

Narrative

Project Justification

The library profession is disproportionately white: In 2021, only [7.1% of librarians in the U.S. were Black, whereas 87% of librarians were white](#). The absence of nonwhite librarians results in the perpetuation of trauma that negatively affects the experiences of Black professionals working in these spaces. Substantial research has documented recurring problems: tokenism in hiring practices, racial microaggressions, isolation, exclusionary attitudes, resistance to change, and repetitive cycles of staff turnover (Brown 2015, Gilbert 2016). Black librarians and archivists often find themselves facing both direct and indirect acts of racism, including pressures to remove works by BIPOC authors through political attacks on critical race theory and African American studies as a discipline. More work needs to be done to retain and support Black librarians, many of whom feel that they are being forced out of a field they love and away from the communities to which they have dedicated their lives (Andrade and Rivera 2011, Kendrick 2017, Anthym and Tuit 2019). Under isolating and often hostile working conditions, it is imperative that Black librarians “[build connections and other networks with other Black librarians](#)” (Pottiger 2022).

CLIR proposes a program that would create such a network: a *safe space* for Black librarians to come together to process these challenges—to heal and support one another through dialogue, mentorship, and cultural immersion—without fear of retaliation. The program would also serve as an incubator to help Black library workers develop and augment programs to support equity in their home communities. Modeled on approaches to sustaining community development through trust-based social networks and [collective leadership](#), the program, *Safe Spaces for Cultural Heritage*, aims to inspire organizational change across the field of librarianship by connecting, empowering, and amplifying the voices of Black librarians. Program participants would share honest lessons that can be expressed only with the backing of collective lived experience. They would also develop small-scale solutions for promoting community equity that can be models for others in the field.

This project seeks to address Objective 3.1 of the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program, under Goal 3: “Enhance the training and professional development of the library and archival workforce to meet the needs of their communities.”

Objective	Alignment with project
<p><i>3.1: Develop training to equip the library and archival workforce to engage in sustained community development.</i></p>	<p>This is a leadership development program rooted in a small, trusting professional community of Black librarians. It equips Black librarians with tools to navigate the professional landscape and begin to heal after professional trauma. It promotes organizational change through collective action, microgrant projects, and a public report documenting insights shared by participants throughout the program.</p>

The group most affected by the proposed project comprises the 20 selected participants. They would include nominated and self-nominated Black librarians, archivists, data management specialists, and support staff currently employed at academic, public, or independent libraries or archives. Experience levels would range from early to late career. Participants would commit to participating in a three-day workshop in summer 2024 and to undertake small community-equity initiatives in 2024-25, developed during that convening. Bringing together this cross section of professionals would afford an opportunity for wide-ranging conversations based on experience, historical knowledge, and new trends.

Additional beneficiaries will include:

- Five facilitators, who would share their expertise in Black studies, librarianship, and healing from racial trauma as they guide participants through the workshop;
- community members, who would benefit from the equity projects designed by participants;
- library professionals, who would listen to and learn from the lessons and experiences that participants choose to share in the project’s final public report.

By addressing the unacknowledged traumas of Black library workers and creating a safe space where they can heal and strategize, the program will be a meaningful step toward cultivating a future library workforce that is more inclusive, healthy, and empowered to serve rapidly diversifying communities.

The creation of the safe spaces program is inspired by [recent research](#) documenting the negative consequences of job-related trauma experienced by BIPOC library workers (Urban Library Trauma Study 2022, Alabi 2015, Riley-Reid 2017). These kinds of trauma will persist so long as the library workforce remains predominantly white, and so long as racial harms in the library workplace remain poorly understood and are not addressed. If today’s libraries fail to grow and retain nonwhite staff members, there are profound implications for the profession’s relevance and ability to serve U.S. communities.

The purpose of Safe Spaces for Cultural Heritage is to create a replicable model for healing those who have been harmed by workplace trauma, and starting to build a network of support that can promote ongoing healing while spreading awareness of the need to address inequities within library organizations and their communities. The program's design is inspired by the work of scholars such as Jaena Alabi, Michelle Caswell, and others who have documented the experiences of minority library workers and identified necessary changes in practice (Alabi 2015a, Alabi 2015b, Caswell 2016, Caswell and Brilmyer 2017), along with [recent research and explorations into healing from racial trauma](#) (Comas-Diaz, Hall, and Neville 2019, Blackwell and Hemphill 2022). While awareness of the persistent diversity problem in the library profession has grown in recent decades and numerous programs to attract nonwhite candidates have helped to bring talented new BIPOC professionals into libraries, few projects have been implemented to facilitate healing from racial trauma in the library workplace. Safe Spaces has been designed to build upon previous efforts to improve inclusive cultures in libraries. It incorporates documented approaches to healing in an experimental program customized for a small group of Black library workers by leaders with significant expertise in librarianship, Black studies, racial trauma and healing, and library community engagement.

Project Work Plan

Safe Spaces is designed to move Black librarians from siloed experiences of workplace trauma, fatigue, and attrition into a path of healing, empowerment, communal networking, and retention. The program would be an asset that participants can share with their organizations, to create increased equity policies, trauma-informed decision-making, and recruitment and retention of Black librarian professionals. CLIR proposes to host a workshop for Black library workers in the summer of 2024 that would include 20 participants, five facilitators, and a digital journalist to document the experience and record testimonials from participants. The workshop will be held in a culturally and historically significant place where Black librarians can heal through a [practice](#) known as "[Sankofa](#)": going back to find things from the past that have relevance to the future. This grant will support the planning, implementation, and documentation of the workshop participants' experiences, enabling future library and cultural-heritage leaders to adapt the program for other groups, including Indigenous library workers and those from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds poorly represented in the library workforce.

The project would be managed by CLIR Program Officer Sharon M. Burney, working closely with CLIR Communications Manager Dr. Stacey Patton, a digital journalist and historian whose work focuses on African American history, who would lead documentation and assessment for the program. HBCU Library Alliance Executive Director Sandra Phoenix, as part of [CLIR's formal partnership with the HBCU Library Alliance](#), will act in an advisory capacity. They would meet monthly with the facilitation team, which would comprise five national leaders with relevant personal and professional expertise. They have agreed to work together to plan and facilitate the Safe Spaces program throughout the grant term:

Ms. Mari Carpenter is director of interpretation and historic research at the Conner Prairie Museum in Fishers, Ind. She brings expertise in African American special collections, community engagement, public programming, and the impacts of trauma.

Dr. Stephanie Evans is a professor and director of the Institute for Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Georgia State University, and on the affiliate faculty in the department of African American Studies and Center for the Study of Stress, Trauma and Resilience there. She brings expertise in mental health, wellness, social justice, empowerment education, African American autobiography and memoir (themes: yoga, mental health, travel, social justice), community engagement, service, service learning, and community-based research.

Dr. Porchia Moore is an assistant professor in the department of museum studies of the School of Art and Art History at the University of Florida. A native of Charleston, S.C., who identifies as Gullah, Dr. Moore brings both local expertise and deep knowledge of critical race theory, cultural-heritage practices, and inclusive praxis in cultural-heritage spaces.

Ms. Monika Rhue, MLIS, is project manager at UCLA's Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies. An experienced library leader who was formerly the chair of the HBCU Library Alliance board, Ms. Rhue brings expertise in academic library and archival practice, collaboration, mentoring, storytelling, and meditation.

Dr. Synatra Smith is a postdoctoral fellow in data curation for African American and African studies at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and at the Temple University Libraries. She brings expertise in community project design, academic-library practice, independent-museum practice, digital scholarship.

Together, these five facilitators will:

- plan the workshop;
- organize the nomination and selection of participants;
- lead the workshop and six follow-up online check-in sessions for the selected participants;
- advise participants on crafting and implementing small projects designed to advance community equity; and
- document lessons, insights, and models surfaced through the project in a final public report.

Participants in the workshop will be selected following a targeted call for nominations and self-nominations to be designed by the facilitators. The call will be circulated among groups already engaged with Black library workers, including the [Joint Council of Librarians of Color](#) and the [Black Caucus of the American Library Association](#). To be considered for participation, nominees will be required to propose at least one idea for a small project they can undertake that would advance equity within a community their organization currently serves.

The community-equity project guidelines will be established by the facilitation team and provided to aspiring participants. The projects will center on actions, events, resources, or creative works that address current needs in specific communities within and around library organizations. For example, participants may propose to organize a community event for Black

History Month, purchase technology to empower community members to document local history, present a special edition on their experience for library journals or conferences, or host a panel discussion that explores strategies for addressing community concerns.

The facilitators will select 20 participants from among the nominees, keeping the following criteria in mind:

- No more than one employee of a single organization may participate;
- Selected participants will represent a diversity of types and sizes of libraries and archives;
- Selected participants will represent a diversity of geographic regions across the U.S.;
- Selected participants will represent a variety of career stages;
- Selected participants should currently hold a range of different types of roles (public services, technical services, special collections and archives, administration, etc.);
- Selected participants will commit to protecting the confidentiality of other participants; to taking approaches to reflective practice and self-care that may be new to them; and to creating a mutually supportive environment in all program activities; and
- Selected participants will propose creative, practical, and potentially replicable ideas for advancing community equity through small projects (up to \$3,000).

Facilitators will orient participants before the workshop by having them complete an anonymous survey prompting them to reflect upon their experiences of workplace trauma. Findings from the survey will help inform the design of workshop discussions and establish a baseline to which follow-up survey results can be compared in the final program assessment.

The workshop will be held over two and a half days in August 2024. While the details of the agenda will be determined by the facilitators and customized to the needs and interests of the participants expressed in their nomination forms and survey responses, the schedule will proceed roughly as follows:

Each day will offer mentorship, idea exchange, training, healing, and cultural immersion. Throughout, facilitators will guide the conversations, teach relevant skills, and help to foster trusting connections among participants, working with the support of local cultural experts and a professional therapist. On the first afternoon, facilitators will welcome participants and guide them through exercises that encourage finding community in one another. The second day's discussions and activities will introduce approaches to healing from trauma including talk therapy as well as modalities such as yoga and other mindfulness exercises, journaling, art and creative expression, music therapy, and outdoor activities. The final day will focus on articulating solutions for building more equitable communities at home. Facilitators will guide participants through refining their proposal for community-equity projects. Participants will have the option to adjust their plans so that they can pool funds and partner with others in the program on larger, collaborative projects. At the conclusion, participants will consider how they can bring the lessons and support cultivated at the workshop back to their workplaces and home communities. Participants will have the option to share their reflections and new insights by

recording video testimonials. If participants grant permission, these testimonials may be publicly shared on the program's web pages or within the final project report.

Charleston, S.C., was selected as the location for the workshop because of the important role it has played in African American history as a major seaport city for the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Built two and a half centuries ago on the scarred and sweating backs of enslaved Africans, Charleston is a city where the spirits and ancestors beckon to be heard in the middle of the modern worship of money, gentrification, and the region's brutal history of racial terrorism. Sullivan's Island, off the coast of Charleston, is known by many as the Ellis Island for Black Americans; and it is estimated that more than half of Black people in the U.S. have ancestors who came through during the transatlantic slave trade. This region is also home to the Gullah Geechee people, a community descended from formerly enslaved people who escaped and have held onto the heritage and many of the traditions from Africa.

Charleston offers a place where participants can heal trauma by "[going back to face what has been forgotten](#)," to paraphrase the Twi (Ghanaian) language proverb: "It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten.

"Experiences of shared cultural immersion—including histories of shared trauma—can be helpful to healing by acknowledging the historical roots and ongoing nature of race-based trauma alongside traditional coping strategies and resilience (Comas-Díaz, Hall & Neville 2019). One of the facilitators, Dr. Porchia Moore, identifies as Gullah, and will work with us to create authentic cultural experiences for participants who support the local community. Proposed activities may include stories by a Gullah griot, a sweetgrass-weaving tutorial, and an African-dance session. Vendors and caterers serving local cuisine will be carefully selected to support Gullah and Black-owned businesses serving local cuisine. Participants will also visit at least one historically important local site, such as the Mother Emanuel AME Church, the Avery Research Center, or Sullivan's Island.

After the last session, participants will be prompted to complete brief reports about their projects and a survey about their experiences with the program. Upon returning home, the group will participate in six online check-in sessions over the course of the following year to support one another's projects and professional lives.

Timeline and Activities:

Project start: August 1, 2023

Project end: December 1, 2025

Phase One: Planning and Recruitment (August 2023-early August 2024)

Q1

- Project managers orient the five facilitators to the program and commit to dates and location for the August 2024 workshop.
- Facilitators craft call for nominations, nomination form, and targeted marketing plan.

- Facilitators draft initial workshop agenda and identify tasks necessary for making local arrangements for the workshop.

Q2

- Project managers prepare notification messages and logistical advice for participants.
- Facilitators monitor nominations and refine criteria for selection of participants.
- Facilitators refine workshop agenda and prepare orientation materials and pre-workshop survey for participants.
- Project managers launch call for nominations, address questions from interested nominees, and make logistical arrangements for the workshop.
- Facilitators establish reporting requirements for microgrant projects.

Q3

- Facilitators review nominations and select 20 participants.
- Project managers notify selected participants and provide logistical support for travel arrangements, approving payments and reimbursements as needed.
- Project managers launch email discussion list for program participants.
- Project managers finalize workshop logistical arrangements.
- Facilitators orient selected participants and administer pre-workshop survey.

Q4

- Facilitators finalize workshop agenda in accordance with survey results.
- Facilitators schedule post-workshop check-in sessions, confirming dates with participants.

Phase Two: Workshop (mid-August 2024)

- Participants, facilitators, and staff travel to Charleston, S.C. for workshop.
- Participants and facilitators document workshop experiences and insights in (on-site optional) recorded interviews.
- Participants develop community-equity projects

Phase Three: Post-Workshop Check-Ins and Participant Projects (late August 2024-September 2025)

- Project managers make logistical arrangements for bi-monthly online group check-in sessions for facilitators and participants and for final participant survey.
- Project managers and facilitators outline final project report.
- Facilitators plan and lead bi-monthly online group check-in sessions; later sessions include participant reports on community-equity projects.
- Facilitators advise participants on project work.
- Participants undertake small community-equity projects as planned in Phase Two
- Facilitators design final participant survey.

Phase Four: Documentation and Assessment (August-November 2025)

- Participants complete final survey.

- Facilitators draft and publish final public report.
- Project managers prepare final report for IMLS.

Note: Phases are organized by activity type, and some overlap in timing does intentionally occur.

Diversity Plan

Racial equity, through healing and empowerment, is the core purpose of this proposal. Intentionality to eliminate hidden barriers is prevalent in every aspect of the program. The creation of action-based workshops and solutions provide a counternarrative of performance-based equity initiatives, which rarely address the trauma faced by Black librarian professionals. Core program staff, facilitators, and participants will all be Black, and grants awarded will support equity in communities across the US. Recognizing the ongoing threat of land, culture and the peoples of the Gullah Geechee Corridor, preference will be given to utilize Black and Gullah-owned businesses and vendors during our weekend workshops. Intentionally investing in the Gullah Geechee vendors is crucial, as they are the last people who have maintained and retained their language, culture, and heritage, in an area that is being rapidly gentrified. Connecting these memory keepers, cultural workers and librarians will create vast possibilities of engagement, education and equity project ideas.

This program was conceived of by Black librarians and cultural workers. Black facilitators and staff will plan and execute the substantive and logistical arrangements for the meetings. As April Hathcock notes in “White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS”: “Our diversity programs do not work because they are themselves coded to promote whiteness as the norm in the profession and unduly burden those individuals they are most intended to help.” We are elated to continue building upon our ongoing relationship with the HBCU Library Alliance, and to create new networks and relationships with all proposed facilitators and participants. With advisory guidance from the HBCU Library Alliance and the strong intellectual background of the proposed facilitators, we will carefully consider the program’s approach to recruitment and nomination, mentorship, and community-building in order to honor the work of those practitioners who are already “bringing true diversity and anti-racist practice to the profession” (Hathcock 2015). White LIS normative professional best practices will not be the norm in this program, and CLIR sees its financial and administrative service role as an opportunity to listen, learn, contribute equitably, and engage humbly and authentically.

CLIR as an organization also speaks to white and non-Black BIPOC librarians, so lessons learned from this experience can be shared with other communities to help retain and improve experiences for Black librarians across the field. If successful, this program will serve as a template for how the library profession can move beyond performative statements about racial diversity and equity into actionable and sustainable systemic change within these spaces.

Project Results

The most significant results of the Safe Spaces for Cultural Heritage program will be the network of mutual support built among its participants and the outcomes of the community equity

projects they plan and create together. Through their collective experience at the workshop and following discussions, participants will learn skills in trauma-informed decision making that they can apply in their personal and professional lives. Healing from racial trauma is a continuing, lifelong process, and all BIPOC library workers can benefit from developing these skills with the support of trust-based networks of peers who are also committed to life-long healing.

Project managers and facilitators will make program resources publicly accessible to the greatest extent possible, in the interest of creating a replicable model that can be adapted by others. However, because the fundamental purpose of the program is to create an opportunity for healing in an environment of safety, all public communications about the program will be carefully vetted by the program managers and facilitators, to eliminate risk of potential harm to participants. No identifying information about the personal experiences of any individual participant will be shared publicly without review and consent from that individual. The pre- and post-program surveys will be completed anonymously by participants and analyzed in aggregate. Participants, facilitators, and program managers will be advised not to communicate about their experiences during the program on social media without obtaining permission from others who might be affected. At the same time, participants will be encouraged to document their private experiences through journaling and to share insights and lessons learned to the extent they are comfortable in recorded interviews at the workshop.

Program managers and facilitators will analyze data from pre- and post-program participant surveys and from participants' final project reports to assess the program's effectiveness. The final participant survey will solicit suggestions for refinements to the model, and these suggestions will be compiled for the final project report. Following the conclusion of the grant term, participants and facilitators will be encouraged to seek opportunities to speak publicly in a general way about the program, reflecting upon its viability as a model for others. Events such as the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) annual meeting and conference, the Digital Library Federation (DLF) Forum, and the HBCU Library Alliance bi-annual meeting are potentially receptive venues. Participants will also be encouraged to reflect on their experiences in podcasts and publications.

Project Dates: August 1, 2023–December 1, 2025

Schedule of Completion

PROJECT TITLE: Safe Spaces for Cultural Heritage

PROJECT DIRECTOR: Sharon M. Burney

PHASE	ACTIVITY	YEAR 1												YEAR 2			
		Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	
Phase 1: Planning and Recruitment	Project managers orient the five facilitators to the program and commit to dates and location for the August 2024 workshop	█															
	Facilitators craft call for nominations, nomination form, and targeted marketing plan	█	█														
	Facilitators draft initial workshop agenda and identify tasks necessary for making local arrangements for the workshop		█	█	█												
	Project managers prepare notification messages and logistical advice for participants				█	█	█										
	Facilitators monitor nominations and refine criteria for selection of participants					█	█	█									
	Facilitators refine workshop agenda and prepare orientation materials and pre-workshop survey for participants						█	█									
	Project managers launch call for nominations, address questions from interested nominees, and make logistical arrangements for the workshop							█	█								
	Facilitators establish reporting requirements for microgrant projects								█								
	Facilitators review nominations and select 20 participants									█							
	Project managers notify selected participants and provide logistical support for travel arrangements, approving payments and reimbursements as needed										█	█	█	█	█	█	
	Project managers launch email discussion list for program participants											█	█				
	Project managers finalize workshop logistical arrangements												█	█			
	Facilitators orient selected participants and administer pre-workshop survey													█	█		
	Facilitators finalize workshop agenda in accordance with survey results														█	█	
	Facilitators schedule post-workshop check-in sessions, confirming dates with participants															█	

Schedule of Completion

PROJECT TITLE: Safe Spaces for Cultural Heritage

PROJECT DIRECTOR: Sharon M. Burney

PHASE	ACTIVITY	YEAR 2												YEAR 3				
		Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Phase 2: Workshop	Participants, facilitators, and staff travel to Charleston, S.C. for workshop																	
	Participants and facilitators document workshop experiences and insights in (on-site optional) recorded interviews																	
	Participants develop community-equity projects																	
Phase 3: Post-Workshop Check-Ins and Participant Projects	Project managers make logistical arrangements for bi-monthly online group check-in sessions for facilitators and participants and for final participant survey																	
	Project managers and facilitators outline final project report																	
	Facilitators plan and lead bi-monthly online group check-in sessions; later sessions include participant reports on community-equity projects																	
	Facilitators advise participants on project work																	
	Participants undertake small community-equity projects as planned in Phase Two																	
Facilitators design final participant survey																		
Phase 4: Documentation and Assessment	Participants complete final survey																	
	Facilitators draft and publish final public report																	
	Project managers prepare final report for IMLS																	

Digital Products Plan

Type

Safe Spaces for Cultural Heritage will produce the following digital products: press releases, video testimonials from participants which will be embedded into an interactive storymap, and new web pages with program-related content. The participants' community-equity projects will contain a mix of digital products such as short reports, user guides, blog posts, special editions for library journals, or recorded interviews. Because those projects are designed during the program and workshops, the specific types of digital outputs that will be created are not yet defined.

Availability

Content will be available on a dedicated website linked with CLIR's main website, www.clir.org. Press releases will be published on the project website. Video testimonials will be hosted on YouTube.com, where they can be easily discovered, and linked to from the project website.

Access

The digital products created for the Safe Spaces for Cultural Heritage program will be available for re-use under a [Creative Commons BY SA 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/). Any personal or sensitive information will not be shared without first notifying and consulting those impacted or referenced.

Sustainability

CLIR will keep the information available online for a minimum of three years beyond the conclusion of the grant.



Organizational Profile

The Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) is an independent, nonprofit organization whose mission is to forge strategies to enhance research, teaching, and learning environments in collaboration with libraries, cultural institutions, and communities of higher learning.¹

CLIR promotes forward-looking collaborative solutions that transcend disciplinary, institutional, professional, and geographic boundaries in support of the public good. In pursuing its mission, CLIR is committed to building trust, retaining independence, fostering collaboration, cultivating effective leadership, and capitalizing on strategic opportunities.

CLIR has formed collaborative partnerships with libraries, cultural institutions, and associations of higher learning to:

- catalog, digitize, preserve, and “un-hide” hundreds of valuable rare and special collections across the United States and Canada that otherwise would remain out of sight and inaccessible (our *Hidden Collections* and *Recordings at Risk* regranting programs),
- federate and make freely accessible data about collections related to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, regardless of where in the world they are held (the *Digital Library of the Middle East*, created in partnership with Stanford Libraries and numerous partners in the MENA region),
- train an emerging profession in service to advanced research (postdoctoral fellows funded by the Sloan Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, and numerous universities and cultural heritage organizations), and
- mentor a growing cohort of future leaders (through the Leading Change Institute, jointly hosted by CLIR and EDUCAUSE).

Base of Support. CLIR receives program and project funding from private foundations, organizations, and federal agencies, including IMLS. Vital to CLIR’s funding base and credibility are the annual fees that CLIR collects from its sponsors who represent more than 200 institutions, ranging from the nation’s largest research libraries to small liberal arts college libraries and cultural heritage institutions.

Brief History. CLIR was created in 1997 through the merger of the Council on Library Resources (formed in 1956) and the Commission on Preservation and Access (formed in 1986). Building on the experience and strengths of its predecessors, CLIR aimed to serve as a catalytic, convening organization that engages the best minds to address important issues of national and international concern. From the start, CLIR has brought together disparate organizations and individuals to resolve deep-seated problems facing the library and cultural heritage communities. More on CLIR’s history is available at <http://www.clir.org/about/history>.

¹ “About Us,” www.clir.org/about. Mission, vision, and values statements approved by CLIR Board in 2011 and refreshed and reaffirmed in 2022. Accessed February 23, 2023.