

Co-Designing Library-Based Adult and Family Literacy Support Centers

Introduction. The American Library Association (ALA) requests \$986,944 in IMLS National Leadership Grants for Libraries funding that will be expanded by contributions from members of the new Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network (ALL IN), including World Education (WE), National Center for Families Learning (NCFL), the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy (BBF), and ProLiteracy provided as cost share for a three-year implementation grant: **Co-Designing Library-Based Adult and Family Literacy Support Centers.** This project aligns with Agency Goal 1 of lifelong learning, Objective 1.1 of learning opportunities for all, and Program Goal 1 of building capacity, and Objectives 1.2 of collaboration and 1.3 of continuous learning. ALA in collaboration with national nonprofits and local libraries will co-design, publish, and provide technical assistance for Library-Based Adult and Family Literacy Support Centers nationwide. This project aims to mobilize “grasstops” resources, such as evidence-based models for community co-design and capacity-building, in service to “grassroots”, specifically local branch libraries that are often responsible for serving the highest adult and family literacy needs. Partner library systems include: Delaware Public Libraries (statewide consortium), Chicago Public Library, and Charleston County Public Library, with its rural, underserved areas.

Project Justification

Today, more than half (54%) of adults in the United States struggle with foundational reading and digital problem-solving skills, which includes the ability to access and interpret information in digital environments to perform practical tasks. Literacy is a multigenerational issue, with the National Bureau of Economic Research estimating that 72% of the children of parents with low literacy skills will experience low literacy themselves. As trusted institutions, libraries afford access, create public, multigenerational spaces, and support curiosity across diverse learners. Libraries serve as informal literacy support centers given that patrons increasingly seek foundational reading and technology support to navigate complex health and social services online, such as housing and job applications. As key anchor institutions in communities across the nation, public libraries are well positioned to increase adult and family literacy equity by expanding literacy support services and partnering more effectively with schools, families, and community-based organizations, but face persistent challenges in resources, coordination, and alignment.

The purpose of the project is to co-design, pilot, improve, and scale a model for Library Adult and Family Literacy Support (AFLS) Centers with a comprehensive playbook for community literacy-building and train-the-trainer materials for replication in libraries nationwide. The national team will research how libraries, in particular branch libraries with limited services and capacity, are successfully meeting adult and family literacy needs as well as where they aspire to improve services in virtual and in-person settings. Through intensive co-design, library and community leaders, including adults and families seeking literacy support, will surface the range of services, partnerships, and referral processes needed to address diverse patrons’ multifaceted literacy needs, goals, and aspirations. Trainings will be designed to build critical skills and competencies among library leaders, staff, and volunteers to support adult and family literacy skills, including digital, through culturally responsive and trauma-informed library-led programming with warm referrals to partner organizations in their local ecosystem. New models for literacy-building service coordination and provision will efficiently build on the strengths of each member of the ecosystem, prioritizing the lived experiences and literacy needs of local adult learners and families—and break new ground in the campaign for literacy equity.

Project Plan

ALA will lead the following project activities in collaboration with key partners from ALL IN. **Year 1:** Conduct action research with a landscape scan to capture existing models, practices, barriers, as well as aspirations for literacy-building via branch libraries across urban, suburban, and rural communities. Focus will be on identifying practices for ensuring effective, trauma-informed services, including protocols for warm referrals, for marginalized populations such as, unhoused communities, returning citizens, English learners, or the undocumented. Issue report and generate content and strategies for library capacity-building through a series of co-design sessions with library leaders, adult learners, and community members in the state of Delaware; Chicago, Illinois; and Charleston, South Carolina. **Year 2:** Co-design and develop resources and trainings to create AFLS Centers. Start to deliver capacity building trainings to library staff and volunteers in participating communities, prioritizing equitable access for branch location staff. Iteratively evaluate effectiveness and document learnings from this rollout. Hold library-led maker spaces with key grant partners to collate and develop needed resources identified in the landscape scan. Develop draft capacity building resources and training

for libraries. **Year 3:** Finalize the community-generated resources and training materials. Design and disseminate products and capacity-building opportunities. Provide targeted technical assistance (TA) to diverse libraries across the country, prioritizing outreach to specific libraries through literacy gap map analytics and census data. Evaluate project for effectiveness, efficiency, quality, and timeliness using a developmental evaluation (DE) approach that is agile, responsive, and focused on value to end-users --in this case dynamic, diverse libraries, including in rural communities.

In order to integrate equity-centered AFLS Centers successfully, library leadership and staff need to develop skills and competencies as literacy conveners and providers. As implementing partners to support ALA, ALL IN will lead the research and landscape scan activities to identify existing literacy services, community needs, and aspirations. World Education (WE) will intentionally include library leaders, staff, and CBO partners to co-design equitable and resilient learning ecosystems and innovative ways to engage patrons through technology use. WE will collaborate with NCFL to innovate library-based approaches to professional development, such as integrating community-driven maker spaces to drive adult and family literacy access and attainment on topics like technology use, artificial intelligence (AI) and multigenerational literacy. NCFL, in partnership with WE, will facilitate cross-sector convenings with libraries, families, local school staff, CBOs, and others to gain alignment around multigenerational literacy, digital equity, and learning.

Diversity Plan. Per ALA’s strategic directions, ALA commits to “addressing, dismantling, and transforming policies structures and bias throughout the organization and the field.” In this project, our EDI approach will intentionally address barriers to equitable access and participation no matter one’s race, ethnicity, gender and sexual identification, physical and cognitive abilities and learning needs, geographic isolation and distribution, socioeconomic level, or other factors. ALA will build on its membership of the ALL IN coalition to deepen our collective impact across the adult learning ecosystem, ensuring that community-based libraries are key collaborators in reaching the unique and diverse literacy needs of adults and families nationwide.

Project Results

This project will inspire and support through capacity building and resources for over 1000 library staff members nationwide to learn how to lead and leverage Adult and Family Literacy Support Centers. Over 500 libraries will receive support through products, over 100 through trainings, and at least 50 through customized technical assistance during the research and design process. ALA, with support and guidance from ALL IN partners, will generate specific products: 1) An action research landscape report, 2) A comprehensive, replicable model for AFLS Centers, including a playbook for advancing adult/family literacy through libraries, including small, but significant branch locations, and 3) A set of train-the-trainer materials for libraries to build initial and ongoing staff capacity to support literacy-building activities across the community, including for establishing effective partnerships, protocols, and processes, such as trauma-informed ways to make warm referrals to service providers. These resources as well as replicable practices, models, and alliances can be widely used, adapted, scaled, or replicated to extend and leverage the benefits of federal investment. By reaching this critical mass of public libraries, serving as anchor institutions for adult and family literacy-building activities, literacy services will become part of the main role and identity of hundreds more libraries. Hundreds of thousands of adults and families will benefit from increased literacy services, impacting education, civic engagement, and workforce outcomes to improvements in community health and well-being. Libraries are enduring, evolving institutions that democratic societies will always need to nurture civil society, and inform public discourse at all levels, ensuring everyone in our communities has a voice through literacy.

Budget Summary

The total anticipated cost is \$1,973,888, including a 1:1 cost share rate and indirect costs. ALA seeks \$986,944 over 3 years from IMLS, including \$155,375 salary; (FTE 100% Primary Investigator; FTE 50% Support; Base salary \$75,000 and \$50,000; 3% salary increase annually); \$51,272 benefits; \$76,700 travel (field research, trainings and convenings); \$4,000 supplies; \$540,000 stipends for ALL-IN partners and 3 library partners; \$77,000 in Other (promotion, evaluation; stipends for branch libraries and community partners; playbook and materials design, publication and distribution; web page design; and technical support); and \$82,597 in indirect costs (federal negotiated rate of 25.10%).