

Public Libraries Are Critical Partners for Collective Impact on Climate Action

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ABSTRACT

Public libraries exist across every state and territory in the United States and are charged with serving the public good, including community lifelong learning needs, inclusive of STEM education. In this context, the profession of librarianship has developed new thinking to articulate how public libraries can embrace the core value of sustainability, including a National Climate Action Strategy for Libraries. This strategy calls on public libraries to harness the transformative power of education for climate justice by developing relationships with local community organizations. This article introduces the framework that has been developed around this topic; some of the work individual public libraries have accomplished; and points out opportunities for enhanced success of climate action plans and policies when public libraries are included.

INTRODUCTION

Public libraries are uniquely positioned as catalysts for climate action. They are ubiquitous, with more than 200 locations in Maine. On average, Americans live about 2 miles from a local library (Donnelly 2015). They are trusted, with 87 percent of millennials and 74 percent of baby boomers agreeing that their library helps them find information that is trustworthy and reliable (Geiger 2017). Some 40 percent of Americans say they trust libraries and librarians a lot—more than twice the rate registered for local and national media and the highest figure across eight information sources (Horrigan 2017). Libraries are strongly valued, both for providing access to materials and resources and for promoting literacy and improving the overall quality of life; 94 percent of Americans say that having a public library improves the quality of life in a community (Pew 2013). They cultivate social capital in their communities, serving as community anchors that contribute to social cohesion and civic participation both through on site services and programs and through digital equity, inclusion, and justice (ALA 2023; Cyr 2019; Johnson 2010).

PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND THE PUBLIC GOOD

Public good is working to improve society and protect the rights to education, literacy, and intellectual freedom. Libraries are an essential public good and are fundamental institutions in democratic societies. Library workers provide the highest service levels to create informed, connected, educated, and empowered communities.

(Core Values of Librarianship, ALA¹)

In modern life it is rare to have access to spaces that do not require the purchase of an admission ticket or a product to remain in that space. Public libraries create welcoming, inclusive spaces and

services that are open to all while carrying out an educational mission designed for the public good, not a corporate bottom line. Libraries provide materials, information, and programs that present all points of view on current and historical issues and defend against censorship to ensure all members of a community can access the information and literature that helps them better understand the world around them. Most libraries across the country have adopted the “Library Bill of Rights,” which institutionalizes the rights of Americans to use a library regardless of their “origin, age, background, or views,” while also respecting their privacy.²

This focus on the defense of intellectual freedom is key in climate action. For example, issues surrounding climate justice require a keen understanding of history, economics, and public policy from all perspectives—not just from the viewpoints of those in powerful and influential positions in our government and corporations. The openness and inclusivity of public libraries in general, and their facilities and grounds in particular, have resulted in communities increasingly finding value in them as a place of convening, and a physical space that connects the community (Rainwater 2023).

PROFESSIONAL PRIORITIZATION OF SUSTAINABILITY AMONG LIBRARIANS

Public libraries are playing an important and unique role in promoting community awareness about resilience, climate change and a sustainable future. In 2019, the American Library Association (ALA)—the oldest and largest membership association in the library profession with more than 50,000 individual and 4,000 organizational members³—adopted sustainability as a core professional value. In adopting sustainability as a core value, ALA recognized the findings in the latest report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The report, written and edited by 91 scientists from 40 countries who analyzed more than 6,000 scientific studies, found that the immediate consequences of climate change are far more dire than originally predicted, calling for a transformation of the world economy at a speed and scale that has “no documented historic precedent” (IPCC 2018: 17). ALA recognized the need to harness the strength of the library network to pull together with other agencies and institutions to address climate change and its impacts on people and the environment, including the health and well-being of all Americans.

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ALA has built on the work of its membership and partnered with the Sustainable Libraries Initiative (SLI), a not-for-profit project created to build leadership in the library profession to ensure libraries and communities thrive in the coming years in the face of climate change and other major disruptions predicted throughout the country. Over the past decade, thanks to the work of ALA, the SLI, and their partners, a growing number of libraries have deliberately prioritized climate action in their strategic plans, facility plans, and community partnerships. The SLI also has a sustainable library certification program (SLCP) in which over 200 libraries—mostly public libraries—are participating.⁴ The SLCP helps libraries

manage the organizational and cultural changes necessary to prioritize sustainable thinking: using the triple-bottom-line definition of sustainability to balance environmental stewardship, social equity, and economic feasibility throughout all decision-making in the library across 12 categories.

The ALA-SLI partnership has resulted in the development of a *National Climate Action Strategy for Libraries* (ALA-SLI 2024), released in June 2024. The strategy exists to focus the attention, energy, and resources of libraries in three key areas:

- Libraries are encouraged to align greenhouse gas emission reduction goals with those that international climate scientists and policymakers consider necessary to prevent catastrophic cascading effects.
- Libraries are encouraged to adopt both internal disaster-preparedness plans and strategic goals that speak to the most likely climate hazards facing their area to contribute to their community's resilience
- Libraries are encouraged to harness the transformative power of education for climate justice and developing relationships with local community organizations working on climate justice to embed a deeper awareness of the intersection of human and civil rights with climate stewardship than is presently found.

This strategy will result in even more libraries being ready and willing participants and partners in climate action efforts for collective impact.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF EDUCATION

The *National Climate Action Strategy for Libraries* calls on libraries to work with partners to harness the transformative power of education for climate justice. The educational role of public libraries sees local libraries leveraging physical and outdoor spaces, technology, trained information professionals, a variety of collections, and creative partnerships to meet the needs of their community. While traditional services such as book lending (physical and digital), homework help, and research are still prevalent, the modern public library has expanded the definition of collections and programming to more adequately meet different learning styles and communities' priorities.

It is not uncommon to see libraries lending objects far beyond books: gardening tools, kitchenware, craft instruments, sports equipment, home improvement items, and

items to increase health and wellness.⁵ The design of programming for community members of all ages has exploded, between 2010 and 2016 there was a 72 percent increase (ALA 2019) in the amount of public programming happening in public libraries, and this number is only growing, evolving beyond the traditional story hour for children and book club for adults. The range of topics in library programming is almost unlimited, but all speak to the aspirations and learning goals of their community. A significant investment has been made in the evolution of libraries as venues for informal science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education. The National Science Foundation has funded several programs and studies demonstrating the effectiveness of public libraries in STEM education.⁶ Libraries may be providing STEM programs on their own, or in partnership with other libraries, museums, businesses, and schools to educate and engage the public in STEM topics (Dusenbery et al. 2020).

The educational programming work undertaken in public libraries typically requires community partners. Across the United States, public libraries are working with everyone from university researchers to community-based organizations to develop new approaches for learning, growth, and action—the ideal combination to help climate action plans come to life through partnerships large and small.

LEVERAGING PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Public library facilities serve as demonstration sites for climate change mitigation technology and applications such as renewable energy, energy conservation, water management, stormwater mitigation, and waste management.

- The Hendrick Hudson Free Library (Montrose, New York), the first library in the country to complete the SLCP, boasts a solar array and battery storage, rain garden, composting, and more. They use a flat panel monitor in the children's area to educate the community about solar—how it works, how much the library is saving, and the environmental impact of switching to renewable energy.
- The Chrisney Branch of the Lincoln Heritage Public Library (Chrisney, Indiana) was the first net-zero energy library in the nation, serving as a tactile demonstration of how high-performance green building and renewable energy could be realized on a tight budget.
- The Concord Free Public Library (Concord, Massachusetts), the first library in Massachusetts to

complete the SLCP, partnered with their municipality to adopt a sustainability plan, creating goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, prioritizing indoor air quality, and ecological restoration on their property.

- The San Diego County Public Library, the first in California to complete the SLCP, adopted a master facility plan that has set the goal of new construction projects exclusively being designed to net-zero energy and net-zero water design standards.

There is also a growing trend of library facilities providing resources during and after natural disasters, including those events supercharged by climate change. Public library facilities, always a refuge for intellectual pursuits, now serve as refuge for an expanding list of basic human needs: air quality, cooling, warming, and food security. Libraries also play a role in acute disaster recovery efforts, serving as rallying points for volunteers, information distribution centers, and hosts to disaster recovery agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—so much so that FEMA formally designated libraries as essential community organizations through the Stafford Act of 2011 (Patin 2020). For example, the Lindenhurst Memorial Library (Lindenhurst, New York)—one of the first libraries to complete the SLCP—served as a FEMA disaster recovery center for close to a year in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy. In addition to FEMA, the library hosted representatives from several New York state agencies, other federal agencies, and county and municipal agencies and nonprofits. In one day alone, the American Red Cross food truck served hot meals for 500 residents in the library's parking lot (Capella Loehr 2012).

Thanks to the role the Lindenhurst Memorial Library played in Superstorm Sandy and their early adoption of the SLCP, municipal leaders have recognized the library as a strong partner. In 2022, the county executive announced a multimillion-dollar investment in electric vehicle charging stations to be colocated at libraries to charge residents' vehicles and county fleet vehicles. During the press conference to announce the investment, it was noted he chose this library as the location for the announcement due to their leadership on climate action (SCG 2022).

Outdoor spaces at libraries are increasingly leveraged to meet community goals for not only public gathering spaces but also for food security with libraries providing community gardens to grow fruits and vegetables. From *library farms*, to edible landscaping, to community

composting, public libraries are expanding people's minds about how they can contribute to community goals.⁷ In Oslo, Norway, public and private funding was used in a partnership with the library to explore ways of integrating urban agriculture in urban public spaces. A study of this project found that this partnership created the opportunity for the dissemination of knowledge on food systems and ecology (Evensen and Stafseng 2024). Study authors noted that key to the project's success was the collaboration across sectors and the public-private partnerships created in the process, showing, once again, that libraries make great partners.

The egalitarian nature of library facilities—in that they are open to everyone in a community—results in residents of all walks of life experiencing a public facility designed with their health and the health of their environments at its core. Quietly leading by example, a growing

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LEVERAGING COLLECTIONS, PROGRAMS, AND SERVICES

Libraries have a proven track record of contributing to the social well-being of communities. Research shows that public libraries are deeply embedded in their communities in ways that enrich the well-being of local residents. Libraries meet a diverse range of needs for individuals, organizations, and their broader community tackling such issues as community health, school effectiveness, institutional connections, and cultural opportunities. In addition to the traditional roles of public libraries—curation of knowledge, collective history, and cultural heritage; the provision of access to public

knowledge and learning; and the creation of spaces for children to learn and play—libraries are facilitating “access to resources and services to get things done” (IMLS 2021: 14).

Examples include

- hosting repair cafes and fix-it clinics to connect residents with local experts who will teach them how to fix their stuff;
- hosting bicycle-repair programs and even installing bike repair stations on library property;
- investing in makerspaces and providing access to expensive or unique equipment (e.g., 3D printers and scanners, laser engraving and cutting machines, computer numerical control machines, soldering irons, sewing machines) that enable residents to imagine, create, and innovate; and
- expanding the library-of-things concept to include access to hand tools, kitchenware, repair tools, science equipment (e.g., air-quality monitors, multimeters, electricity-usage monitors, participatory science kits).

This library-as-laboratory concept encourages and empowers residents to not only understand the world around them but also to engage in actively repairing it and innovating for our future. The programs that are offered alongside the tangible resources encourage collaborative problem-solving, on a small scale, but they set the model for the larger work necessary in communities to ensure we work together to solve the problems we face due to climate change.

CONCLUSION

Social cohesion is the ability for community members to cooperate to achieve shared well-being. Strong social cohesion is one of the most important factors in successfully responding to climate change impacts (Malerba 2022). Climate action plans will not succeed without the social cohesion, social capital, and social infrastructure that public libraries can provide. The human effort required to make the necessary changes at the speed and scale called for by climate scientists and policymakers is enormous. Without neighbors who have empathy, respect and understanding for one another, climate action plans will fall flat. Libraries are the special ingredient, found in every community across the land, that climate action plans need to actualize the buy-in, collaboration, and energy that will bring them to life.

NOTES

- 1 <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues>
- 2 <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>
- 3 Membership, American Library Association, <https://www.ala.org/membership>
- 4 The Maine Library Association recently signed a memo of understanding with the SLI to secure free membership for MLA members in the SLI.
- 5 The Library of Things, Curtis Memorial Library (ME), <https://curtislibrary.com/library-of-things/>
- 6 "Reimagining Equity and Values in Informal STEM Education," <https://informalscience.org/stem-learning-libraries/>
- 7 "What Is the Library Farm?," Northern Onondaga Public Library, <https://www.nopl.org/library-farm/>; "We Have an Edible Campus in Our Back Yard," Emmaus Public Library, <https://www.emmauspl.org/edible-campus/>; "Food & Compost," Greenwich Free Library, <https://greenwichfreelibrary.org/food-compost/>

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