

IMLS Planning Grant Application: Fostering Empathy with Immigrant Communities to Enhance Library Public Programs and Services

Introduction: The proposed project, **Fostering Empathy with Immigrant Communities to Enhance Library Public Programs and Services**, aims to build the capacity of libraries to improve community well-being and strengthen civic engagement, in keeping with the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian grant program's Goal 2: Strengthen Community Engagement and Objectives 2.1: Promote inclusive engagement across diverse audiences, and 2.2: Support community collaboration and foster civic discourse. This project, led by Califa Group in partnership with California Humanities, will enhance the ability of libraries across the country to welcome and support the lifelong learning needs of immigrant communities, a need that has been given urgency as a result of recent migration patterns that have dispersed refugees and immigrants outside of major cities and traditional areas of resettlement. We request \$150,000 for this two year project, which will enhance and scale-up to national scope an ongoing program, **Library Innovation Lab: Exploring New Ways of Engaging Immigrant Communities through Public Humanities Programming**, which has been successfully piloted by California Humanities in California public libraries over the last seven years. Our intended project results are: a) revision of the existing curriculum to emphasize how cultivating empathy with immigrants and engaging them in co-design activities contributes to effective library programs; b) field testing the revised curriculum with a cohort of libraries recruited from across the country; c) identification of new models to deliver the program, program partners, and an action plan for broader state, regional, and national reach.

Project Justification: Although a growing number of libraries want to better serve immigrant communities, along with other historically underserved populations, many lack the skills and resources to make these aspirations reality. The LIL program, which has been field tested in California public libraries from 2015-2023 with staff from over 60 branches and 50 jurisdictions, provides an effective and affordable approach to in-depth training for library staff. By cultivating library workers' capacity to empathize with immigrant's experiences, hopes, and dreams during the course of a 10-month cohort-based learning community which provides a supportive, learn-by-doing practical experience, LIL enables libraries to provide culturally relevant programs that grow organically from the desires and aspirations voiced by immigrant community members. One example of the successful projects produced by LIL libraries was a Day of the Dead celebration at a rural library, which responded to the community's desire to have their children better understand the meaning behind traditional cultural practices such as altar-building and sugar skull decorating, along with the foods, music, and stories associated with this holiday. Working in partnership with local community members to design the program, continuing collaborations have resulted in a new collection of books in the Mixtec language, establishment of a women's group, and other services to this community of indigenous Mexican migrant agricultural workers.

Stressing the value of maintaining cultural connections as immigrants navigate the challenges of adapting to life in American society, LIL effectively complements more traditional "needs-based" library programs such as citizenship and ELL classes. Evaluation to date shows how LIL has increased capacity, confidence, and practical skills on the part of participating library staffers, who also report increased interest in collaborating with immigrants to develop new programs and services. Feedback gathered from thousands of community participants – immigrants and others – shows how LIL programming has resulted in public perception of libraries as inclusive and welcoming places in which all people feel seen, heard, and valued. Given these successes, we would like to explore how it LIL's most successful elements might be further enhanced by enriching the emphasis on building empathy brought by Design Thinking with application of the Radical Empathy model to further connect library workers to the immigrant communities they serve, as well as identifying additional ways to involve community members in co-designing programs to augment the resources in the Design Thinking for Libraries Toolkit

funded by the Gates Foundation, which we currently use. We also want to explore and identify new ways to expand the program to reach communities across the nation, given the interest already expressed by librarians at conferences and the Infopeople webinar hosted by Califa in 2022.

Project Workplan. This work will be accomplished in several phases. In Phase 1 (summer and fall 2024), we will research new developments in inclusive and human-centered design to identify best practices. We will analyze existing data from Library Innovation Lab cohorts 2015-2023 (final reports from library participants, audience surveys, debriefing sessions, and staff site visits and observations) to deepen our understanding of program impact to date, as well as collect new information from past participants and the broader library community through surveys, focus groups, and interviews. We will develop an advisory group of library staff, administrators, field experts, and past LIL participants – library workers and community members – to provide input throughout the process. In Phase 2 (2025) we will revise the curriculum based on what we have learned, field test it with a national cohort of libraries, collect and analyze resulting data, and continue to consult with advisors, experts, and other stakeholders. In Phase 3 (2026) we will cultivate partnerships with library and immigrant-serving organizations to support the new program (curriculum and delivery models), continue to measure program impacts with our participants, and refine our evaluation tools. Throughout the process we will communicate findings and results with the library community to raise awareness and interest.

Planning and implementation will be managed jointly by staff at Califa and California Humanities over a 24-month period. Contracted consultants will assist with data collection and analysis and codifying and field-testing the revised curriculum. Progress will be measured through setting deadlines and deliverables for each component of the workplan and assigning responsibility to each team member. Resources needed include Califa and California Humanities staff and contractors, stipends for participating libraries, travel to disseminate information at professional meetings and conferences, meeting expenses associated with evaluation and research activities (virtual and in-person focus groups and site visits), and operational support for both Califa and California Humanities activities.

Diversity Plan: DEI considerations are at the heart of the current LIL program, which focuses on building the capacity of librarians and libraries to better serve an important constituency of underserved people – immigrants. The proposed project will enhance the capacity of libraries to authentically engage with their communities, as well as promote a model of program planning and development that aligns with best practices in the field and are generalizable to library work more broadly.

Project Results: Our aims for this project include using research findings to enhance the curriculum (including incorporating Radical Empathy and other user-oriented design methods as well as Design Thinking); improve the quality of the training and follow-up support; identifying effective models for expanded service delivery (might include packaging or “franchising” the model; and cultivating partnerships with library jurisdictions, library- and immigrant-serving organizations, and other state humanities councils. This will enable us to further strengthen the LIL program as well as expand its operational scope to maximize the program’s potential to benefit libraries and communities nationally.

Budget Summary: We respectfully request a total of \$150,000 for this work over the 24 month period for staffing (\$41,000 for California Humanities and \$21,000 for Califa), an evaluation consultant (\$20,000), a library curriculum consultant (\$12,000); stipends for focus group and advisory board participants (\$10,000); travel to professional conferences (\$5,000), and \$26,000 to support national library participants in Phase 2 (beta-testing the revised curriculum). Califa Group will receive 10% of the total grant amount for indirect cost recovery (\$15,000). California Humanities will commit \$150,000 over the grant period for staffing, consultants, travel, operations, and participant support as cost-sharing.