



Libraries as Adult and Family Literacy Hubs

Findings from a Landscape Scan



**WORLD
EDUCATION**
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Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

The United States faces a persistent adult literacy crisis. Nearly one in five adults read below a third-grade level, and a majority of adults would benefit from improving their reading and/or digital literacy skills in order to complete essential tasks such as accessing health care, finding and retaining work, and supporting their children's learning. Despite this vast need, the publicly funded adult education system serves only a small fraction of the eligible adult population, leaving a wide gap in services.

To bridge this gap, public libraries have organically assumed the role of foundational literacy hubs. Unlike formal educational institutions, community colleges, or state workforce agencies—which often require extensive intake processes, state-issued identification, or semester-based enrollment—libraries offer a high-trust, low-barrier environment that meets adults where they are. They outnumber McDonald's and Starbucks locations combined, yet each reflects the unique character of its surrounding community. This landscape scan examines how libraries are navigating this evolving role, highlighting their unique strengths, the considerable challenges they face, and three core strategies they employ to meet community needs.

Conveners

Acting as the "connective tissue" of the local literacy ecosystem, libraries align efforts across community partners and refer patrons to specialized services—expanding their reach far beyond what any single institution could staff or fund alone.

Venues of Instruction

Leveraging their trusted physical presence in communities, libraries share space with external partners to deliver services such as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and high school equivalency preparation (e.g., General Educational Development [GED]), reducing barriers to participation for adults who might not otherwise access these programs.

Direct Service Providers

Offering end-to-end literacy instruction in areas where staff have expertise—most notably in digital literacy—libraries provide adaptive, "shoulder-to-shoulder" support that meets patrons at their point of need in real time.

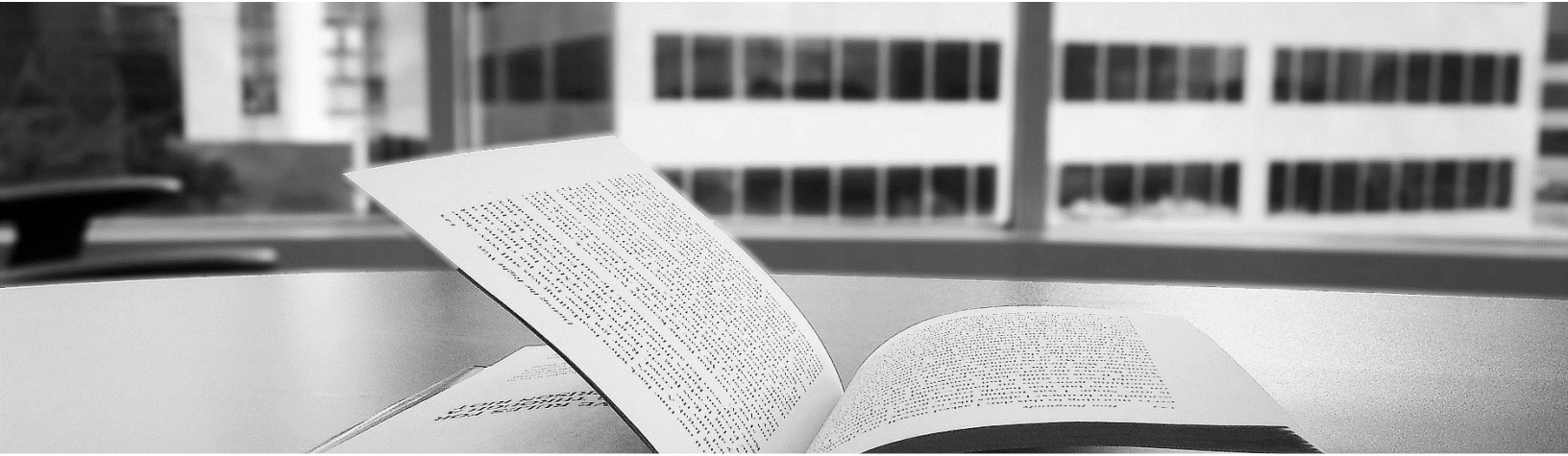
Ultimately, the findings from this scan are intended to inform the design of resources and training to better support and streamline the essential, yet demanding, role of libraries as literacy hubs within their communities.

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Acronyms & Abbreviations

AEFLA	Adult Education and Family Literacy Act
ALA	American Library Association
ALL IN	Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network
CCPL	Charleston County Public Library
CPL	Chicago Public Library
DL	Delaware Libraries
ESL /ESOL	English as a Second Language / English for Speakers of Other Languages
GED	General Educational Development (a high school equivalency credential)
Hi-Lo	High-interest, Low-reading-level (refers to beginner collections for adult readers)
IMLS	Institute of Museum and Library Services
IT	Information Technology
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
MLIS	Master of Library and Information Sciences
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NCFL	National Center for Families Learning
PACT time	Parent and Child Together time
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PD	Professional Development
SNAP	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
WIOA	Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act



Introduction

The Silent Crisis: Adult Literacy in America

The United States faces a crisis in adult literacy. An estimated 43 million adults, nearly one in five, below a third-grade level. What's more, 54% of adults have some need to boost their literacy proficiency, and 62% of the population have only minimal digital problem-solving skills (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).¹ In other words, a majority of adults would benefit from improving their reading and/or digital literacy skills in order to complete tasks such as accessing health care, finding and retaining work, and supporting their children's literacy skills.

An estimated 92% of jobs require digital skills, yet one-third of workers lack or have low digital skills due to historic underinvestment and structural inequities (Bergson-Shilcock & Taylor, 2023). Adults with lower literacy levels are generally 1.5 to 3 times more likely to have an adverse health condition than those with higher literacy levels (Dewalt et al., 2004). For adults with low literacy skills who are parents or caregivers, the consequences are twofold. The National Bureau of Economic Research estimates that 72% of children with parents who possess low literacy skills will experience low

¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), U.S. PIAAC 2012/2014, U.S. PIAAC 2017, U.S. PIAAC 2023. Our figures were extrapolated from the Survey of Adult Skills data gathered by the PIAAC. PIAAC was a large-scale, international, household study conducted under the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In the United States, PIAAC is funded and led by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). PIAAC ranks literacy levels on a scale of 1 (least literate) to 5 (most literate). Level 3 – which roughly equates to a minimum 6th grade reading level – is considered the minimum level for proficiency in literacy. PIAAC survey results indicate that 54% of American adults are at Level 2 or below, with just under 20% at Level 1 (equivalent to 3rd grade reading proficiency) or below. For more information, visit: <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/litproficiencylevel.asp>

literacy themselves, are more likely to live in poverty, and are five times more likely to drop out of high school (Strauss, 2016).

Despite this vast need and steep national-level consequences, the publicly funded system established in the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act within the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title II—while essential—serves less than 10% of the overall population of adults with low literacy, leaving a large gap in services.²

Libraries Bridging the Gap

As one of the nation's most trusted, enduring, and accessible institutions, libraries are increasingly thrust into the role of *de facto* first responders on the front line of the nation's adult literacy crisis. Their free access, welcoming community spaces, computer labs, and dedicated staff make them a logical place for literacy service providers to offer classes and support, and for adults to access help with reading, technology, and navigating health and social service needs.

Yet this role places great demand on libraries. They cannot meet community needs through institutional strength alone; instead, they must leverage a mix of strategies to bridge the gap between community demand and institutional capacity. This landscape scan examines how libraries are navigating that tension — surfacing their unique strengths, the considerable challenges they face, and the strategies they employ to function as effective literacy hubs within their communities. Ultimately, our goal is for the findings to inform the design of tools, training materials, and resources that strengthen libraries' capacity in this role.

Our Approach

In response to the growing recognition of libraries' role in meeting adult and family literacy needs, we conducted a landscape scan to examine current practices, challenges, and opportunities across three library systems: the Chicago Public Library, the Charleston County Public Library, and the Delaware Libraries.

Our exploration focuses on adult foundational education—the core skills and knowledge adults need for work, further education, supporting their families, and functioning effectively in their communities.

² WIOA-Title II programs served just over 1 million adults in the program year (PY) 2022–23, per the National Reporting System (NRS) for Adult Education's [Statewide Performance Report: Program Year 2022-2023](#) (U.S. Department of Education, NRS, 2023).

We situate this within the four-component model of family literacy developed by the National Center for Families Learning (NCFL, n.d.), which encompasses adult education, children's education, parent time, and parent-and-child-together (PACT) time. While children's programming and family engagement initiatives are abundant in libraries, practical guidance and empirical evidence related specifically to adult education services are far more limited. For this reason, our data collection, analysis, and findings focus primarily on the adult education component.

We define adult education expansively to include adults developing foundational reading and math skills, those pursuing a high school diploma or equivalency credential, adults learning English as an additional language, and those seeking to build digital, financial, health, or civic literacy skills.

To ensure comprehensive analysis, we employed a mixed methods approach drawing on four data sources:

1. **Literature Review:** Thematic analysis of 34 recent sources on adult education and literacy in libraries
2. **Survey:** Responses from branch managers (n=29) and library staff (n=137) across the three library systems
3. **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with nine library staff from the same three systems
4. **Focus Groups:** Semi-structured focus groups with staff of organizations that partner with libraries to deliver adult literacy services.

Throughout this report, findings are organized around three strategies libraries employ—often simultaneously—to function as literacy hubs in their communities: as **Conveners, as Venues of Instruction, and as Direct Service Providers**. These strategies, introduced in the Executive Summary, are woven throughout each section. For more detail on our methods, see Appendix 1.



An Overview of the Landscape



Before looking at specific elements of libraries' work in adult foundational education and tracing key steps in a patron's journey to services, this section presents a bird's-eye view of the landscape, discussing the following topics:

- How **our research stands** in the gap in literature looking broadly at adult literacy and education practices in libraries.
 - An overview of **the range of adult education and literacy services** libraries offer, and which are offered more and less frequently.
 - An introduction to **how libraries offer services**, via a mix of direct and partner-led offerings.
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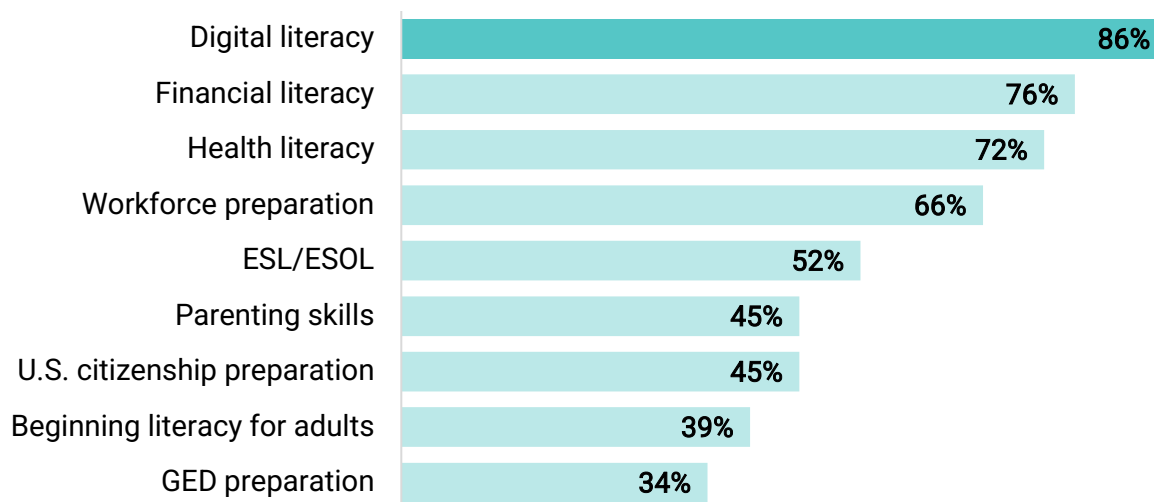
A Mostly Unmapped Landscape

As part of our literature review, we conducted a thorough search for articles related to adult education and literacy in libraries, using research databases as well as crowdsourcing articles from library and literacy partners. Despite our broad search, we identified only 34 publications from the last decade that met our criteria (see Appendix 2), and these were primarily secondary analyses and evaluations or discussions of policies or practices. Many articles focused on specific issues in just one or a few libraries. Generally, there is a dearth of comprehensive information on how libraries meet their communities' adult literacy needs.

Digital Literacy Dominates Adult Literacy Services in Libraries

At a basic level, we wanted to get a sense of what kinds of adult literacy services libraries are offering. Our survey gathered responses from 29 branch managers from the three systems—Charleston County Public Library, Chicago Public Library, and Delaware Libraries. The libraries they represented included a mix of rural, suburban, and urban branches and the number of paid staff ranged from three to forty. We asked branch managers whether their library provided nine different types of adult literacy services. Most of them provide a wide range of offerings, either directly or through partnerships, with digital literacy, financial literacy, health literacy, workforce preparation, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) among the most common.

Figure 1: Digital literacy is the most commonly offered service, among a wide range of services provided by 29 libraries in our sample.³



Digital literacy stands out as a staple of modern library work, with 86% of the libraries offering these services. Furthermore, as Lopez (2023) notes, by offering digital literacy, libraries are “at the forefront... of supporting families” (p. 330). Financial literacy, health literacy, and workforce preparation were other common services.

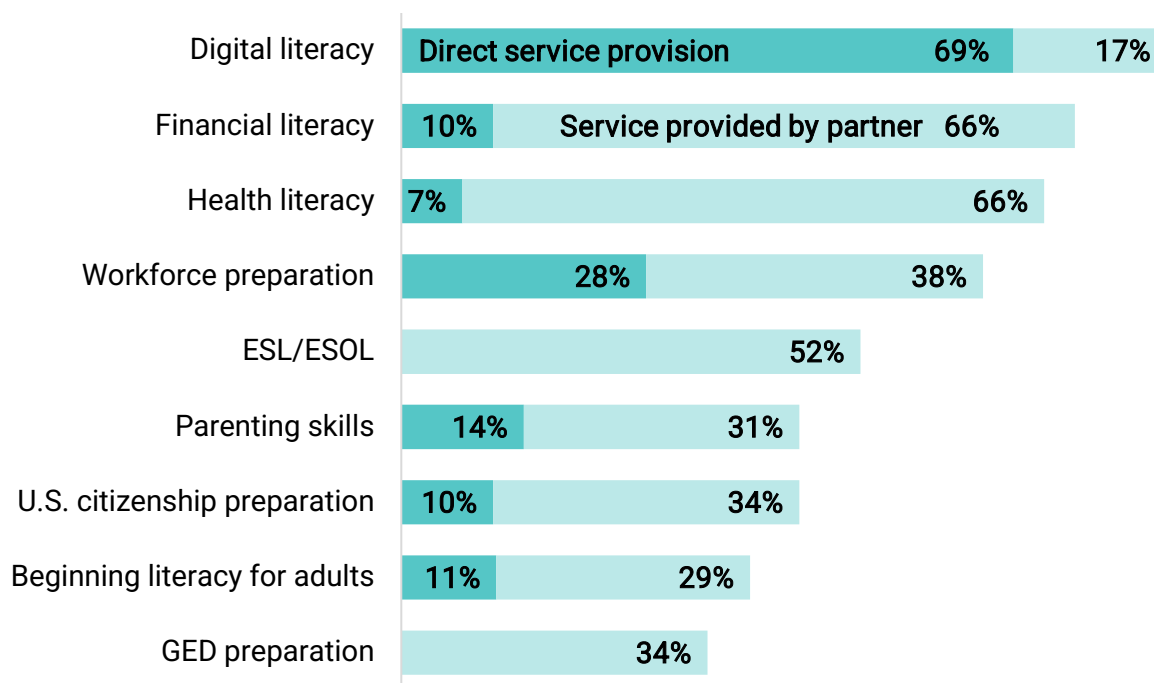
On average, each library offered five different types of adult education services. However, as you’ll see throughout this report, we find a high degree of variability across libraries, with a few branches (three) not offering any adult literacy services, while at the other end of the spectrum, another three reported offering all nine different types of services.

Libraries Work with Partners to Meet Adult Literacy Needs

In addition to exploring what kinds of adult learning opportunities libraries offer, we also explored *how* libraries provide these services—whether directly or via partners.

³ Proportion of 29 branch managers reporting that their library offered different adult education services, either directly or via partners.

Figure 2: Most libraries provide digital literacy services directly, but the bulk of adult literacy services in libraries are offered via partners.⁴



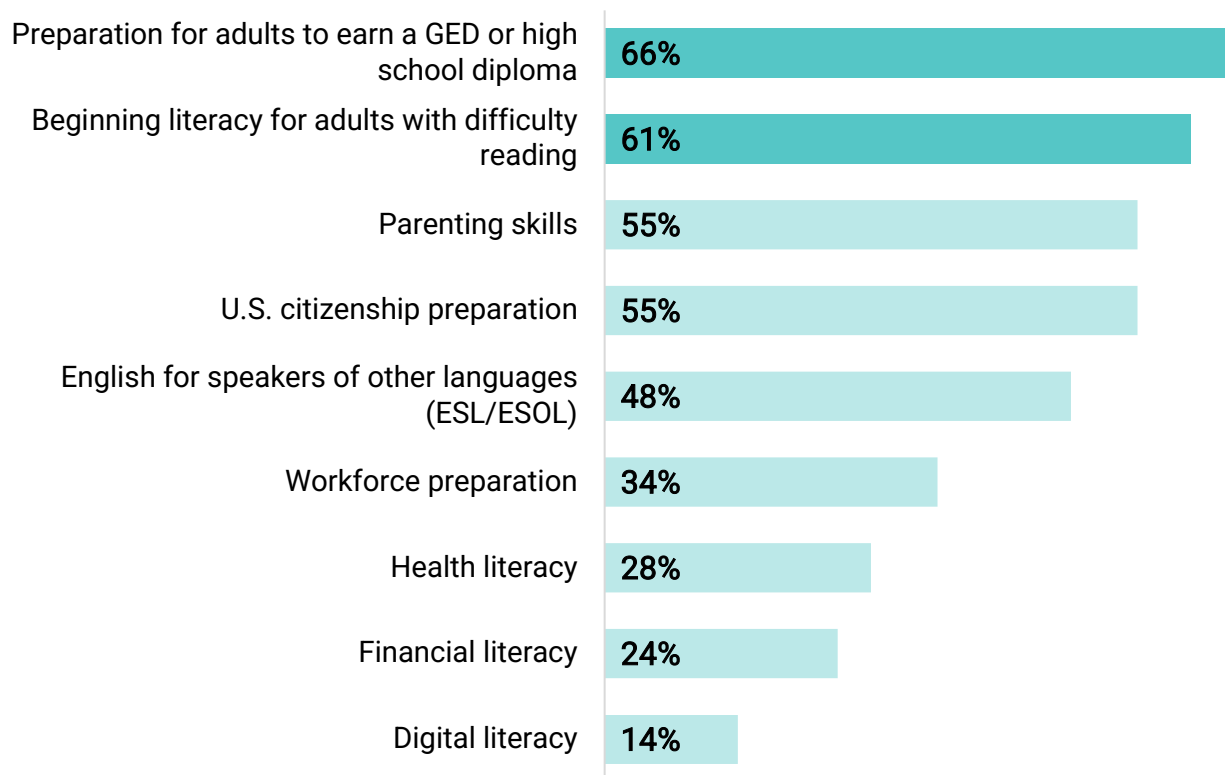
Unlike other areas, digital literacy is primarily provided directly by library staff (80% of those offering it do so directly) through digital navigation and formal classes. On the other hand, not a single branch manager reported offering ESOL or GED preparation directly, and only 10% of branches offering health literacy and 14% of branches offering financial literacy did so directly.

We discuss partnerships in greater detail later in this report in the Partnerships and Referrals section.

Importantly, our findings not only tell us what services libraries provide, but also which adult literacy services are not provided or supported. In more than half of libraries, the staff claimed that GED preparation, beginning literacy for adults, U.S. citizenship preparation, and parenting skills were not part of their services or partnerships.

⁴ Proportion of branch managers reporting that their library offered different adult education services, by direct service and provision with partners.

Figure 3: GED and beginning literacy top the list of services *not* provided by libraries (as reported by 29 branch managers).



There may be adults in communities who need this support from their local libraries. It's possible, too, that these services are provided by other community partners. In either case, this shows some areas where libraries can map needs and resources to employ one of the three aforementioned strategies—convener, venue of instruction, or direct service provider—to fill gaps.



Libraries in the Middle

Strengths, Challenges and Tensions



Libraries bring unique strengths to adult education in their communities, yet they face knotty challenges and persistent tensions. These strengths, challenges, and tensions shape multiple aspects of adult education and literacy programming, library work, and patrons' journeys. These observations frame the discussion and recommendations in later sections. Our aim is to showcase and honor libraries' existing strengths and help them use these even more effectively to support adult literacy. Simultaneously, we recognize that real challenges and constraints exist, and our recommendations are developed with an awareness of these limitations.

Strengths

When we asked library managers and staff in a survey, *"What is a strength of your library in serving adults with foundational education needs?"* the following themes emerged from their response as key areas of strength:

- **Staff:** Nearly half of all respondents mentioned or alluded to staff as a core strength in libraries' ability to serve adults with basic education needs—a level of consistency that highlights the people who work at libraries as the essential ingredient in any recipe for adult education. There are multiple dimensions of this strength and different ways in which library staff may catalyze positive impact. These included their patient and open attitude, dedication, willingness to help, and specific technical skills and knowledge, including those with specialized roles (e.g., social workers, cyber navigators).
- **Specific service offerings:** Following staff-related strengths, the most frequently occurring theme was specific service offerings. Within this group of responses, digital literacy was the most frequently mentioned pattern that confirms our findings described above and the literature's emphasis on this aspect of adult literacy. However, the range of services cited reflects the full range of offerings different branches provide, and other specific services mentioned included ESOL, GED, and career-related services.
- **Responsiveness:** An overlapping theme that arose in many responses related to both staff and services was responsiveness to community and/or individual needs. Services were a strength when they met specific needs, and staff are especially effective because they offer tailored support.
- **Holdings, resources, and technology assets:** Another common source of strength was the variety of resources that support learning, including online resources, specific learning tools (e.g., Northstar Digital Literacy), computers, and Wi-Fi.
- **Partnerships and referrals:** Library staff also saw high value in partnerships that allow for service provision and staff's ability to connect patrons to other service providers to meet adult

education needs. These partnerships enable libraries to act as literacy hubs when they employ strategies like being conveners and providing venues of instruction.

- **Programming:** In addition to specific service offerings, a less frequent but clear pattern arose related to general programming. This also included events and one-on-one support or appointment opportunities.
- **Physical space and location:** Libraries' physical infrastructure within communities came up as a strength for offering services and providing a safe space. Some respondents also cited the existence of multiple branches or locations as a strength in meeting adult learners' needs.

Underlying all of these strengths is a shared institutional identity. Across data sources, library staff consistently framed adult literacy not as a peripheral or optional service, but as core to who they are and what they stand for. As one participant noted,

We see our libraries as this huge open door to the community and a gateway into the communities that we serve, that people touch the library for the whole family system many times.

This collective sense of purpose shapes decision-making around partnerships, staffing, and programming priorities—and sustains engagement with adult learners and partners even in the face of significant resource constraints.

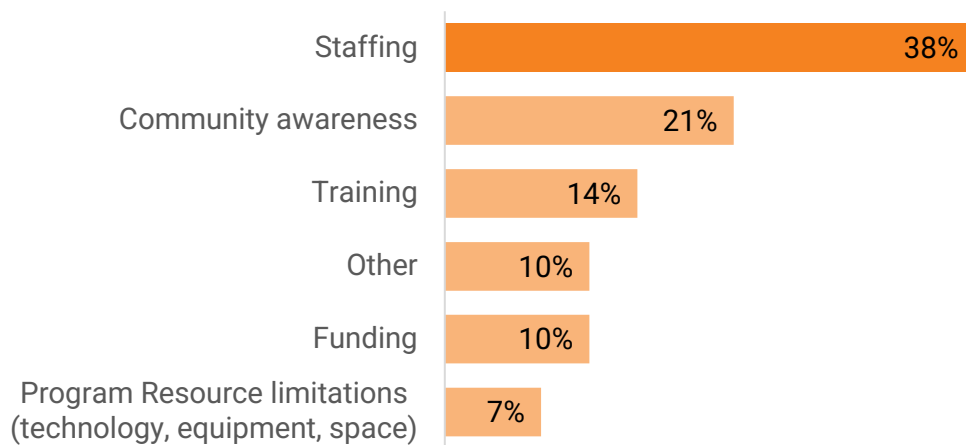
Challenges, Needs, and Areas for Improvement

Our research gave participants multiple opportunities to share their ideas for improving adult education and literacy, their priority needs, and the key challenges they face.

Branch managers were also asked to select “the biggest challenge your library encounters in offering adult foundational education services” from a list of common challenges. Staffing was by far the most popular response,⁵ followed by community awareness.

⁵ Notably, staffing was selected as the biggest strength *and* challenge. While we cannot pinpoint the exact reason, our interpretation is that library managers recognize the incredible value of staff, and see that being able to hire more staff and staff with specialized skills (like speaking multiple languages or having backgrounds in education or social work) might boost their ability to meet adult literacy needs.

Figure 4: Staffing was most frequently cited as the biggest challenge among 29 branch managers.



All survey respondents—both library branch managers and staff—had the opportunity to respond to the open-ended question, “What is one area of your services you would like to improve in order to better serve adults with foundational education needs?”

The most prevalent areas for improvement were expanding service offerings and staff-related opportunities.

- **Expanding Service Offerings and Resources (Most Needed):** Staff clearly see a need to increase both the variety and breadth of what the library offers. Within this theme, there were clusters of responses: those mentioning specific content areas or populations, general calls for expanded offerings, and endorsements of the need for learning resources or materials. Library staff desired to expand programming, especially noting needs related to specific topics and populations that require more specialized support, such as to support adults with basic literacy needs and English language learners, offer more in-depth computer help, or provide GED programs. Another sub-theme was a desire to expand programming scope and mode to include more library-led programs, increased frequency of programs, and a greater availability of in-person programming. A third sub-theme was a call from respondents for additional learning resources, including “Hi-Lo” reading sections and digital practice-test databases.
- **Staff Capacity and Resources (Second Major Area):** The second major area for improvement related to human resources and library staff’s ability, knowledge, and availability to effectively serve adult learners. Within this theme, responses indicated a strong need for more professional development, training on adult learning principles, and best practices for serving adults with foundational needs. However, while training offers the promise of better equipping staff with knowledge and skills to meet patrons’ adult literacy needs, training also requires staff time, which respondents noted was in short supply. A notable portion of respondents clearly articulated the need for more people—staff, teachers, or specialists—or staff time to run programs and provide the one-on-one help often required to meet patrons’ needs. This is a

crucial practical barrier to improvement. Respondents suggested improvements in response to challenges including shortages for core librarian roles, challenges serving patrons with complex needs (pointing to the need for social workers on staff), and the effort required to build and manage programs. Language also emerged as a staff-related sub-theme: there was interest among staff to improve their own language skills, as well as a call for hiring more staff who speak non-English languages. Finally, the response pattern also highlighted a need for clearer, accessible, and up-to-date internal informational resources for staff to better equip them to meet adult learners' needs.

- **Outreach, Engagement, and Accessibility:** Staff expressed a need to improve outreach efforts to identify and connect with target populations and better advertise existing programs. They also cited barriers to engagement, including ineffective marketing, difficulty finding digital resources on the library website, and external factors like lack of public transportation.
- **Partnerships and Referrals:** Given that many libraries rely heavily on partnerships to offer services, it is not surprising that a desire to establish or strengthen partnerships arose as a pattern. Respondents also mentioned a need to improve formal referral processes for both incoming and outgoing patrons.
- **System-Level Opportunities for Improvement:** A final theme included suggestions for system-wide coordination, resource-sharing across branches, and addressing variability in staffing across different areas.

Tensions

These challenges, as well as evolving expectations for the role of the public library in today's society, create a number of tensions and paradoxes that libraries and their staff must grapple with. These include the following:

- **Libraries' traditional role vs. evolving role on the front lines of social needs:** While the public library's role has historically centered on information and knowledge, libraries increasingly find themselves expected to meet challenges far removed from this history and that emerge as social support for marginalized groups fray. In describing the role complexities that today's libraries face, Howard (2019) notes:

[Libraries'] commitment to inclusivity, along with a persistent ability to adapt to changing times, has kept public libraries vital in an era of divisive politics and disruptive technological change. But it has also put pressure on them to be all things to all people, and to meet a vast range of social needs without correspondingly vast

budgets. These days, a branch librarian might run story hour in the morning, assist with a research project at lunchtime, and in the afternoon administer life-saving medical aid to a patron who's overdosed on the premises.

- **Librarian training vs. patron needs:** Similarly, most library staff have backgrounds in library sciences and information management, which is more aligned with the traditional role of the library. These skills are still important (libraries do still manage large amounts of information and help patrons with research), but they are no longer sufficient to meet the vast array of needs that library staff face on a daily basis.
- **Branch autonomy vs. leveraging system strengths and standards:** Most library branches operate fairly autonomously, which is critical to enabling them to be responsive to community needs at the hyper-local level. However, at the same time, branch autonomy and variability means that libraries can miss out on opportunities to create efficiencies of scale and replicability—which are especially key when resources are limited.
- **Responsiveness vs. measurement:** Personalization and community-responsiveness are strengths but can inhibit the program monitoring and evaluation needed to secure funding, and prioritization of resources. For example, ad-hoc, just-in-time support is one of the key ways that libraries support adult learners, but this type of support—let alone its long-term impact—cannot be tidily tracked and turned into the kind of crisp impact statistics that inspire donors.
- **Partnerships vs. control:** Partners expand what a library can do and bring diverse areas of expertise, but reliance on partners means that libraries have less control over what and how they offer services. Libraries may know of community needs but have no partner available to meet those needs.

Navigating the Tensions: Three Strategies for Libraries as Literacy Hubs

To effectively function as literacy hubs within resource constraints, libraries employ and mix-and-match different strategies to meet adult and family literacy needs in the community:

1. Conveners: Connective tissue in the community

As conveners, libraries act as the connective tissue of the local literacy ecosystem—not by delivering every service themselves, but by knowing what exists, who needs it, and how to make the connection. Rather than functioning as stand-alone program sites, libraries in this role build and maintain the infrastructure that allows learners to access specialized instruction and community support that the

library alone cannot staff or fund. This requires a deep, localized understanding of community demographics, available resources, and service gaps—and a proactive orientation toward mapping those elements together. Crucially, convening is not passive coordination; it involves cultivating and sustaining bidirectional relationships with partners, establishing clear referral pathways, and ensuring that when a patron walks through the door with a need the library cannot meet directly, there is a trusted, warm handoff waiting rather than a cold referral to a brochure.

2. Venues of Instruction: Embedded, accessible, physical institutions

As venues of instruction, libraries leverage their most fundamental asset—their physical presence in communities—to reduce barriers to participation in adult literacy education. By opening their doors to external partners, libraries make it possible for adults to access specialized programming like ESOL instruction and GED preparation in a space that is already familiar, trusted, and free of the bureaucratic hurdles that can deter participation in more formal educational settings. This strategy allows libraries to play a meaningful role in supporting high-demand services without requiring internal staff to serve as instructors or curriculum developers. The library's contribution in this role is the trust, accessibility, and neutrality that the institution carries, making a partner's program viable in a given community.

3. Direct Service Providers: End-to-end literacy instruction

As direct service providers, libraries move beyond coordination and space-sharing to deliver literacy instruction themselves. This is the most resource-intensive of the three strategies and the one most dependent on staff capacity and expertise. In practice, it is most evident in digital literacy, where library staff have developed deep, consistent competence and where the nature of the need—immediate, practical, and highly individualized—aligns well with libraries' strengths. This can take two forms: structured, classroom-based programming led by library staff, and adaptive, just-in-time support where staff function as digital navigators meeting patrons at their specific point of need in real time. Many libraries employ both approaches simultaneously, calibrating their response to the nature of the need and the capacity of their staff. In either form, direct service requires staff who are not only knowledgeable but empathetic, patient, and skilled at identifying the literacy needs behind a patron's presenting question.

It's not like [the library patron says,] "I want to take a computer class." It's more common [that they say they are] here because of a very specific issue, and then usually in the course of helping the person, that's when you say, "Hey, by the way, we have a class coming up."

In the remainder of this report, we will highlight insights and recommendations regarding the three strategies that libraries leverage to fulfill their role as literacy hubs. Specifically, we will explore libraries' strengths and challenges in responding to local needs, sustaining partnerships, supporting staff, and engaging adults with literacy needs, and offer key recommendations to further streamline and bolster their efforts.



Community Responsiveness



This section focuses on our insights into community needs for adult literacy on the following themes:

- The **library’s evolving role** and highlighting the tension between ever-changing roles of libraries and availability of staff resources and training.
- **Strategies for addressing this changing role.** This includes two key strategies:
 - Libraries' shared mission and vision can support partnership development to address community needs.
 - Adults' literacy needs can be integrated into family literacy services.
- **How libraries’ changing role affects the goal of maintaining a low barrier to access** while collecting data needed to advance efforts that meet community needs.

A library's effectiveness as a literacy hub hinges on a deep, localized understanding of its community's demographics including languages spoken, educational attainment, and economic circumstances. Rather than uniform mandates, branch-level autonomy allows services to adapt to neighborhood needs, such as offering popular Excel classes or creating safe spaces for immigrants. This responsiveness is relational, driven by interpersonal connections and staff who reflect the community and build trust over time. Increasingly, effective libraries are moving away from formal, top-down methods for service design and outreach, instead relying on community-driven approaches that ensure services are relevant, accessible, and reflective of the specific needs and cultural context of the populations they serve. Those who do attempt to formally identify potential learners typically rely on a mix of partner referrals (41%) and program participation (38%), though many learners ultimately self-identify through informal interactions like reference interviews.⁶ This iterative, "place-based" approach allows libraries to map local needs to existing services, ensuring that the most vulnerable patrons can navigate the literacy ecosystem within a secure and familiar environment.

Conveners...	Venues of Instruction...	Direct Service Providers...
conduct community assessments and asset mapping to identify gaps in the local literacy ecosystem.	allocate a safe space to partners for programming and are prepared to educate partners on the needs of their community, and how they make space utilization decisions.	design and deliver programs that reflect hyper-local neighborhood needs, from outreach to scheduling to delivery, and continuously re-evaluate according to community feedback loops.

⁶ A reference interview is a structured approach library staff use to understand a patron’s core needs and interests. Smith & Wong (2016) define the reference interview as the "conversation between a member of the library reference staff and a library user for the purpose of clarifying the user’s needs and aiding the user in meeting those needs," while (Reitz, n.d.) defines it as "the interpersonal communication that occurs between a reference librarian and a library user to determine the person's specific information need(s), which may turn out to be different from the reference question as initially posed."

A patron's journey truly starts with the library's understanding of the community, including the ecosystem of other services (schools, adult education, workforce agencies, social services, clinics, cultural institutions, and nonprofits). This knowledge of needs and resources is the foundation for mapping local needs to services and shaping outreach and implementation strategies. Participants in the landscape scan expressed their own desires to gain a deeper understanding of adult literacy needs. Many managers noted that they had to conduct their own demographic research upon starting at a new branch to understand the unique "strengths and areas of need" in their neighborhood, as central systems do not always provide localized training for every distinct community.

When asked what they would like to improve to meet such needs, participants shared the following responses:

“ improve outreach efforts *to properly gauge the needs* of patrons in the community who may not visit our branch but could benefit from these services.

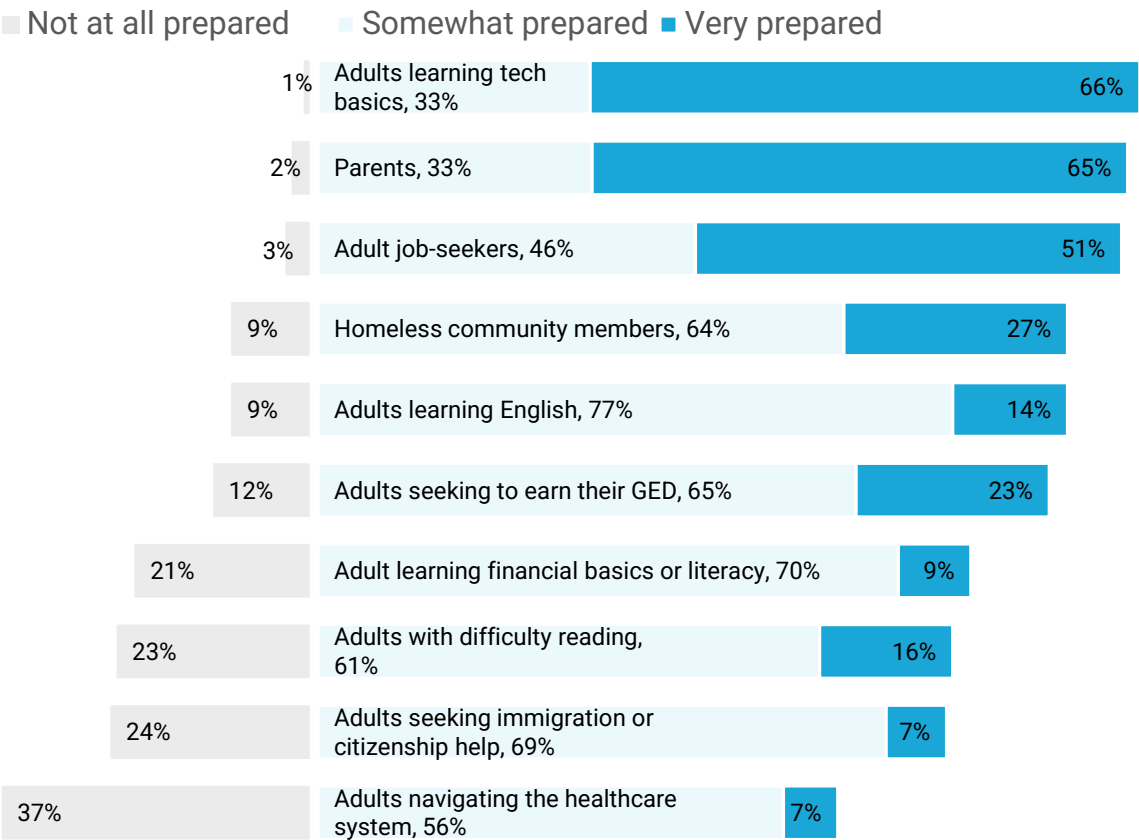
“ find the *people* who need these services.

“ conduct a community assessment to *determine needs*.

Unpacking the Library's Evolving Role

A major finding across all data sources is the tension between the library's evolving mission and the professional training of its staff. Libraries are increasingly filling gaps in the social safety net, blurring the lines between "library work" and "social work" and even acting as advocates to get ahead of these problems (Schwartz, 2020). Some libraries employ social workers or partner with their local human services agency to provide services in the library where library staff cannot meet the need or demand. Also, some schools are now offering joint programs for a Master of Library and Information Science and Master of Social Work in response to this need. In our scan, we found that while staff feel prepared to help job seekers and those learning digital skills, nearly 1 in 4 staff reported feeling "not at all prepared" to help adults with difficulty reading, those seeking immigration help, and those navigating the healthcare system. Branch managers cited staffing as the single biggest challenge in offering adult foundational education, while staff expressed a struggle to reconcile their roles as "information expert" with the perceived need for a role as teacher.

Figure 5: Library staff feel at least somewhat prepared to meet the needs of most patrons but feel less confident supporting some adult learning needs.



Some traced this back to the preparation they received in Master of Library and Information Sciences (MLIS) programs and the daily demands of the job. One branch manager articulated this tension clearly,

My staff have Master's [degrees] in Library and Information Science. They are not teachers. We weren't trained in adult basic education classes... I think people are coming to us, expecting we personally can teach them how to read... However, I was not ever taught that in library school."

While another staff member noted,

I think the profession is in need of another reckoning. We're becoming more social workers, too.

Of course, the landscape scan highlighted the limited resources that libraries have to work with. Financial limitations are explicitly linked to the inability to acquire necessary technology, maintain adequate staffing levels, and expand physical infrastructure to accommodate demand. Participants describe a systemic discrepancy between the desire to meet patrons' diverse needs and the "bare bones" reality of current budgetary allocations. This constraint often necessitates a reliance on external grants or "glue money," which may come with unrealistic reporting expectations, further complicating the library's ability to sustain the consistent, high-impact programming required for adult learners. So, meeting the need will require a creative, flexible, and strategic approach that reconciles the demands with the reality of resource constraints.

Vision and Commitment

Participants repeatedly articulated a shared sense of purpose regarding the library's role in serving adult learners. These expressions go beyond individual acts of helpfulness or isolated programs and instead reflect an institutional orientation grounded in values such as access, inclusion, responsiveness, and community responsibility. Libraries frame adult literacy as aligned with who they are and what they stand for, rather than as an optional or peripheral service. This shared commitment appears to shape decision-making around partnerships, staffing practices, programming priorities, and the willingness to adapt services to meet adult learners where they are. This collective vision supports sustained engagement with adult learners and partners even in the face of resource constraints.

 *Our library offers a multifaceted approach to the learning and support by providing access to a wide array of reading materials both in-house and digitally. We offer targeted programs in the areas of finances, health, literacy, history, and cultural arts. In addition, we have knowledgeable staff dedicated to ... providing personalized support to help with building a strong education foundation.*

 *And as we partner, I think we see our libraries as this huge open door to the community and a gateway into the communities that we serve, that people touch the library for the whole family system many times.*

One notable pattern observed is a shift away from reliance on purely formal, top-down methods for service design and community outreach. Instead, effective engagement is heavily informed by deep local observation and a genuine, community-driven orientation. For example, library staff described ways they had adapted their approaches or created resources or programming in direct response to patterns of patron requests. This approach ensures that services are relevant, accessible, and truly reflective of the specific needs and cultural context of the populations they serve, fostering greater trust and utilization.

A consistently highlighted need across the library landscape is the challenge of effectively responding to the needs of multilingual patrons. This is not a single issue, but a multi-faceted demand that impacts several operational areas:

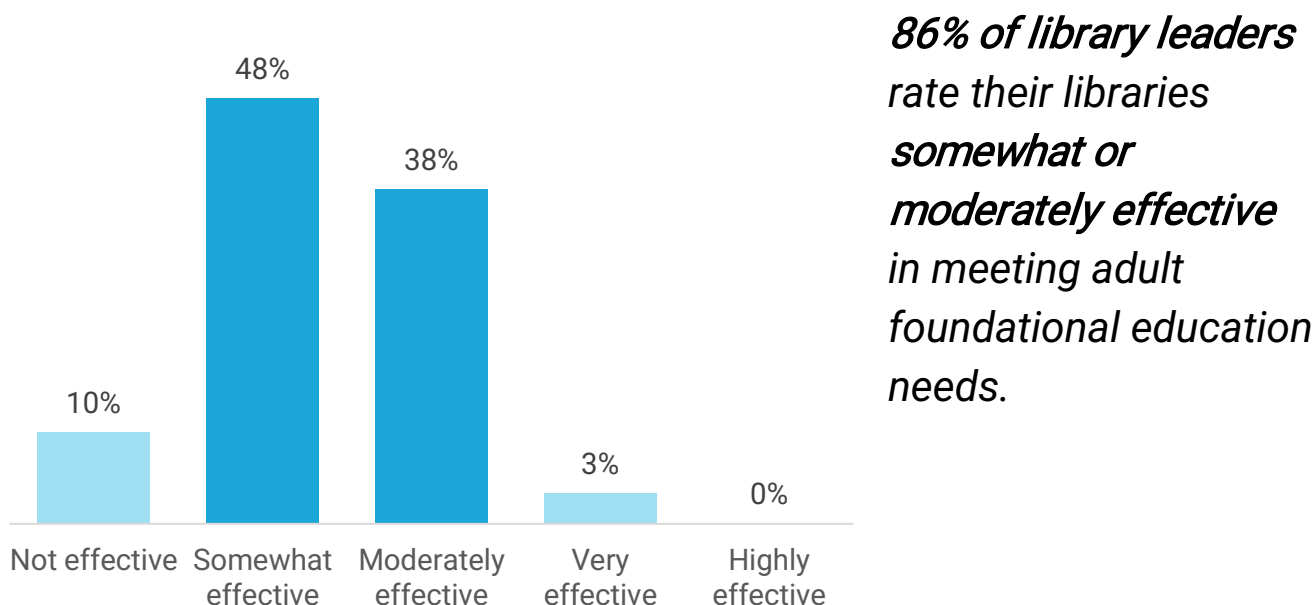
- **Staffing:** There is a persistent need for staff who possess fluency in key community languages or who are trained to effectively serve patrons with limited English proficiency.
- **Staff Professional Development (PD):** Targeted training is essential to equip all staff with the cultural competence, awareness, and specific skills necessary to navigate cross-cultural communication and service delivery.
- **Material and Resource Needs:** Libraries require better access to, and implementation of, robust material resources, including on-demand translation tools, translated informational signage, and collections that reflect the languages spoken by the community.
- **Outreach Strategies:** Outreach efforts must be re-envisioned to move beyond English-centric communication, utilizing channels and materials that are accessible and culturally resonant for multilingual populations.

A central strategy identified for navigating patron needs—particularly those related to multilingual support and specialized social services—is the cultivation of meaningful partnerships. By strategically collaborating with external organizations—such as local non-profits, educational institutions, social service agencies, and cultural groups—libraries can expand the scope of what they are able to offer. This partnership model transforms the library into a crucial hub that not only provides resources directly but also facilitates warm handoffs and referrals to specialized services beyond the library's internal capacity. This aspect of the library's role as a literacy hub is detailed further in the Partnerships and Referrals section of this report.

Responding to Adults' Needs as a Family Literacy Strategy

Library branch managers see room for improvement in meeting adult literacy needs. When asked to rate effectiveness on a 5-point scale, 86% of branch managers chose "somewhat effective," or "moderately effective."

Figure 6: Library branch managers' perceptions regarding their library's ability to meet adult foundational education needs.

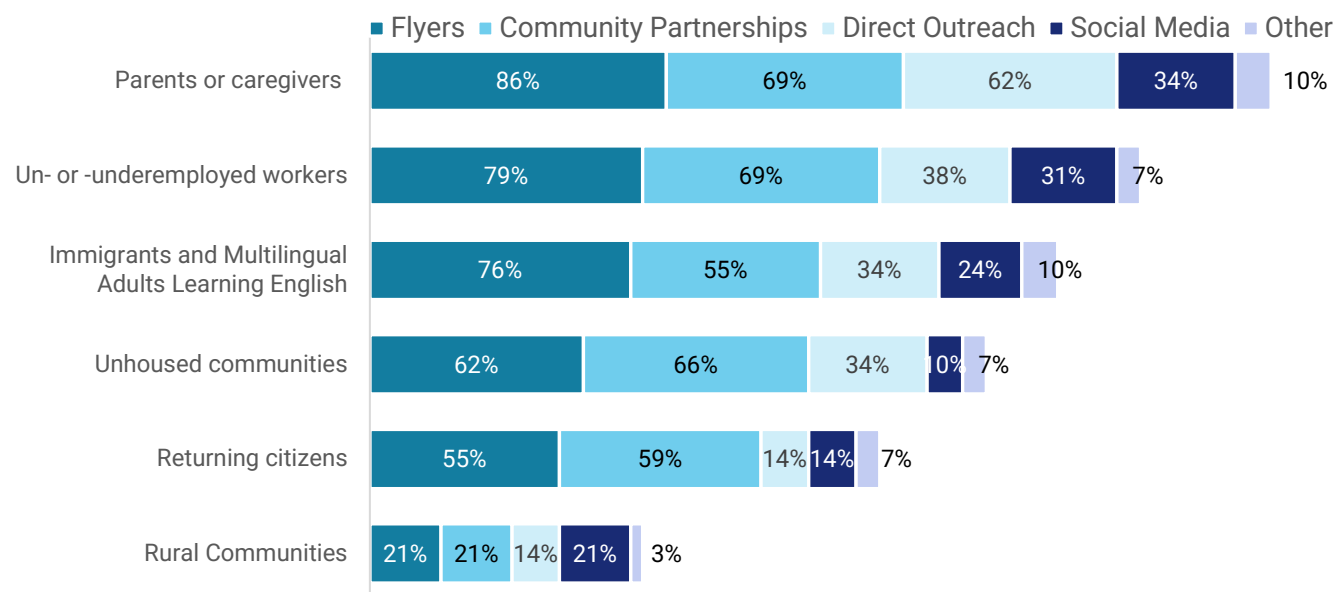


When branch managers answered questions about outreach to different populations, the group most targeted for outreach was parents and caregivers. Libraries also used the highest number of methods to reach this group. This focus on parents and caregivers is supported by the ample literature we found on family engagement and was further confirmed in the qualitative data. Yet despite this outreach emphasis, a relatively low proportion of libraries reported offering parenting skills services.

One potential explanation for this mismatch is that parents and caregivers may already be targeted for outreach through existing children's services and programming. Another possibility is that libraries may find it easier to define and design targeted outreach for parents and caregivers and the specific services aimed at them, compared to other target groups. Given that supporting parents' own literacy is a cornerstone of the family literacy model, this represents a natural avenue for growth.

The next most targeted groups after parents and caregivers were un- or underemployed workers, and immigrants or multilingual English learners. Fewer libraries conducted outreach to rural communities; however, this finding could be an artifact of our sample composition, which included many urban library branches for whom rural outreach would not be applicable.

Figure 7: Portion of branch managers reporting outreach to different populations by different outreach methods.



Open Doors vs. Data Collection

Nearly one in five respondents identified community members needing adult foundational education services through "other" informal methods, such as reference interviews and general customer service exchanges. The most common data tracked were participants in adult education (71%), participation in adult education-focused activities (64%), and participation in family literacy activities (57%). Tracking was primarily endorsed by branch managers for evaluating program effectiveness and making improvements. Other key purposes included reporting outcomes to stakeholders (64%) and informing funding proposals/reports (57%).

A hallmark of the public library's mission is its role as a high-trust, low-barrier institution. Unlike many social service agencies that require extensive intake forms, state-issued identification, or proof of address, libraries often choose to "open their doors" without formal requirements. This practice is an institutional strength, particularly for serving vulnerable populations like unhoused individuals, returning citizens who may lack stable documentation, or immigrants who feel uncertain about what public services they can access with their work authorization or status. By removing these hurdles, libraries create a safe space where adult learners feel comfortable walking in for "shoulder-to-shoulder" navigation with a trusted staff member.

However, this commitment to low-barrier access creates tension when it comes to data collection and reporting. Because libraries prioritize patron privacy and ease of entry, they often struggle to collect the consistent, compelling data required to demonstrate impact or secure certain types of funding. Our scan found that tracking participation in adult literacy services is currently inconsistent and uneven across branches.

The lack of a standardized tracking system means that many libraries are operating with only a partial picture of their impact:

- **Split Practices:** Branch managers are divided nearly fifty-fifty on whether they track adult foundational education participation, with 45% reporting that they do and 52% reporting that they do not.
- **Branch Autonomy:** No library system surveyed had consistent answers from all branch managers regarding tracking. This could suggest that these decisions are made at the local branch level rather than through a coordinated system-wide effort.
- **The Funding Disconnect:** While libraries prioritize the "intangibles"—like the empathy and patience of their staff—partners have expressed that the lack of hard data can be a barrier to securing the very funding needed to sustain those services.

Ultimately, if a library cannot identify the specific needs of its patrons through data, it becomes harder to prioritize which services to expand. Moving forward, the challenge for libraries will be to develop "low-touch" data collection methods that respect patron anonymity while still providing the evidence needed to prove that libraries are a key component of the adult literacy ecosystem.

Spotlight: Charleston County Public Library

Reporting through Storytelling

At Charleston County Public Library (CCPL), surveying is one of the primary ways we harness anecdotal feedback from our community. Beyond the general feedback forms available on our website, we make a concerted effort to collect regular data on specific offerings, ranging from our teen volunteer programs to our technology classes.

A key example of this strategy is our story time survey, which we conduct twice a year. By using targeted timelines rather than constant polling, we successfully avoid "survey burnout" for both our patrons and our staff. These surveys do more than just collect demographic data; they provide a dedicated space for families to share what they value most about the program. This qualitative data allows us to build a vivid picture of our impact through direct quotes, such as:

"I love a story time that offers play time with toys after! It allows my child to have free play time with other kids, which is so valuable."

"Super interactive, research-based approach... staff is super knowledgeable about child development and literacy development in littles, and genuinely cares about building relationships with those in attendance."

Our Free and Fresh Community Fridge program also utilizes surveys to understand how the initiative supports healthy eating and introduces patrons to new ingredients. Because these forms include an optional field for contact information, we can follow up with participants for deeper insights. This has connected us with patrons who are eager to share their stories in articles and news features, highlighting the positive real-world impact of the program.

We also look for feedback in more creative corners. For instance, we invite patrons to leave voicemails after listening to our Dial-A-Story excerpts, giving them a platform to review stories or suggest new titles.

Ultimately, social media remains one of our most successful tools for storytelling. By featuring patron interviews that highlight specific branches or services, we lean into our greatest strength: our community. Our patrons are our most effective advocates, and by giving them a platform to share their experiences, we are able to connect more deeply with the county we serve. As an example, in [this Instagram reel](#), we introduce Joy, a valued member of the community and regular patron.

For more, see [ProLiteracy's AEFL Week 2025 Awareness Toolkit](#) to make the case for adult education and family literacy and Karen Eber's TED Talk, [Why Storytelling Is More Trustworthy than Presenting Data](#).



Outreach and Engagement

Making people aware of adult literacy services and supporting them with engagement in those services are critical. This section addresses what we learned about libraries' outreach and engagement efforts for adult literacy services, including:

- How library staff aim to **increase awareness** of their services through outreach efforts.
 - How libraries **meet patrons where they are** by adjusting strategies based on patrons' preferences, assets, and needs.
 - How library staff aspire to **maintain engagement** with adult literacy learners, especially when it comes to the use of self-directed, digital learning resources.
-

To appropriately leverage their strengths as trusted, welcoming spaces with responsive staff and a wealth of resources, libraries must ensure that target populations are aware of what is available and know how to engage with these resources and services. The existing literature highlights the challenges of reaching and engaging key groups that might benefit from adult literacy services. Our scan suggested that adults in the community may not be aware of adult literacy services, that libraries may struggle to provide relevant services, and that there may be challenges in connecting with and maintaining relationships with community members, especially those in hard-to-reach populations. Furthermore, the stigma associated with participating in adult education services might prevent or lessen the likelihood for participation (Salusky et al., 2021). Other demands on an adult's time (e.g., caregiving, work schedules) are obstacles to engagement that have been seen consistently across the adult literacy landscape (Patterson, 2018), but operating under this constraint boosts engagement and rapport-building when the adult can actually drop in and seek help at the library on their own schedules.

Outreach responsibilities are distributed across multiple levels of library systems, with central offices and regional hubs sharing duties with individual branches. This structure creates an inherent tension between standardization and local responsiveness. Libraries aim to offer consistent baseline services across branches while recognizing that branches vary considerably in size, staffing, and community context. Systems generally navigate this by preserving branch-level autonomy in outreach and service design while maintaining certain system-wide expectations. Capacity differences across branches remain a practical challenge, however, smaller or less-resourced branches may require additional central support to sustain outreach efforts comparable to those of larger, better-resourced locations.

When asked, "What is one area of your services you would like to improve in order to better serve adults with foundational education needs?" 20 responses related to outreach, indicating a need for more proactive, targeted efforts to identify adults with foundational education needs and encourage their use of library services:

“ We have engaging programs that the community is often unaware of. Currently, the library is working [on] revamping how it advertises adult literacy programs.

“ [We need] better placed and more relevant advertising to let patrons know of [the] existence of these services.

“ We have the resources and the staff able to help them. Getting those adults into the building and aware of our services is quite lacking.

“ [We need to] definitely increase the marketing and frequency of these programs. The most common problems we run into are people not showing up to programs because we really only advertise through Facebook and paper flyers. This means we only reach people who are already in the library. However, sometimes when programs do get advertised properly we fill up quickly and cannot meet demand. There's not really a balance and it's always one or the other.

Learner Identification

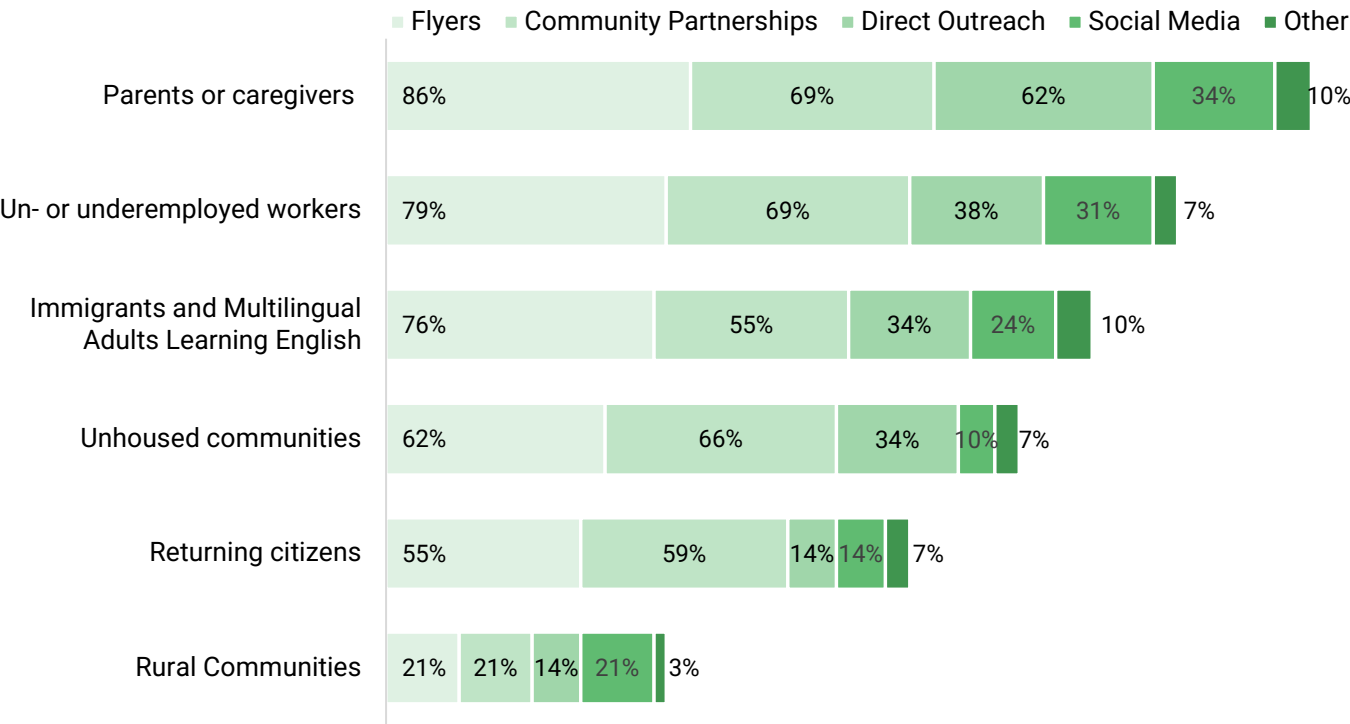
Branch managers were asked, “How does your library identify community members who may need adult foundational education services?” and they were given the option to select multiple methods. Nearly half (45%) of branch managers indicated they had “no specific method” for identifying potential learners. On the other hand, those who did report trying to identify learners typically selected at least two different methods. Referrals from local partners (41%) and literacy program participation (38%) were the most common strategies to identify learners, followed by library card sign-up.

Respondents who selected “other” and wrote in their own responses tended to indicate informal and responsive methods like, “Through reference interviews, patron inquiries into available resources, general customer service exchanges,” and “Interactions that are typically initiated by the patron; questions about how to fill out a resume, how to use the computer, how to file taxes, etc.” These clarifications in our survey responses echo our findings from interviews and the literature review, which emphasize the unique just-in-time, tailored supports that libraries offer.

Outreach Methods and Target Populations

We asked branch managers what kinds of outreach methods they used to target different groups of patrons. Flyers were the most common form of outreach to specific audiences regarding adult foundational education, followed by community partnerships.

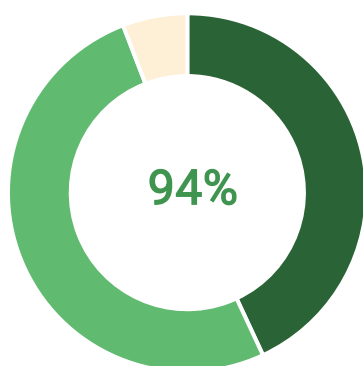
Figure 8: Portion of branch managers reporting outreach to different populations by different outreach methods.



Asked in a separate question how they publicized events with partners, branch managers reported most frequently using flyers or posters displayed in the community (82%), library website or calendar (79%), word of mouth (68%), and announcements via partner organizations (68%).

Building Awareness through Outreach

Generally, library staff feel *somewhat successful* in reaching out to diverse communities and individuals. Even more commonly, library staff think that patrons are not fully aware of their offerings



94% of library staff think patrons are *not aware* (43%) or only *somewhat aware* (51%) of the extent of resources available to them at the library. Only 6% believed patrons were fully aware of the resources available.

Figure 9: Library staff responses to the question "Do you believe patrons are aware of the extent of resources available to them at the library?"

Participants mentioned **word of mouth** as a key source for information about what's happening at the library.

“ A lot of it is word of mouth that helps bring in patrons.

It seems that some libraries struggle to find the right channels for promoting their adult literacy services. One participant remarked:

“ We have found that, despite our best efforts, we can post as many flyers or post as much on social media or post as much in the newspaper or literature as we want to. But people just will not see them.

While another made an explicit connection between social media and digital access:

“ We focus a lot on social media marketing, and a lot of [people in] our community do not have smartphones or internet access at their points of access.

Interviewees reported positive results with **partner amplification**. In the scan, a cross-cutting pattern is that awareness of library offerings spreads through interpersonal pathways and partners. Outreach is not only a library-to-patron communication task, but also a networked process in which community members, partner organizations, and local institutions help circulate information. This is especially salient when physical location, routine foot traffic, or direct access to target patrons are limited,

leading staff to rely on trusted connectors who can relay information. The participants noted variability in how well these networks function, depending on existing relationships and whether relevant partners have mechanisms (such as newsletters) to carry library information into the community.

Conveners...	Venues of Instruction...	Direct Service Providers...
have a strong communications strategy and leverage partner amplification to circulate information in a streamlined manner.	utilize a variety of physical and digital channels (e.g., bulletin boards, signage, physical and online calendars) to promote the programs taking place at the library.	monitor and analyze data related to their outreach strategy and regularly update it to ensure the services are being utilized by the target populations that they are meant to support.

In some cases, staff act as their own marketers to spread the word about their services.

I'm actually my own marketing [person] because I'm the only IT person here. So, I would obviously know what's going on IT-wise as far as what programs I can offer, what help I can offer ... so in a sense, I have to be my own marketing person.

A risk of relying on staff’s interpersonal networks and partner amplification is that those ties are cut when there is turnover. We heard a few examples of this in our scan: staff recalling that they used to work with a partner, but the library staff liaising with that partner left, so the connection went cold. Similarly, a librarian may have been offering a particular service that they self-promoted, and when they moved to another position or location, the service and outreach fizzled out. Maintaining an outreach matrix, well-documented memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with partners, and outreach logs for staff are ways to track outreach efforts and avoid this potential pitfall.

However, the data includes repeated indications that outreach efforts do not reliably translate into awareness or participation, even when multiple channels are used. Barriers appear to include limited visibility of postings, challenges tied to physical location or travel, and mismatches between service design and adult learners’ constraints and decision-making. Capacity differences across branches also surface as a barrier: when staffing and specialized roles vary, the ability to promote those services, which can further reduce awareness in communities that already have fewer supports.

Meeting Patrons Where They Are

Effective outreach is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor; it requires a deep understanding of local access constraints and common communication channels. Libraries intentionally shift their outreach channels to fit the communication habits and connectivity levels of their specific communities. A recurring pattern is emphasis on physical approaches, especially where digital access is limited or where digital outreach is viewed as less effective for reaching intended audiences. Survey respondents cited social media as the least commonly used outreach method, while flyers were the most common, followed by outreach via community partnerships. This variability drives a diversified outreach mix, including approaches that allow patrons to access information privately and without requiring immediate interaction.

Physical or Digital?

While digital marketing is a standard for many public service agencies, libraries remarked that physical or offline approaches are important for reaching those with literacy needs, especially those who might be in communities with limited connectivity, “digital deserts.” In those cases, libraries pivot to print-based outreach with **tactile materials** like printed calendars, bookmarks and flyers, sometimes placed in **non-traditional locations**, extending outreach beyond the library walls to gas stations, farmers’ markets, and local businesses. The added benefit of such materials is that they allow patrons to access information privately without the pressure of an immediate interaction, which can be helpful for those who feel uncomfortable or stigmatized.

Different Landscapes, Different Strategies

The choice of outreach channel is often a direct response to community needs rather than preference. We observed patterns across different service areas:

Urban	Reliance on print media and physical distribution at transit or community hubs
Suburban	Greater use of digital platforms, websites, and social media
Rural	Focus on meeting people where they are, sometimes utilizing outreach vans or centralized support from larger systems

Keeping Patrons Engaged

When outreach is successful and the community is aware of what the library has to offer, whether through its own services and resources or partners, it can still be challenging to keep patrons engaged. A majority of survey respondents (61%) believe their library is somewhat successful at keeping patrons informed and engaged with resources. However, even when patrons learn about and express enthusiasm for the library offerings, they still sometimes don't show up. This is likely due to myriad competing obligations or reasons that could be completely unrelated to the library's outreach efforts. Thus, even when outreach efforts are successful, they do not reliably translate into participation.



Most library staff say their library is *successful (34%)* or *somewhat successful (61%)* at keeping patrons informed and engaged.

Figure 10: Library staff responses to the question "Do you think your library is successful in keeping patrons informed and ensuring they engage with library resources?"

The scan revealed some key barriers to engagement for adults with literacy needs, including challenges related to physical location, parking availability, transportation, as well as time and scheduling constraints.

Traffic and the lack of mass transit in [our location] inhibits residents' ability to visit their local library.

Digital Access Is a Hurdle

Digital access emerged as another hurdle that libraries believe keeps adults from accessing some of their resources. They expressed that some resources were hard to find, with one staff member lamenting that information was buried "ten clicks deep" on a website, while others remarked that learning online may not be suitable for adults who are developing foundational digital skills.

“GED prep programs are available for free online through Delaware libraries, but no one knows about them. To make it worse, the resource is buried ten clicks deep on the website, making it near impossible for anyone to find unless staff walk them through how to get to it.

“ There are a ton of online resources for adults to learn. However, they are all hidden behind a ton of links and are difficult to find on our website. Connected Learning is one of our amazing resources, but if the patron is not computer savvy, they will never find it. Somehow, if our website and resources were more user-friendly, I think that would be an improvement.

“ We have Brainfuse as an online resource for adults, but not visible to many of the patrons who may need the help or who would prefer in-person, small group, or 1:1 tutoring for these skills. Especially those also struggling with digital literacy skills.

Respondents suggested ways libraries could bring their services (not just advertising) to target groups to improve engagement but also recognized that keeping patrons engaged was sometimes a challenge.

“ We would like to see weekly or bi-weekly literacy classes offered, in the library and as a community outreach to designated areas within our local community.

“ If we had more direct information in pamphlets and packets to give to these patrons with all of these resources and information, it would better serve the community.

“ One way this can be done is by offering more accessible programs in rural areas. We aim to bridge the gap and ensure that all adults regardless of their locations have programs available to them.

“ [We] attempted an English conversation program that was asked for but had no attendance.



Library Staff

Library staff are central to serving adult learners in libraries. This section addresses how library staff see their role in providing adult literacy services:

- They see **staff as the heart** of efforts, despite the constraints they face.
- They are able to build **confidence to face growing demands**.
- They see a role for **professional development** opportunities to help them provide adult literacy services.

Library staff are the most critical asset in meeting adult literacy needs. Their dedication, empathy, and willingness form the foundation upon which all other services are built. To keep this foundation strong, staff are calling for systemic support with targeted training required to meet the complex learning and social support needs of adult learners.

Staff at the Heart

While physical collections and digital tools are essential, the true engine of adult literacy in libraries is the staff. Library workers often serve as the first—and sometimes only—point of contact for adults navigating complex systems. Our findings consistently highlight that the "secret sauce" of meeting the highly personalized literacy needs of adults isn't a specific curriculum, but rather the empathy and skills provided by frontline staff. Just as the need for more staff was the greatest challenge identified, an appreciation for existing staff was the greatest strength. Nearly half of the survey respondents identified staff as a core strength and within that, a few sub-themes emerged:

Sub-Theme	Illustrative Responses
Staff attitude and values: Of note, library staff's "soft skills," values, and attitudinal orientation emerged as at least as important as—if not more important than—specific "hard skills" and knowledge. Response patterns painted a clear picture of library staff's patient and open attitude, dedication and willingness to help, and their attentiveness and responsiveness to patrons' needs	• <i>Staff are patient and very willing to "let's learn this together" when faced with challenges.</i> • <i>We have friendly staff who are always willing to serve our patrons' needs as they arise. If we don't have the answer, we will do our best to direct them to someone who does. While we don't have a dedicated job center, staff have been willing to work one-on-one with patrons to assist with job applications and computer assistance.</i> • <i>I believe our staff is deeply passionate about supporting patrons, including those who lack foundational educational skills. This dedication</i>

as intangible sources of strength in serving adult learners.	<i>fosters remarkable patience, and I've heard numerous stories of staff regularly meeting with patrons to help them complete simple tasks or paperwork.</i>
Staff training, knowledge, skills, and experience: Complementing the dedication and welcoming attitude library staff bring to serving their patrons are specific technical skills and knowledge that are also a key strength.	• <i>[We have] a staff with diverse skill sets and a commitment to helping those who need it.</i> • <i>Our staff have a wide variety of educational experiences and backgrounds that we bring to the public. Quite a few of our staff have teaching experience in one way or another.</i> • <i>[We have] bilingual staff.</i>
Specialized roles: A number of responses mentioned different types of specialized roles that helped them serve adults; these included digital/cyber navigators, social workers, case workers, teleservice specialists, etc.	• <i>We currently have a social worker in the library once a week, which means we have a trained professional in specific needs such as housing, job assistance, Medicaid/Medicare when library staff aren't able to assist.</i> • <i>We also have a healthcare navigator at the library once per week and social workers that table.⁷</i> • <i>Our Cyber Navigator has been an asset in providing one-on-one support to adults who struggle with reading and/or digital literacy.</i>

The Trusted Bridge: Staff act as a "trusted bridge" between marginalized individuals and complex systems, identifying the literacy gaps that prevent a patron from successfully navigating government or employment forms.

Conveners...	Venues of Instruction...	Direct Service Providers...
map out bidirectional referral flows and specialized roles and skills within the community so that, as needs arise, they can pinpoint who can meet the need and how.	give library and partner staff clear guidance on space-sharing policies and provide opportunities for both agencies' staff to collaborate and share knowledge.	offer curated and clear professional development opportunities and make space and time for staff who are providing services to participate.

⁷ "Tabling" refers to hosting a resource person, community organization, or vendor at an informational table or booth

As one practitioner noted,

Almost all of our staff members are qualified to help patrons with their questions; we can help them navigate the internet or create an email account, with a lot of empathy and understanding at how frustrating all of the new processes can be for anyone.

However, placing staff at the heart of the mission puts pressure on human resources. In our survey of branch managers, **staffing was identified as the number one challenge** in meeting community needs, far outstripping concerns about community awareness or specific training. Library workers are increasingly asked to play the role of social workers, digital navigators, and educators simultaneously, often without a corresponding increase in capacity or specialized support.

Building Confidence to Face the Demands

To sustain this human-centered work, staff need ongoing support, and the data revealed the specific strategies that libraries employ as workarounds, as well as key areas that would further support them. Their strategies include leveraging one-on-one exchanges with patrons to identify needs and using navigator-like support to promote learning. They expressed a clear need for more formalized and systematically supported professional development opportunities and support to better understand and address the needs of multilingual patrons.

Adapting the Reference Interview

Staff described how they use the standard "reference interview" as a tool for empathetically identifying literacy needs. Librarians use these one-on-one exchanges not just to see if there's a fitting book in their catalogue, but to uncover the potential "hidden" literacy needs behind a patron's initial question. Of survey respondents, 21% noted they identify learners through "informal" means, such as "reference interviews, patron inquiries... and general customer service exchanges." Librarians identify needs by helping with specific tasks, like filling out a resume or a tax form, and then pivoting to offer educational resources.

But there's the shame and the stigma of being an adult who doesn't know how to read. So, they're not going to just come in and say, "I need to learn how to read." [...] And you kind of pick up on the fact that they're having you type everything ... It might be that they actually don't have literacy skills ... Maybe they can't read the question. So I've

had people say, "Oh, can you just read it to me? I don't have my glasses." Maybe that's a workaround they've learned.

Librarians as Navigators

The available data affirms that the librarian's true role goes beyond the traditional picture of a librarian helping someone find the right book. The librarian's role is less about object retrieval and more about **process guidance and participatory learning**, which can be described as "**navigation**." In this collaborative approach, librarians act as expert guides who walk patrons *through* complex information-seeking and literacy processes. This involves helping users define their information needs, select appropriate search strategies, evaluate sources for credibility, synthesize findings, and apply the knowledge they have acquired. The focus is on teaching the patron *how* to navigate the information landscape independently, rather than merely handing them a final answer or physical item.

I often say that phrase, "We really want to teach you to fish here. We want you to be empowered. We want you to have this information."

Professional Development

Staff perceptions revealed a spectrum of confidence that aligns with traditional library functions versus emerging social and instructional roles, and how targeted professional development, whether provided by libraries themselves or through trusted partners, could help.

- **Areas of High Confidence:** A strong majority of staff feel "very prepared" to assist patrons with needs related to information and resource navigation. This includes helping adults with technology basics (66%), supporting parents (65%), and assisting job-seekers (51%).
- **Preparedness Gaps:** Confidence drops when staff are asked about serving patrons with more intensive instructional or social service needs. Nearly one in four staff members feel "not at all prepared" to help adults with difficulty reading (23%) or those seeking immigration or citizenship help (24%). The gap is even wider for complex social navigation, with 37% of staff feeling "not at all prepared" to help patrons navigate the healthcare system—the area that the fewest staff felt prepared to help.

This preparedness gap is the quantitative expression of the paradox at the heart of the modern library's mission. When libraries are filling gaps in social services, their formal MLIS training can feel misaligned with the day-to-day basic needs they encounter among patrons. One librarian talked about

how learning loss during COVID-19 and the lack of literacy support for young adults has been visible in their community,

And I was just getting patrons, asking me every day, "I can't read this form. Can you help me fill out this form?" And I was... trying to pry a little bit more [to find out] why so many 20, 25, and 30 year-olds in our library system are not able to read. It's something that is really interesting to me, because it's really detrimental to my patrons. And we try here to be very community focused and patron driven in terms of our services and responses. So it was something that we are hearing every single day.

In the scan, we explored how current professional development (PD) structures equip library staff to specifically address adult literacy needs. For frontline program and desk staff, PD is infrequent, with most reporting they engage only a few times a year. PD occurs through diverse channels like employer platforms (e.g., Niche Academy), state offerings, conferences, and listservs. For frontline staff, engaging in PD depends heavily on their own intrinsic motivation to sift through the opportunities and find time to participate.

Every week we get this professional development email with a whole list of things that are offered, and they also say at the end every time, "If there's something you see that you want to do that costs money, reach out. We will pay for it," so they want to encourage it.

Compliance and administrative topics are the dominant required trainings, while literacy-related topics are rarely covered. The figure below shows the percent of library staff reporting participation in professional development on a variety of topics.

Figure 11: The most common trainings for library staff are compliance related (n= 137 staff not in branch manager roles)



The prioritization of compliance and administrative topics explains the confidence gaps reported by staff; while they are trained on ethics, they feel less prepared to support an adult with reading difficulties. Some libraries have external partners provide PD on adult learning and evidence-based reading. As one interviewee noted about the lack of relevant training:

I think a huge issue that we do have is just straight up literacy, and to my knowledge there is not support for that on the adult side of things.

Staff themselves recognize this disconnect and express a strong desire for more relevant training. Their comments reveal a clear call for practical skills to better serve their communities. For example, two respondents noted:

“ We need formal adult learning instruction training for programming staff.

“ I would like to feel that all front-line staff felt trained to serve those adults.

In promising cases, library partners have stepped in to provide basic training on adult learning principles and evidence-based reading instruction—sometimes offering reusable materials that libraries can leverage flexibly. As libraries continue to expand their role in adult and family literacy, a more intentional and systematically supported approach to professional development will be essential, with content calibrated to whether the library is acting as a convener, venue of instruction, or direct service provider.

Spotlight: Chicago Public Library

Partners in PD

The Chicago Public Library (CPL) is a member of Literacy Works, which is a Chicago-based non-profit organization that provides professional development on a variety of adult education topics including basic literacy and ESL instruction. Literacy Works also connects students with literacy organizations and tutors. The library's membership with Literacy Works provides staff with free access to live and recorded training videos. Recent topics have included: "advanced reading comprehension strategies"; "building healthy reading habits for learners and their families"; "building reading comprehension: tools you can use with learners of any level"; "tips and tricks for leading English conversation groups"; and "popular education and student-centered learning."

Literacy Works has also led in-person training sessions on adult learning principles as well as planning and implementing digital literacy classes. These training sessions have occurred during "clusters" which are opportunities for the library's adult-serving staff to meet in person multiple times per year to learn from outside presenter and from their peers. After the professional development sessions with Literacy Works, library staff have felt more empowered to lead basic digital literacy workshops for adults and seniors on topics ranging from keyboard and mouse practice to job searching.

Literacy Works is currently working with Kat, a librarian in Adult Services, to develop staff trainings on adult literacy and programming. The first session will cover basic adult learning principles and how to incorporate them into programs to support learners of all backgrounds. The second training will delve into some specific program types and examples and how to incorporate elements of adult literacy (such as background knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension checks) into various types of programs. These trainings will be offered virtually and will also be recorded for staff to access at their convenience.

CPL also partners with Literacy Chicago which is a local nonprofit organization that provides tutor training and instruction in basic literacy, ESL, and other topics. Literacy Chicago has its own network of volunteer tutors and paid instructors, and the library offers ESL classes and conversation groups through Literacy Chicago. The library is also partnering with Literacy Chicago to offer services to both tutors and library staff. For example, Joanne from Literacy Chicago and Kat from CPL's Adult Services department collaborated on a lesson plan at the 3rd-grade reading level about the library and its resources for tutors to use with their ABE and ELL classes. CPL is developing ABE and ELL kits and collections of basic literacy books to share with tutors and instructors. Literacy Chicago is also working with Kat and the library to create some professional development sessions on incorporating principles of adult learning and literacy into library programs to support all patrons.

These partnerships demonstrate how partnerships can strengthen libraries' ability to meet the needs of patrons, both through partner-delivered programs and through partnerships that equip staff with key skills and resources they need to work more effectively with adult learners.



Programs and Materials



Libraries have developed a menu of programs and materials that are designed to meet patrons at their specific point of need—whether that is a physical workbook, a digital learning platform, or a one-on-one instructional session. This section describes the status of providing resources and services related to adult literacy, including:

- the diverse service landscape of adult literacy,
- the digital and physical resources for adult literacy services, and
- the paradox of accessibility when it comes to the accessibility and usability of adult literacy resources.

A Diverse Service Landscape

As mentioned in the opening section of this report, digital literacy stands out as the cornerstone of modern library work, with **86%** of libraries offering these services. Unlike other types of adult literacy services, digital literacy is primarily provided directly by library staff (**80%** of those offering it) through digital navigation and formal classes.

Adults need supports that are integrated and rely on relationship-based coordination, like having a social worker available and present when adult literacy programs are taking place and offering warm handoffs, like a side-by-side consultation, as opposed to cold referrals, like handing someone a brochure or binder. Some patrons experience acute or layered challenges (including crises and instability), so the programs and materials that meet their needs require cross-agency coordination.

Conveners...	Venues of Instruction...	Direct Service Providers...
have a strong knowledge of the local programs and resources and help coordinate partners to meet multidimensional needs.	provide physical space for programs and materials so that partners can bring specialized skills to the trusted library space.	bundle wraparounds like clothing, food, and transportation with educational supports like resume-building workshops and ESOL classes.

Support for adult learners is most effective when it acknowledges the whole person rather than the person as a student or job-seeker. Early in our project, it was evident that libraries reach adults with literacy needs through family literacy programming, enabling parents to learn alongside their children, acknowledging their multifaceted lives.

Libraries cannot meet these complex needs without partners. In our scan, these were the service areas that relied more heavily on external expertise:

- **Financial Literacy (76%)** and **Health Literacy (72%)**: These are widely available but predominantly delivered via partners (66% for each).
- **Workforce Preparation (66%)**: A core offering often delivered through a mix of direct staff support and partner agencies.
- **ESL/ESOL (52%)**: Despite high demand, these services are provided almost exclusively through partner organizations in library spaces.
- **GED Prep (34%)** and **Beginning Adult Literacy (39%)**: These specialized instructional areas are the least commonly offered and are most often the domain of partners.

Digital and Physical Resources

Libraries leverage a diverse inventory of learning resources to reduce barriers to skill-building. These tools allow for customized learning paths based on individual needs.

Digital Platforms and Tools

Staff utilize a variety of commercial and homegrown resources to facilitate learning.

- **Digital Literacy Curriculum:**
 - [Northstar Digital Literacy](#) includes curriculum and assessments for adults
 - [Chicago DigitalLearn](#) is a localized version of the Public Library Association's [DigitalLearn.org](#) that teaches computer basics
 - San Jose Public Library's [Digital Skill Building Pathways](#) include self-paced courses
 - The [BRIDGES Digital Resilience Toolkit](#) hosts self-assessment checklists, a digital literacy framework, and free and open educational resources
- **Learning Platforms:**
 - [Brainfuse](#) offers live, online tutoring in partnership with libraries
 - [LinkedIn Learning](#) connects LinkedIn users to a variety of self-paced courses and credentials to add to their profile
 - EBSCO's [LearningExpress Library](#) has a suite of test prep, skill-building, and career resources, and EBSCO offers [BlueCareer](#) and [AlliedCareer](#) for occupational skills
 - [Khan Academy](#) and [Universal Class](#) provide asynchronous opportunities to build academic and professional skills
 - [SkillBlox](#) is a free, no-login platform that can be used to locate, curate and share learning materials
 - [Cell-Ed](#) is a mobile-first language learning and skill-building platform that delivers short-form learning to adults on any device

- **Language Learning:**
 - [Mango Languages](#) and
 - [USAHello](#) are used for language learning
- **Workplace Software Suites:** Some digital literacy classes focus on building skills to use commonplace workplace applications like those found in **Microsoft** and **Google** suites (e.g., PowerPoint and Google Slides). Videoconferencing tools like **Zoom** were also mentioned for holding remote classes.
- **Hardware and Connectivity:** Beyond software, the simple provision of computer labs, **Chromebooks** for in-library use and borrowing, and Wi-Fi and **hotspots** remain a foundational strength.

Physical Collections and Innovation

Traditional holdings are being reimagined to be more inclusive and less stigmatizing:

- **"Hi-Lo" Collections:** Some systems have implemented high-interest, low-reading-level books for adults, like Nashville's "Fresh Reads."⁸ These are strategically placed in adult sections (rather than near children's books) to destigmatize literacy-building.
- **Specialized Resource Binders:** Staff often compile physical binders of job postings, housing resources, or social service contacts to provide immediate, "low-tech" help.
- **Test Prep:** Physical study guides like **GED Test Prep** books help people prepare for high school equivalency exams.

The range of digital and physical resources libraries have assembled reflects both the diversity of adult learners' needs and the resourcefulness of library staff in curating tools within tight budget constraints. No single platform or resource dominated across library systems; instead, libraries tended to build layered, locally adapted collections that combined commercial platforms, free online tools, and physical materials to meet their specific community needs. While 35 of 166 survey respondents cited the general availability of resources as a strength, others noted a recurring tension between the **availability** of resources and their **usability** for adult learners. In some cases, valuable resources were reported as buried deep within library websites, making them difficult for adults with low digital literacy to find without staff intervention. Staff also noted that when materials are not available in community languages, multilingual patrons may feel the library's resources are not intended for them. These observations suggest that building robust resource collections is only part of the challenge—ensuring those resources are genuinely reachable by the adults who need them most is equally important.

⁸ Learn more about Fresh Reads: <https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/stigma-free-reading-adults-collections>.

Spotlight: Delaware Libraries

Place-Based Hubs

Delaware is a small state with 33 public libraries in the three counties. Our State Librarian's, Annie Norman, EdD, goal is to establish Family Literacy Centers in each of the public libraries. Delaware's Department of Education funds Adult Education programs for ABE/GED and ESL in the three counties. These programs are managed by technical and community colleges and many of these formal classes are held in the local public libraries.

Using these classes as a base for expanding services and activities that support and enhance the learning experienced by adults, the Delaware libraries are experimenting with Learning Circles for adults and their children. Using a book as the foundation, the Learning Circle reads, discusses, explores character development, historical norms, geography, vocabulary, language use, and fluency. These tasks are supplemented by board games and other activities that are fun and educational. Adults are encouraged to bring other family members of any age. Conversation groups and multi-generational arts and crafts programs also engage adults learning to read to be supported by their children and other family members. This increases motivation and develops skills for all.

Partnering with Delaware Humanities, libraries have hosted Prime Time Family Reading, a humanities-based program designed to build literacy, critical thinking, and family bonding through reading. Delaware Humanities provides scholars to moderate the discussion and funding for food for the meal to support the family bonding process. Libraries provide space, staff support, and books for each family to keep and take home weekly.

Literacy Delaware is a non-profit organization that provides one-on-one tutoring for adults learning to read or to speak English. Libraries are typically the most often used site for tutor and student to meet. Responding to demand and expanding waiting lists, Literacy Delaware is experimenting with development of small group teaching classes which are held in libraries in each of the counties. The development of Job Centers more than twenty years ago in the libraries has expanded into a broader Open Lab project which uses AmeriCorps Vistas to assist patrons with information and access to a variety of social services to include housing, Medicaid, SNAP benefits, and employment search. A frequent observation in the Open Labs is that low literacy is evident in many visitors to the Open Labs. Literacy Delaware and Delaware Libraries are partnering on a pilot project to do just-in-time literacy assessment to determine if support services for learning to read would be helpful to that patron. From there, referrals for services can be made and connections established immediately.

One of the public schools, which is located in an area where poverty and low literacy are prevalent, holds a Family Reading Night hosted in one of the Delaware libraries. This event involves storytellers, activities to support literacy development, and provides books for all participants. The entire library is filled with centers for learning and engagement for everyone for the evening. Delaware has committed to and funded the Dolly Parton Imagination Library project state-wide. All Delaware children birth to age five are eligible to participate at no cost to them. This puts books in the hands of every young child and their families in the state. Our goal is that every child in Delaware has a library card and reads two books per week. For Delaware "Family Literacy Center" is an umbrella term for all activities that support and enhance literacy for all ages and the reduction of low literacy across our state.



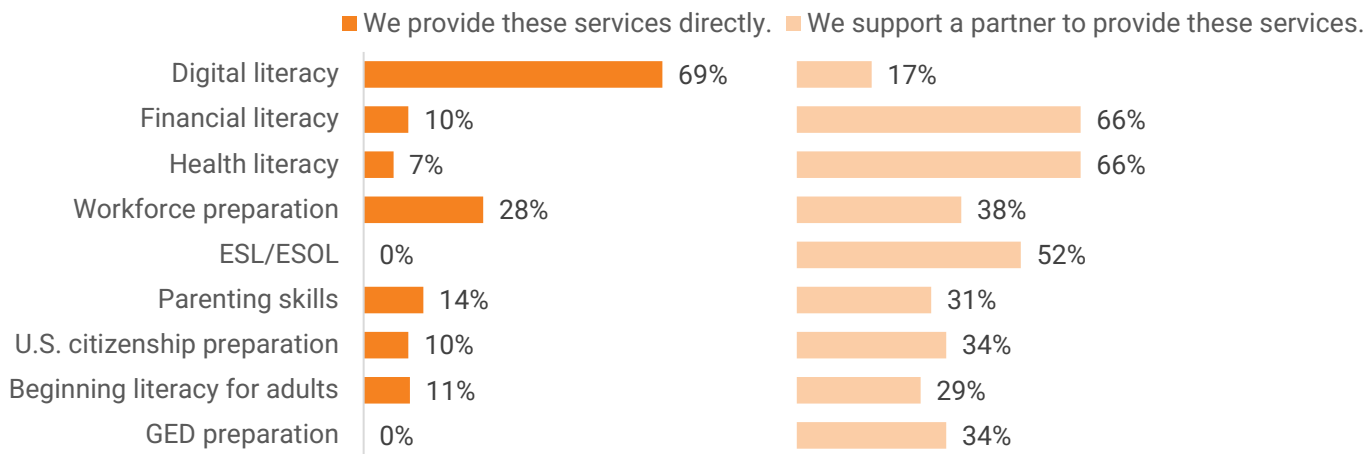
Partnerships and Referrals

Partnerships are not peripheral to the libraries’ work in adult literacy; they play a central role in extending the libraries’ reach. Partnerships are key to the library’s role as a literacy hub: they enable a library to be a convener or venue of instruction when a library cannot provide direct services in a given area. In practice, partnerships are how libraries resolve a core tension identified through the scan: the wide-ranging and evolving adult literacy needs amid staffing, funding, and other institutional constraints. Thus, in this section, we share insights related to partnerships and referrals, including:

- the practices of library partners,
- the strengths of these partnerships and concerns about their future, and
- strategies for strengthening ties between libraries and adult literacy sector partners.

With the notable exception of digital literacy, most adult literacy services offered at libraries rely primarily on partners rather than library staff. For other adult education services, most libraries reported relying on partners to provide those services, reflecting a deliberate strategy to serve as hosts or conveners rather than investing internal expertise and resources.

Figure 12: Proportion of libraries offering different adult education services, directly vs. via partners.



Branch managers reported partnering with an average of 5.9 different types of organizations to meet adult literacy needs including adult education providers, workforce development agencies, K-12 school systems, colleges, community-based nonprofits, social service organizations, and faith-based groups.

Figure 13: Portion of libraries partnering with different types of organizations for adult literacy services



What Partners Do

Partners play multiple, overlapping roles within library-based adult literacy ecosystems. Most commonly, they deliver specialized instruction such as ESOL, GED preparation, health or financial literacy, or workforce training. Libraries provide the trusted physical space, logistical coordination, and community visibility that make participation feasible while partners contribute instructional expertise, curricula, and in some cases, material and fiscal resources.

Beyond instruction, partners are also crucial to outreach and access. Libraries report that partners help reach adults who may not otherwise engage with library services, including immigrants, underemployed workers, and adults with limited literacy who may experience stigma around help-seeking. In these cases, partnerships function as two-way relational bridges, allowing information about library-based services to travel through trusted community networks, and vice versa. One library partner stated:

I think one of our greatest strengths with our library... is that we really avoid duplication of services. That's expensive and inefficient. And so I think the library is great about having open sources of communication with us and figuring out all right, what do you need from us, and what do we need from you sometimes?

Some partnerships extend inward, supporting library staff themselves. In a smaller but important set of examples, adult education partners offer training, coaching, or informal professional learning opportunities that help library staff understand adult learning principles, multilingual learners' needs, or referral pathways. These arrangements can ease the tension between high demands and limited resources that many library staff face. One respondent shared the following:

[Our partner organization] takes more of an educational... standpoint. And so they have come out to offer trainings to my staff on how to better serve patrons that have low literacy skills or have below average reading levels.

Strengths and Concerns

Across interviews and focus groups, a shared mission and values consistently surfaced as the foundation of strong partnerships. Partners described libraries as uniquely positioned to convene agencies who might not otherwise collaborate, in part because libraries are perceived as neutral, trusted, and enduring rather than program owners or competitors. Libraries' flexibility further strengthens partnerships. Unlike more formal education systems, libraries can adapt to changing schedules, facilitate pilot programs, and adjust offerings in response to local needs. In some cases, this responsiveness allows partners to experiment with service delivery models and respond to emerging needs with less bureaucracy. This reinforces the overall perception of libraries as high-trust, low-barrier institutions, not just for patrons, but for partners, positioning the libraries as an ideal convener and venue. As one participant from a partner organization shared,

We think that libraries are such a wonderful place to have classes, especially today, because people are safe in libraries... Libraries are a safe space. People feel good in libraries. Libraries are close to where people live. So that's why having more and more is great because one of the barriers, of course, to adult education is actually getting to be in a class.

At the same time, partnerships introduce their own set of challenges. Coordination requires staff time that is already in short supply, particularly at the branch level. Managing space, scheduling programs, aligning calendars, and communicating across organizations often falls to frontline staff or branch managers, adding to existing workloads. The scan pointed toward tensions around control and the fragility in some partnerships, too. While partnerships expand what libraries can offer, they also limit

the libraries' ability to shape program content, data collection practices, and evaluation methods. Partners noted that inconsistent data tracking and limited outcome documentation can make it difficult to demonstrate impact or pursue joint funding, even when the partnership itself is strong. Furthermore, many partnerships depend upon personal relationships rather than formalized agreements. In some cases, partnerships functioned more as personal relationships than institutional agreements—a dynamic that, while reflective of genuine commitment, also introduces fragility when staff turnover or organizational priorities shift, as one partner organization respondent illustrated:

We have such a great relationship with my contact at the library... I have one person I speak to. So, if somebody needs to talk to me from the system, they go to [Name], and then [Name] and I speak regularly. We even speak off hours; we text each other all the time.

Staff turnover, organizational restructuring, or shifting priorities can quickly weaken or dissolve collaborations, leaving libraries to fill gaps, rebuild connections, or eliminate the service to the community altogether. This is especially consequential when a partnership is essential to meeting community needs.

Strengthening Ties

Given the library's role as a literacy hub, the scan suggests that intentionally designing partnerships and referral systems can be a defining factor in how libraries fill that role. While informal relationships may be convenient, libraries and partners alike noted the value of light-touch structures that reduce risk without undermining trust. These include clearly documented referral pathways, shared expectations around roles and communication, and basic coordination tools that persist beyond individual staff members.

And then the other one is data... nobody wants to share data unless you've got money, and then nobody wants to collect data... Two things: collaboration, data. If those two things were solved, some of the other things would probably do really well.

Conveners...	Venues of Instruction...	Direct Service Providers...
align and coordinate efforts and data sharing across various stakeholders and take a proactive role in communicating externally about literacy impact.	set up data sharing plans with partners, ensuring each agency has access to the data they need for reporting, while honoring the library's data minimization principles.	ethically gather stories about participants' experiences to demonstrate impact.

Spotlight: Kennett

Navigating Data Sharing

Beginning as a one-on-one tutoring program in English language acquisition, Kennett Library's Adult Literacy Program (ALP) has grown with the needs of the Kennett community in southeastern Pennsylvania. It now offers classes in ESL and preparation for the GED and U.S. citizenship exams in addition to tutoring in these areas. Recently, ALP has noticed a growing need among its students for workforce development offerings that would allow them to secure their financial futures. It found an ideal partner to meet this need in The Welcoming Center, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit with a mission to welcome immigrants as leaders and neighbors, create pathways to economic growth, and strengthen the fabric of communities. With deep expertise in English and digital skills contextualized for the workplace, work readiness, and the unique needs of immigrant jobseekers, The Welcoming Center offers opportunities that map exactly to Kennett community needs.

The Welcoming Center suggested two of its courses to deliver as a pilot: English for Workplace Communication and English for Job Search. The nonprofit would select and train an instructor to deliver course curricula, and ALP would provide space and support. ALP would also assist with or oversee administrative tasks, such as student assessment and data collection. However, the data points and collection methods required to execute the courses and evaluate student progress were more extensive than what ALP currently used. Thus, The Welcoming Center and ALP sought integration of their data collection policies and requirements. They decided that both organizations would use their existing data handling processes, allowing them to meet their respective needs and follow their existing security policies. Where data needed to be shared, both would opt for publicly shareable data wherever possible, with a secure email solution used when needed. In this way, the library and its partner agency would meet the requirements of their stakeholders while also respecting individual data practices. However, as the partnership between The Welcoming Center and ALP grows and deepens, the organizations see opportunities for additional integration. Further alignment of evaluation tools would serve the goals of advancing each partner's mission and enhancing abilities to achieve desired student outcomes.

The lessons learned early in this partnership underscore the value of comprehensive, tailored data systems and processes designed with foresight for organizational, student, and security needs. Where foresight is difficult, agility is valuable. Both are necessary to meet dynamic needs.

Conclusion

Behind every statistic in this report is a person. An adult who quietly works around reading challenges. A newcomer navigating an unfamiliar system. A parent with ambitious dreams for their children. These are the American adults walking through library doors every day. What this landscape scan makes clear is that libraries are stretching limited resources remarkably far, sustained by a genuine dedication to the adults and families they serve. The question is not *whether* libraries have a role in adult literacy, but what they can do to further optimize that role. We acknowledge that the recommendations that follow cannot be implemented by libraries alone. They require sustained investment and commitment from funders, policymakers, and partners across the adult literacy ecosystem. With that support in place, we offer the following recommendations to strengthen and build on the strong foundation that already exists.

1. **Expand outreach efforts so that patrons can access the myriad adult literacy services that libraries already provide.** Strategies highlighted in this scan include maintaining an outreach matrix, creating outreach logs for staff, and developing formal partnerships with well defined roles and responsibilities.
2. **Reach out to adult learners to explore potential barriers to continued engagement with resources and in services.** Given that library staff identified continued engagement with resources as an area of concern, direct communication with adult learners who either do have continued engagement or with those who have just started their participation may provide library staff with additional information about why adult learners may elect to not use certain resources or services.
3. **Build library-led comprehensive referral networks in partnership with the adult and family literacy sector.** Libraries have a long history of connecting community members with services and resources that best fit their needs. Comprehensive referral systems that rely on the library's unique role as community hub and provide systematic referral practices such as warm hand-offs may most effectively connect adult learners with a variety of much needed services. Comprehensive referral networks avoid the pitfalls described in the above sections such as staff turnover and may open up opportunities to support the development and implementation of multilingual services and resources.
4. **Leverage partnerships with the adult literacy sector to offer professional development on working with adult learners.** Library staff have indicated a desire to be more informed about how to serve adult learners and multilingual learners of English, so basic professional development may address these concerns. Library staff also indicated that they found some difficulty in identifying adults who may benefit from adult literacy services. Libraries could rely

on partnerships with the adult literacy sector to provide this professional development, and thus further strengthen those partnerships.

5. **Establish data sharing practices with partners in the adult literacy sector.** Library partners indicated that they would benefit from additional data sharing practices in order to track learners' progress and apply for grants in collaboration with libraries. This data sharing could also include an emphasis on storytelling so that libraries and adult literacy partners can better share adult learners' experiences and reach additional adults who may benefit from services.
6. **Share information and training on civic participation, voting, and advocacy.** Libraries are not equipped to fulfill every community need. Patrons can engage in advocacy, voting, and other forms of civic action to secure the resources and services their community requires. While libraries are not obligated to immediately address every community crisis, they can play a vital role in supporting individuals to advocate for themselves and their communities. This perspective regards library patrons not merely as recipients of services, but as active citizens capable of influencing their environment.

Libraries have always been more than buildings full of books. They are among the last truly public spaces in American life—open to everyone, free of charge, without judgment. This landscape scan affirms that they are meeting one of the most consequential challenges of our time with remarkable dedication and creativity. Investing in libraries is investing in our collective ability to meet the literacy crisis head-on. Ultimately, it is an investment in the adults, families, and communities at the center of American life.

Appendix 1: Methods

This landscape scan was designed to examine current practices, challenges, and opportunities in library-based adult and family literacy services, with the ultimate goal of informing the design and development of tools, training materials, and resources to strengthen libraries' capacity in this area. Our exploration was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do libraries design and deliver adult and family literacy services?
2. Which factors contribute to a library's ability to meet the needs of diverse populations, especially those with adult literacy needs?
3. What challenges do libraries face in supporting adult literacy learners?

To ensure a comprehensive analysis and contribute novel insights, we employed a mixed methods approach, leveraging the advantages of qualitative, quantitative, and integrated analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Our landscape scan is based on findings from four data sources: a literature review, a survey of library managers and staff, semi-structured interviews with library staff, and semi-structured focus groups with staff of organizations partnering with libraries to deliver adult literacy services. The research design and methods integration map (Figure 2) illustrates how these methods were sequenced and integrated across the project.

Our exploration focuses on adult foundational education, which we define following Rosen (2021, p. 49) as "the core skills and knowledge that adults need for work, further education, helping their families, functioning effectively in their communities, and as citizens in a democracy." We situate adult education within the four-component model of family literacy developed by the National Center for Families Learning (NCFL, 2023), which encompasses adult education, children's education, parent time, and parent-and-child-together (PACT) time.

During our research co-design and preliminary literature review, it became clear that services for children and parent-and-child-together time (e.g., story time) are abundant in libraries; in contrast, practical guidance and empirical evidence related specifically to adult education services are far more limited. Given this skew in the existing literature, we focused our data collection, analysis, and reporting more narrowly on the adult education component, even while situating it within the four-part family literacy model.

We define adult education expansively to include adults developing foundational reading and math skills, those pursuing a high school diploma or equivalency credential (e.g., GED), adults learning English as an additional language, and those seeking to build digital, financial, health, civic, or workforce literacy skills.

This landscape scan did not aim to produce generalizable results, but rather to offer rich descriptions that can lead to actionable insights for program design and implementation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). To enhance credibility, the research team kept detailed memos, maintained researcher overlap throughout the analysis process, and conducted a whole-group member reflection halfway through analysis with representatives from project partners, supplemented by member checking via email as needed (Tracy, 2025).

This project was issued a temporary stop-work order in April 2025, immediately following data collection, and resumed in August 2025. Staff turnover during this period required the team to reacquaint themselves with the data before proceeding with analysis. The team did so using the exploratory approaches suggested in Miles et al. (2020), and the credibility measures described above were applied with particular care, given this interruption.

Sample and Setting

Aside from the literature review, the study concentrated on libraries in three systems: Chicago Public Library, Delaware Libraries, and Charleston County Public Library. Overall, this includes approximately 50 library branch managers, and over 1,000 library staff and volunteers. These three library systems are key partners in the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) technical assistance project entitled Co-Design for Library-Based Adult and Family Literacy Support Centers. Aside from the literature review, the remaining three methods (survey, interviews, focus groups) were virtual, and the sample included only individuals from the three library systems. Given the considerable size of these three library systems, and the diversity of the systems, we do not intend to argue that findings of the sample size will be reflective of the full population. However, we do contend that this substantial sample size is large enough to illuminate trends and draw conclusions about what might be relevant for this sample moving forward, and, in turn, these trends may be relevant for the larger population.

- **Literature Review:** Our scope focused on U.S.-based, English-language publications from the last decade concerning adult foundational education in libraries. The sample included peer-reviewed empirical studies, secondary analyses (literature reviews), and grey literature (commentaries, reports), but excluded dissertations and theses to prioritize practitioner-focused materials. A librarian search using "adult education," "parenting," and "library" yielded 37 sources; these were supplemented with sources suggested via partner crowdsourcing for a total of 62. After eliminating 28 sources that did not meet the inclusion criteria and an additional four upon review, 34 sources remained.
- **Survey of Library Staff:** Two surveys were conducted with 29 branch directors or branch managers and 137 non-director library staff from three library systems: Chicago Public Library, Charleston County Public Library, and Delaware Libraries.

- **Interviews with library staff:** We conducted semi-structured interviews with nine library staff from the same three library systems.
- **Focus groups with library partner organization staff:** We conducted semi-structured focus groups with staff of organizations that partner with libraries in these systems to deliver adult literacy services.

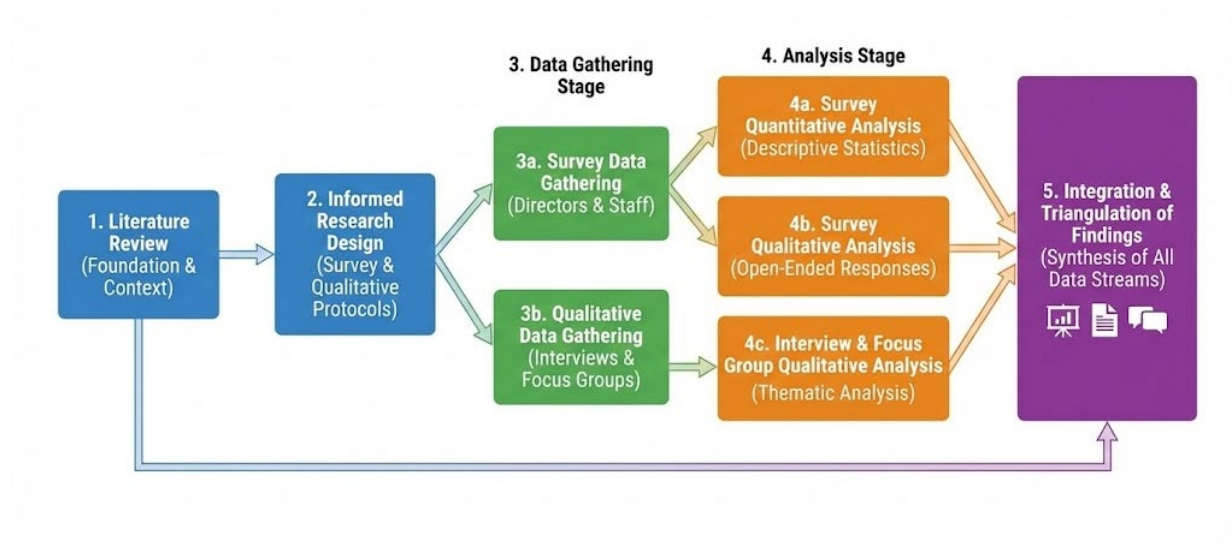
Table 1: Study Population Groups, Data Collection Method, and Sample Sizes

Study Population	Inclusion Criteria	Data Collection Method	Sample Size
1. Library Branch Managers	• Must be employed as library director within the three library systems included in this sample: Charleston County Public Library, Chicago Public Library, Delaware Libraries	Survey	29
2. Library Staff (not branch managers) who support adult and family literacy activities	• Must be employed as library staff within the three library systems included in this sample: Charleston County Public Library, Chicago Public Library, Delaware Libraries • Must directly support activities for adult education • May directly support activities for family literacy • Selected for interviews by library system administrators	Interviews Surveys	Interviews: 8 Surveys: 137
3. Library Key Partners	• Selected for interviews by library system administrators • Must directly support activities for adult education	Focus Groups	8 total participants

Ethical approval was obtained from JSI's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (approval # #25-07E). The study adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, ensuring respect, confidentiality, and participant safety.

Analysis

Figure 14: Research design and methods integration map.



For the **literature**, we employed a thematic analysis approach for data analysis, using multiple cycles of coding and categorization to establish key themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

For the **survey responses**, data was first thoroughly cleaned, recoded for analysis, and then analyzed in Microsoft Excel. Given the nature of our research and survey questions, our analysis primarily uses descriptive statistics to provide a picture of services, strategies, and library staff experiences.

Our surveys of library managers and staff included two questions—one on strengths and one on areas for improvement—that offered respondents an opportunity to provide detailed, qualitative, and unstructured feedback in their own words, which yielded responses that, while brief compared to our interviews and focus group discussions, lent themselves to qualitative analysis. We employed a similar process of multiple rounds of coding to determine core themes from the 127 responses on strengths and 131 responses describing areas for improvement (some survey participants did not answer these questions).

Qualitative analysis of library and partner staff interviews and focus groups: The qualitative analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, including multiple rounds of coding across all open-ended responses for the purpose of determining relevant themes and patterns.

Integration and Triangulation of Findings

While data from the literature review, surveys, and qualitative sessions were initially analyzed in isolation, the final phase of our research employed an Integrated Analysis approach. This process involved triangulating data—cross-verifying results from multiple sources—to increase the validity and depth of our conclusions. Our integration process followed three primary steps:

- **Cross-Method Validation:** We compared the quantitative trends identified in the staff surveys (e.g., frequency of specific literacy programs) against the qualitative themes from interviews to understand the "why" behind the numbers.
- **Gap and Convergence Identification:** We looked for areas of convergence, where the literature review and field data aligned (confirming established best practices), and areas of divergence, where library staff experiences contradicted or updated the existing academic literature.
- **Thematic Synthesis:** Finally, we integrated the "practitioner voice" from focus groups with partners and the "foundational knowledge" from the literature review to develop a unified set of insights. This allowed us to contextualize library services within the broader ecosystem of adult education and family engagement.

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