

FINDING LEVEL GROUND



Participants at Central Library's Plaza Performance Series



A participant at BPL's Summer Reading kickoff



A BKLYN Incubator program designed around the world's biggest questions at the Adam's Street Library



Expanded outdoor Wi-Fi at the Flatbush Library

INTRODUCTION

Brooklyn Public Library kicked off a strategic planning process in the Spring of 2021, a year after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and during a nationwide reckoning over entrenched racism in our society. The previous summer, in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd, BPL's Central Library became a focal point for peaceful protests, a role we embraced publicly through programs on the plaza and a series of anti-racist initiatives throughout the Library system. Since then, several additional domestic and international crises have taken place, putting the country's economic and political stability at risk, including the core democratic institution of free and fair elections and the peaceful transference of power.

All of this has had an impact on the Library's work, adding stress and uncertainty to an already difficult job for over 1,200 BPL employees, and has served to underscore the importance of our mission as something profoundly important to democracy, fairness, equality, and even basic human decency.

Our Strategic Plan—*Finding Level Ground*—enshrines our continuing response to these challenges. It puts BPL on a path to learn from this period of profound change and uncertainty, with concrete objectives that arose from our shared experiences over the last two years. We have a lot to be proud of and to build upon: We have eliminated late fines for overdue books, one of the biggest barriers to the Library in under-served communities; launched a scholarship program for BIPOC employees who want to become librarians; created thousands of new virtual programs; increased our footprint outdoors; and opened award-winning new libraries in Greenpoint, DUMBO, Brooklyn Heights, and Brower Park at Brooklyn Children's Museum. In the coming months and years, we will be launching new programs and spaces for teens, expanding our digital equity services, and institutionalizing Diversity Equity and Inclusion. We will also be opening new beautiful libraries in Sunset Park, Fort Greene, Crown Heights, East New York and Canarsie.

Inscribed above the entrance to BPL's beautiful Central Library are the words: "Brooklyn Public Library... offers to all the people perpetual and free access to knowledge and the thought of all the ages."

Free access to knowledge and the thought of all the ages.

Who could imagine that that would be controversial 125 years after the Library's founding? In the face of all the book bans and the disappearance of sources for accurate, unbiased

information, it is the essence of what we are celebrating—and committing to uphold—with this plan.

Linda E. Johnson, President and CEO

OVERVIEW

In its 2018 Strategic Plan, Brooklyn Public Library set out to accomplish two things: (1) identify the principles that define our work and motivate us to continually improve and (2) articulate a set of priorities for deepening our impact on the communities we serve. Nothing about the pandemic or the racial injustices of the last two years has changed our core principles, but the ways we embody those principles have changed dramatically. The tools we rely on to deliver services are very different now, as are many of the challenges facing our patrons and employees. While digital literacy, for example, was important before March 2020, it has become vital for survival as well as economic advancement.

To assess how the Library's work has changed during the pandemic, BPL hosted a series of staff listening sessions in the spring of 2021. Topics included our transition to digital services and programs, health and safety protocols, our commitment to antiracism, the state of our community partnerships and more. The issues raised during these discussions helped us identify the following four strategic priorities.

Community Connections: Reestablishing neighborhood relationships, partnerships, and programming after more than two years of disruptions

Digital Inclusion: Breaking down barriers to internet-based resources, tools, and services

Anti-oppression: Creating a culture of anti-racism and anti-bias in all BPL locations and neighborhoods

Staff Supports: Ensuring our staff have the tools, training and support they need to thrive

For each priority, we have identified several concrete objectives to guide efforts at all levels of the organization. These will serve to align departmental projects and collaborations, inform new initiatives and fundraising efforts, and inspire a renewed sense of purpose for the Library and our partners.



The People's Ball, BPL's celebration of style, fashion and happiness

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

REESTABLISHING NEIGHBORHOOD RELATIONSHIPS, PARTNERSHIPS, AND PROGRAMMING AFTER MORE THAN TWO YEARS OF DISRUPTIONS

In response to the "New York State on PAUSE" executive order and continued social distancing requirements, BPL closed its physical spaces and dramatically expanded its digital services for long periods during the pandemic. We made an historic investment in eBooks and digital resources and produced thousands of virtual programs for all ages with a surprisingly international reach.

Despite our successful transition into the digital sphere, many Brooklynites without reliable access to broadband were unable to access critical services during this period. Now that our doors are open and in-person services and programs have resumed, the Library needs to rebuild these local relationships. BPL's new fine-free policy is also an opportunity to connect with those who have long stopped using the Library or have never used it because of concerns about late fines. To expedite this reconnection process and ensure our pandemic responses are as impactful as possible, BPL will take steps to achieve the following objectives.

about their experiences and how they think the Library can better serve their communities. Insights from these engagements will help inform BPL's approach to many of the challenges identified in this strategic plan, including how the Library can best help patrons access online services and resources, technology and safe spaces after school, health and immigration support, and more.

Success Indicators:

- New insights into how Brooklyn residents work, learn and consume information
- Increased understanding into how residents use key Library services and what can be done to improve their experience
- Discovering and introducing methods for ongoing research into patrons' Library experiences

ALIGN BRANCH SERVICES AND PROGRAMS WITH NEIGHBORHOOD NEED

As BPL reintroduces indoor programming and invests in new outreach efforts, the time is right for branches to prioritize the needs of their individual neighborhoods. In a borough as diverse as Brooklyn, different communities require different things from their Library. Some neighborhoods have a large population of aging residents and few resources aside from the Library to keep their minds active. Others have a large number of immigrants with low levels of English language ability and not enough ESOL classes and support services. In some neighborhoods, teen programs are in high demand, while in



Outreach at a Slavic Soul music event near Borough Hall

LISTEN AND LEARN FROM OUR PATRONS AND COMMUNITIES

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic will be felt in Brooklyn for years to come as residents continue to grapple with its physical and mental health impacts, evolving public health threats, learning loss among school children, increasing economic uncertainty and more. To better understand these longer term trends, BPL will launch an extended listen and learn community engagement campaign to give our patrons and partners the opportunity to tell us



A University Open Air class on community planning and participatory design

others services for young families are the highest priority.

Working with the Office of Neighborhood Services and the Department of Strategic Planning, BPL branches and the Bookmobile fleet will build individualized service plans with activities and targets based on their neighborhood. The fleet, including two Bookmobiles, one Kidsmobile and one Techmobile, will provide replacement services for branches that are undergoing construction, and will also bring books, computers and Wi-Fi to homeless shelters, senior centers, parks, commercial districts and other areas of the borough that are not within walking distance of a branch library.

BPL will expand teen services in neighborhoods where there is a dearth of resources and spaces for teenagers. In addition to BPL's Best Buy Teen Tech Center at Kings Highway Library and the soon-to-open teen tech hub at Crown Heights Library, BPL will create new teen tech centers at three additional locations. BPL will also pilot an after-hours program for teens in select neighborhoods. As part of the pilot program, branches will stay open late on select Friday or Saturday nights, providing a safe and engaging place for teens to socialize, play video games, create digital media and more.

Success Indicators:

- Reintroduction of in-person programs for all ages
- Expanded presence beyond our branches
- Increased teen engagement with the Library through programs and internships

GET THE WORD OUT ABOUT BPL'S SERVICES AND RESOURCES

BPL will launch a targeted messaging campaign in conjunction with the Library's 125th anniversary to encourage residents to rediscover their local library by visiting their branch or the BPL website. The campaign will emphasize the Library's fine-free policy and encourage people to sign up for library cards. Outreach efforts will continue to prioritize new card creations and new programs will teach patrons how to use the Library, including how to check out eBooks on BPL's supported ereader apps.

BPL is also looking to expand its outreach capacity by hiring specialized outreach librarians in every region and filling new public service positions with people who have the linguistic and cultural competency to work more deeply in Brooklyn's diverse communities, including those who lack English

fluency and struggle to access needed support services or to participate fully in the civic life of our city.

Finally, BPL will continue to emphasize health outreach, building on existing efforts to connect vulnerable communities with trusted health information and resources, including information about nursing home providers, nutrition and mental health assistance. The Library will also continue to serve as a trusted resource for Covid-19 information, vaccines and protective equipment.

Success Indicators:

- Renewed outreach efforts and offsite programs
- Deepened marketing presence in Brooklyn neighborhoods
- Sustained efforts in health outreach and programming

EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF LIBRARY MEMBERSHIP

Many people who regularly visit the Library don't have active BPL memberships and therefore aren't able to take advantage of the full range of free resources on offer. Due to the pandemic, many others have forgotten their membership information and/or lost their cards. Taking advantage of a simpler and more inclusive sign-up process, new fine-free policies and much richer materials for introducing new patrons to BPL's broad range of services, BPL will emphasize the importance of getting a library card.

The Library will target messaging in areas of the borough where card sign-ups are historically low as well as areas with large numbers of patrons who have not used their cards recently. BPL's new fine-free policies provide an excellent opportunity to re-engage with residents who may have let their cards expire or never signed up for one in the first place because of unpaid late fees or the prospect of fees. With new library card outreach, BPL will provide more resources (i.e., programs and materials) to introduce patrons to the online catalog, the smartphone app and holds system, particularly in non-English speaking communities and neighborhoods.

Success Indicators:

- Improved communication to patrons starting with the sign-up process for Library cards
- Increased Library card signups and renewals (with special attention paid to areas where Library engagement is lower than average historically)
- Increased outreach in areas where late fees have had an outsized impact on Library usage



A display at the Pacific Library celebrating Culture Pass, a service that offers free passes to over 60 museums and theaters citywide.



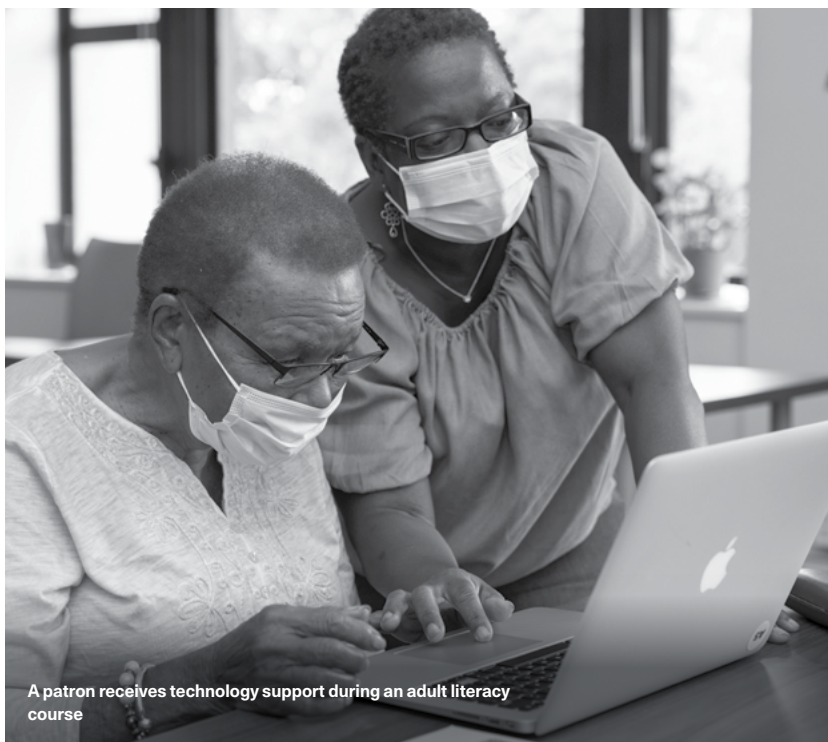
An outdoor reading room at the Crown Heights Library



Sauteing vegetables during a teen culinary program



A Library crafts program at Brooklyn Bridge Park



A patron receives technology support during an adult literacy course

DIGITAL INCLUSION

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS TO INTERNET-BASED RESOURCES, TOOLS, AND SERVICES

In Brooklyn, nearly 800,000 people or 30 percent of the population lack a home broadband connection, with even higher rates of disconnection in neighborhoods like Sunset Park, Crown Heights, Coney Island and Flatbush. Most of these people, it is safe to assume, cannot easily log into remote classes or complete their homework, search for job opportunities, order prescription medication, locate testing or vaccine sites, or Zoom with their children or grandchildren.

Though BPL has long offered assistance to those on the wrong side of the digital divide, our patrons' digital needs have undoubtedly changed over the course of the pandemic, with some patrons being all but cut off from critical services and resources. For this reason, the Library will take a number of steps to update those offerings and more effectively market them in our communities. As a part of this priority, BPL will commit to the following objectives:

internet and digital devices. The Library will make investments to better help patrons navigate government websites, career resources and digital library tools.

Success Indicators:

- Deepened outreach and support around federal broadband subsidies, with emphasis on connecting qualifying residents to low-cost or even free internet service
- Heightened awareness around digital privacy and safety among staff and patrons
- Expanded Wi-Fi hotspot lending through BPL's Adult Learning and Justice Initiatives programs

UPDATE AND REFRESH DIGITAL LITERACY OFFERINGS

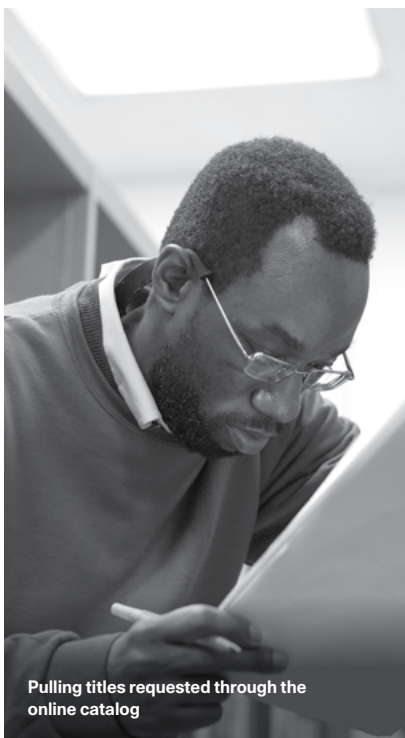
BPL's digital literacy programs—including everything from computer basics and internet 101 to Microsoft certifications and robotics—have long been a core part of our educational offerings. But now that digital know-how has become so important not just for educational and career advancement but for daily survival, the Library is making a commitment to deepen and expand our programs in this area. With government and private donor support, BPL is investing in new tools and spaces for digital learning, including a new teen tech center at Crown Heights Library, a new Techmobile, and expanded laptops and hotspots for participants in BPL's Adult Learning and TeleStory programs. The Library will also invest in a systemwide audit and refresh of its digital literacy offerings, with an eye toward updating program curricula to meet current needs, creating connections across content,



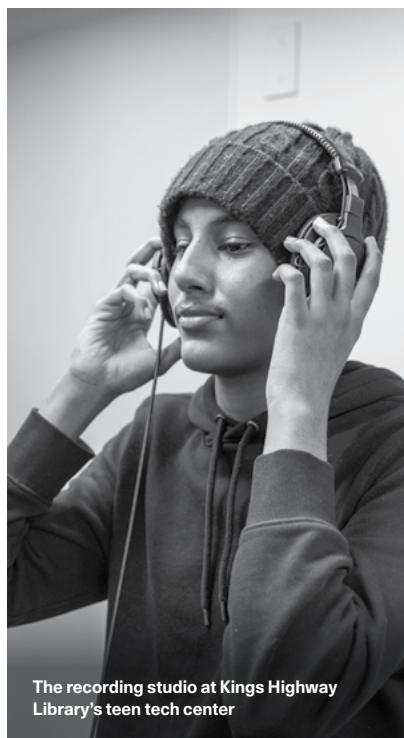
Preschool Story Time, a program that is now hosted online as well as in-person

ELEVATE AWARENESS AROUND DIGITAL INCLUSION AND CITIZENSHIP

Through expanded Wi-Fi at our branches, hotspot lending and support for signing up for home broadband subsidies, BPL will continue to build on efforts to equalize broadband access in our communities. We will also continue to elevate digital equity issues among public service staff and partner organizations so we can better help patrons of all ages become responsible digital citizens, including how to be safe and effective on the



Pulling titles requested through the online catalog



The recording studio at Kings Highway Library's teen tech center

and adding new programs in high-need areas.

Success Indicators:

- New investments in digital literacy programs, including both curricula and technology
- Enhanced communication around digital literacy offerings at the Library and partner organizations
- Increased technology programs for teens, older adults, and those participating in BPL's adult literacy classes

COORDINATE SERVICE OFFERINGS WITH NEIGHBORHOOD PARTNERS

Dozens of community-based organizations across Brooklyn offer digital literacy and inclusion programs, including everything from hotspot lending and classes on basic computer literacy to intensives on digital media and coding. Many of these programs could be made stronger through a relationship with the Library, particularly if our resources and efforts were better coordinated. Building on previous work in Brownsville, Bedford-Stuyvesant, East New York, and Sunset Park, BPL will undertake efforts to better coordinate services with external providers. In Sunset Park, BPL will work with the newly formed Digital Inclusion Group to provide a community needs assessment and service coordination plan and will use this as a model in other neighborhoods. In addition, the Library will continue to work with strategic partners across our borough, city and state to launch new services to tackle the digital divide, emphasizing the need for expanded outreach and programming beyond the walls of the Library branch.

Success Indicators:

- New strategic partnerships around digital literacy and inclusion
- A deeper understanding of service ecosystems and gaps at the neighborhood level
- Enhanced communication of neighborhood resources and assets

BUILD ON BPL'S SUCCESS WITH VIRTUAL PROGRAMS AND OTHER SERVICES BY

MAKING THEM MORE SUSTAINABLE, IMPACTFUL AND INCLUSIVE

During the first few months of the pandemic, BPL went from hosting a handful of virtual programs every month to hosting hundreds. Virtual programs were held on a wide variety of platforms for every age group, including storytime for preschoolers, Library Lab for elementary school children, ESOL classes for English learners, and painting classes for older adults. Over the last two years, tens of thousands of people have attended BPL's virtual programs, many of them from different states and countries. BPL will build on this success, while maintaining capacity for traditional in-person services by identifying programs that work well on virtual platforms, increasing production values, and creating opportunities for staff to learn from each other about what works best.

BPL will also continue to improve digital user experiences with upgraded website search and navigation, enhanced online catalog layout and search functionality, new and improved e-reader options, and more. The Library will evaluate all patron touch points (digital and analog) to make sure our digital tools reinforce and enhance transaction processes and overall patron experiences.

Success Indicators:

- Establishing clear standards for virtual and hybrid programs
- Improved production quality through investments in staff training and technology
- Virtual programs and digital services that address access challenges



A visual playlist of inspiring art, music, and history, projected on the facade of Central Library



Spectators at BPL's middle school Robotics League Competition



A volunteer in BPL's Books Unbanned initiative



An exhibition at the Center for Brooklyn History documenting black Brooklynites' resistance to racial injustice

ANTI-OPPRESSION

CREATING A CULTURE OF ANTI-RACISM AND ANTI-BIAS IN ALL BPL LOCATIONS AND NEIGHBORHOODS

In the summer of 2020, as protests against racist policing practices erupted across the country, BPL made anti-racism an organizational priority. The Library hosted a series of internal listening sessions titled Real Talk: Race, Truth, and Transformation; formed an internal Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Council and board committee; and launched Pathways to Leadership, a scholarship program for non-librarian employees seeking a Master's in Library Science, which was created with the intention to diversify librarianship at BPL. In the fall of 2021, the Library announced the first six scholarship recipients, who will have the opportunity to earn their MLS degrees while receiving mentoring and professional development support from BPL.

However, if BPL is going to live up to its ideals and stand against biased practices and behaviors in the workplace as well as in our neighborhoods, there is still a lot of work to be done. The following objectives are intended to make DEI a permanent part of our operations and approach to customer service.

ENSURE BPL STAFF AT ALL LEVELS REFLECT THE DIVERSITY OF OUR CITY

Removing financial and workplace barriers standing in the way of advancement for all staff, but especially BIPOC staff, will continue to be a priority for BPL. The Library will seek funding to continue the Pathways to Leadership scholarship indefinitely, while strengthening professional development offerings for all staff

including those without college or professional degrees. The Library will also review and update BPL's hiring practices to ensure our organization and the people who rely on us benefit from the insights and skills of a diverse workforce, with racial and ethnic representation at all levels.

Success Indicators:

- Increased transparency on organizational diversity, including senior leadership and the Board of Trustees
- Increased diversity among librarian and leadership titles
- Continued success through the Pathways to Leadership program and other programs supporting advanced degrees and certifications

FOSTER AN INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE CULTURE

BPL is committed to creating a workplace environment in which all staff can feel comfortable expressing their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, cultural background, family status and other parts of their identity without judgment. The Library is similarly committed to creating opportunities for all staff, regardless of title, to weigh in on organizational goals and services.

In support of these commitments, BPL will continue to offer DEI training for staff—including bystander and cultural competency training—and will create a more inclusive process when it comes to recruiting members for internal committees and other decision-making groups, extending invitations to all titles and removing obstacles to participation where they exist.

Success Indicators:

- Comprehensive and regular training on race, LGBTQIA+, and disability issues, as well as ongoing bystander and de-escalation training
- Increased diversity (including diversity of titles) on internal committees and working groups
- A high percentage of staff who feel BPL is committed to creating an inclusive workplace environment

CONNECT PATRONS WITH A MORE DIVERSE AND REPRESENTATIVE COLLECTION OF MATERIALS

BPL serves one of the most diverse counties in the country and our collection should reflect that. We will continue to identify and address diversity gaps in our collection with the awareness that every gap cannot be filled with titles currently on the market. For instance, a recent audit of children's and young adult books found insufficient titles from Indigenous authors available for purchase. As a result, the Library will address any identified gaps through a mixture of acquisitions and advocacy, elevating the needs of its patrons vis-à-vis publishers and championing authors from traditionally marginalized groups.

BPL will also identify inequalities in access. For instance, non-English speaking patrons sometimes face barriers when using the online catalog and holds system. Barriers may also exist for some would-be ebook users. BPL will continue to research these and other access challenges and will address them through circulation policy changes, catalog interface improvements, title curation and promotion, and more.

Success Indicators:

- Increased understanding of important diversity gaps in BPL's collection and the publishing industry at large
- Organizational advocacy for diverse titles and authors in the publishing industry
- Sustained efforts to prioritize and address digital accessibility challenges.

MAKE PROGRAMS AND SPACES ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE FOR ALL

It is a core value of Brooklyn Public Library to provide programs and services that are both accessible and welcoming to absolutely everyone. BPL will take steps to ensure that we live up to this value in two ways: by removing inaccessible and unwelcoming physical barriers in our spaces and by investing in cultural competency among staff.

In the first category, BPL has developed design standards that emphasize physical accessibility and welcoming exterior and interior spaces at all facilities and will continue to incorporate these standards in all capital projects going forward. In addition, we will assess locations where existing fences and other outdated security infrastructure create unwelcoming experiences and will take steps to mitigate these features over the next several years. Foreboding or inhospitable spaces will be replaced with urban-friendly environments that are well-lit, safe and comfortable, with fully-accessible entrances, outdoor seating, bike racks and other amenities.

In the second category, BPL will make sure staff have the skills and cultural competency to ensure our programs and spaces (including both physical and virtual programs and exhibitions) are welcoming and accessible to all. BPL will look to hire full and part-time staff with the language and cultural competencies needed in our communities and will sustain DEI training for existing staff.

Success Indicators:

- Improved physical accessibility at BPL locations across Brooklyn, including more accessible outdoor areas, programming spaces, and exhibitions
- Increased materials and supports for patrons who speak languages other than English
- Renewed focus on cultural competence and linguistic skills among staff

STAFF SUPPORTS

ENSURING OUR STAFF HAVE THE TOOLS, TRAINING AND SUPPORT THEY NEED TO THRIVE



Managing patron accounts and returns at Central Library



Maintenance staff working to ensure our renovations go smoothly



A children's librarian conducting a program at the Bedford Library

As discussed in the *Finding Level Ground* staff listening sessions, the pandemic has fundamentally changed the way nearly all of us at BPL do our work and required us to repeatedly adapt to new workplace requirements and practices. Though staff from across the organization have stepped up to redefine our services at a time of great need, the uncertainty of the last two years has taken a toll on all of us. Many have lost family members, friends, colleagues and neighbors. For this reason, BPL is focusing more than ever on supporting its employees with the policies, tools and training they need to thrive professionally and personally. Among other things, BPL will provide staff with new opportunities to further develop their skills through training and mentoring. It will invest in needed staff technologies and tools, and will increase support for those unfamiliar with core software systems. Additionally, BPL will take steps to increase professional and personal connections across our dispersed physical locations by creating an all staff conference or similar event(s) and instituting in-branch service requirements for administrative leaders.

CONNECT STAFF TO LEADERSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL ADVANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

With the Pathways to Leadership scholarship program and other tuition reimbursement plans, BPL has already put in place several important resources for professional advancement. The Library will build on these and other supports by introducing a systemwide mentorship program for new hires and investing in leadership training for branch managers, adult literacy site supervisors and other team leaders across the organization. Leadership training will provide staff with concrete tools for managing teams with different needs, breaking down organizational silos and building more collaborative relationships.

Success Indicators:

- Improved onboarding and mentorship of new hires
- Continuing leadership training and professional advancement opportunities

CREATE ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT FOR BPL'S CUSTOMER SERVICE

PRINCIPLES

Although different communities often have different needs, requiring different services and programs from staff, there is a baseline of services, experiences, and values that patrons can expect at every BPL location. BPL is developing a customer service plan that will reestablish and rearticulate these services and values. Key features of this plan will include redeveloped core competencies for a wider array of job titles, improved staff training (including technology training), improvements to internal workflows, and streamlined communication channels and tools. Norms and guidance for both public and administrative staff will be clarified and reinforced.

Success Indicators:

- Re-establishing and re-affirming customer service standards and norms
- Increased training and support in core service areas
- Sustained improvements to internal platforms and tools

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR STAFF TO CARE FOR AND LEARN FROM ONE ANOTHER

With more than 60 locations and a wide array of specialized services and departments, creating meaningful professional connections across the system has long been a challenge. Though virtual meeting platforms have made it possible for BPL to host a variety of important systemwide discussions, many people feel disconnected from their colleagues at other locations and need more opportunities to reestablish working relationships. To address this problem, BPL will restart the tradition of all-staff days and create other opportunities for employees to meet and learn from one another by working at other locations and shadowing colleagues when they host programs. In order to foster more interpersonal communication between administrative and public service staff, BPL will also require department leaders and team leads to work alongside public service staff in a branch at least once per year.

Success Indicators:

- Enhanced communication around self-care and wellness resources for staff
- Increased opportunities for staff to collaborate and learn from one another
- A high percentage of staff who feel they are engaged employees