

## Community Building: *Or, How Do I Find a Good Partner?*

There is no widely accepted definition of community engagement and the meaning can vary in different contexts. The following are some definitions of community engagement mainly in the context of [vertical community engagement](#), particularly in relation to [planning and decision making](#).

Community engagement is a process enabling a public library to:

- proactively seek out community values, concerns, and aspirations;
- incorporate those values, concerns, and aspirations into a decision-making process or processes; and
- establish an ongoing partnership with the community to ensure that the community's priorities and values continue to shape services and the service system.

Community engagement is an ongoing commitment that all public library directors and library board members should consider incorporating into in their workflow. What it will look like will depend on you, your library, and your community.

While there is no one pathway for developing community engagement which every library can follow, there are resources which provide tools, so library directors and board members working with their community stakeholders, can create a successful community engagement plan.

Here are some basic tips:

1. Identify a long-term, broad vision for your community. Remember that the library is a part of the community. The vision should be about the community and the role that library can play to support a healthy community.
2. Identify who in your community should be involved in the conversation. Who is interested in building a healthy, strong community?
3. Review the resources listed below and others as well. Pick one that best fits your situation. Or, better yet, use parts from all resources that apply.

4. Make a commitment as director to maintain the activities of community engagement as an ongoing part of your responsibility as a library director. And make sure that your board understands the importance of community building and supports the library's efforts in in this area.
5. Think big, but realistically. What relationships can you build and successfully maintain? Keeping the conversation going is important so that individuals can be heard and can contribute.
6. Use your library community connections to discover what other communities are doing. Learn from your colleagues. Or better yet, if your communities are close geographically, work together.

Today's world of information is changing quickly. It has always been a tough road to go alone, but today seems to be even tougher. Here are some reasons why community building makes the easier for all concerned:

- Building collaborative partnerships with other like-minded organizations in your community can maximize the impact of your library's long-term vision. If you are a one-person library, you may not be working 40 hours a week at this position. Therefore, you need help.
- Engaging others in the community can help the director and the library board keep the library relevant, regardless of the fast-changing world in which we live.
- Community engagement builds strong communities which in turn impact the use and viability of the local public library.
- And you can probably add to this list to meet the needs of your community.

## Resources

- **Community Heart & Soul: Revitalizing Small U.S. Cities and Towns**
  - A resident-driven process that engages the entire population of a town in identifying what they love most about their community, what future they want for it, and how to achieve it.

- Developed and field-tested over a decade in partnership with over 90 small cities and towns across America, Community Heart & Soul is a proven process for engaging a community in shaping its future.
- <https://www.communityheartandsoul.org/>
- **Turning Outward Resources for Libraries**
  - Tools below designed to help libraries strengthen their role as community leaders and bring about positive change in their communities.
  - <http://www.ala.org/tools/librariestransform/libraries-transforming-communities/resources-for-library-professionals>
- **The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions**
  - We envision a future where communities create their own vibrant and lasting solutions to the social and economic problems that they face.
  - <https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/>