

**Community
Engagement**

**Staff
Training**

Table of Contents

Section 1: Community Engagement Basics

Community Engagement at Vancouver Public Library	3
Definitions	4
Community Engagement Principles	4
Why Do We Do It.....	5
Roles and Responsibilities	6-7
Turning Outwards.....	8

Section 2: Learning About Your Community

Leverage Existing VPL Knowledge	9-10
Research Your Community Further.....	11
Share Your Findings.....	13

Section 3: Making Connections

Working With Team and Supervisor	12
Make a Plan to Act	13
Community Engagement Communication: Email, Phone Call, Community Visit	14-15
Understanding Privilege	16
Strategies for Building Relationships	17
Strategy 1: Conversations In-Branch	17
Strategy 2: Hanging out in the Community	18
Strategy 3: Attending Regular Meetings/Events	18
Share Your Findings.....	19

Section 4: Strengthening Our Skills

Active Listening	20
Comfort with Ambiguity and Awkwardness	21
How to Positively Disengage from a Conversation	22
Setting Professional Boundaries	22

Section 1: Community Engagement Basics

Community Engagement at Vancouver Public Library

Since its beginnings, VPL has believed in the importance of meaningful and sincere relationships with our community members. We are a library system that is open to all and we are committed to building connections with our communities in order to understand their strengths, interests, and needs; recognizing community members know best what their needs and interests are.

A Curated History:

- In 2004, VPL initiated the **Working Together Project** to develop methods for libraries to work in low-income communities through a community development approach. The project aimed to use a community development approach to build relationships with library communities and to identify and investigate barriers to library use
- In 2008 the Working Together Project published the **Community-Led Libraries Toolkit** which captured the experiences and lessons garnered from the project. Print and electronic copies are available and still widely used today.
- In 2008, 2 full time **Community Librarian** positions were created at VPL to continue the relationships that had been built. The Community Librarian team has now expanded to 5 full time librarians at Mount Pleasant, Oakridge, Kitsilano, Renfrew, and náca?mat ct Strathcona Branch
- In 2014, VPL launched a **Community Engagement Training** to introduce key concepts and emphasise the importance of community engagement to library.
- **Connecting the Dots: A Guidebook for Working with the Community** was created as part of 2014 training to answers many of the questions that staff have around community engagement.

Supporting Policies:

1. Community Engagement Values Statement
2. Diversity and Inclusion Statement

Definitions

Community Engagement:

Community engagement in a library context is the practice of building relationships with community members through connecting, listening, understanding, and involving. Community engagement encompasses a continuum of informal and formal tools and methods.

Community Led:

Community led work stems from the relationships built and information gathered during community engagement. From these relationships, the library can work collaboratively with the community to discuss, plan, deliver, and assess programs and services.

Community Engagement Key Principles

1. Community engagement is an ongoing process that enables relationships and trust to be built with the community and strengthen *over time*. It requires working to the community's time table and being patient while relationships are built.
2. The focus is on building relationships so that we can learn and understand *what the community* wants or finds important. Our role in the community is not to tell them what they need or suggest a service that meets their needs.
3. Relationship building takes place **both** inside and outside of library.
4. "Success" is not tied to outputs or statistics, but to the relationships and trust you are building
5. Think small: small actions, conversations, moments build up over time).
6. There is no one size fits all approach.
7. Be curious, be brave, and resilient! Don't be discouraged if it takes time to see progress.

Why Do We Do It?

While the library is able to reach many community members through our open doors, regular programming, and in-building conversations, the reality is **there is still a significant percentage of the population that is not using the library**. There are also many community members who do not feel welcomed or supported by the library, and for whom the library is **not** the inclusive, neutral, or barrier-free institutions we want it to be.

As the Working Together project emphasized **“it is clear, from library literature and our experiences, that libraries serve some segments of the library better than other, and some segments not at all.”** **Social exclusion** takes many forms and may affect community members who are poor or living in poverty, unemployed or underemployed, new immigrants and refugees, the unemployed and underemployed, seniors, and individuals who are marginalized because of race, gender, sexual orientation, or class.

To improve the inclusiveness of the library and to support those who have previously felt under-supported, we *must* take a community-led approach and actively seek to build relationships and trust. Community engagement will help us to strengthen relationships and better understand the needs and wants of all our community members. It is *especially* crucial with those who experience social exclusion or marginalization.

Roles and Responsibilities

At VPL, the entire organization is committed to a community-led service philosophy and to embracing community engagement as a way to build relationships with our communities and better understand their needs and interests. Different roles and classifications across the organization will have their own specific community engagement activities:

The following represents community-led and community engagement-related roles and responsibilities appropriate for various levels (pulled from job descriptions):

Associate Director, Neighbourhood & Youth Services:

- Leads system-wide community engagement service planning and strategy development.
- Initiates and develops relationships with funding agencies and community partners.

Managers:

- Engages community to inform decision-making.
- Initiate and develop partnerships with community organizations and businesses.
- Applies community-led model to service planning and delivery.

Unit Heads and Assistant Managers:

- Initiate and develop relationships with outside organizations and community partners.
- Ensure that community-led approaches and practices are practiced by staff.

Librarians:

- Under direction; initiates and develops relationships with outside organizations and community partners.
- Understands and practices community-led approaches.

Community Librarians:

- Use collaborative community engagement techniques to assist in developing service to the community.
- Maintain contact with community groups.
- Engage communities in discussions about and planning for library services.
- Represent the library at community events and in community spaces.
- Make and maintain partnerships with community agencies and groups.
- Act as a resource to branch and Neighbourhood Services team staff in their community engagement activities.

- Work in the community with those who have not traditionally been served effectively by the library.

Library Tech IIs and SLPSAs:

- Under the direction of the librarian, liaises with representatives of outside agencies in the planning of programs and projects.
- Understands and practices community-led approaches.
- Provides support to the librarians in initiating and developing collaborative relationships in the community.

Library Tech Is and Information Assistants:

- Understands and practices community-led approaches.
- Provides support to the librarians in initiating and developing collaborative relationships in the community.

LA IIs and LPSAs:

- Understands and supports community-led approaches.

Important Note:

Depending on your branch and/or department, the way you approach community engagement might be different. Community engagement activities should ultimately be a team effort, and it is important that you consult and coordinate with supervisors and peers.

Turning Outwards

As community engagement is fundamentally geared towards better understanding and connecting with our communities, we must have a mindset that is 100% focused on our community. Or as Richard Harwood, founder of the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, says we must begin from a position of being **turned outwards**. Turning outward is an orientation—a mindset, a stance—that uses the community as our point of reference.

Fundamental to turning outward are the following principles:

- **ACTIVE:** Being turned outwards is an active stance that recognises that the community is our point of reference
- **INTENTIONAL:** Being turned outwards means deliberately choosing to focus on community
- **CHOICE:** In every interaction with the community, we *choose* to engage and listen rather than tell
- **GOAL:** Is to let the community direct conversations about their interests and needs

Section 2: Learning About Your Community

Leverage Existing VPL Knowledge

It's important to remember that it's quite rare to encounter entirely uncharted territory. Save yourself some time and find out what others have done in the past.

Documented Information:

Various worksites have created **community contact lists** that can be accessed on the HUB or VanDocs. These lists are structured in different ways and capture different kinds of information, such as names of community organizations, history of working with that organization, etc. You'll have to do a little digging and asking around, so do not be shy.

Community maps are another means of capturing community information. A community map is a visual representation of a community, including service providers, informal hangout spots, etc.

You can also look through some **community engagement reports**, which are another way to see what kind of work has been done in an area. These are longer and often contain an individual's experiences of a community visit. The Community Librarian reports and debriefs are great examples of this type of work (search VanDocs for "VPL – Community Librarian Report"). Many larger projects or working groups will have minutes or a final, outgoing report that might relate to your branch; if you are unsure, chat with your branch head about which projects align the best.

You might search meeting minutes, shared network drives, the HUB and VanDocs for this information. Try different searches within work units or with keywords related to this work. If you know someone who has done work in your area, see what documents they have authored and scan titles for something useful.

Undocumented Information:

Not everything is written down. To access the kind of information that hasn't been documented, you might...

Start a conversation with...

- Colleagues at the location (e.g., your Branch Head)
- Person who previously did your job or who is doing it at another location
- Staff currently doing community engagement (e.g., local SLPSA, local Community Librarians, Branch Heads, etc.)

Talk about...

- Informal strategies
- Recommended next steps for your project
- Any anxieties or concerns
- Previous efforts and ways to improve
- Ask for any documents, pictures, or other parts of their work that you can learn from

Just go for it...

- Introduce yourself
- Make a phone call, send an e-mail
- Walk over, start a conversation
- Don't overthink it

Research Your Community Further

Before meeting with community members, it's helpful to do some additional research. Be sure to consult with your supervisor before embarking on individual research.

Demographics:

Demographic information can provide a valuable window into a community: income levels, family size, languages spoken, etc. Though this information won't provide the whole picture, it provides a good starting point for community engagement.

Check out the City of Vancouver community profiles: <https://vancouver.ca/news-calendar/areas-of-the-city.aspx>

In addition to demographic information, these profiles include other useful information such as a neighbourhood's history, major initiatives and community events.

Community Service Providers:

Community services providers deliver numerous forms of aid and support, such as meals, daycare services, supportive housing, etc. They often serve as a hub where community members gather and connect. Learning about local community service providers is key, as these agencies will serve as the gateway for connecting with community members.

To locate community service providers, check out bc211 (aka. Red Book Online): <http://www.bc211.ca/>

You can narrow your search to particular types of community service providers (e.g., organizations that provide employment and training) as well as particular neighbourhoods. Note that the search results are incomplete; all organizations are not represented in bc211.

Community Walks:

A community walk is exactly what it sounds like—it's when you walk around your community! It sounds very simple, but it's also an extremely valuable way to get to know your community beyond what community demographics or bc211 can teach you.

To conduct a community walk, simply take a stroll, maybe for just 30 min., around an area in your library's neighbourhood. Pay close attention to what you see—you'll often find small hints and clues that develop your understanding of your community. For example, what are some local community service providers that you maybe didn't identify in your prior research? What are some informal community hangout spaces where you can connect with community members? Who are the people who hang out there (e.g., primarily families, seniors, etc.)?

Jot down your findings and then return to this information when you're ready to begin making connections with community members.

Section 3: Making Connections

Working With Team and Supervisor

- Establishing priorities with your supervisor can guide you. Work with your supervisor to assess what you can do, what you need help with
- When working with large organizations be sure to operate within the framework of VPL's established teams and partnerships. Ask yourself, "Who else do I need to talk to before I contact the organization?" For example, you may want to contact a Community Librarian before reaching out to South Vancouver Neighbourhood House. We do not want to have several representatives from VPL contacting the same organization – streamlined continuity in our communications will speak to our professionalism, as individuals and as an organization, and prevent duplication of resources.
- Check in with your Supervisor and possibly the neighbourhood Community Librarian before initiating a relationship with a community organization
- Once you have worked with your supervisor and team and made a decision to connect with a group, it's time to call, email, or drop in.

Make a Plan to Act

Effective community engagement requires thought and strategy. When undertaking community engagement in a new position or with an unfamiliar community with an in-person visit, you can complete this worksheet prior to making contact. These questions are not exhaustive, but are meant to keep you focused during the planning phase.

General Questions Going into Your Research:

- Who are you choosing to contact and who are you choosing not to contact?
- How do you plan on meeting them and what will be the tone of those meetings?
- Why is your outreach to this group important?

Takeaways from Your Research:

- What is one point you know you want to take away from your research?
- What is one area of sensitivity or empathy required of you for this group?

Community Engagement Communication: Email, Phone Call, Community Visit

Email Template:

Hello,

My name is And I'm a Librarian/SLPSA at the ____ branch of Vancouver Public Library. I heard about your organization through ____ and wanted to let you know you are always welcome at the library. I'm interested in the work you do in our community and wonder if the library might be able to support you in some way and if I could come and visit you sometime.

Is there a time in the next ____ when it might work for me to pop by?

I look forward to meeting you!

Kind Regards,

.....

Phone:

Every conversation is different. Often you might have to go through a receptionist. Here are the important points to hit.

1. Introduce who you are – name and title and organization
2. Who are you calling?
3. Why are you calling?
4. Suggest a follow-up time to meet or confirm by email. Offer to come visit them. You are the one reaching out so you need to make it easy for the other person to connect with you.
5. If you can't speak to the person directly, leave a message/voicemail and then follow up with an email if you haven't heard back in a couple of days.

Tips for Community Visits:

Do:

- Ask questions. Find out what motivates people or their organization
- Engage in active listening and really go the extra mile to let them finish talking before speaking
- Remain curious and open without making commitments or setting up expectations

- Demonstrate empathy, passion, enthusiasm and honesty so that you can truly learn from the community
- Surrender your expertise and be a person of integrity, warmth and kindness – these can open doors for you that no degree or title ever will
- There may be times where you are not sure how to respond to a request from a partner or community member. It's okay to say that you don't have the answer but will take it back to your branch or team to see what is possible

Don't:

- Compare their needs to the needs of past organizations or relationships
- Assume that existing programs will necessarily meet their needs in their current form
- Promise something you cannot 100% deliver and be open about expectations

Understanding Privilege

The next step in reaching out to connect with community members, groups, or organizations is to check in with yourself and understand how you might be viewed by the community you are connecting with. One way to do this is to understand your own privilege and how this frames the way you interact with your community.

What is Privilege?

Privilege refers to not having to face barriers that others have to face (trainer can give an example of one of their privileges here for understanding). Privilege can be hard to recognize, hard to acknowledge or something we take for granted because we didn't ask for it. It can make us feel guilty. It can be hard to let go of, especially if we cling to the idea that we're entitled to it. Recognizing privilege is a good place to begin as we try to figure out how to work across differences.

Some examples of privilege: race, class, gender, sexuality, ability

Strategies for Building Relationships:

Building relationships in the community is the foundation of the community-led model. It involves putting in the time to build trust with community members, by engaging them in conversations about themselves, their needs, their community, and the library. (Community-Led Libraries Toolkit)

How do we build relationships?

- There are 3 main strategies for building relationships in the community:
 1. **Conversations in-branch**
 2. **Hanging out**
 3. **Attending regular meetings and events**

Strategy 1: Conversations In-Branch

Every interaction in the library is an opportunity to build relationships and learn about the community we serve. Sometimes these conversations highlight things the library is doing right or areas for improvement. These sorts of conversations are useful to other staff in your unit and potentially to management.

- Be visible on the public floor of your service point. Being in the service space allows for opportunities to meet current library users and to form relationships with them. For example: before or after a program, roving, at the information and service desk
- Sometimes there are competing needs between working in the service point and getting out into the community. Your service point may need you to be on site due to operational needs and as a result, you may find that opportunities to go out into the community are limited
 - Talk with your supervisor about how you can work together to schedule time for community engagement outside of the library. But also remember how important service point work is and how reassuring it is for patrons to see you actively engaged within our library walls as well as outside
 - Community engagement can also take place in the branch

Strategy 2: Hanging out in the Community

Hanging out in the community involves regularly visiting a community space to meet and talk with people and allowing time to build and nurture a trusting relationship with community members and community partners. The long-term goal is to allow these casual conversations to evolve into ongoing, respectful relationships through which community members eventually feel comfortable sharing information and work with you to develop ways that the library can provide services to them. Hanging out gives community members the choice and freedom to participate in a conversation in an environment they are comfortable in. It is also a way to meet community members who do not come to the library

- When you first connect with community groups, remember that you don't need to do a "hard sell" about the library. Nobody likes feeling like someone is trying to sell them something and promoting the library can be alienating for some people.
- Shared activities can be a fantastic icebreaker. It can also be helpful to visit when another event is going on. This enables you to observe and interact with community members naturally, without an agenda. Find out ahead of time whether you can visit a group around planned activity or meal times. But be sure to check with group leaders beforehand.
- Social exclusion and institutional wariness are real hurdles that need to be addressed compassionately

Strategy 3: Attending Regular Meetings/Events

Hosting a VPL table at a **community event** can be an effective way to meet people who are not connected with service providers or with other community groups where you hang out.

Attending **regular meetings** provides an opportunity to learn about community resources, connect with service providers, and share current information about each other's organizations, and represent VPL as an integral part of the community

- Be open and curious, listen actively
- Come early or stay late to build in time for conversations
- Don't do a hard sell, but be prepared to answer questions about what is happening in your area or what the library offers for specific groups
- Listen for barriers as well as positive stories of how the library is impacting peoples' lives and bring that feedback to your supervisor and team. Solicit ideas from community members on how the library can do better
- When hosting a VPL table at a community event bring promo materials and library swag
- Your participation allows community members to see active engagement and interest outside the library walls

Share Your Findings

It's important to share what you learn during your community engagement work.

- Pick a meeting
 - Choose one meeting you have regularly and commit to having your community engagement conversations and activities be a part of what you talk about there

- Promise to take action
 - Turn to the person next to you and arrange for a time to chat next month to talk about community engagement work you have done
 - Remember, a simple conversation during a transaction is meaningful connection

Section 4: Strengthening Our Skills

Active Listening:

“Community members generate service ideas when sustained relations are in place. In order for this to occur, library staff need to reposition their role in the community from an expert to a facilitator. By becoming active listeners instead of disseminators of information, library staff take information from the community and place what they are hearing within the context of library services. Each community is unique and will identify need(s) for services based on its unique circumstances.”- Kenneth Williment, Community Development Manager, Halifax Public Libraries. “It Takes A Community to Create a Library,” 2009, p. 8

Active listening and your role:

1. **BE THE LEARNER:** Use active listening skills to help move away from the role of the expert. The focus of active listening is the same as being a learner: we are trying to receive information and build understanding. Let community members guide the conversation to ensure that it focuses on issues that are important to them
2. **SUMMARIZE:** Always reflect back to the speaker—repeat or rephrase what you’ve heard—because assumptions and biases may shade our understanding of what is being said
3. **CLARIFY:** Probe and clarify to understand what people are trying to tell you. Remain curious. Ask questions
4. **STAY IN THE MOMENT:** Do not think ahead. Keep an open mind and try not to prepare your next remark. This can distract you from what is being said. Provide time for people to finish describing their thoughts

Tip: The Customer Service Excellence core course is available to develop these skills further.

Comfort with Ambiguity and Awkwardness

Awkwardness is OKAY. Feeling anxious and uncomfortable at times is a normal part of community engagement. Remember, you have the skills to succeed. Even when you have experience working in the community, it can still be uncomfortable to be in a new situation where you don't have a defined role and aren't on the home turf of the library. You may not know exactly what to expect and that ambiguity can be challenging to navigate.

- Go into new situations with an attitude of “I’ll just see how this goes,” rather than “I’ll follow prescribed steps and expect a specific outcome.”

Discomfort is a predictable result of putting yourself outside your comfort zone, and a good indication that you're probably on the right track towards breaking new ground in making connections with people you might not otherwise meet.

Strategies for managing discomfort or awkwardness:

- Give yourself permission to fail and if failure happens, leverage it! A mistake can be an opportunity to learn and grow. It can provide direction. Community-led work is not a smooth process with a predetermined outcome.
- If you are nervous about going to events where you will meet new people, try setting small goals for yourself. For example, talking to three new people. This will keep you focused on your goal rather than your nerves.
- Arm yourself with neutral topics to discuss (e.g. food, weather, movies, etc.)
- Learn to act without the complete picture
- Make jokes to break the tension
- Remind yourself of why you're there, and the unanticipated ways in which your presence can have a positive effect

How to Positively Disengage from a Conversation

- Sometimes you need to disengage from a conversation but feel awkward excusing yourself. Speaking points: “I’m due back at the library but it’s been great talking with you.” “Thanks for taking the time to share your idea/experience/perspective. I’ll be sure to discuss this with staff at the branch.”

Setting Professional Boundaries

- Setting boundaries for your interactions with community members is a matter of personal and professional judgement. Talk to a supervisor or with a colleague who has experience with community work and can help you clarify what’s appropriate in a professional sense as well as what feels right for you individually
- Some documents to review when thinking about boundary setting include:
 - Re: Human Rights and Harassment Policy
 - Re: Respectful Workplace Policy
 - Re: Code of Conduct Policy
 - Re: Working Alone Policy