How U.S. Public Libraries are Bridging Social Divides

Landscape Analysis
May 2023

IREX

Table of Contents

IREX

Executive Summary

The U.S. is reaching a crisis point where rising levels of division, distrust, social isolation, and segregation make it difficult to relate to others who are different from us. This is a threat to our democracy. To heal these divides, we as a nation need to strengthen social capital and civic infrastructure. Increasingly, bridgebuilding (or bridging) is proposed as part of the solution because of its ability to strengthen civic life and a sense of mutuality.

Public libraries have incredible potential to amplify the impact of bridging movements across the U.S. Public libraries have low barriers to entry and offer services and resources that enable them to welcome a diversity of people each week. Additionally, through a variety of programs and activities, individuals can connect with others through shared experiences.

Through our conversations with public libraries, library associations, and bridging organizations, we found that the work public libraries do can be categorized into four types of activities that spur and strengthen social capital and civic infrastructure. These four types are: facilitating access to information, resources, and experiences; meeting essential community needs; civic engagement; and bridging activities.

However, public libraries face several challenges in implementing these activities, including rising threats to intellectual freedom, insufficient funding and resources, and a lack of widely-known systematic methods for both conducting bridging activities and for measuring their effects.

IREX

Executive Summary, continued

In addition to defining next steps for IREX in this project, we propose the following practical recommendations for different stakeholders.

For public libraries and library associations:
* Consider forming a community of practice, complete with training opportunities and toolkits, around building social capital, strengthening civic infrastructure, and bridging

For public libraries:
* Consider more regularly employing community needs assessments to fine-tune civic activities
* Implement a change process that maps out the different stages of bridging activities - from assessment to design to implementation to evaluation - that contribute to broader community change

For donors:
* Fund a national trust for social capital and civic infrastructure; provide support to public libraries for basic operations and programs/activities that public libraries determine will meet community needs; facilitate connections for public libraries to expand their work into bridging
* Get donors in the conversation with More Perfect and partners about learning, needs, solutions, and how to scale
* Convene members of the bridging community with public libraries for a series of mutual learning opportunities
* Invest in library support organizations to scale and support coordination across public libraries.
* Invest in additional supports to mitigate and reduce potential harm to public libraries and librarians, supporting and amplifying the work that public libraries and associations are doing, including psychosocial care, security guidance, and advocacy for stronger policy in support of public libraries' autonomy to pursue their missions,

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Program Summary

The Library Bridge Building program aims to enhance the bridging capabilities of public libraries in the U.S. to combat rising levels of distrust and division.

IREX and its expert partner spoke with diverse public libraries, library associations, and bridging organizations and analyzed existing bridgebuilding initiatives, tools, models, approaches, and programs; analyzed challenges and gaps in resources that public libraries need to implement these activities; and identified library needs in terms of effective tools to measure impact.

This landscape analysis will inform the next phase of our work: developing a resource hub in collaboration with WebJunction to support public libraries and library stakeholders with implementing bridging activities in their own communities.

IREX

Project Activities and Milestones

Activity	Timing
1. Analyze the landscape of bridging activities in public libraries	Month 5-6
2. Create a hub of resources for public libraries to use	Month 7-8
3. Take stock of available metrics; propose common metrics	Month 7-8
4. Conduct outreach to share hub and findings	Month 8-9

IREX

Approach - Landscape Analysis (Activity 1)

- A comprehensive review of library bridging activities is unrealistic
  - The U.S. has approximately 117,000 libraries of all types and 17,000 public libraries*
  - The system is decentralized, with wide variation in how public library systems are organized
- Our approach to mapping the landscape
  - Top→down – outreach to library associations and bridging organizations that had insight into different aspects of the landscape
  - Bottom→up – outreach to individual public libraries** recommended by associations, bridging organizations, and other public libraries as doing exemplary work in their communities
    - We attempted to reach a diversity of public library perspectives in terms of region, size, resources, etc.

*https://www.ala.org/ala/alalibrary/libraryfactsheet/alalibraryfactsheet1.htm
**For practical considerations, the IREX team limited our interviews and analysis to public libraries, however, many aspects of this analysis are true to some of all types of libraries.

IREX

Primary Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews from late 2022 to early 2023 from library associations, bridging organizations, and 20 public libraries. Interviewees demonstrate a range of exemplary work but are not necessarily representative of all public libraries.

Library Associations
1. American Library Association (ALA)
2. The Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL)
3. Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA)
4. Public Library Association (PLA)
5. Urban Libraries Council (ULC)

Bridging Organizations
1. Bridge Alliance
2. Essential Partners
3. Interactivity Foundation
4. Living Room Conversations
5. National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD)
6. The Village Square

Individual Public Libraries*
1. Cobb County Public Library, *Atlanta, GA*
2. Columbus-Lowndes Public Library, *Columbus, MS*
3. Conneaut Public Library, *Conneaut, OH*
4. Dakota County Library, *Eagan, MN*
5. Dallas Public Library, *Dallas, TX*
6. Daniel Boone Regional Library, *Columbus, MO*
7. Estes Park Public Library, *Estes Park, CO*
8. The Ferguson Library, *Stamford, CT*
9. Johnson County Library, *Shawnee, KS*
10. Kansas City Public Library, *Kansas City, MO*
11. Lexington Public Library, *Lexington, KY*
12. Memphis Public Libraries, *Memphis, TN*
13. Milton Public Library, *Milton, MA*
14. North Liberty Library, *North Liberty, IA*
15. Saint Paul Public Library, *Saint Paul, MN*
16. Salt Lake County Library, *Salt Lake County, UT*
17. Skokie Public Library, *Skokie, IL*
18. Spokane Public Library, *Spokane, WA*
19. Topeka-Shawnee County Public Library, *Topeka, KS*
20. Toronto Public Library, *Toronto, ON*

*Data from 10 of the public libraries came via a case study questionnaire implemented in 2022 by Shamichael Hallman.

IREX

Project Team

Nana Akua Brookman, Program Associate, IREX

Phoebe Bierly, Program Manager, IREX

Shamichael Hallman, 2023 LOEB Fellow, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University; Co-Founder, Libraries as Bridges; Former Senior Manager, Memphis Public Libraries

Nada Mohamed-Aly, Program Officer, IREX

Tara Susman-Peña, Senior Technical Expert, IREX

Aisha Thompson-Banton, Technical Advisor, IREX

IREX

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. in 2023: A fractured social landscape

America is increasingly divided, with nearly 80% of adults now having few or no friends in a different political party.* Our trust in government, other institutions, and each other is decreasing.** Social inequality is not new, but the resurgence of social movements in 2020 brought it back to the surface of American consciousness. That and other factors such as migration and changing demographics have heightened tensions across the American landscape. Few Americans know their neighbors' names, and far fewer report interacting with them daily. One third said they've never interacted with their neighbors. This represents a significant decline from just a few decades ago.***

Today's information environment is extremely complex; the volume and speed of digital production and circulation has fundamentally changed how our society operates. This has amplified the reach and power of disinformation and manipulation, which in turn exacerbates social divisions and tension.

Our society appears to be reaching a crisis point. With rising political polarization, racial tension, misunderstanding across generations, and many other areas wherein differences of perspective, opinion, or experience create dangerous divides, we seem increasingly unable to relate to or empathize with those different from us.

*https://www.npr.org/2020/10/27/928209548/dude-I-m-done-when-politics-tears-families-and-friendships-apart
**https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/the-state-of-personal-trust/
***https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-08-19/why-americans-are-less-likely-to-interact-with-their-neighbors-than-ever-before

IREX

The U.S. in 2023: A fractured social landscape

"Everybody is aware that we are very divided, that there is a lot of distrust and polarization. One thing I've noticed is even the people who I see as very, very extreme and polarizing figures will point to the problem that we are very polarized. I think a lot of us are in this space like, Okay. So... what do we do about it?. . . A lot of different groups and projects are starting to emerge and we're trying to learn from each other, and we're asking, 'Do you have the right answer? What are you doing over there?...' We're all kind of in that space." **Spokane Public Library.**

IREX

American democracy needs systems-level solutions

The opportunity to address these social divisions and ultimately, strengthen American democracy, calls for solutions that address the roots of the problems. Increased levels of social capital and a stronger civic infrastructure must be integral to any such solutions.

Social capital describes relationships between individuals that facilitate the kind of social trust that strengthens communities.*

Civic infrastructure is a "system of organizations and relationships — with the explicit goal of maximizing public participation and agency in service of better public problem-solving."**
Civic infrastructure consists of physical spaces; organizations; networks; civic attitudes; and types of knowledge, policies, and behaviors that enable a culture of civic action and interaction.

*"Social capital". https://www.brookings.edu/research/social-capital-why-we-need-it-and-how-we-can-create-more-of-it
**21st Century Civic Infrastructure: Under construction, Aspen Institute, 2015. https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/21st-Century-Report-FINAL-NoBlanks.pdf

IREX

How to strengthen social capital and civic infrastructure? Bridging is one solution

In this context, there is an increasing need for people to be together and to understand each other. We need to create more opportunities to inspire "a culture of commitment to American constitutional democracy and to one another."*

Increasingly, bridging (also called bridgebuilding) initiatives are proposed as part of an answer to strengthen civic life and a sense of mutuality. Bridging is one aspect of the broader, underpinning web of civic infrastructure.

Bridging can be defined as *engaging across difference in ways that respect identities, foster mutual relationships, seek a common good, and promote a commitment to civic engagement, thereby contributing to increased social capital and strengthened civic infrastructure, and ultimately, a stronger democracy.*
- Adapted from Interfaith America, Bridgebuilding in Higher Education Draft Report

*Our Common Purpose: https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report

IREX

How public libraries build social capital and civic infrastructure

Public libraries provide continual opportunities for people to gather in a unique manner that creates social capital and a strong civic infrastructure.

In addition to a rich tradition of providing open access to knowledge and information, public libraries continually work to both understand and meet a variety of community needs. Among these needs are: supporting literacy efforts for people of all ages (including information literacy, digital literacy, civic literacy, etc.); connecting the community to information and resources on housing, food, employment, health; providing opportunities for community engagement and relationship-building; and serving as a convener for and facilitator of civic engagement and civil discourse, where all voices may be heard and respect is displayed for community members' diverse opinions, thoughts, histories, and cultural heritage.

Public libraries across the country often collaborate with other local partners (e.g., local elections boards, businesses, schools, arts organizations, and others). These collaborations are critical to building community trust; extending the reach of both the local partners and of public libraries; and bringing in more community members from different perspectives.

In meeting community needs and through their collaborations, public libraries continually facilitate relationships across individuals and groups in their communities.

For more information, see: https://www.ala.org/tools/librariestransform/libraries-transforming-communities/about-ltc, and
https://www.urbanlibraries.org/initiatives/democracy/declaration-of-democracy

IREX

Public libraries' potential to contribute to bridging

Public libraries are among the most trusted institutions in the U.S.* They have a low barrier to entry, and accommodate a wide range of ages, interests and abilities; they provide vital social infrastructure:** a physical space where people from all walks of life can just *be*… together.

Public libraries provide a common ground for people who would not likely otherwise share space to enjoy shared experiences and participate in public life.

Our analysis found that **public libraries are already creating the conditions for bridging opportunities and are well positioned to increase their contributions to their communities.**

They are laying the foundations for bridging through the collections and resources they make available, their engagement with the public, the programs they offer, the opportunities they create for people from different backgrounds to interact with each other, and the multiple collaborations they participate in throughout their communities. Some individual public libraries are already piloting structured bridging initiatives.

Note: not all public libraries consider bridging to be a current part of their work, or even know what bridging is.

*https://www.imls.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/swi-report.pdf
**Per Eric Klinenberg, social infrastructure is "the physical conditions that determine whether social capital develops," in other words, the degree to which a space fosters human connection and relationships. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/14/books/review/palaces-for-the-people-eric-klinenberg.html

IREX

Public libraries offer unique spaces in American life

Public libraries serve a critical role in the current polarized U.S. environment by building a sense of community that fosters natural mixing across socioeconomic, racial, political, and other groups. They bring people of all backgrounds into public life as stewards and advocates, to shape their community's future. These spaces allow everyone in the community to practice positive civic norms and construct traditions that support democracy and social cohesion.

Public libraries are currently undergoing a new level of threat against intellectual freedom, which appears to be galvanizing their motivation to contribute even more to the social and civic wellbeing of their communities. Public libraries have always served as a place for people to come together. In the wake of recent social justice movements like Black Lives Matter, they more consistently articulate goals to act as a welcoming, convening civic space in their strategic plans as well as in specific activities.

IREX

Typology of Activities

These public library activities* contribute to building social capital and strengthening civic infrastructure, and may have either an implicit or explicit focus on bridging. It's important to note that these activities are not confined to programming alone. For instance, creating a book display that highlights a theme (e.g. climate change) isn't a program per se, but is an essential contribution to patrons' learning and experience that plays a vital role for public libraries.

It may be useful for public libraries, when they engage in Type A and Type B activities, to consider openly communicating about how those types of activities build social capital and civic infrastructure.

- Type A: Facilitating access to information, resources, and experiences (book loans, internet access, author talks, art exhibits, story time, etc.)
- Type B: Meeting essential community needs (providing a food bank, supporting job searches, supporting unhoused people, providing free cell phones to youth, etc.)
- Type C: Civic engagement (showcasing understand the constitution displays, facilitating meet your representative events, hosting voter registration, etc.)
- Type D: Bridging activities facilitated by bridging organizations or by public libraries (helping to create understanding across different identity groups by facilitating difficult conversations, implementing a "Human Library,"** offering a concert or event designed to attract a wide variety of people, etc.)

*Not all public libraries engage in all types of activities
**https://humanlibrary.org/

IREX

Type A: Facilitating access to information, resources, and experiences

- Activities that connect people to and help them stay engaged with information in many forms, other people, and classes
- Bringing people together to do something fun (e.g. learn a new hobby, skill, etc.)
  - This can begin to build the social cohesion needed to tackle more difficult conversations
- Examples of activities include:

"Showing people how to navigate a computer, how to send email, basic 'what you should look out for'…Teen anime and manga clubs – they meet at 5:00. Very popular." **Columbus-Lowndes Public Library**

"The Social Justice Book Club started in 2019 after a library patron wanted to talk about topics from books that she was reading. The book club brings people together in a safe, non-judgmental setting to have conversations about books in the library's collection." **Cobb County Public Library**

IREX

Type B: Meeting Essential Community Needs

- Public libraries are more than just a place to borrow books. They have always provided access to information and increased social connection. Public libraries (even more so post COVID-19) play a critical role in addressing other essential community needs such as food insecurity, unemployment and housing needs, and social services.
- Through modeling care for community members, these activities lay the foundation for the positive civic attitudes and behaviors that are components of civic infrastructure. It also helps to meet foundational needs so that community members may eventually be able to engage in other types of public library activities, including civic engagement and bridging.

"We play roles of social workers, therapists at times. In the small branches, we work with people who were recently incarcerated, and are still processing the trauma that got them into the system." **Columbus-Lowndes Public Library**

"In my community, there's a food pantry because we're a large small community . . . but I also have a what we call a blessing box, and we fill that with food. And the community is eating and getting toiletries out of the blessing box every day because the library is supplying it." **Conneaut Public Library**

"One of the other things that we do have, and we have a social worker student who is an intern, trying to meet needs of some of our unhoused population that comes into our library, we are a Warming and Cooling Center, so we were seeing increases in numbers of our unhoused patrons come in. That social worker has been very helpful in making connections with people." ***Daniel Boone Regional Library***

IREX

Type C: Civic Engagement

- Public libraries help to enhance civic capacity through building:
  - **Civic knowledge** (meet your representative, understand a ballot initiative, how to address misinformation, etc.); **Skokie Public Library's Civic Lab**
  - **Civic attitudes** (cultivating understanding of "the other," etc.); **Memphis Public Library's Civic Saturday**
  - **Civic behaviors** (voter registration, etc.); **Salt Lake Country Library's Let's Be Neighbors**

"I did an event with a former Iranian refugee who came here to tell his story and weave it into what's going on there now and the protests. A couple came to that, and they really liked it, so they were keeping an eye on the other events I was doing. Then they showed up to the John Stuart Mill event and we talked about different issues, like what is liberty? What are our expectations of living in a free society? One of the biggest themes is issues around free speech. You just lead a discussion and see where it goes. It was really fun." **Spokane Public Library**

IREX

Type D: Bridging Activities

- Public libraries facilitate difficult discussions across social divisions, engage in deliberation, and create a safe space for people to come together and share ideas and try to heal divisions. The terms bridging or bridgebuilding are employed inconsistently.

- Example: activities facilitated by bridging organizations

"We now run a couple of trainings for The Carnegie Library through their grant program. We were trying to transform some of their public speaker series into dialogues and conversation formats that wouldn't blow up into an argument." **Essential Partners**

IREX

Type D: Bridging Activities, continued

- Example: activities facilitated by public libraries

"I had at least 12 people show up for a National Issues Forum Guide Workshop on Safety and Justice that's about racial tension. We had corrections officers, a community advocate for a racial justice group, an on-the-clock police officer with a firearm and a radio, and a current employee of a racial justice kind of nonprofit. There was an older woman from my book club who had a mixed-race granddaughter who she was worried about. And they were all in the same room. And it was really hard. And no one truly changed their mind, and no one agreed....At the end, we did a reflection – we deliberated but didn't reach common ground. This is where I'm crying now. And I cried that day too. Because when you read the newspaper tomorrow and there's a headline, you're gonna think about that person's story and that person's heart and this person's grandchild and this person at work. Man, this work is hard; sometimes we don't have common ground yet, but we can just kind of consider. That was my biggest success and biggest failure." **Topeka-Shawnee County Public Library**

IREX

CHALLENGES

Challenges: National Level

- Threats to intellectual freedom are impacting public libraries and public library workers
    - Book banning and attempts to influence how books are shelved and displayed are increasing tension and fear
    - Threats of physical violence are having a chilling effect on free speech and access to a broad range of information in public libraries
    - Misinformation has increased societal rifts as well as influenced some people's misperceptions of public libraries

"I had a patron come in last week, said she'd stopped using a library 30 minutes away because they just recently added a bunch of LGBTQ stuff to the collection – she didn't want certain books in certain area. Some misinformation on her end. She kept saying that they had explicit, pornographic books in the children's section. I have a hard time believing that was in there. I told her that we wouldn't put something graphic as that in the children's section. But teens, adults, we believe that people should have access to information that they need to know about. That seemed to appease her." **Columbus-Lowndes Public Library**

"My very first event was on intellectual freedom. We're in eastern Washington, very close to Idaho… it's a pretty wild place! In one of their library systems, there are a lot of book banning attempts. A lot spreads through social media. People share tactics for getting material out of libraries. Really intense in one library system, I was watching videos of library board meetings. The director resigned because the intimidation was so intense." **Spokane Public Library**

IREX

Challenges: National Level

- The pandemic
  - Dampened in-person attendance… even post-pandemic attendance has been lower (habits changed; some people became more reluctant to attend in-person events, while digital and virtual use increased)
  - Exacerbated basic needs in communities – public libraries stepped up to provide basic services (hosting food pantries; giving out masks, COVID tests, etc.)

"The League of Women Voters was coming every month to do a topic series. I started doing more on civic activities. They were doing an excellent selection of topics, presentation, but we were working on how to capture the ideas better, better present it on the website. The pandemic was very disruptive to the progress… we moved the event online, recorded it, and we posted it online, both on our website, and on YouTube, to extend the reach.

"The library also conducts public deliberations with the Kettering Foundation where community members are invited to participate in discussions on issues such as poverty, race and policing, and mental health….The pandemic has disrupted some of these programs, moving some online and reducing the number of participants." **Topeka-Shawnee County Public Library**

IREX

Challenges: Language/Definitions

- Difficulties in identifying a common language for related activities
  - "Bridging" or "bridgebuilding" as a community activity is not always understood or known by public libraries

"I will admit, bridgebuilding was one word that I stumbled across, because I was thinking about physical infrastructure, and I was like, are we talking about actual bridgebuilding? For a hot minute, I was like wait, is this like we need to build bridges and we're going to do community forums in the library, anyway." **Chief Officers of State Library Agencies**

  - Public libraries categorize the work in different ways (they call it meeting needs, civic engagement, civic discourse, information literacy, etc.)

IREX

Challenges: Language/Definitions

- Language and communication around these types of activities are important to employ carefully to try to be truly inclusive
  - For example, "bridging," "dialogue," "intersectionality," and other terms are often perceived by community members as speaking only to liberals
  - How to describe programs so they appear truly inclusive is a challenge – librarians want to provide information, not opinions, but are sometimes uncertain as to how to do this with controversial topics

"The first year we were calling it 'fake news' and we dropped that after going to a conference … and started concentrating more on the idea of information literacy and media literacy. This fall, I completely dropped media literacy from the title. Because we were running into some pushback just by using the word 'media.' But I think that's where I'd like to go, focusing more on digital wellness and literacy." **Daniel Boone Regional Library**

IREX

Challenges: Understanding Community Needs

- Lack of widely known systematic methods (e.g., assessments) to identify community needs
  - Means that public libraries often identify needs in the community through word of mouth and anecdotal stories
  - Results in public libraries sometimes identifying needs by observing how national trends play out in their communities
  - Impedes precise definitions of the problems public libraries are trying to address
  - Increases the risk that public library priorities don't always match community priorities
- Goals for civic initiatives are not always clearly defined, for example:
  - Is it about creating opportunities for engagement?
  - Building trust?
  - Encouraging relationships?
  - Creating consensus?
- The process to reach these goals is difficult...

IREX

Challenges: Activity Implementation

- Inadequate funding and staffing prevents the ability to broadly and consistently implement bridging activities (a broader systems-level problem)
- There is a need for more systematic (yet flexible) planning
- Some public libraries partner with bridging organizations, others employ experimental approaches (i.e., try something, see how it goes, adapt and try again…) to programming. Some of these experiments become part of the public library's regular programming (e.g., Civic Lab at Skokie Public Library).
- Planning is fraught and less experimental for explicit bridgebuilding activities or activities that might be seen as controversial
  - There is much less experience in how to conduct activities that touch on "*scary topics*"
  - Concern about striking the right tone, which requires a lot of planning
  - The stakes are high: the concern to not harm participants or the public library's reputation increases planning time and effort
  - Outreach / responsiveness from diverse groups is a challenge. It can be hard to get people from all perspectives in the door, and public libraries want to ensure a safe space and not be seen as taking one political side
  - Getting community support and partnership from civic leaders/leaders is sometimes challenging (e.g., only one political party will participate in an event)

Challenges: Activity Inputs

- Insufficient resources
  - Decentralization of the public library system and a proliferation of associations means that not all librarians know where to go or go to the same places for information about bridging or other civic activities
  - There is limited knowledge and access to models, tools, and partnership opportunities (e.g., with a bridgebuilding organization) to conduct bridging activities. Some public libraries have them, know how to find them, or have resources to partner with national organizations. Others aren't sure where to start.
  - Lack of funding and staffing impedes public libraries' ability to join associations, pursue professional development opportunities in and outside of the library profession, and fully participate in continuing education and networking, which would ready them to lead (more) bridging initiatives.

"Collectively as a profession, librarians are finding information, that's what they do, and because of that, there is no single repository...so it is kind of all over. The American Library Association has a tremendous amount of information out there...I think the downside is that the ALA is a large entity, and their website is labyrinthine.... The state library agencies provide resources and get them out, every one of their websites is different, but there's toolkits and stuff on all of them. And the state library associations as well, all of them have pages on their website where they're pushing stuff out.... So, there's no one spot." **Chief Officers of State Library Agencies**

IREX

Challenges: Activity Inputs

- Lack of opportunities for training and facilitation skill-building to better learn how to:
  - Convene disparate groups
  - Moderate difficult conversations
  - Get support in librarians' roles as trust-builders
  - Best measure "success" (number of attendees, level of engagement, whether the activity was a pathway to other public library services/resources, etc.)
- Insufficient staffing and time limit prioritization of civic activities
- Budgets are always limited

"We ensure great care in putting together and planning programs. The goal of the library is to provide a judgment-free space, where people can enter "as they are" and learn about topics and dialogue with others…. Even conversations about voting and getting involved in the community can be discussed in a non-opinionated perspective so that anyone can participate" **Salt Lake County Library**

IREX

Challenges: Risks to individuals and institutions

- Bridging/controversial programs may affect the wellbeing of public library staff
  - Some activities have the potential to impact the librarians' mental health, sense of security, and physical safety
- In today's polarized landscape, there is reputational and funding risk for public libraries when they take on controversial topics or difficult conversations

IREX

Challenges: Understanding & Assessing Impact

- There have been some assessments and evaluations of bridging activities, but they are rare and not systematic, and they can be expensive (examples include the ALA Libraries Transforming Communities evaluation, and the Civic Commons survey* done at Memphis Public Library)
- Without measuring local needs as a baseline from which to design a program, and without having concrete goals, it's difficult to track progress or measure a program's impact
  - Creating space and time for librarians, who are already doing so much in their community, is a challenge. Some public library systems have community engagement teams who are doing this work, but that requires additional financial resources.
  - Ensuring that funding addresses the needs identified in evidence-based strategic plans requires the resources to design, conduct, and analyze assessments
- Thus, it's hard to broadly determine the key impacts of civic strengthening and bridging initiatives

*https://civiccommons.us/2019/01/measure-matters-diy-toolkit/

IREX

Challenges: Understanding & Assessing Impact

- Measuring impact of bridging activities is perceived by most interviewees as difficult and generally beyond public libraries' current resources and capabilities
- Current measures: Quantitative
  - Institutional focus on counting participants skews perceptions of impact
    - Small groups may be critical to create and maintain a dynamic of safety and trust, but is also potentially perceived as lesser
    - Minimal resources are available to understand other types of impact
- Current measures: Qualitative (implicit – qualitative data are not generally recorded or counted in the same way)
  - Feedback through social media is noted
  - Observational data (recalled but not necessarily collected as data): e.g., librarians observe participants staying to talk to each other; saying "I never thought about it that way," etc.

IREX

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall Recommendation

Considering the potential harms to public libraries and librarians' well-being, should we encourage public libraries to do bridging work? YES!

Public libraries should continue to facilitate bridging activities, and should recognize their contributions to civic infrastructure.

- In various ways, public libraries' work is already building social capital and creating a civic infrastructure, which lays the foundation for bridging. Some public libraries are already conducting bridging activities. Ways to support this include:
    - Be intentional about creating resources that ***build upon*** the current social capital and civic infrastructure programming/structures within public libraries
    - Introduce to public libraries, the idea that all their work is already building social capital and civic infrastructure, and can help support bridging efforts
    - Create a training manual to connect current programming that supports civic infrastructure and social capital to bridging activities
    - Highlight resources about how to do outreach to diverse groups, and how to tailor outreach to specific communities

IREX

Overall Recommendation, continued

Even considering the potential harms to public libraries and librarians' well-being, we encourage public libraries to continue to do bridging work. We recommend supporting public libraries to proactively work to reduce their risk.

- In the current environment, public libraries are subject to threats in response to their collections, display practices, and author events, regardless of whether they implement bridging activities.

- To mitigate and reduce potential harm, donors should consider investing in additional supports for public library staff and library organizations, including psychosocial care and security guidance, and supporting library associations' advocacy for stronger policy in support of public libraries' autonomy to pursue their missions, supporting and amplifying the ongoing work of public libraries and associations

IREX

Recommendations for Public Libraries/Library Associations

- Consider forming a community of practice around building social capital, strengthening civic infrastructure, and bridging. Building on and linking to ALA, PLA and ULC offerings, a community of practice would provide opportunities for:
  - Defining and adopting a change process to help frame and guide the work (suggested process on slides 43-44)
  - Raising awareness of and sharing knowledge, tools, and resources; for example, facilitation guides
  - Developing a shared understanding of challenges/gaps of the current state and better defining a north star and concrete goals
  - Sharing experiences on using neutral language around difficult topics
  - Sharing successes and challenges with experimental approaches
  - Providing peer learning and support
  - Creating a shared language and understanding of building social capital, creating civic infrastructure, and bridging

IREX

Recommendations for Public Libraries/Library Associations

- Create knowledge sharing opportunities for public libraries and bridging associations. There is a lot that the bridging community can learn from public libraries' roles, experiences and programming that strengthen social capital and civic infrastructure.
- Consider updating current community needs assessments to support the public library's potential to build social capital and civic infrastructure. For instance, Memphis Public Libraries, with the help of Reimagining the Civic Commons, now captures data on themes such as the percentage of patrons who make new acquaintances while visiting the public library or participating in a library program.
  - Ensure that information from these community needs assessments are reflected in strategic plans and annual reports.

IREX

Recommendations for Public Libraries: Define a Change Process

We recommend that individual public libraries implement a change process they define together as a community. A change process maps out the changes a program intends to make to contribute to larger system change. In this case, a change process could lay out the different stages of bridging activities - from assessment to design to implementation to evaluation - that contribute to broader community change. This helps create a common understanding across public library teams, identify gaps, facilitate planning, and clearly measure progress.
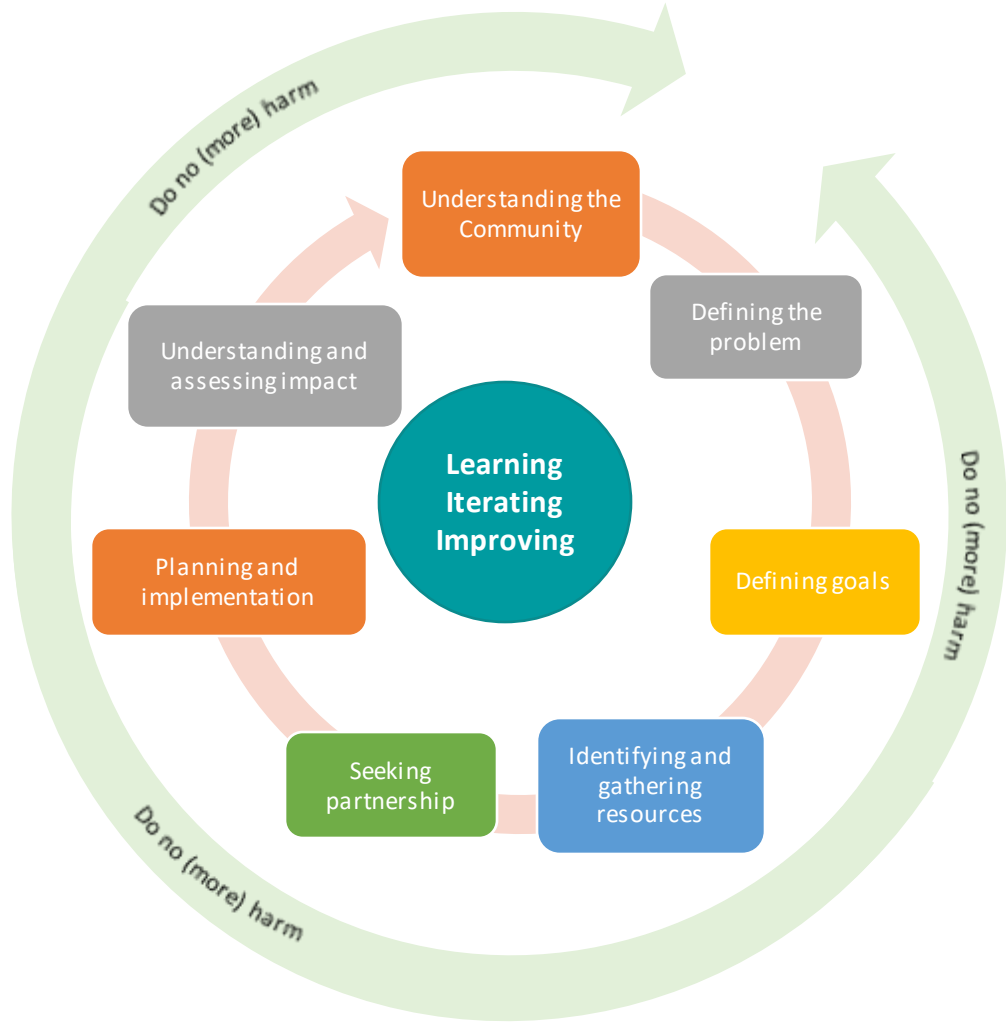
A conversation about how best to institutionalize this process should be part of the co-creation.

Based on our data collection, analysis, and reflection, IREX suggests a change process for public libraries to consider (see next slide). The change process is cyclical, with learning, iterating, and improving embedded throughout.

Public libraries should strive to Do No (More) Harm* throughout this process. IREX's Do No (More) Harm approach means taking proactive steps to mitigate negative unintended consequences to participants, partners, and staff as a result of harm caused by our activities and/or past and current harm related to existing identity-based disparities and structural forms of discrimination.

*https://www.irex.org/insight/irexs-journey-do-no-more-harm-approach

IREX

Suggested Change Process

Recommendations for Donors: Funding Opportunities

- Funding opportunity: a national trust for civic infrastructure (see Our Common Purpose),* for example…
  - More funding for public libraries (e.g., a grant program) to help them engage in a range of types of civic activities
  - Fund a national campaign (like the National Week of Conversation) that could have public libraries test and scale adaptations of programs that work
  - Fund the measurement of civic and bridging initiatives that is embedded into the programming

IREX

Recommendations for Donors: Funding Opportunities

- Funding opportunity: support public libraries' basic operations and programs/activities that public libraries determine will meet their communities' needs
  - Understanding and respecting public libraries' priorities supports their work that builds social capital and civic infrastructure, which in turn creates the conditions for bridging activities to flourish
- Funding opportunity: Resources and connections for public libraries to expand their work into bridging
  - Capacity building for librarians, including how to share resources and activities on controversial topics while remaining neutral*
  - Support the maintenance of a hub for bridging tools and resources
  - Facilitate partnerships by building relationships and offering funding for bridgebuilding organizations to engage with public libraries and adapt their tools to public libraries
  - Support public library communities of practice.
  - Invest in library support organizations to scale and support coordination across public libraries.

*We are aware that there is some controversy around the word "neutral" in the library community and that it is not an acceptable concept to all, but we currently lack a more widely acceptable term. https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2018/06/01/are-libraries-neutral/

IREX

Recommendations for Donors: Funding Opportunities

- Funding opportunity: Measurement for bridging activities that is integrated into programs and initiatives (e.g., Bridging Behavioral Outcomes and Skills Survey (Bridging BOSS))
  - Renew funding to support the sustainability of Project Outcome, a free library evaluation resource from PLA; integrate bridging measurement tools
  - Facilitate partnerships to make measurement processes easier and more consistent.
- Funding opportunity: Support existing emergency resources for public libraries to that help them manage attacks on intellectual freedom, support staff wellbeing. For example:
  - The Merritt Fund for the support, maintenance, medical care, and welfare of librarians
  - The Freedom to Read Foundation defending the first amendment and access to information
  - The ALA office for Intellectual Freedom providing confidential support during censorship challenges
- Funding opportunity: Create an emergency funding pool for additional grants to enhance available resources and respond to additional threats such to help heal community crises of trust, respond to other emergencies, and be able to adapt quickly to provide services and resources for emerging needs and opportunities.

IREX

Recommendations for Donors: Convening/Partnerships

- Partnership/learning opportunity: Include donors in the conversation that More Perfect and other partners are having about learning, needs, solutions, and how to scale
    - Including defining and measuring the change process
    - Could help to validate and test a change process that public libraries can use to design their programs
- Partnership/learning opportunity – convene members of the bridging community with public libraries for a series of mutual learning opportunities so that
    - Public libraries can gain skills, resources, partners, and connections
    - Bridging organizations can observe and learn from how public libraries create a container for different types of people to be together in the same space (which lays the groundwork for bridging)
    - One possible event for this learning opportunity to happen: the Civic Collaboratory at Tufts University, Fall 2023

IREX

"Reflecting on closing down divides, or helping with understanding, I really like the idea that libraries are a place for everyone, and the ideological differences shouldn't matter in terms of what our programming offers and what we try to accomplish here.

"It's getting the people into the room, figuring out how to reach audiences, because it's a leap of faith, not only for the people who are volunteering, but also for people to come do a reading, because you're all being very vulnerable. You're showing: 'I'm completely ignorant about this identity that you identify as.' And so, it takes an act of bravery." **Daniel Boone Regional Library**

IREX

www.IREX.org