

**Building Public Library Capacity for Supporting Young Adult Engagement and Wellbeing**  
*IMLS Program Goal 1: Champion Lifelong Learning; Objective 1.2: Support the training and professional development of the museum and library workforce.*

The New York Public Library (NYPL) respectfully requests a grant of \$249,999 from the IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program for a three-year implementation grant to develop, test, and iterate a Young Adult (YA) Engagement & Wellbeing training for library staff who work with adolescents. Designed to equip YA staff with best practices to support teen mental health and community engagement, the resulting open source training toolkit will be made available online for national use.

**Project Justification:** In the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, American adolescents already experienced historically high levels of depression and anxiety.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic, however, added loneliness and social isolation, and libraries, which have always served as safe harbors and community builders, were, by necessity, closed. While many libraries, including NYPL, were able to offer virtual programs to teens, those interactions did not make up for the loss of the ability to experience in-person community and belonging. Further, research shows that Black and Hispanic teens are more likely to experience mental health issues due to a complex set of factors that include racial trauma and poverty; and these communities were also disproportionately affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Now, more than ever, libraries need to reach out to teens in our communities and offer them safe, inclusive spaces where they can develop agency and voice, build resilience, and feel that they belong to a larger, supportive community of teens and caring adults.

NYPL recently conducted a survey of YA-serving staff and library managers across NYPL's 88 branches that illustrated the need to better equip staff to support our teen patrons - of the 72 non-managerial survey respondents, only 22 percent felt strongly confident in their ability to support teens' mental health, and only 18 percent in leading culturally-relevant programming. Staff also expressed strong interest in bridging this knowledge and confidence gap through additional training. NYPL seeks to develop a Young Adult Engagement & Wellbeing training and toolset to help librarians and library staff:

- Understand the communities they work in, inclusive of demographics, history, and community assets, such as community-based organizations and schools;
- Conduct outreach to teens and bring them into library spaces that are inclusive, community-centered, and culturally responsive; and
- Offer teens library experiences that address their mental health needs, and provide them with opportunities to express teen voice and agency within a supportive community— mechanisms that adolescent development research cites as critical to creating self-confident and resilient teens.

The development of the training will support NYPL's broader goals to invest deeply in teen library users, including through the opening of ten newly upgraded Teen Centers in the coming years, which will reflect the Library's holistic approach to supporting adolescents as they explore their interests, develop technological fluencies, connect with peers, and develop their unique voices. The initial target of the training will be NYPL Young Adult Librarians and Information Assistants (junior branch staff who also provide teen services and support programming), of which there are approximately 120 across the system, with the ultimate goal of making the training curriculum and resources freely available to library staff across the country. Beneficiaries of the project will be teen library users in New York City and beyond, who will experience improved service from library spaces where staff are equipped with a research-based skill set to respond to the issues facing adolescents from all backgrounds.

**Project Work Plan:** NYPL seeks funding for three years to develop, test, iterate, and release an open source training toolkit for Young Adult Engagement & Wellbeing, designed to equip library staff with trauma-informed knowledge and skills to support adolescent mental health, deliver culturally responsive programming, and elevate teen voices to empower their creativity and civic engagement. NYPL will draw from the lessons learned from its "Raising the Bar" early literacy training, developed with IMLS funding (RE-40-16-0158-16) and released for widespread use online in 2019, which equipped library staff with child development knowledge and caregiver engagement skills to deliver higher quality 0-5 programming. In the same way that NYPL brought its early literacy practice to the next level by infusing early childhood

<sup>1</sup> <http://yalsa.ala.org/blog/2016/05/29/the-calm-before-the-storm-how-teens-and-libraries-can-fight-mental-illness/>

development and brain development research-based practices throughout its training with the help of external early childhood educational experts, the Library would now like to respond to critical, emergent adolescent needs by infusing its teen programming and services with research-based adolescent development and mental health approaches through partnering with relevant experts.

NYPL's Associate Director of Young Adult Services and Manager of Young Adult Education Programming will lead the project, in consultation with an internal advisory group of NYPL YA staff. In order to ensure the training meets the needs of both teens and library staff beyond the NYPL system, NYPL will additionally convene an external advisory group, including staff at peer institutions as well as mental health experts. In developing the content of the training, NYPL will also incorporate feedback from teen library users through either surveys or focus groups.

In Year 1, NYPL will convene advisory groups of YA staff. In consultation with these stakeholders, the project team will engage in a landscape and peer review to further refine the goals of the project and identify a program partner. The project team will then develop the training curriculum with the help of the program partner. In Year 2, NYPL will work with the program partner to co-facilitate the training for initial cohorts of approximately 60 YA staff members, and iterate the training in response to feedback from staff and advisory councils. During Year 3, NYPL will train the remaining cohorts of approximately 60 staff; create a final iteration of the training toolkit and resources with a curriculum designer; and release the training materials online as open-source resources. Staff will additionally plan to travel to local and national conferences and convenings to discuss and promote the training.

To ensure the project's successful impact, NYPL will conduct pre- and post-training surveys of participants to track key changes in knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Once the training toolkit is publicly released, NYPL will also measure success through widespread usage, determined through downloads and views of the open source material, as well as anecdotal feedback from external library systems.

**Diversity Plan:** The project is DEIA (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility) driven, with a focus on equipping library staff to support teens from diverse communities through multilingual and multicultural approaches, and the resulting training will be provided to different categories of staff members, including librarians, information assistants, and later library managers, which is important for workforce inclusion and equity. Team members and NYPL branch staff are highly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, country of origin, age, native language, and disability, and many of them are from the communities the Library serves, which will support multiple perspectives during project development and iteration. Additionally, one of the main criteria for selecting a training partner will be the partnering organization's expertise in working with the diverse populations that NYPL serves.

**Project Results:** Key project results will be twofold: 1) develop and iterate a Teen Engagement & Wellbeing training for approximately 120 YA staff; and 2) release an open source toolkit of the training curriculum and resources for widespread use by YA staff nationally, including an observation rubric. Ultimately, the project will increase the capacity of libraries, already a trusted community resource, with the knowledge and resources to better support adolescent mental health, deliver creative and culturally relevant programming, and engage teens in their communities through amplifying their voices and creating agency. Beyond the grant period, the Young Adult Engagement & Wellbeing training will be used for future NYPL hires, and the resulting open source toolkit materials will continue to be made available for use by librarians across the country. The training will have utility beyond large, urban library systems, providing a free and open resource for all library staff seeking a DEIA-focused, trauma-informed approach to supporting a post-pandemic teen population.

**Budget Summary:** NYPL requests a grant of \$249,999 over three years. Costs include project staff time (\$54,579) and fringe benefits at a rate of 51 percent for full-time staff and 8 percent for part-time staff (\$22,504); travel for the two project leads to three national conferences (\$9,000); supplies and materials (\$5,000); contracted costs for the program partner, a curriculum designer, and web developer (\$135,000); and advertising/marketing to promote the project products (\$5,000). The budget also includes IDC (\$18,917), at a de minimis rate of 10 percent and exclusive of travel and contracted costs in excess of \$25,000.