

Civic Engagement and the Austin Public Library: A Preliminary Report

by City of Austin Library Commissioners JC Dwyer and Beth Smyer

October 22, 2019

Purpose of this report

This report aims to provide the Library Commission with an overview of civic engagement work within the Austin Public Library system (APL), including work currently underway, opportunities in FY20 and recommendations to strengthen this work in FY21 and beyond.

Definition of Civic Engagement

In this report, “civic engagement” is defined as activities that further the goal of an informed local citizenry that is actively engaged in shaping public discourse and participating in the decisions that affect their lives. This work centers the values of inclusion and equity in the co-creation of public understanding and public policy.

It does not refer to individual or household-level services typically considered “social work” (such as public benefits outreach or homeless services), although some library systems group these activities together. While it does include activities designed to increase participation in public elections, it is never partisan or agenda-driven.

Why Do This Work?

Civic engagement is a rising area of interest among many library systems, funders (e.g. Kettering Foundation) and national library groups (e.g. American Library Association, Public Library Association, Urban Libraries Council).

According the Urban Libraries Council¹:

“Public libraries, working in close partnership with local government and the many available resources and experts, are well positioned to provide the consistent, close-to-home, sustained leadership that contributes to community success. They are trusted, stable, apolitical, safe, and positive—in short, ideal civic engagement leaders. At a time when trust in government remains low and many citizens feel disconnected from public institutions, libraries offer a bright light for producing long-term results.”

¹ [ULC Civic Engagement Report](#), accessed 10/18/19.

Civic engagement work is broadly aligned with APL’s vision to play a key role in “making Austin a dynamic creative center and the most livable city in the country.” It is also closely aligned with City Council’s Strategic Direction 2023 strategies², including:

- Enhance communication and collaboration between City Council, City staff, and community members to enhance transparency, trust, and shared decision making. Ensure collaboration is strengthened by accessible, timely, and accurate information sharing. (GTW#5)
- Engage community members on the matters that impact them in ways that are timely, convenient, meaningful, and honor their communication preferences; and equip employees to better engage vulnerable and historically marginalized communities. (GTW#6)
- Create a new integrated approach to managing community members’ multiple relationships with different City departments to strengthen feedback loops, build trust, and improve satisfaction. (GTW#8)

As well as the following City Performance Metrics³:

- Percentage of eligible residents who are registered to vote and who participate in City elections (disaggregated by race and geography). (GTW.E.1)
- Percentage of residents who express high levels of satisfaction with the outcomes of their engagement with the City. (GTW.E.2)
- Percentage of residents who believe Austin values dialogue between residents and government. (GTW.E.3)
- Number of [stakeholder] engagement/outreach activities by department, Council district, time and type of activity. (GTW.E.4)

Current Areas of Civic Engagement

Several APL branch libraries and staff are already committing their limited time and resources to strengthen civic engagement. The following section summarizes their accomplishments and provides examples of how other library systems and local organizations are committed to similar work.

Census Outreach

What is the opportunity?

The decennial Census is a massive effort to count every person residing in our nation on April 1st, 2020. The results will be used to allocate political representation, as well as billions of dollars in public and private resources over the following decade. The City of Austin is a major participant in our local Complete Count Committee (CCC), which aims to ensure an accurate count by offering

² [Austin Strategic Direction 2023 Master List of Strategies](#), accessed 10/18/19

³ [Austin Strategic Direction 2023 Metrics List](#), accessed 10/18/19

outreach and assistance to traditionally undercounted communities, including Austinites with low-incomes, immigrants, LEP families and others (see Map in Appendix).

What is APL doing?

APL has formed an internal staff committee to assist the CCC. Plans are being discussed to include Census promotion / educational messaging in existing communications channels and events; using librarians with laptops as mobile outreach / access points; and reserving computer stations in some branches for patrons to complete the Census online. Census Program Manager John Lawler has suggested that branches in undercounted communities could also act as clearinghouses for promotional materials and organizing neighborhood volunteers.

Who else is doing this work in Austin?

The U.S. Census Bureau has opened a regional office in Austin to direct local hiring and promotional efforts. A local CCC including public officials, private businesses and nonprofits has been formed to coordinate work in this area. The City of Austin / Travis County has jointly hired a Census Program Manager (Lawler) to assist the CCC. The United Way of Central Texas is in the process of hiring a similar position to act on a regional basis. Local nonprofits and churches are planning to outreach their communities.

What are other library systems doing?

The Texas State Library and Archives Commission, as well as the American Library Association have formally requested the assistance of their members in carrying out the census (see Appendix). The Dallas Public Library has committed to pushing Census messaging through all their existing public programs for children (e.g. storytime) and adults (e.g. ESL classes).

Voter Registration & Participation

What is the opportunity?

Voting is the cornerstone of civic engagement. Although Austin has a high overall voter registration rate (95% in 2018⁴), the franchise requires constant maintenance, and is not equitably distributed among all Austin communities. Voter participation in Austin is much lower (61% in 2018⁵). Under state law, libraries are allowed to promote voter registration as well as serve as polling locations on election day.

⁴ [Daily Texan](#), "Nearly 95 percent of Travis County is registered to vote, setting 'modern-day record.'" Accessed 10/18/19.

⁵ [Texas Tribune](#), "Look up Texas midterm turnout in your county against historic numbers." Accessed 10/18/19.

What is APL doing?

APL currently makes mail-in voter registration forms available at every branch, although their presence is not always obvious. New library card applicants are also asked whether they would like a mail-in form. The Travis County Elections Office historically partners with APL on an annual, system-wide event at which Voluntary Deputy Registrars (VDRs) staff tables at several branches to assist patrons in registering. One source involved suggested this event does not have a strong ROI in terms of newly registered voters. In 2019, nine branches also served as polling locations on election day.

Who else is doing this work in Austin?

Various political, nonprofit and civic groups in Austin conduct voter registration drives and turnout efforts, however these are usually either partisan or focused on a single population or issue. To our knowledge, no entity engages in a universal, citywide turnout strategy. The City and County make educational resources available to the public on how and where to vote. The County conducts ongoing voter registration, primarily through VDRs at events and locations across the city.

What are other library systems doing?

The Dallas Public Library plans to offer librarians the opportunity to become VDRs, and broker an arrangement with library truck drivers to deliver completed registration forms to the County within the 3-day deadline. Previous efforts to involve library staff in voter registration were challenged by this deadline.

The Anythink library system in Colorado provides [voter registration kiosks](#) in their largest branches, trains their librarians as VDRs and has a [voter info page](#) on their website.

Public Discourse / Issue Engagement

What is the opportunity?

Public-policy making is improved by opportunities for civil discourse between decision-makers and their constituents, as well between neighbors with differing views. As a trusted, non-partisan institution that promotes knowledge / understanding and has resources spread strategically across the city, neighborhood libraries are a perfect venue for promoting civil discourse.

What is APL doing?

For the past year, Little Walnut Branch Manager Marcos Martinez has piloted a series of structured community forums at branch libraries across eight City Council districts co-sponsored by the National Issues Forum (NIF). These events include a facilitated conversation with library patrons around an issue of national interest (e.g. immigration) supported by a factual issue guide produced by NIF. If the pilot is deemed successful, one the next step for the program (supported by the Kettering Foundation) could be to create a system-wide series of forums resulting in a

locally-created issue brief and citywide conversation, which could then be documented for City Council's use. This next step would require system-wide support and one or more formal partnerships with outside organizations with the capacity to create the fact-based issue guide (such as UT or Glasshouse Policy).

Other branches have hosted smaller events. Common Ground for Texans recently held a non-partisan Legislative Roundup at Old Quarry Branch. The Twin Oaks Branch has a monthly Social Justice Book Club. The Terrazas Branch has a monthly Controversy & Conversations film screening program with the UT Humanities Institute. The Oak Hill and Spicewood Springs branches have held a series of volunteer-run events event similar to the National Issues Forum called Conversation Cafe.

Systemwide, APL also maintains a limited Civic Engagement page [on their website](#) with a focus on volunteering. In 2018, APL's adult programming advisory team submitted an application to host Citizenfest, an annual civic engagement event started in Seattle (APL did not receive the honor).

Who else is doing this work in Austin?

Common Ground for Texans is a volunteer-run group that advocates for “positive solutions through civil engagement” and hosts occasional events around Austin similar to National Issues Forums. Better Angels is a national group also active in creating opportunities for bipartisan conversation in Austin. The League of Women Voters is a volunteer group devoted to election issue education. Generation Citizen is a local nonprofit that works in high schools to develop public policy literacy and engagement.

What are other library systems doing?

Anythink, the Colorado library system intends to establish their libraries as a “town square” in their communities. To this end they host a series of civic dialogue programs around specific issues, manage a recurring program called Civic Saturdays founded by the Seattle group Citizen University, and are a pilot location for the Aspen Institute’s Better Arguments Project.

The Cincinnati Public Library recently hired a Civic Engagement Coordinator, who has been tasked with positioning the library as a venue and convener for multi-stakeholder civic issues such as homelessness and workforce development.

The D.C. Public Library also recently hired a Civic Engagement Coordinator, who has been tasked with developing a slate of services designed to engage community members in dialogue around key civic issues (see position descriptions in Appendix).

Recommendations

There is an increasing amount of civic engagement activity happening at APL and comparable library systems across the nation. There is also a growing interest by funders, associations and other

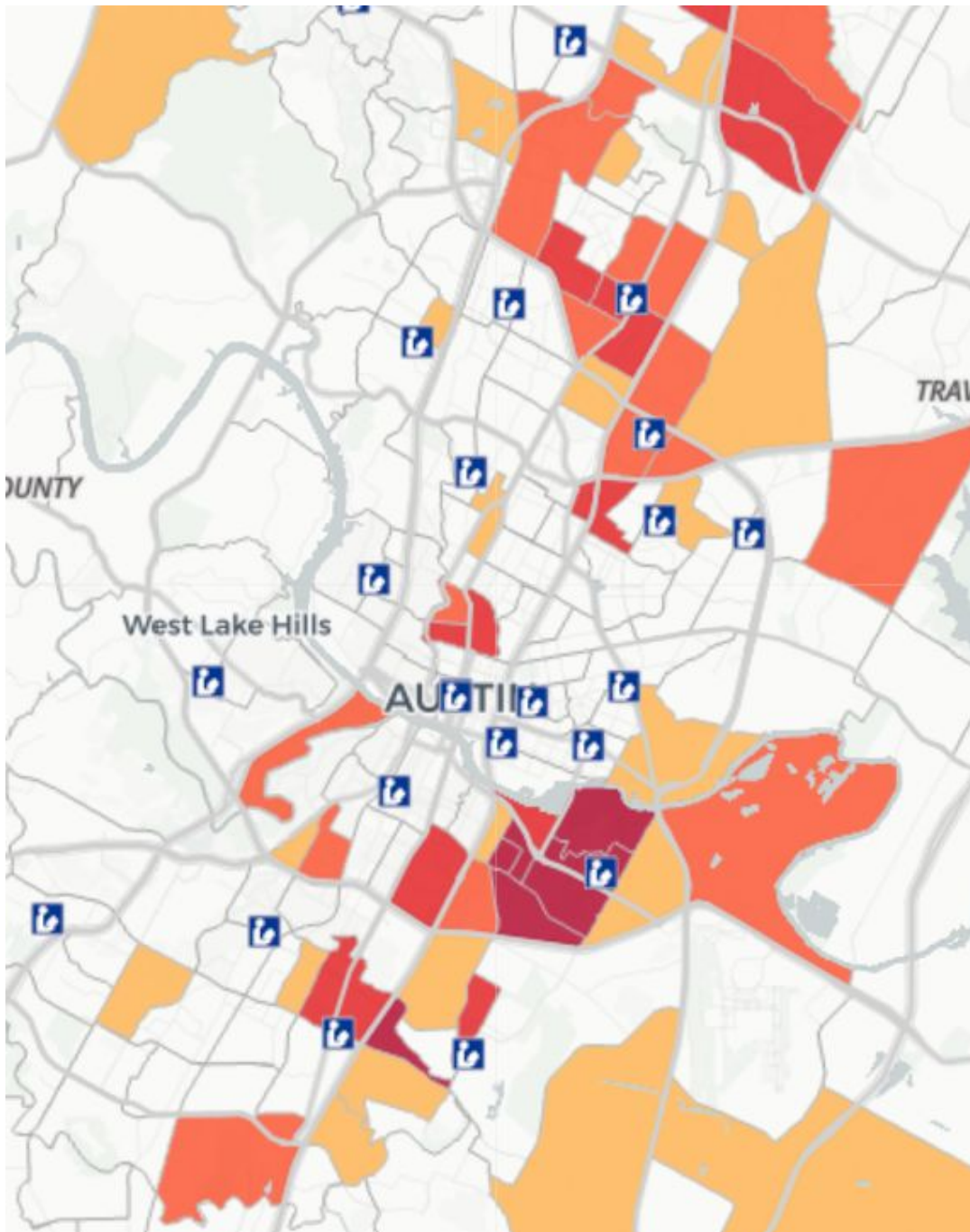
stakeholders in using libraries as conveners and spaces for civic education, discourse and election participation.

We recommend the Library Commission consider two actions to recognize and support this important work:

1. In the short term, we recommend the immediate passage of a resolution recognizing APL for their commitment to partnering with the 2020 Census and highlighting their value to City Council and the Complete Count Committee as centers of Census education and promotion.
 2. We recommend the creation of a temporary Library Commission working group to (a) learn from and inform APL's staff working group and (b) investigate the possibility of articulating a more cohesive, system-wide civic engagement strategy supported by a new or repurposed FTE starting in FY21.
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Appendix

Map: Census "Hard to Count" Populations & Libraries in Travis County



Source: <https://www.censushardtocountmaps2020.us/>, visited 10/18/19

Letter from TSLAC to APL regarding Census participation:



May 29, 2019

Austin Public Library
PO Box 2287
Austin, TX 78768-2287

Dear Roosevelt Weeks,

I am writing to you to let you know how you, your library, its staff and your community can prepare for the 2020 Census.

The United States Constitution requires that a census of America's population be taken every 10 years as mandated by Article I, Section 2. The first Census was in 1790. The goal of the 2020 Census is to ensure that every resident in the United States is counted. Census results are used to reapportion the United States House of Representatives, redraw congressional and state legislative district boundaries, draw school district boundaries, and determine eligibility for public assistance, including the distribution of more than \$675 billion in federal funds to local communities.

Now is the time for libraries to begin preparing to help patrons respond to the Census—not only using the new online response option on your library's computers, but via phone or mail, as well. You will find resources attached, including information about methods of response, young children as an undercounted population, 50 ways the Census affects our lives and more. You may also be interested in the American Library Association's February webinar recording, "[Libraries and the 2020 Census](#)." Finally, ALA has also just released a downloadable PDF, [Libraries' Guide to the 2020 Census](#).

There will be a presentation from the U.S. Census Bureau on Wednesday, July 10, 2019, at the Texas Library Association's Annual Assembly in Austin. Scheduled for 4-5:00 p.m., it is called "Census 2020: What libraries can do now."

If you, your librarians, or your staff have any questions regarding what the Census is doing locally in your community, please direct them to U.S. Census Bureau Partnership Specialist Macy Hurwitz at macy.d.hurwitz@2020census.gov or 737-247-9119.

We would be interested to hear about the ways your library is preparing for the Census. Would you please email Naomi DiTullio at ld@tsl.texas.gov to let us know.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mark Smith".

Mark Smith
Director and Librarian

Enclosures

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Position Description for Cincinnati Public Library Civic Engagement Coordinator:

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY OF CINCINNATI & HAMILTON COUNTY

Position Description

Civic Engagement Coordinator

Reports to: Chief Strategy Officer	Supervises: None
FLSA Status: Exempt	Division: Administration
Pay Grade: 10	Agency: Strategy

POSITION SUMMARY: This position is primarily responsible to serve as the liaison to library staff and community groups whose priorities align with the Library's Strategic Plan to promote and facilitate civic engagement through the Library. The Coordinator will identify relevant community groups who can help the Library better serve the community and increase its impact; and assist staff in programs and services to facilitate civic engagement around issues and topics that align closely with the Library's mission, vision and Strategic Plan.

RESPONSIBILITIES (not all-inclusive) all of the duties listed below are essential job functions for which reasonable accommodations will be made. All job requirements listed indicate the minimum level of knowledge, skills and/or ability deemed necessary to perform the job proficiently. This job description is not to be construed as an exhaustive statement of duties, responsibilities or requirements. Employees may be required to perform any other job-related instructions as requested by their supervisor, subject to reasonable accommodations.

ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS:

Oversight

- Develop and implement a systematic long-term plan for institutionalizing Civic Engagement across the Library.
- Periodically plan, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of the Library's civic engagement strategies.

Programs and Services

- Collaborates with community groups to plan, organize and implement civic events around topics of mutual interest to the Library and to the community.
- Develop, implement and evaluate ways to offer community members specific opportunities to learn together, frame issues of common concern, deliberate about choices for solving problems, deepen understanding about others' opinions, and connect across the spectrum of thought on issues that relate to the Library's Strategic Plan or priorities.
- Actively participate in community and civically engaged groups whose focus aligns with one or more Library priorities as identified by the Strategic Plan or the Eva Jane Romaine Coombe Director to 1) hear community concerns and identify ways the Library might connect with community groups to resolve them; 2) promote relevant library use, services and resources.

Serve the community

- Assists Library agencies with applying an equity, diversity and inclusion lens to strategic plan priorities and then identifying and pursuing programs that align with the plan and that address critical community needs, especially those of vulnerable and/or underserved populations.
- When requested by the Chief Strategy Officer or Eva Jane Romaine Coombe Director, represent the Library at community meetings which focus on issues aligned with the Library's priorities and Strategic Plan.
- Shape and lead community discussions that encourage active and purposeful civic engagement and address issues of concern to the Library and to the community.
- Collaborate with experienced individuals and organizations to organize civic engagement trainings and programs for and with the community.

Engage and support Library staff

- Serves as primary resource for staff in support of civic engagement; ensure quality control; serve as point of contact for opportunities and identifying solutions to related issues.
- Develop effective internal relationships by collaborating and consulting with departments, internal stakeholders and co-workers in implementing civic engagement activities; create value for the efforts of internal staff and departments by participating in and providing support to cross-functional library teams.
- Regular and reliable attendance is a requirement of this position.
- Build knowledge of appropriate civic engagement services and resources to make appropriate referrals for Library users.

Communications

- Work with Internal Communications staff to maintain regular and appropriate communications about civic engagement activities with staff, board and key stakeholders.
- Compile and update as needed a list of community contacts who can assist with civic engagement efforts
- Provide regular reports to the Chief Development Officer on the outcome of attendance at community meetings and events and work together to determine what further communication is needed

EDUCATION:

Bachelor's Degree in Social Science, Political Science, Community Organizing, Public Policy or related field or an equivalent combination of education and experience.

Master Degree strongly preferred with preference for this with an MLS, MPA, MSW, or MPS

MINIMUM QUALIFICATIONS:

- Strong organizing skills; ability to communicate and work effectively with people of diverse backgrounds
- Ability to work on deadline and maintain accountability with others in collaborative projects, and work well under minimal supervision
- Excellent communication skills, both written and oral
- Ability to work effectively and independently with all levels of the library organization as well as community and other non-profit leaders.
- Strong leadership qualities and leadership experience.

- Demonstrated program development and implementation skills.
- Ability to represent the Library effectively in a variety of settings and with diverse communities. Demonstrated understanding and appreciation for diverse cultures.
- A demonstrated interest in civic and community engagement, a gift for communication and facilitation, and a drive to innovate.
- Must have the ability to safely, frequently and independently move and handle a minimum of 25 lbs. to a minimum height of 2 feet and/or carry such minimum of 5 feet.

Position Description for DC Public Library Civic Engagement Coordinator:

Civic Engagement Coordinator at DC Public Library

The Civic Engagement Coordinator position is a new position at the DC Public Library (DCPL), and the incumbent will work collaboratively with the Assistant Director of Service Design & Engagement and internal/external stakeholders. The approach to the work is iterative and human-centered.

This position is part of the Service Design and Engagement team at the (DCPL). The Library System is comprised of the Central Library and 25 neighborhood branch libraries. Within that framework, the Civic Engagement Coordinator is charged with coordinating the library's work as a voter registration agency across all library locations, designing services that promote civic participation and engagement, and supporting the Community Alliances area of the renovated Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library (opening 2020).

Duties:

- Serve as the library's liaison with the District of Columbia Board of Elections (DCBOE); ensure that the library is kept up to date on voter registration policies and procedures.
- Coordinate training to provide direct voter registration.
- Coordinate programs and outreach efforts to actively encourage District residents to register to vote and to actually vote.
- Develop a slate of services designed to engage community members in dialogue around key civic issues.
- Support neighborhood library staff in developing highly-localized services that support civic engagement neighborhood by neighborhood and look for opportunities for higher-profile District-wide events.
- Work with the Health Human Services Manager and the Assistant Director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library to formalize the concept and approach for the new community alliances space.

Qualifications:

- A minimum of three years of work experience in programming in a public library, or advocating, planning or organizing with a community organization, non-profit association, civic organization or campaign.

- Two years of experience using the principles and practices of producing public events and programs.
- Two years of demonstrated experience in outreach and community engagement activities.
- Two years' experience facilitating group conversations and leading training.
- Two years' experience coordinating program services involving several organizational entities and managing multiple, complex partnerships.
- One year using MS Office and other technology applications.
- Master's Degree Required

Additional Qualifications

- Familiarity with design thinking-based approaches to addressing community problems.
 - Ability to train and lead others in new processes.
 - Skill in communicating, collaborating, and establishing effective working relationships with employees, volunteers, organizations, and the public.
 - Ability to use workplace and other technology, including email, internet, databases, social media, and other software.
-