

Bridgebuilding Case Study: Johnson County Library



This case study was developed by [IREX](#) as an example of a "bridgebuilding" activity. IREX defines bridgebuilding as engaging across differences 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.

Background/context of the library

“[Johnson County Library](#) provides access to ideas, information, experiences, and materials that support and enrich people’s lives...and creates an environment that enables people to learn, explore, enjoy, create, and connect.”

Throughout their services and offerings, they are committed to these [values](#):

- Customer needs come first.
- People are respected.
- Access to information is ensured.
- This is a learning organization.
- Freedom of information is protected.
- Privacy and confidentiality are rights.
- Basic services are provided without charge.
- Quality of service is important.
- Integrity is a commitment.
- Being stewards of community resources.

What bridging initiatives/programs has the library offered?

Since 2015, Johnson County Library has partnered with their local chapter of the League of Women Voters to hold Legislative Coffees. The library invites Kansas state senators and representatives, along with constituents in Johnson County to participate in these sessions. During the sessions, legislators are given a few minutes to present on the work that they do in their communities and other important, current events in Topeka, and then take questions from the audience. Coffee and donuts are provided.

Each session opens with a reminder for the legislators and audience to maintain a tone of civility. Audience members submit questions via notecards, and preference is given to questions related to the most popular topics. The library provides contact information for all legislators in case questions are not answered or community members would like to follow up.

Library details

- Library name: Johnson County Library
- City, State: Shawnee, Kansas
- Size of library system: 15 locations
- Contact for bridging information: Ashley Fick, Civic Engagement Librarian, ficka@jocolibrary.org

Use this case study to learn:

- how the Human Library program can teach people about different experiences and perspectives.
- innovative solutions to build empathy and create a welcoming space across different groups.
- ways to engage people who have different viewpoints on a range of topics.
- technology-related services that you could provide to patrons, especially those looking for jobs.
- digital wellness programs and activities that assist individuals with digital literacy skills.

The event is hosted each year during the Kansas legislative session. The library reaches out to legislators in late November to December with an invitation to participate. The day before the event, staff set up the space. Recently, with its growth in popularity, this has included outsourcing sound support and hiring a company to livestream the event.

To encourage a diverse audience from the community, the library uses inclusive language so that all feel welcome, such as referring to “community members” rather than “citizens” wherever possible. The primary audience that attends the Legislative Coffees are voters; however, the library reaches out to local civics/government teachers to invite future voters.

The library also hosts [Gather at the Table](#), a program that offers a space for conversation over a meal about difficult or controversial topics with people of diverse ages. The conversations are led by library staff who were trained in facilitation by the [Institute for Discourse and Democracy at Kansas State University](#). For these conversations, staff select topics on timely and relevant issues, and develop a set of open-ended questions that are written in a neutral tone. Past topics include local LGBTQ+ rights and local protection ordinances, the #MeToo movement, legalizing medical and recreational marijuana, and climate change. Before the start of any conversation, staff share a set of ground rules to help set the tone.

The program is hosted at the Central Resource Library branch of the Johnson County Library. Prior to the pandemic, they hosted one event per month, and had a large group of teen regulars who participated in this program in large numbers. The pandemic caused the library to pause the program, and as of 2022, they were slowly restarting it.



Photo: Courtesy Johnson County Library

Why were bridging initiatives needed in the community?

Since starting the Legislative Coffees in 2015, interest and attendance have grown. The events started in smaller meeting rooms in three different library branches, and have expanded to the main area of six branches. When community members attend the sessions, they leave with more knowledge about what is happening in their state legislature, the people who represent them, and the type of work they are doing as legislators for their communities.

Studies published in the [Journal of Deliberative Democracy](#) have shown that conversations with people of different viewpoints, like those facilitated through the Gather at the Table program, can give others a deeper understanding of differences and can moderate viewpoints. Teen participants are also introduced to and engage with issues in their communities.

What were the signs of success?

The library measured success by the number of people that attended the events, as well as qualitative survey responses that demonstrated that participants were eager and willing to engage in vulnerable conversations. They received positive responses from participants, both from those who were human books and attendees. For example, one of the human books was a homeschooler, and during one event, an attendee said that their stereotypes of homeschooling had been shattered and that their previous assumptions about why someone would choose to homeschool had been incorrect. The attendee also said that they learned how much they have in common with the book. On the other side, books have noted that they felt listened to during events and that it was beneficial to tell their story in a space that felt safe.

What was learned?

As these programs continue, the library is learning and making changes to improve events. For example, they have learned that an important aspect of organizing these kinds of events is to start off by setting expectations for participants. Starting with a reminder of civility during the Legislative Coffees and establishing ground rules at the beginning of each Gather at the Table event has contributed to maintaining civility throughout and creates an enabling environment for people to learn and listen.

The library also changed the space where they host Gather at the Table to make it more inviting. Originally, the events were hosted in a meeting room, but library staff found that people were hesitant to cross the threshold to come in and participate, and so they moved it to be in the main area of the Central Resource Library branch.

Advice to other libraries: create ground rules, build relationships, and don't be afraid to keep trying and adjust for improvements.