

**Project name: Libraries as catalysts for unveiling more inclusive data in rural areas**

**Introduction:** The Califa Group, in collaboration with the University of Washington Information School, requests \$249,999 in funding for a two-year *Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian program grant to create a training program for rural libraries aimed at developing community engagement strategies to implement inclusive data practices* (Goal 3: Objectives 3.1 & 3.2). Library workers, policymakers, and community organizers, often struggle to find datasets that accurately represent the realities and aspirations of rural communities. To address this data gap in rural communities, we propose co-creating a training program with rural library workers that is based, in part, on the results of a rural libraries data needs assessment that we will conduct as a first step of this project. The training will detail a process for bringing community stakeholders together to determine gaps in existing public datasets, identifying missing voices, and devising strategies to address these gaps. This process, which we define as *inclusive data practices*, is needed to generate data that better represents communities and facilitates the development of more equitable programs, services, and public policies. At the conclusion of this project, ***we will deliver a free, on-demand online training course that will equip rural library workers with the skills and tools to facilitate inclusive data practices*** in rural communities in the production, analysis, and use of data to address local social issues. The partner organizations for this project are Califa Group, University of Washington (UW) Information School, Research Institute for Public Libraries (RIPL), Infopeople, and rural library workers.

**Project Justification:** Data to measure economic development and social wellbeing is a foundational element for inclusive program development, informed policy decision-making, and equitable allocation of resources. Yet, we also know that as much as data can reveal, data often embody the historical underrepresentation of certain racial, ethnic, and other marginalized groups. ***Public libraries serving rural areas struggle to find open data that accurately reflect the diversity and complexities of their communities.*** Challenges like data granularity, accessibility, resource constraints, multiple definitions of rurality, and rapidly changing demographics ([Johnson & Lichter, 2022](#)) often limit the effectiveness of existing open data to provide meaningful insights for driving sustainable rural community development ([Payton Scally, et al., 2020](#)). Additionally, indicators of rural prosperity are unique and require distinct metrics compared to urban areas. For example, indicators related to entrepreneurship, agricultural development, social capital, government capacity, and voluntarism, among others, are fundamental for understanding the realities of rural communities. However, these indicators are inadequately represented in public data sets (*ibid*). Community-driven inclusive data processes could play a pivotal role in creating more representative and holistic data about a community. This improved data can then positively facilitate the development of more equitable public policies and programs, fostering sustainable rural development.

As trusted, safe spaces for civic participation and dialogue, public libraries are well-positioned to play a more central role in co-creating with their communities more inclusive data practices ***This project will leverage existing strengths and provide additional resources to public library workers in rural areas to facilitate utilizing inclusive data practices to produce better data for their community.*** A previous project partner collaboration culminated in the creation and implementation of [two four-week online synchronous training courses](#) for public library staff in California, and on a series of hybrid webinars offered in New York, Minnesota, and during the Research Institute for Public Libraries (RIPL) conferences in 2020 and 2021. These courses were popular but not developed with the rural context in mind and focused on particular issues occurring during the COVID pandemic. Rural library workers who provided feedback after attending the training suggested that adapting the content to include specific examples reflecting rural dynamics and data challenges, and reformatting it into a self-paced learning format would make it more relevant for their needs. This project is also informed by prior projects funded by IMLS, including several projects that have focused on enabling open data use by equipping library staff to better use existing data to identify community needs. (e.g., “Leveraging Use of Open Data by Public Library Staff for Community Benefit” (LG-246255-OLS-20); “The Regional Equity Atlas” (LG-94-18-0278-18); the “[Civic Data Education Series](#)” (RE-254899-OLS-23) and the [Data Privacy Project](#) (RE-06-15-0050-15)).

**Project Work Plan:** ***Our approach to developing the training program places the voices and expertise of rural library workers at the forefront throughout the project.*** By actively involving them in every phase of the project, we aim to create a training program deeply rooted in the needs and aspirations of rural library staff and their communities. The project lead will be authorizing agent Veronda Pitchford, Califa Assistant Director (librarian with extensive experience managing and directing complex grant projects); project co-directors from UW Maria Garrido (co-creator of original training and experience in co-design) and Stacey Wedlake (experience developing training and professional development resources and in co-design); senior personnel Linda Hofschire of Infopeople & RIPL (experience in professional development for public library workers) and Chris Jowaisas of UW (experience in co-design with public librarians and open data); and consultant Chris Rothschild (co-creator of original training). Throughout the project the team will hold bi-weekly meetings to monitor progress and plan next steps. We propose a four phase work plan:

**Phase 1: Planning, rural libraries data and community engagement needs assessment, and creating a co-design group (August - December 2024 | 4 months).** The core team will facilitate an event at the ARSL annual conference to gain insights into how rural library staff currently use open datasets, the obstacles they encounter when seeking relevant community data, their current collaborations with local stakeholders, and their broader community engagement initiatives. The information gathered during the event will serve as the foundation for the first iteration of the rural-focused inclusive data training curriculum. We will also recruit 4-6 library workers from different rural geographies to be part of a *co-design group* to review the existing training material referenced above in the Project Justification, identify gaps, and support the development of new modules that are tailored to a rural library context. We will recruit participants from the event and our professional networks.

**Phase 2: Co-design the first iteration of a rural-focused inclusive data training (January - August 2025 | 8 months).** Based on the information gathered during the workshop, the project team and the co-design group will work together to develop the first iteration of the training. Activities during this phase include: 1) *Revise modules from existing training and design for an online, self-paced delivery format;* 2) *Outline new modules based on workshop participants' community data needs and challenges;* and 3) *Develop 2 new modules to be piloted at a second event during ARSL 25 and solicit feedback from the larger rural library community in Phase 3.* The core team will coordinate a planning meeting with the co-design group at the beginning of this phase to create a review process and will hold monthly meetings to share progress, integrate feedback, and plan next steps.

**Phase 3: Finalize training modules, tools and resources (September 2025 - April 2026 | 8 months).** The project team will facilitate an event at the 2025 ARSL conference for feedback on the pilot modules. The team will integrate this feedback and develop the rest of the modules, tools and additional resources, in close consultation with the co-design group. Activities during this phase include: 1) *Pilot the two fully developed modules and share the outline with all the components of the training for feedback during the ARSL 2025 event;* 2) *Integrate feedback;* 3) *Develop the rest of the modules, tools, and additional resources;* and 4) *Design a dissemination strategy to launch the training program in Phase 4.*

**Phase 4: Launch open training, publish training resources, and produce an action plan for inclusive data practices (May - July 2026 | 3 months).** At the conclusion of the project, a free, on-demand version of the training program will be released for open enrollment of library workers. Additional training resources will also be published to assist library support organizations that wish to facilitate a synchronous or hybrid training model. Outreach will be conducted through national and state library associations, project partners, and prior training participants to ensure awareness of the training opportunity. The core team will conduct three online workshops to further aid dissemination and engagement. Additionally, an action plan will be published that identifies key strategies for advancing the utilization of inclusive data practices in rural public libraries. This plan will be based upon the data gathered during the project, including the rural data needs assessment, co-design group input, and feedback from the broader group of rural library workers.

**Diversity Plan:** The project focuses on redressing data gaps for marginalized communities. It provides rural libraries with tools to better serve rural, low-income, racially and ethnically diverse communities in ways that empower marginalized people to have a voice in creating more inclusive data practices. For our co-design group, we will recruit libraries that represent diversity of geographic and demographic communities. Additionally, engaging with the broader community at ARSL conferences will help our materials to incorporate strategies and methods that represent different rural realities.

**Project Results:** This project will have the following *outcomes which support national impact:* 1) Free, on-demand, online training, hosted by Infopeople for rural library staff on how to implement inclusive data practices with their communities created through iterative co-design with rural library workers; 2) Curricular support materials for library support organizations to facilitate a hybrid or synchronous training for rural public libraries utilizing the online training course; 3) Increased capacity of rural library workers to engage their communities about data gaps needed to address local social issues; and 4) Advance an understanding of current rural data and community engagement needs and opportunities for future work. All outputs of the project will be co-hosted on the training website for findability and accessibility. We will use the expansive networks of the project team and engagement with ARSL to disseminate the results and the newly-developed training.

**Budget Summary:** The proposed 2-year budget is for \$249,999, inclusive of Califa's 10% indirect cost rate (\$18,940). The total anticipated costs includes \$43,000 for personnel (salaries + fringe benefits for Califa / Infopeople staff); \$14,400 in conference travel and registration fees; \$126,996 is requested for a subward to the University of Washington, of which all will support staff salaries, wages, and fringe benefits including the 37.4% UW indirect rate; \$5,000 is requested for training consultant fees for Chris Rothschild; \$41,663 is requested for other costs, including library workers' stipends for participation in the co-design group (\$40,163), and workshop meals (\$1,500).