

# PUBLIC LIBRARIAN'S GUIDE TO SERVING UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS

Public libraries serve everyone, but not everyone experiences the library in the same way. Small shifts in services, spaces, and communication can help reduce barriers and create a more welcoming experience for underserved populations in your community.

## **Start by Identifying Barriers**

Consider what may unintentionally make library use difficult. Sometimes access barriers are invisible. Ask:

- Are transportation, hours, or technology barriers present?
- Are materials accessible for different reading levels or languages?
- Do some community members feel unwelcome or overlooked?

## **Build Relationships Beyond the Library Walls**

Partnerships help libraries reach people who may not regularly visit. Try to meet people where they are. Consider connecting with:

- schools and afterschool programs
- senior centers or assisted living communities
- community health organizations
- shelters, workforce centers, or local nonprofits

## **Make Services Easier to Navigate**

Library systems can feel overwhelming to new or infrequent users. Try some of these small strategies to make a big difference:

- simplify signage and instructions

- provide welcoming “start here” information
- offer one-on-one technology help
- reduce jargon when explaining services

### **Expand Representation in Collections & Programs**

People are more likely to engage when they feel seen, and representation helps foster belonging. Consider:

- diverse books and materials
- multilingual resources
- programs for different ages, interests, and abilities
- displays that reflect your whole community

### **Design for Flexibility**

Different communities have different needs. Flexibility increases access, so considering asking yourself:

- Are program times accessible?
- Could outreach or pop-up services help?
- Are there quieter spaces or sensory-friendly options?

### **Listen to the Community**

Listening builds trust, and the best ideas often come directly from the people you hope to serve.

To better listen to your community, try:

- short surveys
- community conversations
- informal feedback during programs
- partnerships with trusted local leaders

Serving underserved populations shouldn't feel like doing more or creating “extra” services. It's about ensuring all community members can fully access the library's opportunities, resources, and sense of belonging.