

Building Community Trust through Libraries



Photo courtesy: Memphis Public Libraries

Overview

In many American communities, public libraries are the most prominent and accessible venues for people to come together across social and political divides, to benefit from a public institution, and to build trust and pride in their communities. But libraries also face unprecedented threats to funding, public trust, and their longstanding bipartisan appeal. To help libraries navigate these turbulent times, and retain and capitalize on their unique power to cultivate community trust and connection—IREX, the Urban Libraries Council, and OCLC's WebJunction program are building, informing, and empowering a national coalition of urban, rural, and tribal public libraries to share best practices and collaborate on trust-building efforts.

A NATIONAL STRATEGY

At the heart of this initiative is the [Community of Practice](#), a growing national network of public libraries that are testing, sharing, and scaling strategies for building trust. This free network empowers libraries to strengthen social cohesion, bridge divides, and demonstrate the enduring civic value of public institutions.

To date, over **220 librarians from 40 states and the District of Columbia**—from urban, rural, and tribal communities—have joined. Participants gain access to **peer-to-peer learning** and a supportive network of practitioners, **expert guidance and evidence-based tools** for integrating trust-building into existing programming, **proven strategies** for engaging diverse communities, and **impact measurement tools**.

BUILDING A BODY OF EVIDENCE

To scale trust-building efforts in libraries nationwide, IREX is building a **robust body of evidence** to understand what strengthens social trust at the community level. We are collaborating with libraries to **develop and test practical tools for measuring trust** that will enable the field to better evaluate trust-building efforts over time. In parallel, we are supporting seven libraries to **pilot innovative trust-building initiatives**. These libraries will receive in-depth training in IREX's [Research to Change \(R2C\)](#), a user-centered implementation research approach that enables practitioners to learn, adapt, and improve their programming in real time.

Together, these efforts will generate a growing evidence base on **what works, why it works, and how it can be scaled**.

ONLINE RESOURCES

As part of our commitment to equipping libraries nationwide with the tools they need to foster social trust, IREX and WebJunction launched the [Bridgebuilding Resource Hub](#), a free, online platform offering curated, tested resources for library professionals. The hub features case studies, facilitation guides, and measurement tools, enabling libraries of all sizes and contexts to integrate trust-building into their existing work.

Since its launch in 2023, the hub has become one of WebJunction's most visited and valued resources—ranking in the top 10 most-viewed news items out of more than 700—demonstrating strong demand from the field.

Project Vision

Our project is informed by a 2023 IREX study on US libraries' bridge building work, during which we heard directly from library professionals about their aspirations and needs. As explained by a librarian at Daniel Boone Regional Library in Columbia, Missouri: *"Reflecting on closing down divides, or helping with understanding, I really like the idea that libraries are a place for everyone, and the ideological differences shouldn't matter in terms of what our programming offers and what we try to accomplish here. It's getting the people into the room, figuring out how to reach audiences, because it's a leap of faith...because you're all being very vulnerable...And so, it takes an act of bravery."* We will work with libraries to take these leaps of faith.

About IREX

IREX strives for a more just, prosperous, and inclusive world, where individuals reach their full potential, governments serve their people, and communities thrive. We believe that our vision is best realized through leaders who are rooted in and representative of their home communities, and we strive to create the conditions for those leaders to thrive—through educational and leadership programs, networking and convening, and systemic efforts to create enabling environments where social change leaders can thrive.

— Visit our website: www.irex.org —

To learn more about IREX's work and how you can partner with us contact us at communications@irex.org