

Libraries Transforming Communities: Accessible Small and Rural Communities Example 3

Library Type: Public Library (single branch)

Population Size: <4,999

What did reviewers like about this application: Applicant clearly defined audience and project plan based on research and community partners.

*Note that narrative answers below were slightly edited to anonymize the applicant.

Community and Library Information

Describe your library and the community it serves, including demographics, dynamics, and key issues or challenges it faces. What should reviewers know about your library and community in order to understand your proposed project?

The Library is a free association library that was founded in 1935 and is a member of the County Public Library System. The library is in the heart of a small village surrounded by farmland in an area known as the Hills, 20 miles south of City in State. The library serves the 5,968 residents who live within the 82 square miles of the Central School district as well as residents of nearby rural communities.

The community is largely white (92%), but other demographics show the community to be far from uniform.

Adult education level varies widely. 27% of adults ages 25+ have achieved an education level of high school or lower. 28% have some college or an Associates degree, 25% have a Bachelor's degree, and 20% have a graduate or professional degree.

Household income also varies, with a significant portion of the population living in poverty. 11% of households earn less than \$25k, 16% between \$25k and \$49k, 31% earning between \$50k - \$99k, 18% between \$100k - \$150k, and 24% earning more than \$150k. The median household income is \$82,000.

Children up to age 18 make up 20% of the population, with young adults 19-24 at 7%, adults 25-64 at 55%, and seniors 65+ at 18%.

The Library has a strong relationship with the Central School District. The two schools in the district are adjacent to the library, and a significant number of library users are kids and teens visiting after school to study, meet with tutors, hang out with friends, or participate in our afterschool programs. The community has a significant number of neurodivergent youth. Within the school district, there are 120 students out of 800 (15%) who are neurodivergent, with the population increasing every year.

The library is undertaking its first renovation in twenty years, and this grant will help Library significantly improve its space to be more sensory-friendly and accessible for neurodivergent youth of all ages.

Primary Audience

Describe the primary audience for your project. Why did you choose to focus on this audience? How, if at all, do you currently serve this audience? What are your plans for outreach efforts to engage this audience throughout the project? What are your overarching goals for engaging this audience with your project?

The primary audience we will focus on is neurodivergent youth spanning from toddler through high school age. We want to focus on youth because of our strong connection to the Central School District.

After meeting with the school district's occupational therapist (Staff 1) and Director of Student Support Services (Staff 2), we decided that because neurodivergent youth are a significant population in City, focusing on them would allow us to improve our service to a large segment of the community.

We currently serve both neurodivergent and neurotypical youth with our library collection and programming, though the school's assessment revealed our space to be significantly lacking in accessibility for neurodivergent youth. We are eager to make our physical space more sensory friendly, which will improve our service to this growing but often overlooked segment of the community.

We plan on engaging neurodivergent youth in several different ways. We will be collaborating with our partners at the schools who will assist us in creating communications and marketing materials such as flyers and talking points, and then reaching out directly to neurodivergent kids in the schools and their families. The Library will use these materials to engage others who are not connected to the schools, such as families with children younger than school age, by partnering with local Early Intervention providers. We will also reach out to homeschoolers in our area. The library will reach the primary audience and families through our newsletter, articles in the school and Town newsletters, our website, and social media.

Our overarching goal is to significantly improve the accessibility of the library's space by directly engaging with the neurodivergent youth in our community. Working closely with this population to make the library more sensory friendly will add a valuable first-person perspective to our plan and ensure its success.

Rationale

What challenge or opportunity does your project seek to address for the primary audience? How was it identified? Describe how you used relevant information from reliable sources to define the need, challenge, or opportunity you seek to address.

The challenge we seek to address is that the library's current space is neither welcoming nor accessible for neurodivergent youth.

Staff 1 and Staff 2 from the Central School District helped us assess our library's space, and its current limitations were easily identified. From inflexible seating to harsh fluorescent lighting to the lack of visual supports for non-verbal folks, there are many improvements that would make the Library more welcoming and significantly improve its accessibility for neurodivergent youth.

Staff 1 and Staff 2 gave us a tour of a sensory room they created at Elementary school. The sensory room is very popular with the school's neurodivergent students and has greatly improved the school's accessibility. The room includes supports for neurodivergent youth such as sensory-friendly furniture, fluorescent light covers, weighted stuffed animals, portable textured seating cushions, noise canceling headphones, fiber optic sensory lights, a projector, and a visually calming bubble tube.

Incorporating these supports at the Library would greatly expand the accessibility of sensory-friendly spaces for youth outside of the school day, for those who are either younger or older than elementary school age, such as teens and the children attending our storytime programs, and for all the residents of our rural area who lack access to nearby sensory-friendly spaces.

In addition to using our partners as reliable sources to help us define our challenge, journal articles such as “How Can Literary Spaces Support Neurodivergent Readers and Writers?” helped us identify additional ways in which we could address this challenge, such as “calming support kits” and furniture such as “reading coves.” (<https://tinyurl.com/2vem23v7>)

Project Plan

Describe your preliminary plan for addressing the challenge or opportunity identified. What activities will you carry out to execute the plan? How has the input of the primary audience influenced this plan? How will the perspectives and input of the primary audience continue to be incorporated throughout the project? How will you share information about the project and its outcomes? Do you have any community partners in mind (existing or new) that you plan to engage in the process?

Two community partners will engage with us in the project. City schools are an existing community partner, but we will be expanding our partnership with the district by working with Staff 1 and Staff 2 for the first time. Early Intervention providers are new community partners who will help us reach younger children.

Our preliminary plan for improving the library’s accessibility for neurodivergent youth is to work closely with our community partners on a strong communications and marketing plan to engage the primary audience, including flyers, clear messaging and talking points for library, school, and Early Intervention staff to communicate with potential participants. We will benefit from the in-depth knowledge our community partners have of neurodivergent youth when planning the community conversations’ agenda and questions. Community conversation participants will receive sensory-friendly incentives. We will work with our community partners to create optional surveys to provide the space for more in-depth feedback from the primary audience.

Following the community conversations, we will revise portions of our plans if needed. The architects working on the library’s current capital renovation will assist us in designing the accessibility improvements, ensuring any changes meet our space requirements. We will get the input of the primary audience again before finalizing the design.

The input of neurodivergent youth has influenced our plan indirectly via our school staff partners. Once the grant begins, we will receive direct input from neurodivergent youth through their participation in community discussions and surveys.

We will share information about the project and its outcomes through our website, newsletter, and social media, flyers throughout the community, our monthly column in the Town’s newsletter, school district flyers and our monthly column in their newsletter, Onondaga County Public Library system’s marketing and communications notices, and media outlets.

Budget Plan (\$10,000 or \$20,000)- \$20,000

Describe your plans for the grant funds. What will you use the funding to purchase or support? Please be specific (e.g. \$10,000 will be spent on staff time to support the development and implementation of the project, \$6,000 will be used to purchase and install an automatic door opener, \$2,000 will be used as incentives for conversation participants). The total amount of this section should add up to \$20,000.

\$10,000 sensory-friendly seating/furniture such as “reading coves.”

\$4,000 visually calming bubble tube, interactive fiber optic lights, projector.

\$1,500 other sensory support - sensory tiles, portable textured seating cushions, crash pad, rocker chair, "calming support kits," weighted stuffed animals, noise canceling headphones, fidgets.

\$1,500 staff time for development and implementation of the project.

\$800 incentives for conversation participants.

\$500 for architect assistance with the design.

\$500 fluorescent light covers.

\$500 for visual supports for non-verbal library users.

\$500 staff time to produce a Social Story about visiting the library.

<https://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/what-is-it/>

\$200 for raising community awareness of neurodivergent youth and their needs.

Budget Plan (\$10,000 or \$20,000)- \$10,000

Please describe what your plans for the funds would be at the \$10,000 level. What will you use the funding to purchase or support? Please be specific (e.g. \$5,000 will be spent on staff time to support the development and implementation of the project, \$3,000 will be used to purchase and install an automatic door opener, \$1,000 will be used as incentives for conversation participants). The total amount of this section should add up to \$10,000.

\$5,400 for sensory-friendly seating and furniture such as "reading coves."

\$2,000 for other sensory support - sensory tiles, portable textured seating cushions, crash pad, rocker chair, "calming support kits," weighted stuffed animals, noise canceling headphones, fidgets.

\$800 for staff time for the development and implementation of the project.

\$400 for incentives for conversation participants.

\$300 for architect assistance with the design.

\$250 for fluorescent light covers.

\$250 for visual supports for non-verbal library users.

\$500 for staff time to produce a Social Story about visiting the library

(<https://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/what-is-it/>).

\$100 for raising community awareness of neurodivergent youth and their needs.