

# **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

STEPPING UP TO THE  
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT  
CHALLENGE

## Letter from the President & CEO

Civic engagement is among the most enduring cornerstones of democracy representing promise, opportunity and responsibility all at once. While much of our political discourse is seemingly fractious, citizens everywhere gather daily to find the common ground that helps us meet the challenges of our time. Research and experience tell us that engaged and empowered citizens generate optimism about the future, produce good decisions on meeting tough community challenges and contribute to local economic vitality.

In communities large and small, public libraries provides leadership, information, tools and a place where people can connect to fulfill the roles and responsibilities of active civic engagement. Because of their well-earned stature as a trusted community resource, libraries have an important role to play in shaping and leading discussions along with forging strategies and decisions that advance community goals.

This publication celebrates the role of libraries in nurturing an active citizenry and advocates that libraries step up even more fully to embrace their natural leadership.

The Urban Libraries Council (ULC) is an association of leading public library systems in the U.S. and Canada. For more than 40 years, ULC has served as a forum for library leaders who share best and next practices resulting from targeted research, education and emerging trends. ULC programs are recognized for creating new frameworks that invigorate public libraries and their communities.

Civic engagement is an urgent priority of ULC member libraries throughout North America. Stepping Up to the Civic Engagement Challenge is intended for a wide and varied audience of library, local government, business, civic and philanthropic leaders who are looking for sound ideas and effective strategies to advance the promise of citizens working together. It provides a rich context for understanding the important role of libraries in the civic engagement arena, concrete examples of specific programs and services that libraries are providing and recommends five powerful roles that libraries can assume.

More than a primer, this is a toolbox and *idea repository* that we hope will not only spark conversations but also provide the basis for activities that animate community life and support democracy in the 21st century.



Susan Benton  
President & CEO

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

STEPPING UP TO THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT CHALLENGE

**“CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IS A MAJOR ISSUE HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT -- ONE THAT NEEDS OUR ATTENTION.”**

-THE HARTFORD COURANT, DECEMBER 9, 2011

Engaged, connected, and involved citizens help create strong, optimistic, economically resilient communities.

That’s why civic engagement matters. In a world that is shaped by distrust in institutions, economic worries, and political partisanship, engaging people in meaningful ways to build stronger communities is valuable, necessary, and even urgent.

This report examines the value and impact of investing in civic engagement and makes the case for public libraries as civic engagement leaders.

### **What Is Civic Engagement?**

Civic engagement is deliberate, consistent, and purposeful outreach that creates an environment in which people of all ages and from all backgrounds believe they have a voice and a role in decisions and actions that affect their lives. It includes volunteering, voting, participating in civic and social organizations, engaging in public discussions, connecting with community and government decision makers, running for public office, and caring about and working to make a difference in the places people call home.

### **Why Invest in Civic Engagement?**

Trust in public institutions is at an all-time low. High unemployment, housing foreclosures, a shaky economy, growing economic disparities, and an inability to tackle major national priorities have caused widespread stress, anxiety, frustration, and disappointment. In contrast, research has consistently shown that engaged and empowered citizens generate optimism, produce good decisions on tough community challenges, and contribute to economic success. Communities thrive when residents feel that their voices are heard, their opinions matter, and their leaders are listening.

Perhaps most important, when times are tough, people are often more willing to step up to tackle challenges and work together for the good of their community. That means now is the ideal time to invest more deeply in civic engagement.

### **Why Libraries as Civic Engagement Leaders?**

Public libraries are trusted and tested resources that aren’t going away. They have deep hometown roots and broad assets that contribute to community building. And, many libraries have already invested in programs that support civic engagement goals which contribute to stronger communities.

Yet, their stature as civic engagement leaders is far from confirmed. While libraries are often referred to as democracy’s best promise, they are rarely seen as community and civic engagement leaders - even though they are right there in plain sight.

And that’s a missed opportunity for libraries, local governments, civic groups, and the people they serve.

### **Stepping Up to the Civic Engagement Challenge**

Maximizing the potential of public libraries to create and sustain an environment that promotes community attachment, empowerment, and engagement requires:

- Raising the library’s profile as a civic engagement leader
- Changing how community stakeholders view the library
- Changing how libraries operate and view themselves
- Being prepared for the challenges that come with a leadership role

## About This Report

This report is a publication of the Urban Libraries Council (ULC), a membership organization representing more than 130 leading public libraries that collectively service 190 million people. It is based on current research, in-depth interviews, and discussions among local government leaders, library directors and trustees, researchers, and civic leaders.

The report provides new ideas, thoughtful perspectives, success stories, and strategic approaches for use by local government officials, library leaders, and other key players who share a commitment to engaging citizens in meaningful and productive work to build strong communities.

**“NO LONGER A PASSIVE REPOSITORY OF BOOKS AND INFORMATION OR AN OUTPOST OF CULTURE, QUIET, AND DECORUM IN A NOISY WORLD, THE NEW LIBRARY IS AN ACTIVE AND RESPONSIVE PART OF THE COMMUNITY AND AN AGENT FOR CHANGE.”**

- ROBERT D. PUTNAM & LEWIS M. FELDSTEIN,  
BETTER TOGETHER: RESTORING THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY

## URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL

### 2011 Partners for Success: Civic Engagement & Building Community

In November 2011, more than 80 library leaders, city officials, and community and corporate partners met in Miami, FL for the Urban Libraries Council Partners for Success Conference. The conference was designed to explore the state of civic engagement practice and examine the role of libraries in building stronger communities. Publication of a Leadership Brief on Civic-Community Engagement as a Library Priority in 2011 laid the foundation for this conference.

The conference built on ULC’s mission to strengthen the public library as an essential part of urban life. Its focus on civic engagement is part of a long thread of inquiry into the library reaching out to the community.

Two noted leaders in engaging citizens in governance and community building—Carolyn Lukensmeyer, president and founder of AmericaSpeaks, and Paula Ellis, vice president/strategic initiatives at the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation—were keynote speakers. They provided a framework for the conversations based on their extensive work on deliberative democracy, civic engagement, and community building.

The presentations, group discussions, and strategic thinking during the conference provided a foundation for this report.

## 1. WHY CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

**“CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IS ESSENTIAL TO THE HEALTH OF OUR COMMUNITY. THE MORE ENGAGED OUR CITIZENS ARE THE STRONGER AND BETTER WE ARE AS A COMMUNITY.”**

- CARLOS A. GIMENEZ, MAYOR MIAMI-DADE COUNTY, FLORIDA

Civic engagement is about strengthening local democracy, building stronger communities, and empowering people to contribute to their communities in meaningful, productive, and sustained ways.

- And that matters—particularly in today’s environment. Trust in most public institutions is at an all-time low, leading to frustration and disengagement.
- Political paralysis and hyper-partisanship have led to little or no progress on big challenges facing the country.
- Complex 21st century problems cannot be solved by government alone and often cross government boundaries.<sup>i</sup>

These challenges suggest that giving people a voice and a role in decisions that affect their lives is a worthwhile, necessary, and urgent investment. “The profound brokenness of the system leads to a willingness to be involved to work toward solutions,” said Carolyn Lukensmeyer, president and CEO of AmericaSpeaks. “Traditional structures for linking the public to our institutions are outdated and don’t easily facilitate engagement. Yet, the core of democratic practice is creating structures and processes where differences are aired and processed.”

A recent editorial in the Hartford Courant (CT) pointed to low statewide voter turnout in municipal elections in 2011—“an embarrassing 30.67 percent”—as an indicator of poor civic health in the state. “Democracy is predicated upon the participation of informed citizens,” the Courant wrote. “When voters stay home, they are less likely to get competent or accountable government, which in turn affects the quality of schools, public safety, and town service.”<sup>ii</sup>

### Why Engage the Public?

- To create a stronger public constituency and mandate for change
- To educate the electorate about the challenges facing government officials
- To involve the public in being part of the solution and taking action
- To gain unique insight and new ideas <sup>iii</sup>

### Civic Engagement Supports Economic Vitality

Research and experience have shown that investing in civic engagement produces significant dividends. Engaged and empowered citizens generate optimism, produce good decisions on tough community challenges, and contribute to economic success.

The results of several multi-year studies of U.S. communities have identified strong connections between civic engagement and economic well-being. In its continuing work to create informed and engaged communities, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation has concluded that:

- Informed and engaged communities are better places to live, work, and play.
- The more attached people are to their communities, the more empowered they feel to voice their perspectives.
- Community attachment may be the leading indicator of economic vitality.
- Communities where people are civically engaged are more economically resilient.
- There is a direct correlation between high levels of civic engagement and economic growth.
- A culture of civic empowerment generates a widespread sense of optimism that people can shape the future of their community.<sup>iv</sup>

The engagement-economy connection was reinforced in a report published by the National Conference on Citizenship, which found that states with more civic engagement have experienced less unemployment and seemed better able to weather a recession. States with the highest volunteering rate in 2006 had the smallest unemployment increase between 2006 and 2011. Among the possible reasons cited for the connection between civic engagement and lower unemployment are:

- People who participate in civil society trust others more, and trust is a powerful predictor of economic success.
- Participation in civil society helps develop skills, confidence, and habits that could contribute to success in the job market.
- People get jobs through their social connections—family, friends, professional connections, and community networks.
- Civic engagement encourages community attachment, which increases the odds of investing, spending, and hiring in the community.v

## Key Concepts in Building Strong Communities:

- Community attachment: the loyalty and passion people feel for where they live.
- Community empowerment: the belief that individual action can make a difference.
- Civic engagement: the choice to be involved in community life and community action, including but not limited to voting, volunteering, serving on committees, reaching out to public officials, connecting to information and current events, involving oneself in politics, and contributing to local causes.
- Civic health: the measure of how well diverse groups of citizens work together and with government to solve problems and strengthen their communities.
- Democratic governance: the art of governing a community in participatory, deliberate, and collaborative ways.
- Compiled from the National Conference on Citizenship and the National League of Cities

**“OUR GOVERNANCE—OUR CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE—IS ROOTED IN THE BELIEF THAT GOOD IDEAS CAN COME FROM ANYWHERE, THAT COLLABORATION BETWEEN CITIZENS AND COUNTY GOVERNMENT TYPICALLY LEADS TO BETTER RESULTS THAN WORKING ALONE, AND THAT STRATEGIC DECISIONS STAND THE TEST OF TIME WHEN DEVELOPED TOGETHER.”**

- MARY HUGHES HYNES, CHAIR, ARLINGTON COUNTY BOARD, ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA

### Civic Engagement Helps Solve Local Challenges

Local elected and appointed leaders recognize the value of directly engaged citizens. Their involvement contributes to a stronger sense of community, builds trust between the public and the government, and produces better solutions to local problems.vi Local officials look to the public to:

- Make choices about cutting services during tough economic times
- Establish strategic priorities through neighborhood and city-wide planning sessions
- Discuss challenging community issues using both online and face-to-face forums
- Provide important information about day-to-day community needs

In addition to fostering a strong local economy, sustained civic engagement contributes to well-informed citizens, safer neighborhoods, community stability, supportable budgets, and more. It also helps citizens embrace new roles as co-producers of government services rather than consumers.

For example, in 2012 more than 1,800 Washington, DC, residents participated in a One City Summit to provide input on local priorities. Mayor Vincent C. Gray called the event “real-time grassroots democracy, DC style.”

“Our city is far better off when we give our residents genuine ways to shape the future,” Mayor Gray said. “Engaging people gives city leaders better information about what residents want and need which informs policy, program, and budget development. A budget is far more supportable when citizens have had direct input.”

Many local leaders say engaged citizens contribute to safer communities.

“Residents know best what is going on in their neighborhoods,” Mayor Gray said. “If they trust their government and police officers and believe their voices will be heard, they will help us keep their neighborhoods safe.” Similarly, North Miami, Florida, City Manager Stephen E. Johnson said engaged citizens have contributed to the city’s lowest crime rate since the early 1980s. “By reaching out regularly to our citizens, we learn what’s important in the community and what the safety concerns are,” Johnson said.

### Civic Engagement Is Democracy in Action

Arlington County, Virginia, builds its entire approach to governance and decision-making around an active and engaged citizenry. It is called “the Arlington Way.” During 2012, Board Chair Mary Hughes Hynes has launched a new initiative called PLACE: Participation, Leadership, and Civic Engagement to bring more residents into civic conversations and decision-making. Components of the year-long effort include: (1) creating a map of civic resources; (2) conducting a formal community-wide conversation to define roles and responsibilities and energize civic decision-making; (4) providing training on civic engagement skills for key community groups; and (5) making civic engagement a required skill for all county employees.

Chair Hynes said PLACE is more than a year-long exercise. “Our goal is for more members of our community to be involved—actively and constructively—in the important local government decisions that affect their lives and those of their neighbors.”

For Hartford, Connecticut, Chief Operating Officer David B. Panagore, getting community residents involved in local decision-making on a regular basis isn’t optional. “The legitimacy of government is derived from the consent of the governed,” Panagore said. “That consent is essential to achieve lasting change.”

For more than 10 years, proactive civic engagement has been a priority in Hartford to deal with major community challenges including a growing immigrant population, entrenched poverty among city residents, and significant illiteracy among the adult population. And a key part of the city’s efforts to involve residents in meaningful and productive civic engagement is a partnership with the Hartford Public Library (CT). “Every public initiative we launch is done with the library,” Panagore said. “Whenever we think of a challenge, we say ‘let’s go to the library.’”

**“THE BEST PUBLIC POLICY IS A MIX OF EXPERT KNOWLEDGE AND THE WISDOM THAT COMES FROM ORDINARY PEOPLE LIVING THEIR DAILY LIVES.”**

- THOMAS JEFFERSON



### Five Key Ideas About why Civic Engagement Matters

- Civic engagement involves deliberate, consistent, and purposeful outreach to create an environment in which people of all ages and from all backgrounds feel they have a voice and role in decisions that affect their lives.
- Engaged and empowered citizens contribute to economic success, generate optimism, and help solve tough community challenges.
- Sustained community outreach generates valuable information for delivering effective public services, makes citizens co-producers of services rather than consumers, and produces results and strategic decisions that stand the test of time.
- Lack of trust in public institutions points to an urgent need for change.
- When times are tough, people are usually more willing to be involved to work toward solutions.

## II. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT & PUBLIC LIBRARIES

“IN A WORLD OF DECAYING TRUST, ONE BRAND REMAINS **HIGHLY TRUSTED AND RESPECTED**, AND THAT’S THE BRAND OF THE COMMUNITY LIBRARY.”

-PAULA ELLIS, VICE PRESIDENT/STRATEGIC INITIATIVES,  
THE JOHN S. AND JAMES L. KNIGHT FOUNDATION

There are many voices and resources involved in civic engagement, civic health, community attachment, democratic governance, and community building. Nonprofits, foundations, civic groups, and research organizations are making valuable contributions to the field and carrying out successful projects.

But projects end while the business of building healthy, vibrant, engaged communities goes on. Long-term success requires sustained leadership, consistent coordination, and deep community connections.

Public libraries, working in close partnership with local government and the many available resources and experts, are well positioned to provide the consistent, close-to-home, sustained leadership that contributes to community success. They are trusted, stable, apolitical, safe, and positive—in short, ideal civic engagement leaders. At a time when trust in government remains low and many citizens feel disconnected from public institutions, libraries offer a bright light for producing long-term results. Maximizing the potential of public libraries to help create and sustain an environment that promotes community attachment, empowerment, and engagement requires:

- Raising the library’s profile as a civic engagement leader and resource
- Changing how community stakeholders view the public library
- Changing how libraries operate and view themselves
- Being prepared for the challenges that come with a leadership role

## Raising the Library’s Profile as a Civic Engagement Leader

Libraries are at the heart of the communities they serve, and civic engagement is at the heart of where libraries are going in the 21st century. Moving from a community resource to a civic engagement leader is a logical step in the evolution of public libraries. They have a rich knowledge base about what’s going on in the community that can shape and encourage strong connections for engagement and action.

“If we aren’t sharing that market intelligence to build community and advance democracy, then we aren’t sharing the value of the public library,” said Susan Benton, president and chief executive officer of the Urban Libraries Council.

Public libraries’ natural assets for civic engagement and community building run deep. Libraries are:

- Accessible to the entire community
- Respected as a source of factual information
- Trusted as a neutral convener
- Able to attract partners and create alliances

They also bring knowledgeable and skilled staff, physical space for community meetings, and technology resources for use by all.

But, libraries need to define their role in the community differently and raise their profile to maximize their value as civic engagement leaders. Today’s library must be a more extroverted resource, driven by the ability to participate in community life in meaningful ways on a regular basis. That role involves:

- Becoming engaged in activities that may be different from traditional library business
- Being aggressive in positioning the library as a broad resource with deep capacities that both support and drive actions to engage citizens and build stronger communities
- Leading with a point of view about what is important in the community
- Helping the community shape a vision that is built on civic engagement
- Focusing outward to the community more than inward on the library

“It is important for the public library not to stand in the background, but to lead with its point of view about what is important in the community,” said John W. Hill, president of the Board of Library Trustees for the DC Public Library (Washington, DC). “Today’s library must be fearless in expressing that point of view and come to the table with a strong belief in what libraries are and how they can help build strong communities.”

A more extroverted library can be politically aware while maintaining its reputation as an unbiased, neutral resource. “Library leaders are public administrators and political analysts,” said Nashville Public Library (TN) Foundation Board Member Keith B. Simmons. “They have to be in that political world and connected to what is going on. And, they have to mesh the library with the influential priorities of the community.”

San Antonio Public Library (TX) Director Ramiro Salazar has focused on raising the library’s profile by building strategic alliances with decision-makers, civic groups, and chambers of commerce, and aligning library priorities with the mayor’s priorities. “We have worked to emphasize and articulate the library’s role in dealing with issues that are important to the community,” Salazar said. “If it is a community-wide issue, then the library should be involved.”

### Changing How Stakeholders View the Library

“What makes good cities into great cities is leadership,” said Simmons. “And, that leadership does not always come only from elected officials. It often comes from informal, influential individuals and organizations.”

An extroverted public library can become the informal, influential civic engagement leader in ways that stretch beyond traditional library roles. But success as an influential community leader depends, in part, on changing how stakeholders and decision makers view the library.

Library trustees can be instrumental in achieving that change because they are community stakeholders. Their broad knowledge of library capacities combined with their professional and community connections help the library director get to the tables where important community decisions are made. They, better than any other resource, can carry the message of the library as a vital resource for strengthening democracy, enhancing citizen empowerment, and reconnecting residents with public institutions.<sup>vii</sup>

Successful library performance in supporting civic engagement leads to legitimacy as a civic engagement leader. “Community engagement is a way of doing business in our city,” said St. Paul, Minnesota, Deputy Mayor Paul D. Williams. “We focus on relevance, access, and partnerships in how we deliver our commitment to community engagement. And, the library is a key resource for our efforts because of its sustained community connections and because we know we can count on it to get the job done.”

## Changing How Libraries Operate

While most public libraries offer programs that support civic engagement goals and contribute to stronger communities, becoming a civic engagement leader may involve realigning priorities, shifting staff responsibilities and focus, and leveraging library assets and capacities to meet community needs.

Civic engagement leadership also requires reaching out to the community more than pulling the community into the library. The following four strategies contribute to solidifying the library’s role as a civic engagement leader.

### 1. Make civic engagement a library priority, and let everyone know.

Aligning library and community priorities and drawing attention to the library’s commitment to civic engagement and community building will change the way stakeholders view the library. That means making civic engagement an explicit library responsibility, commitment, and priority rather than a side benefit of community-driven programs. Redesigning the library’s mission, vision, and strategic priorities is an important step in confirming the civic engagement focus.

“Civic engagement is not separate from other library priorities,” said Saint Paul Public Library (MN) Director Kit Hadley. “All of our programming is about the library promoting civic engagement. We get people out of their houses and bring families together to socialize. And, we find ways to engage people around things that stir passions.”

## St. Paul Public Library Vision & Strategies (MN)

**Vision:** We are a cornerstone of a thriving city; welcoming people of all ages and cultures; strengthening neighborhoods and learning networks; and inspiring all with the world of ideas.

**Strategies:**

- Set priorities and align library resources with key community partners.
- Strengthen St. Paul’s digital and community-based learning network.
- Focus on services that are high priority, effective, and innovative.
- Align library spaces to support group and individual learning.

In 2009, the Board of Trustees of the Cuyahoga County Public Library (OH) adopted a new mission and vision designed to strengthen the library’s position in the community. “We knew we were a solid public library system, but we were not integrated into community life,” said Sari Feldman, Cuyahoga County Public Library Executive Director. As a result, the library’s focus became making a difference in the county and ensuring that community needs aligned with library values and capacities.

**Cuyahoga County Public Library Mission & Priorities (OH)**

**Mission:** Cuyahoga County Public Library will be at the center of community life by providing an environment where reading, lifelong learning, and civic engagement thrive.

**Priorities:**

- Reconnect with reading
- Ensure every child enters school ready to learn
- Help youth to reach maximum potential
- Put Cuyahoga County back to work
- Keep seniors healthy, happy, and independent
- Connect with new Americans

As part of its strategic planning process, the San Antonio Public Library (TX) created a leadership advisory committee made up of two former mayors, the superintendent of a school district, a former city manager, and chairs of two chambers of commerce. The group helped define a broader library role in the community, raise the library’s profile, and increase awareness of the contributions it makes to solving community challenges.

**San Antonio Public Library Vision (TX)**

**The San Antonio Public Library...**

- is recognized as a premier resource for educational support, self-directed learning, and literacy
- provides invaluable tools for building the community’s prosperity
- anticipates community challenges and responds with creativity and innovation
- is a welcoming community gathering place and a cornerstone of family, cultural, and civic life
- bases all service decisions on customer needs and preferences
- is a forward-thinking organization that maximizes the potential of each employee

**2. Show up.**

More extroverted libraries initiate action and show up at decision-making tables rather than waiting for invitations. That means stepping out and stepping up in ways that may not be expected of the public library. For example, the Springfield City Library (MA), broadened the focus of its strategic planning process from the library to the entire community. The effort led to six strategic priorities designed to build a brighter future for the entire city and an expanded role for the library in the community.

“The library was not visible or valued in the community, and we wanted to change that,” said Library Director Molly Fogarty. “We demonstrated through this process that we are a real partner in the community.” For Fogarty, a key lesson from the experience was the importance of “putting yourself out there rather than waiting for an invitation.”

Arlington Public Library (VA) Director Diane Kresh sees stepping out as a daily responsibility. “My job is to pay attention to issues that matter in the community and then look for ways to contribute,” Kresh said. “I scan the horizon, look for opportunities, and partner with the right resources to help build a stronger community.”

### 3. Encourage and expect staff to get outside the library walls.

Library staff are community ambassadors. Their presence in the community on critical activities—not just library business—helps raise the library’s profile as a civic engagement leader. For example, the Hartford Public Library (CT) has a full-time position dedicated to community development and civic engagement. Associate Librarian for Community Development and Civic Outreach Richard Frieder said the most important work he does every day is building relationships throughout the city, and the rest of his work grows out of those relationships.

“I intentionally wander the city and spend time in City Hall so that I know what’s happening,” Frieder said. “My goal is to make sure people see me, know me, and think of the library.”

The Edmonton Public Library (AB) affirmed its commitment to civic and community engagement by establishing 17 community librarian positions working out of service points throughout the city. The decentralized model gives the library valuable intelligence on community priorities and helps build strong relationships throughout the community. During their first year of operation, the community librarians worked with more than 300 organizations in the city for a total average of 145 hours per week.

Staff at the Alachua County Library District (FL) are encouraged to leave the library, go out into the community, learn what the community needs, and explore how the library can help meet those needs.<sup>viii</sup> With its slogan of “thinking outside the book,” the library has positioned itself as a place where new ideas thrive beyond typical library services. “It is important to get imbedded in your community so that stakeholders see the library as central to the community rather than an amenity,” said Alachua County Library District Director Shaney T. Livingston.

### 4. Identify opportunities to make a difference in the community.

Opportunities that libraries have embraced to leverage their expertise to meet community needs include:

- Providing services to and offering a safe welcoming place for immigrants
- Designing and supporting e-government services and community portals that broaden access to reliable information
- Being a safe place for launching community conversations on tough issues

- Facilitating strategic planning processes that address broad community needs
- Providing civic and voter education
- Serving as voter registration and polling sites

Calgary Public Library (AB) Chief Executive Officer Gerry Meek uses a four-step process for identifying needs and opportunities that shape how the library operates in the community:

- Listen to the community
- Make what the library does matter
- Identify dialogues that the library can influence
- Play to the library’s strengths

### Dealing with the challenges of a leadership role

Stepping into a civic engagement leadership role offers opportunities and challenges for libraries. The clear opportunity is to build stronger, economically resilient communities where citizens feel they have a voice and role in decisions and actions that affect their lives. But, an extroverted leadership role means moving into unfamiliar territory, which may be more political or contentious than traditional library business. Challenges libraries may face as they build their civic engagement credentials include:

- **Taking the heat that comes with a leadership role**  
Flying under the radar screen has its advantages. Being a leader raises expectations about broad and quick results and increases the likelihood of criticism, naysayers, and missed expectations. Over the past decade, libraries have been strategic and resourceful in reinventing themselves in the face of changing needs while sustaining their status and reputation in the community. That foundation will help when operating in new and more challenging territory. Setting manageable expectations, communicating regularly, and being aware of the challenges that come from naysayers are important to managing the leadership role.
- **Maintaining the library’s neutrality**  
While the library should have a point of view about issues that matter in the community, it should not have an agenda. Convening community conversations around challenging social issues creates opportunities for exploration and group problem solving. Library leaders can bring information and ideas to the table without offering answers or taking positions on public policy issues. Ensuring balanced perspectives among presenters will facilitate a balanced

conversation. The library's reputation as an apolitical, nonpartisan, neutral welcoming place strengthens its power and influence in the community. That reputation is an essential asset that must be preserved.

- **Balancing traditional services with new leadership responsibilities**  
Becoming a civic engagement leader is not a new program or more work for already-stretched staff. Instead, it involves rethinking how the library approaches its role in the community, how it defines priorities, and who it connects with to meet community needs. It does not mean stopping services that are important to and valued by the community. Moving from a reliable provider of community services to a leader that is committed to building an engaged and economically resilient community is an extension of the library's fundamental mission rather than a new venture.
- **Gaining credibility and legitimacy as a civic engagement leader**  
Stepping up, showing up, reaching out, building on successes, and raising a leadership voice in the community will contribute to the library's legitimacy. The library's stature as a reliable community resource provides a foundation for shifting into a stronger leadership role. But moving from supporter to leader requires different behavior, persistence, and a fearless commitment to civic action. Choosing opportunities that match the library's skills and roles—such as using a one-book program to launch conversations about systemic community challenges—increases the likelihood of success.
- **Building civic engagement skills**  
AmericaSpeaks President Carolyn Lukensmeyer says the most important skill for building a healthy democratic society is to “listen with an open mind and an open heart.” Skilled staff are essential to carrying out the library leadership role and supporting community building efforts by others. For example, having a cadre of trained facilitators to support community conversations and problem-solving sessions in the library, in neighborhoods, and in schools may make it possible to engage more people in these discussions. Providing staff training to enhance civic engagement skills and confidence is a valuable investment. Offering training to other community groups will further broaden the impact of civic engagement efforts.

## RECAP

### Five Key Ideas About Civic Engagement and Public Libraries

- In a world of decaying trust in public institutions, libraries remain highly trusted and respected, which makes them ideal civic engagement leaders.
- Today's library must be a more extroverted resource driven by the ability to participate in community life in meaningful ways.
- Maximizing the library's potential as a civic engagement leader requires raising the library's profile, changing how stakeholders view the library, changing how libraries operate and view themselves, and being prepared for the challenges of a leadership role.
- Library trustees, in their positions as community leaders, can help change how stakeholders view the public library.
- A higher-visibility leadership role may produce new challenges for libraries which must be managed in order to maintain the library's stature and reputation in the community while producing good results.

## III. ENGAGED LIBRARIES LEADING THE WAY

“IN A WORLD OF COMMUNITY BUILDING, LOCAL LIBRARIES HAVE A UNIQUE AND POWERFUL ROLE.”

-THE ENGAGED LIBRARY: CHICAGO STORIES OF COMMUNITY BUILDING

Public libraries have been strengthening democracy and building community for years. In many communities, they are already leading civic engagement efforts that reach beyond their traditional library roles. “People view their library as this democratic place where opinions are heard, resources are universally available, everyone is welcome, and programs are offered about things that matter in the community,” said Hartford Public Library (CT) Director Matthew K. Poland.

Engaged libraries are leading the way around these five roles:

1. **Civic Educator**—raising awareness of civics, civic engagement, and civic responsibility
2. **Conversation Starter**—identifying challenging community issues, creating forums for sharing opinions, and developing action strategies
3. **Community Bridge**—bringing diverse people, including local government officials, and organizations with different perspectives together to build stronger communities
4. **Visionary**—leading efforts to develop a broad and inclusive community vision
5. **Center for Democracy in Action**—walking, talking, thinking, and acting as the place where democracy, civic engagement, and public discourse happen

The following sections provide snapshots of how libraries are already leading civic engagement efforts.

### Civic Educator

Successful civic engagement requires a combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make a difference and solve community problems. The educator role comes naturally to libraries.

- Calgary Public Library’s (AB) civic literacy program educated voters about the 2010 municipal election, emphasized what a difference one vote can make, and encouraged active and purposeful civic engagement over the longer-term. It included candidate forums, election blogs training sessions for candidates and campaign managers, and meet-the-candidate sessions. The result was a 53 percent voter turnout in 2010, compared with an average of 28 percent during the previous three municipal elections.
- Sacramento Public Library (CA) became a center for political and civic engagement around a new citizen-driven redistricting process. It was one of six redistricting centers created to give state residents access to data, software, education, and information about the redistricting process. The library’s evening and weekend hours, Internet connectivity, secure office space, ADA accessibility, nonpartisan welcoming environment, and commitment to supporting and encouraging civic engagement contributed to its selection for this once-a-decade responsibility.
- Anchorage Public Library (AK) combined its civic education and conversation-starter roles by conducting a series of conversations on the Alaska Constitution. During nine conversations, citizens explored the foundations of civic life in Alaska and even talked with some of the original framers of the state constitution. As a result of this effort, more copies of the Alaska Constitution were in the hands of residents than ever before.
- San Antonio Public Library maximized a state statute that allows libraries to be voter registration sites. All library branches offer voter registration as an option when signing up for a library card, emphasizing the library’s role as a civic educator.

## Conversation Starter

Democracy happens when interested people engage in informed discussion about issues affecting their lives and their community. Libraries are leading these discussions from identifying the most important issues through facilitating community action.

- Pima County Public Library (AZ) regularly brings citizens and state and local elected officials together to discuss community issues, build civic relationships, and maintain connections between citizens and elected leaders. A toolkit developed by the Arizona Library Association provides guidelines for conducting successful meetings with elected officials—which is an important indicator of civic engagement.
- Calgary Public Library (AB) conducts dynamic community forums around key issues facing the community such as sustainability, immigration, health and well-being, voting, and engagement. The series is designed to build awareness of the library’s civic leadership role and create a place for citizens to explore quality-of-life issues.
- San Diego Public Library (CA) uses the one-book model to encourage widespread conversations around issues that matter in the community. The library involves both a public television and radio station to broaden the community impact and engages the community in selecting the book for discussion through an online community vote.
- Arlington Public Library (VA) used its Arlington Reads program to support a local leadership agenda on sustainability, focusing particularly on local food production. While it began with two books and author presentations, the initiative also included creating a community vegetable garden in a raised bed at the entrance to the Central Library to benefit the Arlington Food Assistance Center. The comprehensive effort engaged new partners, supported a worthy cause, demonstrated the feasibility of producing food in urban spaces, and served as an educational laboratory for both the volunteer gardeners and the 3,000 people who visited the library daily.
- Pima County, Hartford, and Brooklyn (NY) Public Libraries all provide a range of services for immigrants to connect them to their adopted homes. The programs are designed to educate immigrants, facilitate their access to services, help them navigate unfamiliar processes such as securing visas to continue working and living here, and build social capital and trusting relationships.
- Skokie Public Library (IL) brings residents of its highly diverse population—who speak 100 different languages—together to explore a different culture each year, including a series of community conversations to increase understanding and create stronger community connections.
- DC Public Library connected two groups that coexist in the community but are often at odds with each other—the homeless and teens. The teens were trained in professional photography and interviewing to collect the stories and images of the homeless residents, which became part of the library’s website and gave identity to the often faceless homeless population.
- Orange County Public Library (FL) built a shared history of Orlando—a city which many erroneously think began with the opening of Disney World. Both the content of Orlando Memory and the process for collecting community and individual stories honored the city’s rich and unique history and provided a vehicle for binding residents together.
- Miami-Dade Public Library System (FL) has used storytelling to engage children and families from the multicultural and multilingual community and increase cultural awareness. The library connects with libraries in other countries to introduce residents to other cultures while embracing diversity and connecting to their community.

## Community Bridge

Libraries are uniquely qualified to create community bridges by connecting groups who may have little in common and by helping to engage disconnected groups.

## Visionary

When diverse people are enlisted in the work of shaping a community vision, they become optimistic about the future and are more committed to the vision. Absent a longer-term vision, citizens are likely to get stuck in short-term problems that contribute to frustration and disengagement.

Libraries can lead the process of developing a community vision as the Springfield City Library (MA) did. Or, they can contribute to and encourage its development by collecting useful information, refining the library’s vision to support community building, and creating opportunities to get people involved in bigger conversations.

- Free Library of Philadelphia (PA) redefined its service vision to focus on transforming lives by making economic recovery and ongoing prosperity its highest priority.
- Jefferson County Public Library (CO) launched a comprehensive community assessment process to strengthen its capacity to connect with the communities it serves and to lead community problem solving.
- Contra Costa County Library (CA) used the need for a new library branch to raise the library’s profile in the community and shape a new vision. More than 4,000 residents participated in assessments, surveys, focus groups, and interviews to build a new library that would be a center for lifelong learning and a civic focal point for everyone.
- Public Library of Youngstown and Mahoning County (OH) carried out a strategic planning process to broaden its vision and increase its community-building skills using the Harwood Institute innovation framework. The process strengthened the staff’s skills and shifted the library’s focus from traditional services to leading efforts to address persistent community problems.

### Center for Democracy in Action

Becoming a center for democratic action requires moving from events that support civic engagement to a coordinated strategy designed to achieve active and purposeful engagement. Library leaders who see themselves as centers for democratic action say all of their programming is about civic engagement. Programs that address key civic engagement indicators—voting, civic understanding, connections with public officials, services to immigrants, and easy access to reliable data and civic information—position the library as the place where democracy, civic engagement, and public discourse happen.

Being successful as a center for democratic action requires:

- Positioning the library at the heart of the community where its role as a civic leader is widely communicated, understood, accepted, and valued
- Committing to civic engagement and community building as the library’s overall focus
- Modeling civic engagement, including encouraging staff to be actively involved in community work both in their library jobs and their personal lives

Using strategies, concepts, mission statements, and slogans such as “building bridges” (Calgary Public Library), “working for democracy” (Johnson County Public Library), “thinking outside the book” (Alachua County Public Library District), and being a “cornerstone of a thriving city” (St. Paul Public Library), public libraries are reshaping their vision and leading the way toward stronger communities.



**Five Strategies for Leading the Way**

- Educating voters about civic responsibilities, including participating in municipal elections.
- Helping immigrants connect with their new homes.
- Building community histories that encourage community attachment.
- Bridging diverse cultures and disconnected groups.
- Creating a vision of an engaged, connected, healthy, vibrant community.

## IV. STEPPING UP TO THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT CHALLENGE: A CALL TO ACTION

**“THERE ARE TWO WAYS OF SPREADING LIGHT:  
TO BE THE CANDLE OR THE MIRROR THAT  
REFLECTS IT.”**

- EDITH WHARTON

Civic engagement does matter. The research is compelling about the economic and social benefits that come when residents are connected to their communities in meaningful and productive ways. Most local officials also agree that when residents get involved in public decision-making and behave more like citizens than consumers, the results are positive.

The need and the opportunity in this fertile territory is for a reliable, trusted, hometown resource to lead, manage, and ensure sustained attention to civic engagement every day—not just for a special research project or a pressing need.

That resource is the public library.

Because of the library’s deep community roots and programs that already support civic engagement, becoming the go-to resource on civic engagement requires a shift in emphasis, approach, and attitude rather than a mission change. That shift will happen through:

- A solid understanding of why civic engagement matters and how it contributes to stronger, more economically resilient communities
- A higher profile and louder voice for the library and its work throughout the community
- An explicit commitment to civic engagement and community building as a broad library priority

- Sustained connections to local challenges and leadership priorities
- Constantly nurtured partnerships throughout the community
- Persistence and courage
- Good work that produces good results

Much of the onus for ratcheting up close-to-home, consistent attention to civic engagement lies with public libraries themselves. They can step up, reach out, show up, flex their civic capacities, connect with influential partners, and define themselves as civic engagement leaders. At the same time, local leaders, many of whom have structural relationships with public library systems, can think of their libraries as they look for partners to lead civic engagement efforts.

Libraries are more than another civic group or asset to be added to an outreach list. They are deeply rooted in the community— present, ready, trusted, respected, well-known, and capable.

As libraries continue reinventing their roles in the face of changing needs, shrinking resources, electronic books, and new models for reading and learning, a renewed focus on their original purpose as democracy’s best promise offers a strong value proposition.

For libraries, the challenge is to step up.

For government officials, civic groups, researchers—anyone interested in encouraging, building, and supporting civic engagement and community empowerment—the best approach may be “let’s go to the library.”

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URBAN  
**LIBRARIES**  
COUNCIL

INSPIRING LIBRARIES.  
TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES.

# ABOUT

## URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL

Founded in 1971, the Urban Libraries Council (ULC) is a membership organization made up of North America's premier public library systems and the corporations supporting them. While ULC's members primarily represent urban and suburban settings, the work done by ULC is widely used by all libraries including those in rural settings. ULC strategically addresses issues important to all communities including education, workforce and economic development, public safety, environmental sustainability, health, and wellness. ULC's members are thought leaders dedicated to the continuous evolution and strengthening of libraries to meet changing community needs. ULC's focus is on helping library leaders develop and utilize skills and strategies that match the challenges of the 21st century.