 16 unique needs.

**A PLACE WHERE COMMUNITY WISHES COME TRUE**

For the third round of grant funding, Laurel Public Library built on the foundations it laid in the “You’re Valued” initiative to develop a program more squarely focused on childhood trauma and food insecurity. In addition to donating food to the local food pantry, Phillips and her colleagues hosted a “Gather at the Table” meal for the Laurel community. The meal was meant to bring together community members from different walks of life and to increase camaraderie in a moment of social and political polarization.

One other activity that Phillips jump started with the help of the LTC grant was an art installation in the library. The installation was made out of “wish ribbons,” pieces of fabric onto which individual
patrons wrote their wishes about the future. The wishes community members wrote speak to the town’s isolated character and the need it has for increased connection and community-engagement. People wrote down things as simple, but as crucial, as “food access,” “fixing paved roads and sidewalks,” and “getting together” as well as more universal themes like “compassion and acceptance for all.” But underlying all the wishes is the same idea, that the library—rather than any individual person or other community organization—is the place where the community’s wishes are most likely to come true.

Phillips feels that the LTC grants her library received have helped to shift the Laurel community’s perception of the library. With the funds they received the Laurel staff has been able to focus on getting community members to understand that if they have a question or concern, they can always contact the library. Now, residents know that “it’s a full-service library…but we don’t sell cars…yet,” as Phillips says.

According to Phillips, the future of the library looks bright. The weekend after our interview, she was preparing to host a block party, the first since the pandemic. The last one the library hosted had an amazing turnout—with 40 nonprofits and 2,000 people showing up over the course of 2 hours. And while Phillips doesn’t know what this one will look like, she’s excited that the mobile clinic will be there. It was donated by one of the biggest hospitals in the area and has two separate rooms where community members can get physicals, have doctor’s appointments, and, hopefully soon, take advantage of free OBGYN services. The library is hoping to target groups that are underserved in the Laurel community, such as undocumented immigrants and folks who may otherwise not go to the doctor. Of LTC, Phillips says, “It’s kind of like striking a match. We were the candle, but LTC added that fuel to make us a bonfire.”

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Wenona Phillips, Assistant Director and Head of Circulation at Laurel Public Library

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.