

CENTERING COMMUNITY: LIBRARY STAFF RESPONDING TO CRISIS

A FIELD GUIDE

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AI USAGE DISCLOSURE

This Field Guide was human-led. Our team did not feed any research data or personally identifiable information into an AI system to support with analysis or to generate the writing of this document. We did leverage AI to support our efforts in two ways:

(1) Spelling and grammar checking, and editing; and (2) Brainstorming headers and titles (Example prompt: Write 5 options of words that can replace “Structure” in this title/header/sentence).



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WHAT'S ReadyNOW?

In summer 2020, Dr. Mega Subramaniam and Linda Braun worked with 137 library staff to understand how they supported their communities while library buildings were fully or partially closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although COVID-19 prompted the project, the concurrent civic unrest following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, and Dion Johnson broadened its scope. As multiple crises unfolded, it became clear that while public libraries aspired to help their communities, many struggled to determine how. Through a series of virtual co-design sessions with staff serving youth and families, the project team developed strategies for community support during crises, culminating in the first Field Guide, published in Winter 2021.

Building on this foundation, the Ready NOW project launched in 2023 through an [Institute of Museum and Library Services \(IMLS\)](#) grant to expand and refine the original Field Guide and to develop resources to help library staff build community-centered crisis services. The project emerged from the recognition that libraries must not only respond to crises¹, but also work with communities, to prepare for them. To support communities effectively before, during, and after crises, library staff must embrace two interconnected mindsets: equity and community-centered. The essential tasks outlined in this Field Guide serve as a call to action for public library staff to adopt these mindsets and establish the relationships, processes, and skills necessary before reimagining the programs, services, and capacity needed during local, regional, or national crises.

Between 2023 and 2025, in partnership with the [Chief Officers of State Library Agencies \(COSLA\)](#) and [The Association for Rural and Small Libraries \(ARSL\)](#), we conducted a series of virtual co-design sessions with library teams from 14 states in the United States and the District of Columbia. This Field Guide reflects insights from initial and follow-up interviews, co-design sessions, and ongoing conversations with participating library staff—whose contributions we deeply appreciate.

This Field Guide is designed for library staff at all levels and can be adapted across roles and community contexts. While it emphasizes supporting youth² and families, its strategies can easily be extended to other populations. To learn more about our process and findings, please visit the [Publications](#) section on our website, where additional publications will be forthcoming.

¹ We define crisis broadly as “an occurrence of natural catastrophe, technological accident, or human-caused event that has resulted in severe property damage, deaths, and/or multiple injuries” (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 1996) or “a situation that produces significant cognitive or emotional stress” (APA, 2018).

² We define youth as inclusive of ages 0–18.

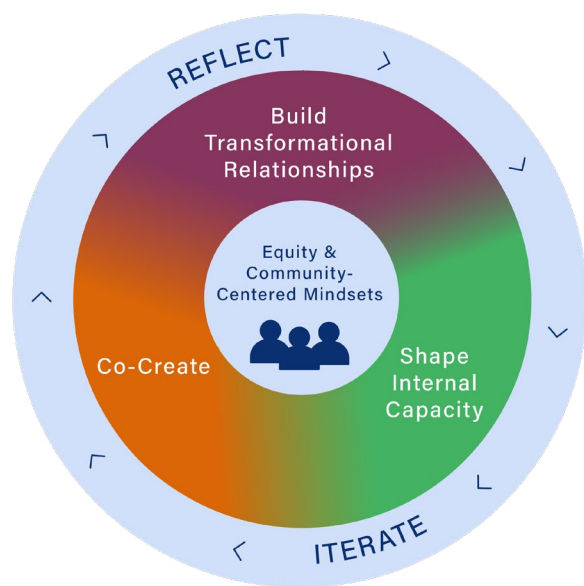


Figure 1: Ready NOW Mindsets and Essential Tasks

WANT TO TRY OUT THE FIELD GUIDE'S ESSENTIAL TASKS?

Want to adopt the mindsets and put the essential tasks in this Field Guide into action with your colleagues? Interested in leading professional development to prepare library staff to support communities before a crisis happens? Do you work with a team eager to learn and grow together? If you answered yes to any of these questions, our co-design session plans are for you.

We've designed a set of eight [co-design session plans](#) to help library teams build the skills, relationships, and confidence needed to practice the Ready NOW approach. Each session plan introduces one or more essential tasks and mindsets and includes slide decks, design-activity templates, and hands-on exercises that spark learning and ideas for real-world application.

Copy our materials and adapt them to fit your local context—if you do, make sure to provide attribution to the Ready NOW team, following the format provided via the [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Share Alike 4.0 International](#).

Questions? Interested in bringing Ready NOW to your library?

Please contact Dr. Mega Subramaniam, lead Principal Investigator of the Ready NOW project, at mmsubram@umd.edu



Image 1: A Snapshot of our Design Session Materials

FOUNDATIONAL MINDSETS FOR CRISIS WORK

Equity & Community-Centered Mindsets



EQUITY MINDSET

Communities are made up of diverse individuals and groups whose lived experiences are shaped by factors such as age, racialized identity, ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, social class, education, and disability, to name just a few. Each of these impacts how an individual or group experiences a crisis, and what they will need to survive and thrive. Often in their haste to respond to crises, organizations like libraries, make decisions that treat everyone exactly the same, regardless of personal needs or individual differences. This approach results in equality, allowing libraries to focus on the needs of some members of the community, but not all. To serve the needs of community members during times of crisis, libraries must intentionally cultivate and sustain equity.

Equity is an outcome, and results from the fair treatment, access, and opportunity for advancement for all people based on their specific needs and individual differences.

Cultivating and sustaining equity involves understanding the needs and circumstances of diverse individuals and groups within a community. This allows library staff to identify and reduce/eliminate barriers preventing full participation. Ultimately, these actions promote justice in library procedures and processes and ensure that power and resources—time, budget, staff, and space—are distributed fairly. This guarantees that everyone, including those experiencing marginalization, has the resources and services needed to survive and thrive during a crisis – whether the crisis is sudden, like an adverse weather event, or more long-term, like a lack of child care or low literacy levels.

Equality means that everyone receives the same resources and opportunities, regardless of circumstances and despite any inherent advantages or disadvantages that apply to certain groups (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023).

Equity requires recognizing and understanding the specific needs or circumstances of a person or group and providing the types of resources and services needed to be successful. Equity recognizes the shortcomings of a “one-size-fits-all” approach and understands that different levels of support must be provided to achieve fairness in outcomes (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023).

Inequity refers to differences in treatment, experiences, and outcomes related to characteristics such as racialized identity, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability status, language, and income gradients that disadvantage one individual or group in favor of another. These differences are systemic, patterned, and unfair, and can be changed. Inequities are not random and occur within the context of historical and cultural conditions, systems of power and privilege, biased and unfair policies, and the implementation of those policies.

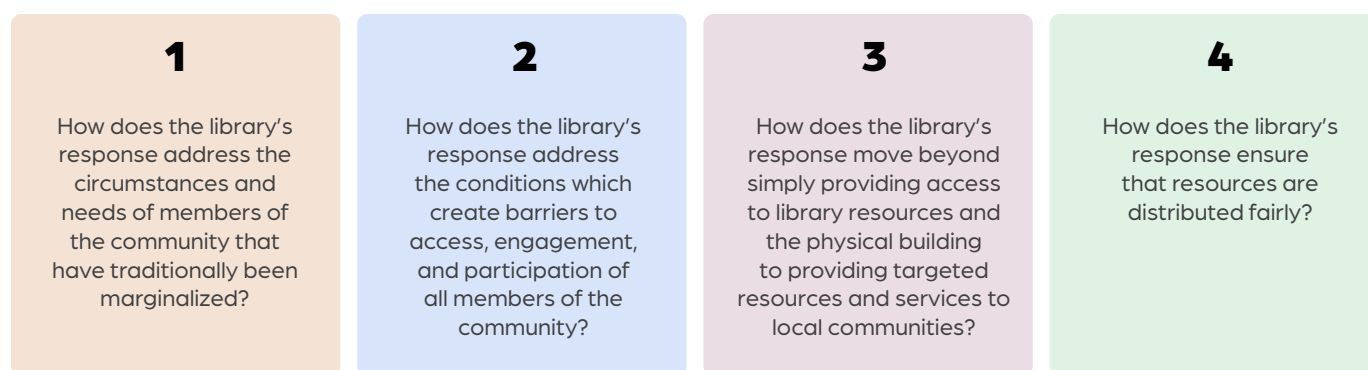
Marginalized refers to individuals, groups, or communities that experience discrimination and exclusion (social, political and economic) because of unequal power relationships across economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions (National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health, 2024).

To cultivate and sustain equity during crisis, library staff must:

- Realize that community members have different experiences, circumstances, and needs.³
- Prioritize the circumstances and needs of communities that have been traditionally marginalized and whose circumstances are often overlooked or misunderstood in times of crisis.
- Recognize that inequity exists within the community, understand the ways inequity affects different individuals and groups in the community, and identify the conditions that are causing the inequities. This is especially critical during times of crisis.
- Acknowledge and act to overcome the conditions which cause barriers to access, engagement, and participation including internal policies, job descriptions, and external factors such as transportation or language differences and proficiency.
- Recognize that responding equitably involves reshaping policies and practices, changing services, and making decisions in new ways to ensure that all members of the community have the library services and programs they specifically need during the crisis.
- Build transformational relationships with community members—including individuals and organizations—grounded in trust, care, commitment, connection, and respect.
- Be aware that responding equitably means not everyone will get the same response. Instead, everyone will get the response they need to cope with the crisis.

By embracing this mindset, library staff can ensure that equitable services—beyond access to physical materials and the library building—are available to support their communities before, during, and after crises.

As library staff design services and programs in response to community needs during crises, they should ask themselves:



Equity is embodied in the community-centered mindset, which we discuss in the next section.

³In the United States, we know that the lived experiences, life circumstances, and needs of different groups vary based on racialized identity, gender identity, social class, and other factors (i.e. immigration status). For example, people who live in low income communities are more likely to face economic instability or to have inadequate digital access. LGBTQ+ individuals, especially youth, are highly overrepresented in the homeless population (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2023). Black, Hispanic, American Indian, and Alaskan Native peoples fare worse than White people across the majority of examined measures of health care and social determinants of health (Ndugga et al., 2024). People with disabilities are less likely to own vehicles and less likely to drive than their able-bodied counterparts (Gonzales, 2024).

[Project READY: Reimagining Equity & Access for Diverse Youth](#)

Project READY is a free, online, self-paced racial equity curriculum developed specifically for library staff. Funded by the IMLS in 2016, Project READY centers the work of BIPOC⁴ scholars and practitioners in more than two dozen modules covering foundational and applied topics related to equity, social justice, antiracism, and culturally responsive practice. Use the curriculum to expand your knowledge of the root causes of inequity, learn how inequity impacts traditionally marginalized communities, and gain strategies for creating equitable libraries.

[Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide](#)

This action guide, developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, provides seven steps for cultivating and sustaining equity in organizations, like libraries. It is built on the premise that equity must be incorporated into every aspect of an organization's work.

[Racial Equity Tools](#)

This website, developed by Equity in the Center (EIC), provides tools, research, tips, curricula, and strategies for understanding and incorporating equitable practices into community work. It includes materials to make sense of core concepts related to race and racism, tools for planning and implementing change in organizations, and strategies for assessing, learning from, and documenting equity work.

⁴BIPOC is an acronym for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

COMMUNITY-CENTERED MINDSET

To effectively support marginalized communities during crises, library staff must reconsider why libraries matter in such times and reimagine their role within the local communities. This requires adopting a community-centered lens—an approach that places people, not institutions, at the heart of the work. The prefix “community-centered” is often paired with concepts such as design, learning, or philanthropy to emphasize this focus on people.

In this Field Guide, we use the term community-centered mindset to describe an inclusive approach that recognizes the diversity within communities and seeks to learn from and design solutions with them (Flinner et al., 2019).

Library staff with a community-centered mindset prioritize listening to and building relationships with community members to identify what matters—the strengths, issues, and concerns groups have, as well as the services they need and want during times of crisis—and demonstrate a willingness to be guided by communities’ needs, interests, and voices to support them before, during, and after crises.



...we look for creative solutions to meet people’s needs. Sometimes this means thinking outside traditional library services.” (Dallas Carey, Director of Marcus Public Library, Iowa, see [full article](#))

This community-centered mindset requires:

- Moving beyond hosting one-way conversations and seeking feedback only after a program has finished or a resource has been created, and instead intentionally listening to and learning with communities before determining priorities.
- Identifying strategic opportunities with communities and inviting community members and organizations to contribute their expertise and knowledge to the development of equitable responses.
- Sharing power with communities in decision-making and program or service implementation, releasing library staff from the role of experts and focusing instead on being listeners and supporters.
- Co-creating crisis responses with and for the community so that their perspectives, ideas, and preferences are woven into services, programs, resources, policies, and the library’s internal capacity-building decisions.
- Implementing equitable services that go beyond traditional or legacy models focused primarily on providing access to physical materials and the library building.
- Reflecting on legacy services to identify what should be retained, left behind, or added based on communities’ changing priorities (Finch, 2020).
- Rethinking the library’s organizational culture and infrastructure to design flexible policies that ensure the library can respond quickly as community strengths and challenges evolve.

In the upcoming sections, you will learn how to implement the essential tasks to prepare to support communities before, during and after crises by embracing these two interconnected mindsets: equity and community-centered.

[Five Practices of Community-Centered Work](#)

This action guide, developed by Beth Yoke, Executive Director for the Workforce Council of Southwest Ohio (2025), provides five practices for cultivating and sustaining a community-centered mindset among library staff. It is built on the premise that a community-centered lens must be incorporated into every aspect of library staff's work.

[21st Century Public Servant Mindset](#)

Needham, Mangan, McKenna, and Lowther from the University of Birmingham, UK, conceptualize something similar to a community-engaged mindset – a public servant mindset – which means to be “able to work with complexity,” “develop and value new ways of working” and “thrive in the new environment.” Read more about this mindset on their [abbreviated report](#) (page 4), and also refer to their [full report](#) for more resources such as coaching cards, case studies, etc.

[Centering-Community Self-Assessment Tool](#)

This [tool](#) from the Full Frame Initiative (2025) helps organizations evaluate how effectively they are making community leadership and participation the heart of their work. It includes both an internal organizational self-assessment and a community-member survey as a way to spark discussion, identify alignment gaps, and support more equitable and meaningful engagement.

ESSENTIAL TASKS FOR PREPARING TO SUPPORT COMMUNITIES BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER CRISES

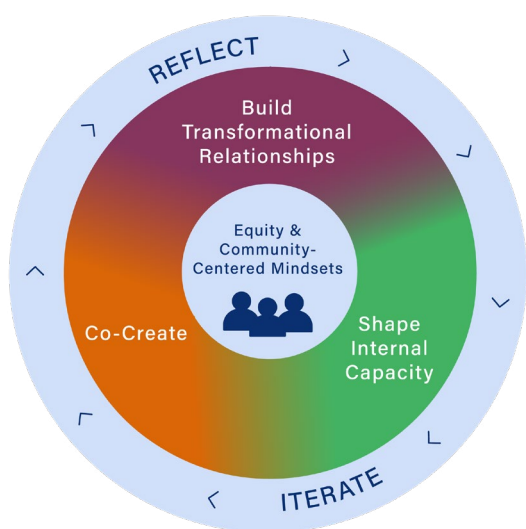


Figure 1: Ready NOW Mindsets and Essential Tasks

This Field Guide assumes that library staff have embraced equity and community-centered mindsets and are ready to act on a set of essential tasks alongside youth, families, and communities. Through our work co-designing with library teams across the United States, we identified three essential tasks for preparing to support communities during crises: *Build Transformational Community Relationships*, *Co-Create with Community*, and *Shape Internal Capacity for Community-Centered Practices*. A fourth essential task, *Iterate and Reflect with Community*, serves as an overarching set of practices that informs each of the others. In this Field

Guide, this fourth essential task is woven into the presentation of each of the other essential tasks as *Practices for Iteration and Reflection with Community*.

While these tasks can be initiated during a crisis, library staff who build community relationships before a crisis occurs, can act more quickly and effectively. Even without such relationships, progress is possible—albeit slower—and must continue after the crisis lessens or is over.

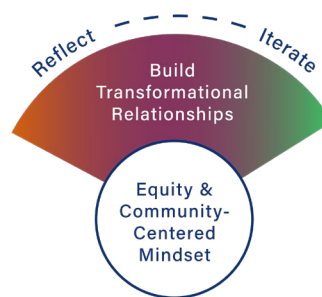
These essential tasks are **non-sequential and iterative**—they may be revisited or repeated as needed to support communities before, during, or after crises.

In the sections below, each essential task is described through a combination of guidance on how to carry out the task and examples of “What It Looks Like in Practice” that show what the task looks like in action. This is followed by a “Do It with Others” section.⁵ Each essential task section concludes with “Practices for Iteration and Reflection with Community”.

⁵We use the phrase Do It With Others (DIWO) instead of Do it Yourself (DIY) which we derived from the maker movement vernacular (see Maravilhas & Martin, 2017) to reflect the nature of these steps that emphasize the focus on community and collectivism, further calling library staff to embrace the community-centered mindset.

ESSENTIAL TASK: BUILD TRANSFORMATIONAL COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

During a crisis, no single organization can address all the challenges a community faces. When libraries operate in isolation, staff often rely solely on prior knowledge, leading to assumptions about communities that may not be accurate. At the start of the Ready NOW initiative, we observed that library staff were eager to “make community members aware of library resources” and to begin conversations with partners by “introducing what the library offers” as a first response during crises.⁶ Yet, this resource-first and library-centric approach tended to reinforce a transactional dynamic, rather than fostering the trust and mutual understanding needed for authentic relationships.



Relationship is the capacity to create, sustain, and grow healthy connections with others.”

LaKesha Kimbrough,
Equity Consultant and Coach



Library staff shouldn’t assume they know what the community wants or needs without asking them.”

Year 1 Ready NOW participant

Approaching communities with an equity-driven, community-centered mindset and cultivating authentic relationships with a wide range of community members and organizations ensures that programs and services are grounded in community knowledge and that power is shared with those best positioned to facilitate a coordinated crisis response.

⁶ Quoted text represents participants’ verbatim statements from our co-design sessions.



What it Looks Like in Practice

Challenging Assumptions Through Relationship Building at the Parsippany Public Library Lake Hiawatha Branch

The Ready NOW team from the Lake Hiawatha Branch of the Parsippany Public Library in New Jersey, through a focus on library-centered assumptions, identified the lack of resources for a growing immigrant community in their native language as a crisis. Staff knew that a large number of residents speak a language other than English in the home.⁷ The team joined the Ready NOW initiative with the intention to acquire materials to support this need and as a way to take steps to overcome the identified crisis.

During their work with the Ready NOW team in January 2024, Parsippany Library staff realized that purchasing materials in languages other than English for their large immigrant community (36.6%⁸ of their served community), wasn't necessarily going to support the group's most critical needs. To better understand what the immigrant community was struggling with, they needed to learn more about them – from them.

The Parsippany team identified the Islamic Community Cultural Center (ICCC) as an organization to learn from. Library staff saw families from the Islamic community in the library and had connections with the Executive Director (ED) of ICCC. Working with the ED, library staff set up a meeting with members of the organization. This presented an opportunity to learn more about the strengths and challenges of the immigrant community in their area.

To the surprise of library staff, resources in native languages were not of concern to those attending the meeting. When directly asked if there was an interest in these materials, the response was that most family members spoke English, and that while having materials in their home language would be appreciated, that wasn't a top priority. Instead, participants identified challenges connected to the immigration process such as visa and green card procedures they are required to go through in the United States. They asked the library to support the community learning about the ins and outs of these processes. They also indicated that learning about employment opportunities and job seeking skills would be extremely helpful.

The experience demonstrated to the Parsippany Library Ready NOW team the importance of not making assumptions about community strengths and challenges. Staff discovered that prioritizing conversations and learning opportunities that directly involve the community building and strengthening relationships with community members and organizations, needs to take precedence over what the library has to offer the community. This process provided an opportunity to move beyond assumptions to designing services with impact.

The Parsippany Ready NOW team has started building relationships with the members of the ICCC community. By continuing these conversations, library staff are expanding their understanding and ability to provide services that directly respond to the community they are serving.

⁷ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/parsippanytrovhillstownshipmorriscountynewjersey,NJ/POP645222>

⁸ Ibid

This focus on community relationship-building requires a shift from transactional to transformational relationships. Transactional relationships are common in libraries and other organizations and typically center on a give and take framework. For example, a library might provide space to a local organization, and in return, the organization brings people to the library for a meeting or event.

When considering this shift, it is essential to help community members and partners understand the value of transformation over transaction. One way to begin is by reflecting on the language used to describe each. For instance, consider the ideas of expertise and power. When library staff take on the role of experts, they may assume they already know the community's strengths and needs, making decisions based on those assumptions. In contrast, when staff share power with community members and partners, they invite open dialogue, learn from lived experiences, and work together to build responsive services. The shared power approach fosters trust, mutual learning, and ultimately, transformational relationships. LaKesha Kimbrough, an Equity Consultant and Coach, provides this [guidance](#) about the difference between relationships that are transactional and those which are transformational.

In the Ready NOW work, we observed that transactional relationships did not lead to the types of opportunities necessary to support marginalized communities during a crisis. Often relationships have to start as transactional. They should not stay there. Library staff must work together to build opportunities for moving from transactional to transformational.

Transactional vs Transformational Relationships

Transactional Relationships

- Based on give-and-take exchanges
- Often task- or service-focused
- Positions librarians as the experts

Transformational Relationships

- Built on shared power, trust, and mutual learning
- Centered on authentic connection and lived experience
- Lead to more community-centered crisis responses

...this [learning about transformational relationships] helped almost tear down where we started. The team realized, we need to actually establish connections and relationships with community before we can tackle the crisis that we had identified in a way that was not quite removed from community."

Year 2 Ready NOW participant

We cannot fill our roles appropriately if we believe we are supposed to be serving the populace as it looks when it walks through the door. Learning about community forces us to see the community as it is and not as what we think it is."

Year 2 Ready NOW participant

The move from transactional to transformational relationship requires:

- **Time.** Authentic relationships are not built in a day. Conversations over weeks, months, and maybe even years are often required.
- **Trust.** Relationships that are built on trust are more likely to thrive. Trust comes from spending time learning about one another through relational conversations.
- **Reimagining what you and your colleagues mean by community.** Are you only talking about the community of those that traditionally use the library? Is your perspective based on conversations you had with people who come to the library, or with others in the community you may have met someplace else?
- **Acknowledging that there are multiple communities in the area that you work.** Communities are geographic and demographic and there are also intersections between communities. Talking to people in one neighborhood or of one racialized or cultural identity does not mean those in other neighborhoods, or with other identities, view their world the same way or need the same type of crisis response.
- **Acknowledging that it can be uncomfortable to talk with people in communities that you do not already have relationships with.** This discomfort is to be expected—and it's a natural part of library work. Consider connecting with a friend or colleague who already has relationships with the group you'd like to engage. They can help by making introductions and joining meetings or conversations. Having a buddy in the process can make the experience more comfortable and effective.
- **Conversations that lead to connecting** with the people in an organization as people and not simply employees. Instead of talking about what the library can do for the person or organization, have conversations about what brings joy to those you are talking with, their favorite things about the community, what they would like to see happening in the community, and what they work on with, and for, the community, etc.
- **De-centering the library as the expert,** sharing power, and acknowledging and using the strengths that different members of the community and organizations bring to crisis responses.
- **Moving away from a solution-oriented mindset** to a responsive and change-oriented mindset. When working with organizations and individuals, focus on ways to make a difference instead of ways to solve a problem.



What it Looks Like in Practice

Ferguson's Library Journey Toward Community-Centered Practice

The Ferguson Library community in Stamford, Connecticut, is working to respond to low literacy rates that affect communities across the state. To begin to address this crisis, the library team used a child-centered approach and worked closely with their existing partners (e.g., the Board of Education, educators, members of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), and others whom they have started to build relationships with). Library staff participated in meetings and visited spaces they had previously been in, in order to learn more and begin to understand the low literacy crisis more deeply. They listened more closely during conversations with community members and members of organizations to learn more about their challenges and strengths. Because these partners were more aware of the authentic needs of the community facing this crisis, the process taught staff the value of building transformational relationships and learning about their community. This led to prioritizing time to listen to and learn from community members—sometimes in unexpected places, such as barber-shops or nail salons—rather than planning new services and designing resources that did not

meet actual needs. Staff also made a habit of leaving the library building to discover who else in the community they could serve and to better understand how to provide that service. This [relationship map](#) represents a small part of their relationship-building process, which they continue to develop and grow as a team.

It is important to recognize that library staff may not always be the most appropriate individuals to initiate the relationship-building process. Identifying who is best suited to begin that process is key. It may be a colleague, a community partner,

or someone who already has an established connection with the organization or individual. When another person is better positioned to make the initial contact, it is helpful to work with them to facilitate the start of the relationship-building effort.



What it Looks Like in Practice

Addressing Rural Transportation Challenges in York County

The Kreutz Creek Library team in York County, Pennsylvania, identified a growing transportation crisis in their rural community. The library's branch manager, described how the crisis was identified:

"Our library is about a mile outside a small town. Unless you have a car, it's really hard to get to. We created a teen space—but realized teens couldn't reach it unless someone drove them."

Motivated to address the problem, the library team began connecting with nonprofits and local government representatives who shared the concern about transportation from a countywide perspective. Through these conversations, they connected with an employee of United Way, who invited the library's branch manager to join a countywide coalition formed to identify transportation solutions. United Way had recently completed a [study](#) on transportation gaps in York County and was seeking actionable initiatives to support through its programs. Although unsure of how she might contribute, the library's branch manager joined the coalition as a listener. Attending monthly meetings, she learned about local transportation efforts and was eventually invited to join a working group tasked with mapping both formal and informal transportation networks. As she explained,

"Formal ones [transportation] are easier to identify—you can follow a trail to them. The informal ones are more ephemeral, like people on social media offering rides to others."

Through this process, the library team learned that addressing community challenges requires stepping outside the library's walls, and building trust across networks that in many instances may at first seem unrelated to library services.

Building relationships before a crisis occurs is essential, as these connections provide a foundation for coordinated action when a crisis arises. Strong preexisting relationships enable power sharing with community members who have the strengths and knowledge needed to plan and implement an effective response. Achieving this requires continuously cultivating new relationships grounded in an understanding of community strengths and challenges, while also maintaining, reassessing, and releasing existing ones that no longer serve.

"I think it is important to note that this task is ever-present and ongoing in this work. Turnover in organizations happens all the time and new relationships need to be built. New organizations begin to provide new services or resources. Community's needs change and resources shift. A skill that should be constant is the ability to stay present in community connections, check in on your relationships and continue to build new ones when it feels appropriate."

Year 2 Ready NOW participant



What it Looks Like in Practice

Cultivating Continuity of Relationships for Lasting Community Impact at the Providence Public Library

As a part of their [Teen Squad](#) project, staff at the Providence Public Library (PPL) in Rhode Island, worked for several years (through an IMLS funded project) to build relationships with a variety of people and organizations. As a project that focuses in part on workforce development and engaging with teens to help them gain skills needed to be successful in employment, Teen Squad centers teen passions and interests in programming and services. Interest-based activities sponsored by Teen Squad include data visualization, culinary arts, web development, and fashion. In many instances teens are paid for time spent learning about their interests.

PPL's existing relationship building and growing knowledge of community (see [sample community data set](#)), which began much before the crises of 2020, led to a strong set of partnerships that support marginalized youth and their families. A look at [an asset map](#) for the Providence community provides a glimpse of all of the opportunities the library can leverage, and which they did leverage during the crises of 2020. As a result of their own asset mapping, library staff recognized assets within the city and included those that specifically connect to their workforce development focus.



Do it With Others

One of the ways in which library staff can move from transactional to transformational relationships is to consider together, with a community partner, how to deepen the current relationship. The steps below provide an outline of how you might have that conversation and take next steps:

- Think about the organizations you currently work with and identify one you would like to explore further as you move toward a transformational relationship that can help prepare for a crisis. As you select an organization to focus on, consider your current relationship: Are there elements already in place that could help shift from a transactional to a transformational partnership? Reflect on how the organization's goals and values align with the library's and whether there are opportunities to deepen trust. Not every organization you work with may be ready to move toward transformation, so begin with one that shows potential for deeper, shared work.
- Invite those in the organization that you already have a relationship with to talk with you about deepening ties. Volunteer to visit their site, or meet at a community space easy for everyone to get to. Keep in mind building relationships should not require people you are connecting with to visit the library. No matter where you meet, make sure to show your appreciation of the staff member's time by bringing (or having) refreshments available.
- Prior to the meeting, ask the organization's staff to watch this [30-minute video](#) of LaKisha Kimbrough talking about transformational relationships.
- Start the conversation by talking with everyone about the value of transformational relationships and why it is important to move from transactional relationships to transformative relationships.
- Facilitate a conversation about where the library and the organization's current relationship is. Ask yourself(selves) what is it about the relationship that is transactional in nature and what is transformational?
- Set up a time to talk again and what next steps you are each ready to take in order to begin the move from transactional to transformational. This [template](#) provides a format to document this transition.

PRACTICES FOR ITERATION AND REFLECTION WITH COMMUNITY

Building transformational relationships with community requires regular reflection, ongoing iteration, and practical tools that guide conversations and deepen understanding. The following resources support different aspects of relationship-building by offering iterative and reflective practices—from initiating conversations to analyzing power dynamics to examining the quality of relationships over time.

Getting Started with and Deepening Conversations

[Conversation Starter Template](#)

A set of questions that deepen community connections

This template focuses on open-ended questions designed to move beyond transactional exchanges (such as “What do you need from the library?”) and toward understanding community members’ and organizations’ deeper visions for their community. Rather than centering questions on gathering information for the library, the template prompts help surface what truly matters to community members and organizations. The questions are intentionally broad and relationship-focused, supporting library staff in practicing a form of listening that is not tied to immediate programs or services. This can feel uncomfortable at first—many staff are accustomed to conversations that lead to a specific outcome or solve a particular problem. Yet these slower, more exploratory conversations are what build the trust and understanding that become essential during moments of crisis.

Focusing on Understanding and Shifting Power

[Identifying Clusters of Power in Relationships: Co-creating a Power Map](#)

A visualization strategy for building relationships and transforming power dynamics

After developing relationships with partners and community members and defining the goals and vision of crisis-response work, regularly visualize community power by co-creating and updating a [power map](#). Use the following questions to guide discussion: Who are the individuals or organizations with a voice or role in the crisis response? Who is directly or indirectly impacted by this work? Who supports or opposes the intended goals? Once the map is complete, look for patterns and relationships, and reflect on visible and invisible forms of power by asking: What do we know about the people on the map? Who is missing and should be added? (Othering & Belonging Institute, University of California, Berkeley, 2025). Repeat this visualization process as needed to ensure the map remains current and reflective of evolving community dynamics.

[The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#)

A framework for shifting power and deepening community ownership

This framework from the Movement Strategy Center looks at how organizations and people can move from tokenizing and marginalizing communities to building processes and projects in which ownership and power is shared. Library staff can move through the spectrum and use examples and ideas presented in the document to build transformational relationships and services.

Practicing Ongoing Reflection

[Becoming Transformational: Reflective Questions for Practice](#)

A set of questions to examine trust, connection, and relationships with communities

Library staff and their community partners are encouraged to pause and reflect regularly as they build and sustain transformational relationships with their communities. These questions are designed to guide meaningful reflection on relationship-building practices, helping teams remain responsive, equitable, and community-centered throughout their crisis-response work.

[From Transaction to Transformation: Reflection and Data in Relationship-Building](#)

A set of examples of data-informed iterations with communities

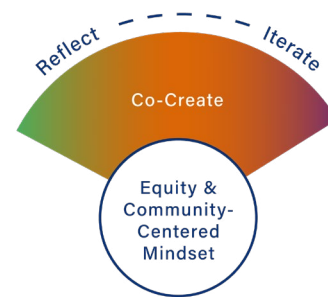
Regular reflection and iteration are essential throughout the relationship-building process. Pausing to reflect allows library staff and community members to determine which strategies are most effective, identify what data to collect to deepen understanding, and evaluate what is working well—or not. When current strategies prove ineffective, reflection helps determine what pivots and iterations are needed. Along with reflective questions shared above, library staff can use additional tools to support this process. The examples illustrate how the Iterate and Reflect with Community essential task was applied within the Ready NOW library teams, enabling them to examine and strengthen their approaches to building transformational relationships during crises through the use of data.

ESSENTIAL TASK: CO-CREATE WITH COMMUNITY

The co-creation process begins by building and nurturing transformational relationships to understand the challenges and experiences of community members. This foundation is followed by simple techniques (or activities) where you work together to explore possibilities, ideas, and opportunities to develop solutions that leverage community strengths. Co-creation is a *design* process—one that includes iterating a variety of options to arrive at solutions that are feasible, support next steps, and advance crisis-response work.

We define design as the intentional process of solving problems with the aim of discovering new and better ways to address them. True design work requires adaptability and a deep understanding of community strengths and challenges. Co-design extends this further by engaging diverse vested partners as active participants throughout the process to ensure solutions are inclusive, relevant, and responsive to local crisis needs. At its core, co-design emphasizes designing *with* others rather than *for* them.

Because the term *co-design* is commonly associated with developing new technologies and systems in fields such as Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), we use the term co-create to highlight the involvement of community members and to better reflect the intangible ideas, structures, and processes central to library and crisis-related work. You may hear colleagues or community members use the term *co-design*; in practice, *co-design* and *co-creation* can be used interchangeably.



It is important to note that co-creation is not the same as collaboration. When community members are invited to provide feedback or evaluate a service or program already created, that is collaboration. Even when they are asked to help refine a service based on a problem the library has already identified, this process is still not fully co-creation because community members were not part of identifying the problem itself. Co-creation occurs when community members are engaged from the outset—helping define a problem, question, or opportunity—and remain involved through brainstorming, contributing ideas, prototyping, testing, and identifying ways to move forward. When they participate across this full arc, they become true partners in the creation process.

Collaboration vs. Co-Creation

Collaboration: Community members give feedback or refine ideas the library staff have already developed.

Co-Creation: Community members help define the problem, generate ideas, prototype solutions, and determine next steps.

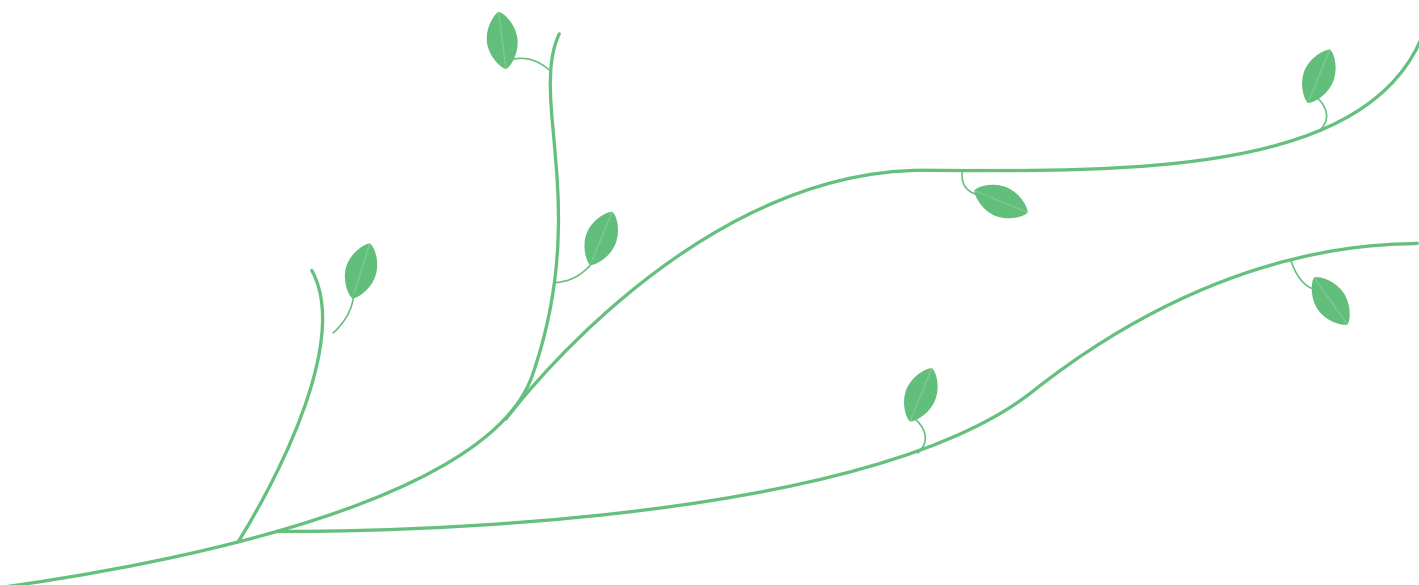
Co-creation democratizes the development of programs and services by equalizing power among those who will benefit from the outcomes—library staff, community members, and partner organizations. It positions everyone as an equal partner in shaping services (Druin, 2002; Harrington et al., 2019). The co-creation process unfolds through empathizing, ideating and brainstorming, creating, testing, and implementing crisis-responsive solutions with the intended audiences.

While the co-creation process requires one or more people to prepare and facilitate the design process, it remains a cooperative effort between library staff and the community. While coordination is necessary—such as scheduling co-creation sessions and organizing logistics—the core of the work involves facilitating sessions and ensuring that all relevant voices are included and heard. The figure on the next page provides a high-level overview of the co-creation process, and the sections that follow break it down into specific steps and their purposes.



"Library staff shouldn't assume they know what the community wants or needs without asking them. The community has agency to co-create on solutions that affect the community."

Year 1 Ready NOW participant



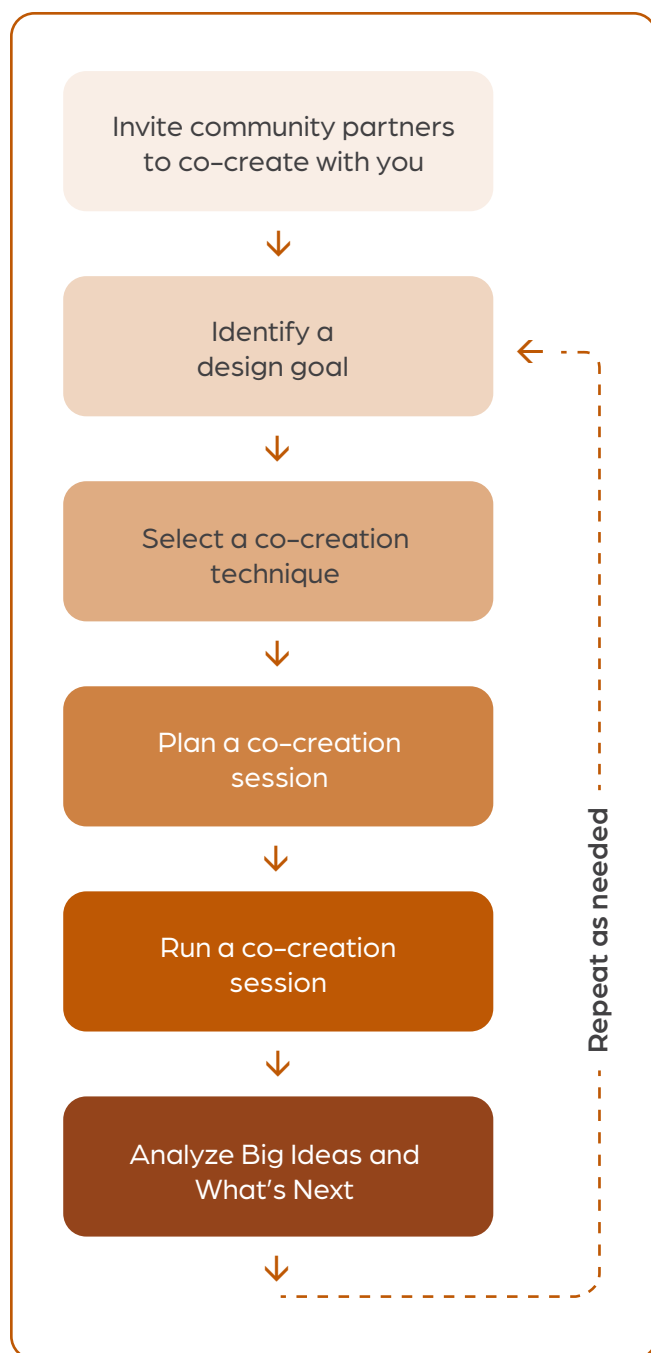


Figure 2: The Co-creation Process

Invite community partners to co-create with you

In this step, you will identify whom to invite into the co-creation process. The individuals you select—ideally two to three people—will depend on your initial understanding of the crisis, what you have learned about the community up to this point, and whether you have established—or are in the process of building transformational relationships with community members. When the people you identify are both able and willing to participate, they become your co-creation team. We refer to this group as the “co-creation team” throughout this Field Guide.

Identify a design goal

Every co-creation process needs a goal. The design goal is an overarching statement that reflects what the group hopes to work toward and should resonate with the people you invite into the process. This goal is not fixed; it should remain iterative, flexible, and open to change as the work progresses. A design goal may begin simply, but it will often become more nuanced and complex as crisis work evolves and deeper insights emerge. You may identify an initial design goal before inviting community partners to co-create with you, but you will later refine it with the co-creation team to ensure it aligns with everyone’s perspectives. The design goal serves as your compass—it guides the direction of the design work and helps the team maintain a shared understanding of the purpose.

The goals of a co-creation process depend on how the crisis is framed and on the problem, opportunity, or question identified by those involved. In crisis-response work, this often manifests in the following ways:

When you don't know a starting point

In this case, the co-creation process will aim to clearly define the problem.



What it Looks Like in Practice

Partnering for Youth Well-Being: Addressing Truancy Through Co-Creation

A Ready NOW team at a library on the East Coast of the United States identified a truancy problem affecting multiple organizations, institutions, and local youth. Many youth who were skipping school began spending time in the library, and staff felt torn between offering a brave space⁹ and coordinating with law enforcement.

The team identified several partners to engage, including law enforcement, public schools, and youth-serving nonprofit organizations. They developed a plan to invite these partners to co-create guidelines to help the library respond more effectively to truancy, and to address the following design goal: *How might we work with partners to support youth who come to the library during school hours in ways that prioritize their safety, well-being, and educational needs?* To begin the co-creation process, the team drafted a set of questions to better understand how partners were addressing the issue of truancy:

- What are you and your staff expected or instructed to do when you see youth at the library during school hours?
- Can you describe any challenges/predicaments that you face (feel free to provide as much detail as possible)?
- Is there anything else we should know?

The team planned to share these questions through [Mentimeter](#) to gather initial insights from current and potential partners. Their findings would inform how they structure their first co-creation session and guide next steps in addressing truancy collectively.

Image 2: Example of Question on a Mentimeter



⁹ We define brave space as an environment where all members of a community know they are free to explore their passions and interests, are respected, and are able to be their authentic selves. This is an environment that inspires risk-taking and growth, and fosters an inclusive atmosphere where all voices are heard and valued (Rubio, Gonzalez, Bjorling, Lee & Martin, n.d.)

When a problem has been identified by the community, but it's not clear how to solve it

In this case, the co-creation process aims to identify possible solutions to the problem.



What it Looks Like in Practice
Co-Creating Solutions for Caregivers
and Children at the Birmingham Public
Library

The Birmingham Public Library in Alabama planned to work with community members and partners to co-create solutions for parents and caregivers whose children are home alone after school. This need emerged through multiple conversations staff had with caregivers and teens, which revealed the extent of this community challenge. The library team chose to use co-creation to work with caregivers to further define the problem and develop solutions to help address it. Their initial [co-creation session](#) was designed to address the following design goal: *How might we work with parents and caregivers in planning, building, and supporting flexible structures for providing refuge to children when they do not have caregivers at home?*

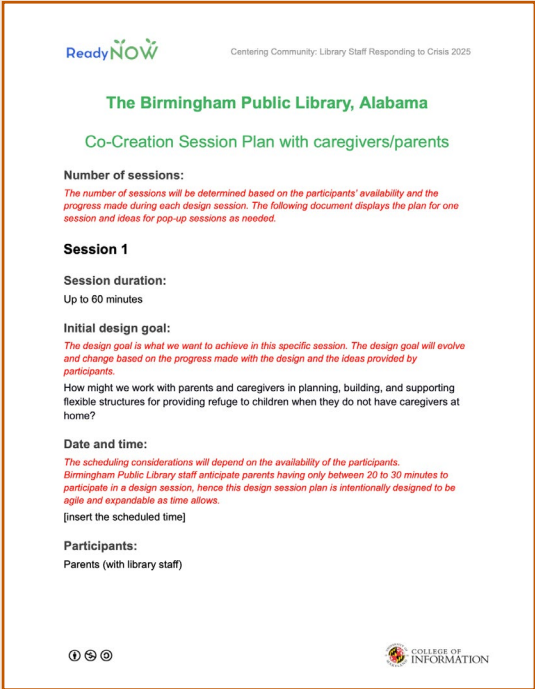


Image 3: A Screenshot of Co-Creation Design Session Plan

When you would like to reimagine current services/structures/systems to better align with community strengths and challenges

This type of co-creation process aims to provide opportunities to test and iterate on a design until the co-creation team of library staff and community representatives reaches agreement on the nature of the program, service, or structure.



What it Looks Like in Practice

Co-creating Brave Spaces for Teens Well-Being

The [Nourishing Minds](#) project reimaged mental health services in libraries and their communities by focusing on the following design goal: *How might we create brave spaces for creativity and normalize mental health conversations by harnessing the power of co-design for discovery and growth?* The result of this co-creation between library staff and teens includes a published collection—a “cookbook”—featuring step-by-step instructions for activities (“recipes”) that library staff can facilitate with teens, along with an accompanying card deck that helps to organize the process. The activities range from creative strategies for coping with daily stressors to reimagining physical spaces to be more welcoming. Together, these resources engage teens in co-creating a deeper sense of belonging, developing healthy approaches to navigating challenges, and building stronger connections with their community.

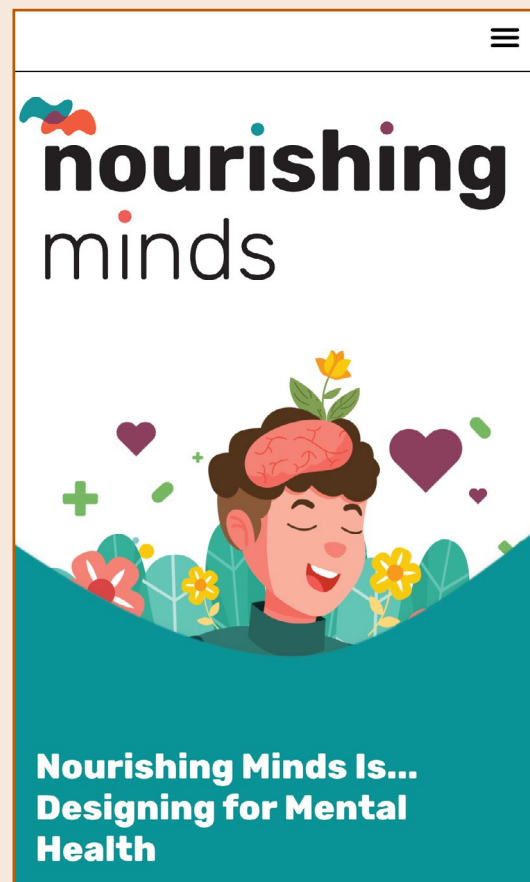


Image 4: Nourishing Minds Website Main Page

When you would like to build stronger relationships with community members

Co-creation can serve as an important way to deepen relationships with community members and organizations, using co-creation sessions to strengthen and advance those connections. Organizations can invite partners with whom they already have established relationships to co-create, particularly when there is an understanding of the community's needs, wants, and assets.



What it Looks Like in Practice

Co-Creating Civic Learning Program with Immigrant Teens in Prince George's County

The [NatureFind](#) program was designed with and for immigrant teens through a series of co-creation sessions involving teens, young adults, library staff, and youth-serving organizations, following an assessment of the challenges immigrant teens face in navigating political information. This co-creation effort was guided by the following design goal: *How might we design an experiential learning program with immigrant teens and their information mediators, anchored in teens' contexts, to help them develop political information literacy?* VineCorps, a nonprofit organization in Maryland, and the University of Maryland with established relationships with immigrant teens in Prince George's County, used co-creation to further strengthen these relationships and to develop the learning program collaboratively with other community stakeholders, including library staff.



Image 5: NatureFind Website Main Page

Select a co-creation technique

The co-creation team should determine who will facilitate and guide the brainstorming, discussion, or design session using techniques that support progress toward the design goal. Sessions often benefit from co-facilitators who support each other in leading activities and discussions. The core of a co-creation session is often referred to as a "design activity." These design activities are essential because it empowers members of the co-creation team to brainstorm, ideate, evaluate, and experiment with different ideas and solutions. Many

design techniques originate from education and experimentation-focused projects. The [Selecting Design Techniques for Co-Creation](#) resource provided can help you identify which techniques are most suitable for your co-designers, taking into account factors such as age (e.g., children or teens), role (e.g., caregivers), occupation (e.g., professionals), and more. The Nourishing Minds (n.d) project outlines 23 co-design techniques, with clear instructions on executing each technique (see [page 108-154](#)).



Image 6:
Sticky Noting –
Generating Big
Ideas on Equity



Image 7: Digital "Bags of Stuff"

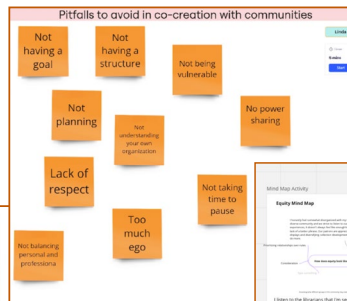


Image 8:
Generating
Reflection on
Co-Creating with
Communities

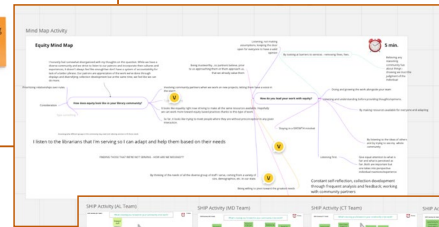


Image 9:
Mindmap

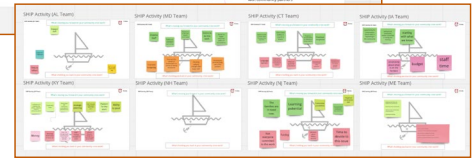


Image 10: Digital Gallery Walk – A
Brainstorming Session

Plan a co-creation session

You can use this [co-creation session plan template](#) to develop a session plan based on a design goal that emerges from what you have learned about and with the community (E. Bonsignore, email communication, November 28, 2020). A completed example of a [co-creation session plan](#)—geared toward designing with children—is also provided.

A session plan may include some or all of the following activities, depending on the time available to you and your co-creation team:

- **Informal gathering.** A brief settling-in time (often more successful when food is involved) helps co-creators ease into the session.
- **Icebreaker activity.** A simple introductory question or prompt that allows participants to introduce themselves and respond to a "Question of the Day," often related to the session's focus.
- **Design activity.** The core of the session, where participants work individually or in small groups to design. You will select one or more design techniques, explain the task, and divide participants into groups to begin.
- **Big Ideas.** This final segment provides an opportunity for participants to present their work, summarize ideas, and identify recurring themes across groups or individuals.

Run a co-creation session

Use the session plan to facilitate the various activities. Most importantly, remain open to any ideas community members raise, even when the process feels intangible or abstract.

We made room for differentiating opinions...we just made our room bigger for all the ideas."
Year 2 Ready NOW participant

Analyze big ideas and determine what's next

Most co-creation sessions conclude with a team-work effort to identify the big ideas generated during the session. These ideas help you and your co-creators determine next steps. In some cases, this may require revisiting and refining the design goal; in others, it may mean running additional design sessions with the same goal to narrow the big ideas into a coherent direction you can begin to develop. It's important for the co-creation team to debrief the design session soon after it takes place, to assess the process and the learning and to determine what's next.



What it Looks Like in Practice

Co-Creating Virtual Learning Support: Preparing for the 2020 School Year in Austin

During the summer of 2020, staff at the Austin Public Library's Central Library in Texas co-created solutions with teachers at the Harmony School to support youth virtually at the start of the Fall 2020 school year. Their design goal was: How might we design and implement services and supports that help mitigate the virtual learning challenges K–12 youth and families may face in the upcoming school year? Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, both teachers and library staff anticipated that schools would remain fully virtual in fall 2020, and library staff sought ways to support both youth and educators.

Together, the team brainstormed the immediate and anticipated needs and barriers for the upcoming school year, aiming to co-create responses to support the virtual learning environment. Co-creators used Google Jamboard (now discontinued) to identify needs and challenges. After the initial brainstorming, they grouped the big ideas into themes such as educational support, mental health, physical health, and safety (see Image 11 below). The library staff then used these themes to begin planning the partnerships and services needed to support teachers in Fall 2020.



Image 11: Grouping Ideas into Themes

Keep in mind that the co-creation process will likely require multiple design sessions. Each session builds on the ones before it, keeping the design goal in mind and revisiting it as needed as needs evolve and the design develops. As each session unfolds, synthesize the “big ideas” into coherent themes that will inform the design of systems, structures, services, or programs. Based on each session’s outcomes, you will repeat co-creation sessions as needed to iterate on both the design goal and the emerging design.

Co-creating with your communities may seem like a lot —perhaps even a bit intimidating—but it doesn’t have to be. Co-creation processes can be short- or long-term. When you keep an open mind and listen to the ideas, suggestions, and needs of your co-creators, you’ll find that each co-creation

process looks different. However, the techniques you use are adaptable, and session plans can often be reused with only minor adjustments. Maintaining a regular co-creation practice helps ensure crisis-response services continue to reflect community insights as conditions and capacities shift over time.

It [co-creation] is a constant feedback loop, not just a one time ask about your community."

Year 2 Ready NOW participant



Do it With Others

Every step in the co-creation process requires library staff to work closely with communities. The “co” prefix inherently signals working with others throughout the process. One of the most important—and often most challenging—steps is determining who should participate in co-creation sessions and how to share the co-creation goals and process with them. While co-creation teams work best when transformational relationships are already in place, co-creation sessions can also be used to initiate and strengthen those relationships. The steps below outline how you might begin selecting co-creation team members and planning the first design session (step 1 and 2 adapted from Inclusive Design Research Center, n.d.):

1. With the initial co-creation team, identify who to invite to the co-creation planning session. Depending on the relationships you already have, ideal community members are often those considered “edge cases”—individuals who experience the most significant challenges related to the crisis. It is also valuable to involve community connectors or leaders with whom you already have established relationships. If such relationships do not yet exist, consider using the tools and practices recommended in the Build Transformational Relationships with Community essential task to identify participants for the first co-creation session. Keep in mind that the community members on your co-creation team will have connections you may not and be valuable in this identification process.
2. Invite selected community members to an initial planning meeting and to contribute as a member of the co-creation team. If others on the co-creation team have established relationships with those you are inviting, make sure that they offer the invitation. Because community members are most familiar with the context and challenges within a crisis, they can help brainstorm the design goal and identify appropriate co-creation techniques, ensuring the session is accessible and relevant. This step also helps develop a shared understanding of the design goals and the co-creation process. Discuss the different ways community members might be involved in the session. The list below is not exhaustive—additional roles, tasks, or interests may emerge during planning:
 - Co-facilitating the co-creation session: Community members with facilitation experience—or an interest in facilitating—can be encouraged to co-facilitate.
 - Planning the co-creation session: Community members can help plan activities and scheduling in ways that reflect the community’s context, interests, and crisis experiences. Talking through the session plan can also be a meaningful learning experience for these community members.
 - Managing logistics: Community members are often well-positioned to handle logistics because they are familiar with potential venues, ideal dates and times, and local services.
 - Recruiting members to participate in the first design session: Because community members have strong ties within their communities, they can effectively help identify and invite additional participants for the co-creation and planning sessions.
3. Encourage learning about co-creation. Many potential co-creators may not be familiar with the term “co-creation,” even if they have participated in similar processes before. Share resources such as this [video](#) by Juan Rubio, Principal of JR Learning Labs, in which he teaches co-design methods using co-design techniques.
4. Hold follow-up meetings to ensure clarity about roles among the co-creation team. Continue meeting to finalize the list of co-creators, refine the co-creation plan, and confirm logistics.

PRACTICES FOR ITERATION AND REFLECTION WITH COMMUNITY

Co-creating with community requires regular reflection, ongoing iteration, and practical tools that guide the team to the next stage of the process. Co-creation is a shared journey toward a solution that staff undertake with the community, and the process itself is just as important as the outcome—moving closer to being prepared to respond to a crisis. The following resources support different aspects of co-creation by offering iterative and reflective practices, including refining design goals as the work progresses, analyzing big ideas to determine next steps, facilitating co-creation sessions, and integrating reflection as a routine practice in co-creation.

Getting Started and Moving the Co-Creation Process Forward

[Shaping the Design Goal Through Collective Insight](#)

A guide to co-creating the “right size” How Might We question

Formulating a design goal can be challenging because many ideas may surface when considering a crisis. Some teams find it easier to begin by crafting How Might We (HMW) questions to help identify the design goal. It is recommended to start with the problem or crisis the community is facing and define it collaboratively with your co-creation team. The Interaction Design Foundation provides guidance on writing HMW questions, including when and why to use them, best practices for framing them at the “right size,” and a worksheet for generating HMW questions. Their best-practice guidance also explains how to iterate on HMW questions to ensure they are neither too broad nor too narrow. Keep in mind that at the end of each co-creation session, your team will determine the next step: Do you need another session with the same design goal? Should the design goal be refined? Did the analysis of the big ideas reveal a new design goal for the next co-creation session?

Reflection on the analysis of big ideas should help surface the team’s next design goal.

[Analyzing Big Ideas For Next Steps](#)

An exercise for collective sense-making after each co-creation session

Through our work with Ready NOW teams, we have learned that taking time at the end of each co-creation session to identify and analyze the “big ideas” that emerged is crucial. Just as important is determining the next focus of co-creation—the next How Might We question—or the next set of actions, which requires iteration and reflection with co-creators. Involving all co-creators in this process ensures that no critical insights are missed, including those from quieter participants. This “big ideas” exercise is designed for use after every session. It is essential not only because it brings the entire co-creation team together, but also because it is an ideation activity that often results in a clearer sense of next steps. Work through the steps on the first slide during the final 20 minutes of each co-creation session. See the examples of big ideas boards on the slide for inspiration.

Facilitating Conversations in Co-Creation Sessions

Listening and Empathizing with Communities

A collection of facilitator guides for co-creation sessions

Facilitation is a skill that library staff must learn and feel comfortable practicing. These skills are especially important when navigating challenges and vulnerabilities within communities and within library services, particularly during times of crisis. Facilitators should use active facilitation strategies, establish ground rules, feel comfortable deviating from the script when needed, and allow time for reflection on what was discussed and learned.

There are excellent facilitator guides that library staff can use to strengthen their skills, including those by [Koren \(2025\)](#), [CDC \(2025\)](#), and [Inclusive Design Research Center \(n.d\)](#). We also recommend watching [Juan Rubio's video](#). Pay close attention to how he skillfully facilitates the session with effective prompts and clarity.

Integrating Reflection as a Routine Practice in Co-Creation

Any design technique used in co-creation can be reflective if we are intentional about asking reflective questions and encouraging co-creators to think aloud as they participate in design activities. Below, we offer two suggestions for incorporating reflection into design activities, and we encourage co-creators to consider additional ways that reflection can be embedded:

[Prompting with statements or questions](#)

A method to shift behaviors and mindsets through reflection

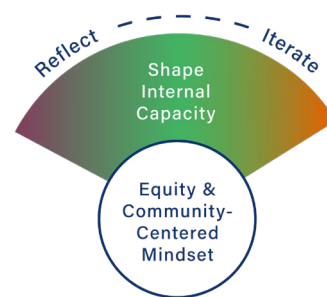
It can be challenging to change deeply held perceptions or beliefs simply by asking people to be more critical of their actions. Prompting or asking reflective questions can help individuals examine, with others, whether what they believe aligns with what they actually do. Reflecting on something we often overlook can be a powerful way to remind ourselves why we do what we do and to pause and consider how we do it. These examples from the Ready NOW sessions demonstrate how co-creation teams can engage in these reflections on a routine basis.

[Reflecting through sketching or visualizing](#)

An embedded reflection to identify where we are now and where we want to go

Our Ready NOW sessions taught us that reflection can often feel abstract and difficult to connect to next steps—especially when we need to ask critical questions. Visualizing what we do and where we want to go provides a powerful opportunity to reflect on how we can improve. Incorporating visualization or sketching exercises into our design sessions created meaningful moments for reflection. These examples from the Ready NOW sessions demonstrate how co-creation teams can engage in such exercises.

ESSENTIAL TASK: SHAPE INTERNAL CAPACITY FOR COMMUNITY-CENTERED PRACTICES



Library services that successfully support community strengths and challenges, leverage transformative relationships, and embrace co-creation require cultivating both a responsive culture and a flexible infrastructure. In this Field Guide, we refer to the library's culture and infrastructure as its "internal capacity." While internal capacity is expansive—encompassing skills, knowledge, resources, systems, infrastructures, and learning processes, and influenced by factors such as organizational culture and funding—our work with the Ready NOW teams revealed that a community-centered library culture and a responsive library infrastructure are the internal capacity elements that must be in place for libraries to support communities experiencing crises. Building a responsive culture and robust infrastructure enhances the ability of library leaders and staff to implement all other essential tasks outlined in this Field Guide.¹⁰ Creating a supportive and agile workplace is a shared responsibility across all levels of the organization, from leadership to frontline staff, to Friends of the Library and Boards of Trustees.

Library Culture

A thriving library culture embraces risk-taking, encourages reflection, builds trust, prioritizes relationship building, and demonstrates flexibility and responsiveness. When library leadership cultivates this kind of culture, staff are empowered to adapt to changing community needs. Cultural shifts of this nature require intentional effort, and they yield powerful results that position libraries to serve a wide range of community groups effectively.

During crises, a strong library culture enables staff to pause, reflect, and respond with community-centered approaches rather than defaulting to reactive solutions. For example, libraries with strong cultures can move beyond quick fixes—such as implementing curbside pickup which was assumed to meet community needs during the pandemic—to addressing deeper, systemic community challenges. While curbside pickup services helped maintain access to materials, it did not meet the needs of all community members, particularly marginalized groups who faced other challenges during the pandemic (Subramaniam & Braun, 2021). Instead of focusing solely on sustaining existing services, staff could have centered the specific challenges these groups were facing. For instance, if parent groups were struggling to support their children's virtual learning, libraries could have created virtual gatherings, such as Zoom sessions, to help families brainstorm and co-create the supports they needed in partnership with relevant organizations.

On the next page, we outline what is required to cultivate an organizational culture that is responsive to local communities:

¹⁰We define leaders as those in positions such as director, assistant or deputy director, and any member of a library leadership team – if one exists. Staff are those who work on the front-lines with community members (including managers of departments and branches) or those behind the scenes in support of service delivery (e.g. technical services and IT staff).

Cultural Practice: Risk-Taking

- Leaders model risk-taking by piloting new approaches themselves.
- Funds for innovation are available, especially for experimental or pilot programs.
- Staff feel empowered to propose innovative ideas without fear of ideas being rejected or dismissed.
- Failed initiatives are treated as learning opportunities rather than mistakes.
- Success stories highlight calculated risks that resulted in community impact.

Cultural Practice: Relationship building

- Staff invest time in understanding each other's roles, challenges, and professional aspirations and move beyond focusing only on immediate work tasks.
- Cross-departmental relationships evolve beyond transactions into joint problem-solving and support.
- Leaders regularly spend time with different departments and service points, learning about staff experiences and operational realities.
- Initiative development begins with relationship-building across departments and roles rather than siloed decision-making.
- Success metrics include the quality of internal working relationships.

Cultural Practice: Trust Building

- Decision-making is shared between all levels.
- Staff input is actively solicited and incorporated into strategic planning processes.
- Staff have ongoing opportunities to shape budgetary priorities before decisions are finalized.
- Regular forums exist for staff to provide feedback on organizational challenges and proposed solutions.
- Staff are able to solve problems without check-ins and micro-management.
- Leadership keeps staff informed of how feedback was or wasn't integrated into decisions and why.
- Credit is shared widely and publicly.
- Staff know that critical feedback is provided to encourage community-centered services.
- Conflict and tension are viewed as opportunities for deeper understanding rather than obstacles.

Cultural Practice: Flexibility & Responsiveness

- Policies emphasize equity principles (see Equity Mindset section of this Field Guide) over rigid rules.
- Library and staff schedules and workflows are adapted to current and emerging community needs.
- Resources are reallocated quickly when priorities shift.
- Decision-making accelerates during crisis moments.
- Co-creation with communities directly influences service design.
- Evaluation and assessment goes beyond numbers and includes ideas related to impact in and on the community.



Our organizational culture has suffered for a long time from lack of adequate management. We have, until recently, existed in a culture of fear and mistrust of people in administrative positions. I must first (or perhaps in tandem) come to a basic level of understanding and trust with my staff so that we, collectively, can better extend that same understanding and trust to our community." Year 1 Ready NOW participant who is member of a library leadership team

This culture does not emerge overnight. It requires intentional cultivation, consistent reinforcement, and ongoing commitment from both leaders and staff. Transformation often begins with small changes in daily practices that gradually shift expectations and behaviors. Most importantly, it requires a willingness to acknowledge when the current library culture is not enabling staff to respond effectively to crisis needs—and the courage to make the changes necessary to move forward.

Library Infrastructure

To support these above-mentioned cultural practices, the library requires a robust and responsive infrastructure—one that includes clearly defined policies, comprehensive and iterative job descriptions, staffing patterns that reflect communities served, and flexible organizational frameworks (e.g. strategic plans and staff guidelines). Responsive infrastructure also incorporates meaningful evaluation processes, mechanisms for cross-departmental collaboration, effective communication channels, and transparent approaches to resource allocation.

When library infrastructure aligns with a community-centered mindset, staff respond more effectively to community needs while advancing strategic priorities. This alignment creates pathways for innovation rather than barriers. Table 1 on the next page highlights key components that need to be in place to build a responsive library infrastructure:

Infrastructure Area	What's Required?
Policies	• Policies are built around core values, equity- and community- centered mindsets, vision, and mission rather than around rigid rules, traditions, or ease of implementation. • Policies are written in plain language and available in language that are accessible to local communities. • Clear pathways and workflows are designed to empower staff to make exceptions when policies create barriers to participation and access. • A policy review cycle is created to ensure relevance and effectiveness. • Mechanisms for community input in policy creation are created and facilitated.
Staffing Models	• Jobs are defined by outcomes rather than tasks, allowing adaptation and revision as needed. • Recruitment practices build a staff that reflects the makeup of the community. • Staff have opportunities to develop skills beyond primary responsibilities, for example a circulation staff member has the chance to build skills in relationship building as a part of youth or reference services. • Staff from different departments work together based on community strengths and needs rather than professional disciplines. • Organizational models emphasize collaboration over hierarchy and individualism. • Specialized knowledge (such as community organizing or fundraising) is recognized across all staff levels. • Development of future leaders is intentional and strategic at all organizational levels.
Resource Allocation	• Community needs and outcomes serve as the basis for allocating and assessing resource use. • Budgets recognize that different communities within the library's service area require different types of resources and services. • Clear frameworks are in place for how resource allocation decisions are made. • Processes are in place for staff and community input on financial decisions. • Resources are reserved for quick deployment to respond to emerging needs.
Communications Channels	• Tools are in place to facilitate communication vertically and horizontally across all levels of the organization. • Formal and informal mechanisms are designed to gather and respond to input from library staff and community members and organizations. • Processes are in place for capturing and sharing organizational learning. • Processes and tools are available for documenting and communicating how decisions are made. • Communication is adapted to meet the learning and access needs of library staff and community members. • Pathways and workflows for rapid information sharing have been established and are utilized during times of crisis.
Cross-Departmental/ Team Collaboration	• Joint goal-setting occurs across departments/teams. • Working and service groups are organized around achieving outcomes rather than specific service areas or type of library user. • Systems and processes are in place for departments/teams to support each other's work. • Positions are specifically designed to connect different departments/teams and roles. • Evaluation looks across the entire organization, not just at individual teams, programs, or services.
Evaluation	• Outcomes are determined in partnership with community members and vested partners. • Methods are designed and implemented for capturing qualitative impact beyond numbers. • Regular opportunities to reflect on and refine services are a part of every staff member's schedule. • Assessment is integrated across roles rather than centralized. • Assessment includes growth and adaptation. • Evaluation findings are regularly shared with library staff and community.

Table 1: Components to Build a Responsive Library Infrastructure



We have done some deep work on our infrastructure this past year, and we have seen some adjust better than others to the community-centered expectations it brings. As we promote within and/or hire external candidates, we are careful to educate and provide clear expectations of our systemic goals.” Year 2 Ready NOW participant

Effective infrastructure does not develop in isolation—all of its components must work together as an integrated system. When aligned with a community-centered mindset, this infrastructure creates the conditions for a transformational culture to thrive, enabling staff to focus their energy on relationship-building and responsive service rather than navigating organizational barriers.



What it Looks Like in Practice

Strengthening Internal Capacity: Organizational Transformation at the Warren County Public Library

“Enhancing quality of life” is the guiding tenet of Kentucky’s Warren County Public Library (WCPL) in its work with and for its communities. Over the last decade, as the library responded to natural disasters such as tornadoes, the pandemic, and the evolving everyday needs of its residents, staff revisited the library’s mission, rethought their role in the community, and revised organizational structures to better center community needs in times of stability as well as crisis.

This example outlines the changes WCPL made to its organizational structures to focus its work on enhancing the quality of life for Warren County residents before a crisis occurs, positioning the library to better support its communities when a crisis does arise.

Strengthening relationships as a foundation

Understanding the changes needed in WCPL’s structures and systems was a gradual process that began with building strong relationships with community members. Staff started with small steps—such as opening pop-up libraries and purchasing outreach vans—that helped them get to know the community. As they built relationships, learned about public service from organizations like the Red Cross, and listened closely to community members’ needs, they quickly realized that significant structural and systemic changes would be necessary to advance the library’s efforts to enhance quality of life for Warren County residents.

Through these interactions, staff made sense of what they were learning, reconsidered how they served the community, and began modifying existing organizational structures. They rethought how staff roles and responsibilities were defined, with whom programs were designed and planned, and where—and why—library services were delivered.

Embedding flexibility through Blue Sky Gray Sky planning

To further support its efforts to enhance “quality of life” for residents, the library adopted a flexible, comprehensive structural approach to guide how it works with its communities—a strategy called *Blue Sky Gray Sky Resiliency*. Blue sky planning focuses on supporting everyday community needs (such as providing free notary and passport services, tax assistance, and more). Gray sky planning focuses on what the community requires during times of acute crisis and involves developing strategies for how the library will pivot its everyday structures and operations to address those needs (such as opening warming centers or resiliency hubs and offering a free shuttle service).

Adopting and implementing the *Blue Sky Gray Sky Resiliency* model ensures that WCPL can support residents’ immediate needs during crises as well as their everyday needs at other times. This approach requires library staff to use community data, lessons from prior experiences, insights gained from partner organizations (such as the Red Cross), and professional expertise to make ongoing changes to the library’s culture, structure, and staffing.

This reflective process led to substantial shifts in WCPL’s mission, staffing, structure, and leadership, positioning the library as a critical organization focused on building and supporting community resilience in Warren County. These shifts strengthened WCPL’s role as a community connector, working with organizations and residents to develop responsive initiatives that address both immediate and long-term community challenges.

Restructuring and hiring to support the vision

In alignment with the *Blue Sky Gray Sky Resiliency* strategy, in 2020, the library expanded from 14 leadership positions to 34 within 18 months. New branch libraries were opened, requiring additional branch leadership positions, and all locations adopted a focus on placing outreach front and center. WCPL also partially shifted from a hierarchical management structure to a matrix management structure, which they determined would better support the delivery of community-centered services. A key difference is that in a matrix management structure, managers or leaders have dual or multiple managerial accountability and responsibility, rather than holding responsibility for only one department or staff group (Archibald, 1976).

To staff the library system with personnel dedicated to—and knowledgeable about—making the structural pivots required in both *Blue Sky and Gray Sky* contexts, WCPL overhauled its hiring process, beginning with its job descriptions. Instead of emphasizing “traditional” librarian competencies, such as facilitating existing programs, staffing service desks, or developing displays, new job listings prioritized candidates who demonstrated a community-centered mindset, a growth orientation, the ability to pivot, and strong social and emotional intelligence. Job titles were also revised to center communities and reflect the public-facing nature of the work, rather than traditional library service functions.

Below is an example of a recent job description for a librarian position at WCPL that demonstrates new thinking about the skills needed by library staff in order to support the community effectively. This Community Resilience Lead position helps break down silos often found in other departmentalized positions in the library.

A Community-Centered Library Staff: WCPL's Community Resilience Lead Job Description

Full time position for **a communicative, creative, organized, and collaborative individual with a heart for community building and public service.** WCPL is committed to improving quality of life in Warren County by **providing equitable access to information, resources, and services that our community needs.** Candidates for the Community Resilience Lead position **should be passionate about this commitment and eager to help develop these initiatives.** This individual cares about the values of WCPL and the story we are building through our events and partnerships.

Ideal candidates for this position have **previous work or volunteer experience in public service, community organizing, or non-profit work, and are skilled at working collaboratively with a variety of community partners.** This individual is **comfortable serving and advocating for patrons of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities with dignity, respect, and nonjudgement.**

The Community Resilience Lead is expected to work at least one evening per week and one week-end per month and **must be willing to be flexible with their schedule as needed to accommodate system-wide needs.**

Emerging as a community connector

As the library implemented organizational and staffing changes and formed transformational relationships with key community partners, its position and public perception shifted. WCPL became a community connector on issues affecting the county and was asked to take a leadership role in coordinating efforts across local government and public-serving organizations to support residents during times of crisis.

For example, as part of its *Gray Sky* planning, WCPL—along with the Red Cross—led a team of representatives in guided conversations and learning sessions. Grounded in mindsets of community-centeredness and equity, the team launched the [Start Here Warren County](#) website. The site includes the county's disaster management plan and provides information and services across a wide range of topics (veteran services; family and community; food security; infrastructure; housing; crisis and emergency support; education; and more). Resources are updated over time.

Beyond offering this “first aid” solution, the library plans to continue innovating and co-creating with its communities to strengthen preparedness and support before, during, and after crises. Their revised culture and structure give the library the agility to better support residents’ quality of life, and continued refinement will strengthen this responsiveness over time.

Community-Centered Job Description vs. Traditional Library-Centered Job Description

Community-Centered Role

Focuses on community building, equity, and cross-sector partnerships.

Emphasizes transformational relationship development

Requires experience in public service, community organizing, or nonprofit work.

Values collaboration, flexibility, and responsiveness to community needs.

Traditional Library-Centered Role

Focuses on delivering in-house programs and services, created and facilitated by the staff.

Emphasizes library-based activities such as storytimes, reading programs, and desk duties.

Requires experience with programming within a library setting.

Values program planning, customer service, and departmental responsibilities.



Do it With Others

While all areas of library culture and infrastructure discussed above are equally important—and both influence and reinforce one another—our work with the Ready NOW teams revealed that having flexible, well-developed policies in place before a crisis enables staff to be agile and pivot services more seamlessly during a crisis. The process below is intended as a starting point for library staff and leaders to develop an auditing process for reviewing and assessing their current policies:

1. Build a cross-departmental team of about five staff members. Ensure representation from a variety of departments and roles, and involve leadership in both the recruitment of team members and the planning process.
2. Develop a team charge for the policy review. For example: The policy assessment team's charge is to transform library policies so they are responsive to the voices and experiences of all community members and do not create barriers. The team will develop a policy framework that embodies our values of

community-centeredness, flexibility, and trust, and will help create an infrastructure that strengthens staff ability to build relationships and meet evolving community needs with confidence and creativity.

3. Review the library's suite of policies and determine which one to start with. Begin with one policy to establish a process and framework for reviewing and revising the full set of library policies. Questions to consider when selecting the first policy are populated in the Table 2 on the next page:

Area to Consider	Questions to Ask
Overall Impact	• Which policies directly affect the most community members on a daily basis? • Which policies generate the most exceptions, workarounds, or staff confusion? • Which policies have community members or staff identified as creating barriers to service? • Where do we see misalignment between our stated values and our policy language?
Strategic Alignment	• Which policy areas most directly connect to our current strategic priorities? • Where are we seeing the biggest gaps between community needs and our current approach? • Which policies feel most outdated relative to current library practices? • Which policy revision would best demonstrate our commitment to changing organizational culture? • Where do we have momentum or existing energy for change?
Practical Considerations	• Which policy has clear ownership for implementation after revision? • Which policy offers a manageable scope for our first deep dive? • Where do we have robust data or feedback to inform revision? • Which policy revision could show visible results relatively quickly?
Opportunity for Learning	• Which policy helps us develop transferable frameworks for other policies? • Which policy touches on multiple aspects of library operations, offering broader insights? • Which policy helps us practice community involvement in the revision process? • Which policy would help us develop skills in balancing flexibility with consistency? • Which policy involves multiple departments, helping us practice cross-functional collaboration?
Organizational Change	• Which policy revision would face the least resistance? • Which policy revision would be most easily communicated to vested partners? • Which policy change could serve as a compelling proof of concept?

Table 2: Questions to Consider when Selecting the First Policy to Review

Once a policy is selected for test revision as a team, develop a set of criteria for evaluating the policy in several key areas. The team will want to talk with colleagues and community members to uncover the answers to some of the questions listed on this [guide](#). You can also involve community members at different stages of the policy revision. To do so, you may refer to the guidance provided in the *Co-create with Communities* essential task. With the policy evaluation in hand, the policy team can begin developing an updated version. The first step in this process involves speaking with staff and community members about the policy. These conversations or focus groups may vary depending on the policy under review. The team should use the findings from the policy assessment to craft discussion topics and talking points.

For example, if the assessment revealed that the policy created undue burden for staff or community members, the conversations should explore what needs to be in place to ensure such barriers do not persist.

Once the conversations with staff and community members are complete, the policy team should synthesize what was learned and begin revising the current policy using those insights. Updated policies should then be vetted by leadership, colleagues, and community members. The final step for the policy revision team is to develop a policy framework—based on their learnings and experience—for updating other library policies and creating a schedule for ongoing reviews.

PRACTICES FOR ITERATION AND REFLECTION WITH COMMUNITY

Shaping internal capacity for community-centered practices requires regular reflection, ongoing iteration, and practical tools that help the library cultivate a strong culture and a responsive infrastructure. While carrying out the tasks outlined in this section, time should be intentionally set aside for individual and collective reflection. This may take many forms, including conversations during staff meetings about what has not been going well and why, as well as discussions of new, innovative approaches that have proven successful. Staff should also be encouraged to participate in professional development opportunities that support reflection on building and sustaining a strong organizational culture and developing creative infrastructures. The following resources support different aspects of shaping internal capacity by offering iterative and reflective practices and tools, including approaches to pruning library efforts, introducing a leader to their team, sharing decision-making, and managing culture change.

Adopting a Critical Approach Towards Building Responsive Infrastructures

[Creating Space for What Matters: Organizational Pruning](#)

A three-phase DIY approach to review existing library efforts

Organizational pruning is the intentional process for assessing current efforts to determine which ones should be set down, scaled back, or modified in order to advance healthy organizational growth. It is a strategic practice—not an act of indiscriminate cutting. The Center for Leadership and Organizational Change (CLOC) at the University of Maryland created this do-it-yourself (DIY) approach, which can be adapted for use by libraries. The process consists of three phases—Appreciate and Catalog, Pruning, and Discuss and Decide—and includes both individual and group activities. We recommend beginning by reading

the document “Organizational Pruning: What, Why, Who, How” to understand the process, followed by working through the phases outlined in “CLOC’s Organizational Pruning Process.”

Building a Collaborative and Transparent Leadership Practices

[Introducing Your Leadership to your Team](#)

A reflective exercise – “Who I am as a Leader”

CLOC’s “Who I Am as a Leader” process allows a library leader to give their team and colleagues a sense of who they are, how they work, and what their vision is. When staff understand their leader, they can bring their best efforts to help the library achieve its vision, mission, and goals more effectively. This process involves two steps. First, the leader reflects individually—using prompts about the moments that shaped them, their inner compass, their current state of leadership, and what they hope to build with the team. Then, based on these reflections, the leader crafts a slide presentation, a less formal talk, or another appropriate format to share with staff about who they are, their vision, and their work style.

[Using a Consensus Continuum for Shared Decision Making](#)

A structured tool for consensus building

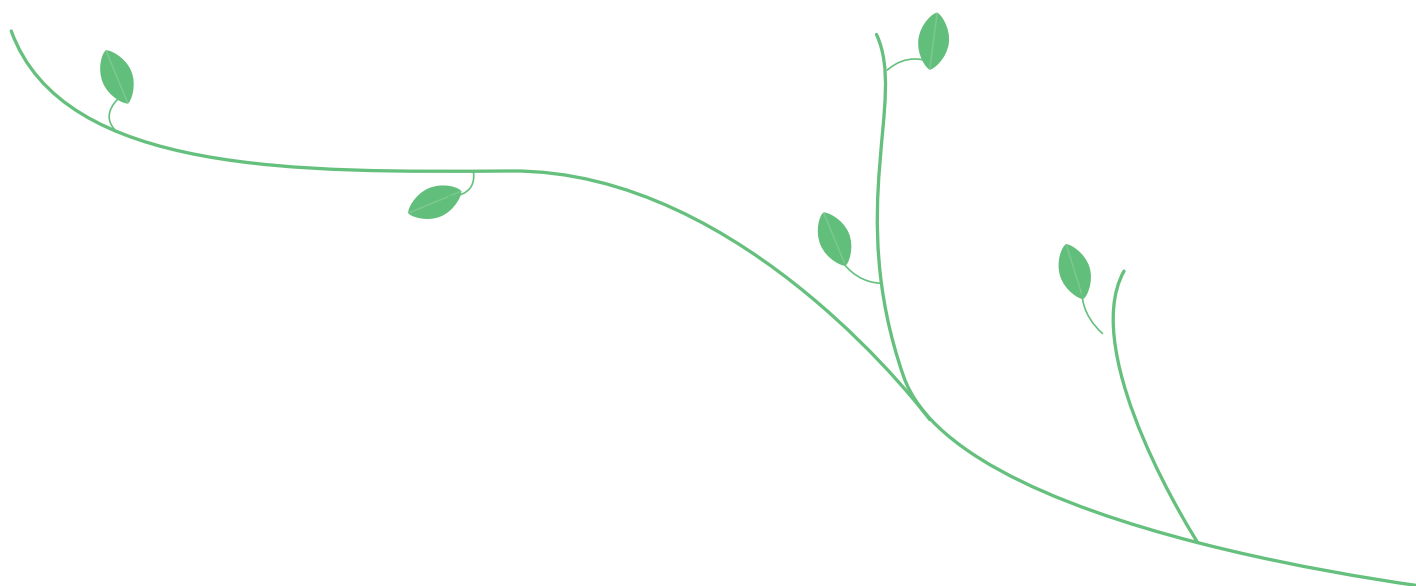
Each of the culture practices described in this essential task encourages shared and timely decision-making during crises. This consensus continuum tool, developed by CLOC, allows library staff and leaders to indicate their level of support for a decision using a scale from 1 to 5 (1 – stop; 2 – hold; 3 – stand aside; 4 – agree with reservations; and 5 – endorse). It also provides guidance on when to engage in further conversation, when to adjust or reconsider a decision, and when a decision has been affirmed.

Changing to a Thriving Library Culture

[Reviewing Current Library Culture before Changing It](#)

A five-step approach for managing culture change

Barsade (2014) of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania outlined a five-step approach that emphasizes the importance of reviewing an organization's current culture before attempting to change it. The five steps are: (1) Quantitatively measure your current cultural values; (2) Intentionally align culture, strategy, and structure; (3) Ensure staff and stakeholder participation; (4) Communicate and demonstrate the change—again, and again, and again, and then ... again; and (5) Manage the emotional response of both the person leading the change and the employees experiencing it.



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