

# Urban Libraries Council

## LEADERSHIP BRIEF

### LIBRARY PRIORITY: COMMUNITY-CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

**About this Leadership Brief** Over the past decade, public institutions have become increasingly concerned about and committed to strengthening the foundations of community and civic engagement—volunteering, voting, participating in civic and social organizations, engaging in activities that strengthen community, participating in public dialogues and problem solving sessions, and working to make a difference in their communities. Local government leaders, in particular, have broadened their approaches to engaging citizens by moving from traditional representative governance to democratic governance where citizens work directly with public officials in participatory, inclusive, deliberative, and collaborative ways.

The long-term benefits of increasing civic and community awareness, engagement, and activity are well documented. Research and experience have shown that engaged and empowered citizens generate optimism about the future, produce good decisions on tough community challenges, and contribute to economic success and individual well-being.<sup>i</sup>

Public libraries, with their sustained stature as the most trusted government entity, are ideal resources to shape and lead discussions, decisions, and strategies that encourage active and purposeful civic engagement. Yet, despite the assets, resources, and experience that libraries bring to the table, they are rarely seen as community and civic engagement leaders. Failing to leverage the library's broad community connections, respected public stature, and capacity to bring people together is a missed opportunity.

This Leadership Brief explores how to move libraries from supporting players to valued leaders in today's civic engagement space. It identifies five leadership roles to help libraries broaden their impact as the go-to resource for building a culture of enlightened, engaged, and empowered citizens.

#### A Perspective on Civic Engagement

When sociologist Robert Putnam suggested in his 2000 book that people were “bowling alone” and becoming increasingly disconnected, he opened a discussion about apathy, declining social capital, waning social networks, and the need for renewed civic engagement. Based on years of research and thousands of interviews, Putnam concluded that people signed fewer petitions, belonged to fewer organizations that met, knew their neighbors less, connected with friends less frequently, and even socialized with their families less often. His data showed that more Americans were bowling than ever before, but not in bowling leagues.

In a follow-up book three years later, Putnam concluded that the tide was turning, people were “better together,” and that one place they were coming together regularly was the public library. Life, according to Putnam, is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital.<sup>ii</sup>

Community and civic engagement goes beyond citizen participation. Participation is usually designed to collect information and opinions on an issue and generate support for an already-defined direction. Community and 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 a role in decisions and actions that affect their lives.

#### INDICATORS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

- Volunteering and service
- Political action
- Connecting to information and current events
- Participation in a group
- Social connectedness

*Civic Life in America Assessment*  
*National Conference on Citizenship*  
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Local governments recognize their essential role in nurturing civic engagement, promoting democratic governance, and connecting with the citizens they serve. Increasingly, local officials look to the public to (1) make choices about cutting city services during tough economic times; (2) establish strategic priorities through neighborhood and city-wide planning sessions; and (3) discuss challenging community issues through both online and face-to-face forums.

More than 95 percent of city officials who responded to a 2010 National League of Cities survey reported that public engagement processes contributed to a stronger sense of community, built trust between the public and city hall, and produced better solutions to local problems.<sup>iii</sup>

However, civic engagement and democracy in action involve more than government decision-making. People come together in

a variety of ways that are not government driven to solve problems, build stronger communities, address personal needs, and plan for their collective future.

## DOING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE RIGHT: SEVEN PRINCIPLES

1. Model civility
2. Sharpen skills
3. Create opportunities for informed engagement
4. Support a culture of community involvement
5. Make the most of technology
6. Include everybody
7. Make it last

*Beyond Civility: From Public Engagement to Problem Solving*  
National League of Cities, January 2011  
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## Civic Engagement and Libraries

Public libraries are ideal community and civic engagement leaders and partners in democratic governance because they are trusted, stable, apolitical, and positive. They also bring substantial community assets to civic action, including physical space, technology resources, knowledgeable and skilled staff, connections to influential community groups, and a history of successful and valued performance.<sup>iv</sup>

Perhaps most important, libraries are already at the heart of the community, and civic engagement is at the heart of where the public library is going in the 21st century. “People view their public 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,” says Hartford Public Library Chief Executive Officer Matthew K. Poland.

Being a visible, successful, and distinct leader in the increasingly crowded civic engagement space requires a strategic approach that reaches far outside the library’s walls—an approach that leverages library assets in new ways and puts the public library at the center of an important community movement. The National League of Cities survey about municipal leaders’ attitudes toward public engagement

observed that “it takes a whole community to create and sustain an effective democratic government culture.” But municipal officials also reported that important players, including their own city halls, were not “stepping up to their proper roles.”<sup>v</sup>

While many libraries offer programs that serve civic engagement goals and contribute to stronger communities, stepping up to their proper roles may require realigning priorities, changing staff responsibilities, and leading in new and different ways.

Five leadership roles for public libraries to broaden and deepen their contribution to civic and community engagement are:

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.

## Library as Civic Educator

Successful civic engagement requires a combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make a difference in the community. Libraries contribute to successful civic engagement by leveraging their existing education capacities to increase knowledge about civic responsibility and broaden participation skills. Apathy is sometimes driven by lack of awareness about where, when, and how to get involved. The library’s reputation as an accessible, welcoming, and informed resource can break down barriers, open doors to informed citizen engagement, and reduce apathy. Libraries serve as civic educators by:

- Drawing on their track record and experience as community educators to increase civic understanding, knowledge, skills, and motivation;
- Maximizing access to information about opportunities and resources for civic engagement;

- Creating reliable, accessible, informative, and easily-understood databases and community portals to increase civic awareness;
- Leveraging their non-political status to provide unbiased information to support voter and candidate education;
- Connecting with and supporting other organizations committed to civic and community engagement to broaden the library’s impact and reach;
- Bringing civics education to the community in partnership with key players to reach audiences that are not connected to the library.

## Library as Conversation Starter

Democracy happens when interested people engage in informed discussion about issues affecting their lives in order to produce meaningful action. More than hosts for events, libraries can be conversation starters by identifying emerging issues, establishing accessible and trusted conversation tables, engaging appropriate people and organizations, and facilitating action.

Conversations about challenging issues facing the community—such as changing demographics, high school bullying, cultural diversity, youth engagement, reducing energy consumption, dealing with the impacts of unemployment and housing foreclosures, and more—can contribute to long-term civic health. Unfortunately, communities sometimes don’t confront tough or controversial issues until they reach a crisis point. Libraries can bring emerging issues forward in a safe, unbiased environment where all opinions are valued and heard.

Libraries initiate, shape, and sustain community conversations by:

- Establishing public discourse as a library priority with dedicated resources;
- Creating systems and processes for regularly identifying issues that are or will affect the community’s long-term health, including dedicated staff when possible;
- Knowing all of the community stakeholders and their interests, issues, and concerns, and building partnerships that foster productive dialogue;
- Regularly engaging local and state elected and appointed officials in community conversations to establish government connections and facilitate

actions that emerge from those conversations;

- Building capacity to facilitate discussions about challenging issues, either through in-house expertise or strategic partnerships;
- Being active and visible in the community where issues surface and channeling informal conversations, community buzz, and incidents into productive discussion, problem solving, and action.

### Library as Community Bridge

Libraries already serve as a bridge for civic and community connections by offering a range of easily-accessible services and opportunities for diverse populations. In addition, libraries ensure equal access to important community services, which draws in disenfranchised and disengaged populations. From programs for the homeless, youth-at-risk, the unemployed, senior citizens, and new immigrants to partnerships with government officials that connect residents with state and local elected leaders, libraries demonstrate that everyone is part of the community.

Creating connections with the disengaged is an important step in broadening community-wide civic engagement, and libraries are particularly well positioned to lead this effort.

The library's role as a resource center for new immigrants is a powerful example of how community bridges are established. Increasingly, libraries serve as a safe and reliable place for immigrants to learn about their new community, get access to community resources, learn about legal requirements related to their status, improve their communication skills, meet people, and get involved in community life. In addition, programs that connect long-time residents with new neighbors from different cultures reduce the potential for future misunderstanding and conflicts. Libraries have also established themselves as creative, accessible, and exciting centers for young people through programs that are tailored to their needs, interests, and learning styles. For example, the rise of digital learning labs designed to engage young people in learning, socializing, and participating civically connects youth with the library, new learning models, and their communities. The library's credibility as a reliable, exciting, and hip resource offers

a starting point for giving youth a voice in the community and cultivating the next generation of civic leaders.

Steps that public libraries can take to build bridges as a foundation for community and civic engagement include:

- Establishing building bridges as a library priority rather than a side benefit of other programs with dedicated resources;
- Promoting the library's role and capacity as a community bridge builder with residents, government, businesses, and civic organizations;
- Seeking out disengaged populations, identifying their needs, and offering programs that bring them into community life;
- Creating partnerships with organizations that serve diverse groups in the community;
- Encouraging delivery of government services for special populations—such as immigrants—through the library because of the safety and comfort it offers;
- Establishing programs that promote and teach cultural awareness;
- Leveraging library branches as safe, comfortable, welcoming places for all residents.

### ACTION STEPS FOR THE ENGAGED LIBRARY

1. **Get outside the doors.** Successful community/library relationships are proactive.
2. **Find the leaders.** A concerted effort to discover who's who in the community makes all the difference.
3. **Be creative about what the library can contribute.**
4. **Discover and contribute to the unique capacities and conditions of the community.**
5. **Make the library building a community center.**
6. **Create a community-minded culture among library staff and volunteers.**
7. **Support library investments that jump start community redevelopment efforts.**

*The Engaged Library: Chicago Stories of Community Building*  
Urban Libraries Council, December 2005

### Library as Visionary

Visioning processes engage people in defining their future, contribute to civic health, and build stronger communities. When diverse people are enlisted in the work of shaping a community vision, they become optimistic about the future and more committed to carrying out that vision.

Because vision is so important to community building and civic engagement, libraries should take an active role in encouraging, shaping, and leading visioning efforts. For example, the Springfield (MA) City Library broadened its long-range planning process from a focus on the library to how it could help reverse the city's downward economic spiral and build a brighter future for the city. The effort led to an expanded role for the library in the city.

Visioning is a foundation for community building which is driven by civic engagement. In their white paper on *Connected Communities*, James Svava and Janet Denhardt say it is hard to have civic engagement without a sense of community, and it is hard to fashion a sense of community without civic engagement.<sup>vi</sup>

Libraries can lead the way by:

- Promoting the importance of community vision as a vital component of successful civic engagement;
- Linking existing strategic and long-term plans from government, business, and civic groups to begin to shape a broader community vision;
- Connecting with organizations that teach visioning skills and facilitate strategic processes to build capacity;
- Convening community conversations to identify shared ideas, concerns, and long-term expectations and sharing the results of those conversations;
- Working with local government leaders to review and refine existing plans and provide a foundation for a more comprehensive vision.

### Library as Center for Democracy in Action

Libraries are in a position to define themselves as **the** place in the region/ community where democracy, civic engagement, and public discourse happen. Becoming a center for democracy in action requires moving from events that support civic engagement to a coordinated strategy

designed to achieve active and purposeful engagement that promotes civic health. It also requires:

- The ability to position the library at the heart of the community in which its role as a civic leader is widely communicated, understood, accepted, and valued;
- A visible and sustained commitment to civic engagement and community building as a library priority with dedicated resources;
- Modeling civic engagement by including encouraging staff to be actively involved in community work both in their library jobs and their personal lives.

Libraries can build their stature and capacity as centers for democracy in action by:

- Developing a strategy that defines programs and outcomes that will contribute to the community's civic health;
- Working closely with local government to support its civic engagement and democratic governance efforts and to offer library capacities to achieve shared outcomes;
- Establishing clear internal responsibilities for civic leadership, such as a director of civic and community engagement and outreach librarians;
- Empowering citizens to be community contributors by providing information, resources, and paths to citizen engagement;
- Being willing to take on the controversial issues that are important to the community;
- Pushing library capacities out into the community to serve broad civic engagement goals that reach beyond traditional roles.

## Becoming Civic Engagement Leaders

Libraries clearly recognize the important role they play in *supporting* civic engagement. The breadth of programs libraries already offer under the aegis of civic and community engagement is impressive and innovative. They range from traditional education services that provide valuable information and skills to broader political and civic roles, such as serving as a state community redistricting site, managing community services for growing immigrant populations,

and building databases that centralize vital community and government information for improved decision making.

But libraries can be much more than supporting players. While Robert Putnam saw the stock of social capital plummeting, libraries generate and nurture social capital. While local officials worry that technology-driven public engagement will create new digital divides and increase disconnectedness, libraries have already built the infrastructure and capacity to ensure broad access to and skill in using technology resources. And, while lingering mistrust of government institutions among some populations contributes to civic apathy, libraries maintain their standing as a highly-trusted and valued public resource.

Moving from *respected supporting player* to *consistent and valued leader* requires a clear definition of the scope of library civic service and development of strategic agendas that broaden the impact of library action, measure and report on outcomes, and position the library as the go-to civic and community engagement resource.

With the public library's stature as democracy's best promise, the transition to civic engagement leader is both necessary and long overdue.

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## Civic Engagement Resources

*America's Civic Health Index 2009: Civic Health in Hard Times* (Washington, DC: National Conference on Citizenship, 2009), [www.NCoC.net](http://www.NCoC.net).

*Authentic Youth Engagement: A Guide for Municipal Leaders* (Washington, DC: National League of Cities, 2010), [www.nlc.org](http://www.nlc.org).

Barnes, William and Mann, Bonnie, *Making Local Democracy Work: Municipal Officials' Views about Public Engagement* (Washington, DC: National League of Cities, 2010), [www.nlc.org](http://www.nlc.org).

*Beyond Civility: From Public Engagement to Problem Solving* (Washington, DC: National League of Cities, 2011), [www.nlc.org](http://www.nlc.org).

*The Engaged Library* (Chicago: Urban Libraries Council, 2005), [www.urbanlibraries.org](http://www.urbanlibraries.org).

Leighninger, Matt, *Using Online Tools to Engage – and be Engaged by – The Public* (IBM Center for the Business of Government: Washington, DC, 2011), <http://www.businessofgovernment.org>.

Lukensmeyer, Carolyn and Torres, Lars Hasselblad, *Public Deliberation: A Manager's Guide to Citizen Engagement* (IBM Center for the Business of Government, Washington, DC, 2006), [www.americaspeaks.org](http://www.americaspeaks.org).

Svara, James H. and Denhardt, *The Connected Community: Local Governments as Partners in Civic Engagement and Community Building* (Phoenix: Alliance for Innovation, 2010), <http://www.tlgconference.org/communityconnectionswhitepaper.pdf>.

*A Tale of Two Cities 2010: Civic Health in Miami and Minneapolis-St. Paul* (Washington, DC: National Conference on Citizenship, 2010), [www.NCoC.net](http://www.NCoC.net).

<sup>1</sup> From multiple research sources including *America's Civic Health Index 2009*, National Center on Citizenship, *Making Local Democracy Work: Municipal Views About Public Engagement*, National League of Cities, 2010; *A Tale of Two Cities 2010: Civic Health in Miami and Minneapolis-St. Paul*, National Conference on Citizenship, and *Connected Communities: Local Governments as a Partner in Civic Engagement and Community Building*, Alliance for Innovation, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) and Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> William Barnes and Bonnie Mann, *Making Local Democracy Work: Municipal Views About Public Engagement* (Washington, DC: National League of Cities, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> *The Engaged Library: Chicago Stories of Community Building*, (Chicago: Urban Libraries Council, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Barnes and Mann, op. cit., page 2.

<sup>6</sup> James H. Svara and Janet Denhardt, editors, *The Connected Community: Local Government as Partners in Civic Engagement and Community Building* (Phoenix, Arizona: Alliance for Innovation, 2010), page 7.

**About ULC** The Urban Libraries Council (ULC) has worked to strengthen public libraries as an essential part of urban life since 1971. As a member organization of North America's leading public library systems, ULC serves as a forum for research widely recognized and used by public and private sector leaders. Its members are thought leaders dedicated to leadership, innovation and the continuous transformation of libraries to meet community needs. As ULC celebrates its forty year anniversary, its work focuses on assisting public libraries to identify and utilize skills and strategies that match the challenges of the 21st Century.

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