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As Librarians Convene Here, Multnomah County Library Showcases Work in Equity and Inclusion

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BOOKS

As librarians convene here, Multnomah County Library showcases work in equity and inclusion

The pandemic, and social justice work after the 2020 protests, have permanently influenced how the library delivers services

Kathi Inman Berens

For The Oregonian/OregonLive

As more than 3,300 librarians from around the U.S. flock to Portland for the Public Library Association conference this Wednesday to Friday, they'll witness up close Multnomah County Library's groundbreaking work in diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice.

The pandemic, and social justice work after the 2020 protests, have permanently influenced how the library delivers services. There is now more in-person, on-site dialogue between community members in multiple languages and from various cultures. The library has also significantly expanded who can access its digital services, and made it easier to get a library card.

When Multnomah County reported that people of color were shouldering a disproportionately large burden of pandemic harms, the library came up with remedies. Step one: Listen to BIPOC library patrons and community members for guidance how to serve them best.

"Before we reopened buildings," said Shawn Cunningham, the library's director of communications, "staff led a process of community engagement to reach out to our culturally and linguistically-specific communities to learn what they value most."

Those listening sessions supercharged DEI work already underway.

The pre-existing We Speak Your Language program, which serves linguistic and cultural communities in Spanish, Russian, Chinese and Vietnamese, received more resources. The Capitol Hill branch has added two staff members dedicated to serving Somali patrons in the Somali language, and the collection has included Somali-language resources for several years.

The library created a staff position for translation services, ensuring that most people could access information in their native language, crucial during pandemic conditions such as changes in mask



St. Johns Library is part of Multnomah County Library, which has changed the way it delivers services in recent years. *Motoya Nakamura, Multnomah County Library*

requirements or increased need for digital access to jobs resources.

The library also added 33 Black Cultural Library Advocate positions between 2019 and 2021, bringing the total number to 38. Currently, 14 libraries have dedicated BCLA positions: North Portland, St. Johns, Kenton, Hollywood, Albina, Midland, Central, Capitol Hill, Hillsdale, Sellwood, Gregory Heights, Gresham, Fairview-Columbia and Rockwood libraries.

Staffing branch buildings with friendly faces from the neighborhood's linguistic and cultural communities became a priority when libraries reopened in 2021. More patrons can now walk into their local branch and see, hear, and feel they are welcome. Each branch customizes its themes and programs around specific community needs.

"There is so much knowledge and resources that should be afforded to every-

one, and representation matters," said Hollywood Library Black Cultural Library Advocate Tamara Stigler. "I am a native Portlander, and I remember going to the school library, but I don't recall going to the local library. When I had my son, we encouraged him to go. The library opened up so many doors for him to explore and to learn, and in part because of these experiences he is now a computer engineer."

"I'm proud you are doing these for us as people," said one participant in the Hip Hop and Wellness for Black Teens program during Black History Month. "You're not only doing it but you're interacting, giving kids like me a safe haven, so all respect to you!"

The listening sessions also influenced several building renovations in east Multnomah County.

Invited into the design process, BIPOC youth are telling the library what will help

them feel welcome in their neighborhood branches. "Each library serves a distinct community," explains Chelsea Bailey, MCL communications manager, "so it's really important that our community feel reflected in those spaces, in the collection, and among our staff."

When schoolkids were learning remotely, access to digital learning tools became a top priority. The library fast-tracked digital access for 80,000 K-12 students enrolled in Portland-area public schools using their school ID numbers, eliminating the need to visit a library branch to obtain a library card. Because the library already offered digital access for students through its Library Connect program, the infrastructure was there to move quickly when parents, caregivers, learners, and teachers needed it most.

Serving homeless people was one of the biggest challenges the library faced. Curb-side services weren't going to help those who need a library's physical shelter.

The library "is one of the few places where (homeless) people feel welcome," said library communications specialist Paty Rincon, "where they are able to be treated fairly and kindly, have a place to use the restroom, drink water, read books. A lot of folks spend their days there, have library cards, and access technology."

When library buildings were shut, Multnomah County Library increased WiFi access, making it available 24/7 in the outdoor environs around its physical libraries.

The library also doubled down on coordination with the Multnomah County Joint Office of Homeless Services. When library doors opened after vaccination rates rose, on-site social workers offered window service for walk-up assistance at the Central Library in downtown Portland.

While it's difficult to know how many people used the WiFi and walk-up social services — librarians do not assume who is and is not homeless and "we also have no reason to ask," observes Rincon — library data show that in the last quarter of 2021, the library's embedded social workers helped 160 unique patrons, 83 of whom self-reported being homeless.

"We will use our presence in the City of Roses to elevate the important role public libraries play in advancing equity, diversity, inclusion and social justice in their own communities," said Public Library Association President Melanie Huggins, of South Carolina. "The Portland community provides a vibrant backdrop for our conference."

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