

## Public Libraries: Cornerstones of Democracy

Our libraries serve as **community conveners** – providing safe spaces for the exchange of ideas and information. The books and resources that public libraries have in their collections are meant to be engaged with and talked about, even when there is disagreement with their content. **Public libraries are the spaces we go to learn new ideas, experience cultures unlike our own, be inquisitive and become better and more empathetic citizens.**

Libraries are central pillars in our communities, our nation and our democracy. **Libraries have robust online and offline resource-sharing infrastructure that can be used to easily share information about elections.** They also serve as physical spaces for community members to come together for events like voter registration drives, candidate forums and debates or speaker series. Libraries also convene stakeholders across a community, including schools, election administrators and other community organizations to discuss important issues.

## Snapshot of Libraries Engaging in the Free Exchange of Ideas



### Louisville Free Public Library (KY)

In 2022, the Louisville Free Public Library **partnered with Kentucky's largest daily newspaper**, *The Courier Journal*, to host mobile newsrooms at library branches located in diverse neighborhoods across the city. A small team of journalists worked out of a library location, connected with residents, wrote stories and presented programs. By having reporters “embedded” in libraries, the **library**

helped connect reporters directly to the people in those underrepresented communities and resulted in more positive stories about those areas. Local candidate forums hosted by the library and the newspaper brought hundreds of citizens into libraries to ask questions and engage in the democratic process, and op-ed writing sessions taught residents how to better make their voices heard using the free press



### Baltimore County Public Library (MD)

The Baltimore County Public Library is the first library system in the country to own and operate a vehicle solely dedicated to free legal services for those with accessibility limitations. Since 2021, the **Mobile Library Law Center** has served as a mobile legal office with attorneys offering free civil legal advice to community members in need. The vehicle, fully funded by private donations and grants, is retrofitted to include a private meeting space, solar panels to reduce the vehicle's carbon footprint and all the necessary electronic equipment and internet access, in addition to a collection of legal books and library-staff provided notary service.



## Austin Public Library (TX)

The Austin Public Library's **Enhanced Library Card** is for adults (18 or older) and includes the person's library card number, photograph, address, date of birth, the expiration date and a scannable barcode. The card can be used the same as a standard library card to check out materials at all APL locations, as well as online to access eBooks and other digital resources. It is also recognized by many other City of Austin departments – including the Austin Police Department, Austin Energy, and Austin Public Health – and local organizations as a valid form of identification or to supplement other documents to prove one's identity. Several other Texas library systems have established similar Enhanced Library Card programs over the last few years, including San Antonio, San Marcos, Harris County and Dallas.



## Arlington Public Library (VA)

In the past two years, the Arlington Public Library **organized a "Human Library" event** to increase understanding of one another through open, respectful conversations. At these in-person events, human "readers" are invited to check out a "human book" for an enlightening conversation. A "human book" speaks to their lived experience as a person who is commonly judged by society for some aspect of themselves.



## King County Library System (WA)

The King County Library System partners with the **Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle (ULMS)** to offer various support services to empower voters. People can learn about their voter eligibility, register to vote, print a personalized ballot and voter guide and more. These **pop-up events** often take place before a primary or general election.

## WHAT'S AHEAD FOR LIBRARIES: PROTECTING INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM & ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE CONTENT

Intellectual freedom and access to information is a fundamental value of democracy and individual rights. ULC actively supports congressional anti-book ban legislation and efforts to protect intellectual freedom. We also seek to advance awareness of the issues for public libraries on access and fair pricing for e-content, including the need to modernize copyright law.