

Spokane County

Library District

*Building an
Organizational
Culture that
Puts Community
First*

Location: Spokane, WA

Staff Size: 130 FTE

(10 branches)

Service Area: 255,000

Spokane County Library District joined the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) initiative in part to deepen the transformative work they had begun with a strategic planning process.

Staff at the library used their training through LTC to focus not only on how they could build stronger relationships with the community and add more value as a library, but also how they could embed in the library a culture that put the community at the center of decision-making. During the two years of LTC, library staff members have become involved in a variety of initiatives to improve the community based on what they have learned from engaging residents. Additionally, library leaders have taken important steps to embed this new way of working into their talent management efforts.

HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Nancy Ledebøer, Spokane County Library District's director, made an important decision to hit the ground running following her LTC training from The Harwood Institute, which kicked off the two-year initiative. She asked her 15 librarians to use what the LTC team learned through their training and host Community Conversations with residents.
- ▶ The library staff continued to use their training to make another important decision: to align their programming to not only solve problems in the community but improve the conditions that residents said were standing in the way of progress. This forced the library out of its comfort zone but led to a number of innovative programs, including park clean-ups and supporting town revitalization efforts.
- ▶ Ledebøer ultimately decided to require staff to engage the community in some way as part of their job—to make working with the community central to how they operate. Again, this represented a critical decision to ensure that the library would stay the new course, but one that also caused staff turnover.

Background

When Nancy Ledebøer joined the Spokane County (Wash.) Library District as director in 2012, one of her first actions was creating a strategic plan that relied significantly on staff and community input.

With 10 branches, the library district serves a string of rural, urban and suburban communities (ranging in size from 600 to 91,000) surrounding the City of Spokane, which is served by a separate library system. Replacing a leader who had been in the position for more than three decades, Ledebøer felt that the library needed to go in a new direction, one that was closely aligned with the community's needs.

"We have to show we are focused on caring about our community," Ledebøer said. "It's not just about books; it's about connecting people to ideas or connecting people to one another."

Not everyone within the library initially embraced this approach, said Amber Williams, a librarian in rural Deer Park.

"I had been at the library six years at this point and worked with a lot of people who had been here a heck of a lot longer," Williams said. "When people heard, 'Hey, a new strategic plan,' I can't tell you how many people rolled their eyes. But Nancy set the

precedent that we were going to do this, and it was really going to affect our jobs."

Progress Made

Three years later, after this strategic planning process and subsequent changes in how the library relates to and connects with the community, the skepticism has waned. The library is playing a stronger role in helping move the community forward.

Some signs of progress include:

- ▶ In their job descriptions, librarians and others within the system are explicitly directed to engage with the community in a way that the library had not previously required. This shift was not well-received by everyone, and in some cases, it caused staff turnover.
- ▶ Instead of just concentrating on the things it was known for in the past—lending

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Spokane County Library District LTC team members: Deputy Director Patrick Roewe, community member Ann Apperson, Executive Director Nancy Ledebøer, Librarian Amber Williams, and Managing Librarian Aileen Luppert.

popular materials, having good customer service, and being a sound steward of public dollars—the library is taking steps to work with the community, not just serve the community. Spokane County librarians are serving on local chamber of commerce boards, organizing park clean-ups and joining town revitalization efforts.

- ▶ Library staff members have prioritized integrating themselves into the community. The community sees the library as a vital player in addressing issues important to everyone. As a result, the library staff

members are now being asked to partner with other community organizations in deeper ways.

According to Ledeboer, much of this transformation can be attributed to the library's participation in the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) initiative, a partnership between the American Library Association (ALA) and The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, LTC helps libraries reimagine their role in supporting communities, giving them the skills to help communities come together to address challenges. The goal is to strengthen libraries'

roles as core community leaders and change agents.

During this initiative, The Harwood Institute trained and coached teams from libraries in 10 communities across the country to develop the practice of Turning Outward—using the community, not libraries' conference rooms and programs, as the reference point for choices and actions.

Their Journey

Today, the Spokane County Library District staff is using this approach as the basis for planning and making decisions.



A Spokane County Library District employee helps a patron with a tablet computer.

The approach is not “top-down”; instead, the work is spreading throughout the organization, with front-line librarians leading the way.

They’ve come a long way in a short period of time. When Ledebøer arrived in 2012, she feared the library was becoming irrelevant as the world continued to change around it.

“When I first got here, I think the mission statement was something like, ‘We provide the stuff people want 24/7,’” she said. “It was very much focused on books and being a popular materials library. If people really want books, they can get them from other places today. If we want support from our communities, we have to show we are focused on caring about our community, not just about books.”

Library leaders believe the training and support provided through LTC will guarantee that the library district will play a central role in the community for years to come

“Central for us is the question of ongoing relevancy,” said Patrick Roewe, the library district’s deputy director and a member of the five-person LTC team. “The old model of libraries is not working anymore. What was really critical about Libraries Transforming Communities is it gave us a path to follow that was more intentional than we had

been before. It took some of the guesswork out of the approach.”

In 2014, back home after a three-day training with ALA and The Harwood Institute in Denver, the Spokane team scheduled some meetings to share what they learned with the rest of the district’s branch librarians.

community a reality. Each branch librarian was asked to lead 10 Community Conversations. While not everyone reached that goal, the district conducted 80 of these short, informal “kitchen table-style” conversations.

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“We realized we needed to Turn Outward and be more a part of the community,” Ledebøer said. “But we couldn’t just have four people doing this in an organization of our size. We needed more people doing this proactively.”

To get more staff involved, the LTC team hosted conversations with the library’s 170 staff members, 131 of whom are full-time. They used a conversation format they learned from Harwood. The 15 staff librarians were then asked to go out in the community to learn more about the kind of community people wanted and the challenges people saw in making that

We wanted to do things the community cared about,” said Ledebøer.

In those gatherings, residents told the librarians that they felt disconnected from the community; they were concerned about lost jobs and businesses and worried about safety.

“Even though we live in this very spread-out community, people’s concerns and beliefs and aspirations were very similar from place to place,” Ledebøer said. “I expected it to happen, but it was eye-opening for staff and community members who think their issues are so different.”

Taking what they learned from the community, the librarians began to figure out ways to address issues people cared about while improving the way the community works. This new approach to making choices marked a fundamental shift in how staff developed programming.

"I'm certainly more deliberate in how I look at programs we offer," Roewe said. "I apply a higher sense of scrutiny to make sure we know how this is benefiting the community, not just how this is benefiting the library."

At the Deer Park Branch, the library focused its efforts on a trash-strewn park behind the library. Knowing the city lacked resources to clean it up, the library partnered with an Eagle Scout to organize a clean-up. Local churches solicited help from the park's neighbors, and people spent a day hauling out 300 bags of trash and chopping wood. The city named the park "Library Park" as a result of the efforts, and now the library is organizing similar clean-ups in two additional locations.

"We could have just asked for money and hired a landscaper, but doing it the way we did created leadership opportunities for people to step forward," Ledeboer said. "It connected a whole bunch of other people and gave [people] opportunities to socialize."

"We did it with the community and not to the community," she noted.



As part of the LTC project, the library hosted a park clean-up day. Volunteers hauled 300 bags of trash out of a park adjacent to the Deer Park Branch library.

As librarians were holding Community Conversations in the City of Medical Lake, a handful of community members were organizing into a group called "Reimagine Medical Lake." The library was able to support this effort by sharing the knowledge they had gained from the community to inform the work of this coalition.

"We didn't know about them, and they didn't know about us," Roewe said. "It's a good example of community will for change. Libraries Transforming Communities gave us an opportunity to connect, share

what we already gained and find partners to help us solve the problems we heard about from the community."

Librarians in the Valley Branch now visit an alternative high school every week to help students with résumé-building and interviewing skills.

"We packed up our computer labs and went over there," said Aileen Lubbert, managing librarian in the Valley Branch. Librarians also started going to the local Boys & Girls Club to allow children to check out books and make crafts. "In some ways, this has already

At a staff retreat for supervisors and librarians, Ledeboer asked the group to go around and share recent successes. Every one of them had a story to tell.

become a way of life, particularly with the librarians' job descriptions changing," Luppert said. "I hope in five years we're in more high schools, [and] we're embedded in more agencies."

Not every effort has been successful. The library tried to build a program in its Spokane Valley Branch—its largest location, serving a population of 91,000—that would match teenagers looking for job skills with older adults looking to learn how to use technology. While the program seemed successful based on knowledge gathered from Community Conversations, the timing was off. The project started as school was getting out for the summer, so the library had trouble coordinating with students, and the plans stalled.

The shift to working in a new way has also led to some internal growing pains.

"It was a tough sell for some," Roewe said. "We did see some retirements when we adjusted the job descriptions. Whether that was directly due to a change in priority, I don't know."

Now, new librarians are hired

based on job descriptions that include Turning Outward.

"We're involving all the libraries in the process," added Ledeboer. "We're not just focusing it on one library, but we're trying to make this philosophy a systematic part of how we do business as a library."

To help spread the Turning Outward approach across the library system, more staff and board members attended subsequent Harwood Institute trainings. The LTC committee regularly reports to the district board and provides written and verbal reports so board members understand the process.

Moving Forward

Ledeboer said she anticipates that staff members will continue to report to the board on efforts as they unfold, while continuing to expand what they have learned through LTC across their library system.

Nearly 18 months after her group attended the initial LTC training, Ledeboer said she believes

the Turning Outward approach has taken root throughout her organization's staff.

"Would they say this shift has come from Libraries Transforming Community or from the practice of intentionality? I'm not sure they would all have that language or that lens," she said. "But from my perspective, this is what we wanted to see happen."

At a staff retreat for supervisors and librarians, Ledeboer asked the group to go around and share recent successes. Every one of them had a story to tell.

One staff member shared that in the City of Medical Lake, the library had sought for more than 15 years to be included in the local school's annual reading night. They were finally invited. In another example, the newly reactivated Deer Park Chamber of Commerce felt it was vital to have a librarian on its board.

"This is why this [initiative] is so successful," Ledeboer said. "It engaged the community, it built leaders, and it connected people. If we want to replicate this or something like it, this is what we need to look for." ■