



WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Recommendations for Strengthening Community Engagement in Wisconsin's Public Libraries

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This **Recommendations for Strengthening Community Engagement in Wisconsin's Public Libraries Report** was prepared by:



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The following recommendations from Russell Consulting, Inc. (RCI) are based upon the results from the online survey of public library directors, three focus groups, and six interviews all conducted between May and July 2018. These recommendations are offered as a starting place that both the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and Public Library Systems can use to begin building their strategies for strengthening, supporting, and sustaining public library community engagement activities.

Department of Public Instruction

Recommendations for what DPI can do to be a catalyst and support public libraries in their community engagement efforts include:

1. Describe the primary role for DPI – (1) online clearinghouse and portal for community engagement information and success stories and (2) convener of library directors, staff, and trustees around community engagement ideas and strategies.
2. Provide a template to public libraries that enables capturing community engagement success stories – which will be uploaded to the portal for sharing with the library community and at DPI statewide/regional conferences/events.
3. Convene conferences/events regionally and statewide where library directors, staffers, and trustees can share effective practices. These conferences/events should be facilitated by DPI but focused on peer-to-peer sharing among library peers.
4. Define the desired temperament and set of core competencies that should be selected for and developed among the library staff to enable successful community engagement activities – and integrate these competencies into model job descriptions (see recommendation #9) and suggested hiring strategies to ensure that the library director and staff have the right abilities and skills to accomplish the engagement initiative. The temperament and skills might include:
 - a. **Temperament:** such characteristics as risk taker, being courageous, love of learning, humble, empathic, strategic thinker, emotional intelligence, openness to new ideas/change, etc.
 - b. **Skills/Knowledge:** such as communication skills, working with people who are different from you, cultural competence, advocacy, program evaluation/assessment, problem solver, leveraging the talents of others, leading vs. managing, developing/supporting others, etc.
5. Provide training/workshops for library directors and staffers to strengthen/build the above competencies (recommendation #4) and enable success in critical aspects of the library's community engagement initiative:
 - a. Selling Community Engagement to Your Staff and Trustees

- b. Selling Community Engagement to and Building Strong Relationships with Local Elected Officials
 - c. Hiring the Right Staff – Finding Candidates with the Right Temperament and Skills to Enable Community Engagement and Library Success
 - d. Where and How to Begin Your Community Engagement Initiative
 - e. Facilitating Community Conversations – Especially on Challenging or Charged Topics/issues
 - f. Creating and Building Sustainable Community Partnerships
 - g. Measuring the Success of Your Community Engagement Activities
 - h. Diffusing Difficult Conversations with Community Members Who Disagree with the Library's Involvement in Community Engagement Activities
 - i. Locating and Leveraging Demographic Information about Your Community
6. Establish a statewide *Community Engagement Advisory Committee* to help develop, shape, and evaluate DPI's community engagement activities. The *Advisory Committee* (reporting to the Public Library Development Team) would be comprised of public library directors and DPI/library system support professionals.
 7. Hire a DPI staff member dedicated to supporting libraries and library systems with their community engagement events and strategies. This person would: be an advocate for community engagement at the state level; coordinate the online clearinghouse and portal, gather community engagement success stories; provide consulting assistance to libraries and library systems; work with the *Statewide Community Engagement Advisory Committee* as it develops, shapes, and evaluates DPI's community engagement activities; work with WLA, WAPL, SRLAW, and other public library groups/associations to help leverage efforts and create synergy around community engagement; and, working with library systems and other staff at DPI, take the lead in convening and coordinating statewide and regional conferences focused on community engagement.
 8. Send the DPI community engagement specialist (see recommendation #7) to receive training from leaders in the community engagement field (e.g., Harwood, Aspen Institute, etc.) and have the specialist identify successful community engagement practices used by other states.
 9. Lead the effort in redesigning job descriptions for public library directors and staffers by developing and supplying updated templates that include a community engagement component.
 10. Update the orientation program for new library directors to include an expanded discussion of community engagement – what it is, why it's important, what it looks like (with examples), and provide resources for how to learn more about it.
 11. Create a statewide workgroup/task force to develop possible success measures that enable libraries and the State of Wisconsin to gauge the effectiveness of community engagement initiatives. Once these possible success measures are identified and shared with the Wisconsin library community, DPI should finalize and

settle upon a suite of measures and include these in its reporting requirements of public libraries.

12. Provide ongoing clarity about where and how community engagement fits into various public library initiatives that are encouraged and supported by DPI (e.g., Wisconsin Libraries Transform).
13. Develop a financial support program, perhaps financed by LSTA funds, to enable library trustees to attend and participate in public library staff conferences such as WLA's and WAPL's annual conferences. Such a development initiative for trustees enhances their understanding of their role in community engagement, connects them with other trustees involved in community engagement activities, and elevates the role/status of trustees in building a stronger community image for the library.
14. Create an online *Community Engagement Toolkit* that includes a comprehensive and integrated suite of tools to assist any library in getting started with their community engagement initiatives. The Toolkit should be an online resource (vs. a more traditional paper or digital document) to enable quick and potentially frequent updates. The toolkit might include the following:
 - a. A definition of public library community engagement and why it matters.
 - b. A statement concerning the roles that the director, staffers, and trustees should play in fulfilling the library's community engagement initiatives.
 - c. Example community engagement success stories and links to other success stories and who to contact for more information. The success stories should include a diversity of examples that demonstrate that community engagement is scalable to the needs of the community and the capacity of the library. The examples should also include one-person/small library success stories as well as larger-scale stories that might seem more doable for larger libraries.
 - d. Example job descriptions for the director, leadership/managerial positions, supervisors, frontline staff, and trustees – all of which include community engagement responsibilities.
 - e. Example success measures and tips for how each library might develop its own success measures which it can use to report to key stakeholders (e.g., staff, trustees, municipal/village/town/county governing bodies, DPI, and the broader community).
 - f. Develop a checklist of key questions that libraries can use to help identify and select engagement initiatives that would be the best fit for the library and the community. The checklist might include such items as:
 - *What are the desired outcomes of the engagement initiative?*
 - *How does the engagement opportunity advance the impact of the library in the community?*
 - *How will success of the engagement initiative be measured?*

- *Is the initiative a one-time event (e.g., a panel discussion on teen suicides, or a community-wide book read), or is it part of a longer-term community awareness raising and action-oriented activity?*
 - *Who are the potential community partners for this initiative and what track record/history do these potential partners have in the community?*
 - *What's in it for potential partners? Why should they want to be part of this engagement initiative?*
 - *What are the likely public library staff resource/time commitments of the initiative? Are these resource/time commitments sustainable while tending to the library's daily operational needs? And, if trade-offs between operational requirements and community engagement activities need to be made, are these justifiable to local elected officials?*
 - *Is the library able to fully support the initiative in concert with its community partners?*
 - *Who among the library staff (including the director) would bring the right passion, skills, and experience to this engagement initiative to enable its success?*
 - *What are the potential "pot-holes" or "mine-fields" that could be uncovered when pursuing this engagement initiative – and do these outweigh the potential gains for the library or the community? In other words, are there potential risks to the library's political capital or image in the community – and can these be offset by larger benefits to the community and the library?*
- g. Community engagement orientation/information packets that library directors can use with library staff and with library trustees (the orientation packets might be slightly different given the different roles that staff and trustees are likely to play in community engagement activities).
- h. A tip sheet for how to talk to your local elected officials that includes suggested strategies for getting to know their needs/interests, inviting them to library events, enhancing their visibility through the library's engagement activities, etc.
- i. Model "memorandums of understanding" (MOUs) and partnering agreements to provide guidance to libraries in how to forge effective working partnerships with other groups in the community (e.g., other municipal departments, schools, non-profits, charitable associations/groups, etc.). The model MOUs/agreements should address areas such as decision-making authority, event coordination, areas of responsibility, communication and marketing, volunteer management, cost accounting, and performance follow-through and accountability.
- j. Press release templates that libraries can use as a framework for promoting community engagement events.

15. Create an online *Community Engagement Forum* where library directors and staffers can share ideas, post questions, offer resources, suggest solutions, etc. regarding community engagement initiatives. This *Forum* could serve as a self-managing opportunity for public library professionals to provide peer-based information sharing around community engagement.
16. Explore incentives to encourage innovative community engagement activities. These incentives might include such things as:
 - a. A collaborative DPI/WAPL/WLA award presented annually to libraries of different sizes/geographic areas whose community engagement initiative had a significant impact on their community.
 - b. Seed money grants to libraries of different sizes/geographic areas to help them take on a community engagement project that might be unaffordable otherwise.

Public Library Systems

Recommendations for what public library systems can do to support public libraries in their community engagement efforts include:

1. Describe the primary role for library systems – (1) provide consulting support for libraries to enable them to be successful with their community engagement efforts; (2) in concert with DPI, convene meetings of library directors, staff, and trustees around community engagement ideas and strategies; (3) assist libraries with marketing/promoting community engagement activities to the community and elected officials; and (4) help coordinate regional community engagement activities where multiple libraries may wish to coordinate their engagement efforts.
2. Encourage member libraries to include community engagement as a key strategy for sustaining the library's relevance when developing their strategic plans.
3. Designate a system staff member as the community engagement specialist or consultant and provide her/him the training and support to develop expertise such that the consultant can, in turn, help member libraries to be successful at their community engagement activities.
4. In concert with DPI, convene regional conferences/events where library directors, staffers, and trustees can share effective practices. These regional conferences/events should be facilitated by system staff but focused on peer-to-peer sharing among library peers.
5. Consider establishing and coordinating a staff exchange program that enables library staffers from one library to work with, assist, learn from the staffers from another library in the area of community engagement. [This could also be done at the statewide level – but likely with greater difficulty.]
6. Create regional pools of library staffers who would be willing to provide back-up support to other libraries to enable their staff members to participate in conferences, workshops, regional meetings, and community engagement initiatives. With professional backup staff support available, especially to smaller libraries, libraries can maintain their core services while taking advantage of learning, development, and community engagement opportunities.