

SUPPORTING VULNERABLE POPULATIONS AND ADDRESSING COMMUNITY NEEDS

As well-established, resource-rich community hubs, libraries are well-suited to supporting vulnerable populations and addressing community needs.

Libraries provide services tailored to early learners and families, teens and seniors, adult learners, veterans, jobseekers, people new to the United States, and people experiencing homelessness or mental illness. High-speed broadband and technology lending programs increase digital equity. California's 54 bookmobiles¹ deliver services to people who face barriers accessing the library.

By helping vulnerable populations, free of charge, libraries are delivering the kinds of services Californians want in their communities. Survey data shows that “91 percent of Californians support the provision of free services for veterans and youth, 87 percent support services for seniors, 85 percent for young families, 83 percent for people experiencing mental illness, 81 percent for individuals experiencing homelessness, and 71 percent for new immigrants.”²

Public libraries in Imperial County have partnered to create spaces and programming for community members with autism. The spaces include floor rockers, bean bags, and cushions, and sensory baskets with shapes, fidgets, lap pads, and therapy balls. The programs include storytimes and sensory exploration stations.³

HELPING CHILDREN, TEENS, AND FAMILIES

Early learning programs keep young children playing, singing, talking, reading, and writing, and prepare them for school. Summer programs provide learning and enrichment opportunities that help combat summer learning loss—and offer free meals for children and teens experiencing food insecurity.



- In a typical year, almost 800,000 Californians—from early learners to adults—take part in public library summer reading programs and over one million attend summer activities at the library.³
- Food insecurity has been linked with cognitive delays in children, as well as with poorer overall health.^{4 5} When school lunch programs stop in the summer, children in food-insecure and low-income households turn to libraries and other organizations for free, healthy meals and learning opportunities.
- With 24,000 internet terminals⁶ and technology lending programs, California public libraries help to bridge the digital divide between those who can and cannot afford private access to the internet. Over 98 percent of public libraries have public internet terminals and free public Wi-Fi.⁷

TEACHING ADULT LEARNERS

Library literacy services help adult learners develop basic reading and writing skills.

- Over 15,000 adults received tutoring in reading, writing, and math skills in a California public library during the 2018–2019 fiscal year.⁸ Adults with greater literacy and more education are more than twice as likely to vote in national elections, while those with strong English-language skills are more than twice as likely to become citizens as those with limited English proficiency.⁹

ASSISTING VETERANS



Veterans Connect programs support veterans and their families and provide veterans with opportunities to serve as library volunteers and ambassadors.

- Only about 19 percent of California’s 1.8 million veterans receive their earned benefits from the federal Department of Veterans Affairs. California’s Veterans Connect @ the Library program helps veterans and their families navigate the complex systems of federal, state, and local benefits programs, and connects them with healthcare, housing, and job opportunities.¹⁰

SUPPORTING OLDER ADULTS

Programs for seniors—from technology classes to book discussion groups to exercise classes—build social connectedness and cognitive ability and support healthy, happy aging.

- Classes in basic computing skills—offered at 90 percent of libraries—help close the generation gap in digital literacy and internet use.¹¹ Many libraries also offer “Tech Tuesdays” or similar weekly drop-in sessions, where older adults with varied technical needs can get personalized help with e-readers, smartphones, tablets, and other devices, allowing them to stay connected and independent. Other services designed for seniors include the delivery of specially-selected books to residential facilities.¹²



Libraries in San Benito County, Inyo County, El Dorado County, the Inland Empire and other parts of the state are investing in bookmobiles, book lockers, kiosks, and “open plus” technology solutions which allow libraries to be used during unstaffed hours. The Sacramento Public Library has commissioned a new fleet of electric bookmobiles to take library services in to the community. The Santa Maria Public Library’s specially-outfitted library van provides literacy services, library materials, computer access, and programming in places where community members live and gather, including local housing authority developments.^b

OFFERING AID TO PERSONS EXPERIENCING HEALTH CONDITIONS AND HOMELESSNESS

Library workers, including social workers, connect persons experiencing mental health conditions and persons experiencing homelessness with social services and resources.

- Libraries are “mental health hubs” supporting community members with mental health and substance abuse conditions. The San Francisco Public Library was the first in the nation to employ a social worker on staff.¹³ In recent years, hundreds of California library staff have been trained in Mental Health First Aid—learning about the prevalence and symptoms of mental illness as well as de-escalation strategies—through the State Library’s Mental Health Initiative.

- Libraries continue to support vulnerable populations even when their doors are closed. Keeping Wi-Fi networks on 24/7 and boosting service to reach outdoor areas around library buildings keeps users connected.¹⁴ In San Luis Obispo, county officials converted parking lots to safe overnight refuges with bathrooms and showers for those sleeping in their cars during the COVID-19 pandemic. This program began in the Los Osos Library parking lot.¹⁵

WELCOMING IMMIGRANTS

For the millions of Californians born in another country, libraries provide pathways to learning a new language and connections to the communities they call home.

- Roughly 27 percent of California’s population are immigrants—over 10 million individuals.¹⁶ Nationwide, 55 percent of recent immigrants use the library on a daily or weekly basis.¹⁷
- Library resources such as English-language education,¹⁸ civics courses, and programs for job-seekers make it easier for immigrants to integrate into new surroundings.¹⁹ Library programs “serve as a gateway to the workforce by providing access to critical and employment skills.” They “help new Americans overcome the barriers to becoming more engaged members of their communities.”²⁰



Anaheim Public Library’s Welcoming Anaheim: Immigrant and Refugee Integration project provides local immigrants and refugees with access to resources and materials in its Citizenship Corner. Programs feature topics like acclimating to a new community and how to find citizenship information. Community partners provide counseling to help with integration, acclimation, and citizenship.^c

NOTES

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