LIBRARIES TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

7 Steps to Effective Community Engagement

Evidence from Small & Rural Libraries

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Preface

The impetus behind this paper comes from the work of over 500 small and rural libraries across the United States that engaged their communities through the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC): Focus on Small and Rural Libraries project. From 2020 through 2022, the project awarded approximately $2 million in funding to 567 small and rural libraries to help them address issues of concern in their communities.

A project of the American Library Association (ALA), supported by a private funder, and offered in partnership with the Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL) and the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD), LTC: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries was part of ALA's longtime commitment to preparing library workers for the expanding roles of libraries.

Since 2014, LTC has re-imagined the role libraries play in supporting communities. Libraries of all types have utilized free dialogue and deliberation training and resources to lead community and campus forums; take part in anti-violence activities; provide a space for residents to come together and discuss challenging topics; and have productive conversations with civic leaders, library trustees, and staff.

The grantees of LTC: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries were selected through a competitive peer-reviewed application process and included public, academic, school, and tribal libraries representing 48 U.S. states. Participants received training in how to lead conversations, a skill vital to 21st-century librarianship. Using the resources provided by the grant, the libraries tackled a range of community issues including media literacy, COVID-19 safety, unemployment, food insecurity, and more.

The report that follows distills the amazing efforts of these libraries to highlight their accomplishments and show how their work acts as a model for effective community engagement for the library field.

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Introduction

Small and rural libraries are the backbone of the US public library system. According to a 2013 research brief by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, small libraries (which serve communities with populations under 25,000) account for roughly 75% of all public libraries in the country. Nearly 50% of US public libraries serve rural populations (those living in communities located 5 or more miles away from an urban area).

Yet despite the fact that they comprise the bulk of the US public library system, these institutions are critically under-studied. Why is this? For one, many overlook the diversity that exists in communities served by small and rural libraries, falsely assuming that they are demographically and culturally homogenous—and thus, of lesser importance than their larger counterparts in urban and suburban areas. Secondly, even when discussions of small and rural libraries do surface, they are often framed in terms of "deficits," the assumption being that the challenges confronting these institutions (be they social, geographical, financial, professional, technological, or otherwise) are completely insurmountable, making them poorly equipped to help the communities they serve.

Both of these assumptions are incorrect. In addition to serving as go-to destinations for books and other forms of popular media (including movies and TV shows), libraries are also a social lifeline for people in small and rural communities. They provide access to computers and the internet, and offer technology-training programs that help bridge the digital divide. They promote individual and collective well-being by serving as health information and service hubs. They offer education programs that can lead to degrees and certifications, along with employment and entrepreneurship programs that show patrons how to land jobs and launch their own businesses.

In all of these ways, small and rural libraries are absolutely central to community life. Due to their intimate ties to the localities they serve, these libraries are uniquely positioned for community engagement work. Even when operating with shoestring budgets and limited professional development opportunities, they have discovered how to strengthen and transform their communities. Through their efforts, small and rural libraries have become a model for effective community engagement. Much of their work revolves around seven critical steps:

- Identifying Community Needs
- Raising Awareness
- Promoting Inclusion
- Mediating Dialogue
- Building Community Partnerships
- Ensuring Accessibility
- Seeking External Support

In the hopes of encouraging use of this model, in what follows, we discuss these seven steps individually, providing examples of each from our research among 528 LTC libraries who gave us permission to review their final reports, which we conducted in the course of our work with ALA's Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) initiative.

Step 1: Identifying Community Needs

An essential prerequisite for effective community engagement is finding out what a community's needs are. Small and rural libraries do this in a variety of ways. Sometimes, they convene meetings where residents are given an opportunity to openly talk about issues of local concern. For example, at the Kilgore Memorial Library in York, Nebraska, library staff hosted a conversation in which residents came together to discuss what they wanted from the library. Reflecting on these conversations, library staff realized they needed to *"evolve to meet the information needs of 21st century people,"* and drafted a community "Vision" for the year 2025. After coming up with a basic structure for this document, library staff then solicited more feedback from community members, who met to create a "cloud" of sticky notes listing their top needs. This was then sorted into six topic areas, and from there, library staff held more meetings, in which residents were connected with community experts and organizations who helped transform their notes into new and exciting realities.

At the end of the process, two topics were chosen for the 2025 Vision plan: diversity and space. The initiative was entirely successful—both in terms of promoting awareness of library services and drawing local residents together to develop concrete plans for improving the quality of community of life. As library staff explained:
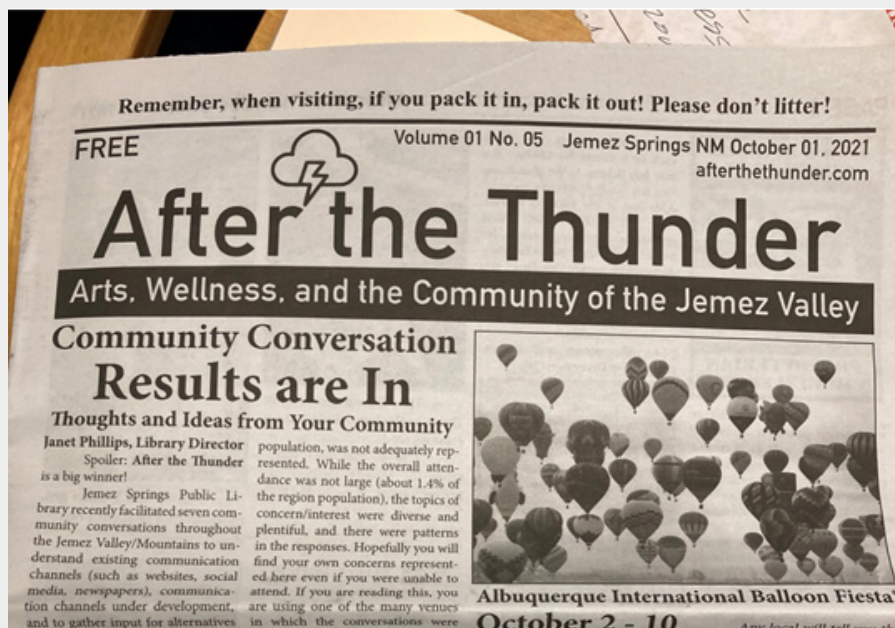
"We have had three front-page stories about the Community Conversation at our library. Citizens are asking about it. New members are joining our group. We have momentum like I have never seen for this type of discussion about library services. This is what I hoped could happen."

Another way small and rural libraries identify community needs is through survey research. At one rural library, for example, staff turned to Survey Monkey to better understand how they could offer residents *"the best library services and resources possible."* After developing a set of questions, this was posted on the library's website. Those who completed the survey were automatically entered into a drawing to win a $100 gift card. To increase response rates, library staff are planning to promote this at their town's annual street fair, which will help them formalize plans for better serving the community's present and future needs.

Figure 1. Jemez Springs Public Library reports on the results of a community conversation. Image courtesy of Billy Ehret, editor and publisher of "After the Thunder," Jemez Springs, NM.

While these outreach strategies help libraries with their strategic planning efforts, they are also being used to identify and respond to broader community needs. After speaking with patrons and community members, library staff at one public library learned that the town's mostly white residents wanted programming that was both relevant to and included the perspectives of people of color. Deciding to focus on issues of racial diversity, equity, and inclusion, the library partnered with a number of anti-racism organizations, who helped them plan and host a "community read" event designed to foster discussions on how to combat racism and promote better representation among BIPOC groups.

The process of seeking community input is often an iterative one, involving the use of many different data-gathering tools. As an example of this, consider

the experience of the Crittenden County Public Library, located in Marion, Kentucky. Here, library staff began by holding a community focus group. Those who attended this represented a *"great cross-section of our community,"* and were *"brutally honest"* about how the library could best serve their needs. After realizing that some community voices were missing from this discussion, library staff developed a questionnaire, and during a local holiday parade, they took to the streets to ask attendees how they wanted to see the library evolve and grow. Next, they posted these questions on a whiteboard set up in the library's lobby, and asked visitors to leave responses on sticky notes. As a result of all of these efforts, the library now has *"pages and pages of community feedback"* that they will use to craft a new strategic plan with the library board.

In order for libraries to accurately and comprehensively identify community needs, they need to do much more than simply schedule events and gather the feedback of those fortunate enough to attend them. Beyond this, they need to be the eyes and ears of their communities, using time and other available resources to develop strategies for acquiring data about local needs in less formal ways—for example, by paying attention to local media, or by simply listening to what people in their neighborhoods are talking about. For example, Owls Head Village Library in Owls Head, Maine found that the town's residents were in need of factual information regarding a contentious topic: plans to rebuild and expand the town's regional airport. With LTC funds, the library hired an external moderator and joined a panel of experts to discuss the expansion. Owls Head Village Library recognized a pressing need for fact-based information and someone trained in facilitation to moderate what otherwise could have been a very difficult conversation. The result was that 140 people showed up to the event and cemented the library's reputation as a reliable place to go for factual information and civil deliberation.

These additional strategies have been particularly relevant in the context of COVID-19, which has presented countless obstacles to individual mobility and community interaction. While causing death, sickness, and devastation on a

massive scale, the pandemic has helped libraries be more proactive in their approach to identifying community needs—some of which may escape notice, be difficult to speak about, or otherwise not naturally arise during community conversations. At North Liberty Library in North Liberty, Iowa, for example, library staff saw a pressing need for conversations about several community topics, including back-to-school COVID safety. Because the library anticipated a heated discussion on the topic, one of the staff took the ALA facilitation course and engaged in a series of coaching calls to sharpen her skills in moderating difficult conversations. They ended up hosting a successful conversation with a panel of school administrators, parents, and students.

Step 2: Raising Awareness

The process of gathering information about community needs puts libraries in an excellent position to raise awareness about issues of local, regional, and national importance. Small and rural libraries have developed a number of effective strategies for doing this, and by sharing information and knowledge with local residents, they have succeeded in improving community relations and strengthening community bonds.

One rather straightforward technique for raising awareness is to acquire books and other resources that bolster library collections on specific topics of concern. Speaking to this, one librarian noted how through an LTC grant, they were *"able to get large quantities of meaningful books into the hands of our community members."* These helped the library meet its goal of *"growing awareness and sharing the social-emotional learning we have received through professional development."*

Figure 2. As part of their attempt to promote awareness of important local and national issues, small and rural libraries have created programs on a range of difficult topics—including racial justice and implicit bias. Photo courtesy of Rosalia Slawson at the W. J. Niederkorn Library in Port Washington, WI.

Conversation and direct engagement offer additional means of raising awareness. After completing an LTC facilitation eCourse designed to impart skills for facilitating difficult discussions, library staff at one public library decided to host an event focusing on two key topics: the impacts of multi-day power outages due to climate change, and food vulnerability within the community. As they put it, this led to *"an hour of finding common ground, awareness-raising, and community-building."*

The process of raising awareness is an ongoing one. Particularly when dealing with difficult topics such as systemic racism, racial disparities, or implicit bias, small and rural libraries recognize that it often takes multiple conversations to impact local residents' hearts and minds. But gradually, through a multi-faceted program of *"education, raising awareness, and providing opportunities to learn"* (as one library worker put it), they are making positive change within their communities. And as this happens, members of the public come to see libraries in a new light. Speaking of the many resources they devoted to community engagement, one library worker explained how *"we were able to raise awareness of how a public library can*

be even more transformative for its community as it takes on new roles and partnerships." Instead of being seen simply as *"a place for books,"* the process of raising awareness is giving small and rural libraries a new reputation: as critical community hubs that provide *"a bastion of hope against stagnation."*

Step 3: Promoting Inclusion

The process of identifying community needs and raising awareness often shines a light on various forms of exclusion—that is, assumptions, norms, and practices that devalue particular individuals or groups and put up barriers around their access to all manner of public and private institutions. Effective community engagement work means removing those barriers. It means fully welcoming the excluded into civic life, and helping all members of the community feel a sense of belonging.

Small and rural libraries are making significant strides in the direction of more inclusive communities. Through talking and interacting with members of the community, they learn about those individuals or groups who are not present in community conversations, and who are not attending events. With this knowledge, they can then work to bring excluded populations more fully into community life. For example, after realizing that they were having difficulties reaching senior citizens, the Tryon Public Library in Tryon, Oklahoma launched a program dedicated to exploring available resources for those facing food insecurity and hunger—which affects many elderly members of the community. After bringing attention to this important local concern, the library succeeded in helping seniors become active members of the community. Describing the program, one library worker noted how *"more seniors are now coming to the library once a month to pick up sacks of food,"* and how in other cases, *"we are delivering food to them."*

Similarly, after hosting a community conversation, library staff at the Bixby Memorial Free Library in Vergennes, Vermont, realized the need to improve relevancy and connections with their farm community members, including a significant population of workers from Latin America. The library hosted and facilitated a "conversation partners" series to connect native English- and native Spanish-speaking residents, help them learn each other's language, and encourage them to share stories. Though interest was high, and many attended, the events reminded the staff of the importance of timing: farmers and farm families typically could not participate in community conversations unless held during *"the dead of a Vermont winter."* Additionally, library staff needed to ensure that planned events do not conflict with the open hours of the local clinic, which many migrant workers use to meet their health needs.

Figure 3. After receiving community input, staff at one public library decided to create a community garden. Photo courtesy of the Tryon Public Library in Tryon, Oklahoma.

As these examples indicate, many small and rural libraries are directing outreach efforts toward those who have traditionally lacked access to their services—including historically excluded or vulnerable groups such as recent immigrants

and refugees, those seeking political asylum, and non-English speakers. Small and rural libraries are also making great strides in seeking input from people with disabilities. For example, at Parker Memorial Library in Sulphur, Oklahoma, library staff made a concerted effort to integrate the town's Deaf community into library and community events. Since Sulphur is home to a school for Deaf children, the library recognized a need to reach out to this community and to make sure that accommodations for their participation were included in all outreach, publicity, and information-sharing efforts. Another library, which attempted to integrate residents from outside its immediate area, wrote that, *"We continue to reach people in our immediate community who don't often participate in library programs, as well as attracting people from outside our service area."* Often, these efforts have helped libraries better meet patrons' needs. For example, in a presentation at the Association for Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL), Parker Memorial Library's staff indicated that prior to receiving an LTC grant, there was very little representation of the Deaf community in their collections. Receiving LTC funds enabled them to expand on the materials they have for Deaf patrons, and to include more non-fiction and fiction books by and about Deaf people.

Step 4: Ensuring Accessibility

A key component of effective community engagement for libraries is making both their physical facilities and event programming accessible. Importantly, this means not only ensuring that all patrons can easily navigate library spaces, but also, that people have the ability to participate in programs in ways that reflect their diverse needs, circumstances, and abilities. In other words, accessibility means both accommodation and flexibility.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MEETING

WHEN: Sat., October 9th @ 1PM
WHERE: Neponset Public Library
WHAT: Discuss community technological needs

Figure 4. A public library announces a community engagement meeting designed to gather feedback on technological needs. Image courtesy of Carissa Faber, Director of the Neponset Public Library in Neponset, IL.

Small and rural libraries are demonstrating that the process of ensuring accessibility begins with interaction and dialogue. Through meeting and talking with local residents, they are able to ensure that accessibility measures are built into scheduled events *"from the get-go."* Sometimes, community conversations convince library workers to shift from one topic of discussion to another, or to change program dates and times—for example, hosting events on weeknights or weekends so that they're accessible to busy students and working parents. At other times, input from community members has taught libraries that in order to make programming successful, they need to provide food and childcare. Another library realized that moving its events into a more central location would promote ease of access, and after doing this, it also took steps to provide transportation for residents without cars.

In addition to utilizing off-site physical locations, small and rural libraries are also making great strides in developing virtual spaces for events and programs. Since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, they have recognized a need to *"be more flexible and competent in both in-person and virtual meetings."* In addition to making social media a key part of their outreach efforts, they are using online platforms such as Zoom to deliver content and host programs. What's more, small and rural libraries are now providing access to these technologies as well.

For example, at the James A. Tuttle Library in Antrim, New Hampshire, a focus group held during the early stages of the pandemic demonstrated that many local residents *"desperately needed laptops to access Zoom calls, job interviews, telehealth, and court appearances."* With LTC funds, they purchased two laptops, both of which patrons could check out and use at home. Along with two mobile hotspots that the library acquired, these have been used *"from the first day we bought them."*

As this indicates, accessibility is about more than just ensuring that everyone can utilize a library's facilities and services. More broadly, it means ensuring that local residents have full access to their communities, and to the wider world. This broader mission is something small and rural libraries actively subscribe to. For example, at one public library, library workers embarked on a project designed to expand the availability of Wi-Fi hotspots throughout the community. With LTC funds, they promptly ordered 10 hotspots and made them available for circulation from the library. Families immediately took advantage of these, and in providing this service, library staff found that they *"brought attention to what the library offers and renewed the interest of many of our community members."*

Step 5: Mediating Dialogue

Creating change within communities is about more than simply asking local residents to talk about what's important to them, or raising awareness through conversation or collections development. In order for meaningful change to happen, communities need to develop strategies for resolving disputes and for promoting modes of interactions that allow for the cooperative co-existence of people with different opinions, outlooks, and perspectives.

Small and rural libraries are playing a pivotal role here as well. They are doing this by mediating dialogue, and by serving as sites of conflict prevention and resolution. This is no small task given recent events and developments, including pandemic-related anxieties, rising levels of inequality, and deepening political

Figure 5. Erica Turner of Bridge the Divide leads a community conversation on redlining, racially restrictive covenants, and the impacts of racial segregation in housing. Photo courtesy Rosalia Swalson of the W.J. Niederkorn Library in Port Washington, W.I.

polarization. Relatively few topics today are entirely uncontroversial, and achieving civil, productive dialogue around them is a difficult, painstaking process—one that requires negotiation, compromise, and collaboration. By modeling civility, diplomacy, empathy, patience, and persistence, staff at small and rural libraries are showing how their institutions can help defuse community tensions, heal community wounds, and strengthen community bonds.

Oftentimes, it is library workers who take on the task of mediating dialogue. One library worker discussed how staff have to be prepared to intervene to keep these civil and productive:

"I try to be someone that can 'read the room' by paying attention to side-glances, raised shoulders, the way people lean in and out, etc. I always find this to be really important information that informs how I facilitate conversations or programs."

As library workers gain more experience hosting these kinds of events, they become more confident in mediating dialogue—or as one library worker put it,

"leading more controversial conversations that would bridge gaps." They are developing and utilizing the kinds of emotional skills needed to engage community members on *"tough topics."* At the heart of all of this is empathy. As one library worker explains, *"I think we need more patience and skill in handling difficult people, in having empathy for those who are having tough times and taking it out on the folks behind the counter."* With this, small and rural libraries are able to *"avoid serious challenges"* with community conversations and are ideally positioned to find common ground.

Step 6: Building Partnerships

As small and rural libraries are demonstrating, effective community engagement is about reaching out to individuals in their neighborhoods and communities, and drawing them into relationships with those around them. But beyond establishing personal connections, libraries are also reaching out to groups and organizations. Often, what arises from these efforts are formal partnerships—synergistic relationships through which local resources are pooled together and redirected in ways that more effectively serve the public good. Since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, more and more public libraries have begun forging partnerships with local organizations and institutions. In a separate project called "National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment" (NILPPA), ALA and Knology are developing strategies for examining and enhancing the effectiveness of these partnerships.

Often, small and rural libraries create partnerships that help advance their core missions—for example, promoting literacy and expanding access to high-quality education. At the Macedon Public Library in Macedon, New York, library staff

partnered with the Literacy Volunteers of Wayne County, who helped promote the library's virtual conversation series across the county. In particular, Literacy Volunteers brought high school students and teachers into this program by creating a writing contest directly tied to the library's chosen books. Library staff were incredibly pleased with the results, so much so that they indicated they would *"definitely partner with Literacy Volunteers again when doing other facilitations."*

As this example indicates, the partnerships small and rural libraries are forging often promote intergenerational learning. At Algona Public Library in Algona, Iowa, library staff partnered with a group of senior citizens, who volunteered some of their time to participate in a "Virtual Reading Buddies" program with younger patrons. According to library staff, *"this virtual reading buddy program would not have worked without the support and participation of partners and the community."*

On other occasions, small and rural libraries form partnerships so as to address needs beyond their current capabilities. As an example of this, consider the experience of Coos Bay Public Library in Coos Bay, Oregon. After hosting a community conversation about food insecurity, library staff recognized that local residents needed not only a non-judgmental space for talking about food and nutrition, but also professional advice on how to improve their dietary habits. To meet this need, the library partnered with a number of local groceries (including a co-op) and a health clinic. Through these partnerships, the library was able to provide vouchers that covered the costs of ingredients for cooking classes.

The process of building partnerships often allows small and rural libraries to reach new audiences. At the Bellaire Public Library in Bellaire, Michigan, library staff forged a partnership with Title Track—a local non-profit organization that focuses on supporting clean water, racial equity, and youth empowerment initiatives. After attending a virtual library event in which members of Title Track talked about racial injustice and its impact on Indigenous peoples, many patrons became interested

in learning more about local Native cultures. Some began requesting information about new books written by Indigenous writers, and when library staff decided to put Marie Bertineau's *The Mason House* on their Bellaire Reads Fall 2021 list, they received a call from the author (who is a member of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community) asking how she could help promote the series. Bertineau actually ended up making a presentation to the community. Reflecting on this, library staff found that *"Ms. Bertineau's description of her life on a reservation in the Northern Upper Peninsula was thought-provoking and engaging."*

Small and rural libraries have been incredibly successful in establishing and strengthening many different kinds of partnerships. Whether it be with schools, businesses, non-profit organizations, or volunteer groups, they are forging long-lasting connections with a wide variety of local entities. As they do so, they are broadening the scope of their activities, and incorporating the goals and values of partner organizations into their own mission statements. Speaking to the value of these partnerships, one library worker declared that they *"ha[ve] truly been a blessing."*

Figure 6. A public library promotes an online "community cooking" series made possible through partnership with a local food co-op. Photo courtesy of Coos Bay Public Library in Coos Bay, OR.

Step 7: Seeking External Support

For small and rural libraries, the process of building partnerships with other organizations is not one that ends at the borders of the communities they serve. Nor does it stop with pooling existing resources within the community. Beyond this, these libraries are working on a nationwide scale to bring additional resources into their communities—for example, by writing grant proposals and securing funding from organizations that exist to support their community engagement efforts. A prime benefactor here has been the American Library Association, whose Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) project provides financial aid (in the form of $3,000 grants) to small and rural libraries all across the country. The LTC initiative is offered in partnership with the Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL) and the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD)

Funds from LTC grants have allowed small and rural libraries to offer new programs and services, and extend existing ones. At the Gentry Public Library in Gentry, Arkansas, library staff reported that with an LTC grant, they *"drastically increased and updated our library collection, especially in our children's collections."* Even though their library had *"always been a hub in our community,"* staff observed that updating their collections led to *"increased patronage from newer residents,"* who now go to the library as a way of *"getting to know each other."*

Many of the libraries that participated in the LTC initiative were first-time grant recipients. Though the experience of writing grant proposals was a new one for them, it equipped them with the skills needed to secure additional funding, and made them more confident in their ability to attract external sources of monetary support. As one library worker explained, *"we have been able to not only open the door for conversation, but we have been able to expand, partner, and apply*

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Eagle Lake library receives $3,000 grant

From Staff Reports Lakeland Ledger
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Eagle Lake Public Library has been selected as one of 200 to participate in an initiative of the American Library Association. The program, Libraries Transforming Communities: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries, aims to help library staffs better serve their communities. The competitive award yields a $3,000 grant that will help the library purchase children's books and improve resources for homeschooling parents, the city said in a news release. The Eagle Lake library staff will take an online course in how to lead conversations. Staff will then host a conversation with homeschooling residents on creating an area in the library specifically for that community.

"We are so proud to be chosen for this amazing opportunity," City Manager Tom Ernharth said in the release. "We received one of only two grants awarded in the state of Florida and are looking forward to proving much improved children's services."

Figure 7. A local newspaper reports on a $3,000 grant one public library received through the ALA's Libraries Transforming Communities initiative. Image courtesy of the Eagle Lake Library in Eagle Lake, Florida.

for more funding to continue and further our grant project." With this funding, libraries are reaching new patron populations, and expanding their services in ways that help them develop more effective, community-oriented programming.

New grant proposals are often being drafted with new and existing partners. Highlighting the ways these follow-up grants would allow libraries to develop relationships with new community organizations, a staff member at one public library noted how their second-round project allowed them to *"begin a partnership with boots-on-the-ground researchers"* who are working to devise solutions to the problem of structural income inequality.

These new proposals are also being written through consultation with local residents. Some libraries are using surveys to gather additional input. For example, at the Laurel Public Library in Laurel, Delaware, library staff used a survey to identify 16 key community needs and concerns. After receiving additional funding, they took advantage of this information to develop a program that responded to each of these. Similarly, at the Laurel Public Library, staff decided to apportion LTC funding to programs aimed at addressing trauma and food insecurity, both of which community members had identified as areas of acute concern. This included a community meal; as one library worker explained, *"we fed those in need,"* and *"focused on their dreams and wishes for their community."*

As these examples indicate, gathering input is a necessary step to promoting community engagement. In recognition of this fact, many small and rural libraries are using the external support they receive from the ALA to host additional community conversations. At the Edgerton Public Library in Edgerton, Minnesota, staff explained how a second LTC grant was used not only to build up their large-print collection and expand home deliveries, but also, to *"continue the discussion on the lack of transportation for seniors in our community at our community conversation."* Staff here also decided to launch a series of discussions around mental health in the community.

In relying on external support to become better listeners and mediators, small and rural libraries are establishing a norm of open, continuous dialogue between themselves and their communities. Doing this allows them to respond to new community needs as they arise. For example, though staff at the George McCone Memorial County Library in Circle, Montana used their first LTC grant to program events on civics education, for their second grant, they decided to shift their focus. When a local music teacher retired, they realized their community was suffering from a deficit of music education programming. Remedying this, they used LTC funds to expand their CD and sheet music collections, and began offering micro-lessons for those interested in learning how to play an instrument.

A similar process played out at the Tryon Public Library in Tryon, Oklahoma. After discovering that the community wanted to talk about health and education, library staff developed health literacy packets and distributed exercise equipment to community members. They also ran a program about hunger and food insecurity. According to library staff, *"the town was so impressed"* by the program that *"the library has now become a kids' cafe,"* complete with a freezer that staff purchased with LTC funds to preserve snacks and lunches for kids who come to the library hungry. Perhaps even more impressive, the library also used LTC funds to create a community garden—an acre of land that is now home to 10 fruit trees planted by volunteers. This has been a game changer for the community, which is

located in a food desert. *"When I saw the fruit trees, I just started crying,"* one librarian recalled. Once a week she goes with a group of kids to tend the garden. And next year, she said, the trees will start bearing fruit.

Finally, Eagle Lake Public Library in Eagle Lake, Florida saw so much success with its LTC programming that its Board recognized the need for a new and larger library building. In light of several new housing developments, expanding library services has become especially important for the library, which anticipates an influx of new residents seeking their services. *"Because of our activities in the library,"* a library worker told us, *"It has occurred to the city commissioners that these new citizens will expect more than our library offers."* After recognizing this, commissioners sat down with library staff and asked them to *"estimate what a real library will cost and what will have to happen."* In response, library staff created a budget for the future library, which commissioners considered. The library staff told researchers that they *"give most of the credit to the two wonderful LTC grants for small libraries that we received."* Ultimately, they told us, *"I don't know how much more two little grants could expect to accomplish!"*

Evidence of Community Change

As small and rural libraries work to identify community needs, raise awareness, promote inclusion, ensure accessibility, mediate dialogue, build partnerships, and seek external support, their efforts are producing tangible social change within the communities they serve. Visible at both the individual and collective levels, these changes can be seen in everything from the adoption of new attitudes and perceptions through increased levels of civic involvement, the expansion and improvement of public services, new laws and policies, and renewed feelings

of community pride. In what follows, we highlight several examples of these changes, documenting the process of community growth libraries are fostering all across the country.

The community engagement work small and rural libraries are doing has been incredibly well received. Across the country, library workers reported that their efforts were met with *"overwhelming gratitude," "enthusiastic community support,"* and *"phenomenal"* feedback. At the Jaffrey Public Library in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, a library worker explained how *"people thank us all the time"* for the program on LGBTQ+ topics they launched. Similarly, after expanding internet access throughout the Live Oak Public Libraries consortium in Georgia, a library worker explained that *"we were not expecting such a positive response."* And at the Canterbury Public Library in Canterbury, Connecticut, where library workers assembled and distributed memory kits in connection with a program on dementia, one staff member reported that their efforts *"had further reaching influence and success than I would have imagined."*

Evidence of success can be seen not only in the incredibly positive reception these programs have met with, but also through the positive changes libraries are fostering. Some of this change is happening on an individual level, and often, it begins with library workers themselves. At the Interlochen Public Library in Interlochen, Michigan, a library worker who helped create a program on opioid misuse and harm reduction practices informed us that *"as someone who previously did not understand addiction, I have learned a lot both personally and professionally."* As they present new information to community members, library workers are helping patrons re-examine long-held beliefs and attitudes. After conducting a program on antiracism, a library worker at the Randall Library in Stow, Massachusetts remarked on how *"several middle aged white women reached out to tell me that this conversation struck a chord with them,"* and that they had been *"challenged...to reconsider once held ideals."*

A parallel process of change is happening at the community level. At the Spencer Public Library in Spencer, Iowa, the creation of a free food program worked to *"mitigate the stigma around being food insecure."* At another library, staff highlighted how their program on diversity, equity, and inclusion helped to *"counterbalance some of the negative actions that exist within the community,"* and prompted residents to think critically about a local preacher whose sermons promoted *"lies and misinformation with regard to gender, sexual orientation, racial equality and public health."* Similarly, during conversations on Racial Equity and Inclusion held at the Sayre Public Library in Sayre, Pennsylvania, some residents shared their own experiences of racism within the community, which prompted a deeper commitment to rooting out racial bias at the local level.

Local residents have expressed gratitude for the way libraries are creating opportunities to talk about controversial topics in a *"nonthreatening environment,"* and appreciate how *"all voices could be heard."* This is undoubtedly one of the most important changes libraries are working to produce within their communities. In opening spaces for non-judgmental discussion of controversial issues, they are helping residents develop a broader sense of community, and facilitating the creation of more welcoming, inclusive communities. For example, after conducting a series of an LGBTQ-themed events, staff at the Jaffrey Public Library in Jaffrey, New Hampshire remarked on how this sparked conversations *"in the streets and in the library." "It was like someone had to give them permission to talk about it,"* a library worker told us. Similarly, after implementing a mental health and suicide prevention program, staff at a different library concluded that *"our most significant accomplishment is that our community is no longer scared to discuss mental health and suicide prevention and loss."*

As stigmas and taboos surrounding controversial topics break down, local residents are becoming more and more involved in community engagement efforts. This is another change libraries are helping to bring about. As they become more

community-centered, people are responding by launching initiatives of their own—many of which build off of library programs. After staff at the Spencer Public Library held a conversation on food insecurity, local residents decided to create the Clay County Hunger Coalition, which promotes use of the free food pantry library staff established. Similarly, at a different library, a conversation on children's needs inspired parents to form a group dedicated to promoting more after school services. In response to the Blytheville Public Library's attempts to destigmatize mental health treatment, community members formed an *"unofficial taskforce to address mental health concerns in the community."*

As these examples indicate, library community engagement efforts are inspiring local residents and groups to carry their work forward. After staff at the Tyler Public Library began a program aimed at giving homebound senior citizens better access to library services, other institutions began to *"step up"* to support this population. Among other things, a local nursing home requested library assistance in boosting the morale of residents during a COVID-related shutdown. Summarizing the results of their cooperative efforts, a library worker declared that *"the community response to our morale booster drive has been overwhelming."*

Local governments have been as appreciative of library community engagement efforts as residents. In Ravenna, Nebraska, efforts to address food insecurity found favor among the city council, which commended staff on *"the progress and community involvement that the [Ravenna Public] library has shown in this difficult time."* From these positive appraisals have come formal partnerships with local governments. At the Wide Awake Club Library in Fillmore, New York, a community survey on the topic of local revitalization efforts prompted a governmental board to create an official committee *"dedicated to the betterment of our town and surrounding areas."* In Eureka Springs, Arkansas, a community conversation on affordable housing hosted by the Eureka Springs Carnegie Public Library prompted the town's mayor to work on this issue with city officials, who then placed a cap on the number of licenses issued for overnight lodgings.

Commenting on this, a staff member remarked on how the library's efforts *"will pave the way to accommodate more long term housing opportunities"* for local residents of this popular tourist site.

The end result of libraries' varied engagement efforts is the creation of more unified communities. As they develop stronger ties to those outside their immediate social circles, residents are broadening their understandings of community, and developing a deeper sense of pride and community belonging. At the Charles Whitehead Public Library in Wewahitchka, Florida, a library worker explained how a public history project called "Remembering Wewahitchka" led to *"a small renaissance of pride and community spirit"* among local residents, who appreciated how the library made them feel *"like they matter, that their story matters."* Similarly, at another library, patrons remarked on how a local jobs initiative helped them see the community *"as a whole, and not just whatever part they were in."*

Through their work, small and rural libraries are planting the seeds for community engagement and outreach efforts that will extend far into the future. As an indication of this, consider the experience of Cordova, Illinois, where staff at the Cordova District Library initiated an oral history project aimed at collecting stories of life in this small, rural town. *"The feedback we have received has been phenomenal,"* a library worker explained, noting that the project will *"live on in the years to come,"* as *"we have so many more stories to tell and can't wait to continue gathering and sharing them."* Regardless of the projects they embark on, the success small and rural libraries have met with through their community engagement work indicates a strong potential for growth in the years to come.

Conclusion

When it comes to developing techniques for effective community engagement, small and rural libraries have much to offer. Though often assumed to lack the resources required to assume the mantle of community leadership, these libraries have in fact made tremendous strides toward this goal. Indeed, they are at the vanguard of a movement to transform libraries into bona fide community hubs. Considered collectively, their work serves as a model for community engagement, one whose elements can be broken down into seven steps: (1) identifying community needs; (2) raising awareness; (3) promoting inclusion; (4) ensuring accessibility; (5) mediating dialogue; (6) building partnerships; and (7) seeking external support. This model is one that libraries all across the country stand to benefit from. Nationwide implementation of this will likely help cultivate the kinds of stronger, healthier, more unified communities that are beginning to emerge in small towns and rural areas throughout the US.

Funding