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Special Issue

PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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Inspiring Libraries as Community Anchors

BY SUSAN HILDRETH

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) is the federal agency that is primarily responsible for federal funding to libraries and museums. But we do much more than that. The mission of IMLS is to inspire libraries and museums to advance innovation, lifelong learning, and cultural and civic engagement. We provide leadership through research, policy development, and grant making. One of IMLS's primary activities is to identify the ways in which libraries and museums benefit their communities and provide support to maximize that benefit. Among the most important roles libraries play is that of community anchor. Making the most of libraries' unique ability to strengthen civic life, understand and respond to community needs, and knit community members together through common experiences and shared interests is essential for the continued success of the library institution and the communities libraries serve.

Shaping Library's Role in the Community

In the recently adopted IMLS strategic plan, "Creating a Nation of Learners," one of the five key goals concerns the library and its role in the community. The plan describes the agency's responsibility in this area as providing "important national leadership to help local libraries and museums advance solutions to our most difficult problems by providing safe places for community gathering, centers for community vitality, a connecting point to community services, and a venue for cultural expression and lifelong learning" (p. 8).

The specific term "community anchor" is taken from the National Broadband Plan in which the focus is on the critical role libraries play in providing access to public computers and high-speed Internet. In rural and low-income urban neighborhoods, this service has been a particularly valuable lifeline for the community. Access to job information, health information, financial literacy, and communication with far-flung family members has brought immeasurable value to users. Although computers are pervasive in

our society and much communication has moved to mobile devices, there are still more than 100 million people—one-third of the U.S. population—who are not digitally literate. Libraries serve as the nation's de facto digital literacy corps. Since constant changes in technology create ongoing skills gaps, it is critical that the library continue to provide access to the latest technology and skills training so everyone can have a chance to succeed.

Investments in Libraries as Community Anchors

For the purposes of this article, I want to focus on the role of the library in civic engagement and how that investment can position the library as a community anchor.

I have always been interested in the library as a community convener, but my excitement about this topic was heightened when I attended the Urban Libraries Council 2011 Partners for Success conference in Miami, Florida. The clear message of that meeting was that libraries should—and, in many cases, do—seize the opportunity that civic engagement provides for building strong communities. But despite their initiative, libraries are not seen as active in the field of civic engagement. This is what the conference report said on the topic:

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 that 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. (p. 5)

How can IMLS inspire libraries to take on this important role? We can do so by making a variety of investments in learning about what works, identifying challenges and information gaps, and determining and communicating best practices. We have funded a number of exciting projects centered on civic engagement through our competitive funding programs and our Grants to States program. Information about all these projects is available on the IMLS Web site (www.imls.gov), and I include some recent examples here.

Hartford Public Library

In 2010, the Hartford (Connecticut) Public Library received an IMLS National Leadership Grant to demonstrate a partnership approach to civic engagement for immigrant communities. The library is partnering with Catholic Charities Migration and Refugee Resettlement Services, the City of Hartford's Office of Human Relations, Everyday Democracy, and the University of Connecticut's School of Social Work to promote immigrant civic engagement. Focusing on legal permanent residents within Hartford's immigrant community, the library and its partners trained a core group of volunteer immigrants who help other newly arrived immigrants in tasks such as accessing community services. To further encourage civic participation, the city and the library established a broadly represented library-based Advisory Council on Inclusivity. With the library as the catalyst, this integration model transcends the existing naturalization process to give immigrants a real sense of belonging in America, helping to make them active community participants and civic-minded individuals. The library's Web site provides information that offers other libraries guidance on establishing similar programs in their communities.

California State Library

IMLS provides federal funds directly to the states in its Grants to States program. Much significant work is carried out with those federal funds at the state level. In 2010, the California State Library supported "Making a Difference," a program in which three California libraries—Riverside County, Salinas, and Yolo County—developed their capacity to facilitate civic dialogue in their communities and promote themselves as "community living rooms." Following staff training, a total of

fifty-two library-hosted activities reached nine hundred community members, engaging participants in topics ranging from the roles and responsibilities of individuals in the community to race, politics, and culture. As a result, the participating libraries developed twenty community partnerships and were increasingly perceived as hubs for civic engagement. "Making a Difference—Civic Engagement at the Public Library," in the July/August 2012 issue of *Public Libraries*, provides a detailed report of this program at the Riverside County Library.

Carroll County Public Library

In response to a statewide initiative in Maryland in 2010 that asked libraries to think about leveraging their assets to help solve community challenges, the Carroll County Public Library planned a number of community conversations that informed the library's strategic plan. The idea was to convene conversations focused on community—not library—challenges and needs. Discussions topics included education, economic development, public safety, human services, and government. Participants from stakeholder groups and the general public began by describing their ideal community and then identified ways the library could help the community achieve that future. The library made a point of listening and translating what they heard into a library capacity context. The conversations generated a great deal of community interest, and many participants asked the library to consider hosting similar meetings in the future.

Libraries at the Center of Civic Engagement Efforts

Civic engagement provides a potentially powerful role for libraries in the twenty-first century, and our success in integrating this role into the library suite of services is critical. In order to move the field forward as quickly as possible, IMLS is investing in several programs that will provide opportunities for enhanced awareness, training, and knowledge of libraries and their role in civic engagement. We are developing a partnership with the Local Initiatives Support Cooperation (LISC), the largest national community development organization. Primarily known for work in public housing, LISC recognizes the importance of arts, culture, and education in the ongoing work of community revitalization. IMLS and LISC will partner to demonstrate

ways to create and sustain cooperative relationships between and among libraries, museums, and community leaders engaged in comprehensive community change initiatives.

Through its *Building Sustainable Communities* initiative, LISC has supported the creation of community partnerships in 107 neighborhoods in twenty-eight cities and additional rural areas. These partnerships consist of governmental and community-based organizations, associations, and individual leaders dedicated to carrying out comprehensive programs for revitalization of low-income communities. Most of these community partnerships have created quality-of-life plans that outline strategies for change and record the commitments the parties have made to pursue these strategies.

The prevalence of arts, culture, and educational goals and strategies in these quality-of-life plans is noteworthy, given the importance of other community challenges such as efforts to improve housing, revitalize commercial districts, improve public safety, promote health, and build household income and assets. In many cases, libraries have been key contributors to these plans. IMLS and LISC will encourage communities to build on this expressed interest, taking advantage of the lessons of previous successful experiences of museum, library, and community collaborations.

By using the combined expertise of IMLS and LISC staff in arts and culture, education, and community revitalization, this partnership will support research into past and ongoing collaborations throughout the United States and create a community of practice consisting of those in the comprehensive community change field and in the museum and library community who want to advance collaborative work in this area. Initially we will identify institutions involved in community development work and document their successes and challenges. We anticipate a convening and Web site development in 2013 to begin to share this critical knowledge. After the initial phase of the partnership and the release of a promising practices report, we anticipate funding pilot projects that would provide the opportunity to identify effective civic engagement models for libraries and museums. Evaluation will be a key component of this work, and an evaluation model will be devel-

oped to be used in all pilot projects. We hope to identify private funders who will assist in leveraging IMLS funds in this effort and anticipate that this work will be an IMLS focus for two to three years.

IMLS is also investing in “The Promise of Libraries Transforming Communities,” an American Library Association (ALA) initiative that has been spearheaded by ALA president Maureen Sullivan. The goal of this program is to assist with the shift already beginning to take place in the role that libraries play in their communities. Specifically, the program will develop tools, innovations, and resources that will help libraries lead a collaborative approach to community engagement and development.

ALA will partner with the Harwood Institute to address the need in local communities for public innovators and change agents by preparing library leaders who can make more intentional choices and judgments about fulfilling the promise of libraries in transforming communities. Rich Harwood, founder and chief executive officer of the institute, is a strong supporter of libraries and their potential in furthering the cause of civic engagement. In an essay, he writes, “Libraries are uniquely positioned at the heart of the local, campus, and school communities. . . . Importantly, libraries are ‘boundary spanning’ organizations, organizations that can span boundaries and dividing lines to bring people together, incubate new ideas, hold up a mirror to the entire community, and build true collaborations” (p. 32).

In partnership, ALA and the Harwood Institute will develop capacity with ALA staff and member leaders, train librarians as facilitators for their communities, and create a pilot set of interrelated professional development components designed to work together to foster a dynamic within the field that will grow and expand over time through national distribution as more libraries and librarians opt in. This is a phased program with the first-year focus of building capacity within ALA and creating a framework for a larger, sustainable initiative that could be piloted in libraries all around the country. Evaluation of what works and the development of effective scalable models are key components of this multiyear effort.

Although I believe that both of these partnerships will increase the capacity of libraries to play a significant role in their communities, it will be very useful to evaluate the similarities and differences in impacts and outcomes in each of the approaches. In the LISC partnership, IMLS is moving libraries and museums into the world of comprehensive community development and highlighting the capacity of those institutions to be players in that new world. In the ALA program, the focus is much more internal, developing capacity among the library community to become more outwardly focused, with the intention of engaging the community development world with the library world.

Seeding effective civic engagement models for library work is critical, and I believe that both these new initiatives, as well as other ongoing work that IMLS is funding, will contribute to the creation of models that can be useful for the field. We are committed to evaluating these efforts and sharing the results as

broadly as possible so that the lessons learned can support the vitality and success of libraries in the twenty-first century.

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