

# PUBLIC LIBRARIANSHIP & FOOD JUSTICE: EXPLORING THE INTERSECTIONS

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# Public librarianship and food justice: Current intersections and future opportunities

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The images on the front cover: top to bottom: Southern Adirondack Library System's Farm-2-Library Program, DeKalb County Public Library's Edible Libraries initiative (left), Horry County Public Library's Charlie Cart initiative (left), San Diego County Library's partnership with Feeding San Diego (right), Salem Public Library's partnership with Salem Farmers' Market (left), and Orland Park Public Library's seed library (right). Thank you to these and all other public libraries.

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The public library embodies the spirit that Gwendolyn Brooks saw in the artistry of activism of Paul Robeson. The last lines of her poem, *Paul Robeson*:

Warning, in music-words  
devout and large, that we are each other's  
harvest:  
we are each other's  
business:  
we are each other's  
magnitude and bond.

Source: <https://poets.org/poem/paul-roberson> and from *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks* (Library of America, 2005). Copyright © 1970 by Gwendolyn Brooks.



# Executive Summary

This report explores and examines some of the intersections between public librarianship and food justice. Food justice is a topic many working in public libraries wish to understand and put into action. Many struggle to do so in a way that is sustainable for the institution of the public library. These findings emerged from focus groups with public library workers conducted from November 2023 to March 2024.

This report introduces five themes based on focus group conversations. Three themes describe how public library workers think about the intersections of food justice and public librarianship (1-3). Two describe how library workers structure their labor around it (4-5). The five themes are:

1. The library is an evolving, multi-cultural community resource and hub
2. Food access is essential to learning and literacy
3. Library workers feel pressure and guilt to address all needs and individuals
4. Procedures and policies integrate food work into library work
5. Partnerships integrate library work into food work

Before discussing these five themes, we briefly describe what is known about this topic. This review of current knowledge reveals a growing interest in the topic, both in the public library profession and in the scholarly community. Disruptions in food systems during the COVID-19 Pandemic accelerated this trend. This review also points to a knowledge gap about how public library workers support food justice: **How do public library workers build support around food justice in ways that make this work visible, effective, funded, supported, and sustainable?**

The report then shifts to modeling future opportunities. We advance a continuum model in which, on one end, library workers are working on their own to meet people's immediate needs, and, on the other, library workers are fully integrated into community efforts focused on food justice.

This continuum model then leads to the introduction of a model that offers library workers new ways of thinking about how to do this work with more impact and sustainability:

- **Learn** about food and food justice, as a foundation for considering how the public library could be involved in this work
- **Discover** who else cares about food justice, and position public libraries to be discovered by others who care about this topic
- **Cultivate** relationships focused on how to collectively do the most good
- **Serve & Transform** communities through initiatives built on strategic partnerships
- **Reflect** on how things are working, make changes, and advocate for what works well

The report concludes with a research agenda, as well as with a structure public library workers can use to initiate and facilitate conversations on this critical topic.

# Introduction

Public libraries and library workers are transforming how they engage and serve communities by developing creative partnerships with a broad range of community-based organizations and individuals. Increasingly, the work of public libraries is driven by community needs, wants, and aspirations. One domain of interest and concern during the last five years, and particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, has been hunger, limited access to food, and the critical need for a more just food system.

What comes to mind when you hear the term **food justice**? Everyone having enough to eat? Growing and distributing food in ways that break down barriers? Celebrating and supporting diverse ways of growing, making, and eating food? Food justice is all this, and much more.

What comes to mind when you hear the term **public library**? A community space open to all that is full of books, and other forms of information, learning, and entertainment? Lifelong learning and literacy promotion through classes and programs for everyone from babies to older adults? Workers ready to answer any information questions you may have? Public libraries are all this, and much more.

With funding from Mellon, **Food Justice and Public Libraries explores** the roles of public libraries and public library workers in food justice initiatives. The project used online convenings to bring library workers from across the country together to discuss how their work intersects with food justice.

In these online conversations, public library workers listened to and learned from each other, and we learned from everyone. This research was aided and shaped by a cohort of Research Fellows – librarians, scholars, community activists, policymakers, and students – who helped us frame our inquiry. Our results not only form a solid foundation from which to pursue further work on this topic, it also helps us better understand public libraries as community cornerstones and catalysts.

## Report Readers and Lessons

### *Frontline public library workers*

You are not alone! Collaborate with community partners to meet a community need like food justice.

### *Public library administrators*

There are many ways your library can intervene in food systems to work toward justice. Support your staff in this work.

### *Food justice advocates, activists, and other community partners*

Food is fundamental to individuals and communities. Creative thinking and strategic partnerships will build success.

### *Scholars, teachers, and policymakers*

Frame food justice as part of the work public libraries do in collaboration with communities.

### *Interested members of the public*

Support public libraries in their work to address food justice. Be an advocate to ensure they have the resources they need to continue to work in and with communities.

### *Funders*

Public libraries cannot do it alone. New initiatives that focus on food justice are opportunities for the philanthropic community to help ensure success and build capacity with their investment.

# What is known about food justice and public libraries?

This section provides a brief overview of our current knowledge about the intersections of food justice and public librarianship. This overview includes an introduction to both food justice and to public librarianship. We also introduce a gap in our knowledge: **How do public library workers build support around food justice in ways that make this work visible, effective, funded, supported, and sustainable?** We also provide readers with some historical context that may be useful for understanding where public library work is now.



## What is food justice?

Activist and farmer Karen Washington asserts that food justice centers on the right to fresh, healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food.<sup>1</sup> Many food justice advocates and activists expand the definition to include access to locally grown foods, and community influence on and participation in food systems. Many recognize and value the broad range of workers in our food systems and advocate for a living wage, policies that protect food workers, and benefits.

Food justice work strives toward a society that is more just, fair, and democratic overall. Food justice is an aspect of social and economic justice that brings a diverse array of activists and advocates to the table.

**Shifting from food desert to food apartheid.** Unequal access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food in United States communities has long been studied and discussed. For years, the phrase food desert was used to describe that condition. Recently food justice advocates and community activists have introduced and advocated for a new, and we believe more apt phrase, food apartheid. Food apartheid locates the lack of access to fresh, healthy and affordable food in the systemic racism and economic injustices in our society and our food systems.

In a 2018 interview by *The Guardian* newspaper, Karen Washington argues that the phrase “food desert” is an “outsider term”, one not used by people in communities. She urges us to use food apartheid which “looks at the whole food system, along with race, geography, faith, and economics.”<sup>2</sup> Not only does a food apartheid lens illuminate systemic racism and economic injustice embedded in food systems, it also helps us understand why there has been systematic

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<sup>1</sup> As described in Sevilla, N. (2021). Food apartheid: racialized access to healthy affordable food. *Natural Resources Defense Council blog*. <https://www.nrdc.org/bio/nina-sevilla/food-apartheid-racialized-access-healthy-affordable-food>.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Brones, A. (2018, May 15). “Food apartheid: the root of the problem with America’s groceries,” *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/may/15/food-apartheid-food-deserts-racism-inequality-america-karen-washington-interview>

disinvestment in poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised communities that rob them of a viable and equitable food infrastructure. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food production, supply, distribution, and access amplified issues with food access and hunger that extend beyond poor and marginalized communities, and raised broader awareness of these issues, including the precarious state of food systems in all communities.

## What are public libraries?

Public libraries are trusted institutions that exist in urban, suburban, and rural communities with services available to all. In the United States, the definition of a public library is defined by individual states, which have their own laws defining what an entity must do to be considered a public library eligible for state aid. Public libraries, although primarily locally funded, are also supported by state and federal government. In all states, public libraries are chartered to serve all residents in the community, district, or region that funds and supports them.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond this official definition, we also need to understand the work and workers that enabled and enables these critical institutions found in almost all U.S. communities to survive and flourish over time. We assert that:

- Public library work is shaped by communities.
- Communities are shaped by public library workers
- Public library work is informed by discussions (and debates) among public library workers.
- Public library work is shaped by policy, and the ebb and flow of government resources not only to libraries, but also to the work of other public institutions focused on the public good.

This framework is indebted to the work of scholars and library workers who preceded us. For example, in 1978, the newsletter of the *Social Responsibilities Roundtable of the American Library Association* published “Nutrition: A Federal Food Primer” written by Barbara Zang. This article focuses on educating library workers on existing state and federal food-related resources so they could better support patrons. Zang wrote, “For the library – and the socially responsible librarian – there is a growing literature on the various [federal] food programs,” that needs to be understood. “Ignorance about available food resources means poor people have fewer choices about how to meet their food needs. We [librarians] should not contribute to that situation.”<sup>4</sup>

“  
*Ignorance about available food  
resources means poor people  
have fewer choices about how  
to meet their food needs.*

*We [librarians] should not  
contribute to that situation.*  
- Barbara Zang, 1978

Our framework on public library work is also shaped by the work of the late Dr. Margaret E. Monroe (1914-2005). Over a career that included 13 years as a public librarian at the New York Public Library, three years at the American Library Association, and 27 years as a Library Science

<sup>3</sup> Owens, S. (1996). Public library structure and organization in the United States. US Government Printing Office. [https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/publiclibrarystructureorg3-1996\\_0.pdf](https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/publiclibrarystructureorg3-1996_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Zang, B. (March 1978). Nutrition: A federal food program primer. SRRT-ALA Newsletter #48, p. 3. <https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/rt/content/SRRT/Newsletters/srrt048.pdf>



professor at Rutgers and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Dr. Monroe engaged in research and teaching that has informed our knowledge of the community practices of public library workers. Based on a national study of the community work undertaken by public librarians, in 1976, Monroe concluded that:

The public librarian may play any of several roles in a community-wide action system: information specialist, catalyst change agent, interpreter of community need, channel to community resource, expert in planning and group process. The action system is an ad hoc task-oriented structure, created specifically to deal with a particular problem, and the versatile librarian may exercise leadership and bring library resources and services to bear in a variety of ways. (498)<sup>5</sup>

In this quote, we see articulated the idea that public library work is informed by communities and library workers who share their experiences and build their knowledge through participation in professional networks, and opportunities such as Dr. Monroe's research project.

Unfortunately, it is also the case that public library work is too often invisible and struggles to secure sufficient resources and funding. Public library work is labor done under significant pressure. This policy context shapes what is possible in public librarianship. In the United States, there has been a dismantling of social welfare systems and the so-called social safety net since the early 1980s, directly leading to new challenges for public libraries and library workers. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the *Washington Post* published an article about how "the public library is the latest place to pick up a coronavirus test" and "librarians are overwhelmed."<sup>6</sup> For us to fully understand the role of the public library in communities, we need to account for and engage the impact these types of policy decisions have had on public library work as well as the institution of the public library itself.

**Public libraries: An evolving institution.** Public librarianship is not a monolith, nor has it ever been. Understanding that fact is central to the work undertaken in this report. In a 2007 doctoral dissertation on public librarian participation in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), Joyce M. Latham shows that during the 1930s and 1940s there was a significant debate within the profession about whether public librarians should work to challenge or even over-turn "dominant social and cultural constructs."<sup>7</sup> That debate is just one example of discussions in the profession that continue today, with some library workers seeing a role for themselves and their libraries in challenging social injustices, and others less so.

At a more mundane level, there is broad historical consensus that the institution of the public library in the United States has evolved and changed since its emergence in the mid-nineteenth century. Public library workers have been central to these shifts. According to most historians, it was not until the early twentieth century that the idea of public library services and spaces for children

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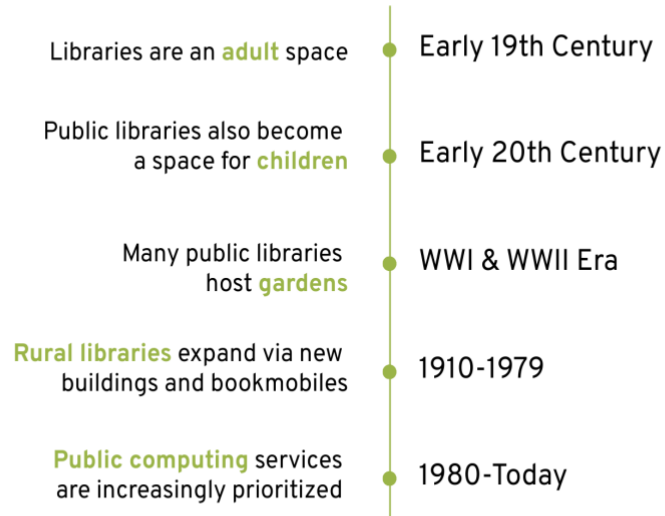
<sup>5</sup> Monroe, M.E. (January 1976). Community development as a mode of community analysis. *Library Trends*, 24/3, 497-514.

<sup>6</sup> Weil, J.Z. (2022, January 18). The public library is the latest place to pick up a coronavirus test. Librarians are overwhelmed. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-vi/2022/01/18/librarians-coronavirus-tests-workers/>

<sup>7</sup> Latham, J. M. (2007). *White Collar Read: The American Public Library and the Left-Led CIO: A Case Study of the Chicago Public Library, 1929--1952* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign).

emerged across the nation. Before the end of the nineteenth century, most librarians and policymakers thought of the public library as a space primarily for adults. Similarly, the first public libraries were focused on towns and cities. The idea of rural public library service via bookmobiles and other extension services emerged later. During national emergencies, such as the two world wars and the Great Depression, public libraries changed again: In many communities, library workers started and sustained victory gardens that both grew food and that educated communities on how and why to do so themselves. Finally, in the late twentieth century, public libraries in the United States became increasingly associated with new technology, and by the 1990s were seen as on the frontlines for addressing the digital divide. These shifts illustrate how public libraries evolve over time in ways that are both responsive and prefigurative. They also illustrate that not all changes are permanent. The victory gardens at public libraries in the United States ended after the wars ended, for instance.<sup>8</sup>

### Public Libraries have shifted over the centuries to serve new populations and evolving community needs



"We have always been in the business of making people's lives better. I think that is the history of public libraries across the globe."

Melanie Huggins, library director

This framing matters because a common challenge public libraries face today is a lack of popular understanding about this history. A CBS Evening News segment that aired on June 20, 2024, characterized what it called an "extraordinary evolution" of public libraries, exemplified by, among other things, the introduction of a seed library and a teaching kitchen where patrons can learn about culinary techniques at the Richland Public Library in Columbia, South Carolina.<sup>9</sup> The library's then director, Melanie Huggins, pushed back on this characterization, however. Huggins asserted that

<sup>8</sup> A few starting points for this history include Banks, C.S. & C. Mediavilla. (2019). *Libraries & Gardens Growing Together* Chicago: ALA Editions; Buckland, M. K. (2020). *Ideology and Libraries: California, Diplomacy, and Occupied Japan, 1945–1952*. Rowman & Littlefield; Van Slyck, A. A. (1995). *Free to all: Carnegie libraries & American culture, 1890–1920*. University of Chicago Press; Wiegand, W. A. (2015). *Part of our lives: A people's history of the American public library*. Oxford University Press; Pawley, C. (2010). *Reading Places; Literacy, Democracy, and the Public Library in Cold War America*. University of Massachusetts Press; Mattern, S. C. (2007). *The new downtown library: Designing with communities*. U of Minnesota Press.

<sup>9</sup> Oliver, M. (2024, June 20). How one county is reimagining libraries, from teaching kitchens to woodworking shops. *CBS Evening News* <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-one-county-is-reimagining-libraries-from-teaching-kitchens-to-woodworking-shops/>

public libraries “have always been in the business of making people's lives better.” We invite readers of this report to similarly consider how public library participation in food justice work both fits within this historical tradition and maybe even pushes its boundaries.

## Food justice and public libraries: Our current knowledge

Our research has already documented that in communities across the United States, public library workers support food justice by collaborating with community partners to provide access to resources, information, and services. Examples of that work include Connecting communities with food-related information and books, distributing food, organizing cooking classes, establishing seed libraries, cultivating community gardens, and supporting farmers markets.<sup>10</sup>

### **Libraries partner to increase food literacy and build food justice in communities**



Connecting communities with **food-related information and books**



**Distributing food**  
(e.g. meal programs and little free pantries)



Organizing **cooking classes and demonstrations**



Establishing **seed libraries**



Cultivating **community gardens**



Supporting **farmers markets**

This work is often done through partnerships with local Cooperative Extension educators, farmers, farmers markets, chefs, and gardeners.<sup>11</sup> However, in recent years, we have witnessed increased concern among library workers themselves who are increasingly aware of a growing inequity of access to food in their communities. Furthermore, public librarians, like all frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, suffered a great deal of disruption in their lives and many were food insecurity themselves.<sup>12</sup> These trends in library work point toward changes needed in our understanding of this sector, the institution, and its workforce.

<sup>10</sup> Lenstra, N., & D’Arpa, C. (2019). Food Justice in the Public Library. *The International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion*, 3(4), 45-67.

<sup>11</sup> Dodge, H. (2020). *Gather 'round the Table: Food Literacy Programs, Resources, and Ideas for Libraries*. ALA Editions.

<sup>12</sup> For example, reporting from places as diverse as Halifax, Nova Scotia; Los Angeles, California; and Western North Carolina highlights food insecurity among the public library workforce: Halifax:

**What does the literature tell us about these intersections?** The literature on public libraries and food tends to focus on specific initiatives that public libraries can or could undertake (see following page). The earliest discussion of this topic came from health science researchers in the late 1990s interested in thinking about public libraries as sites for nutrition education, as well as for food distribution. Public library workers started producing their own literature on this topic beginning around 2008. From then on, book chapters, webinars, and trade publications have focused on everything from public library participation in the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s summer feeding program to vegetable gardens to cooking classes to hosting farmer’s markets at libraries. The topic then started appearing in the discourse of Library & Information Science in 2018, with scholarship on seed libraries, vegetable and learning/teaching gardens, support of local agriculture, and scans and surveys of existing public library initiatives that involve food.

There has also been scattered interest in covering this topic by the national media, with one example being National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered* coverage in 2010 of an innovative program at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore (MD) that enabled community members with little or no access in their communities to a grocery or supermarket to order and pick up groceries at the library.<sup>13</sup> Fourteen years later, in September 2024, WMAR-Baltimore reported that the Enoch Pratt Free Library was launching a new Pratt Free Market initiative where residents could fill library-provided bags with free food at no cost.<sup>14</sup>

**The COVID-19 pandemic and increasing prioritization of this topic.** The COVID-19 pandemic caused massive disruptions to food systems. Public libraries saw those disruptions and how individuals in their communities were being affected. In many cases public libraries responded to them in collaboration with their communities. Responding to these changes, the Public Library Association, a division of the American Library Association, included questions on food insecurity in its February 2021 Survey of the Public Library Field, finding that 28.3% of 2,967 public library workers either were currently partnering or saw an opportunity to partner with others on food insecurity issues. Furthermore, 39.8% were interested in developing better competencies for how libraries work “with vulnerable populations (such as those experiencing food insecurity, homelessness, addiction).”<sup>15</sup>

The juxtaposition of food insecurity with homelessness and addiction in this question is part of a larger trend focused on integrating social services and social workers into public librarianship. A recent study of the perceived need for social workers in public libraries in Florida found that librarians observed the need for “employment assistance... food insecurity issues (locating a local food pantry, applying for food stamps), healthcare and mental healthcare needs ... legal aid, and housing.”<sup>16</sup>

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<https://surge105.ca/2024/08/29/89730/>; North Carolina: <http://dailyyonder.com/healing-amidst-divisions-how-a-small-town-fights-for-its-library/2024/09/16/>; Los Angeles: <https://lacounty.gov/newsroom/la-area-emmys-videos/>

<sup>13</sup> Owens, D.M. (2010, April 26). Check it out: Get your Groceries at the library. *NPR’s All Things Considered*.

<https://www.npr.org/2010/04/26/126282239/check-it-out-get-your-groceries-at-the-library>

<sup>14</sup> Zumer, B. (2024, September 23) Pratt Free Market to offer free groceries in Highlandtown. *WMAR 2 News*

<https://www.wmar2news.com/local/pratt-free-market-to-offer-free-groceries-in-highlandtown>.

<sup>15</sup> Public Library Association (2022). Survey of the public library field. <https://www.ala.org/pla/data/fieldsurvey>

<sup>16</sup> Crabtree, L., Latham, D., Gross, M., Baum, B., & Randolph, K. (2024). Social workers in the stacks: Public librarians’ perceptions and experiences. *Public Library Quarterly*, 43(1), 109-134.

## A selected bibliography of current literature on these intersections

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Freedman, M. R., & Nickell, A. (2010). Impact of after-school nutrition workshops in a public library setting. *Journal of nutrition education and behavior*, 42(3), 192-196.

Concannon, M., Rafferty, E., & Swanson-Farmarco, C. (2011). Snacks in the stacks: Teaching youth nutrition in a public library. *Journal of Extension*, 49(5), n5.

Woodson, D. E., Timm, D. F., & Jones, D. (2011). Teaching kids about healthy lifestyles through stories and games: Partnering with public libraries to reach local children. *Journal of hospital librarianship*, 11(1), 59-69.

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### **Library workers**

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Free Library of Philadelphia. (2017). *Culinary literacy: A toolkit for public libraries*.

Phillips, R., Hambright-Belue, S., & Green, C. (2018). *Fresh food, fresh thinking: An innovative approach to youth development and learning in rural communities*. Chicago: Public Library Association.

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*Information, Diversity, & Inclusion (IJIDI)*, 3(4).

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Similarly, from April to July 2020, OCLC - a non-profit, global library organization – conducted a series of online interviews with library leaders about pandemic-fueled changes to library operations, finding that libraries were increasingly “collaborating with local agencies to address pandemic issues, such as making and distributing face masks, food” and more.<sup>17</sup>

Also responding to these trends, in 2021 and 2022 the Urban Libraries Council led an effort funded by the Walmart Foundation to support multi-sector responses to build food security. This project culminated on January 31, 2023, with the release of a white paper entitled *Food is a Right: Libraries and Food Justice*.<sup>18</sup>

More recently, the American Library Association’s *State of America’s Libraries Report 2024* summarizes the current state of all libraries across the United States. Under the heading “A Year of Innovation” the report devotes nearly an entire page to “food and housing help” featuring examples of public library workers from Spartanburg County (SC), Charleston County (SC), and Des Moines (IA) working with partners to develop new and innovative ways to intervene in food systems to address food access issues in their communities.<sup>19</sup>

Despite this attention to food security, food partnerships, and public librarianship, what remains unknown is how the work gets done? That is, from the perspective of public library workers, what does this work -- food work -- involve in terms of time, resources, and support? How are decisions to engage in food work made and assessed? How do public library workers build support around food justice in ways that make this work visible, effective, funded, supported, and sustainable? These questions remain largely unasked, and therefore unanswered. We assert this knowledge is necessary to more strategically support the intersections of food justice and public librarianship.

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<sup>17</sup> Connaway, L.S., et al. (2021). *New Model Library: Pandemic Effects and Library Directions*. Dublin, OH: OCLC Research. <https://doi.org/10.25333/2d1r-f907>.

<sup>18</sup> Urban Libraries Council. (2023). Libraries and Food Security. <https://www.urbanlibraries.org/initiatives/education/libraries-and-food-security>.

<sup>19</sup> American Library Association (2024). State of America’s Libraries 2024. <https://www.ala.org/news/state-americas-libraries-report-2024>

## Methods: How did we learn?

This section introduces the project's methods for learning about the intersections of public librarianship and food justice. Our process prioritized and focused on listening to public library workers talk with us, and with each other, about how they understood the topic. We asked what they wanted others to know about the topic, and what support or help they felt they needed to more effectively understand and develop public library work that intersects with and supports food justice.

The project team was consisted of faculty and graduate students from Library and Information Science programs at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Wayne State University in Detroit. That team worked with a strategically selected group of research fellows to structure and convene five, one-hour, recorded online conversations to discuss and learn how and why public libraries become involved in food justice efforts. This research was approved by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Office of Research Integrity and its Institutional Review Board (IRB).

What is the value of this qualitative approach to research? We believe that how public library workers become involved in food justice efforts are as diverse as the communities libraries serve, and as diverse as library workers and libraries themselves. This belief emerges in part from our engagement in the public library profession. For instance, at a session on “Fresh Approaches: Food Security & Public Libraries” held at the 2022 conference of the Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL) in Chattanooga, Tennessee, we heard a public librarian share that her library's community garden and food pantry grew out of deep community engagement. She heard patrons who used the library wanted to share excess vegetables from their home gardens, so she created a temporary space for that sharing in the library's foyer. That humble beginning led the library to begin working with other organizations and community groups on food issues, including a local Girl Scout troop and the Purdue University Extension Master Gardener Program. Together, these partners were able to start an outdoor community garden on the library grounds, as well a permanent indoor community food pantry in the library foyer.

The point of sharing this story is to emphasize that our intention in this project was not to identify or promote best practices. Rather, our goals were to understand the labor of public library workers involving food, and, too, how they think about that work in the context of the larger mission of the public library. We were especially keen to hear about the role community partnerships played in that work. As such, the open-ended questions we developed to structure our focus group conversations were focused on these topics: Why, how, and with whom? We also asked participants what they wanted other library workers and the public to know about this topic.

The first step in this research process was establishing a diverse group of research fellows – scholars, activists, public library leaders, and public library workers – who helped us refine our focus, shaped the questions we asked, as well as the strategies used to explore and answer them. This collaboration with research fellows ensured that our work was firmly grounded in and informed by a diverse and representative set of stakeholders with expertise in a broad range of areas connected to food justice, librarianship, and/or community-based work and scholarship. This

strategic approach produced results aligned with current needs, aware of existing constraints, and able to take advantage of perceived opportunities throughout the research process.

As the data was collected, and more intensively after the data collection concluded, the research team closely coded and analyzed the focus group transcripts, as well as surveys completed by focus group participants. This analysis was structured by regular research team meetings, as well as sharing preliminary findings and drafts with the research fellows to solicit feedback. The results emerged from this intensive process of collaborative coding and sensemaking driven by the core research team in partnership with the research fellows. Together we discussed and made sense of what we heard in the focus group conversations.

In the presentation of the data, we made the decision to very lightly edit the focus group transcripts due to the differences between spoken and written language. In all instances where transcripts were edited, we worked diligently to ensure that participants' sentiments were in no way altered or edited.

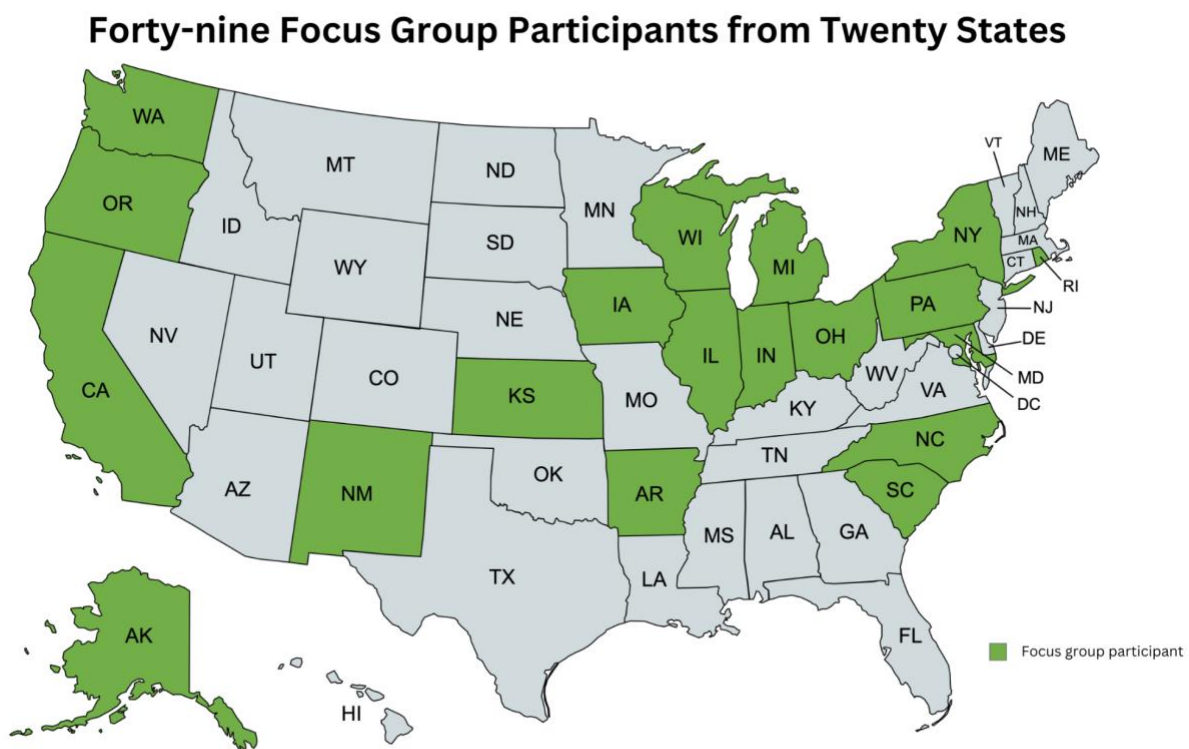
**Limitations.** As an exploratory study, this project did not set out to definitively describe all intersections of public librarianship and food justice. Instead, its aim was to surface key topics and themes. One limitation in our approach is that we did not attempt to strategically recruit library workers who serve communities that are classified as being high-need in terms of food access by organizations like the US Department of Agriculture, and a cursory review of where library workers were located suggests a lack of correlation between high-need communities, as identified by that data, and our focus group participants. Studying this topic is inherently difficult since hunger and related needs in the United States are stigmatized and too often hidden. Furthermore, we did not actively recruit library workers of BIPOC backgrounds, lower socio-economic backgrounds, or other marginalized groups. Future conversations with library workers that center on personal or familial experiences with food insecurity could also be valuable to research in this area. Finally, to fully understand this topic, we would need to listen not only to library workers, but also to their community partners, and other members of their community. A larger study that was more strategically designed to fill some of these gaps could help build a more comprehensive understanding of how public library work and food justice intersect.

## Results: What did we learn?

The report now shifts to what we learned. Using qualitative methods we identified five themes: Three articulate how public library workers conceptualize the intersections of their work and food justice; and two articulate how this work is structured through policies, procedures, and partnerships. Before discussing these themes, we introduce the study's sample.

### Description of sample

The call for participation in Fall 2023 elicited 148 expressions of interest from public library workers and students in 31 U.S. states and territories. Based on the complexities of scheduling and other factors, in the end we hosted five focus groups, engaging 49 individuals from 20 states. A significant majority said they had prior experiences related to promoting food justice, food security, food access, farming/gardening, or several other related areas. The states where the research teams are based (North Carolina and Michigan) were over-represented together encompassing 35% of all focus group participants.



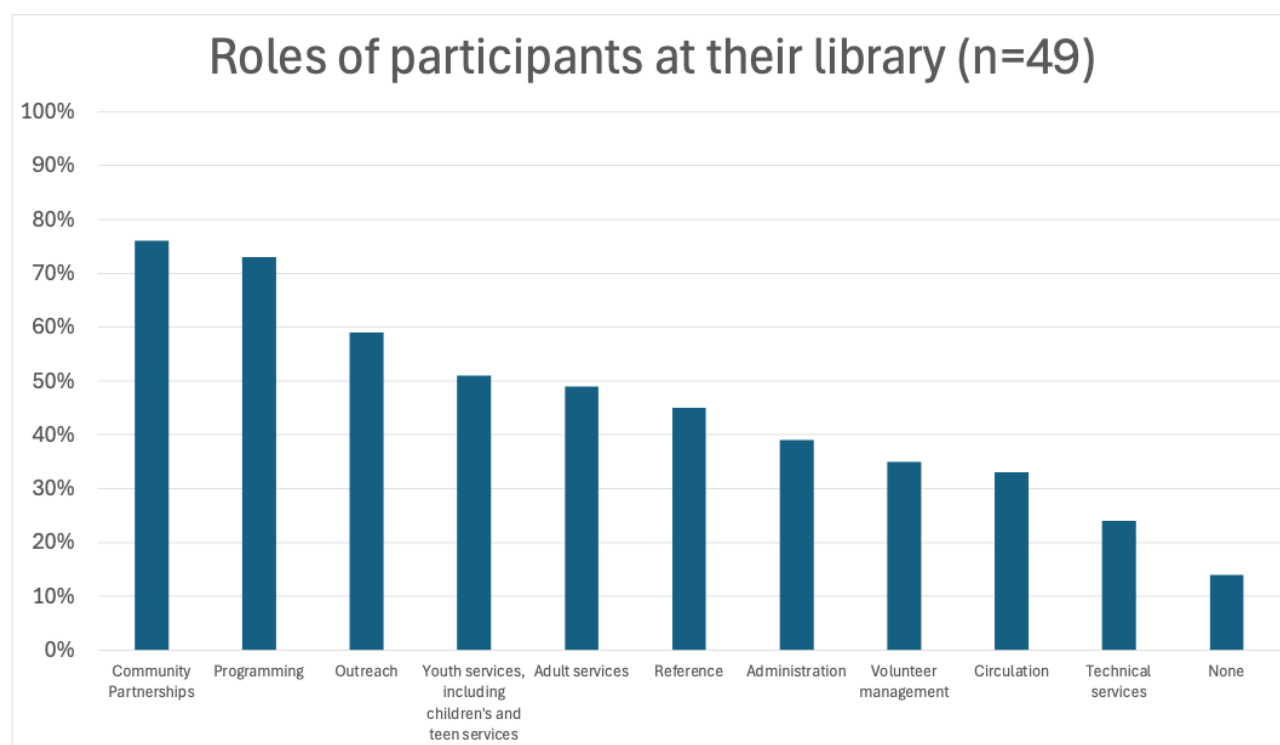
We distributed a survey that asked the participants a series of questions about their professional backgrounds. Most (86%) reported they currently work in a public library. Those that said they did not were all students in LIS master's programs, most of whom reported past paid and/or volunteer positions in public libraries. The majority of those who said they currently worked in public libraries said they were full-time library employees (90%). One participant said being part-time

made it difficult to have an impact, and that they were struggling to feel like they could be effective in terms of advancing new opportunities around food justice partnerships.

Rural, suburban, and urban communities were equally represented among participants, with nearly 40% saying their libraries served these types of communities – they were asked to select all that apply and most said their libraries served multiple types of communities. 27% said their libraries served small towns.

When asked how long they had worked at their current library, most reported 10 years or fewer, with less than 20% reporting working at their current library for more than 10 years. In contrast, more than 50% reported working for more than 10 years in the library profession, with 9 in the sample and 4 among the participants reporting more than 30 years in the profession.

We asked participants to select what duties they had at their library, and they were invited to select more than one option. More than half of participants reported their roles at the library involved community partnerships, programming, outreach, and youth services. Less than half said their jobs included adult services, reference, administration, volunteer management, circulation, or technical services.



We also asked participants to select one job title that best matched their own. Most were library directors, administrators, or coordinators (37%) or public facing professional librarians (29%). Others were in a paraprofessional library role (18%). One said they worked in a non-public facing, non-administrative role. Although students were not asked about their current job titles, it is worth noting that during focus groups two students said they were currently library paraprofessionals, while others had previous work or volunteer experience in public libraries.

Although a master's degree in library & information science (MLIS) from an institution accredited by the American Library Association is considered the primary professional qualification for being a librarian in the United States, many people who work in public libraries, including in some cases library directors, do not have this degree. This is one reason why the term "library worker" is often preferred to the term "librarian." A minority of participants in this study had an MLIS degree and 43% did not have one at the time of the focus groups.

## Hearing the voices of public library workers

During focus groups, library workers shared with us, and with each other, the unique paths that led them to think about and work toward food justice. In four of the five focus groups, we opened by asking participants: **What one word comes to mind when you think about the intersection of food justice and public librarianship.** The word cloud (below) illustrates some of their complex thinking on this topic. In bringing together this rich discourse we endeavored to respect the many ways public librarianship and food justice can come together for library workers. Later we examine the five themes that emerged from these conversations.



The voices of the participants were powerful, reflective, and smart. They helped the research team see this topic in new ways and surfaced related issues and unique challenges. The two stories described below illustrate what we heard again and again in the focus groups, namely that library



workers sharing information about food-related initiatives can lead to awareness of the need for food justice, and how sustaining the work can face many challenges.

**An urban public library worker in the Eastern U.S. shared this story. They remembered when they were a children's librarian learning what a peer at a Western U.S. library was doing. The Eastern librarian decides to replicate the idea at their library, leading to awareness of a community need, which then leads them to try out new things, including efforts that directly intervene in food waste. Now a library director, this librarian continues to look for new ways to integrate food into the work of the library.**

It's funny, [another librarian in the focus group] said she's half Italian, I'm fully Jewish. My first library food event was called 'Books and Bagels' at the public library when I was in [another community]. I have worked in libraries for 25 years now and I was a children's librarian for a period and [Books and Bagels] was just a way to get the kids to come to a story time.

I saw a library in Oregon was doing a similar program and I think I even stole the name, that [idea] spoke to me, so I wanted to host that. Once we did, we realized that there was hunger in our community. You know some of the kids weren't necessarily coming [for] the bagel [as] a fun add-on. The bagel would be the only thing some kids got to eat for breakfast that morning.

Then we started doing some food waste rescue, you could go to Panera Bread and they would give you the days' worth of food they were throwing out and it blew my mind like; we fed the kids for months on the amount of stuff that Panera gave out in one day. We all took bagels home to our freezers and stuff, but it was so much food.

They don't do that anymore, but that was super eye opening to me, so it's just something I've been trying to keep an eye out on for the rest of my career and in connection to other programs we have done a number of things around food issues and hunger issues and food insecurity stuff.

Although some focus group participants were very much figuring out how their libraries could fit into this topic, others worked in libraries that had robust infrastructure for food work. An urban librarian in the Southeastern United States shared that at their library:

*We're serving over 6000 meals a month as a library system. We are using a local vendor who makes hot and fresh meals daily for us and they deliver those meals, they serve them, and they clean them up, which is really fortunate for us.*

We heard that there is no **one** way that public librarianship and food justice come together. This intersection is shaped by many factors, including public library workers themselves. That said, in the following section we introduce the different themes that capture how and why we heard public library workers intervene in food systems.

**An urban public library worker in the Midwest shared this story. Here we hear a public librarian sharing their experiences feeding children through participation in a statewide campaign to promote the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Summer Feeding Program:**

We started with [the USDA Summer] food service in 2006. [It started] very small and [we] just built it up and built it up. We participated with [the state library] 8 or 9 years ago [to make] it a campaign to inform [other] libraries that, 'Yes, they could do this, and the program is out here and here is how it works and that it actually does work.' And honestly, it is like those light bulb moments when people will say something to you, and as soon as they do, you will say, 'Oh well, of course! Oh my gosh, I can't believe I didn't think of it.' But it is just getting that thought out there. Now, in [my] state [], there are a lot of libraries in which this has just become more and more standard, both metropolitan libraries and rural libraries. But part of it is, just getting the word out, it is kind of like how we still have people in our communities who might say, 'Oh, I don't need a book' and you're like, 'That's really not the only thing that we do.'

## How do public library workers describe this intersection?

Here, we turn directly to answering this project's primary research question: What are the intersections of public librarianship and food justice? We heard this intersection described in five different ways, three of which focus on why public library workers engage in this work, while two focus on how the work is carried out.

The five ways public librarianship and food justice intersect:

1. The library is an evolving, multi-cultural community hub
2. Food access is essential to learning and literacy
3. Library workers feel pressure and guilt to serve all community needs
4. Policies and procedures integrate food work into library work
5. Partnerships integrate library work into food work

## Motivations to do the work

### 1. The library is an evolving, multi-cultural community resource & hub

Throughout the focus group interviews library workers discussed the idea that the library is the place where people go in their community; it is a place that changes over time and a place that serves all members of the community.

Within this theme we heard discussion of related topics including (1) concern about barriers that inhibit access to the library for some patrons and (2) the importance of an environment like the library where people can go and access food and other resources without filling out forms or being made to feel like one must identify as being "poor" to utilize resources.

The following statement by one of the focus group participants serves as a good illustration of this theme:

*We have 27 branches and in every single location, the library is where community things happen. We really are the community connection. We're where you go, and we are here to meet community needs, so if one of them is food justice then of course it's going to be us.*

The idea of libraries evolving or changing over time is the foundation of understanding of the library as a community hub. As community needs change so too does the library; as community demographics change so too does the library.

## Why public libraries support food access initiatives

According to focus groups with 49 public library workers across the U.S.



Food access is **essential to learning and literacy**



The library is an evolving, multi-cultural **community hub**



Library workers feel **pressure and guilt to address all needs** that appear in the library



*We see the need. People come to us because we are a welcoming facility. These people are hesitant to go to other official, governmental places to look for food, and they don't know how to fill out the paperwork. There is that comfort factor with libraries that allows them to ask for what they need. We're always going to see the need.*

This idea also appears in the following quote, where a library worker notes that their interest in this topic was sparked by getting involved in work their library was already undertaking. That interest then expanded based on things this worker observed including the witnessing the joy children had from growing their own food:

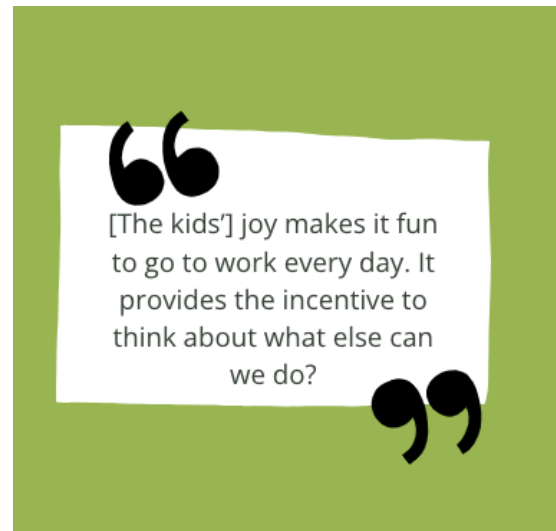
*I just recently started working at the library. We have a lot of latch-key or home-schooled kids who come in. Our previous director had instituted a snack bin for the kids, and it's been highly utilized, and has gotten a lot of praise in our community. That's why I'm here [at this focus group].*

*I've recently got into going to the farmer's market. [I am now] working within our partnerships to grow food in the area to help kids get access to local food. To be able to get*

*the chance to grow their own food [specifically at the library teaching garden]: I think their [the kids'] joy makes it fun to go to work every day. It provides that incentive to think about what else can we do?*

This library worker's experience of work was directly affected by that joy of children growing their own food. In fact, it inspired them to think about what other opportunities could be offered by the library. Library workers like this individual are often responsive to signals from the environment and imaginative in their responses to those signals, and in their responses contribute to the evolution of the library.

The evolution of the library as a community hub also occurs due to changes in the workforce. Some respondents discussed weaving previous interests, expertise, and passion for food work into their public library work, thus evolving the institution. The following statements from focus group participants illustrate a range of perspectives:



*I work at the library part time for four years and I've been a vegetable farmer since 2009, so that is where my passion for food work comes from.*

*While I love working in the library, my whole day is centered around food. That passion came from working in restaurants and seeing how often the folks I was working with needed access to food.*

*I have a background in the service industry with nonprofits and youth groups. So that background makes me want to help the people that come through the door, and we have a high need.*

*When I was a kid, I loved baking with my grandma. I liked cooking with my grandma. So, I like to do food programs with the kids because they can sense my interest in it and I'm getting them interested in it too.*

*I started working with children and gardens when I became a Master Gardener. I planned food gardens for elementary schools and children's gardens. I also had an organic farm for 18 years, so I was involved in producing food locally. Then I had a late career change and became a librarian. I started in an urban environment where we had a great number of people who were unhoused and where food insecurity was a big issue. So, this is something that's really close to my heart.*

We learned that for many library workers food is a touchstone in their lives. It evokes memories from childhood, family, and community. It is that passion and those memories that inform and inspire their food justice efforts as library workers.

## 2. Food access is essential to learning and literacy

A common concern in professional conversations on food security and public libraries is the idea that if children can't access food, learning and literacy are impossible. For instance, since 2019 the national Collaborative Summer Library Program has maintained a Libraries and Summer Food guide for public libraries. That guide opens with the statement, "Hungry kids don't read."<sup>20</sup> This sentiment also surfaced in our focus groups. However, what we heard that was new was that library workers think about the critical importance of food access not only for youth, but also for adults, and even for library workers themselves.

We heard that in rural libraries where salaries do not keep up with inflation library staff often qualify for food assistance programs and may need supplemental access to food. Others discussed how they felt like they had to work to address the primary need for food and nourishment for all ages before they could offer adult enrichment services for their patrons. As one participant said, "we kind of took the approach of you can't engage or enrich or learn if you're hungry."

## 3. Libraries workers experience pressure and guilt to meet all needs

Related to the idea that food access is essential to learning and literacy is the idea that library workers experience tremendous pressure and often guilt if they feel they either are not meeting needs they see, or if they are not offering the same services they see peers offering in other libraries. As one participant said:

*If you don't have the staff for it, you will feel guilty that you didn't do it, and there can be a lot of guilt related to seeing this need. But I can't [meet the need] because I don't have the people for it, I don't have the resources.*

A similar sentiment was shared by a small-town librarian regarding her lack of space:

*[Our] spaces are so much smaller than comparable libraries. We don't have enough space for all the people coming in, and for all the staff that work in our building, so space has literally been an issue.*

Focus group participants also discussed feeling guilt and even shame for not understanding that food security/injustice was a widespread issue in their community. At the conclusion of one of our focus groups we created space for participants to share final reflections. One worker shared that as they thought about this topic their sentiment was, "I want to do it all and there's no time to do it all." That sentiment was shared by other participants. This pressure to be all things to all people and a desire to do it all for those in need, animated the focus group conversations. Several participants noted how not having adequate resources added to that pressure and guilt:

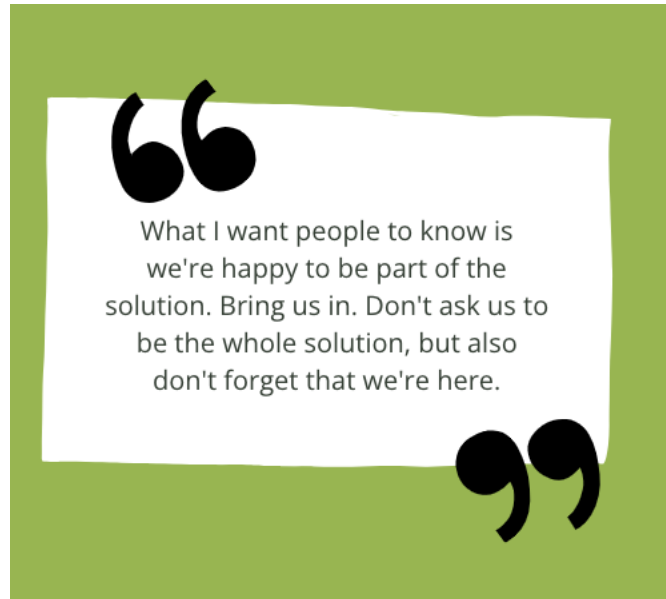
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<sup>20</sup> Collaborative Summer Library Program (CSLP). (2019). *Libraries and summer food*. <https://www.csllpreads.org/libraries-and-summer-food/>

*What I want people to know is we're happy to be part of the solution. Bring us in. We need partners, and we need funds, and we need capacity building. We're happy to be part of this. Don't ask us to be the whole solution, but also don't forget that we're here. You know?*

*I would like to get back to the point where other organizations are handling the distribution and we are just referring [people to food distributions points].*

*I think my main thought is that we see the need. That people come to us because we are a welcoming facility. These people are hesitant to go to other official, governmental places to look for food, and they don't know how to fill out the paperwork. Even the simple form that we have, we often have to talk them through it line by line. And so there is that comfort factor with libraries that allows community members to ask for what they need. We're always going to see the need. We don't have to be the ones doing the work though. We can hopefully pass them along to somebody that can help them.*



## How does the work function in public libraries?

Two partial solutions to addressing and mitigating these pressures are to *institutionalize* and to *extend* -- institutionalize through policies and procedures that shift the responsibility from the individual library worker to the library itself and extend through partnerships that share the work across individuals, organizations, and communities. Public librarians in the focus groups reported that they develop internal policies and procedures that support the work, as well as the workers doing it. They also noted that partnerships developed with external organizations helped maximize impact. For instance, one library worker whose library did not have adequate space mentioned hosting programming in collaboration with a nearby park during a community event. They noted that this had the added benefit of increased visibility for the library's work in the community in a festive context. Challenges have their opportunities, which we will now explore.

This section illustrates how these processes work. The first part engages the themes of **Policies and Procedures**, or the processes of figuring out how to embed or weave this topic into the work of public librarianship at multiple levels. The second part focuses on **Partnerships** -- creating, sustaining, leveraging, and building partnerships to share the work. Those partnerships also create opportunities to find new ways of working to develop and sustain the work.



## 4. Policies and procedures integrate food work into library work

The focus group discussions of what enables and supports library engagement in food justice, library workers pointed to the ways policy development and training can help ensure the work is fairly distributed across the organization. The idea of building buy-in among staff for initiatives was a common theme in the focus groups:

*You have some staff who are all gung-ho and you may even have a director [who is excited about the possibilities], but how does that translate to the rest of the staff who want to know what does this mean for me? Do I have to do this? Is this a part of policy? What procedures do we need to follow, especially with food handling?*

*I think the more information and training that we can get staff on the front-end and reassure them that it can be done and that it can be done well, I think that getting that buy-in from them in the very beginning is huge in getting your program started and going.*

Participants also expressed the importance of communicating the impact and success of programs. One participant shared that at their library “[library staff] ask, what is the benefit for us?” They also noted that library leadership need to have an answer.

**Positioning food justice in the context of public library social services.** One strategy we heard in the focus groups was to position food justice as one way for the library to complement social services in the community. For instance, one library worker shared:

*At my library, we have a map of all the surrounding free pantries [as well as] the local food banks. I really recommend if you are in a library where food insecurity is an issue, that you have that [information] available at the desk where people can take it, so they don't even have to ask about it.*

Here we see library workers integrating existing policies and procedures regarding access to information resources into policies and procedures on access to more sensitive or stigmatized information and resources like hunger.

Others identified that some library staff are more ready and interested in this type of work than others. One participant in the focus groups shared that in their community, people in need know that,

*If you go down this road, there's a library on the right, go in and ask for Cora. She's kind of like an information ninja meets social worker, but that actually describes a lot about the work that we're doing because we are connecting people with these important resources that they need and (helping them to) navigate these systems that they are kind of (like ones they are already) navigating.”*

Recognition that the food system is one that requires navigation analogous to the social service system appears also appears in the following statement:

*[W]e had kids show up who had aged out of the foster system, and they were hungry, and they didn't know what was out there for them. They were actually sleeping in the back of the library when I came in one day. I think this really needs to be discussed in library school. I mean, I know we can't cover everything. We will not talk about the perfect mouse trap and how to expose them if they're in the heater system, but I think this is an important enough topic that more of us need to be discussing it as a [library] profession.*

“

[A librarian] is kind of like an information ninja meets social worker: That actually describes the work we're doing because we are connecting people with important resources they need and helping them to navigate systems.

”

The statement (above) extends the discussion beyond the policies and procedures of a particular library by arguing that these issues need to be instantiated in the policies and procedures of library education and training. Another participant was even more direct:

*...public libraries have been asked to step into a social work services capacity, and many librarians are not prepared for that in school.... How are we preparing public librarians for the actual job that they're walking into?”*

**Navigating procedural challenges.** Participants identified several other challenges related to libraries developing policies and procedures to support this work. These included: the newness of food justice work, a lack of administrative or staff buy-in, and staff turnover. Some participants noted how difficult it was to convince library leadership that there should be policies and procedures for food work. One participant offered this story about reaction by an elected official to the idea of a food pantry in their library:

*[I]t was just too nontraditional for the mayor to deal with. He said it was not the role of the library to do that, and I told him we were open more hours than anything else in town because at that point we were open 66 hours a week. At that point, he just wouldn't go with it. He moved it to the senior center where a group was supposed to be managing it, and within two months of them taking it over, they shut their whole program down. The food disappeared; we don't know what happened to it. So, we sort of started [again] from scratch under-the-counter and we haven't given up on it and we have a new mayor coming in.*

Throughout the focus groups we heard participants talk about challenges related to securing internal buy-in for the idea of public libraries doing food work. That resistance to acknowledging and

supporting the work made developing policies and procedures impossible. The library worker quoted above is a good example of this tension. They felt like they had to do the work “under-the-counter” without the support of internal and external partnerships to avoid the ire of administrators and policymakers. An important aspect of the groundwork needed to develop responsive and responsible policies and procedures is clear communication about the role of libraries in food systems and how they can contribute to food justice.

The absence of policies and procedures can contribute to a concern that the work may be too tightly bound to particular people and that if they left that library the entire initiative would go with them. This was a real concern among some of the focus group participants and one also noted by a research fellow:

*Staff turnover is real in the library profession, and programming can come and go with staff, but policy change is a more secure way to ensure sustainability.*

There was general agreement among focus group participants that changing policies and procedures takes time. One shared that the internal advocacy to transform her library system took over a decade. She reported that the work to create institutional change paid off:

*Starting in 2024, [library administrators] will take into account [the amount of time needed to develop food programs] when they figure out the amount of staffing needed so that branches that have a greater amount of [food] programming will be staffed appropriately. It's a lot of little teeny steps.*

## 5. Partnerships integrate library work into food work

Throughout focus group interviews participants talked about the critical necessity of doing this work in collaboration, alignment, and partnership with other individuals, organizations, and initiatives. These partnerships and struggles associated with building and sustaining them surfaced as a common concern among participants. These dynamics appear in this story by a rural library director. She shared that her community faces severe food access issues. She talked about how a few years ago “we were starting to squirrel away non-perishable foods at the library for these random travelers that were coming through looking for help, and that blossomed into the county sponsoring a monthly food distribution that serves about 200 families in town.” She then described many challenges as the initiative expanded:

*A major challenge that our library - and I think the other libraries are having [based on the conversation in the focus group] - is just keeping up .... If it wasn't for a couple of community partners, we wouldn't even have our fridge or be able to maintain it or afford food and what not. But it's the volunteer recruitment that we're really having trouble with. The main challenge is keeping up, and I think the more you take advantage of these community partners who do care about food justice and related issues the more sustainable these programs are.*

The library director has started to find a solution to this challenge by starting “to rely on my partners for help with recruitment for volunteers. I’ve gotten a few good ones out of that: They’ve come from these local food groups so I’m already getting people who are concerned about it [the issue].”

The following statements further illustrate how participants frame the value of partnerships:

*Seeing this as something that can often be done through many partnerships that already exist in our communities and having the library as a place for those partnerships to convene.*

*...we [found that we] can increase impact for other initiatives going on [at the library and in the community]*

*...just trying to put together resources so that we’re working together[and] finding other people who have information has been crucial [to success].*

We also heard the idea that partnerships were not without challenges. One interesting and common challenge we heard from library workers was that they worried the time needed to cultivate effective partnerships could take them away from the work to meet critical and immediate needs among their patrons. And, yet they were also aware that addressing the immediate need may not have the long-term and more sustainable effect that working in partnership can have to also focus on systemic inequities that need to be changed. Change happens by working on many fronts simultaneously and that kind of work requires buy-in, resources, and compensation for the people doing the work.

**Both doing and communicating.** A sub-theme of partnerships was a discussion about the dynamics of communicating with partners as a process many found to be difficult and at times confusing. Reflecting on their partnerships one library worker said they require:

*Clear information. We have all these different partners that are all doing food distribution, food, justice, [they all] are really working on this, but nobody's talking to each other. And trying just to get the information to work together, instead of having 2 or 3 different organizations doing the same thing at the same place at the same time, together we'd be stronger. That's really difficult, getting just one channel of information and everybody working together.*

Another participant reiterated this theme:

*I think my issue is communication: I can connect with a partner. I can get partners to work together. But then it's like, something hairy happens, and so there seems to be inconsistency [with partners]. So, we have a pantry on the porch, we have a snack sack program and maybe for a few months I can get people to bring in consistently the things we're requesting. And then suddenly, it either turns into the complete opposite of what we've asked for, or it just stops. So, for me, it's communication and consistency [with partners].*

Still another said:

*...for me it's also communication with my municipality. I'll be completely honest; my municipality thinks I'm doing handouts. For me it's how do I communicate with people who aren't experiencing being unhoused, or food insecurity and don't have to worry about where their next meal is. So how do you make it seem [to local government] less odd that your library, which is essentially your only community center in the area, is providing food resources. And that's been one of my bigger challenges.*

Library workers talked about how challenges with partnerships can emerge from trying to work within systems set up to support a different kind of institution from the library. One participant described struggles she has had working with the K-12 school sector in her community, "we're in our 17th year [of providing youth with summer meals] and boy have we had our ups and downs." She noted that much of state funding for education in her state is earmarked for schools and not for libraries. She went on to describe how in her state,

*[the] Department of Education had funding for food support services and schools use it for free and reduced-price lunches. We had to find out what the rules are for non-schools. I'm hoping your states are not as complicated as ours. [Here] you have to have sponsors and partners, but we don't get the money directly. [Cultivating potential community partners was a critical step to securing funding for food work at the library] We found tens of millions of dollars that had been unused every year because it had been budgeted [by our state Department of Education] for summer feeding but the schools for the most part don't do it because they're not in session. So, part of [our work] was just starting to talk to different government agencies and finding out what is there and what is not being tapped [and figuring out how we as a library could tap in].*

This library worker's community had resources allocated to support food distribution, but those resources were earmarked for the schools. Communicating that the library was part of the ecosystem of that supports food secure communities was part of the work that led to this library's long-term successful partnership.

## Summarizing the findings

Across the five focus groups, we heard library workers describe the intersections of food justice and public librarianship in many ways. Through an intensive analysis of these descriptions, five themes emerged. Three describe why library workers are motivated to do this work, including the idea that the library is an evolving, multicultural community resource and hub; the idea that food access is essential to learning and literacy; and that library workers experience pressure and guilt to meet all needs. Two themes further describe how library workers do this labor. One centered on how library policies and procedures enable the integration of food work into library work. A second centered on how partnerships enable the integration of library work into community-based food work. In the following sections, we turn to future opportunities, based on the findings of this empirical inquiry.

# What future opportunities exist to support the intersections?

This report now shifts focus from what is to what could be. We introduce a model of how public library workers intervene in food systems at different levels, ranging from directly connecting people with food to laboring to transforming structural inequities in food systems. We then discuss the steps public library workers take to move into food justice work, providing a model that may help other workers think about this type of work for their workplaces and communities.

*“Food justice requires fundamental shifts in power,”* said one of our research fellows in a planning conversation. Another said it requires a *“restructuring of society.”* Shifts in power emerge in various ways. To illustrate pathways to transformation we drew upon models from public health and elsewhere<sup>21</sup> to develop a continuum model that identifies multiple points in food systems where library workers address individual, and community needs while also contributing to social and economic justice.

## A continuum model: From access to systemic social change

We identified four areas where public libraries can and often do intervene in the food system:

- Access
- Literacy
- Community change
- Systemic change

The first two areas, access and literacy, focus on meeting the needs of the individual. The second two, community change and systemic change, focus on transforming systems that contribute to food insecurity and food injustice.

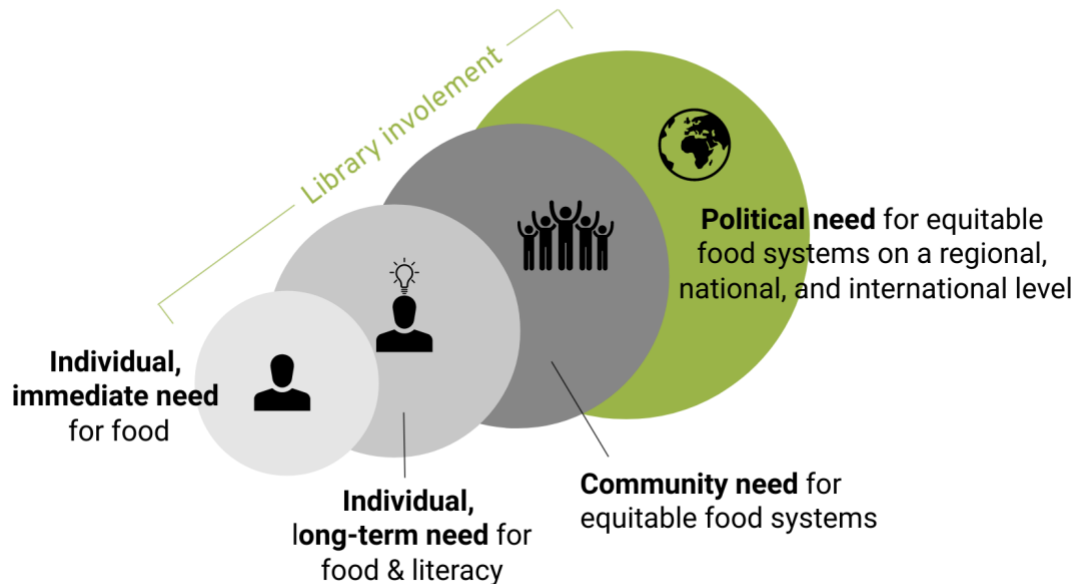
We developed this model as a continuum rather than as a linear process based on two assumptions. First, interventions at one place in the food system influence other parts of that food system. Second, library work in one area creates opportunities for impact in other areas.

This model is presented as a conversation starter and not as a definitive representation of all possible intersections of public librarianship and food justice. Each area of opportunity is illustrated through examples from focus group conversations.

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<sup>21</sup> Models consulted include the socio-ecological model and the upstream/downstream model. See Wold, B., & Mittelman, M. B. (2018). Health-promotion research over three decades: The social-ecological model and challenges in implementation of interventions. *Scandinavian journal of public health*, 46(20\_suppl), 20-26. And Smith, V. C. (2015). Upstream or downstream. *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 203(10), 412-413. For more information.

## Libraries engage with food systems at **many levels**



### Access: Addressing individual immediate need for food

Access is a core value of librarianship. The American Library Association defines access as:

*All information resources that are provided directly or indirectly by the library, regardless of technology, format, or methods of delivery, should be readily, equally, and equitably accessible to all library users.*<sup>22</sup>

When focus group participants were prompted to provide one word that best describes the intersection of food justice and public librarianship the word “access” always emerged first. Other related ideas introduced were words like “necessity” and “need.” As participants moved from this icebreaker exercise into deeper conversation about how public libraries and food justice intersect it quickly became apparent that for most the central motivation was to directly connect individuals to the food they needed.

The strategies public library workers used to directly connect those in need to food included everything from summer meals to after-school snacks to community fridges and little free pantries. It also included sharing information with patrons on community resources like pantries and food banks.

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<sup>22</sup> American Library Association. (n.d.) Core values of librarianship  
<https://www.ala.org/advocacy/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues>



## Literacy: Addressing individual long-term need for information

In addition to supporting access to information resources public libraries are champions of lifelong learning and literacy. It is not surprising that food literacy emerged in focus groups. Food literacy as discussed in the focus groups tended to center on cooking classes and culinary education. However, we also heard library workers talk about food literacy as cultural literacy -- connecting ways of understanding and knowing to foodways and traditions. Other examples discussed were classes and education focused on gardening. One participant said, *My work personally is I'm trying to empower people to grow or produce their own food.*

Library workers are mindful of how they discuss food literacy to avoid stigmatizing patrons for their dietary choices. Some focus group participants felt the medical establishment too often shapes societal views on health and diet in ways that cause personal and cultural food choices to be stigmatized. One participant noted that the concepts of health and healthy eating can be weaponized. That concern prompted her to refrain from using the term “health” in discussions about food at her library.

There were many other mentions of cultural meal programming with most framed with reference to religious holidays. One participant felt the need to preface a discussion of a class they offered that focused on holiday food by acknowledging it wasn't healthy but important because it was part of a cultural tradition. At another focus group a participant shared their ambivalence about the concept of health in relation to food. She expressed concern that it was sometimes used as a means of shaming personal dietary choices that may not align with conventional or popular dietary ideals. These discussions illustrate some of the nuanced considerations some library workers make when developing cooking and food literacy programs at the library.

Reflecting these nuances one library worker said they focus on helping children learn about new foods by adapting them to suit their tastes and needs:

*I worked fast food for years, and I always just thought I'd bring [my] customer service skills to the library. I work with children. Sometimes when we're trying to get them to work with a vegetable or fruit that they may not have tried -- you know, kids can be picky. [I use] that skill to kind of get them to try it, to try something new and kind of work with them to be like, well, you could add this, or you could use it this way.*

This participant noted, too, the importance of learning and teaching food safety skills,

*And also, food safety skills ..., teaching kids how to use knives [and] not let food be out for too long in room temperature. We just go about educating them not only on nutrition but how to handle food. Knowledge is power, and that same thing happens with food as well.*

Several focus group participants also talked about efforts to expand cooking education into their communities via partnerships. One example points to ways to engage patrons with a regular cooking program online with some unique features and affordances:

*One thing we do is a monthly community cooking program on Zoom with a local [food] co-op. I usually try to provide about \$10-\$25 vouchers for ingredients at the co-op so most people who cook along usually get free ingredients and we usually incorporate cultural stuff too. It's a way I can have this monthly program, and I don't have to use the kitchen at the library and I'm still engaging with people locally. They still have to go to the local co-op. They still come into the library and ask questions. It's just been a great way to educate people about different meals, we do try to keep them healthy, they are generally vegan or vegetarian, and we try to have gluten-free and vegan options if they're not.*

We also heard library workers discuss innovative ways to engage with the cultural aspects of food and cooking:

*One of the things that I love that we do a 'Cook Along' monthly where people can sign up to pick up a bag of ingredients at our children's library and the main library as well then, they can take it home and follow the 'cook along' on Instagram or Facebook for them to learn [how to use the ingredients and prepare a meal]. The ingredients are already measured so it is not a lot of work for them to do. [We focus on] how to put recipes together, and how to follow the recipe. They get a recipe card to keep. I know somebody was asking about cultural cooking. I don't know if they do that regularly but for instance, they had me doing Rosh Hashanah dishes during the Jewish holidays and they already have me booked for Passover so they are trying to bring in some different cultural dishes as well, but I really love the idea of people picking the ingredients [at the library] and learning to cook something healthy for their family.*

This example is a thoughtful first step in library-based cooking education. Focus group participants pointed out that learning how to read and execute a recipe are foundational to food literacy. By offering premeasured ingredients to patrons participating in the library program, Cook Along, they can focus on preparing the meal itself.

Another library worker said that in their community they have learned that it is important to acknowledge inequities in terms of access to food, "*We talked about underserved communities and marginalized communities who may not even know about making a list because they live from day to day!*" This quote speaks to the necessity of ensuring that food education is sensitive to and speaks to actual life experiences and does not assume a certain level of education or access to resources.

Food work related to literacy may also contribute to one's ability to navigate our broken food systems and make informed decisions that take lived experiences into consideration. Initiatives that provide immediate food access are vital, but it is the access to information and education that contributes to the on-going and multifaceted work of food justice and promotes those gradual shifts in power.

## Community change: Intervening in community food systems

Some libraries discussed efforts focused on transforming deeper and more systemic conditions in a community. Here the work is focused on the library's community as a whole. One important way public libraries intervene in food systems is to use their resources and knowledge to illustrate where those systems break down. Their next step is to use that knowledge in their work with others to find sustainable solutions.

In two separate focus groups library workers identified the same problem. Middle school children in their communities come to the library after school because they have no place else to go. One thing these library workers realized was that those children are hungry at that time of the day. One library worker shared this story,

*I work at a library that is in [a major metro area] and we are directly across the street from a middle school. I was able to observe that the kids get out of school and they're hungry and we have quite a few kids who have nowhere to go after school. They don't have a key to their house. We have a youth center that's about a mile away but that requires parental permission, so really that's what it is from my perspective [that motivates me to be interested in this topic]. It's the tweens and teens coming in [to the library] and they're hungry and not knowing if they've got a meal at home that night, so just seeing how that plays out in our community and realizing that we do have a role to play in giving them access to some sort of food.*

Another library worker asked a later focus group,

*Is anyone else seeing a large proportion of children that are seeming to be hungry? Because that's, I think, system wide [at my library a big issue]. I'm in a big [library] system. I work right next to the largest public high school in [medium-sized city]. So, every day we're getting 300-350 teens [at the library]. And the whole library turns into like a rec center. This is happening system wide: Kids who are constantly hungry. And so, I'm just wondering if anyone else is seeing that and if you know of any grants [for addressing] similar situations where it's the kids who are consistently hungry in those after school dinner time hours.*

Although these library workers had not yet found a way to transform community food systems, they were thinking in that direction. Library workers often respond to these kinds of opportunities by partnering with others to develop and implement changes that can allow for more strategic programs to address these and similar systemic needs. One suggestion offered by our research fellows was to consider how public libraries could work with tweens and teenagers to help them like they have a voice in food systems. He asked: How could library-based teen advisory boards or other participatory structures help empower those who need access to food reimagine how their food systems operate?

In terms of examples of system transformation, another example appeared in an initiative described by a participant who works in a rural library system that serves “34 member libraries and they are all autonomous, so our project is a matter of working with our libraries and our community

partners to provide local fresh food through libraries that are in rural food deserts.” This individual works behind the scenes as a kind of community organizer to connect public-facing library staff with the resources and partners they themselves may not have time to connect with, given the obligations of their day-to-day work. The librarian talked about what inspired the project,

*This initiative was [focused on] the gap in meaningful adult literacy. [We realized] that we needed to provide some wraparound services to support people .... If we help people to [have] ready access to fresh food, maybe that could free up some of their time to do other things that could help make their lives better .... We're always looking at the connection between food insecurity, food access, food justice, health outcomes in rural areas, and the capacity for people to ... make decisions [in their lives].*

While doing this work the librarian discovered that some of the library staff working in the system's libraries were food insecure and most qualified for SNAP benefits based on their low wages as library workers. The issue of hunger and food justice hit home, *I just don't even want to deal with it, but one of the things we learned was that our entire library staff, including the director, qualified because wages for rural librarians are so low that they cannot afford to feed [themselves]. And so that's part of this.*

This is a case where changing the system involves identifying how the library can work with community partners to transform how food is distributed and circulated in rural communities with the library system a key partner. Through this work to increase access to food for all who need it, the librarian hopes that community members will have more time to devote to other areas of their lives.

Systemic transformation can also take subtle forms. One participant described how they adapted their meal program to free up the time of library workers to support literacy:

*My library has a partnership with a group called Connecting Kids to Meals and they go to all our libraries, and they serve meals for us. But when I started, the librarians had to pass out meals. [But later] they hired people to serve the meals for us. So that was fantastic. Then we [the library workers] could go out and entertain the children while they're eating, talk to them, have great conversations, but not have to worry about passing out food or [not having to] make sure that this [is the] right temperature before we served it. After I started doing programming with the kids [at mealtime], they have [developed] a sense of belonging, a sense of ownership over it.*

Communal eating, especially when centered in joy and sharing, and conversation and learning, is a powerful social bonding ritual. It is one which can also combat stigma surrounding food insecurity.

Relatedly, another library worker said,

*so that's what I see this as: Giving access to resources that the community needs and hopefully taking it to the next level and teaching the community or giving them access to information to move beyond the point where they need a food distribution. And by doing that, we are bringing on entrepreneurship and teaching, finance skills and all the other*

*things that have helped to create this situation through their lives. So, it's part of the bigger mission to me.*

This speaks to community change. We hear a library worker frame the food initiatives at their library in the context of how the library works to build individual skills to transform the economy of the community. Library work related to food is tightly bound up with library work focused on other aspects of community change.

How can we actively engage and change the ways systemic inequities and racism affect both the design and delivery of food work by public libraries? An important step is to recognize the value of lived experience and be sure to include people with experience navigating broken food systems as partners in those programs designed to create fundamental change. This approach actively challenges inequities of power in our food systems.

## Systemic change: Intervening in societal and political systems

The focused and explicit transformation of systemic inequities and political issues that shape our food systems was not a topic that emerged in focus groups. However, we did hear library workers discuss how systemic and structural issues directly affected what they could do. They pointed to racism, misinformation, economic inequities, and transportation.

Regarding economic inequities, one participant talked about the challenge of maintaining Little Free Pantries and similar resources in vulnerable or low-income communities where easy access to a full range of fresh and health foods is not easily available. Focus group participants shared struggles and frustrations when confronted by the disjunctive expectation that those pantries be stocked or supported by the very same community the pantry was intended to support. If these communities lack food, how can they be expected to maintain stocked Little Free Pantries?

Similarly, another participant talked about how community support alone isn't enough when the community itself is facing broader systemic injustices. We heard several focus group participants describe how they needed to seek resources and support outside their community: *We are having to find supplies from outside those neighborhoods and outside those communities, and finding the ongoing search for funding is not something that we realized the magnitude of.*

These inequities also appeared among rural library workers who talked about the realities of rural hunger. Though rural communities face food insecurity just like urban communities there may be fewer organizations with the capacity or interest in offering aid and support. One rural participant said they weren't aware of any other organizations in their area that prioritize food justice work. In some cases, a rural community may not have access to the food produced in their own area. Library workers participating in the focus groups noted that hunger can be invisible in rural communities but, as one participant said, *I'm sure there's hunger in my community.*

Transportation and access to resources are challenges that affect both rural and urban communities. Participants talked about how access to transportation a common issue among rural, unhoused, and school-aged patrons can be. These populations have unreliable and inequitable access to public

transportation, or to family members with cars. The persistent lack of access to affordable and fresh food in communities is often exacerbated by the lack of adequate transportation services. That lack of good transportation is itself deeply rooted in social inequities like those we have identified in food systems.

Finally, we heard discussion about how prejudice, racism, and misinformation can influence and create challenges around this food work in public libraries. One participant said,

*One of the things we heard from some potential partners, people who are working with adult literacy issues or people who are dealing with food insecurity, is that this would not be a success because people at a certain income level wouldn't eat vegetables. This is people who were in the industry! It was hateful. And I just want to say that what we've seen is that everybody loves fresh food from little kids to seniors who come in [to the library]. So please don't ever think that these are experts. [They are] spreading some really bad disinformation.*

In this story we hear about library workers struggling with challenges related to enduring class discrimination. The assertion that those who eat poorly have only themselves to blame and will never change their habits is a dismissive assumption that is not only elitist but based on blindness to structural inequities in society and especially the food system.

The fact that many public library workers are aware of these systemic, societal, economic, and political issues suggests they may be able to collaborate with others to push the needle forward on these topics, in the direction of food justice for all.

## A process model for supporting food justice in public libraries

Before turning to a discussion of future work needed, we offer a process model that grew out of our focus group conversations with library workers. This model frames the work as a process that may help library workers advance food justice work. It has the following five steps: Learn, Discover, Cultivate, Serve & Transform, and Reflect.

**Learn:** There are multiple ways public library workers can learn about food and food justice. This encompasses everything from learning about the diverse foodways in the communities they serve to gathering statistics on local rates of hunger and food insecurity. Learning about food



**L** **EARN** about food and food justice, as a foundation for considering how the public library could be involved in this work

**D** **ISCOVER** who else cares about food justice and position public libraries to be discovered by others who care about this topic

**C** **ULTIVATE** relationships focused on discerning how to collectively do the most good

**S** **ERVE & TRANSFORM** communities through innovative initiatives structured by partnerships

**R** **EFLECT** on how things are working, make changes, and advocate for what works well

and food justice will not only help library workers feel inspired and empowered to do the work, but it will also prepare them to be public advocates. Building that knowledge base will help them articulate the many ways the public library can be a valuable community partner for food justice work. Especially promising is the idea that library workers can learn from and with library patrons and other community members who can then all work together to cultivate food justice.

**Discover:** Discovery takes place at three levels:

1. Through new and existing community connections library workers discover who else in their community and region cares about food justice;
2. Others who care about food justice discover public libraries as important partners; and
3. Through professional networks library workers discover what their peers are doing across the United States and in other countries.

The last point, about discovering connections in the profession, was a lesson learned from the focus groups. One participant shared, *I'm learning a lot from these focus groups, in terms of what's going on around the country. So, thanks!* Another said that they were planning to take what they heard in the focus groups back to their library to start figuring out how their library could participate in food justice work.

**Cultivate:** Libraries and their new partners then work together to cultivate relationships focused on collectively doing the most good. This type of planning includes working to avoid doing work that any partner is already doing. It also needs to address resistance to the idea that this work is either not needed or is entirely the responsibility of someone else. This kind of deliberate cultivation of working relationships leads to the trust necessary for strong and effective partnerships.

**Serve and transform:** Libraries and their partners then serve and transform communities through innovative classes, workshops, spaces, collections, and distribution. Ideally, they work at multiple levels: directly connecting those in need to resources, supporting individual learning and growth, and intervening in food systems to transform societal systems in ways that lead to more justice.

**Reflect:** Libraries and their partners also need to critically reflect on what they're doing. Is it working well for everyone including the partners and library workers themselves? This reflection is crucial for sustaining the partnership work and ensuring trust. It encourages and allows all partners in the work to check in on policies, procedures, and the partnerships themselves. Valuing this reflective process results in collaborative work that is rooted in relationships built on trust and articulated through common goals that both serve and transform communities.



# What more do we need to know about this intersection?

We wrap up with a discussion of what we learned can inform future research, teaching, and professional development, by offering a research agenda that outlines future opportunities. This agenda outlines areas where work is needed to understand and better support public libraries and public library workers as essential partners in furthering food justice. It is organized around four components: Funding and advocacy, geographical differences, intervening in food systems, and perceptions of this work.

**Funding and Advocacy.** The social and community practices of public library workers have been documented and studied by scholars for at least the past 60 years, as discussed earlier in this report. Nevertheless, we still do not fully understand how public libraries participate in, nor the extent of what or how they can contribute to food justice. Our understanding of this topic is built upon and informed by the conviction that public libraries are unique public institutions that exist to support the public good. Some, such as sociologist Eric Klinenberg<sup>23</sup> and political scientist Daniel Aldrich, have called for understanding public libraries as part of our social infrastructure, funded with public monies to, as Aldrich puts it, support “trust and connectivity and help us build collaborative and adaptive responses to major challenges.”<sup>24</sup> We argue that libraries working to ameliorate food apartheid and toward food justice is one important example.

If we think of public libraries as a type of social infrastructure funded to support the public good, what responsibilities does society have to ensure the library workforce is set up for success? At a local level what does the institution of the library need to do to support its employees so they can work with communities to find solutions to issues such as food apartheid and hunger? As we heard from our focus group participants and as we’ve seen in media reporting,<sup>25</sup> public library workers themselves can experience food insecurity because so many are poorly compensated for their work. How can we ensure that library work is valued, and library workers fairly compensated with a living wage and other benefits, so they don’t become the very food insecure population they work to assist? How do we increase community support and investment in local libraries and library workers in ways that respect their expertise and autonomy? More generally, how does advocating for food justice overlap with advocating for public libraries, social infrastructure, and the public good?

We also need to consider how outside funding may enable public libraries and their community partners to innovate together. For instance, one of our research fellows noted that in South Carolina, many small and rural public libraries are able to partner with social workers thanks to funding from

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<sup>23</sup> Klinenberg, E. (2018). *Palaces for the people: How social infrastructure can help fight inequality, polarization, and the decline of civic life*. Crown.

<sup>24</sup> Aldrich, D. P. (2023). How Libraries (and Other Social Infrastructure Spaces) Will Save Us: The Critical Role of Social Infrastructure in Democratic Resilience. Available at SSRN 4639061. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4639061](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4639061)

<sup>25</sup> For example, reporting from places as diverse as Halifax, Nova Scotia; Los Angeles, California; and Western North Carolina highlights food insecurity among the public library workforce: Halifax: <https://surge105.ca/2024/08/29/89730/>; North Carolina: <http://dailyyonder.com/healing-amidst-divisions-how-a-small-town-fights-for-its-library/2024/09/16/>; Los Angeles: <https://lacounty.gov/newsroom/la-area-emmys-videos/>

the South Carolina Center for Rural and Primary Healthcare which largely funds this rural library work through state and federal health funding.<sup>26</sup> What other opportunities are there to bring non-traditional funding to public libraries and how can this work be sustained beyond initial grants? We need to work with funders to think about supporting not only specific projects, but also investing in building institutional capacity with general operating and unrestricted funds that allow libraries to identify their own strategies for growth, innovation, and change. This type of investment would allow public libraries to grow and build infrastructures to sustain the institution.

**Geographical and cultural differences.** We also need to have a more fine-grained analysis of how this intersection appears (or doesn't) in different parts of the United States. For this initial study we did not try to structure focus groups around geographical or community types. We need to better understand how library workers think about this topic in different and complementary ways in various types of communities. Further, we need to understand how diversity within the library workforce may shape how these issues are identified and engaged to begin to address important questions like these: How do community demographics inform library work on food justice? How can public libraries support food justice work already occurring in local communities? And, for a more specific example, what does the public library offer that could support existing efforts in indigenous and immigrant communities already doing the work of developing and maintaining local food systems by building on their resources, traditions, and values?

It is important to note that food insecurity is not just an issue for poor or marginalized communities. We heard from library workers in affluent communities there they are aware of food insecurity among their patrons. That information challenges dominant assumptions about hunger and food insecurity and suggests we need to dig deeper to better understand those needs and the causes and possible interventions that might include the library. One possible future project would be to consider how public library workers could use their expertise, insights, and on-the-ground understanding of local realities to provide correctives to national datasets that may not adequately represent fine-grained hyperlocal situations.

**Intervening in food systems.** A critical knowledge gap we have identified is the limited understanding of how library workers transition from the identification of a need to the creation of - or entrance into -- collaborative systems that address that need with an eye to, ideally, creating a just food system that values people over profit.<sup>27</sup>

We need to better understand how public library workers interact with how food is produced and distributed. Although we know that many libraries offer food growing classes, gardening spaces, and seed libraries, these topics were under-addressed in our focus groups. The library workers we talked with were, not surprisingly, more likely to begin the conversation with concerns about access to food. Can public libraries leverage information resources and partnerships to provoke community conversations about food justice that not only help individuals learn but also stimulate community interest in working together to address problems and find solutions in our food systems? For

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<sup>26</sup> South Carolina Center for Rural and Primary Healthcare. (n.d.). Libraries & health: program overview. <https://www.scruralhealth.org/libraries>

<sup>27</sup> For instance, former US Secretary of Labor Robert Reich documents how food system monopolies not only harm consumers but workers. Reich, R. (2024). Why giant mergers harm workers. <https://robertreich.substack.com/p/the-biggest-grocery-merger-in-history>

example, in the context of climate change mitigation, adaptation, and prevention, how could seed libraries be used to adapt heirloom seed varieties from one climate to a new climate to preserve them across climate change?

Furthermore, how do public libraries intersect with and support local food producers including those who may be growing or producing food for market? Opportunities identified include farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), and local small business development. While there was little discussion in focus groups about the economics of food, we came away asking what roles there might be for public libraries in conversations that move beyond meeting immediate needs to building new and more just food economies?

Since this is a relatively new topic in many public libraries discussions in public libraries seem to default to programming over policy. In other words, the question libraries and library workers often ask is “What can we do now?” without also asking “What may we be able to do for the long-term?” As we noted earlier in this white paper this approach to food work by libraries is a response to seeing a critical human need. However, this could be due in part to a spirit of collaboration among library workers who often are quick to share programming and service ideas. While it is important to understand the reasons for library food work it is also important to understand how a lack of discourse on policy and food, and food work in libraries not only limits the effectiveness of food work efforts but misses an opportunity for progressive change. Reflecting on these matters, one research fellows said, “Policies are challenging to discuss and adopt [in public libraries] as even high-level discussions default to discussing programming over policy.” How can public libraries and library workers use their voices in food policy conversations is an important and promising focus for future research.

Relatedly, we only scratched the surface in terms of understanding how public library workers connect to or collaborate with partners such as educational institutions or nonprofits that are working to catalyze and amplify efforts to transform food systems through research, education, investing in communities, building public awareness, and advocacy. We see it as vitally important to understand how the trust the public places in libraries and library workers could translate to amplifying food justice work being done by researchers, non-profits, artists, and advocates.

**Perceptions.** We also need to better understand how public library workers come to think of themselves as workers engaged in supporting food justice. We found when we broached this topic during our first focus group that a focus group is not an ideal format for that type of reflection. An interview-based study would be much better at creating space for individual library workers to reflect on and unpack the personal and professional journeys that led to their interest and nourish their work.

We also need to explore how public library workers would like the public to understand the intersections of food justice and public librarianship. This was touched on in focus groups when we heard that library workers want others to see them as partners, and as people who see the needs, have access to resources and information, and who see themselves as committed to being part of solutions. Communicating the many ways the public library is valuable to a community is an enduring challenge and much work remains to be done to refine the message with examples, stories, and data. In addition to developing and testing messaging campaigns to library peers and the public

through diverse channels and formats, we also need to support library educators who also, according to our focus groups, need to do a better job of preparing LIS students for the realities of public library work, including the need for advocacy for this work.

Part of this message could center around what we heard in terms of framing the library as a critical community hub. How does our public messaging center the fact that there are things that can happen in public libraries that simply cannot happen in many, perhaps, most other community spaces, particularly for individuals marginalized by prejudice or ignorance? We need to understand, protect, and support what works in public libraries in terms of what makes them places even the most vulnerable among us feel safe and welcome.

In this context, the focus groups illustrated how food justice work overlaps with other social service partnerships library workers engage in. For instance, public library workers discussed food justice alongside other services like making hygiene and health products free at the library or partnering to address critical community issues like the housing crisis and the dearth of services and resources for the unhoused. The triple intersection of social services-food justice-public librarianship needs our attention as we work to understand challenges, opportunities, and long-term solutions.



Finally, we need more research to demonstrate the impact of this work. The California State Library's Lunch at the Library has kept detailed records on the impact of public library participation in USDA Summer Feeding Programs,<sup>28</sup> but outside this initiative we know very little about the impacts of public library support for food justice. Much more work needs to be done to discover and evaluate impacts. Both qualitative and quantitative data, including oral histories with library workers, can enrich our understanding and firmly root it in community stories about what can happen when public library workers collaborate with others to make a difference in their communities.

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<sup>28</sup> California State Library. (2023). Lunch at the Library Summer 2023 Report to the Legislature: 2022-2023 Fiscal Year. <https://www.library.ca.gov/uploads/2024/02/LATL-Legislature-Report-Summer-2023.pdf>

# How do we extend conversations about these intersections?

At the beginning of this project, we set ourselves the task of creating a draft model for a crowdsourced national resource or infrastructure that would enable public library workers to share promising practices that supported food justice in their communities. We wanted to hear what public library workers were asking for in terms of national infrastructure, and then work with them to begin to articulate what that infrastructure could look like. As an exploratory research project, our intent in creating this model was not to work out all logistical details associated with putting the model into place but to ensure the experience and voices of public library workers formed the foundation for design, development, delivery, and evaluation of any product or tool.

It was evident in our conversations that library workers value opportunities to meet with their peers in real time to discuss, share information and resources, ask questions, and develop strategies. They were not interested in another listserv or asynchronous mechanism to communicate. They noted that two already exist, and although they are valued, they are not enough.<sup>29</sup>

What the library workers we talked with want are venues and formats for real-time dialogue, brainstorming, resource sharing, commiseration, and conversation. Using what we learned from library workers we outline the elements of a successful template for this type of conversation:

- Ground rules regarding expectations and active ownership of the process
- Acknowledgement that people will participate in different ways, including but not limited to: Share expertise and insights. listen or soak in information, facilitate or guide the conversation, engage in conversation, help take notes or share out resources discuss in a session. The main point is to work to ensure that everyone knows they are there to work together on a complicated issue that touches individuals in mixed and unique ways.
- Understand that participants want to hear what others are doing – there is a real hunger for this information, including among those who have expertise, experience, insights, as well as those just getting started with food justice work.
- Use a prop to facilitate dialogue. In a similar conversation we convened at the Association for Rural & Small Libraries Conference in 2022, we found the wellness wheel<sup>30</sup> to be a productive visual aid to focus a conversation among a diverse group of library workers. A similar conversation starter could be the models introduced earlier in this report.
- Have a structure in place to enable and encourage participants to take back to their libraries and their communities what they heard.
- Enable library workers to return to a conversation later to share new experiences, resources, and raise and explore questions emerging from the work.

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<sup>29</sup> Some of the support that already exists around this topic is one national listserv maintained by the Urban Libraries Council and another state-wide list maintained by the California State Library, neither of which receive much traffic beyond messages disseminated by their owners. The non-profit No Kid Hungry has also endeavored to create infrastructure around this topic, with quarterly online calls on the topic of public library participation in federal feeding programs, with only modest success.

<sup>30</sup> University of New Hampshire. (n.d.) Wellness Wheel Assessment. <https://extension.unh.edu/health-well-being/programs/wellness-wheel-assessment>.

- Ensure that the conversation environment is focused on brainstorming and is participant driven: There is a desire for an active place, a forum, a real forum, with real-time engagement and back-and-forth interaction
- Some actors that could organize these conversations include,
  - state libraries
  - state library associations
  - regional library associations
  - national library associations
  - regional library systems
  - library consortia
  - more organic and/or spontaneous – such as within local libraries and local library systems
- Structurally, the following elements would be good to include in the design of the conversation template,
  - clarity around roles and expectations in advance to help the moderators move the conversation forward in constructive ways
  - acknowledge that people come with different levels of experience and knowledge
  - create opportunities for participants to:
    - demonstrate or share what they are doing at their libraries and in their communities
    - identify ways to try new things in and with one's community
    - converse and commiserate around struggles and challenge
    - gain access to resources used by others
  - ensure there is adequate space and time for questions and concerns
  - respect privacy and confidentiality of participants and have systems in place that offer options to protect both
  - require participants to share a question or questions they want to bring to the forum
  - use a simple and topical icebreaker that will help begin to establish common ground
  - close by asking for suggestions for further discussion
  - ensure that participants who are interested have a way to share their contact information with the group or individually
  - organizers and moderators should follow up with a thank you email to participants, as well as information on how conversation participants can start their own grassroots conversations after the initial event.

We imagine a phased series of conversations by and with library workers. A workshop or webinar series could be framed around the following topics/questions:

- How do I to start a conversation with my colleagues at the library about food work?
- How do I start a conversation with potential partners in my community?
- How can local work on the issue have a broader and more sustained impact in terms of policy, resources, and support?

Future conversation series could focus on topical areas, using the above as a guide to further explore the following questions:

- How can we work to reimagine engaging our communities on the many issues associated with the food system beyond providing access to food and food education?

- How does my work as a library worker strengthen my local food system? How can I understand the impact of this work? How does this work change my community and the lives of the people in it?
- How does food justice work engage with and/or challenge the values of library workers and public libraries in their work with and service to communities? What conversations about values do we need to have as we think about this topic?
- Where should this topic fit within library education, continuing education, and professional development?
- What message do we want to take to our stakeholders about the importance of food work by public libraries? What do we need funders and partners to know about this work so that it can be further supported and developed?

# Conclusions

From November 2023 to March 2024, a team of researchers engaged 49 public library workers and students in a series of focus group interviews designed to better understand the intersections of public librarianship and food justice. This project was shaped by the idea that public library work is rooted in community, shaped by policy, informed by the values of the library profession, guided by the knowledge, passion, and interests of library workers without whom the library as we know it would not exist.

This report concludes by considering implications of what we learned to the study of the social and community practices of public library workers. Building on a range of scholarship on this topic discussed earlier in this report, our research found that public library workers strive to not only be responsive to but also transform community needs. They work to address needs where they see them and often work through community partnerships to achieve their goals.

At the same time, this research found that many public library workers feel a great deal of pressure in their jobs. This was best expressed as an expectation that they be "all things to all people." In the context of food justice, that often meant an urgency and pressure to be responsive to people's immediate needs for food. That approach often meant that library workers and libraries acted alone. Library workers we talked with knew the value of collaborative approaches but too often felt constrained by the urgency of the need and the limitations of time. Through planning and identifying partners they would be more effective by creating systems that not only make food available but begin to tackle the structures that cause and perpetuate that need. Those collaborations could draw on the unique energy and resources of a public library which could be integrated seamlessly into community-based food justice interventions.

This framing also has implications for those researching, teaching, and supporting public librarianship. Rather than only present public libraries with blueprints for programs they could offer (e.g., a seed library or a Little Food Pantry), a more sustainable and strategic approach would be to nurture and support skills-building in ways that help public libraries think and work creatively with others in their communities to support food justice. Part of this work includes helping public library workers and administrators frame food justice in terms of the enduring values of library work: social justice, equity of access, and community-engaged and community-led services.

Finally, this white paper demonstrates, often through the words of library workers themselves, that public library work is intimately woven into the fabric of community. It both draws on and is informed by community interests and needs. The institution of the public library embodies the idea of the public good, that is, a good that is non-excludable and non-rivalrous. It is, as we learned in our conversations with library workers, a unique and uniquely powerful public institution designed to nurture the desires of individuals to explore, learn, escape, and dream and to use what they discover to turn knowledge to power for themselves, their families, and for many, their communities.

We argue that for public libraries to have a lasting impact in broad-based efforts to bring about justice and equity in how we grow, produce, distribute, cook, and consume food, we need to ensure that public libraries are valued and remain a key part of how we advocate for the public good in this



country and beyond. The work public libraries and library workers do in communities is only possible with that common understanding of their unique role and a full appreciation of the values that guide the institution of the public library.

# About the project's Research Fellows

***Note: These biographies were up to date as of August 2024.***

Cindy Beach is the Public Service Manager – Community Partnerships for the Public Library of Youngstown and Mahoning County (Ohio). In this role she connects the library to other organizations, institutions and groups to collaborate in improving, inspiring and enriching lives in all communities county-wide. She has a passion for reaching underserved patron groups, connected learning, and literacy in all its formats. She currently serves as point person for the Library's Summer Meal Program.

Aaron Castillo is a master's student at L'Institut Agro Dijon in France, studying the Psychology and Physiology of Food Choice Determinants. Prior to this, he completed his bachelor's degree in food and Identity from Brown University. Additionally, throughout his undergraduate career, Aaron became passionate about history, public libraries, and the intersection of these topics with food justice. After curating an exhibition and writing a thesis about foodways as a means of remembrance in Providence, RI, he is passionate and excited to continue incorporating this work into his future. Aaron has a keen interest in exploring the persistence of diet culture, diet as a means of cultural assimilation, and cultural foodways, and he intends to pursue a PhD in this field.

Ally Doliboa has been with MidPointe Library System (Ohio) since 2014 and is currently the Youth Programming Coordinator. She has been involved in MidPointe's Summer Food Service Program since 2016 and has implemented Free Little Pantries at various MidPointe branches. Ally is a member of the Collaborative Summer Library Program's Child & Community Well Being committee and works to bring food justice initiatives to her community.

Shari Henry works as the Branch Manager of the Pohick Regional Library, Fairfax County Library in Virginia. Previously she worked at Urban Libraries Council, and has worked in libraries for over 15 years, including director for Roanoke County, Va. Prior to her library career, she worked in community engagement and outreach in nonprofits and is a published writer. Shari is driven by the desire to impact the community for good by connecting resources to people, and by her undying belief that libraries are fundamental to healthy democracies. She co-authored *Food is a Right: Libraries and Food Justice* (ULC, 2023) and holds a B.A. from George Mason University, an MSLS from Pennsylvania Western University, and a Certificate in Fundraising and Development from the University of Richmond's Institute on Philanthropy.

Rahul Mitra (PhD, Purdue University) is an Associate Professor of organizational communication at Wayne State University. His scholarship focuses on environmental organizing, sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR), and meaningful work discourses. He is a critical-interpretive scholar, and uses primarily qualitative methods, such as ethnography, interviews, focus groups, discourse analysis, and arts-based research methods. His work has appeared in numerous peer-reviewed publications such as *Environmental Communication*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Human Relations*, *Communication Theory*, *International Journal of Business Communication*, *Public Relations Review*, and *Journal of Business Ethics*. His work has received external funding from the National Institute of Environmental Health, Environmental Protection Agency, Great Lakes Protection Fund, and Waterhouse Family Institute.

Alfonso Morales is Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor in the Department of Planning and Landscape Architecture at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. Originally from rural New Mexico with roots in family farming, there and in west Texas, he is a researcher, advocate, and practitioner/consultant on food systems and public markets. He is PI, Co-I, or Key Participant of \$50m in grants and contracts from NSF, USDA, NIH and others. He co-created the USDA Local Food economics toolkit and cofounded farm2facts.org, a suite of tools for collecting, analyzing, and reporting on local foods data from farmers markets, currently used in nine states at more than 100 markets.

Sarah Mott is a program manager at the Michigan Fitness foundation where she advances projects that provide tools and resources for nutrition education and sustainable community change to meet local needs. She also supports local organizations with their nutrition education, physical activity programs, and community change work. With a background in public health, she previously worked for the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. She also has experience providing nutrition counseling as a registered dietitian.

Ashley Page Bookhart is a Program Coordinator for the University of South Carolina's SNAP-Ed team. She works with libraries, food policy councils and nonprofits providing technical assistance on food system policy, system and environmental (PSE) change. She has assisted libraries for over five years implementing various PSE strategies including seed libraries, farmers markets, food pantries and produce gardens.

Lilly Fink Shapiro is a food systems consultant focusing on health, equity, and sustainability. She supports diverse clients working to create a better food system through strategy, evaluation, facilitation and curriculum design. During her decade leading the University of Michigan Sustainable Food Systems Initiative, Lilly collaborated with researchers, activists, funders, and Detroit community leaders in launching the nationally recognized community-academic partnership course, “Food Literacy for All.” She also co-launched the inaugural Transformative Food Systems Fellowship, over \$1 million to support underrepresented students to study sustainable food systems in graduate school.

Mary Sizemore has been a library professional for over thirty years. She was a special librarian at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee and a children’s librarian and branch manager at Charleston County (SC) Library. After moving to North Carolina in 2000, she served as director of the Appalachian Regional Library and the Hickory Public Library. She has been director of the High Point Public Library since 2011. She received a BA in History at Carson-Newman College, and an MA in History and MLS at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. She is a past president of the North Carolina Public Library Association and is active in the North Carolina Library Association, having served as treasurer and regional director. She also held two terms on the North Carolina State Library Commission. At High Point Public Library, she and her staff operate a weekly Farmers Market April – October and the library is actively involved in food access and health-related initiatives in High Point.

Bobby J. Smith II (PhD, Cornell University) is an award-winning author, social scientist, and Associate Professor in the Department of African American Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Trained as a sociologist, with a background in agricultural economics, Dr. Smith’s research, teaching, and service creates a public interdisciplinary space to explore how Black

people's historical and contemporary relationships to food and agriculture have shaped both their lives and the world. More broadly, he is a food justice expert. Dr. Smith is the author of *Food Power Politics: The Food Story of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, the inaugural book of the Black Food Justice series at the University of North Carolina (UNC) Press. The book won the 2024 First Book Prize from the Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS). It was selected as a 2024 James Beard Book Award Finalist and received the 2024 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva Book Award-Honorable Mention from the Society for the Study of Social Problems. Dr. Smith has been awarded fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), among others.

Rachel Tucker is a Library Programs Consultant at the California State Library working on the Lunch at the Library program which provides summer meals to children at library locations across the state. This program addresses summer food insecurity while providing enrichment activities and wrap around services to families. Prior to this, she received an undergraduate degree from the University of California Santa Cruz and spent a year working with AmeriCorps before pursuing a master's in library science from San Jose State University. Throughout her nearly 10 years in libraries, she has maintained a passion for serving the public and especially children and families.

Kaela Villalobos has been working in her local library community on the Central Coast of California for over seven years. She ran the youth services department at two community library branches in San Luis Obispo, and just before the pandemic, returned to her childhood library in Santa Maria to lead the Youth Services department as a Librarian II. Over the last three years, Kaela has written, ran, and reported on over 16 grants, creating new programs and opportunities for families in her community. Kaela is now a Library Programs Consultant at the California State Library, working on Summer Services which focus on Lunch at the Library and Building Equity Based Summers.

Emma Vinella-Brusher is a Mobility Services Planner at the City of Durham, North Carolina. In this role, she oversees the Micromobility and Transportation Demand Management programs. Prior to her time at the city, Emma worked for the United States Department of Transportation Volpe Center, where she contributed to projects related to sustainability, transportation equity, public lands, disaster recovery, and accessibility. Emma received her B.A. in Environmental Studies from Carleton College, and a dual master's in city & Regional Planning and Public Health from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her master's thesis evaluated the programs and strategies local governments have implemented to fight food apartheid and increase food access across the United States

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## Research Fellows:

Cindy Beach  
Aaron Castillo  
Ally Doliboa  
Shari Henry  
Dr. Rahul Mitra  
Dr. Alfonso Morales  
Sarah Mott  
Ashley Page Bookhart  
Lilly Fink Shapiro  
Mary Sizemore  
Dr. Bobby J. Smith II  
Rachel Tucker  
Kaela Villalobos  
Emma Vinella-Brusher

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## About Public Librarianship & Food Justice: Current intersections and future opportunities

This report explores and examines some of the intersections between public librarianship and food justice. Food justice is a topic many working in public libraries wish to understand and put into action. Many struggle to do so in a way that is sustainable for the institution of the public library. These findings emerged from focus groups with public library workers conducted from November 2023 to March 2024. This report introduces five themes based on these focus group conversations: 1. The library is an evolving, multi-cultural community resource and hub. 2. Food access is essential to learning and literacy. 3. Library workers feel pressure and guilt to address all needs and individuals. 4. Procedures and policies integrate food work into library work. 5. Partnerships integrate library work into food work. These findings are followed by models and recommendations that may help us advance knowledge and action related to these intersections.