

# **Community Listening Project Final Report**

**2015-2016**

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## **I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In 2015 and 2016, all seven regions of Seattle Public Library participated in Community Listening. Using an equity lens, librarians examined data and then reached out to community members to do intentional listening about community interests, needs, issues, and concerns. They shared the information they had gathered with each other, looking for the issues that many community members considered most urgent and appropriate for a library response. Each region selected several Local Priorities, and then began work developing or adjusting library programs and services in response to those priorities, working in partnership with community.

Data and demographics showed a city where wealth is increasing but income and opportunity disparities are also growing, a trend that disproportionately affects people of color. Our community partners look to the library to address these disparities, asking us to prioritize our work supporting immigrants, communities of color, and people who are low income or experiencing homelessness, as well as small business owners and budding entrepreneurs.

The project met all of its staff-related outcomes, with participating staff reporting significant gains in their knowledge of their neighborhoods, community engagement skills and confidence, and understanding of community engagement vocabulary. The final outcome of the project, “developing relevant, community-based programs & services,” is now being undertaken and measured by the regions themselves, in conversation with Public Services leadership.

Community Listening is not a discreet project, but a new approach to public services that will be ongoing. Staff are expected to continue to build relationships in their neighborhoods, adjusting programs and services in a continual response to community needs. Other major library programs and services are now adopting this approach, including Seattle Reads, Teen Summer of Learning, and the Committee for Outreach, Programming, and Engagement (COPE).

## II. BACKGROUND

The Community Engagement Service Priority is grounded in six guiding principles, including:

- Listen & learn
- Build relationships
- Prioritize equity

Community Listening represents a new approach to outreach and community engagement, grounded in these guiding principles. Previously, the most common engagement model emphasized marketing: staff offered community members or potential community partners a menu of existing library programs and services, and asked them to make a selection. The library's goal was often framed as increasing door counts in our buildings or attendance at existing programs, rather than producing positive outcomes for patrons.

Community Listening was designed to provide a budget and some tools to support staff in doing intentional listening with their communities, broadening their understanding and knowledge of the neighborhoods they serve. Staff focus on creating lasting relationships and ongoing partnerships, especially with underrepresented audiences, using an equity lens. The resulting programs and services are evaluated based on the outcomes they produce for the communities we serve, rather than the outcomes or outputs that may result for the library.

### PILOT PROJECT TEAM

In summer 2015, a team was formed to design a process and pilot it in the Southwest Region. Chrissy Knoelke, Supervising Librarian at Delridge, was the Region Lead. The Lead acts as a point person for communicating with region staff about the project, and also manages reporting and documentation. Other team members included Alessandra De Campos (an intern from UW School of Education Policy, who led research efforts), Jane Appling, Kip Roberson, and Valerie Wonder.

### RESEARCH

The team looked at how this work has been done at other libraries and institutions, and had some particularly helpful meetings with staff who had led a similar process at KCLS. However, whereas the KCLS process was mainly focused on data, the pilot team decided to emphasize listening to community along with examining data. Other public libraries consulted when designing the process included Vancouver, Pierce County, and Las Vegas. The team also adapted resources from organizations that serve and support libraries (like WebJunction), as well as Seattle City/RSJI resources (including the Racial Equity Toolkit), and books and articles on community-led engagement and race and social justice from various disciplines. (See Appendix 1: Resources Consulted)

### POST-PILOT ADJUSTMENTS

At the end of the pilot, Southwest Region staff were invited to give in-depth feedback on how the process could be improved. This resulted in numerous adjustments, including:

- Additional data analysis and interpretation
- Additional community engagement tools & support documents
- Longer timeline for Community Conversations
- Increased operational support

## FOCUS GROUPS

The Outreach Program Manager held focus groups with staff from several of the Regions before implementing the process system-wide. The information gained, along with responses to a pre-survey conducted in each region, led to further refinements to the project. These steps also helped the Outreach PM to work with the Lead in each region to tailor the process, providing varied support in the areas where it was most needed.

### III. PROCESS

In each Region, the Outreach Program Manager led librarians in a series of meetings over 12-16 weeks to:

1. Examine demographic, economic, and other relevant data about their neighborhoods.
2. Informed by the data, as well as by current community knowledge and relationships, think strategically about members of the community they could contact to learn more about local issues, interests, needs, and goals.
3. Receive training and support in doing that listening and engagement.
4. Share and discuss findings with one another.
5. Develop a Region Profile and Local Priorities.
6. Develop a plan of service based on Local Priorities.
7. Work with community to identify and evaluate outcomes associated with the Priorities.
8. Iterate – adjust and improve programs and services based on evaluations and feedback from partners on an ongoing basis.

All 6 of the remaining regions (after the 2015 SWR pilot) completed this first phase of the Community Listening process in 2016.

## DATA

Virtual Services Librarian David Christensen prepared and presented to each Region a PowerPoint sharing economic, demographic, and other data about their neighborhoods. The presentations identified key communities, trends, disparities, and other information designed to help librarians make decisions about what information they hoped to gather through community conversations.

## COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

After viewing the data, librarians were asked to consider where there might be gaps in current services. Did demographics reveal a population (for instance, a community of speakers of a certain language) with which the library had no current partnerships? Who in the community might be able to suggest strategies for addressing inequities? Did librarians have current contacts with whom they had begun partnerships without ever taking the time to fully understand the partner organization's work and mission?

Based on the answers to questions like these, librarians in each region developed a diverse list of community contacts and divided up the work, with each librarian expected to meet with at least one or two community members. Other forms of listening and information-gathering were also encouraged, including attending existing neighborhood meetings, walking the streets and taking notes on new businesses or construction, reading neighborhood blogs, etc. Staff were originally given two months for this phase, but in the pilot, Southwest Region indicated that more time would have been helpful. Succeeding regions spent 3-4 months better getting to know their neighborhoods.

In the conversations, staff asked community contacts open-ended questions focused on expanding knowledge and laying the groundwork for a relationship. Contacts could be new, or could be contacts about whom staff would like to know more, serve better, or work with more productively. Staff were encouraged to go out in pairs, and were provided with backfill to hire a reference desk replacement, as well as a small budget to take the community member out to coffee or lunch as an acknowledgement of the value of their time. While librarians were asked to be leads on these visits, they were also encouraged to bring along their non-librarian co-workers.

Potential questions asked during the conversations included: “Tell me about the organization/community you work with. What is important to them right now? What is working well? What are some areas of difficulty? What are people’s main interests and concerns?” Staff also encouraged community members to ask questions about the library, often dispelling misconceptions about barriers to library services. Contacts initiated through the CL process bloomed into relationships. In many cases, these contacts became partners in producing programs and services based on the interests and needs they identified. Staff are expected to continue this work on an ongoing basis, enriching and diversifying their networks.

In total, Region staff held Community Conversations with 160 individuals, leaders, and staff and representatives of community-based organizations (See Appendix 3: Complete list of Community Conversation Contacts).

<b>MCE</b>	33
<b>NER</b>	19
<b>NWR</b>	17
<b>MCW</b>	15
<b>SWR</b>	16
<b>DWN</b>	27
<b>SER</b>	33
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>160</b>

## TRAININGS

Hayden Bass and CiKeithia Pugh (Early Learning Program Manager) led informal trainings in each region. Staff were encouraged to share their own knowledge and experiences with their peers. Topics covered included:

- **Community engagement basics:** Approaching partners, listening, relationship building.
- **Partnering with community:** Including using an equity lens, power sharing, and co-creation of programs and services. Being accountable to community.
- **Outcomes-based evaluation:** Setting and evaluating outcomes, particularly in conversation with community partners. (Concurrently with Community Listening, Public Services rolled out an OBE training for staff in 2016, including the use of logic models. Staff understood that they would be expected to measure outcomes for the programs and services related to Community Listening.)

## IDENTIFYING LOCAL PRIORITIES

Rather than committing to new programs or services during their community conversations, librarians framed the sessions as relationship-building for both sides. They brought back the knowledge that they had gained, and came together again as a group to look for through-lines in what they had all heard, considering:

- What audiences do people want the library to prioritize right now?
- What are the interests/issues/concerns/needs that come up the most often, seem most urgent, or are most appropriate for the library to address?
- How is the library already addressing them with current programs and services?
- How might those current services be expanded, adapted, made more accessible, supplemented, etc.?
- What are 2-3 areas where the library could have a significant impact in the coming year?
- How might the library work with community partners to achieve that impact?

#### PLANNING, DELIVERING, AND EVALUATING SERVICES

Staff are expected to plan and implement projects in dialogue and partnership with community, sharing power and resources to maximize positive outcomes. All seven regions have now completed the initial process, and projects are underway. (See Appendix 4: Region Reports)

### IV. FINDINGS

#### DATA OVERVIEW

The excellent data and demographic information provided by David Christensen told a story of a city where both wealth and disparities are increasing.

For example, in Mid-City West, economic data pointed to a sharp divide: 7.8% of residents earn less than \$15,000, while 27.4% of households had an annual disposable income of over \$100k. In the Northwest Region and Mid-City East, the number of middle-income families is decreasing while the number of upper-middle and high income families is on the rise. Downtown Region staff were surprised to learn that while many neighborhood residents are wealthy and live in luxury condos, as they expected, many neighbors are low-income residents of permanent supportive housing. Although unhoused people are not captured in any of this data, according to the 2016 One Night Count, homelessness in King County rose 19% over 2015. All factors indicate a hollowing-out of the middle class, with more people gaining wealth or being pushed into poverty.

Seattle continues to be a segregated city, with both poverty and communities of color concentrated in the south end. Increasing disparities disproportionately affect communities of color. In Mid-City East, 11.5% of households live below the poverty line, compared to 6% in the Northwest Region. In both the Southeast Region and Mid-City East, median incomes are stagnant while rent and housing prices are rising sharply, forcing many low and middle-income residents out of their neighborhoods and into the suburbs. These neighborhoods are becoming more fragmented and less diverse. (See Appendix 4: Region Reports)

#### LOCAL PRIORITIES

Although each region selected different priorities based on the interests and needs of the communities they serve, there were several common themes.

#### Priority Audiences

- People who are low income and/or experiencing homelessness – DWN, MCW, NWR, NER, MCE

Seattle grapples with a homelessness state of emergency and housing costs continue to rise. Many in the community, including local chambers of commerce and neighborhood groups as well as service providers and unhoused people themselves, are eager for the library to continue to develop and expand our programs, services, and outreach to people experiencing homelessness. While homelessness can be a contentious issue in Seattle, many look to the library to provide a refuge for unhoused people, and to convene positive, constructive conversations that include and center the lived experiences of unhoused people. Downtown Region is focusing on expanding its outreach and partnerships to better serve people experiencing homelessness in the neighborhood. Branch regions have committed to monthly visits to sanctioned tent cities to provide library services, including circulation of wifi hotspots for extended checkout periods.

- Immigrants and communities of color, particularly young people and their families – SWR, SER, NWR, NER, MCE

In the SER, conversations with partners like the Refugee Women’s Alliance and El Centro de la Raza led the region to a focus on serving Spanish-speaking and East African families and youth. A Beacon Hill Branch librarian led two successful robot programming series with ReWA youth last summer as part of the region’s response to this priority. In SWR, community members asked for additional services geared towards Spanish-speaking families in the Highland Park/Roxhill and South Park areas. Members of the Latino community shared that in order to successfully serve their community, programming should be intergenerational, and provide opportunities for all the members of a family to enjoy an experience together. In response, South Park Branch has created a successful family-friendly ESL class, attracting parents who would otherwise not attend.

- Small business owners – SWR, SER

Teaming up with the concurrent Library2Business project, libraries are providing support for small business owners in a variety of ways: providing information and resources, and connecting them to each other and other systems of support. Southwest Region has had success in connecting small business owners in the Delridge area, enabling them to provide mutual support, while also introducing them to a network of business support tools and organizations.

- Seniors – MCW, SWR, NER

As baby boomers age, many are turning to the library for support. A series of community-led “Hot Topics” programs, in which senior patrons discuss and debate current events, are popular at Southwest Branch. Ballard Branch is hosting book groups at senior living facilities in response to high demand. Northeast Region is increasing its outreach and computer instruction to organizations serving older adults.

## **Information Needs**

- Library as connector – NER, NWR, SER, MCW

In many conversations, librarians heard that even when there is a wealth of resources available in a community, residents sometimes struggle to find out about them or get informed referrals, especially in north Seattle. Many look to the library to make connections between one organization and another, and between service providers and the public. Continuing to build external relationships and provide excellent information and referral, particularly to hyperlocal social services, was identified as a key priority.

- Language collections – NER, SER, SWR

Many branches, particularly in the Northeast Region, reported hearing about patron frustration at not having any materials available in their own languages at their local branches. Being able to place holds on language materials is often a less than satisfying solution, especially when language may be a barrier to patrons asking for this service. Staff in these regions called for a review of the system’s language collections based on current demographics and usage patterns.

- Collections reflecting community – all regions

Across all regions, there is community interest in making sure our collections reflect our diverse communities. The revision of the Collection Development Plan which is currently underway is poised to address these needs, and expansions of Native American, Muslims, and African American collections are very welcome. This goal will also be served by TCS’s current strategy to bring an RSJI lens to all nonfiction collections.

## V. OUTCOMES

Identified outcomes for Community Listening are:

- Increase staff **knowledge** of neighborhoods
- Increase staff confidence & **engagement skills**
- Build a **common vocabulary** around CE
- Develop **relevant, community-based programs & services**

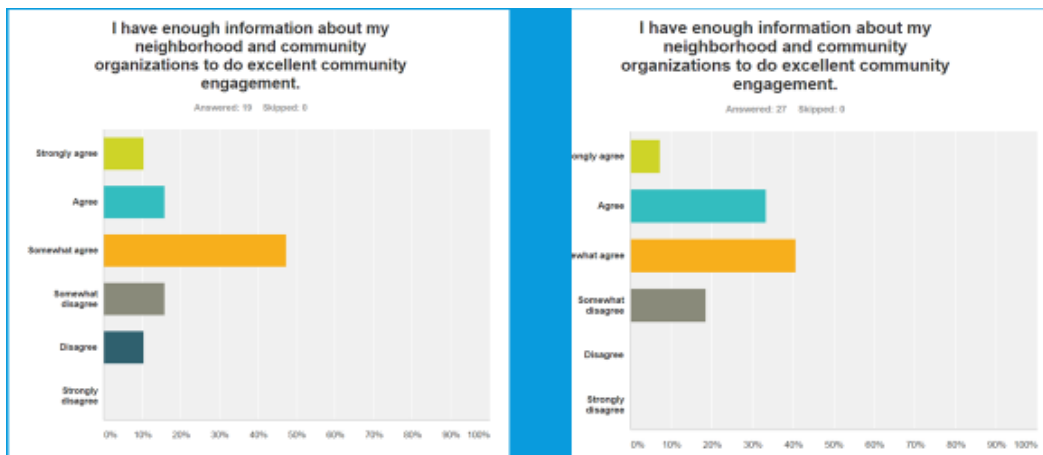
The first three outcomes were measured via a pre- and post-survey administered to all librarians who participated in the process. In the case of the DWN region, some non-librarian staff also participated and took the surveys.

### 1. Increase staff knowledge of neighborhoods

All Regions reported some increase in knowledge of their neighborhoods. This progress was charted both through the surveys and through Google maps which charted previously existing, new, and deepened relationships with community contacts.

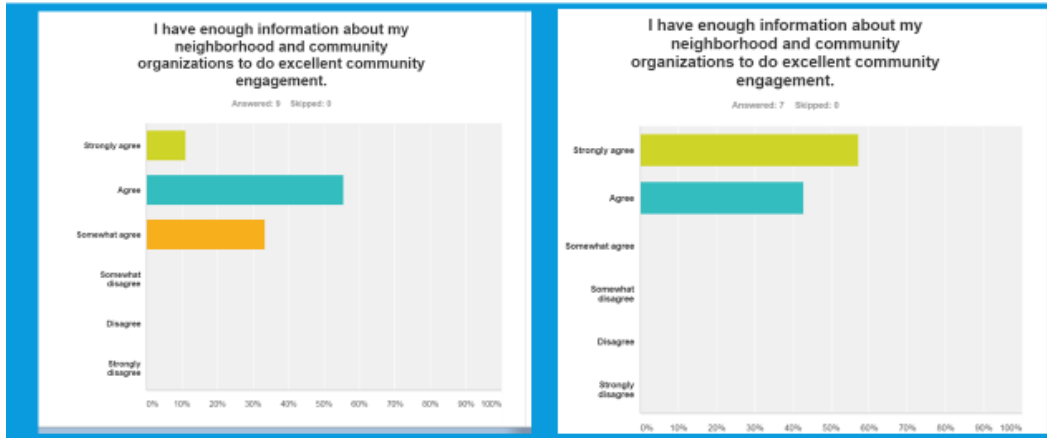
*“I have enough info about my community to do excellent community engagement” – pre- and post-survey of librarians. Strongly disagree (0) – Strongly Agree (5)*

#### DWN



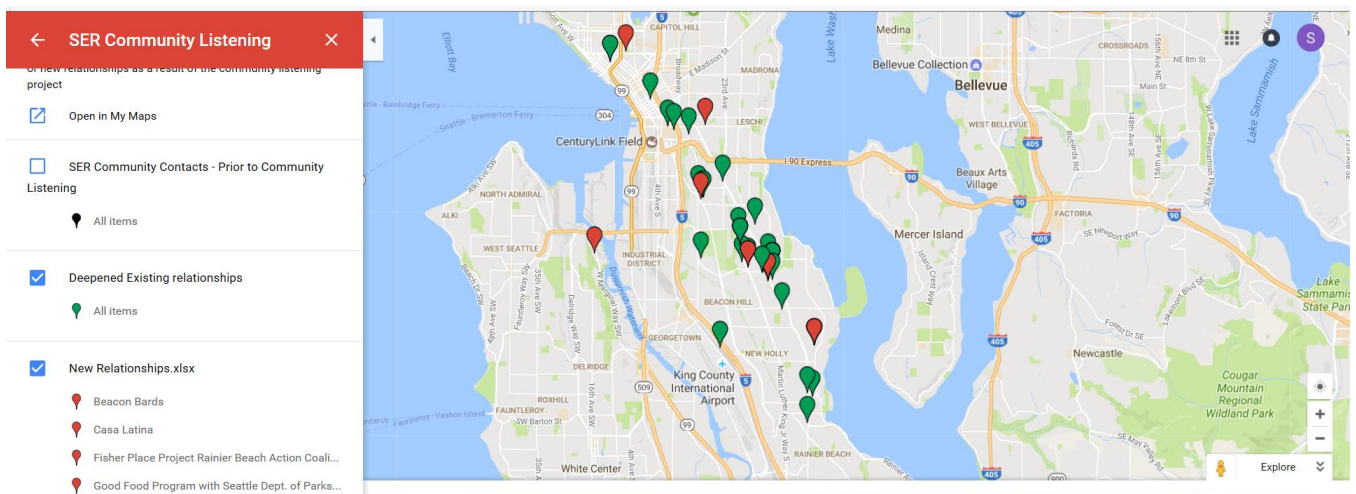
## SER

Moved from 3.78 – 4.56, on average.



Each Region also created a Google map as a visual indicator of relationships that were initiated or deepened as a result of Community Listening.

## SER



Existing relationships (in black – 61 – not represented in this image), deepened relationships (green - 35) and new relationships (red - 10).

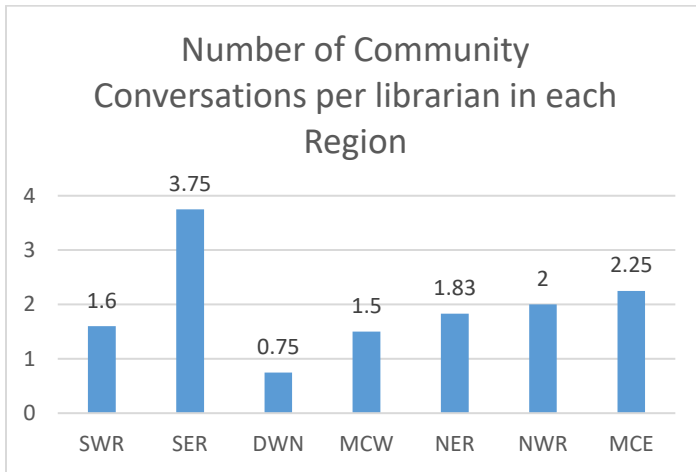
## 2. Increase staff confidence & engagement skills

All regions reported an increased positive response to the statement “I feel comfortable approaching community leaders and potential partner organizations.” This question was used as an indicator for confidence.



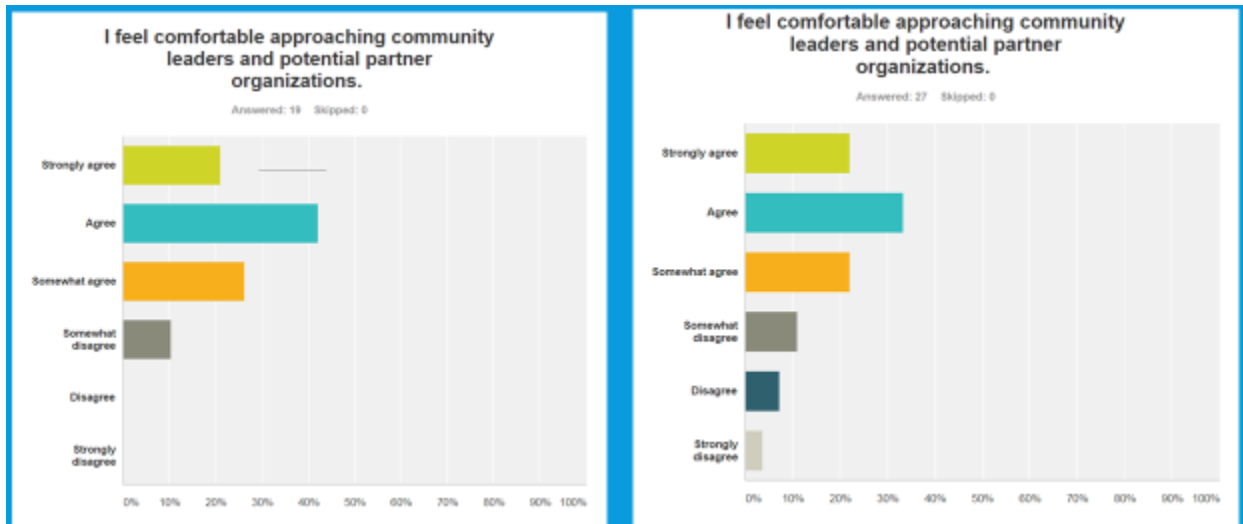
However, there was a correlation between the amount of engagement each region took part in and the reported growth in skills and confidence. All regions in which librarians met with more than one community member on average – that is, all Regions but DWN - made gains in confidence.

For example, on average each Southeast Region librarian met with 3.75 community members, and that region saw some of the biggest gains in skills and confidence. But DWN Region librarians on average met with less than one community member each. DWN staff actually showed a slight decrease in confidence at the end of the process, although this could be related to the fact that relatively few DWN staff completed the pre-survey, so before/after modeling is less reliable.

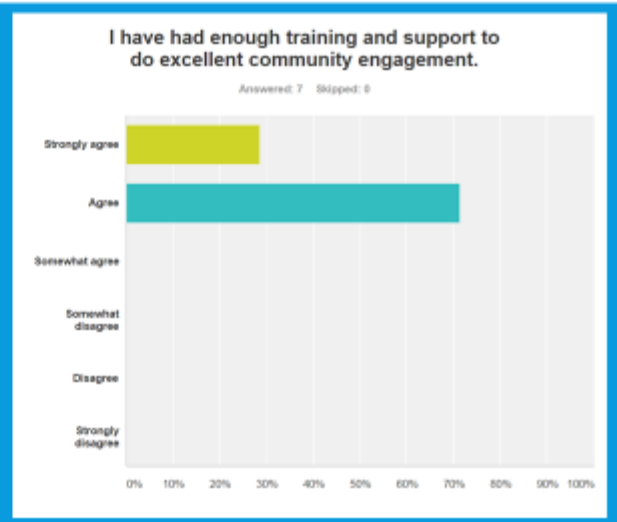
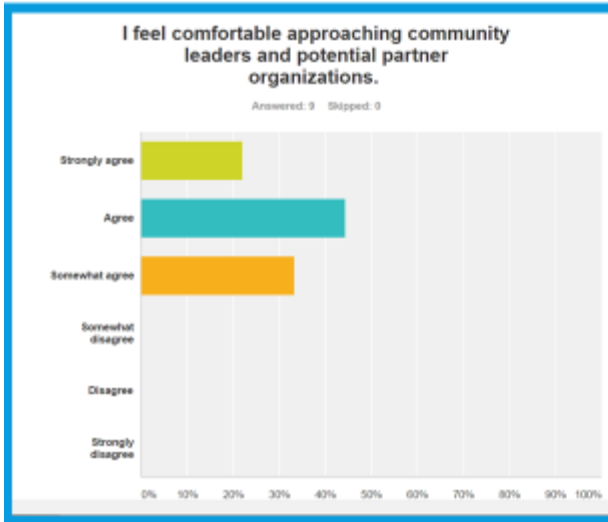


*“I feel comfortable approaching community leaders and potential partner organizations.”*

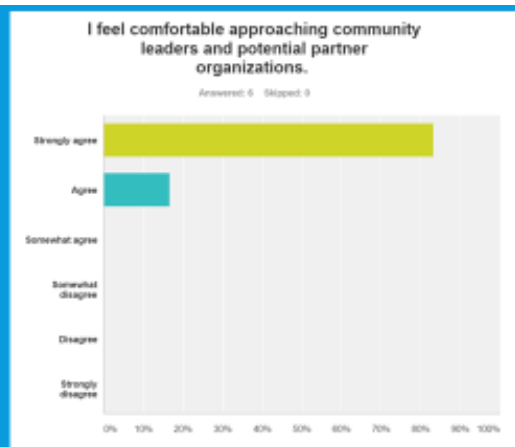
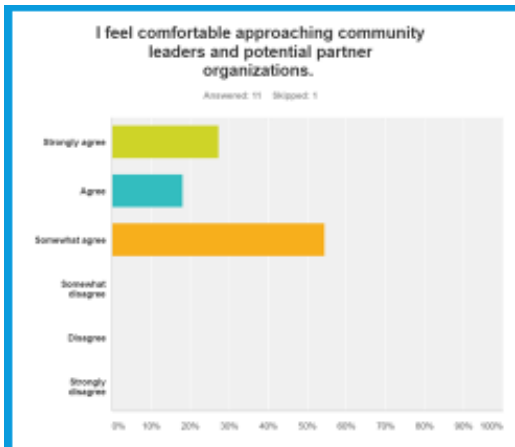
**DWN**



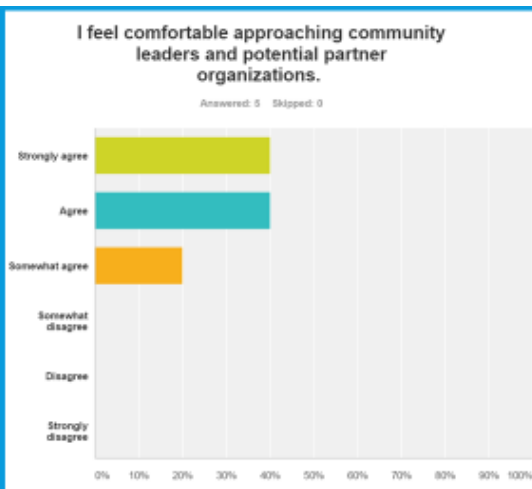
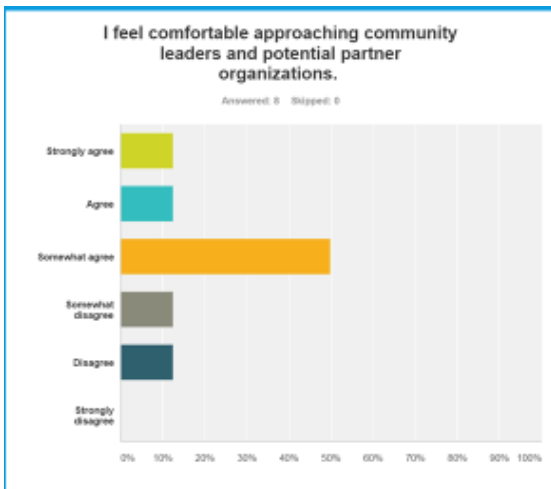
**SER**



**NER**

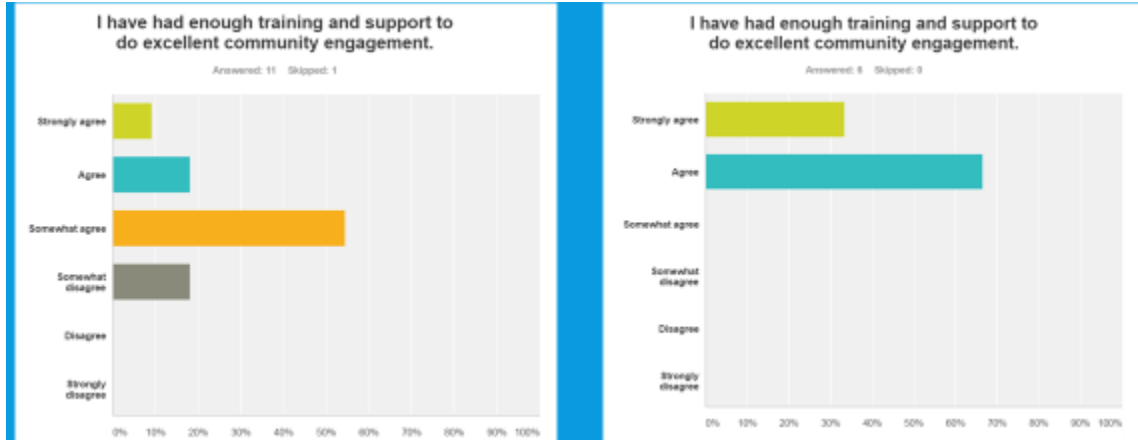


**MCW**

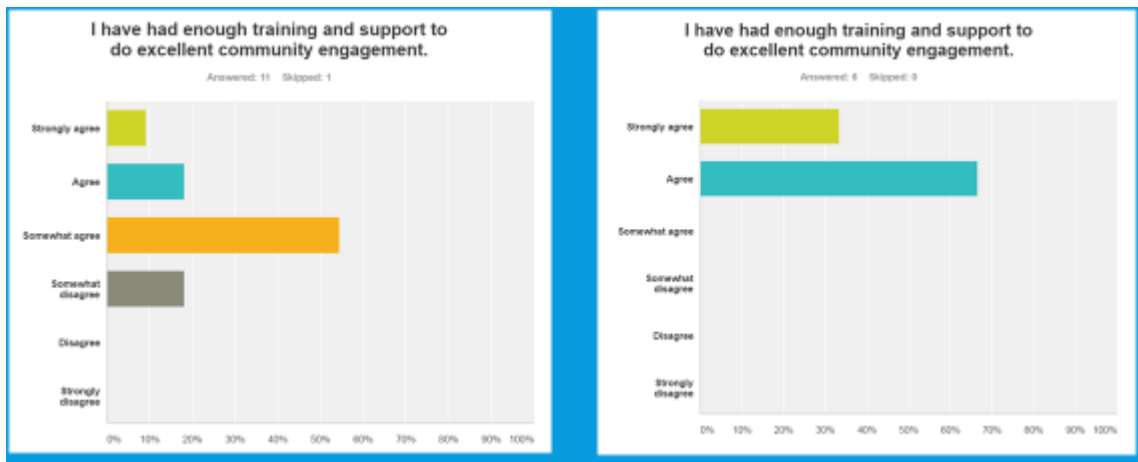


All Regions also reported an increased positive response to the statement: *“I have had enough training and support to do excellent community engagement,”* which was used to measure staff self-perceptions of skill.

**NWR**



**NER**

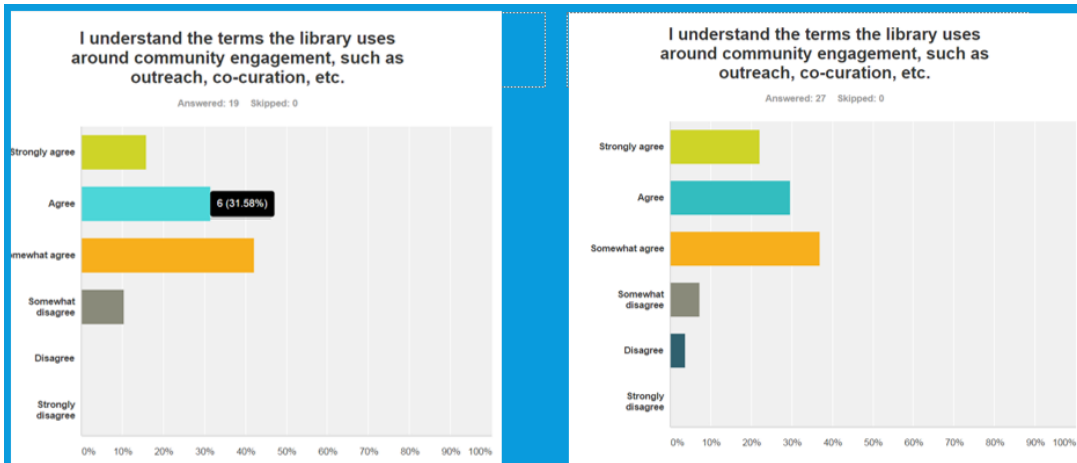


**3. Build a common vocabulary around CE**

Although there is still more work to be done in this area, all Regions reported some increase in positive responses to the statement, *“I understand the terms the library uses around community engagement, such as outreach, co-curation, etc.”*

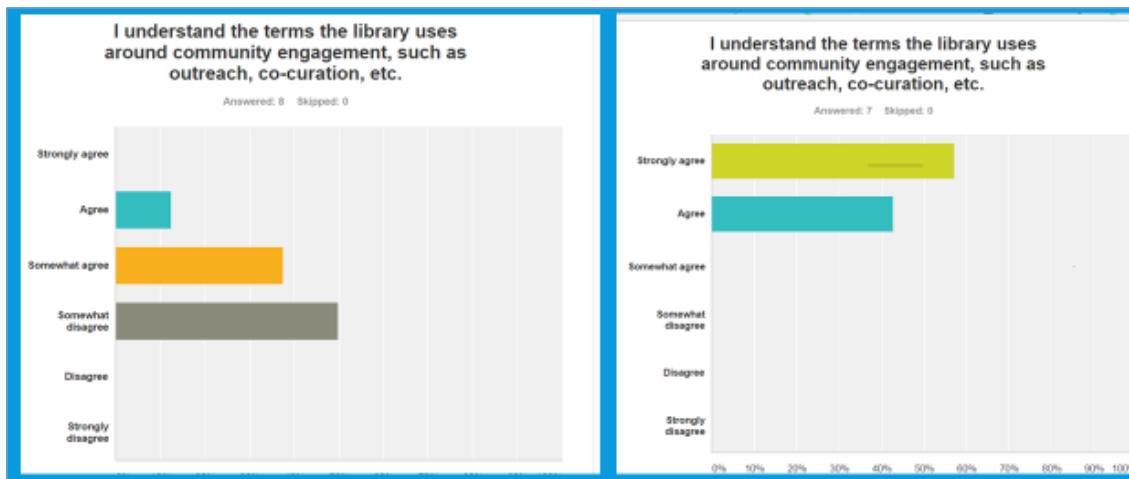
Some gains were slight, such as in DWN, where average response went from 3.31 to 3.74.

**DWN**



But other Regions made huge gains in working with the vocabulary. MCW went from 2.62 to 4.57, for example.

### MCW



#### 4. Create relevant, community-based programs & services

This outcome will be measured by the regions themselves, as they work with community partners to evaluate the programs and services that come out of Community Listening. All regions have been asked to work closely with community to develop and measure outcomes. Region Managers will be reporting to the Assistant Director of Public Services on their progress. (See Appendix 5: Community Listening Extended Timeline).

### VI. STAFF FEEDBACK

Overall, staff feedback to Community Listening was positive. Even librarians who had less experience in community engagement found the approach – focusing on listening, not marketing – liberating. Rather than feeling like every interaction with a potential community partner had to result in a new program or service, librarians were able to focus on learning and relationships, allowing collaborative projects to form more slowly and organically. While

there were some librarians who felt strongly that community engagement should not be part of their job description, they were a small minority.

A few representative librarian comments:

- “Now I know it’s okay for me to get out of the building and just spend time getting to know the community. It’s not just for youth librarians!” – SER librarian
- “I love this approach. It’s a whole new way of thinking about my work.” – NER librarian
- “Let’s all commit to spending at least a couple of hours on relationships every week!” - MCW librarian
- “As a result of this community listening, I have a partnership with Green Bean and Sanctuary Church, and so now we have a logical spot for our pop up library while we are closed. I also feel connected to folks in the community I always want to meet and chat with more deeply but never made the time. Having the backing of an actual library-sponsored initiative made it easier and more productive to reach out to folks.” – NWR librarian
- “I like this approach, but I would like more clarity from leadership around what our priorities are. What are ‘political issues’? What does it mean to be ‘neutral’? If we follow the community, will we be supported?” – MCE librarian
- “The library would be better served and represented if this work/process was performed by professionally trained individuals who do this as their primary work. Many people were needlessly put in awkward work situations unnecessarily, because of what feels like not fully thought out assumptions.” – DWN librarian
- “I enjoyed it. It’s great to find out what’s happening nearby.” – DWN librarian

Staff also had many constructive suggestions.

### **Tracking partnerships**

First and foremost, there is a desperate need for a system-wide partnership-tracking database. Right now, each Region (and in the case of DWN, each unit) is tracking their partner relationships and projects separately. Finding out whether or not a potential partner is already working with the library is difficult, and staff almost universally find this stressful and frustrating; crossed wires are common. Staff eagerly await the completion of the partnership database that IT is working on.

### **Scheduling difficulties**

This project would have been difficult, if not impossible, without a backfill budget. Desk schedules make any kind of offsite project a challenge. But many librarians pointed out that even having backfill available did not always solve scheduling issues. Different schedulers had different understandings of how this work should be prioritized; and most necessarily view their first priority as staffing buildings. Occasionally, backfill hours were posted but were not picked up by other staff, and even the substitute librarians were not available. So even with backfill on offer, some librarians found that their schedules were still not flexible enough to connect with busy community members.

### **Communication gaps**

DWN presented some particular communication challenges. It’s a huge region, with as many librarians as the other Regions combined, as well as large teams of non-librarian staff who were also folded into the project. Working collaboratively across units is still relatively new to the culture of DWN, and lines of communication were sometimes broken or obscure.

There were sometimes communication challenges in the branch regions as well. Some regions seldom hold librarian meetings, so librarians weren’t used to thinking about their work beyond their own branch and

neighborhood. Community Listening meeting time could sometimes be overtaken by the need to conduct regular regional business.

### **Further training**

Although this process was able to provide a basic level of community engagement training, a majority of staff have indicated an interest in learning more, particularly in the areas of:

- Implicit bias and other RSJI topics
- Trauma-informed practice
- Engaging with new contacts
- Creating sustainable partnerships

Many suggested that Region Managers, who lead staff in this work, should also have in-depth training in these areas.

Non-librarian staff, who did not participate in the CL meetings and have received little training in community engagement, have also expressed a strong interest in being provided with opportunities to develop their skills.

## **VII. CULTURAL SHIFT**

Community Listening represents a system-wide change in approach for SPL. The model has already been adapted for use in many major library projects, including:

- **2017 Teen Summer of Learning** – In fall 2016, the TSL work team for this major system-wide program held a listening session with a group of community partners and stakeholders. They asked what outcomes were most important for underrepresented youth to achieve over the summer, and how they hoped to partner with the library to meet those outcomes. This year's program is being created in response to the input they gathered, in ongoing conversation with partners.
- **Black Diaspora COPE Team** – This work team (part of the Committee for Outreach, Programming, and Engagement) will use the basic structure of the Community Listening process to conduct a year-long exploration of the interests, needs, and current status of the black community in Seattle. Other COPE Teams are also trained in Community Listening principles, and expected to work closely with community on their projects.
- **Seattle Reads** – For the first time, this major city-wide program is holding advance meetings with community stakeholders and applying an equity lens throughout.
- **Listening circles with people experiencing homelessness** – Community Engagement Services led a series of listening sessions with people experiencing homelessness to learn more about the barriers they face in accessing library programs and services, as well as their interests in and ideas for future programs.
- **Community-led programs** – Throughout the library, staff are supporting community members who take the lead in developing rich, dynamic programming. Just a few examples: "Legendary Children," led by Seattle's TQPOC (Trans, Queer People of Color) communities; Teen Service Learning Groups, which foster teen leadership – TSL Ayan Adem's group at Douglass-Truth is currently developing a "Know Your Rights" workshop for immigrants; and literary readings by people who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness (University Branch).

## **VIII. NEXT STEPS**

Community Listening is not a finite project, but an ongoing commitment to connecting with our communities. Staff must continue to build and grow their community relationships, with periodic financial and training support.

- **Peer Learning Sessions** – In response to requests for further training, the Outreach Program Manager is leading a series of peer learning sessions in 2017. Librarians will continue to build their community engagement knowledge and skills in a variety of areas.
- **Measuring Outcomes** – It is crucial that staff follow through on our commitment to evaluate CL-related programs and services in order to ensure that they are meeting the needs of our communities, and can make adjustments as needed.
- **CL Check-Ins** – Beginning with Southwest Region in spring 2017, all the regions will conduct “check-ins” at the 18-month mark, meeting with community partners to determine whether outcomes are being met and the original Local Priorities need to be adjusted.