Information Justice Institute

Chicago State University (CSU) proposes to lead the Information Justice Institute (IJI) for a one-year period in collaboration with the non-profit organizations A Way In and Ex-Cons for Community and Social Change (ECCSC). We are requesting $68,228 in funding from IMLS. As a planning grant, IJI will solidify partnerships; develop a project work plan; and pilot training materials designed to explore critical issues facing librarians, library staff, and other information professionals as they confront injustice through innovative programs and services designed to support community members facing onerous and complex challenges such as poverty, violence, and incarceration.

Statement of National Need

According to recent statistics, nearly 40 million people live below the poverty line in the United States, and of those, 12.8 million are children. Additionally, the United States struggles with alarming rates of violent crime and has the highest incarceration rate in the world. As noted by the Prison Policy Initiative, the American criminal justice system holds almost 2.3 million people in numerous facilities including state and federal prisons, juvenile correctional centers, local jails, military prisons, immigration detention facilities, and psychiatric hospitals. As with violence, incarceration disproportionately affects young people, and racial and ethnic minorities. For example, African Americans make up 12% of the country, but 33% of the prison population – compared to Whites who account nationally for 64% and 30% in prison. The incarceration rate for African Americans is nearly five times the rate of Whites and currently almost 9% of all African American men are behind bars. Cycles of poverty, violence, and incarceration are deeply rooted in historic inequity.

Project Design

IJI aligns with the IMLS Build Capacity goal - to strengthen the capacity of libraries to improve the well being of their communities particularly to serve as trusted spaces for community engagement and dialogue around challenging issues. IJI aims to promote renewal and resilience. We ask, how can librarians effectively develop trusted spaces for community engagement and dialogue? What are the possible roles of information professionals? In 2017, the Public Library Association published a short book in its "Quick Read for Busy Librarians" series to introduce librarians to concepts for serving incarcerated populations. This text serves its purpose as a basic introduction, but there is much more to learn and do. After discussing several topics and sharing a few examples, the author, Nick Higgins, poses two insightful questions that serve as a jumping off point for this project: What power do we have as librarians in dismantling systems of oppression – and, more importantly, how do we use that power once we realize we possess it?

The CSU campus is located on Chicago's south side – adjacent to many underserved neighborhoods. It engages a diverse blend of predominantly African American and Latinx students. CSU is well positioned to act as a hub to build capacity for critical community engagement and dialogue. In order to ensure open, culturally relevant, and meaningful conversations that lead to the development of authentic materials and effective practices, A Way in and ECCSC will provide consultation for development throughout all stages of this project. A Way In focuses on assisting people with felony convictions gain access to education and asserts that lived experiences are vital to meaningful conversations. ECCSC is a coalition of hundreds of formerly incarcerated individuals who have taken on the responsibility to serve communities.

IJI will bring collaborators together to consider questions to build understanding and lead to addressing critical community needs around questions such as:
1. How do libraries prevent and combat poverty?
2. How do libraries prevent violence and support community members affected by violence?
3. How do libraries support successful reentry upon release from prison?
4. How do libraries support incarcerated community members and their networks of support?

These questions, and others that emerge, will be the focus of a yearlong effort to develop open online training materials and a replicable in-person workshop, which will be piloted (offered and evaluated) in conjunction with a national library conference. By accessing resources and engaging in focused learning activities during the workshop, librarians will build essential competencies to address critical social issues and act as leaders to remedy existing gaps in library services for those affected by poverty, violence, and incarceration, as well as network with others who are dedicated to these efforts.

IJI recognizes that libraries serve as partners in strengthening the work of collaborators, community members and networks by leveraging their expertise and relationships. IJI supports the IMLS *Community Catalysts* goal with emphasis on the objective of exploring and developing new, scalable participatory library programming models that engage communities and individuals of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. IJI evaluation will incorporate aspects of user motivation, adoption, retention, and application of new skills. Project results will also consider outcomes relating to adaptation, expansion, and re-interpretation.

Diversity Plan
IJI is designed to augment participation in the library field by countering historic and systemic barriers that have limited users' access to information resources, competency-building opportunities, and formal and informal networks. We will create change to transform understanding and enable new connections and growth to overcome cycles of injustice. Librarians and underserved community members will be empowered and co-create inclusive tools and models. Our diverse community-embedded project team possesses the necessary content knowledge, leadership skills, and experience to realize significant shifts across the field. IJI will strategically build and enhance access to library and information services. The project model will be developed to serve individuals of diverse geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds; those with limited functional literacy and information skills; those with difficulty using libraries; and underserved communities, including children from families with incomes below the poverty line.

National Impact
IJI will have far-reaching impact. It will provide a physical and virtual hub to access innovative library training and support materials. Additionally, it will foster important connections and facilitate rich engagement – time and space for diverse community members to gather and share questions, concerns, strategies, and successes. It will serve as an effective model focusing on critical, cross-cultural, interdisciplinary understanding and action. It will benefit librarians and community members, particularly those who are underserved and most greatly affected by poverty, violence, and incarceration. Based on professional experience, compliance with research standards, community embeddedness, and cultural awareness, we anticipate risks associated with project implementation to be low, while the rewards will lead to significant impact.

Budget Summary
IJI requests a total of $68,228 from IMLS for this one-year project from August, 1, 2020- July 31, 2021. Salaries and Wages and Fringe Benefits will cover a project coordinator in summer, support for A Way In and ECCSC collaborators; Travel costs for community member participation in the workshop; Supplies, Materials, and Equipment needed to develop, implement, and evaluate the project; Student Support for a student worker to assist with project promotion and communication. The total budget is for $77,296 including direct and indirect costs at the negotiated rate. Project coordinator salary during the academic year will be provided as cost share.

References
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