Serving the Entire Community: How the Multnomah County Library Ensures a Welcoming, Safe Space for All

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In spring 2020, the Multnomah County (Ore.) Library faced a host of issues impacting libraries across the nation: How to serve the community during a historic pandemic that saw schools and libraries close for an extended period? And how to respond to a racial and social justice awakening that requires systemic change?

Like many libraries across the nation MCL librarians have been quick to meet their community’s needs. Following the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in Minneapolis, the library licensed more e-books and digital audiobooks about white supremacy and racial justice, for example, and undertook more sharing agreements to meet the surging demand for resources. MCL representatives say that in 2020, Layla F. Saad’s Me and White Supremacy was the library’s most checked-out e-book, and How to Be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi was the most checked-out audiobook.

But perhaps the most important response, librarians say, was to listen to the community. "Before we reopened our buildings, staff led a process of community engagement," says Shawn Cunningham, director of MCL communications and strategic initiatives, "to reach out to our culturally and linguistically specific communities to learn what they value most." Those conversations helped MCL leadership better understand how to make their neighborhood library branches more welcoming to BIPOC and culturally marginalized people, and ultimately, to create new programs and increase resources to existing programs that serve its culturally diverse users.

Though hiring bicultural and multilingual staff has been a priority for years, MCL representatives say that in 2021 the library has enough staff who are members of culturally diverse groups to offer services and programs customized to patrons from those communities. The library’s We Speak Your Language program, for example, provides services in Chinese, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese. MCL also fast-tracked translation services during the pandemic, and invested more resources to make sure all patrons had quick access to information in their own languages. One branch library now has a staff member dedicated to serving patrons who speak Somali.

In addition, the Black Cultural Library Advocates program supports a team dedicated to connecting with Black patrons in library buildings. This means more patrons can walk into their local branches and see, hear, and feel they are welcome. And each branch library has the latitude to create its own themes and programs around specific community needs. "I absolutely love the theme and focus on health and wellness," says Lana Sweeting, Black Cultural Library Advocate at Rockwood Library. "It’s a topic that often gets swept under the rug, but to take this time to bring attention to self-care, and taking a step back when we can, is perfect."

Furthermore, several building renovations in previously under-resourced east Multnomah county are kicking off with a community engagement process “focused on our BIPOC youth,” says MCL communications strategist Chelsea Bailey. "Each library serves a distinct community and libraries are for the community,” she explains, “so it’s really important that our community feel reflected in those spaces, in the collection, and among our staff.”

One of the more complex pandemic challenges for MCL librarians, meanwhile, is serving those experiencing homelessness—or houselessness, to be more precise. “You can’t move the physical shelter aspect of a library online,” Cunningham says. “That was one of the biggest challenges for us at the height of the pandemic, how can we restore services in a way that’s sensitive to [houseless] people’s needs?”

The library “is one of the few places where [houseless] people feel welcome—a place where they are able to be treated fairly and kindly, have a place to use the restroom, drink water, read books,” adds MCL communications specialist Paryn Rincon. “A lot of folks spend their days there, have library cards, and access technology.” For this community, takeout services like curbside pickup weren’t going to help.

MCL responded by expanding its Wi-Fi access 24/7 in the outdoor areas around its physical libraries, and by doubling down on its coordination with the Multnomah County Joint Office of Homeless Services. MCL’s on-site social workers offer window service for walk-up assistance at the Central Library on SW 10th Street, an area with many encampments. There, social workers assist in finding resources, shelter, permanent housing, and more.

MCL representatives say it’s difficult to know how many houseless people are served by the Wi-Fi and walk-up social services—after all, librarians don’t know who is houseless and have no reason to ask. Rincon explains. There are instances, however, when social workers need to know in order to properly assist people. And in the last quarter of 2021, embedded social workers helped 160 unique patrons, 85 of whom reported they were experiencing houselessness.

MCL staff know their success is deeply connected to their commitment to serving the community—the entire community. “It’s an ethos that runs deep, including in MCL’s popular Everybody Reads program, a community-wide project that promotes shared reading and discussion around a single book.” This year’s book is Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations by Mira Jacob, which Bailey says demonstrates MCL’s commitment to engagement, and to not shying away from important issues and conversations, no matter how difficult.