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

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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 on 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 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 everyone, and representation matters,” said Hollywood Library Black Cultural Library Advocate Tamara Stiglet. “I am a native Portlander, and I remember going to the Central Library in downtown Portland. I observed 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.

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