

THE GRAND OPPORTUNITY: CREATING COMMUNITY, EQUITY AND INNOVATION WITH HOUSTON PUBLIC LIBRARIES

A REPORT OF THE HOUSTON DIALOGUE ON PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
DIALOGUE ON
PUBLIC LIBRARIES



Unless attributed to a particular person, none of the comments, ideas or recommendations contained in this report should be taken as embodying the views or carrying the endorsement of any specific participant at the Dialogue or affiliated organizations at the Dialogue.

To learn what other communities are doing to transform their libraries, download the *Rising to the Challenge: Re-Envisioning Public Libraries* report or its companion, *Action Guide for Re-Envisioning Your Public Library*, or to share the work that you are doing around library and community transformation in your own community, please visit the Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries online at www.LibraryVision.org.

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FOREWORD

As Mayor of this great city, I envision a Houston where every individual can prosper and reach their full potential. This vision is the impetus behind my Complete Communities Initiative – a program designed to revitalize Houston’s under-resourced communities. The initiative works closely with community residents, city departments, and public/private partners toward a goal of creating sustainable neighborhoods that are safe, affordable, economically viable, and that have access to quality education, affordable housing, transportation alternatives, green spaces, healthy food options, and well-maintained infrastructure.

We welcome the Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries to Houston. As you know, Houston Public Library is a valuable, trusted and sought-after community partner helping to provide solutions to the challenges facing our city and the people it serves. With core values of exceptional customer service, equitable access to services, programs and resources that reflect and celebrate Houston’s increasingly diverse population, the Library leads and partners with strategic initiatives, like Complete Communities, focused on advancing human, community, and economic development in our city.

We are very proud that Houston is the most ethnically diverse city in the nation. The hard work and dedication of many with whom I work to make Houston a welcoming city, where opportunity is available to all, is essential to our success. I am keenly aware that an endeavor of this magnitude requires a comprehensive and concerted approach from many individuals and organizations to work together to build sustainable communities, ensure equity, and foster innovation.

I am extremely grateful to the Aspen Institute and their investment in Houston’s future. And I applaud and thank the elected officials, community leaders, and business and organizational leaders who participated in the Houston Dialogue on Public Libraries. This report will help generate broad based support and promote high visibility to the good work happening across our libraries and city. The report will help influence public policy and resource allocation decisions within our political, economic, social systems, and institutions to support the transformative change that must be realized for our city to thrive. Thank you for choosing Houston.

Sylvester Turner

Mayor

City of Houston

THE GRAND OPPORTUNITY: CREATING COMMUNITY, EQUITY AND INNOVATION WITH HOUSTON PUBLIC LIBRARIES

A REPORT OF THE HOUSTON DIALOGUE ON PUBLIC LIBRARIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thirty library, government, nonprofit, and business leaders convened at the historic Julia Ideson Library Building in Houston in November 2017 to explore opportunities for working more closely and more intentionally with Houston's public libraries. The Houston Dialogue on Public Libraries highlighted the changing role of libraries in response to educational, economic, social, and technological changes in society and explored strategies for leveraging the resources and expertise of the Houston Public Library system to address critical needs for recovery and rebuilding in the wake of Hurricane Harvey.

Participants made recommendations and proposed sustainable solutions with a long-view to confronting troubling barriers to equity and opportunity in the city, and constructing pathways for long term transformation and community success. Specifically, they identified the roles that the Houston Public Library can play in fostering and ensuring access to the building blocks of community resilience, equity, and opportunity in three broad areas: youth and families, workforce development, and civic engagement.

Issues and Opportunities:

Reflecting on problems encountered across the city in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey's devastation and floods, Dialogue participants identified many opportunities to structure a recovery and rebuilding process that would address chronic challenges and previously identified goals for the city. At the top of their

list was helping the city to overcome critical barriers by advancing the following goals with planning, action, and new partnerships.

Addressing information and communication gaps. The public library can play an important role as a highly trusted source with expertise in handling information and helping people find the right information to meet their needs. Widely sharing information and data from the Kinder Institute's post-hurricane needs assessment and helping individuals and small businesses to gather good data of their own to secure funding for recovery and rebuilding are just two ways the library can leverage its information expertise and community connections. The Houston Public Library can help to expand 211 information services and work with community partners to strengthen the use of social media and media infrastructure in order to help close communication gaps.

Prioritizing the needs of vulnerable populations. The needs of vulnerable populations are often complex and require connecting individuals and families to a portfolio of different services available throughout the community. Meeting these needs requires advance planning, greater flexibility, and adaptability in working with these populations, and partnerships that leverage the complementary strengths of each partner. Libraries can help to connect vulnerable members of the community to trusted, credible information and to social services and other resource providers.

Meeting the needs of Latino and immigrant communities. Low literacy, limited English proficiency, cultural differences, and legal and political climates can make life even more difficult for members of Latino and immigrant communities. To better meet the needs of Latino and immigrant communities, libraries can deepen their engagement with trusted community partners, including the Complete Communities Initiative neighborhood teams and faith communities, to develop new relationships with and deliver services to these communities. Successfully serving these communities will require libraries to own the fact that there are cultural differences and develop alternative participatory and engagement methods that align with these cultural and literacy differences. It also requires explicit actions that communicate and create a welcoming and inclusive community.

Addressing barriers to access and engagement. Participants called for greater democratization of access to information and resources. Greater transparency of information held in government databases could have lessened the impact of flooding on many residents through better prior planning. Yet participants cautioned that access cannot happen without a simultaneous emphasis on engagement. Too often access means a “come to me” approach to gaining information or services at centralized access points. By viewing problem-solving activity through the lens of engagement,

stakeholders can begin to build connections to the community and particular populations in ways that make barriers more visible and create opportunities for sustained problem solving when and where it is needed.

Dialogue Recommendations:

The Dialogue reflected broad agreement among participants that public libraries in Houston and the surrounding counties are a critical part of the community’s infrastructure that give concrete meaning to the principals of equity, opportunity, access, and engagement. Participants explored what these principles look like in the context of the discussion of Houston Public Library’s strengths and the critical issues identified above. The Dialogue yielded the following six recommendations.

- **Recommendation 1:** Leverage the Houston Public Library as a trusted source of information
- **Recommendation 2:** Use library infrastructure to provide important touchpoints for access and engagement to develop financial literacy and empowerment
- **Recommendation 3:** Use the Complete Communities Neighborhood Advisory groups as a model and partner for information, communication, and engagement
- **Recommendation 4:** Utilize smart collaborations in a portfolio approach
- **Recommendation 5:** Connect libraries to schools of social work
- **Recommendation 6:** Leverage the library as social infrastructure to foster greater connection among the city’s residents and student populations

A Path Forward

Finally, participants focused on specific actions the Houston Public Library could take in partnership with local partners to advance recovery, rebuilding, and resurgence in the city. With an eye toward concrete, achievable projects that focus on meaningful collaboration,

participants recommended the following projects to create a path forward. Each of the proposals aligns with one or more of the service priority areas of the Houston Public Library (Access, Educate, Connect), and each gives particular attention to the needs of vulnerable populations in the city, aiming to expand equity and opportunity for all.

Project 1: Create a total family literacy program employing a portfolio approach

This project addresses the specific needs of children and families in Houston. Building on the library's current foundation for successful out-of-school and extended learning programs, the goal of this project is to advance these building blocks in ways that equip parents and children with additional services and supports they need to be successful. This includes filling gaps in family services, child care, mental health services, case management, and home repair in the short term. It also includes developing more systematic, data-informed, outcomes-driven portfolio approaches to improving access to literacy and education, healthy living, and civic engagement opportunities for children and families. As envisioned, this project would involve building a total family literacy program by taking components from existing programs and curricula and building on existing partnerships, especially involving early childhood partners and schools. The proposal cited the Houston Public Library's successful 2017 Family Place program as a model and recommends investigating how to build on and replicate this model out to other locations.

Project 2: Leverage the library to fill public gaps along the workforce continuum

The Houston Public Library can support the work of the city's business, workforce development, and higher education sectors in creating pathways for learning, skills development, and helping individuals to identify pathways to achieve their goals. The aim of this project is to change the

perception of public libraries from "Libraries = Books" to seeing Houston Public Library as a thriving part of Houston's economic development ecosystem and a learning institution that fills public gaps along the workforce continuum. The project proposes to scale the [cafécollege Houston](#) program by developing the career component through the integration of workforce solutions and economic development partners. The proposal recommends an initial focus on the five Complete Communities pilot communities and working with local colleges and universities, community-based organizations, and others to develop shared action plans.

Project 3: Insure the integrity of information in the community through collaborations with trusted information and communication partners (HISD and media partnerships)

Designing communication and civic engagement strategies that build awareness, knowledge, trust, and resilience is a priority. This project proposal recognizes the Houston Public Library as the trusted source of information in the community. It seeks to expand access to trusted information in coordination with other critical information partners and ensure the integrity of information in the community as Houston rebuilds. HPL can enhance access to trusted information through strategic partnerships with two critical stakeholders: Houston Independent School District (HISD) and Houston's media outlets and social media. HPL can build on its limited partnership with HISD to create a trusted hub of community information for Houston families by leveraging HISD's student laptop program. Furthermore, HPL should convene a meeting of city-wide media (print, electronic, digital) to develop better alignment and improved infrastructure for coordination, collaboration, and communication of accurate information, especially during times of crisis. Corporate partners with existing relationships with HPL can help to advance this conversation.



The city of Houston has a grand opportunity represented in its public library system. City leaders began to seize this opportunity by identifying critical opportunities to leverage the resources and expertise of Houston Public Library to address critical needs for recovery and rebuilding in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. The library is poised to move the most promising ideas forward and address the goals of all of the recommendations and proposals as resources become available.

The opportunity to bridge gaps in equity and opportunity across the neighborhoods and communities of Houston extend well beyond the library's response to this one disaster. Fully

seizing this grand opportunity will rely on intentionally filtering a vision for the library as a partner, a place, and a platform for learning, literacy, access, engagement, empowerment, and discovery. This level of intentionality to infuse a renewed, community-centered vision for the library into planning by the city's public, nonprofit, and private sectors has not previously existed. With a wake-up call from Hurricane Harvey and the leadership and commitment of the Dialogue participants and Houston Public Library, it is time to advance efforts to leverage the library as a key partner for building thriving families and equitable communities in Houston.

THE GRAND OPPORTUNITY: CREATING COMMUNITY, EQUITY AND INNOVATION WITH HOUSTON PUBLIC LIBRARIES

INTRODUCTION

The Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries and the Houston Public Library (HPL) convened the first city-wide, multi-stakeholder forum on public libraries in Houston, Texas, on November 15-16, 2017. The Houston Dialogue on Public Libraries created an opportunity for open dialogue in which government, nonprofit, and private sector leaders explored the changing role of libraries in response to educational, economic, social, and technological changes taking place in society. These leaders explored how to leverage the strengths of public libraries in collaborative work to build a stronger, healthier, more resilient Houston.

The Houston Dialogue on Public Libraries took on new urgency after Hurricane Harvey made landfall on the Texas coastline and devastated communities across the city and surrounding counties. The themes of equity, opportunity, and strengthening the capacity of Houstonians to rebound and thrive in the face of changing conditions and challenges provided the focal point for dialogue and recommendations to advance library-community partnerships. The discussions addressed short-term needs for recovery and rebuilding across the city as well as sustainable solutions with a long-view to confronting barriers and constructing pathways to opportunity and success for all Houston residents. The essential question was this: How can stakeholders work together to create an infrastructure that not only changes

the equation for the next disaster to strike Houston, but also addresses the elements of an inequitable society that create smaller crises for people every day?

The fifth in a series of Aspen Institute library dialogues across the country, the Houston Dialogue was designed to showcase models through which community leaders working together can leverage the strategic opportunities that public libraries offer as platforms for learning, innovation, and civic engagement. This conference was unique as the only dialogue of the five to take place in partnership with a large urban library system. It provides a model for convening similar conversations in other cities and can serve as a catalyst for a broader conversation on the role of libraries across the nation.

The Houston Dialogue featured an evening reception with opening remarks by City Council Member Amanda Edwards and opening presentations by members of HPL's staff on the innovative work being done by the Houston Public Library. The event continued on the second day with a mix of moderated roundtable sessions and smaller break-out groups to develop recommendations for moving forward. A luncheon at City Hall featured a video welcome from Mayor Sylvester Turner.

This report summarizes the key insights, issues, and themes discussed at the conference. It concludes with a set of recommendations and steps to move the ideas into action. This report

is not intended to be prescriptive; rather, it aims to encourage fresh thinking and further dialogue on the role of public libraries in ensuring that every Houston neighborhood is vibrant, rich in opportunity, and resilient. The goal of this report is to identify models of library innovation and partnerships in Houston that are working well, recommendations to strengthen existing initiatives, and proposals to advance development of new partnerships that tap the expertise of public libraries and their networks.

SETTING THE CONTEXT: HURRICANE HARVEY STRIKES HOUSTON

Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Houston on August 26, 2017. It stayed for four days, causing significant damage and upending lives across the city. The Houston Dialogue on Public Libraries was originally scheduled to take place just twenty days later, on September 13-14, 2017. Because so many of the participants

were deeply involved in response and recovery efforts, the Aspen Institute and HPL made the decision to postpone the conference until later in the year. Through emails and phone calls regarding the cancellation, it became evident that there was interest and benefit to using some of the time reserved for the Dialogue conference to hold a hurricane recovery and response conversation.

HPL and the Aspen Institute hosted a two-hour meeting of 23 leaders from Houston area nonprofit, education, business, and government organizations on September 14, 2017. Participants discussed how their institutions were leveraging their own and other community resources to respond to the complex needs of the city in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane. The September meeting provided an opportunity to gather, exchange information, and identify areas where participants, their organizations, and their networks could support one another and work more effectively in concert in the months



ONE HOUSTON, ONE LIBRARY TRANSFORMATION PLAN

Houstonians gave the Houston Public Library a major vote of confidence on Election Day 2017 by passing a significant bond issue to support library construction projects. “On the bond election, we were successful in achieving \$123 million toward the enhancement of the Houston Public Library’s capital projects over the next five years,” Rhea Brown Lawson, Library Director, Houston Public Library, told the conference participants. The library’s One Houston, One Library Transformation Plan provides a look at how HPL is aligning its people, place, and platform assets with citywide priorities driven by customer usage and needs and how the system is planning for the future. A year after the conference concluded, the vision remains on track, however, progress on implementation has slowed because of reprioritization due to Hurricane Harvey.

John Middleton, Assistant Director of Spaces and Communications Divisions, explained the aims of the new plan. “HPL’s goal is to ensure that our customers have access to equitable services around the city no matter what building they go into, no matter what library staffer they run into or are helped by, that their experience is equally wonderful,” Middleton said. He added, “We know that right now our system isn’t equitable in terms of access. We have some fantastic buildings and some incredible resources, but they are not available to everyone in every part of town. Part of this bond issue and part of the reason that we have this plan put forward is so we can get to that type of equity, so that our customers don’t have to go to ‘the right part of town’ or to the right building to find what they need.”

The One Houston, One Library Plan reorganizes the system into seven full-service areas across the city. Currently there are 42 unique library locations with a defined service area around each. In a research project with a team of students from Rice University, it became clear that Houston has a very mobile population who may access the library via several different service points in any given week. To enhance the customer experience wherever it occurs, the new library structure will include the following:

- Seven full-service areas divided primarily by geography and infrastructure that most Houstonians recognize (bayous and freeways). They will include north, northeast, southwest, south central, southwest, northwest, and central. Within each of these boundaries, there will be a full-service library with services similar to those at HPL’s Central Library. The plan calls for building one of these full-service libraries in the north where there is not currently a library to meet the full-service model.
- Twenty-three neighborhood libraries, some the same size as a full-service library. The neighborhood libraries will include two new ones: replacement libraries in the central part of town and in South Central, where a partnership with the city’s Health and Parks Departments is designing a new multimodal facility to serve that community.
- Sixteen TECHLink libraries. The TECHLink libraries are a new forward-leaning library model that provides the most up-to-date technology, access to skilled training, and an emphasis on users creating with the technology. Some TECHLink libraries will be renovations to existing smaller libraries and others will incorporate a TECHLink component in full service or neighborhood libraries.

ahead. The meeting in November built upon the September conversation to explore how to leverage the city's libraries as public and private sector institutions and residents were moving forward. A brief report of the September 14 hurricane recovery meeting appears in the Appendix of this report.

ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Participants emphasized that recovery from the hurricane and its aftermath would be a long-term process, on the order of three to five years. They saw many opportunities to structure a recovery and rebuilding process that would address chronic challenges and previously identified goals for the city. In exploring the building blocks of a healthy recovery, participants focused on solutions for overcoming barriers that impede progress toward greater resiliency. They identified the roles that the Houston Public Library can play in fostering and ensuring access to these building blocks in three broad areas: youth and families, workforce development, and civic engagement and design. The following section highlights key issues and opportunities for increasing equity and beneficial outcomes in the rebuilding process and beyond.

Addressing Information and Communication Gaps

City and state leaders were already entrenched in leading recovery efforts to address immediate priorities for the recovery defined as the zero-to-six-month time frame. Chief among these priorities were information and data gathering, funding, and closing troublesome communication gaps.

The Kinder Institute at Rice University led a city-wide needs assessment and an assessment of philanthropic funds to identify needs for rebuilding and recovery as the Dialogue met. Participants noted opportunities to leverage this study for making strategic spending decisions going forward. Good data is imperative to success in raising revenue,

securing recovery funds, and making wise spending decisions. Participants cited the example of understanding the housing stock and housing data for current populations, which would be integral to recovery as well as preparing for future populations in the city.

While significant funding would come from Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) and other federal funding sought by city and state leaders, participants identified another set of funding needs. Individuals, small businesses, and community-based organizations needed access to capital and knowledge of how to pursue this funding. This funding also would rely on good data collection, good information, and good channels for communication.

The persistence of communication gaps well into the recovery period concerned participants. Many Houston residents were going without needed resources because they lacked access to information on how to obtain them. Communication, like funding, is closely connected to data and information gathering. Someone has to do the research on where the city's allocations have gone, create banks of information, and provide referrals to the right agencies for assistance. Participants noted that the United Way and its 211 information service were among the most valuable of information resources addressing these needs. They also saw an important role for the public library as a highly trusted source with expertise in handling information and helping people find the right information to meet their needs.

Social media are helpful for information sharing, but they can also be a vector for sharing misinformation as happened too often in the aftermath of the storm. Technologies and the physical infrastructure that support social media can break down. Participants identified the need for stronger systems and structures in the digital media environment to withstand stresses and demands before, during, and after a disaster. (Specific aspects of the communication gaps experienced with Hurricane Harvey are covered in the summary of the September 14 meeting in the Appendix.)

Prioritizing the Needs of Vulnerable Populations

Dialogue participants emphasized a set of priorities that included special attention to the needs of Houston's vulnerable populations, including children and families living on the economic and social margins of society, people experiencing homelessness, adults with chronic health conditions, senior citizens, immigrant and non-English speaking populations, and people with low basic literacy. Highlighting that these needs are often quite complex, participants identified several essential elements for successfully moving forward:

- the need for advanced planning,
- greater flexibility and adaptability in working with these populations, and
- the development of partnerships that leverage complementary strengths of each partner.

Insights from the experience of Hurricane Harvey included the challenge of connecting people with one another and with trusted, credible information when they needed it. Fortunately, connecting people to one another and to trusted information is one of the core strengths of public libraries.

Meeting the Needs of Latino and Immigrant Communities

Participants underscored the need to address barriers faced by Latino residents and immigrants who too often live and work at the economic, educational, political, and social margins of the city. One participant referenced this population as "The Other Houston," describing a reality in which these communities are not integrated into the full life of the city. These communities were particularly vulnerable to the hurricane's consequences, with many residents losing access to housing, jobs, childcare, food, and other critical resources. Navigating the recovery process has been particularly fraught for communities where

low literacy levels, limited English language proficiency, cultural differences, and political and legal climates make many individuals hesitant to engage with institutional and government entities including public libraries in some instances. Participants offered four precepts as a guide to successfully engaging with Latino and immigrant communities and addressing the barriers that impede the creation of One Houston.

NUMBER 1: SEEK TRUSTED PARTNERS FOR ENGAGING IMMIGRANT AND ETHNIC COMMUNITIES, REMEMBERING THAT TRUSTED PARTNERS CAN INCLUDE FAITH COMMUNITIES.

Individuals and their families often have multiple challenges that require collaborative efforts to solve. Trusted partners can help to represent an organization's message and how the organization is there to help. Avenue CDC is one of these trusted community partners. Another example is the Complete Communities network that has grown out of the Mayor's Complete Communities Initiative public meetings. The meeting held in the East End neighborhoods, for example, was noted for its significant mobilization of community partners and impact. The Houston Public Library refers to these trusted partners in the community as *community gatekeepers* and seeks to increase involvement with them.

NUMBER 2: OWN THE FACT THAT THERE ARE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN THE COMMUNITY AND THAT STAKEHOLDERS HAVE TO BE CONFIDENT AND FLUENT IN THE WAYS THEY COMMUNICATE WITH DIVERSE POPULATIONS.

Owning this set of facts means communicating in other languages and acknowledging the different literacy levels that exist in the community. It also means adapting resources, materials, communications, and service provision in ways that meet people where they are, given these differences. Translating information materials into Spanish often is not enough.

Participants cited the excellent work done by the Chinese Community Center and its network of volunteers who translate information into

Chinese and provide additional services. The Vietnamese and Korean community centers provide the same service for their constituencies. These groups also do work to help people with low literacy levels. Ownership of cultural differences involves exploring alternative engagement and participatory methods that align better with cultural and literacy differences, perhaps by partnering with organizations that specialize in multiple methods of convening and facilitating engagement.

The City of Houston has demonstrated leadership in this area through the implementation of the iSpeak program designed to prepare employees to assist non-English speakers with accessing city services and resources through libraries and other public-facing departments in real time. In addition to English and Spanish, other in-demand languages identified include Arabic, Chinese, French, Urdu, and Vietnamese.

NUMBER 3: ENSURE DIGNITY. Service providers of all types need to make sure that ethnic and immigrant populations feel welcome and that residents understand that resources available are available for all regardless of where they come from. Furthermore, supporting diversity and inclusion has to be about more than general statements of support; stakeholders need to include intentional, explicit actions that communicate and create a welcoming and inclusive community.

NUMBER 4: DEVELOP NEW PATHWAYS AND PARTNERSHIPS TO EXPAND ACCESS. Laura Murillo, President of the Houston Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and others emphasized the need to think about the different communication needs of immigrant communities and called for a deeper exploration of how to construct a better infrastructure for engaging immigrant and language communities. She suggested that the Hispanic Chamber can help other community-based organizations and the public library reach Latino and Spanish-speaking

immigrant populations through the chamber's platforms, including its media platform on CBS and Univision with a reach of over 3.3 million Spanish-speaking adults.

Addressing Barriers to Access and Engagement

Dialogue participants called for greater democratization of access to information and resources. Recognizing and removing barriers that prevent people from accessing information, resources, and opportunities has to become a priority. This includes access to information that would help people to prepare before a crisis strikes. In the case of Hurricane Harvey, many residents did not know they lived in a floodway or a flood plain. There were fragile people on oxygen or in wheelchairs who should have been evacuated from their homes prior to the storm. The state maintains a database of this information, but it does not appear that city stakeholders used it effectively to prepare people for the storm. Participants highlighted the need for stakeholders to do a better job of being transparent about the realities of situations that exist in the city and then doing a better job of coordinating that information for better planning. They also pointed out the importance of multiple kinds of service points to address complex community needs.

Crowdsourcing is one way to democratize information because this method allows more people to participate in the creation and sharing of information. In pursuing crowdsourced approaches, participants cautioned that crowdsourcing is sometimes done out of desperation for *any* information during a crisis and it does not always deliver accurate information. The library can be a critical resource and partner in the process of democratizing information access via effective crowdsourcing and information vetting. To do so, the library can develop greater proficiency with actively engaging in the social media platforms where such information access and exchange takes place. Participants

recommended that the library experiment with joining more groups on these platforms where library staff can point to sources of objective information that residents might be seeking.

Access alone is insufficient without a simultaneous emphasis on *engagement*. Access too often means a “come to me” approach that presumes individuals understand their needs and have the capability to get to highly centralized public access points. The late Patrick Walsh, immediate past Director of the city’s Department of Planning and Development, commented: “We’re finding that our neighborhoods don’t necessarily know how to leverage the resources that are out there and available either within the city or within a variety of other community organizations.” He noted that during the floods, libraries were an integral part of the lily pad structures for residents in need.

By viewing problem-solving activity through the lens of engagement, stakeholders can begin to build connections to the community and particular populations in ways that make barriers more visible and create opportunities for sustained problem solving when and where it is needed. As one example, participants noted that many senior residents of Houston will not reach out to agencies for assistance and may not even know that they need assistance with activities like mold abatement and home repairs following floods. These people need help with paperwork, bureaucratic red tape, physical labor, and the know-how to do the work. Without a strategy for engaging senior citizens out in the community where they live, these residents are less likely to get the help they need.

Amanda Timm, Executive Director of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation in Houston, summarized the connection between access, engagement, and the democratization of information, on the one hand, and greater equity and opportunity in the city, on the



other. “I think libraries can play a significant role in providing the information for community awareness and should consider a role in the community engagement piece as well. Engagement is key to activating the information and increasing the community’s understanding of what is happening and participation in decisions. For instance, our region is about to invest billions of dollars of infrastructure improvements – flood mitigation, transportation, housing – that will affect growth and development for the next 20 years and beyond. The democratization of information about those resources and related engagement is critical so that all of our region’s stakeholders, especially residents, can participate in decisions. People are very comfortable in their neighborhood library. Using the library as a forum for information sharing and dialogue can help inform more people and increase involvement in the decision making process.”

Participants discussed innovative solutions for expanding engagement in ways that would leverage the resources and expertise of Houston’s strong stakeholder communities, including the Houston Public Library where access and connection are priority goals.

HOUSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY'S SERVICE PRIORITIES

Nicole Robinson, Deputy Director, Houston Public Library, provided an overview of the library's service priorities in her opening night presentation. These service priorities guide the development and implementation of the library's strategy, programs, and services in the community. Referred to as the A-C-E service priorities, the acronym stands for Access-Connect-Educate.

- **ACCESS!** The goal of the Access service priority is to provide convenient and efficient ways for Houstonians to access a wide array of information and resources to connect to city of Houston services.
- **EDUCATE!** The goal of the Educate service priority is to enhance educational opportunity for youth, families and adults through programs and services that support and prepare them for success in school and/or work.
- **CONNECT!** The goal of the Connect service priority is to help bridge the digital divide in Houston through the expansion of Internet broadband connectivity and access to state of the art technology, especially in high need communities.

The Houston Public Library A-C-E service priorities are core to the library and fundamental to its community success. An important aspect of the A-C-E priorities is that they align well with priorities and goals of the city government, including the Complete Communities initiative of the Turner Administration. Under the Complete Communities banner, the city is working in partnership with community-based organizations and developing stakeholder-driven pilot programs that focus on ensuring access to good schools, parks, infrastructure, and public safety. The library's priorities also align with city priorities to connect students and their families to broadband internet and to address connectivity deserts in the city. Participants noted that there is great potential for collaborations with the library to eliminate the digital divide in Houston.

SIX RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING LIBRARY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Dialogue participants strongly agreed that public libraries in Houston and the surrounding counties are a critical part of the community's infrastructure. Houston's public libraries give concrete meaning to the principles of equity, opportunity, access, and engagement. Participants explored what these principles look like in the context of the library discussion and the critical issues identified above and offered the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Leverage the Houston Public Library as a trusted source of information

Libraries can create information, referral services, and an information bank that rely on the development of relationships and the flow of information and participation of many organizations working with the library. They can identify and build new channels for information.

One suggestion was a partnership between libraries and 211 call centers, an idea that the Houston Public Library has already begun to explore. "The 211 proposal is the modern

version of the library's traditional role in providing information and referral services," noted HPL Director Rhea Brown Lawson. This proposal does not require the creation of a whole new infrastructure; it is a matter of building on the infrastructure that is already in place. The library can provide integrated services at city touchpoints with consumers and constituents. The library can be an important partner in the city's strategy to bridge gaps and overcome barriers, including gaps in access to authoritative information, gaps between immigrant communities, and gaps across language barriers, physical barriers, and transportation barriers.

Recommendation 2: Use library infrastructure to provide important touchpoints for access and engagement to develop financial literacies and empowerment

Bloomberg Philanthropies has spent time thinking about financial empowerment centers and working with the city of Houston to use the city's points of contact with consumers to help do financial empowerment. City leaders are exploring how to use city personnel who touch the citizen-consumer to provide an integrated set of services, so that if a resident is in one place, he or she understands how to "connect the dots." Patrick Walsh noted that this work with Bloomberg Philanthropies is "a hugely important piece of how to create equity and raise all boats. To the degree that libraries could be a resource center for financial empowerment and a place where people can meet, I think that would be great."

Capital One Bank has partnered with HPL to teach courses to small business owners at Houston library branches. Getting Down to Business facilitates opportunities for budding entrepreneurs to make presentations and pitches for business ideas and win matching funds to get their ideas off the ground. Straight Talk workshops at the library help small business owners with knowledge development and skill-building. Bankers volunteer their time

and use the library's facilities. Houston Public Library has also launched a new initiative called Ready, Set, Bank to teach senior citizens how to navigate technology in 21st century banking services. HPL has been invited to serve as a case study model as the first library to implement this program. Results will be published in spring 2019.

Recommendation 3: Use the Complete Communities Neighborhood Advisory groups as a model and partner for information, communication, and engagement

Mayor Sylvester Turner has placed a high priority on equity across the city, advocating that the city must do a better job of closing the gaps between its under-resourced communities and other communities that are better connected and better resourced. Houston's Complete Communities Initiative is focusing on five under-served, under-resourced areas in Houston – Acres Homes, Second Ward, Third Ward, Near Northside, and Gulfton. At many of the kick-off events of the Initiative, speakers and residents highlighted education as a priority goal and need, as well as affordable housing and continued economic development. In education, challenges in the areas of youth services, continuing education, and job placement illuminated the scope of education services as a priority for all ages, from toddlers through adults.

To leverage community resources for community capacity, participants noted that there are public libraries in all five of the pilot communities. Having multiple community-serving institutions collocated helps. The McGovern-Stella Link Neighborhood Library is so successful, according to participants, because it is flanked by two schools and a YMCA.

Each Complete Communities pilot community includes a neighborhood support team as well as Advisory Committee members. Participants suggested that the neighborhood support teams could be a model and a resource for connecting communities and disseminating information in partnership with libraries. Lynn



Henson, the city's project manager for the Complete Communities Initiative, said: "The neighborhood support teams have given us guidance and advice on how we connect to the community and how we structure public engagement. They are key to the process. They live and work in the community and are a great asset for communication in the community."

The neighborhood support teams include many recognized leaders in the community and they are reaching out to business leaders and nonprofits. There may be an opportunity to use those neighborhood support groups in innovative ways to connect communities and disseminate information in partnership with libraries.

Recommendation 4: Utilize smart collaborations in a portfolio approach

An infusion of resources has gone to many organizations involved in the recovery and rebuilding process. Furthermore, Hurricane Harvey displaced library operations in seven communities which has led to the collocation of library services with other community services and the formation of new partnerships. The library does not have the monies to sustain

services in these new locations and rebuild, but it is creating deeper partnerships that it hopes to sustain going forward. Both of these situations provide an opportunity for Dialogue participants and other leaders in the city to explore what a portfolio of place and services could look like and how it can be delivered. There is an opportunity to test the viability of the infrastructure, for community-based organizations and city agencies to use libraries and TECHLink locations, for example, to help people structure the right inquiries and searches and direct them to trusted information and resources. Further ideas for developing portfolio approaches to supporting Houston families appears in the next section of this report, A Path Forward.

Recommendation 5: Connect libraries to schools of social work

Libraries should connect with schools of social work and other helping professions to build connections, and vice versa. Developing library partnerships with schools of social work would address, in an innovative way, two needs identified during the conference: greater access to case managers and other trained service providers in the community

and portfolio approaches to providing services that involve public libraries as collaborators. Baylor University, Texas Southern University, the University of Houston, and University of Texas Health Science Center all provide accredited degree programs in social work yet, as one participant commented, “I guarantee you they think about the libraries not as a social community building resource but as a place of books.” The library should be intentional in reaching out to teach the faculty and staff in these programs what the public library does now; that this is not your grandmother’s library, but a place to send their clients and other people they are helping. Participants noted that the UH School of Social Work and the Honors College would be good candidates for the library to initiate outreach.

Recommendation 6: Leverage the library as social infrastructure to foster greater civic engagement and connection among city residents and student populations

The public library builds individual and community resilience. As a third place alongside home and work, libraries provide human connection and face-to-face interaction on a daily basis. Public libraries constitute an important piece of the city’s social infrastructure. Sociologist Eric Klinenberg of New York University defines social infrastructure as “the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact.”¹ Community resiliency begins with these connections. “We have many parts of Houston that are a bit isolated. People just don’t know each other, they don’t have opportunities to meet each other, and they’re not connected,” said Mary Lawler Executive Director, Avenue CDC. Civic engagement is built upon these connections.

Participants identified an opportunity to use underutilized public buildings for library programs and services to address geographic areas where there are deserts of community

gathering places. The Houston Public Library has built considerable experience taking its people and resources out into the community, in traditional and nontraditional locations such as HPL’s Groomed for Literacy program that places quality children’s books in barber shops.

Building on this concept, participants suggested that the library has physical spaces that could benefit university communities in Houston and university communities can help the library. The recommendation was to *connect and activate* – connecting libraries with universities and community colleges as a strategic element to add value and build infrastructure in Houston. HPL and university communities can open conversations to explore the many ways to connect and activate.

A PATH FORWARD: THREE PROJECTS FOR ACCESS, CONNECTION, AND EDUCATION

Participants focused on what the Houston Public Library could do in partnership with local partners to advance recovery, rebuilding, and resurgence in the city. With an eye toward concrete and tactical projects that focus on meaningful collaboration, participants recommended the following projects to provide a path forward. Each of the proposals aligns with one or more of the service priority areas of the Houston Public Library (Access, Educate, Connect), and each gives particular attention to the needs of vulnerable populations in the city, aiming to expand equity and opportunity for all. Each proposed project includes the project goal, basic assumptions about existing conditions and constraints, and what changes are needed to make it happen. Each project also focuses on leveraging existing relationships and assets, and contemplates key results to be achieved.

¹ Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*, Crown Publishing Group, 2018.

Project 1: Create a total family literacy program employing a portfolio approach

Participants highlighted the need for a community-wide strategy, across all the sectors, to help the most vulnerable Houstonians navigate the system for recovery and rebuilding as well as for long-term success. This includes filling gaps in family services, child care, mental health services, case management, and home repair in the short term. It also includes developing more systematic, data-informed, outcomes-driven portfolio approaches to improving access to literacy and education, healthy living, and civic engagement opportunities for children and families. This project addresses the specific needs of children and families in Houston.

PROJECT GOAL. Building on the library's current foundation for successful out-of-school and extended learning programs, the goal of this project is to advance these building blocks in ways that equip parents and children with additional services and supports they need to be successful. As envisioned, this would involve building a total family literacy program by taking components from existing programs and curricula and building on existing partnerships, especially involving early childhood partners and schools. The proposal cited the Houston Public Library's successful 2017 Family Place program as a model and recommends investigating how to build on and replicate this model out to other locations.

BACKGROUND AND ASSUMPTIONS.

Understanding what services are essential in different communities would require a needs assessment (utilizing existing assessments) and a reexamination of existing partnerships to identify whether new partnerships for service would be needed. This proposal emphasizes a highly intentional effort that first identifies neighborhoods lacking libraries (including school libraries), then leverages existing assets and resources accordingly, and finally finds the right places to provide additional resources

for out-of-school extended learning which is particularly important for children of poverty and low means.

In presenting this project, participants noted the need to address operational funding as well as capital funding for rebuilding the community. It was assumed that institutional operational capacity would be compromised by financial and other demands of recovery and rebuilding, and that programs would grow as more funds become available. Thus, questions about the availability of operational funding in the near-term and beyond make it important to ensure that existing library programs are maximized to the greatest extent possible.

Finally, participants identified the opportunity to address human capital and sustainability needs for this project through a cadre of volunteers from Houston Community College and Houston's many universities. One benefit of developing such partnerships around volunteer needs is the potential for developing sustainable relationships between the libraries, colleges, and universities into the future.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION.

A key aspect of this project is using existing needs assessments to identify areas of greatest impact from the flooding and provide sustained extended learning opportunities for children and their families in these neighborhoods. The proposal emphasizes thinking strategically about creating this program so that stakeholders are not simply using Houston Public Library programs in the short-term, but integrating these into the community to create a model After School Zone program in a pilot community. The Kinder Institute's report on the impact of Harvey and the Out2Learn network report funded by the Houston Endowment and released with the United Way of Greater Houston can be used to identify a pilot community. The approach suggested is to scaffold these reports to identify high-need areas where kids and families lack out-of-school-time resources while preserving quality

and efficacy. Participants advised consulting the Texas Partnership for Out of School Time to identify quality indicators.

This project proposal identifies several partnership types necessary for success:

- a *facility partner*, which could be a school, public school district, community-based organization or even government facility that allows HPL to offer extended and out-of-school programs;
- a *volunteer partner* to help meet programming and staffing needs. A business, community, or higher education partnership as a source for volunteers could help supplement the employees of the public library;
- a *research partner* who would monitor the efficacy of the model, possibly provided by the Texas Partnership for Out of School Time or an Endowment-funded group who has worked in this area; and
- a *programmatic partner* already engaged in the neighborhood, which could include organizations like Workforce Solutions, cafécollege Houston, Women, Infants, and

Children (WIC), or others to create a full-suite, full-service partnership for family out-of-school time.

SUPPLEMENTAL EDUCATION SERVICE FUNDS.

Participants questioned whether Houston Public Library and the type of afterschool/out-of-school learning program envisioned here would be eligible for state funding that supports supplemental learning opportunities in low performing schools. Under the Texas Education Code, the state is required to provide interventions for children attending identified low-performing schools. Eligible services could include tutoring or other afterschool learning services. This could provide a revenue stream for the library to support out-of-school literacy programs. Despite the challenge involved in seeking and securing this funding, it makes sense for HPL to investigate this as a way to support its family literacy work. (See [“LEAs with Schools Identified as Priority and/or Focus for school year 2017-2018,”](#) Texas Education Association website). The Texas Education Agency (<https://tea.texas.gov>) maintains updated information about eligibility and requirements for funding.



In sum, the project proposes the following four key actions to advance a portfolio approach for a total family literacy program:

1. Clarify current available space, partnerships, and funding.
2. Re-examine partnerships. Are they the rights ones to meet the needs for facilities, volunteers, research, and programs? Are they productive and mutually beneficial?
3. Create partnerships to push out authoritative information on topics related to family health and wellness, education, child development, and a variety of literacies to strengthen families.
4. Take the opportunity of siting new library or other city/community-based organization facilities to find the best locations and to leverage other CBOs and neighborhood groups.

MEASURABLE RESULTS AND OUTCOMES.

While there is a tendency to look to academic achievement for measuring outcomes, the proposal advises caution on the ability to draw a direct line from out-of-school programs leading to increased achievement scores. In order to move the needle, the project should focus on student participation which has been shown by research to be a reliable metric for improving academic achievement. Tracking participation would be one way to measure

results. Additional outcome measures would be determined after further deliberation but might include metrics related to socio-emotional learning outcomes. Impact measures could even extend to those outside the education system, such as juvenile crime rates, child abuse or child neglect rates, and other activities that are happening during the programs' scheduled time periods.

Participants expressed interest in an easy-to-implement technology solution for tracking frequency of student participation. They also anticipated the need for policy changes where existing policies present barriers to operational functions and goals. For example, school systems often place restrictions on non-school providers of afterschool programs and use of their facilities on evenings and weekends. There may need to be some policy considerations to figure out what a sustainable hybrid approach might be to the typical model of having kids come to the library.

Project 2: Leverage the library to fill public gaps along the workforce continuum

Dialogue participants expressed concern over the impact of the disaster on Houston's workforce and skills development in both short and long-term timeframes. The Houston Public Library can support the work of the city's business, workforce development, and higher education sectors in creating pathways for learning, skills development, and helping individuals to identify pathways to achieve their goals.

PROJECT GOAL. Change the perception of public libraries from "Libraries = Books" to seeing Houston Public Library as a thriving part of Houston's economic development ecosystem and a learning institution that fills public gaps along the workforce continuum. The project proposes to scale the [cafécollege Houston](#) program by developing the career component through the integration of workforce solutions and economic development partners. The proposal



recommends an initial focus on the five Complete Communities pilot communities.

BACKGROUND AND ASSUMPTIONS.

Participants envisioned libraries as a thriving part of local economic development in neighborhoods and the city. Libraries offer a variety of core strengths and assets to support the workforce development continuum, including community connections, information resources and technology, assistance with basic skills development, and greater awareness about jobs and the economy. They cited cafécollege Houston as a great example, with its job labs, one-on-one coaching from Workforce Solutions, and the help it offers with computers and resume building. HPL's cafécollege Houston does a good job working with youth, including Opportunity Youth ages 16 to 24, to help them get college and completion-ready. And it has the capability to work with the parents of these youth, especially low-literate adults, to help adults with career awareness and exploration.

The library system can work to increase the capacity of volunteers and other organizations such as the newly anticipated Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy as they target human capital development in the city. Given that technology plays an increasingly important role in the workforce and in job-seeking itself, participants identified the need for a "data solution" – as yet undefined – that would address digital capacity building around the workforce. One example cited is how the career site LinkedIn requires a new set of skills to create a digital online narrative about one's work history, successes, and skills. Libraries can be places where job seekers can create their own personal narratives.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADVANCING IMPLEMENTATION. First, the library and other partners in the ecosystem need to clarify accountability and roles concerning participants on the workforce development continuum, including how layers on this

continuum might overlap others. Similar to Project 1 above, this proposal involves building on existing community assessments to address the following tasks:

- Clarifying shared goals and metrics. How well do these align?
- Identifying training and partners to fill the identified need
- Increasing volunteer opportunities and deployment
- Re-branding to include all services available through the partnership

Houston Public Library will need to integrate partners into its cafécollege Houston offerings in ways that can scale into the five Complete Communities neighborhoods and ultimately across the city. This will involve creating a vision, getting that vision out to CBOs, and developing shared action plans. It also will involve leveraging assets like the TECHLink locations and perhaps HPL's planned seven central libraries, on the one hand, and community and employer-based assets, like makerspaces and Houston Community College's Fab Lab expertise, on the other.

Adaptable spaces for training literacy workforce partners and bringing expertise on-site are also crucial. The continuum of classes could run from adult basic education, ESL, GED, to workforce development and digital literacy training. Curriculum could be derived from any number of sources, including partner organizations or online resources like Khan Academy. Financial literacy and empowerment is an essential part of the overall curriculum, in keeping with the vision of the public library's emerging role in neighborhood and community economic development. This highlights the need for banks and other financial institutions as partners. With the library's exploration of more non-traditional library roles, there is an opportunity for the library to foster innovative partnerships to blend areas of expertise. For example,

connecting social work (see schools of social work recommendation above) to workforce development activities.

The project's success would rest not only on the library's ability to build capacity to do this work, but also on its ability to successfully rebrand the library in this area. The rebranding is not only external (for example, messaging such as: "The library does great partnerships. It is a workforce place. It is a family place."), or signage at the library (e.g., "Stella Link Library: A Workforce Resource Center"), but also with regard to the workforce ecosystem in Houston, rebranding as partners (i.e., "The libraries are amazing to work with...it's more than just an MOU").

In sum, the project addresses the following six key actions to support libraries' role on the workforce continuum:

1. Filter the library's visions and action plan to CBOs and workforce partners for adapting program development and delivery.
2. Bring community-based expertise (e.g., Workforce Solutions, United Way of Greater Houston's Thrive) on-site.
3. Assess current levels of financial literacy and empowerment, and blend into action plan.
4. Identify specific curriculums to scale and deploy.
5. Integrate sub-regional economies into these efforts.
6. Design data solution that allows the user to own their career narrative and provide digital access training.

MEASURABLE RESULTS AND OUTCOMES.

The eventual success of scaling the cafécollege Houston concept and expanding the library's role in Houston's workforce development ecosystem would be evaluated by measuring the following outputs and outcomes: increased workforce participation in specific neighborhoods and the city; newly adaptable spaces used by training, literacy and workforce partners in target communities; increased

financial literacy and empowerment measured in the community; and increased internal innovation and partnership capacity with Houston Public Library.

Project 3: Insure the integrity of information in the community through collaborations with trusted information and communication partners

Participants explored the need for better alignment of organizations and the need to design and develop an infrastructure that can facilitate improved mechanisms for convening, coordinating, collaboration, and communication. Designing communication and civic engagement strategies that build awareness, knowledge, trust, and resilience is a priority.

PROJECT GOAL: Houston Public Library is to be recognized as the trusted source of information in the community. Furthermore, this project will expand access to trusted information in coordination with other critical information partners and ensure the integrity of information in the community as Houston rebuilds. Participants proposed enhancing access to HPL's trusted information through strategic partnerships with two critical stakeholders: Houston Independent School District (HISD) and Houston's media outlets and social media. A key part of the goal is to make this project budget neutral.

BACKGROUND AND ASSUMPTIONS: Access to information comes through both physical and digital resources. This requires attention to the physical spaces and hours of access to community information resources such as schools, libraries, and government offices where participants noted that hours are often too limited. Traditionally, libraries have had greater capacity for expanded hours than these other information outlets making them a key part of the city's information infrastructure (although, it was noted, a usage study to determine library hours may be advisable to confirm this presumption).



Digital access is just as important and offers a number of new ways to extend the library's reach by connecting with and through existing partners, like the public school districts and media outlets. The Houston Public Library has an array of digital assets and technologies including Internet access at all locations, Wi-Fi hot spots and laptops for loan, and digital literacy training. Participants noted that a large percentage of Houston's senior population is not tech-driven; there are many seniors who need assistance using new technologies. It is important to connect with seniors and other vulnerable populations to provide opportunities for "free" resources, including materials in multiple languages.

Concerning funding, participants recommended that recovery funding should assist in rebuilding the city's digital infrastructure. They also raised the potential to leverage contracting to expand opportunities and enhance partnerships in this area.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION.

Implementation of this project is envisioned with two primary sets of partnerships and collaborations: a partnership with HISD and partnerships with Houston's media ecosystem (print, electronic, and digital outlets).

HISD Partnership. A key concern addressed by this proposal is the need to get information about access and services to community members who may not proactively seek it. This project proposes a partnership with HISD which has wide reach and provides high school students with laptops and K-8 students with laptops during the school day. Each child signs onto an HISD hub that could include valuable information posted by the Houston Public Library. The partnership would push content from HPL as a trusted source through that hub, allowing students to click on a link (if that is part of the information for that day) or share the availability of information with parents, allowing parents to click and read.

The partnership can let parents know that information is available on the hub by using HISD’s parent contact information. An information sharing agreement already exists between HISD and HPL (217,000 students use their student ID number as an HPL library card), so a modification of the MOU may be all that is required to begin. For families that do not have digital connections in the home, students who bring laptops home provide an important information resource in the home. This can be leveraged to improve accessible information channels in the city.

Media Partnerships. Each media organization has a mandate to benefit the community, but often these obligations are not put into play as effectively and sustainably as they otherwise could be. The premise of this partnership is that HPL would collaborate with media and other community partners to provide vetted information and content, and to extend the reach of the Houston Public Library as a key source of trusted information in Houston.

The project would reach out to all media in the city – community and ethnic newspapers, other print publications, radio, broadcast and cable television, and digital media. Innovative distribution partnerships (Meals on Wheels, county and state Department of Public Safety offices, health clinics, and churches) could be engaged as well, to reach vulnerable populations and others who may not access

traditional or digital media on a regular basis. The project envisions that HPL would convene a meeting of all media outlets at the owner, news director, general manager, and publisher levels as a means to seek partnerships for library-related public service announcements (PSAs) and to develop better alignment and infrastructure for coordination, collaboration, and communication. This meeting could also enlist their assistance with the creation of an “HPL Trusted Source” campaign and to develop partnerships to create PSA campaigns and messaging around HPL content. Developing these relationships now would be vital to preparation for the next disaster to strike Houston.

Corporations like Comcast, which is a member of the Houston Public Library Foundation board, Clear Channel, and Houston Television (HTV) that have existing relationships with the library could be enlisted to help lead the development of this project. They might, for example, identify one channel for library and/or CBO content, perhaps by service areas, or use their influence to get others to the table for dialogue and conversation.

With regard to social media, the project proposes to increase the library’s presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or other valuable social media channels. It also recommends that the library develop partnerships with city council members to disseminate trusted information at critical times and on important subjects, pointing back to the library as a place of access and engagement, free information, and information in multiple languages and for multiple levels of literacy.

In sum, the project addresses the following five key actions to strengthen collaboration for a trusted information ecosystem:

1. Partner with HISD to push library-created content and information out through student laptops via the HISD hub and use parent email to make families aware of hub-based information and resources.



2. Convene a meeting of city-wide media (print, electronic, digital) to develop better alignment and improved infrastructure for coordination, collaboration, and communication of accurate information during times of crisis.
3. Enlist media outlets to create PSA campaigns for the Houston Public Library as a trusted information source in the community.
4. Increase the library's social media presence, activity, and engagement.
5. Develop innovative partnerships with other community-based organizations and service providers as channels for disseminating library information.

MEASURABLE RESULTS AND OUTCOMES.

These projects would result in greater and timely dissemination of accurate information to residents in the community, especially important at times of crisis. It would also produce increased utilization of library resources and assets, and improved community engagement and internal staff development. Outreach to media across the city would be expected to result in an increased number of partnerships which would increase the number of people who engage with library-created content, library brand building, and library awareness (as measured by community surveys). The library's partners will enjoy a boost to their own brands through association with the library.

CONCLUSION: THE GRAND OPPORTUNITY

The Houston Dialogue on Public Libraries brought together city leaders and stakeholders from community-based organizations to identify ways to leverage the assets and expertise of the Houston Public Library to build a more equitable and resilient city. The Dialogue serves as a model for demonstrating the library's power to convene people and

to serve as a catalyst for fresh thinking and creative, collaborative problem solving.

The experience of Hurricane Harvey and its aftermath have affected the fabric of community and daily life for all of the city's residents, especially the most vulnerable populations. Participants highlighted themes of resilience and strength and they brought strong leadership and vision to the conference table, resulting in a set of compelling recommendations for HPL and other local institutions to pursue.

The conversation uncovered several promising ideas to engage the city's libraries in new ways to expand access to key literacies and financial empowerment. The discussions also highlighted the opportunities for the library to engage with the Complete Communities initiative and its five pilot communities. Focusing on these five neighborhoods provides a means to start small in implementing ideas in this report and then plan for growth as resources become available and results warrant. The Dialogue created a fertile environment for thinking creatively about new partnership possibilities between the public library and the city's colleges and universities, and for developing new models like smart portfolio approaches for more effective service delivery. Importantly, the conference identified the Houston Public Library as one of the most trusted and capable information sources in the city at a time of great despair nationally over trust in institutions and the state of accuracy and credibility in information providers.

Perhaps the most compelling insight from the Houston Dialogue on Public Libraries is the recognition that the city of Houston has a grand opportunity represented in its public library system. City leaders began to seize this opportunity by identifying critical opportunities to leverage the resources and expertise of Houston Public Library to address critical needs for recovery and rebuilding in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. Of course, demands on HPL resources and the resources of potential partners have tempered HPL's ability to

pursue all of these recommendations and projects in the near-term. However, the library is poised to move the most promising ideas forward and address the goals of all of the recommendations and proposals as resources become available.

The opportunity to bridge gaps in equity and opportunity across the neighborhoods and communities of Houston extend well beyond the library's response to this one disaster. Fully seizing this grand opportunity will rely on intentionally filtering a vision for the library as

a partner, a place, and a platform for learning, literacy, access, engagement, empowerment and discovery. This level of intentionality to infuse a renewed, community-centered vision for the library into planning by the city's public, nonprofit, and private sectors has not previously existed. With a wake-up call from Hurricane Harvey and the leadership and commitment of the Dialogue participants and Houston Public Library, it is time to advance efforts to leverage the library as a key partner for building thriving families and equitable communities in Houston.

APPENDIX:

HURRICANE RESPONSE AND RECOVERY DISCUSSION SUMMARY HOUSTON DIALOGUE ON PUBLIC LIBRARIES

INTRODUCTION

On September 14, 2017, the Houston Public Library (HPL) hosted 23 leaders from the government, nonprofit, and private sectors for a two-hour meeting to discuss how their organizations were leveraging their own and other community resources to respond to the complex needs of the city in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. HPL and the Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries convened this meeting in lieu of the previously scheduled two day Houston Dialogue on Public Libraries, which was postponed until November 15-16. The meeting took place in the auditorium of the Julia Ideson Building of the Houston Public Library in downtown Houston.

Participants represented nonprofit and community based organizations of various sizes serving diverse populations and missions throughout the city; organizations from the business sector and private philanthropy; colleges and universities; and select agencies, departments, and branches of local and state government. A list of participating leaders appears at the end of this summary report.

The meeting provided participants an opportunity to gather, share stories, exchange information, and identify areas where they, their organizations, and their networks could support one another and work more

effectively in concert in the months ahead. The agenda addressed two tasks: first, identifying community needs and priorities and, second, identifying common ground where aligning efforts could lead to greater efficiency and impact. The following questions served as a catalyst for discussion:

1. How has your organization been engaged in helping its constituents and the community at large recover?
2. With whom have you partnered?
3. What has gone well and where can we do better?

This conversation took place just 20 days after Hurricane Harvey made landfall on the Texas coast. While participants were focused on the immediate priorities and goals of responding to the disaster and getting a solid recovery underway, they also had an eye on the longer term needs of rebuilding and achieving goals for the city that predated the hurricane. The following summary highlights insights and observations of participants including the priorities and goals that participants identified for their organizations and the city; challenges faced during the early days of the response and recovery activities; and issues that will need to be addressed to ensure a strong recovery and more resilient city in the long-term.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

There were three critical needs in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane and flooding: (1) ensuring that first responders had the information and resources they needed to do their work, (2) providing accurate information to key stakeholders, partners, and the public, and (3) monitoring and providing stability for people who were most adversely affected, with particular concern for employees, customers and clients, students (in the case of colleges and universities), and vulnerable populations (children, seniors, low-income individuals and families, people with health challenges). As participants discussed how their organizations mobilized their resources, personnel, and other assets to address these needs, 12 insights and common themes emerged from the experiences shared around the table. Insights 1-8 describe what went well and Insights 8-12 reflect challenges encountered.

- 1. The needs at the city's shelters were very complex and involved many organizations bringing their unique competencies and resources.** The Health Department provided epidemiologists and health inspectors to ensure that the shelters would not spread disease, and coordinated dialysis and medication services for people with ongoing medical needs. Capital One Bank deployed ATMs. The Harris County and Houston Public Libraries set-up computers and Internet access that enabled residents to apply for FEMA aid. They also provided books and makerspaces in pop-up libraries at the Convention Center and NRG Stadium to keep children and families entertained.
- 2. Advanced planning helps.** The United Way of Greater Houston is a lead agency in disaster relief and recovery; it maintains a 2-1-1 Texas/United Way Helpline that answers calls 24/7 to connect callers to the



help they need. This includes emergency and evacuation information, food, and other essential resources. Other participants whose core missions are not so closely aligned with disaster response noted that they had applied lessons learned from previous disasters, including Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Ike. Capital One Bank had a 1-800 number ready to provide information, the bank's associates were mobilized to learn, and the bank was ready to set-up mobile ATMs and provide grants. After Katrina, the Chinese Community Center (CCC) decided to build a pipeline for doing relief work. CCC obtained CDBG funding to renovate the gym and volunteered its use as a shelter. The center went through training to be a first responder. With Harvey, the center's plans to be a shelter faltered when its southwest neighborhood flooded and they had to pull out, but they still were prepared to provide case management services initially for 100 families.

3. Organizations quickly reprioritized resources and programming to address the urgent needs of the community.

As a HUD certified agency, Avenue CDC immediately deployed staff to do FEMA enrollment and made enrolling people in FEMA a critical priority. Avenue CDC has reshaped its counseling programs into disaster recovery counseling, housing counseling and helping people with decision making on how they can move forward. The United Way of Greater Houston suspended the regular fundraising drive planned for the fall and, as a leading organization in the recovery, has been focused on securing resources and getting information out to people and providers of services (in collaboration with others). Peter Beard of Greater Houston Partnership emphasized the importance of helping people to understand the timeline and what resources are available because the window for FEMA applications is a relatively short one.

4. Many community-based organizations served a critical role as liaisons for other organizations based on their established relationships with clients in vulnerable populations.

The strengths and roles of organizations differed depending on the size of the organization, the resources that they had available, the organization's mission, and other factors. In some cases, this differentiation allowed for complementary roles in the immediate disaster response. For example, smaller community-based organizations (CBOs) like Literacy Advance, which provides free adult education and literacy services and serves culturally-diverse vulnerable populations on any given day, did not have case managers and specific information on disaster response. However the organization and its volunteers did offer a safe place and wrap-around services, as well as connections to the people for case managers from larger CBOs to come in and work with their clientele. The Chinese Community Center provided in-language case management support.

5. Providing places for people in the community to gather and communicate with one another was very important for addressing the mental and emotional needs of people.

Libraries and churches were some of the many places fulfilling this role.

6. Organizations redeployed and repurposed staff to support internal departments and external communities.

Harris County Public Libraries redeployed branch staff from libraries that were closed to other locations, and their engineering staff helped to do infrastructure and facilities assessments for other organizations in the community. Avenue CDC deployed staff and volunteers to churches and other community locations to provide expert assistance with FEMA enrollments. The Houston Public Library provided child care

services for City of Houston employees; this safe place for children enabled city departments to get up and running more quickly. HPL also provided office space, parking, and technology support to maintain operations for displaced city departments. Faculty at Rice University worked with synagogues in Meyerland facing the loss of precious historical documents to create an archive for the synagogues to preserve the docs.

7. Providing financial assistance in many forms was also a critical role filled by many organizations. The United Way of Greater Houston maintains funds to help with unmet recovery needs, works with nonprofits on coordination and collection of donations, and it launched a disaster-specific fundraising effort. Capital One Bank deferred payment options for banking products to ease the financial strain on customers. Colleges and universities ensured that students had access to food, shelter, and counseling on their campuses. Rice University provided free food and waived fees for students living on campus. Houston Public Library waived and adjusted fees for programs and services. The Chinese Community Center gave small grants in the form of Visa cards and provided help in applying for Small Business Administration (SBA) loans. The Texas State Library and Archives Commission working with the Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries made small grants of \$5,000 available to school libraries throughout the southeast region for things like pop-up libraries, evacuation services, and equipment needs. Phyllis Bailey discussed working with the Texas Black Expo to raise money and give grants to small businesses in need. Avenue CDC helped with distribution of cash. The Greater Houston Partnership helped businesses get access to capital to get up and running.

8. The existence of established relationships facilitated organizational responses. Where relationships and networks were weaker, it was sometimes harder to figure out how to mobilize volunteers and offer resources, infrastructure, or other support. One participant cited his organization's ability and desire to become a shelter but without having sought out this information beforehand, there was no information flow and preparedness for organizations that wanted to assist in this way. Others noted that they had many volunteers who were ready and willing to help (students, in the case of local universities), but there was no system for quickly or easily identifying where the needs were and then matching volunteer resources with those needs.

9. The need to obtain and share information quickly was frequently met by broken channels of communication or an inability to verify the accuracy of information. This was compounded by the fact that needs were constantly changing and evolving. As an example of misinformation spreading, some displaced residents showed up at the city's multiservice centers because they had heard these centers would be opened as shelters; they had to be directed to the appropriate city shelters. The lack of electricity and cellular telephone service compounded the information and communication challenges. Councilmember Amanda Edwards noted that she kept a bunch of portable cellphone chargers that she used to stay connected to the Internet. She used her social media channels to gather and send information. "We put out a list of shelters on social media and it had 800 shares immediately," she said. People were hungry for information and there was no good way to get it.

10. The infrastructure for early childhood care has been destroyed in some places, causing great concern for the safety and well-being of vulnerable children and their families. The Houston Children’s Museum and the Collaborative for Children were active doing social media and trying to meet the immediate needs of families. Tammie Kahn cited the need to focus on stabilizing communities around children with the challenge that, as of this date (9/14), “We don’t know where those people are yet.” The Houston Endowment was focused on getting 1/3 of child care programs online and doing site visits to assess the damage. Tonyel Simon noted that the Endowment partnered with Collaborative for Children to assess the damage.

11. There was concern with how to bring the flow of donations into organizations in a meaningful way and to achieve equitable distribution of donations. This was illustrated particularly well by the library participants. Edward Melton commented that it can take a lot of effort that libraries do not have resources for at this time to process book donations; monetary donations are better. The Houston Public Library Foundation was accepting book donations for school and public libraries and, through collaborative efforts, will help to make sure that there is equity in who receives the donations so that all areas are made whole again.

12. Participants expressed specific concern for the needs of vulnerable populations in the city, particularly in the long-term. These vulnerable populations included families with children, seniors, persons with chronic health conditions including mental health and substance abuse, low-literacy and non-English speakers, low-income individuals, and those experiencing homelessness. Judy Harris of the city’s Health Department described the problem succinctly: “We design systems for ‘normal’ people – those who have the physical and

intellectual ability to navigate the system with minimal assistance. Most vulnerable people are not included. We needed to set-up a communications hub to respond to the FEMA system, and assist these people who cannot navigate the FEMA system on their own.” She concluded by saying, “We need a community-wide strategy across the sectors.”

GOALS AND PRIORITIES FOR LONG-TERM RECOVERY

From the beginning of the conversation, participants made it clear that Houston’s recovery from the hurricane and its aftermath would be a long-term process, on the order of three to five years. Participants described in broad terms what kind of recovery they envisioned and what elements would be needed to arrive at that goal. First, participants described the need for the proper focus to guide the long-term recovery and rebuilding efforts. This included:

- focus on getting better, sooner
- focus on a more holistic recovery
- focus on boosting the long-term recovery
- focus on vulnerable populations

Peter Beard envisioned the long-term recovery as a “resurgence” when he listed the three priorities of the Greater Houston Partnership (recovery, rebuilding, and resurgence). “Don’t forget to communicate for the long-term,” said Beard, who added that it is important to keep promoting #HoustonStrong as part of the DNA of Houston, which will be an important help with Houston’s long-term economic recovery.

Participants cited three key challenges that will need concerted attention as the long-term recovery unfolds, including:

1. The long-term housing needs of transient populations. The current focus on recovery housing is months in scope, not years. Harvey has given new urgency to an old problem.

2. The need for a community-wide strategy, across the sectors, to help the most vulnerable and ill-prepared to navigate the system. This includes filling gaps in mental health, case management, and home repair – three critical areas in recovery and rebuilding from the floods. It also includes a focus on removing barriers for what people can't or won't do for themselves – first identifying the needs, then looking at what can be done by which organizations to address them (e.g., seniors who feel safe because the water has receded when they may have a serious mold problem)
3. The impact of the disaster on Houston's workforce and skills development. Beard expressed concern for businesses in the residential space where there are many independent contractors in the types of work that will be needed for rebuilding, and the need to address their workforce needs. Moreover, looking at skills longer term is still an important focus. The skills gap that existed pre-Harvey won't be going away and lost wages will have a big impact on people already on the wrong side of the gap and those severely impacted by Harvey.

ELEMENTS NECESSARY FOR A STRONGER RECOVERY

Finally, participants listed the following elements as necessary for a strong recovery:

- Honest assessments of what is going well and what isn't
- Alignment of organizations and development of an infrastructure to convene, coordinate, collaborate, and communicate better; to "complete the circle" of matchmaking needs and volunteers; and to mitigate future disasters (CCC's Chi-Mei Lin suggested forming

a closer communications network with the public sector, especially libraries and schools, around mental health and childcare issues)

- Leadership commitment²
- Recognition that needs are constantly evolving and a willingness to be adaptable to these changing conditions and needs
- Addressing the information gap and providing basic disaster education
- Addressing legal concerns
- Ongoing capital access, grants, and resource support
- Understanding the role of and need for technology and how to deploy and use it effectively (e.g., develop recharging strategy to address lack of electricity and cell service, community solar power chargers, how to reach people effectively via social media)

In a final reflection, Larry Payne reminded the group that the face of poverty in Houston is that of a single mother. He suggested that changing this picture would require tackling "the five pillars of life in Houston" (social, economic, political, racial, and spiritual) and addressing the common duties, obligations, and responsibilities that we owe to one another as part of our democracy.

² Margaret Larson, a disaster recovery management expert with Ernst & Young, cited the example of the nonprofit community in Dallas which used a recovery grant (CDBG) to develop a disaster supply plan, kit, and resources. A group of top-level nonprofit leaders focused on communications get together once a month, making a leadership commitment, to be prepared for the next disaster or crisis.

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