

ALA American Library Association



Library Programs and New Americans

A WHITE PAPER



An oral history event in Fort Worth, Tex.

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PREFACE

When immigrants, refugees, and displaced persons first arrive in the United States they frequently turn to public libraries for free and trusted services. More than [55 percent of new Americans](#) use their public library at least once a week, according to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), to access English language learning classes, citizenship and civic educational programs, and a vital support network.

Public library responses to the needs of these patrons vary widely across the country due to factors such as budgetary constraints, shifting populations, and local priorities. While some successful case studies have been observed, currently there are no field-wide best practices to assist public libraries in serving the unique needs of new Americans. This is a critical gap in library practice that needs to be addressed as immigration numbers continue to grow. According to the Migration Policy Institute, [1.38 million foreign-born people](#) moved to the United States in 2015, an increase of 2 percent over the prior year. Public libraries, and the new Americans they serve, need a plan that properly positions libraries to meet the challenges of our nation's shifting demographics and ensure equity for all.

Addressing the singular needs of new Americans meshes with the public library field's commitment to treating patrons with dignity and respect. US public libraries have a long history of service to immigrants, dating back to the nineteenth century when immigrant populations began [contributing content to library collections](#) in their native languages. The American Library Association stated its support for immigrant rights in a [January 2007 Council resolution](#):

"The American Library Association (ALA) promotes equal access to information for all persons and recognizes the ongoing need to increase awareness of and responsiveness to the diversity of the communities we serve . . . ALA strongly supports the protection of each person's civil liberties, regardless of that individual's nationality, residency, or status . . . ALA opposes any legislation that infringes on the rights of anyone in the USA or its



A literacy program at Edwin A. Bemis Public Library in Littleton, Colo.

territories, citizens or otherwise, to use library resources, programs, and services on national, state, and local levels."

ALA's leaders and its members are firmly committed to standing up for the rights of new Americans and have been vocal in their support for these populations. On September 5, 2017, ALA President Jim Neal [released a statement](#) condemning the proposed end to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, stating, "Our nation's libraries serve all community members, including immigrants, offering services and educational resources that transform communities, open minds, and promote inclusion and diversity." The association's commitment to serving and supporting immigrants has only strengthened in light of the current political climate.

ALA and its divisions have responded to this need by developing a variety of support materials to assist libraries in reaching their immigrant patrons, including [webinars](#) and [resources for immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers](#). However, ALA has not yet undertaken a comprehensive approach toward developing a set of best practices, nor have we endeavored to start a national conversation about library services to new Americans, until now. We hope this white paper feeds the discussion and advances the public library field's work to support the needs of immigrants, refugees, and displaced persons in their local communities.

Melanie Welch

PROJECT DIRECTOR
ALA PUBLIC PROGRAMS OFFICE

INTRODUCTION

Libraries have long had a reputation for supporting healthy communities by providing a range of programs, services, and reference and educational materials. Service to new American populations is an important part of this work, and recently the American Library Association (ALA) has taken decisive steps toward supporting immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers arriving in the US. The ALA Bill of Rights states that a person's "right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views."¹

Over 43 million immigrants live in the US, making up about 13% of the nation's population.² New Americans commonly rely on local libraries for a wide range of services—and have done so for decades. At libraries, new Americans learn about local culture, find assistance in job seeking, learn about financial systems in their new country, seek support in obtaining citizenship, learn English, and more. Indeed, "outreach to immigrants through public libraries dates back at least to the World War I era."³ According to ALA's *American Libraries* magazine, "service to immigrant populations is an increasingly important part of the library's mission, as refugees or displaced persons are relocated in the United States and Europe, sometimes in places reluctant to have them."⁴

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) notes that new Americans find in public libraries "a trusted environment, resources, and community connections that can ease the way to full participation in American society."⁵ Libraries offer a place where dominant communities and those who traditionally have less social or political power can meet on more or less equal

footing—and in these encounters different cultures can refashion the library to fit their needs. With libraries, new Americans have the opportunity to both learn about American culture and systems, and at the same time inform the established community about their own cultures.⁶

Developing services for new Americans gives libraries an opening for collaboration with local organizations that have a common vision for education, civic discourse, safety, and health and wellness. Through these partnerships, libraries across the country are expanding new American programming and building patrons' confidence in using local resources in their new communities.

PROJECT WELCOME

Project Welcome is one of ALA's larger efforts, with its Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services working in partnership with the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the IMLS. Project Welcome assesses current resources in libraries, ensuring "that all are welcomed by and in libraries."⁷ Through a summit involving 70 members of the library community, Project Welcome developed a guide, titled *Project Welcome Guide: Public Libraries Serving Immigrants*, to ensure that libraries across the nation possess the resources to best serve refugees and asylum seekers in the US throughout their resettlement and integration.

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1. Michael Dowling, "Project Welcome." *American Libraries Magazine*. Accessed: August 15 2018. <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2017/09/22/project-welcome-refugees/>.
 2. Gustavo Lopez & Jynnah Radford, "Facts on US Immigrants, 2015: Statistical portrait of the foreign-born population in the United States." Accessed: August 15 2018. Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2017/05/03/facts-on-u-s-immigrants-current-data/>.
 3. Susan K. Burke, "Use of Public Libraries by Immigrants." *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, 48(2), 164–74.
 4. George M. Eberhart, "Immigrants and the Library." *American Libraries Magazine*. Accessed Aug 2018. <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/immigrants-and-the-library/>.
 5. The statistics on new Americans cited here come from sources that define the term differently and, in many cases, leave the definition implicit. As such, we present these statistics for general breadth and depth but are unable to comment on the comparability of statistics from different sources. Institute of Museum and Library Services, "Serving New Americans." Accessed: August 15 2018. <https://www.imls.gov/issues/national-initiatives/serving-new-americans>.
 6. James K. Elmborg, "Libraries as the Space Between Us: Recognizing and Valuing the Third Space." *Reference and User Service Quarterly*, American Library Association 5, no. 4 (2011): 339–50.
 7. Dowling, "Project Welcome."

ALA'S NEW AMERICANS LIBRARY PROJECT

In 2018, with support from The JPB Foundation, the ALA Public Programs Office convened an exploration of public library programs and services that support new American populations. The New Americans Library Project explored the landscape of literature and resources about library services for new Americans, studied how libraries can more effectively serve new Americans, and made recommendations about this topic for the library field.

As the research partner, New Knowledge Organization Ltd. conducted a landscape review of current library practices and offerings across a wide variety of geographic regions, community types, and partnership models. With input from ALA and project advisors, researchers collected information about dozens of library public programs in the US and abroad, as well as information from research and other perspectives that might benefit this initiative.

Following this review, researchers conducted site visits at six public libraries in five cities, where they spoke with new American patrons, as well as library and community partner organization staff. The five cities represented a wide range of characteristics and demographics, including rural, suburban, and urban



A Hispanic Heritage Festival at Somerset County (N.J.) Library System

areas across different regions in the US, with diverse immigrant populations, cultures, and languages.

Finally, project advisors convened at a workshop to identify the key topics contained in this white paper and make recommendations to the library field.

THIS WHITE PAPER

This white paper provides a synthesis of the project to help library professionals understand opportunities for libraries' work with new Americans. The paper includes two parts. First, an overview of research and findings summarizes the most salient themes uncovered in the landscape review and site visits. Second, we offer a list of actionable recommendations for libraries.

PART 1. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

WHO ARE NEW AMERICANS?

For this white paper, the term “new Americans” encompasses people who might consider themselves new arrivals in the US and anyone who is a non-native English language speaker. New Americans might be immigrants, refugees, or temporary or long-term visitors. New Americans may be here with or without legal documentation. New Americans might be born

here to immigrants or have newly arrived themselves. New Americans may come from any place, including countries that are affluent and those that are under-resourced.

We use this inclusive definition because there is no consensus around the definition for “new Americans.” Some federal agencies determine a specific amount of time, such as the last 15 years, while other agencies use relative terms like “recently arrived”—though some

might consider themselves new Americans even if they arrived in the United States 30 years ago. Some libraries prefer to use specific terms that reflect the experience of an individual, like “immigrant” or “refugee,” though there are concerns about stigma surrounding those words. For some, the word “American” is confusing, since any person from Central or South America also identifies as American.

HOW DO PUBLIC LIBRARIES SERVE NEW AMERICANS?

Here we explore what we know about current practices in new American services, particularly those designed to uniquely serve new Americans. The libraries we visited offer an assortment of programs and services specifically for new Americans, addressing myriad needs.

Libraries design these services to address multiple needs at the same time. We witnessed multifaceted programming approaches during the site visits, where, for example, one library hosted cross-cultural luncheons where people from a certain national or ethnic group provided traditional food. This library also offered collections in other languages, foreign film screenings, a series of easy-to-read news articles titled “news for you,” and free museum passes. Other libraries housed a “New Americans Initiative” that offers guardianship workshops, housing rights help sessions, access to financial coaches, small business workshops, and citizenship resources. According to the libraries we visited, the primary programs used by new Americans fall into the following categories: English language acquisition and education, citizenship preparation, and digital literacy. Spanning all of these services is libraries’ commitment to ensuring access to new Americans.

However, it should be noted that new Americans take advantage of many other library programs and resources not necessarily designed for them as a primary audience. Services like notarization, multilingual collections, providing space for cultural groups to meet or host events, small business support or other

financial skill-building services, and “welcome corners” (providing information necessary for integrating into a new community like transportation, taxes, and legal services aside from citizenship resources) are all examples of resources available to and frequently utilized by new Americans while not being advertised specifically for them.

English Language Acquisition and Education

A central aspiration for many new Americans is to speak English proficiently and with the confidence to interact with native speakers. Between 2009 and 2013, the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey found that over 25 million people in the country speak English *less* than very well and over 60 million people speak a language other than English at home.⁸

In response to this need, libraries provide English language learning (ELL) opportunities. In fact, ELL was the most frequently mentioned service overall among the libraries we visited. There are different approaches to English language teaching; some courses focus on building from the basics of grammar and vocabulary, while others attend to English in special settings, like doctor’s appointments. Recognizing the pragmatic needs of English language learners, some libraries offer English conversation opportunities.

Moreover, English language learners who turn to public libraries for support are a diverse group, and developing programs that accommodate a variety of



A financial literacy program for Burmese speakers at Lakewood (Ohio) Public Library

8. US Census Bureau, “Detailed Languages Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over: 2009–2013.” Accessed: August 15, 2018. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2013/demo/2009-2013-lang-tables.html>.



Children at the Anaheim (Calif.) Public Library

learning groups is imperative for libraries. Libraries meet this need by creating developmentally appropriate language programs for children up to adults. Some programs incorporate bilingual education, in both English and another language, and others are geared toward straightforward ELL lessons. Libraries may also partner with local schools and school libraries, leveraging local expertise in education and access to students who have not been raised in English-speaking households.

The site visits illuminated the creative formats language learning services can take. These programs feature drop-in conversation practice, writing classes, traditional language classes held twice a week, and classes centered on the English component of the citizenship exam. Libraries also provide other classes that indirectly supported ELL. Topics of those programs include financial and business courses (e.g., using Excel, job interviews, and résumé writing) as well as other skill-building classes (e.g. yoga, stress management, and conflict prevention). Unlike general ELL courses, these other offerings require a baseline level of English competency and continue building speaking abilities along with other new skills.

Understanding the needs of the new Americans in a community is an important factor in considering the

type of ELL programming libraries should offer, for many reasons. Successful programs adapt to changing cultural demographics of the community and emphasize the empowerment of local people.⁹ First, new American communities' needs fluctuate over time; for example, one community might begin with a widespread need for basic English skills and eventually shift to a greater need for specialized or industry-specific English language skills. Second, learning a specific populations' language aspirations can reduce overlap with and complement other language learning opportunities that are available.

Citizenship Preparation

Recent studies show that 7% of the United States population are not citizens,¹⁰ and over 11 million undocumented immigrants live in the country.¹¹ Not surprisingly, citizenship is on the minds of many of these individuals, but not all; other options for legal documentation status include immigrant visas, work visas, and green cards that can be sought in advance or in place of seeking full citizenship.

Obtaining citizenship is often a drawn-out process, with the length of time depending on personal circumstances and factors beyond one's control, like national politics. On top of it all, the process of obtaining US citizenship can feel intimidating and confusing for individuals, families, and entire communities. According to one report, "*many immigrants hope to naturalize someday, but do not have access to the instruction and application support they require in order to succeed.*"¹²

While many libraries provide resources about citizenship, the exact role libraries can and should play in assisting with exam preparation or legal support is still up for debate. The best guidance that libraries can give will take into account the social and emotional

9. April Witteveen, "Word of Mouth- Language Learning." *Library Journal*. Accessed: August 15 2018. <https://www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=word-of-mouth-language-learning>.

10. Kaiser Family Foundation, "Population Distribution by Citizenship Status." Accessed: August 15 2018. <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/distribution-by-citizenship-status/>.

11. Jie Zong & Jeanne Batalova, "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigration in the United States." Migration Policy Institute. Accessed: August 15 2018. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states>.

12. Jeff Chenoweth & Laura Burdick, "Different Learners, Different Services, Preparing Immigrant Learners for Citizenship," in *A More Perfect Union: A National Citizenship Plan*. (Catholic Legal Immigration Service Inc: Washington DC, 2007).

concerns, alongside the logistical requirements that are part of the citizenship preparation process.

Currently, it seems there are many ways to find that balance. Library support for the learning activities surrounding the citizenship process are multifaceted, with many programs incorporating some form of preparation classes that help new Americans pass the federal examination. As described above, the citizenship exam training overlaps with ELL training. Good citizenship class instructors must be knowledgeable in best practices for ELL classes, with awareness of the teaching practices that will best support students working toward citizenship. Skilled instructors work toward not simply teaching students the basic history and government topics on the exam but also contextualizing this new information so students will find it relevant to their lives.

In the cities we visited, we found that libraries varied widely in how much they prioritize and how they design citizenship preparation services. At some libraries, citizenship classes are the centerpiece of new American programming. Other libraries serve populations less interested in citizenship, often because they do not plan to stay permanently in the United States. Citizenship programs took on diverse forms even within a single library system. Resources for becoming a citizen were available at all of one urban library's locations, but individual branches approached the citizenship preparation differently. Library staff at one location collaborate with community partner organizations to offer certified legal assistance and practice interviews to help students. Other branches have "New American Centers" offering free onsite immigration and naturalization services, including assistance with paperwork.

Digital Literacy

For new Americans to gain their footing in America economically, finding jobs and maintaining financial stability is vital. Many cannot attain this level of security until they have achieved basic digital literacy and have consistent access to the Internet. A lack of digital literacy can further marginalize community members,



A poetry event at Contra Costa County (Calif.) Library

limiting their ability to participate in our democracy, access educational opportunities, obtain health care, find and keep jobs, and connect with family and friends.¹³ Public libraries have historically been important places for people to pursue all of these activities and to find guidance to accomplish their goals for finding information.

Libraries certainly fill this role for new American communities. Digital literacy was among the most frequent types of desired skills we heard about from patrons and staff during the site visits. The scope of digital literacy classes varies widely from library to library. While some libraries offered more narrowly defined computer literacy services, at least one library taught classes about using technology in general, such as smart phones, printers, and the Internet. This library also used tablets in their citizenship classes, as much of the citizenship process takes place online, the exam is given on tablets, and learning a tablet interface would also ensure new Americans could access important information on another type of technology.

Ensuring Access to Programs

During site visits, library staff expressed particular concern with ensuring access to new American library programming—that is, creating circumstances where a wide range of patrons would have a reasonable opportunity to benefit from services. Like any programming designed with a specific audience in mind, library professionals must consider a range of factors when

13. Jill Castek, Kimberly D. Pendell, Gloria Jacobs, Drew Pizzolato, Elizabeth Withers, & Stephen Reder, "Volunteers in an adult literacy library program: Digital literacy acquisition case study." Accessed: August 15 2018. <http://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/16517>.

developing new American services. The structure of library programs is largely dependent on different components of access, such as patrons' ability to understand the language in which programs are conducted, convenient times and locations that match public transportation routes and schedules, the availability of childcare during programs, and conflicts with patrons' work schedules.

A flexible approach to scheduling new American programming is advantageous, as we heard at multiple locations that timing of library programs strongly influences who is able to attend. For many libraries, operating hours present a challenge, as those hours coincide with business hours for most jobs; many library staff wished they had the resources to hold night classes to mitigate this problem. Hosting programs outside library walls was another way of improving access. One location wanted to prioritize meeting patrons where they are and described plans to create satellite locations with books that were reflective of the cultures represented in different neighborhoods. In a similar vein, transportation presents additional challenges, as many cities and other areas lack affordable public transportation (or any at all). One library shared that for some events, they had the capacity to cover patrons' bus fares, but this strategy was not feasible for all programming.

Language barriers also frequently limited access to services. In response to these barriers, library staff at some sites shared examples of successful programs designed to have little dependency on spoken English, like juggling class, which allowed people with a variety of English capabilities to engage.

Sometimes, library services remain underutilized simply due to lack of awareness about what is being offered, perceptions of who a service is intended for, or other concerns. Libraries often struggle to reach their target audiences—this is true for programs in general but even more so when target audiences include those who face linguistic or cultural barriers. A constant refrain heard by programming librarians is *"Oh, I never knew the library did that!"* Citizenship courses can present an additional hurdle: patrons may not want to identify themselves as non-citizens out of safety concerns.¹⁴ Similar considerations may dissuade some new

Americans from signing up for a library card, as they perceive formal documentation of any sort as a threat.

HOW DO NEW AMERICANS EXPERIENCE LIBRARIES?

New Americans use libraries in the same ways as other patrons—for a wide range of reasons that change over time. At the sites we visited across the country, new Americans check out books, attend public programs, or bring children to a dedicated homework space after school. Some new American populations rely heavily on their library system to meet needs for language learning, citizenship resources, and more.

The relationship patrons have with their library also varied greatly, according to library staff. At one extreme, some new Americans call the library their "second home," while at the other extreme, some new American patrons had little sense of the resources these institutions provide. Generally, patrons we spoke with were grateful for the resources they can access at libraries, for a place to meet other people, share different cultural traditions, and for a space they could bring their children. However, some patrons were overwhelmed by navigating the resources available at the library and wanted a more organized way for information to be displayed.

Motivations and Expectations

New Americans use libraries in myriad ways to accomplish similarly varied goals. We heard at library sites that not all new Americans had the same ideas of "success" when it came to what they hoped to gain from engaging in library services. For instance, some groups might use libraries to get the skills they need to go to school and access higher education, while other groups might be more committed to learning how to sell something and run a small business. Moreover, these individuals may attend the same programs to achieve their different goals.

Like many other people, new Americans use libraries for social purposes. At some locations, patrons

14. Diana Miranda-Murillo, "New immigrants center at the Austin Public Library," *Texas Library Journal*. 182 (Winter 2006), 144-147.

told us that the library is important to *finding* a sense of community or belongingness, while at another location, we learned that most of the library users are already members of tight-knit groups. Those who have established social networks may use the library as a social place to meet up with their friends, as well as to acquire skills.

Family enrichment is a driving factor for many new Americans, according to patrons we spoke to during the site visits. Library programming for these populations must address the needs of multiple generations. Often the impetus for parents to come to the library is discovering programs that will benefit their kids, such as help with homework or access to textbooks. Once there, they become aware of additional programs that serve the needs of the family as a whole. Intergenerational programming can take various forms, such as an older generation passing on skills to their younger counterparts that might otherwise be lost, like their native language or cultural heritage. This skill-sharing works in the other direction as well. For instance, programs can connect younger people with older family or community members who want to learn English or digital skills. One advantage of intergenerational programming is that it eliminates the need for childcare. Often, parents or caregivers cannot attend programs if they have children, unless those children are also occupied and learning alongside the adults.

New American patrons have varied expectations of libraries. According to conversations we had during site visits, these expectations reflect a range of familiarity with libraries and library workers. Some patrons did not have access to libraries in their home country, and libraries serve different roles in different places. As a result, serving these populations requires libraries to communicate the role that libraries play in the United States. For instance, we heard from staff that new Americans occasionally conflate the concept of a library with notions of a bookstore. Similarly, some new Americans we spoke with were initially surprised to find out that library books and movies are free to use.

Many patrons first encounter a library through programs, which they learn about through word-of-mouth or because community partner organizations hold a class or event there. We observed that these situations often help new Americans find out that the

library offers resources or programs beyond what they originally came for. Even among those familiar with libraries, perceptions varied across different library sites. Some patrons see libraries as important places for people to gather in public, while others view them as potentially threatening due to their ambiguous affiliation with the government.

Interaction with Library Staff and Volunteers

Productive interactions among library staff are a key aspect of new Americans' experience at libraries and their ability to meet their objectives. Library personnel's identity, training, and approach to working with new Americans all influence these relationships.

Library personnel who reflect the population that the library serves can help new Americans leverage what the library has to offer. Staff who speak new Americans' language offer an obvious advantage, as they can deftly explain the intricacies of using library systems and programming. There is added benefit if staff are familiar with cultural norms, having the ability to anticipate and explain situations that may confuse or offend new Americans. According to the site visits, many libraries see hiring diverse staff as an area for further improvement.

Volunteers can play vital roles in new American programming, shoring up staff's limited capacity to offer services and sometimes contributing by leading programs themselves. As with all volunteer work, we saw in site visits that libraries need additional resources to make the best use of volunteers' time.

New Americans themselves can be just as involved as volunteers and staff, serving the needs of their own community and those of the library at the same time. At a site visit, one new American patron remarked that their peers are "*untapped resources*." We saw that new Americans' involvement in the work of the library takes many shapes, from teaching traditional cooking classes to translating mail for other patrons. Library staff observed that personnel from marginalized groups may face unique hurdles due to stereotyping from other members of the community. While this role of "cultural broker" may be challenging and not appealing for everyone, it can help counteract other patrons'



An oral history event in Fort Worth, Tex.

misconceptions about new Americans and lead to greater appreciation of groups that are new to a given location. In fact, libraries can formalize the role of “cultural liaison” in staffing, with a staff member from a new American community leading outreach at cultural and religious centers, as well as individual outreach to other new Americans who are not yet aware of or using library services. Libraries are already taking this approach in some cities, with success, particularly when it supports part of a library’s commitment to a strategic plan. But the cultural liaison position appears to be difficult to sustain due to budgetary constraints—not to mention funding to create this position may be completely out of reach for many libraries.

At multiple locations, we heard that establishing trust with an individual staff member kept new American patrons returning to the library, regardless of the background and identity of that individual. These relationships can be a crucial link to the library for new Americans. However, library staff have observed there is risk of some patrons becoming dependent on a single staff member. This situation can be magnified particularly when the staff member shares the same culture and speaks the same language as a new American patron.

Professional Development for Library Staff and Volunteers

Across site visits, library professionals advocated for professional development opportunities to build the skills of both staff and volunteers to effectively work with new American communities. Many of these skills are important for public programming in general. Skills that staff members saw as critical included:

- ▮ Volunteer management skills;
- ▮ A broad approach to collections management that includes community resources outside the library’s physical collections;
- ▮ Administrative and organizational skills, such as time management;
- ▮ The ability to gain buy-in from administration;
- ▮ Teaching skills; and
- ▮ Cultural competency, particularly with specific groups who use one’s library.

While these skills may be applicable across many libraries that provide new American programming, a one-size-fits-all approach to professional development is unlikely to work. Two types of differences among libraries determine the need for tailored training approaches.

First, libraries of different types and sizes have different needs. Large, well-funded libraries tend to have substantial professional development budgets and more time available for training, compared to smaller rural libraries that may only have one or two staff members. Libraries of different sizes may also have varying priorities, depending on the resources available. For instance, a small library with one computer might find computer-based technology training for all staff to be a low priority.

Second, libraries that serve different communities have unique needs. New American groups have a diverse range of cultures, aspirations, and goals. General cultural competency or inclusivity trainings often lack the details library workers feel they need to work with new Americans in their communities. In the site visits, we saw that library personnel highly value specific cultural knowledge. For instance, library staff have found it useful to understand how new American patrons at their library prefer to build rapport. Equipped with this information, library staff can build stronger connections and better serve their patrons.

For most libraries, communication may present one of—if not the—largest operational challenge in serving new Americans. This concern relates to sharing information across the library field about new American services: what has been done, what works well, what has failed, and special considerations for working with particular communities. Across the board, libraries in the site visits

voiced the need for a strategy for improving communication within individual library systems, between libraries and community partner organizations, and across the library field as a whole. Better communication, they hope, will help them improve services to new Americans without reinventing the wheel.

Training volunteers to work on new American programming presents unique considerations for libraries, particularly those where staff are looking to expand their ability to manage volunteers. Some libraries in our site visits require volunteers to take online courses on topics like ELL before bringing it all together in an in-person training. Other libraries who work with new American volunteers may find that they need to invest more time in learning the library systems that are not specifically related to working with a particular community.

The Need for—and Lack of— Consistent Evaluation

While libraries throughout the United States have developed programming to support new Americans, few of these initiatives have identified impact beyond outputs like circulation statistics, program attendance, and anecdotal evidence from individual patrons.

Library professionals, particularly those we spoke to during site visits, clearly understand the benefits of evaluation and want to increase their use of evaluation in new American programming. Evaluation can help libraries maintain or increase funding, understand the reasons programs fail or have low participation, determine to what extent a program meets its goals, and identify unintended outcomes of a program that may be critical to its success.

In site visits, we heard that while library staff value evaluation, they acknowledged that it occurred only occasionally. Similar to field-wide barriers, typical challenges include cost, time, and lack of training in evaluation. Additionally, protecting patron anonymity during evaluation, while not unique to new American programs, is a particularly sensitive issue. More uniquely, library staff's discomfort with common evaluation methods where an individual's demographic information is collected (perceived as potentially compromising the anonymity of patrons or patron library card records) presents a major obstacle to assessing

new American programs. Staff may also perceive that evaluating the patron's experience at the library may erode the trust built between personnel and the patron. However, evaluation of new American programs could not be more critical to their success as new Americans have specific needs and wants that library staff may not be able to predict nor support effectively without feedback. Appropriate evaluative tools can foster relationships, as well: new Americans utilizing the library and providing feedback through surveys, focus groups, or interviews will see improvements being made to better meet their needs and will understand the library is committed to helping them succeed.

WHY A COMMUNITY- CENTERED APPROACH IS THE BEST STRATEGY

Over the past decade, libraries have increasingly invested in learning about and addressing their communities' aspirations through programming and other services. This approach is core to the mission of libraries, as institutions that support their communities' learning, access to resources, and ability to thrive. Library staff across the sites we visited were uniformly committed to the concept of a community-centered approach, where the definition of community is all-inclusive, taking into account the full range of diverse populations, both newer and longer-established. They had a clear understanding of strategies for ways to learn about their communities' needs, like providing comment boxes, attending community events, having bi- or multilingual staff, and conducting formal community needs assessments.



A program focused on South Asian culture at Palatine (Ill.) Public Library District

However, these strategies were often aspirational rather than currently in practice.

At the same time, libraries must find a balance between addressing communities' needs and the constraints that necessarily shape their work. Perhaps unique to services for new Americans, libraries must navigate legal limitations as well. Services that some new Americans are interested in—particularly obtaining citizenship—are legal procedures. Many libraries are not equipped to provide legal counsel, and might better invest their skills in developing programs that have a dramatic impact on the daily lives of new Americans. Time, budget, and access to resources are concerns for all programming as well.

When a library undertakes a structured needs assessment, it can take a range of forms. One library we visited worked with community organizers to do needs assessments with a variety of local groups, including new Americans. Another library conducts interviews with members of different cultural groups in their area. Meanwhile, other libraries have committees dedicated to promoting literacy for new Americans.

Outreach Strategies

Across the libraries we visited, we found that outreach and community needs assessment are closely linked. Staff reported that no matter what a library was doing, it was not effective programming unless the community was aware of it. Libraries used a range of strategies to reach out to new Americans. Library staff attendance at general community events and meetings is essential to understanding the inner workings of communities. Partnerships with community organizations can aid in building pathways to communities where those organizations may be more involved, and vice versa. Offering or serving as a stop on city tours presents another way to get new Americans, and anyone else new to the community, into the library.

The Importance of Community Partnerships

Libraries have long partnered with other community-based organizations to enrich and expand their service to their communities. The mutual benefits are well documented—staff from other community

organizations and libraries alike enjoy increased capacity, and members of the community get access to better services and resources. Partnerships designed for services for new Americans are no different. Collaboration among organizations is not necessarily an easy, organic process; it requires an investment of time and resources to build the relationship and maintain the work. Nevertheless, our site visits demonstrated that the effort is worth it: partnerships produce more than the sum of their parts.

Just as conducting an assessment of community needs is critical to understanding how to provide new American library services, it is also important to assess the landscape of community organizations to understand where the library might fit in. During the site visits, staff from multiple locations expressed the importance of assessing what other organizations are already doing in the community. That way, libraries could ensure that their programs were complementary rather than competitive with resources that already existed. Community resource fairs could be helpful in this regard, in addition to helping new Americans see all the resources provided where they live.

In the site visits, we observed several differences between libraries and their partners, as well as patterns that emerge when they work together. Library staff voiced their desire to have a dedicated staff member to focus on partnerships. Meanwhile, community organizations were more likely to have personnel in a liaison role. One library staff member said ideally there would be staff from the library at the partner organization's space, and vice versa, every day. In practice, because libraries often provide space for partner-led programs, partner organization staff were much more aware of a library's full suite of programs than the other way around.

While dedicated or embedded partnership staff isn't feasible for all libraries—typically depending on size and funding—staff at site visits consistently reported that communication between partners greatly improved by having one clear point person at each organization because it led to clearer communication pathways. Having a point person is particularly important for a library system with multiple branches; the community partner organization can communicate with this one person rather than individually with each branch manager.



A participant in a literacy program at Edwin A. Bemis Public Library in Littleton, Colo.

The structure of a partnership can vary from organization to organization. Here, we define a partnership as an ongoing relationship between a library and another organization. Across the site visits, we heard that library-community organization relationships fell into one of five categories:

1. **Parallel services:** Libraries and partner organizations work on the same issues or topics in parallel but do not collaborate directly. In these cases, libraries and community organizations are often aware of each other's resources and may refer patrons to one another.
2. **Library as space:** Libraries provide space for programs or events, and partner organizations take the lead in other aspects of the program.
3. **Space plus:** In addition to hosting programs in library space, libraries provide additional resources such as volunteer time or outreach materials. However, partner organizations continue to take the lead.
4. **Library as collaborator:** Libraries and community organizations work together closely to provide programs and services. While staff members from nearly all locations identified this partnership model as the ideal, not all of them are able to implement it in practice due to constraints on time and resources. Programs in this category

may take place inside or outside the library. For example, offsite programs may include pop-up health clinics that also provided an opportunity to sign up for a library card, or a food pantry whose baskets included free books.

5. **Library as implementer:** In this model, libraries use a curriculum developed by a partner organization but are responsible for all other elements of the program. The partner organization may provide training or support, or may be entirely hands-off.

MOVING FORWARD: THE TWO-WAY STREET OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Many new Americans are interested in sharing their culture with others. This sharing is better understood as an opportunity for cultural “exchange”—a two-way street of learning. Along with using library programming to give new Americans the opportunity to learn about “American life” in a given community, it is also an opportunity for new Americans to share their own culture with other residents through their public library. As new Americans arrive in a new place, they can simultaneously seek to be a part of the fabric of their new home and impart some of their former countries’ traditions, foods, and other parts of their culture into the new community.

Public libraries are an integral part of their local communities, bringing together diverse patrons for a variety of reasons. Libraries are an ideal space for cultural exchange programming because they serve as a place for the intersection of people and ideas, and also because Americans frequently rank public libraries as one of their most trusted institutions.¹⁵ For a city or town to successfully integrate new members, cultural awareness is key. And what better place to help foster dialogue about culture than the library? Acknowledging that many new Americans are, in fact, new to life in the US, many libraries have developed programming to draw them into the local fabric and support them in forming social connections.

15. John B. Horrigan, “How People Approach Facts and Information.” Pew Research Center. Accessed: August 15 2018. http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2017/09/12135404/PI_2017.09.11_FactsAndInfo_FINAL.pdf.

PART 2.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO LIBRARIES

As migration patterns continue to fluctuate, we can expect to see people coming to the United States from all over the world. Many are coming in need of a safe place for themselves and their families. The ALA Public Programs Office's New Americans Library Project reaffirms the important role libraries play in providing services to people who consider themselves new to the United States. In many ways, libraries are singular in their service to their communities: their mission is to equitably help all people to reach their aspirations so the collective can thrive. This commitment positions libraries as uniquely suited to help new Americans—and *all* community members—learn and grow together.

But libraries cannot do this important work alone. There are many, many organizations that specialize in the myriad areas that are relevant to new Americans: legal counsel, language learning services, job training services, financial advisors and institutions, and the diverse organizations focusing on aspects of culture, like religion, ethnic heritage, and more. The same is true for these community organizations—they need the help of libraries. With partnerships, libraries can achieve far more for their new American constituents than they can do independently.

This research shows there is no silver bullet for libraries' work with new Americans; just as there are diverse groups of newcomers to the country, so too are there many library service approaches that successfully meet their needs. Finding the right approach is less a matter of following a rubric and more of a listening activity. Once a library understands their new American

communities' needs, they can design services that are both relevant to their constituents and appropriate for their organizational capacity.

Library programming used by new Americans is as diverse as the patron population that relies on it. The term "new American" can encompass individuals of a variety of ages, cultural backgrounds, levels of English language proficiency, legal documentation status, and degree of experience with American institutions or cultural practices. Accordingly, library programming that meets their needs will vary widely depending on the local community. In addition, new Americans take advantage not only of library programs geared specifically toward their needs, but also of programs that are designed for all library patrons, such as financial literacy and job training.

Libraries across the United States have introduced innovative programming that has resonated with new Americans. The most creative and successful programs have been borne out of meeting new Americans where they are and assuring them that public libraries are spaces where they are welcome and safe, even for those who may feel insecure or stigmatized due to their immigration status. A thoughtful approach also requires understanding what programs will fit the needs of local new Americans, ranging from English conversation opportunities to cultural exchange that draws new arrivals into the established community. Many libraries have seen enthusiasm for these types of programs, and further evaluation offers the opportunity to demonstrate how these programs work and how they can continue to improve.

Library professionals who have championed new Americans programming have attributed their success to a partnership approach with community organizations. Collaboration provides both organizations with access to more materials and resources, and enables both organizations to increase the populations they

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A financial literacy program for Burmese speakers at Lakewood (Ohio) Public Library

serve and the services they provide. These partnerships can form when neither organization has the full breadth of resources to meet the needs of the community. For example, libraries can offer space, staff time, and advertising capacity, while community partner organizations bring knowledge of and connections to multiple groups in the community.

In short, there is no one-size-fits-all model for serving new American populations. To make a program sing, a library must authentically understand and design the service to meet the specific needs of its unique community. Nevertheless, this research has shown there are approaches that can lead to success across geographic locations and kinds of communities. We present the following strategies as a list of options, rather than a prescriptive model. For each option, we offer potential actions that libraries can take toward programming for new Americans.

PLANNING PROGRAMS FOR NEW AMERICANS: CONSIDERATIONS FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Assess community needs.

Libraries should learn about the needs of the members of a community, including new Americans, established residents, library patrons, and non-patrons. Learning about the community can range from setting up a comment box, to undertaking a full-scale community needs assessment conducted by the library or outside organization. There are advantages and disadvantages to every method, so libraries may consider experimenting with several needs assessment techniques at first. Keep in mind that open-ended approaches, such

as a comment box, may yield such a wide variety of responses that a library may find it hard to prioritize a path forward. The needs assessment strategy may also depend on whether the library already serves a particular new American population or is looking to draw in a new population that is underserved or unaware of library resources.

Learning about community needs can also be done in partnership with organizations who have already been working in communities for many years. These partners can help identify community stakeholders, facilitate focus groups, or contribute in other ways to the needs assessment. This approach may also help a library avoid creating redundant services, as many communities have existing programs for new Americans, often run by new American groups themselves. In these cases, a library has an opportunity to reflect on what they might uniquely offer.

SUGGESTED ACTION STEPS

1. Think about all the ways you learn about the population your library serves, including those who don't currently use library services. What tactics have you used in the past? What worked and what didn't? What would you change about the process of determining community needs?
2. Decide whether a more formal or structured needs assessment would be appropriate for your library. Talk to other library workers, such as members of ALA's Programming Librarian Interest Group ([facebook.com/groups/ProgrammingLibrarianInterestGroup](https://www.facebook.com/groups/ProgrammingLibrarianInterestGroup)), about their needs assessment experiences. Consult census data if there are studies or assessments already being done by municipal agencies or other community groups; keep in mind that some new American groups may not be accurately represented in these studies due to concerns about interactions with government entities.
3. Consider what you already know. Think about data you already have access to rather than spending time and resources on pursuing new information from external sources. For example, asking security or front desk staff what types of questions they get from patrons could provide useful insight.

Foster partnerships with community organizations.

Many libraries already have relationships with community organizations and networks of groups working on issues relating to new Americans. Community organizations have different types of expertise, hold specific knowledge about the community, and may have a different relationship to their members. At the same time, community organizations already find that collaboration with municipal organizations—including libraries—is a great way to work with professionals who share the same dedication to helping community members realize their goals. Understanding how community organizations work with new Americans can help libraries avoid reinventing the wheel and instead focus on how they might complement existing work with space, curriculum, technology, books, and more.

Partnerships can take many forms, consisting of a single event, recurring event or series, a class, or a long-term initiative. Having recurring events or building a sustained initiative can lead to a stronger relationship. This work can then help foster an increased commitment to serve new American communities and reduce gaps in services.

SUGGESTED ACTION STEPS

1. Make a list of the organizations, networks, or groups in your community who already serve new Americans. How does your library fit in?
2. List the additional resources the library needs to better serve new Americans. Which community partners would be best positioned to assist in this effort?
3. Make a detailed plan for connecting. Is there a clear ask? Mutual benefits that could be highlighted? A plan for nurturing the relationship? Intended outcomes for new Americans? Who is serving as the contact person? What is the decision-making hierarchy, or who needs to give approval?

Offer professional development opportunities for staff and volunteers.

There are a variety of professional development offerings—many of them free or low-cost—that can help library workers and volunteers serve new Americans to their best potential.

SUGGESTED ACTION STEPS

1. Prioritize the areas in which you most want to grow your staff skills. Does your library need to focus on ELL courses for adults, teens, or children? Marketing and outreach to new American populations? Providing cultural competence/humility training for desk staff?
2. Explore professional development and continuing education opportunities available to you and your staff. This may include in-person or online courses from national membership organizations like ALA or the Public Library Association, or offerings from your state or regional library association.
3. Determine your available budget for staff training in this area. If you are unable to allocate any of your current funds, investigate free options for now, and prioritize professional development funding in your next budget cycle. Even a few hundred dollars can make a big difference. You may also apply for grant funding to support these efforts.

Include new Americans in decision-making and implementation.

While we recognize that decision-making processes vary widely, as does inclusion, libraries should prioritize finding ways to include new Americans in decision-making and implementation of programming designed for their communities. Involving new Americans can consist of creating additional volunteer positions at smaller libraries or hiring additional staff members as cultural liaisons at larger library systems. Libraries could also consider having new Americans teach or co-teach classes, or even lead tours of the library—in several languages—to introduce newcomers to its people, programs, and resources. New Americans could also be informally included through discussion groups and/or the community needs assessment.

SUGGESTED ACTION STEPS

1. Consider what type of involvement for new Americans is possible at your library and ask staff

if they know new Americans at the library or in the community who might be well-suited to fill the roles you identify.

2. If you're doing a community needs assessment, make sure new Americans' voices are included!
3. Develop an advisory group that has equal representation of the new and "old" American communities.

Use terms that resonate with your specific community.

When promoting a new American program, word choice is important. Knowing the best terminology to use with the general public, while at the same time targeting a subset of people, can prove critical to the success of a program for new Americans.

We recommend avoiding broad terms like "new Americans" in promotional materials due to the multiple ways it can be interpreted. For instance, "new Americans" might be misinterpreted as those who become legal citizens. Instead, try to understand how the specific new American populations might describe the program. For instance, new Americans may want to use their places of origin or ethnic identifications and aren't concerned about generic terms. At the same time, being too specific can make it difficult for a library to communicate to a large audience, and even to staff. In other cases, it might be helpful to know the name of a service or idea in a group's native language, so that the people who might benefit from the program can recognize its relevance. This approach can reduce the need to find the proper generic terms in English.

Libraries should ensure marketing terminology accurately represents the intended outcomes of the program and be aware of problematic translations. Libraries can work with their community partners to develop recommendations on proper terms. Creating promotional materials is also a great role for a new American staff member or volunteer, as they will likely have unique knowledge of the target audience. Understanding appropriate terminology can also be embedded in the community needs assessment process. It is advisable to use terms that best fit the specific community being targeted.

There are additional dynamics that libraries should be aware of when marketing a program, particularly the

intended audiences. Some services—like immigration legal counsel—might seem like they're for new Americans seeking legal documentation. However, these programs might be primarily sought out by the families of new Americans rather than by the individual who needs the service.

SUGGESTED ACTION STEPS

1. Make a list of terms you hear used around your library.
2. Talk to coworkers and library patrons about which terms they prefer and why.
3. Use a public feedback activity for further input—like inviting Post-it notes on a question wall.

Develop multilingual resources.

New Americans will feel more welcomed in a space where their language is represented. While it's not realistic for libraries in major resettlement areas to provide substantial resources in all languages, many libraries could benefit from considering how to develop multilingual resources in the languages widely spoken in a community. Libraries can strategize to accomplish this objective by considering both collection development and creating bi- and multilingual versions of other resources, such as templates and signage. Keep in mind that these efforts still will not reach non-literate patrons, and easily recognized graphics or icons in signage will be especially helpful. Libraries should consider the scale of their institution when developing a realistic strategy for what multilingual resources they can produce. The community assessment can inform the languages to focus upon, and to what degree.

SUGGESTED ACTION STEPS

1. Do an inventory of your current bilingual or multilingual collections and signage.
2. Identify your greatest languages of need. Do they match your current collections? What about signage? In particular, consider critical wayfinding

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signage that helps patrons meet their basic needs, such as directions to the restrooms.

3. Write up a wish list and begin to brainstorm how to fill the need. The Programming Librarian Interest Group can be a great resource here too.

Foster connections between new Americans and established residents.

New Americans often desire to learn about their new community and its members, just as much as people who already live in the area wish to get to know new Americans. Given the importance of fostering connections between new Americans and patrons who already live in the area, libraries can strategize by first understanding to what degree new Americans feel welcomed. This work can also be accomplished in the needs assessment process.

In some places, libraries can explicitly welcome new Americans in promotional materials, signage, and other areas. In other places where there may be ambivalence or tension supporting the presence of new Americans, a broad message of welcome to all might be more appropriate. Libraries should consider a range of approaches to meet diverse needs. How can you maximize word of mouth to promote your services to diverse populations? How might existing programming be made as inclusive as possible? Moreover, these libraries may want to figure out how they can serve new Americans with existing programming, rather than creating new programming that would draw attention to groups who may wish to remain anonymous, such as ELL classes or citizenship preparation.

Strategies for supportive programming that builds relationships among community members include conversation partner programs, multicultural meals, World Book Day events, and other types of cultural exchanges. These opportunities should go beyond the tendency to essentialize—meaningful interaction is more than a single meal, festival, or movie.

SUGGESTED ACTION STEPS

1. Review existing programs. Are any of these already attracting both new Americans and those who are established in the community? If not, are there ways to modify the programs to be more inclusive?

2. Could any existing programs do a better job of having patrons interact? How?
3. Determine your library's goals for helping people connect. Is your goal to increase cross-cultural understanding and appreciation? To make new patrons feel more welcome? Having clear goals will help with program strategy.

Create more intergenerational programming.

Intergenerational programming offers participants rich learning and social experiences, where people can gain an understanding of language and culture of people in different age groups. At the same time, it meets the needs of new Americans and anyone with a family who wishes to participate in activities as a group. Like all patrons, new Americans of all ages have needs that can be met by a library. Moreover, many new Americans live in multigenerational households. Libraries should consider which programs could either benefit from or accommodate intergenerational participation. In marketing materials, consider how to clearly communicate which programming serves family members of all ages at the same time, in the same space, or both.

SUGGESTED ACTION STEPS

1. Determine which of your current programs reach an intergenerational audience already. What's working well with these programs? What needs to be improved?
2. Identify obstacles to increasing family participation at your library. Is it transportation? Child care? Cultural norms?
3. Ask new American patrons what programs they'd like to do with their family members, and how to design those programs for success.

Build sustainable services.

Figuring out how to make programs sustainable is key to serving new American populations—particularly given shifts in national or local narratives about refugees and immigrants—which can have consequential impact on funding sources. Thinking about outcomes, building multi-faceted initiatives, and knowing how programs can be best positioned are invaluable to planning in an unstable environment. Another important part of

building sustainability is knowing what programs work and how they accomplish their intended objectives; it is helpful to have a plan from the start about how evaluation will be part of a new service. Resources are available to guide libraries on how to conduct evaluation (for example, the Public Library Association's Project Outcome). There are also many methods for evaluation beyond the survey tools currently used by many in the library field, to provide more systematic and comprehensive understanding of sustainable strategies.

SUGGESTED ACTION STEPS

1. Think about efforts your library has used in the past to evaluate programs. What did you learn? Was it what you *wanted* to learn?
2. Determine where the gaps are in your library's current approach to evaluating programs and services. What do you wish you knew? How could that information be obtained?
3. Talk to staff at another library that has done a type of evaluation different from what you've done to learn about new methods. The Research Institute for Public Libraries¹⁶ hosts a variety of webinars and online forums designed to help libraries address their evaluation needs.
4. If cost is a barrier, utilize free evaluation tools such as Project Outcome. Google Forms can also facilitate basic data-gathering.
5. If patron privacy is of particular concern, use anonymous evaluation methods and clearly communicate how new Americans' identities will be protected when gathering data. In addition to not gathering personally identifiable information, libraries could use Dropbox or another file hosting service to gather completed evaluation forms or ask a volunteer to gather data when staff are not present.

CONCLUSION

Public libraries are hard at work supporting new Americans. This research has uncovered just a fraction of the vibrant library programs and services that help new Americans achieve their aspirations in this country. These services are the products of library professionals and volunteers' thoughtful, creative, and resourceful approaches to working with immigrants, refugees, displaced persons, and other members of their communities.

The ALA Public Programs Office is committed to supporting this critical work and maintaining the rich tapestry of library programs and the opportunities they open for new Americans. To that end, we have created a website ([NewAmericans.ala.org](https://newamericans.ala.org)) that, in addition to providing the content described in this report, gathers and consolidates trusted resources for easy access by library professionals. These include resources created by ALA—such as ALA's Reference and User Services Association's guide for developing multilingual collections and the Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach

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Services' training on cultural humility, cultural intelligence, and implicit bias—as well as numerous resources from the field at large.

This exploratory phase of the New Americans Library Project has given us tremendous insight into the current offerings in the library field, but much work remains to be done. ALA will seek additional funding to pursue efforts to strengthen library offerings for new Americans and prepare library professionals for work with these populations. With added support, we envision everything from training opportunities for library professionals, to best practices for programs to serve new Americans of all ages, to print-ready signs and templates in multiple languages to help libraries be more user-friendly to all patrons. We look forward to exploring these exciting possibilities.

16. Research Institute for Public Libraries. <https://ripl.lrs.org> (accessed May 23, 2019).

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

In addition to the sources cited throughout the white paper, this work draws extensively from two sources:

- ▮ Barchas-Lichtenstein, J., Nock, K., Norlander, R. & Brucker, J.L. (2018). *New Americans Library Project: Evaluation Report*. NewKnowledge Publication #NPO.074.518.02. New York: New Knowledge Organization Ltd.
- ▮ Laursen Brucker, J., Nock, K., Norlander, R., Dixon, J. & Flinner, K. (2018). *Libraries & New Americans: Landscape Review*. NewKnowledge Publication #NPO.074.518.01. New York: New Knowledge Organization Ltd.

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An oral history event in Fort Worth, Tex.



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AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION PUBLIC PROGRAMS OFFICE

50 E. Huron St., Chicago IL 60611

NEW KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION LTD.

40 Exchange Place, Suite 1403, New York, NY 10005

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