Driving Change: A Model for Collaborative Librarianship in Prince George's County, Maryland

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Keywords

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Abstract

The Prince George’s County Memorial Library System (PGCMLS) has a long-standing partnership with the county’s human rights education and enforcement agency, the Office of Human Rights (PGCOHR), formerly the Prince George’s County Human Relations Commission (PGCHRC). The two agencies serve over 967,000 Prince Georgians, a majority-Black (64.4%) and Latin or Hispanic (19.5%) population with a sizable immigrant community (22.7%). The civil rights issues of 2020 hit close to home in Prince George’s County and the agencies have sustained a multi-year effort to provide residents with opportunities to learn how to engage with social justice topics for personal and collective advancement. This paper outlines the agencies’ innovative model for collaborative community programming, which has dramatically expanded the scope and impact of their equity, diversity, inclusion, and antiracism (EDIA) initiatives despite minimal funding resources and the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic. PGCMLS and PGCOHR’s approach to joint programming is modeled in their Collaborative Programming Lifecycle, which can be applied to a wide range of content areas, whether special events, series, thematic programs, or special events. The lifecycle also touches individual presenters, partners, funders, attendees, and the daily work of programming staff. The partners have successfully deployed the Collaborative Programming Lifecycle to develop internationally acclaimed EDIA programs in multiple formats that influence local efforts to advance social equity and anti-racism. The joint mission of this partnership is to provide meaningful conversation that strengthens the collective community. While this partnership pre-dates both the pandemic and the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the agencies rapidly transitioned to virtual programming and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to immediate local impact, the partnership’s programs have resulted in a compelling new model for making local programs accessible to larger communities at state, regional, and national levels.

Keywords: social justice, programming, collaboration, local government, public libraries, anti-racism, equity, diversity, inclusion, virtual programs, outreach
Introduction: Collaborative Library and Human Rights Programming

“The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.” –Coretta Scott King

Due to an urgent social justice movement, a generational economic crisis, and spending much of 2020 and the first part of 2021 isolated from each other physically during the COVID-19 pandemic, many communities throughout the United States have a stronger sense of the existential importance of community-based collaboration. The societal conditions faced during this period have highlighted to the extreme the ways that systemic inequities and injustice prevent vulnerable populations from accessing the health care services, computers and the internet, healthy food, and financial stability that they need to advance their own lives. Twenty-first-century public libraries, which are historically underfunded for the level of services and support they are expected to provide, are particularly skilled at cultivating community-focused partnerships that expand capacity to benefit their customers. This study explores a model for practical collaborative librarianship between a public library system and local human rights agency in advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracism education during a flashpoint in U.S. history. This example provides library workers, across settings, with best practices for identifying and nurturing opportunities for expanding mission-aligned social impact with limited financial and human resources. The Prince George’s County Memorial Library System (PGCMLS) and Prince George’s County Office of Human Rights (PGCOHR) Collaborative Programming Lifecycle models how imagining possibilities can lead to national impact with a nimble, entrepreneurial approach to institutional collaboration. This discussion of the PGCMLS and PGCOHR model for collaborative librarianship is especially helpful for library workers who may be in search of tactics for strengthening and adding new partnerships in their organizational setting.

The Prince George’s County Memorial Library System (PGCMLS) in Maryland is a public library that serves urban, suburban, and rural communities outside of Washington, DC. Prince George’s County has a population of over 967,000 residents who are 64.4% Black, 19.5% Latin or Hispanic, and 22.7% immigrants or refugees. The community has been a powerhouse in producing Black leaders across every industry, from actress Taraji P. Henson to author Jason Reynolds and NASA innovator Valerie Thomas to basketball star Kevin Durant, while also having a legacy as the largest slaveholding county in Maryland prior to abolition. These contrasting themes inform the vast socio-economic inequalities that exist in Prince George’s County, in which 54.6% of K-12 students are eligible for free or reduced meals. Since its founding in 1946, PGCMLS has leveraged local collaborations to adapt its services and collections to anticipate and serve the evolving needs of customers, whether through social services partnerships in the 1960s-70s or outreach partnerships with professional sports teams during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the Library’s most valued partnerships is with the Prince George’s County Office of Human Rights. While this partnership pre-dates the pandemic and murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor (among other innocent victims of systemic violence), the agencies rapidly transitioned to virtual programming and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to immediate local impact, the partnership’s programs have resulted in an effective new model for making local programs accessible to larger communities at the state, regional, and national level. The audience reach has been accomplished through myriad collaborations with government agencies, nonprofit organizations,
businesses, civic leaders, and national service organizations like the Black Caucus of the American Library Association. Together, the agencies present dynamic programming that focuses on civil and human rights awareness, social equity initiatives, and creates opportunities for residents across the county, state, region, and nation to hear and learn from various speakers on topical matters. The programs have been especially engaging when exploring topics like diversity, antiracism, “Black Voices,” Hispanic heritage, electoral engagement, human trafficking awareness, and LGBTQ+ identity. The presentation of Ibram X. Kendi on *How to Be An Antiracist* in July 2020 reached 226,000+ live viewers on six continents. While this program saw tremendous success and has had a long-term impact on PGCMLS and PGCOHR’s programming, it more importantly served as an inflection point for PGCMLS’ expanded emphasis on human rights programming, in keeping with the Library’s “Strategic Framework 2021-2024,” which includes focus areas of inclusion, lifelong learning, and literacy. The Library’s public programs in this area are part of a larger institutional mandate, shared by staff, administration, and the Board of Library Trustees, to address internal systemic inequities based on race, socio-economic status, and other demographics, in conjunction with advancing the community’s general understanding of the historical and daily impact of systemic racism and oppression locally and beyond.

This study explores the origin of the PGCMLS/PGCOHR partnership, the motives and tactics that have informed its evolution, the realization of goals and objectives, the ripple effects of successes in programming, qualitative social impact, and recommendations for replicating the model in other settings. The Prince George’s County Collaborative Programming Lifecycle model for collaborative librarianship is value-based and especially significant, because it can be replicated in any library, education, or public services setting, from nonprofits and small rural public libraries to community colleges and local government agencies. The programming work of the PGCMLS/PGCOHR partnership cultivates empathy and serves as an important step in the long journey toward making the community a more inclusive and welcoming place for all residents.

**Literature Review**

Extensive scholarship about library programs, outreach, and partnerships has been published over the past two decades, including publications that focus on the evolution of library programs during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2022. One of the general themes evident in much of the literature is that public libraries turn to collaborations, such as the PGCMLS partnership with PGCOHR, to address resource scarcity and provide added value to customers. The two Prince George’s County agencies featured in this study are both providers of “informational and informal or nonformal” education, as defined by Donna L. Gilton in “Lifelong Learning in Public Libraries: Principles, Programs, and People.” 6 While PGCOHR has a civil rights enforcement mandate on top of the educational role, the two agencies model Gilton’s discussion of programs as the marketing of services, whereas author events may highlight collections and electronic resources available through the Library and facilitate timely conversations about social justice issues affecting the local population.

Partnerships between public libraries and K-12 schools are traditionally crucial for delivering library programs, collections, and services. This need for direct partnership was even more extreme during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic as schools struggled to adapt to virtual learning environments. Reporting on library and school partnerships during the pandemic in *American Libraries* magazine highlights that “The key elements for engagement are communication and access.” 7 Partners, like PGCMLS and
PGCOHR, depend on each other to promote services and programs of interest to reach more customers. Public libraries in the United States have been called on to provide access to health services and services to the homeless for decades, not just during the COVID-19 pandemic. Public libraries across the country collaborate with public health and clinical providers to mitigate local or systemic health access inequities, like rural public libraries in Tennessee that partner with healthcare providers to certify their staff as consumer health information specialists. Nancy Bolt’s 2013 article “It Takes a Village – How Public Libraries Collaborate with Community Agencies to Serve People Who Are Homeless in the United States,” provides an overview of why and how urban public libraries are particularly called on to serve the homeless, as “Libraries have been populated by people who are homeless probably as long as there have been free public libraries in the United States.” Public libraries provide welcoming and safe spaces for homeless customers and can connect them with caseworkers and social services programs if they are interested.

Several monographs published since the 1990s discuss how libraries approach partnerships to add content to their offerings and reach a wider community. They include Carl Smallwood’s Librarians as Community Partners: An Outreach Handbook (ALA Editions, 2010), Daisy Porter-Reynolds’ Streamlined Library Programming: How to Improve Services and Cut Costs (Libraries Unlimited, 2014), Betsy Diamant-Cohen’s Children’s Services: Partnerships for Success (ALA Editions, 2010), Library Collaborations and Community Partnerships by Vicki Hines-Martin, Fannie M. Cox, and Henry R. Cunningham (Routledge, 2020), and Valerie Horton’s Launching Large Scale Library Initiatives: Innovation and Collaboration (ALA Editions, 2021). These books reflect trends in library programming and outreach around the time of their publication. However, they also provide strong basic summaries of perennial best practices for working with partner organizations to offer collaborative programs that are ultimately of greater interest to customers than if library staff were to continuously operate as independent program presenters.

Pivoting During the Pandemic: Ideas for Serving Your Community Anytime, Anywhere, edited by Kathleen M. Hughes and Jamie Santoro (ALA Editions, 2021), shares pandemic era best practices from public libraries across the United States, with discussions of virtual program accessibility, cultural inclusivity programming, STEM programs, genealogy programs, serving older adults, and numerous other customer interest areas. When discussing virtual health and wellness programs, Bobbi L. Newman states “Partnerships are a powerful way to expand your offering without requiring library staff to become experts at everything.” Cordelia Anderson’s Library Marketing and Communications: Strategies to Increase Relevance and Results (ALA Editions, 2020) celebrates the benefits of library partnerships but cautions that “…libraries can sometimes fall into the trap of offering to do most of the work and asking little in return from their partners.” This potential issue is discussed openly by PGCMLS and PGCOHR, and representatives regularly recalibrate how each organization contributes to the planning and production of joint programs to ensure that each entity maintains a significant contribution to the other. Staff at both agencies share live-broadcast production duties, booking duties, and interviewing duties, and brief local government stakeholders and funders as needed.

Origin Story

The collaboration began when Kyla Hanington, outreach coordinator for PGCOHR, contacted PGCMLS to secure venues for hosting community conversations. The Office of Human Rights is charged with ending discrimination and ensuring Prince George’s County is welcoming to all who live, work, and play here while reducing
incidents of hate, bias, and violence. Hanington’s role is to create meaningful programming that advances community and builds understanding. Finding free spaces that were accessible to the public for holding events and programming around the County was critical to the success of the outreach program, and PGCMLS was quick to offer “any space, any time” in response to Hanington’s search for locations.

The partnership expanded rapidly as the two agencies swiftly recognized common ground in their mandates. PGCMLS’ outreach program’s goal of strengthening the community while reducing incidents of hate, bias, and violence aligned with PGCMLS’ vision to provide a collaborative foundation within the community for all Prince Georgians to create the world they want to see. PGCMLS invited PGCOHR Executive Director Renée Battle-Brooks to contribute to the Library’s strategic plan, and the two agencies cemented their partnership in providing meaningful community programming on themes of equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-bias and anti-discrimination efforts through a memorandum of understanding. With the arrival of Nicholas Brown, Chief Operating Officer of Outreach and Communications, to the Library in January 2020, the partnership was further enhanced through Brown’s vision for what the Library could be and provide to the vibrant and diverse communities that make up Prince George’s County.

The collaboration moved from PGCMLS offering PGCOHR space for their programming to jointly hosting book discussions in multiple branches around Prince George’s County on works such as How To Be An Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi and Vernā A. Myers’ What If I Say The Wrong Thing: 25 Habits For Culturally Effective People. The two agencies also partnered on a “Movies That Matter” monthly film series, beginning in January 2020, which featured Broken On All Sides: Race, Mass Incarceration and New Visions for Criminal Justice (January), I Am Not Your Negro (February), and Bedlam (March). Screenings of Won’t You Be My Neighbor? (April), Let The Fire Burn (May), and other planned movies were canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This collaboration brought new audiences into conversation about social justice, with the Library providing the movies, film screening licenses, marketing, and the space, and the Office of Human Rights leading the post-movie dialogue about viewers’ experiences.

When the book discussion event for Myers’ book was canceled due to the pandemic, the Library and PGCOHR quickly shifted to hosting a virtual conversation, in which Kyla Hanington from PGCOHR and Michelle Hamiel, Chief Operating Officer for Public Services for the Library, discussed What If I Say the Wrong Thing and spoke frankly about recognizing and identifying their own biases. From this first virtual conversation came their now nationally recognized series, “The Elephant We Don’t See: A Diversity Dialogue,” which was nominated for an Urban Libraries Council Innovation Award in 2020. These monthly conversations, streamed over Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, reached an international audience with viewers regularly tuning in from across the United States and Canada. The series is scheduled for its third season in 2022.

Brown’s adeptness at moving to and navigating virtual platforms has enabled the partners to further enhance community offerings in the virtual space, from author talks to panel discussions bringing a wide range of voices and perspectives to county, state, and national residents in their own homes. See the appendix for a complete list of events and speakers. From an ask for space to a nationally-recognized outreach program, the partnership has grown exponentially since it first began and is creating solid relationships around and for Prince George’s County. At the core of its success has been a shared sense of enthusiasm and support: the Library is immediately supportive of PGCOHR’s efforts and the
same is true in reverse. When one of the partners brings the other a question, the response is always, “How can I help?”

**Large Dreams Yield Unexpected Large Results**

In 2019 and 2020 PGCMLS developed a strategic plan for 2021-2024 with the help of community partners, including PGCOHR. The “PGCMLS Strategic Framework 2021-2024” outlines the Library’s vision as providing “a collaborative foundation for all Prince Georgians to create the world they want to see;” its mission to “build relationships that support discovery by providing equal access to opportunities and experiences;” and its values as putting “community first by being welcoming, curious, accessible, kind, collaborative, and resilient.”

For their part, PGCOHR fulfills its mission through its five pillars:

1. **Investigation:** Conducting robust investigations of complaints of discrimination, and, in so doing, rooting out and ending discrimination when and where it occurs;

2. **Human trafficking:** Leading a coordinated, collaborative response to ending human trafficking (sex and labor) through the Prince George’s County Human Trafficking Task Force, using various methods, including anti-human trafficking awareness training;

3. **VERA/ISLA-CAIR Program:** Overseeing a County program that ensures access to legal representation for those residents of the County who are facing deportation;

4. **Language Access Compliance Program:** Managing a County program that ensures equitable access to County government services for all residents in the language in which they are most comfortable;

5. **Outreach:** Creating and providing meaningful community-building programming to promote positive relationships across diverse peoples and, in so doing, reducing incidents of hate, bias, and violence.

The symmetry between the two agencies’ visions was readily apparent and they were quick to develop a deep and successful collaboration. There are two critical elements that led to this success. First, the leadership of both agencies are fully supportive and encouraging of the work spearheaded by Brown and Hanington, recognizing that the partners’ work aligns with the agencies’ overarching mandates. PGCOHR Executive Director Renée Battle-Brooks and PGCMLS CEO Roberta Phillips arrived at their respective institutions in late 2018 and early 2019. These dynamic leaders shared key traits: one, they brought with them visions of increasing community engagement and institutional relevancy; and two, they each are interested in, supportive of, and encouraging ideas from, and growth of, agency staff members.

Second, large dreams yield unexpected large results. With limited funds, the partners have been able to secure internationally recognized leaders at no cost during book launch tours or with modest honoraria, in no small part because they are simply not afraid to ask. As will be discussed later in this study, the organizations have a minimal programming budget, and it can be a challenge to book guests whose work speaks to the community’s needs, but whose typical rates are far beyond the capacity of available funding. This brainstorming is without limit, and dreaming of the ideal person for a given conversation, and the subsequent willingness to then ask, is how the team secured legendary human rights and food security leader Dolores Huerta, for example, for an event in October 2021.

The switch to virtual programming has led to phenomenal audience growth in the agencies’ combined and individual outreach programs. The virtual space allows for greater access to national thought leaders—when the time and expense of travel is removed, guests are more readily available to participate in activities. The same expanded access also benefits attendees—the lack of commute time to an event and the...
ability to tune in from a home computer has exponentially increased attendance, with the average number of attendees viewing the program live increasing from 50 when in person to 300 virtually, with outlying numbers from 900 up to 226,000+ for certain high-profile speakers. Additionally, the virtual platforms allow for on-demand viewing, as the majority of past joint programs remain on YouTube indefinitely (with the permission of presenters).

“How Can I Help?”: Openness and Teamwork

How can I help? This immediate, positive responsiveness impacts collective programming in multiple ways: it creates safety for ideas, encourages brainstorming, and ensures goals and aspirations are allowed to flourish rather than be limited by the status quo of local precedent. This openness ultimately opens doors to unanticipated possibilities over time. While this study explores a programmatic partnership, the value of openness can transform any professional collaboration, from joint fundraising to a for-profit business. The Prince George’s County approach reflects a broader national trend of programming collaborations with public libraries. Shaun Briley, director of the Coronado Public Library in California, describes libraries’ role as the “community connector, bringing everyone together. . . .”15 Such a role and approach with PGCMLS and PGCOHR means there are no limitations to what the collaborative team can envision and, through such vision, are then able to achieve.

Having the right personnel involved in creating, building, and executing programming has solidified this successful partnership, ensuring the agencies continue to meet the needs of their collective communities. At weekly meetings, Brown and Hanington discuss any issues facing their agencies and county, and strategize effective and meaningful responses. The trust between the partners creates a safe space for both issues and ideas to be brought forward, ensuring a collaborative approach to problem-solving and positioning PGCMLS and PGCOHR to be regional and national leaders in diversity programming. The overall goal is to be ahead of issues, not trying to catch up. Agility, forward-thinking, and regularly scheduled conversations allow the team to stay ahead of and responsive to issues of import around the region and the nation.

Hanington often refers to this motto: “I want to plant trees under whose shade I will likely never sit.” Institutionally, this has meant looking at building the foundations of a robust and meaningful outreach program with deep roots—a program that matters to its community and its agency that will outlast any one staff member. Agencies, be they libraries, offices of human rights, or educational institutions, are well-served by taking a long-view approach to outreach and growth. PGCMLS and PGCOHR fully embrace W.P. Kinsella’s mantra, “If you build it, [they] will come.” In the case of programming, they have seen dramatic, immediate results with attendance rates but even had they not, both agencies are fully aware of and firmly believe in the need to do the work to build long-lasting, dependable, and meaningful outreach—a journey that can and does take time.

Assessment

One of the key parts of successfully envisioning what the outreach programs can be for this partnership is that neither agency has been overly concerned with the numbers of attendees. This can be challenging in metrics-driven funding cycles; one might be challenged to show the efficacy of a program by showing how many people came. The need to report these numbers (to stakeholders) can cause anxiety for some, to the point that they are unwilling to put on a particular panel discussion or a particular guest speaker in case only five people attend. The partnership recognizes that those five people
count, and it is as essential to reach and talk with the five as it would be if there were fifty people in attendance. Several in-person events had under twenty people, and from those events came the most astonishing relationships: people exchanged phone numbers and met for coffee; an older white woman who stood up to say she did not know anyone who was not like her was greeted by a seventeen-year-old Muslim woman who said she felt the same way about her own world, and they exchanged numbers and developed an intergenerational, cross-cultural friendship. Agencies are encouraged to reconsider what success looks like regarding outreach and community-building. Relationships are built one person at a time. Successful outreach programs keep that at the forefront of their vision. This approach facilitates strong social impact one community member at a time, while shifting the broader community forward. The partners are willing to plan an event without having everything perfectly figured out at the outset. Perception of barriers does not stop them. In other words, do not close doors; let the universe close doors for you.

Figure 1. Viewer @tingtingcam reflects on the impact of listening to Dr. Ibram X. Kendi’s interview in July 2020.16 (Source: PGCMLS/PGCOHR)
As noted above, in the case of PGCMLS and PGCOHR, partnership events have drawn quite large numbers of attendees, particularly in the virtual space. And while that is encouraging and even exciting, neither partner advocates for any agency to become too focused on numbers of attendees as the sole or primary measure of success. With a social impact lens, PGCMLS and PGCOHR track a range of qualitative indicators in conjunction with traditional quantitative metrics (e.g., total live views, views by platform, on-demand views, geographic distribution of viewers, age of viewers, etc.). Key qualitative indicators include viewer comments about the impact of a book and discussion on their personal growth, the level of engagement in the chat/comments during live broadcasts, earned media coverage, and viewer social media postings during and after programs (see Figures 1-3 for examples).

**Figure 2.** Geographic distribution of registrants for the Ibram X. Kendi event in July 2020, with viewers tuning in from across the globe.17 (Source: PGCMLS/PGCOHR)
Figure 3. An artist from Ink Factory, an art firm from Chicago, who watched the Kendi program was inspired to create these visual notes and make them available to the public via social media. (Source: The Ink Factory)\textsuperscript{18}

Beyond program-specific reporting, PGCMLS tracks the Net Promoter Score for the Library, which includes opportunities for customers to rate and comment on their experience with PGCMLS programs and services. Numerous comments describe the positive enrichment resulting from joint programs presented by PGCMLS and PGCOHR, from thanks in social media comments during live programming to emails sent to the individual partners and in-
person feedback from community members. Out-of-state viewers have written that they have seen programming, invited members of their agencies or organizations to attend events, or heard about events from third parties (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Author Lenny Duncan reflects on his PGCMLS/PGCOHR event on Twitter.¹⁹

When the partners want something, they ask for it without fear of rejection. This culture of openness of possibility allows for surprising achievements. In the case of PGCMLS and PGCOHR, successes include the July 2020 Ibram X. Kendi event; national book launch events for renowned authors such as Clint Smith (who debuted at number 1 on The New York Times hardcover and combined print/eBook nonfiction bestseller lists²⁰), Simran Jeet Singh, and Alina Boyd; booking labor and food security leader Dolores Huerta; and the Library transforming itself into a leader in multiple areas: Spanish language access and programs, LGBTQ+ representation and programming, American Sign Language (ASL) virtual programming, and more.

The Collaborative Programming Lifecycle

Recognizing and understanding the impact stories of joint programs is an essential element in the constant effort to strengthen, diversify, and expand how the presentations are relevant to attendees. The process of developing an idea, implementing a program, capturing the impact, taking advantage of opportunities to strengthen
relationships, and refining programming priorities is an ongoing and cyclical process. The model shown in Figure 5, established for PGCMLS and PGCOHR by the authors of this paper, reflects the range of content applications, whether special events or series, or the different participant perspectives that engage with programming.

Figure 5. Collaborative Programming Lifecycle model by Nicholas A. Brown and Kyla Hanington. (Source: PGCMLS/PGCOHR)

The “Voting: Democracy in Action” series, for example, was started by PGCOHR specific to the 2020 election. The partners determined it was impactful both from a practical and educational perspective. When a competitive funding opportunity was presented from Maryland Humanities, the partners identified a way to expand the scope of the series with the quantity of programs but more importantly, with the scope of the topics explored. Initially the programs were focused on the history of voting in the United States and practical ways to vote in the upcoming election. Following the election and with the new funding from Maryland Humanities, the series grew to address urgent topics impacting daily life like Black voter suppression, public discourse around Latin and Hispanic identity in the English-language U.S. media, and civil rights issues for South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Muslim Americans. During this programmatic expansion in January-March 2021, the partners added additional programming around historical figures and moments in the civil rights movement, such as the launch of the late civil rights pioneer C.T. Vivian’s memoir, It’s in the Action, with co-author Steve Fiffer as part of the NewSouth Books partnership. These examples provide a tangible expression of how
the Collaborative Programming Lifecycle applies to series and relationships with specific partners (Figure 6). The partnerships with publicists and publishers discussed later in this article shows how the lifecycle applies to special events.

**Figure 6.** Collaborative Programming Lifecycle: content application and the players. (Source: PGCMLS/PGCOHR)

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**Realizing Impact**

The reach and qualitative impact of the joint PGCMLS and PGCOHR virtual programming during the pandemic has been substantial and continues to exceed internal expectations for the quantity and quality of the programming. When the organizations shifted to virtual content delivery in spring 2020, there existed a shared commitment to providing customers and the community with continuous access to joint programs. Several in-person events that were previously announced for spring 2020, including an appearance by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi at the Prince George’s Community College’s Center for Performing Arts (co-presented by Joe’s Movement Emporium, PGCMLS, PGCOHR, and the PGCMLS Foundation), were sidelined by the local outbreak of COVID-19. While the team began conversations with a focus on transitioning the affected in-person events to the virtual environment, the Library’s success with reaching
customers with virtual programs in March and April of 2020 expanded brainstorming of new and improved joint programming. Project staff had free reign, with support from the leaders of both agencies and other partners, to experiment with different program types and formats. Informing this effort was a shared commitment to providing customers with opportunities to learn and think critically about daily life’s major societal themes.

Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, PGCMLS and PGCOHR had twelve events scheduled from January-April 2020. These included six-book discussion events, a panel on women in faith, four “Movies that Matter” film viewings, and the Ibram X. Kendi author event. Between April 2020 and June 2021, the organizations co-presented over 100 joint virtual programs. Most of those programs were broadcast events streamed on up to three social media platforms (YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter/Periscope), with select interactive programs on Zoom. All the joint events, regardless of format, provided participants with opportunities to hear from subject matter experts and participate in dialogues that facilitate their self-reflection and personal growth. The following are summaries of different programs and series that were offered during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The Elephant We Don’t See: A Diversity Dialogue”

“The Elephant We Don’t See: A Diversity Dialogue” is a monthly virtual discussion series featuring Kyla Hanington of PGCOHR and Michelle Hamiel of PGCMLS. Each program uses a book as a launching point for discussing diversity, equity, inclusion, or antiracism. The series was developed after the success of a virtual discussion event focused on What if I Say the Wrong Thing?: 25 Habits of Culturally Effective People by Vernā A. Myers, which provided the proof of concept and audience interest in a book-centric diversity discussion series. Between spring and fall 2020, the series focused on Black history and culture, reflecting the increased global focus on examining and committing to address systemic violence inflicted on Black Americans. In the second year, starting in February 2021, the series featured various cultural backgrounds and identities, including women’s history, trans identity, Hispanic heritage, and Black history. A vital element of this series has been facilitating open and honest conversations with the two speakers (one Black American and one white Canadian-American) across various topics, regardless of the speakers’ direct lived experiences with the issues discussed. This intentionally creates a safe space for learning for the range of diverse attendees who attend. Watch the programs here: tinyurl.com/PGCMLSElephant.

Series reading list (in order of program presentation):

(2020)

- What if I Say the Wrong Thing: 25 Habits for Culturally Effective People by Vernā A. Myers
- How to Be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi
- Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People by Anthony Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji
- White Fragility by Robin DiAngelo
- Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria (20th Anniversary Edition) by Beverly Daniel Tatum, PhD

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- Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- I am Woman by Lee Maracle
- The Mis-Education of the Negro by Carter G. Woodson
- Pass with Care: Memoirs by Cooper Lee Bombardier
- Killers of the Flower Moon by David Grann
Between April and June 2020, PGCMLS, PGCOHR, Prince George’s Community College’s Center for Performing Arts, and Joe’s Movement Emporium worked to reschedule Ibram X. Kendi’s in-person appearance to a virtual event. The event was confirmed for July 2020 and it presented a significant opportunity for the partners to expand access to Dr. Kendi’s interview during one of the social justice flashpoints in U.S. history, involving the mass protests against the oppression of Black Americans by law enforcement. In June 2020, PGCMLS and PGCOHR piloted a model of cross-promotion with public library systems throughout Maryland to provide access to headliner programs across jurisdictions. Three successful programs focused on intersectional Black identity and Black history were presented with partner libraries, such as the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore and Calvert Library in southern Maryland. These programs featured author R. Eric Thomas (Here for It), Christopher K. Bonner (Re-making the Republic), and George M. Johnson (All Boys Aren’t Blue). The events reached significantly larger audiences (up to a 400% increase from average evening programs) virtually throughout the consortium than would have been reached with just PGCMLS and PGCOHR promoting them to Prince George’s County residents. This brief pilot provided a model for involving Maryland’s public libraries in the Ibram X. Kendi event, with support from Maryland State Library, the Institute for Museum and Library Services, and Wells Fargo Foundation.

The virtual Kendi event was announced less than four weeks prior to the event date, yet word about the event spread rapidly and organically on social media because of the reach of the twenty-four partner public library systems and the core Prince George’s County partners. The event had over 270,000 advance registrations and garnered over 226,000 live views with 100,000+ on-demand views after the event. The synergy of Dr. Kendi’s book—a framework for examining racism—and the response to George Floyd’s murder created a circumstance in which many throughout the United States, mainly white Americans, were seeking ways to examine their unconscious biases and the way that Social structures reinforce white supremacy and systemic violence against Black, Indigenous, Latin and Hispanic, Asian Pacific, and other populations.

“Voting: Democracy in Action”

PGCOHR developed a series called “Voting: Democracy in Action” to promote civic engagement and literacy in the months leading up to the November 2020 U.S. presidential election (Figure 7). Prior to the election, the events featured a speaker who provided historical context for an aspect of electoral engagement (e.g., Dr. Joshua Davis, Assistant Professor, University of Baltimore who discussed the history of voter suppression in the United States) and practical instruction about participating in voting, with registration, mail-in voting, voting at physical locations during a pandemic, and understanding the power of the vote. Neighboring library systems quickly emulated this series at the behest of Dr. Richard Bell, a University of Maryland history professor and PGCMLS Foundation board member who appeared in the Prince George’s County “Voting: Democracy in Action” series. This immediate local interest in replicating the programming validated the value and strength of the curatorial work of the Prince George’s County partners. Following the 2020 election, the series was extended with support from Maryland Humanities to explore the role of identity politics based on current events in the
United States. The “Voting: Democracy in Action” program topics were:

- “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Legacy and Ending Voter Suppression” with Andrew Aydin (co-author of the *March* series with the late Rep. John Lewis), Taos Diggs (Director, Nonviolence 365, The King Center), and Andrea Blackman (Curator, Civil Rights Room, Nashville Public Library)
- “Black Voter Suppression” with Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist and author Leonard Pitts Jr.
- “Where Identity Politics Go Wrong: How Hispanics are not a Monolithic Voting Bloc” with journalist and author Ed Morales
- “Immigration, Civil Rights, and Electoral Engagement: South Asian, Muslim, and Middle Eastern Communities” with human rights attorney Azadeh Shahshahani

**Figure 7.** “Voting: Democracy in Action” event graphic (Source: PGCMLS/PGCOHR)

“Women In Faith: Diverse Voices Speak”

Pre-pandemic, the partners developed a panel discussion entitled “Women in Faith: Diverse Voices Speak,” looking at the intersections of faith, gender, and community with Christian, Muslim, Orthodox Jew, and Sikh speakers (Figure 8). That event transitioned to a virtual platform, and the robust, lively discussion led the panelists and partners to continue the series. A second event was held with a panel discussion among the women and then a third with the Muslim speaker taking Hanington through the meaning of Ramadan. This dynamic series has allowed viewers to learn about faiths different from their own and consider both multiple ways
of being and the similarities one finds across faiths.

Figure 8. “Women in Faith: Diverse Voices Speak” event graphic. (Source: PGCMLS/PGCOHR)

“One Maryland One Book:” Lisa See’s The Island of Sea Women

PGCMLS, PGCMLS Foundation, and PGCOHR collaborated to host local programs for the annual One Maryland One Book statewide read program featuring Lisa See’s The Island of Sea Women in September-November 2020. Four local book discussions with branch communities, a county-wide book discussion group, and a virtual event with Lisa See provided readers in Prince George’s County with various opportunities to explore the strength and resilience of a small community of fisherwomen (“haenyo”) in Korea through historical fiction. The Island of Sea Women captures the decades-long complex friendship between Young-sook and Mi-ja, two women living on the Korean island of Jeju during the Japanese occupation of the 1930s and 1940s, World War II, and through the Korean War. From diverse backgrounds, their seemingly inseparable friendship is pushed to its breaking point. By partnering on these programs, PGCMLS reached a broader audience and PGCOHR facilitated thoughtful discussions that related the history of the haenyo in the early twentieth century to contemporary women’s experiences and gender equity.

Young Adult Book Discussion Group

The partners decided to collaborate on a Young Adult (YA) book discussion group that featured books in which there was representation of people with disabilities. Rather than call it a disabil-
ity book group, which would likely limit participation as those who do not consider themselves disabled might self-select out, thinking the book group was not for them, the partners ran the program merely as a YA book discussion group. The books featured in the series feature characters who have disabilities, though this part of their identity is not the focus of program marketing. The presenters intend to normalize disability and provide opportunities for young people and staff to read books about people with diverse abilities and challenges and to consider the many ways there are of being.

NewSouth Books Partnership

The late C.T. Vivian was a leader in human rights and the fight for voting equity. His memoir, *It’s In The Action: Memories of a Nonviolent Warrior*, was published in early 2021 and the partners wanted to highlight his life, work, and memoir as part of their “Voting: Democracy in Action” series. Hanington reached out to NewSouth Books, the memoir’s publisher, to connect to the book’s co-author, Steve Fiffer. Upon learning about the team’s robust programming, NewSouth Books offered more than the team might have hoped—the publishers not only arranged for Fiffer to connect with them and ultimately take part in a discussion about the book and C.T. Vivian, but they suggested other books and authors and have entered a partnership with PGCMLS and PGCOHR, highlighting other important and timely works. Some of the events included in this partnership are:

- *Overturning Brown* with author Steve Suitts
- *American Founders: How People of African Descent Established Freedom in the New World* with author Christina Proenza-Coles
- *The Road to Healing: A Civil Rights Reparations Story in Prince Edward County, VA* with author Ken Woodley
- *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek* with Bob Zellner

Internal Professional Development

During the height of public attention to the Black Lives Matter movement in spring 2020, PGCMLS worked to identify ways to accelerate efforts to understand systemic racism and injustices within the organization. PGCMLS turned to its partner staff at PGCOHR to facilitate two all-staff town halls that intended to provide staff with a safe space for reflection about the injustices and events that added urgency to police reform and engendered global support for Black Lives Matter. PGCOHR was more than willing to step in to support PGCMLS staff in this process, providing thoughtful external facilitation of internal town halls and summarizing staff comments for the new PGCMLS Race and Social Equity Team. This team of library staff focused on advancing equity within the Library were charged with developing a Race and Social Equity Framework to guide the next three years of internal work to advance the dismantling of structures and processes rooted in white supremacy within the Library.21 While the ongoing partnership with PGCOHR focused on programming and outreach up to spring 2020, the PGCOHR’s mandate to advance civil rights education meant that the agency was ideally positioned to support the Library in its own journey in understanding and counteracting expressions of injustice. Between September 2020 and May 2021, the PGCMLS Race and Social Equity Team developed the Race and Social Equity Framework, which involved a comprehensive internal audit of processes and policies. Kyla Hanington is representing PGCOHR in the Library’s internal audit processes, a testament to the two agencies’ deep collaboration of developing and producing dozens of public programs over the past eighteen months.

Benefits of Collaboration

The wide range of programs that have resulted from the PGCMLS and PGCOHR partnership to date directly result from both organizations’
shared commitment to providing community members with opportunities to better understand their own experiences and role in advancing positive change locally and nationally. Success is not measured primarily by traditional metrics (e.g., views, number of programs, and other quantitative metrics), but rather how the programs are advancing the agencies’ strategic goals related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracism. The Library’s current strategic plan includes a focus area of inclusion and was developed with an overall emphasis on integrating race and social equity progress throughout all the Library’s services.

Advantage: Expanding Creative Capacity

One of the most tangible benefits of the PGCMLS and PGCOHR approach to collaborative programming is that both organizations benefit from staff coming together to share expertise, personal networks, and brainstorming. PGCMLS benefits from the human rights, legal, and literary programming expertise of Renée Battle-Brooks and Kyla Hanington, while PGCOHR benefits from Nicholas Brown’s experience with literary and multidisciplinary programs and significant experience working with publishers and publicists, Isaiah West’s expertise as the Library’s Teen Services Specialist, and programming expertise from numerous other PGCMLS staff members. PGCMLS’ Communication and Outreach Division also provides production support, graphic design services, and marketing for almost all joint programs. With the resources of a large institution (PGCMLS) to provide infrastructure and promotion for the programs, the key programming personnel can focus on crafting distinct programs that provide local relevance and context to national and international topics, from voter suppression against Black Americans in the 2020 presidential election with Pulitzer-winner Leonard Pitts Jr. to intersectional LGBTQ+ pride programming that explores the relationship between faith and inter-
whereas Maryland developed a statewide standard by spring 2020. All in all, virtual program viewership, no matter how it is counted, is only a helpful indicator if a consistent measurement system is applied over time within an individual institution or group of institutions.

There is, however, something special about the potential for reaching new audiences for virtual programs that PGCMSL and PGCOHR have tapped into throughout their collaboration. While blockbuster programs—like Ibram X. Kendi’s appearance in July 2020 and the national launch of Clint Smith’s How the Word is Passed in June 2021—reached viewers worldwide, the broad reach of the programs has also been evident on a daily and weekly basis. The PGCMSL and PGCOHR programs have developed a regular following of viewers as far away as California, Canada, Hawaii, the Midwest, Massachusetts, and New York. The presenters intentionally broadcast programs on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn (as of November 2021), which provides customers with open access and user authenticated access (via Facebook) to the events. Making live broadcasts available on these platforms encourages viewers to share them live with their own networks and benefits from the Library’s regular following. Almost all programs are also available on-demand for viewers, and this extended access is an essential point of negotiation when determining which speakers are featured through PGCMSL and PGCOHR. Select programs have also been broadcast via local public access television (PGCC-TV) to maximize access to customers who lack strong internet, are not savvy with technology, or simply prefer to enjoy programs via television.

It is unusual for a public library system that does not directly serve a major city to establish and sustain the organic national and international reach of PGCMSL and PGCOHR’s programs. For a suburban county public library to have a broad and consistent national reach for virtual programs, as a fair representation of the reach of powerhouse city libraries like Los Angeles Public Library and Boston Public Library, is quite remarkable and a true testament to the quality of the PGCMSL and PGCOHR joint programming as representative of PGCMSL’s overall virtual programs. An added benefit of this reach is that programmers can leverage the impact of programs when pursuing new program ideas, speaker bookings, and programming partnerships.

Advantage: Creating and Leveraging Momentum

The partnership’s lead representatives, Hanington and Brown, are also responsible for their organization’s communications and marketing efforts, which has been an advantage in amplifying joint programming. Both are experts in storytelling and reporting around agency programs. The successes with joint programs, starting with joint LGBTQ+ Pride programs and the 2020 Ibram X. Kendi event, formed the basis for the elevation of PGCMSL and PGCOHR as organizations that produce nationally recognized human rights programs for general adult audiences. The reach of the Kendi program alone is a serious advantage that the partners can point to when extending invitations to authors, publishers, and speakers bureaus. While this is certainly not a novel approach to leveraging the visibility of an organization’s platform to attract speakers, this new-found status as a joint national force in public library programming has directly led to many author bookings and mini-series partnerships that would not have been possible without the early successes. As with a concert series, the stature of a series can depend on how innovative and engaging the concerts are or the high-profile status of the performers featured on the series. Audience perception is also a factor in evaluating the effectiveness or impact of public library programs. When PGCMSL and PGCOHR can point to having a national and sometimes international audience for programs that focus on human rights topics, authors (or
their representatives) with a shared topical focus are attracted to presenters who share a similar emphasis.

Immediately following the Kendi program, PGCMLS and PGCOHR had the opportunity to develop joint programming on Black voices with the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, which is the professional service organization for Black library workers. The series included appearances by Princeton University professor and bestselling author Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (Begin Again), New York Times bestselling author Bassey Ikpi (I’m Telling You the Truth But I’m Lying), and scholar Calvin Baker (A More Perfect Reunion).

Another positive outcome from the Kendi program is a new statewide series in Maryland called “Maryland Libraries Together.” Sponsored by the Maryland State Library and the Institute for Museum and Library Services, the series presents up to three high-profile speaker events per year for the benefit of customers of all twenty-four of Maryland’s public library systems. The Kendi event provided proof of concept for the expansive reach and qualitative impact of timely programming about contemporary issues when organizations combine efforts. In the virtual environment, the achieved audience reach was significant, given the total saturation of amazing virtual programs available 24/7 between live and on-demand content.

While virtual programs offer tremendous potential reach, public libraries in Maryland found themselves competing for audience and customer attention (at least regarding virtual literary programming), when viewers could tune into any number of libraries, cultural institutions, or independent bookstores that made their virtual events available to anyone at no cost. It made sense for Maryland’s libraries to identify critical programs that would have broad appeal and benefit from a collective effort. The series was funded for a second year, through the 2021/2022 season. The 2020/2021 programs featured distinguished authors, scholars, poets, and artists whose perspectives on race, social justice, and identity were remarkably prescient around the time of the 2020 presidential election and the first hundred days of the Biden administration:

- Isabelle Wilkerson (Caste and The Warmth of Other Sons)
- Artist Devin Allen and educator DeRay Mckesson
- “Viva Latino: Own Voices Writers in Conversation” panel discussion with Julia Alvarez, Angie Cruz, Reyna Grande, and former U.S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera

Maryland State Library deems these programs especially valuable because all libraries, regardless of budget size and staff expertise, can provide customers with access to some of the important public thinkers of our time. In Maryland, there are library systems’ that serve rural jurisdictions with sparse populations, large suburban counties, regional library systems, and the Enoch Pratt Free Library, which services the city of Baltimore.

Momentum is also evident in the personal relationships that PGCMLS and PGCOHR staff have cultivated with publishers and publicists, leading to new mini-series (like the NewSouth Books partnership in 2021 focused on racial justice) and regular engagement with publicists like Helena Brantley, who facilitated the PGCMLS and PGCOHR presentation of Anna Malaika Tubbs (The Three Mothers) and Lenny Duncan (United States of Grace). These partnerships are much more meaningful than transactional professional relationships in that we are collectively working to connect authors whose work shares important perspectives on topics that will help our local and national communities advance human rights. During the pandemic, the partners also established a regular working relationship with Blue Flower Arts, LLC, which represents
numerous leading American poets. This relationship provided PGCMLS and PGCOHR with the opportunity to host former U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey (*Memorial Drive*), Obama inaugural poet Richard Blanco, NEA Literature Fellow Randall Horton, and others.

With the Prince George’s County government, PGCMLS and PGCOHR have demonstrated a deep commitment to advancing the visibility of countywide initiatives through programming, including the Children’s Mental Health Awareness Month, the Prince George’s County Human Trafficking Task Force, and expungement clinics for returning residents. In all these cases, the combined effort involving PGCMLS and PGCOHR provides exposure to important initiatives that can play a role in the daily lives of many in the local community.

**Impact Stories: Presenters and Community**

Positive responses to programs have been received from both event attendees and featured guests. Authors ask to come back, panelists thank the team for providing a forum for meaningful conversations, and audience members share the positive changes the event brings to their communities and their lives. A few examples of positive community feedback follow (see Figures 9-12).

**Figure 9.** Viewer post on Twitter in response to the July 2020 Ibram X. Kendi event.24

> “I just want to take a moment to tell you how much difference your work with the Prince George’s Human Relations Commission [now the Office of Human Rights] has made in my life. When I started attending your events my goal was to have a bigger world. That happened. I met all kinds of people there, but sometimes participants expected me to already know
the very things I had come there to learn. I could see how exhausting it was having to explain themselves to yet another person. Ibram Kendi’s book was the turning point. He gave me a context to see what was going on, and now it makes sense why others were frustrated with me. I will also never forget the women in the Kendi discussion group you led—both their stories and their graciousness to me. Since then, you have recommended and led discussions on many other books that continue to open my eyes and challenge my thinking. So, thank you for helping me turn things around in my corner of the world.” –January 2021 email from a frequent event attendee.

**Figure 10.** “The Elephant We Don’t See: A Diversity Dialogue” event graphic (Source: PGCMLS/PGCOHR)

**Figure 11.** Viewer post on Twitter in response to the July 2020 Ibram X. Kendi event.  

Lauren Reese @LaurenARE... · 7/20/20  
What an amazing discussion on #antiracism. @PGCMLS moderator is EXCELLENT, @DrIbram is giving me renewed motivation & tactics to fight #systemicracism. And big ups to the Black woman sign language interpreter too! THANK YOU all the organizers behind the scenes ❤️👏
“I am a fan! I follow all the Diversity Dialogues you hold.” –September 2020 email from a viewer from Tennessee

“My parents called me as soon as the program ended and enjoyed it as well. We definitely have to figure out more opportunities to work together.” –April 2021 email from a panelist

“That was the most enjoyable book event I’ve experienced. Thanks to the three of you (moderators and technician).” –June 2021 email from an author

“I need to thank you; I heard about What If? Short Stories to Spark Inclusion and Diversity Dialogue from your series and I immediately ordered it. Now I’ve brought it to work and have my staff read it.” –May 2021 comment from a director of a state agency

Figure 12. William G. Thomas III (University of Nebraska professor and author of A Question of Freedom: The Families Who Challenged Slavery From the Nation’s Family to the Civil War) responds to the PGCMLS/PGCOHR Clint Smith event on June 1, 2021. Professor Thomas is a past presenter with PGCMLS/PGCOHR and frequently engages publicly with the events presented from Prince George’s County. Thomas’ book recounts the history of enslaved Prince Georgians who challenged slavery in federal courts in the early 18th century.26

William G. Thomas III
@wgthomas3

Could not agree more with @ClintSmithIII that slavery is taught like it was ancient history, but it was "just yesterday." And that we need to feel the "proximity" of slavery. And need to write about it that way or we are being "morally and intellectually disingenuous." @PGCMLS
The overwhelming community interest in the partners’ programs in Prince George’s County and beyond has been clear. The Library has received a small number of comments via email, mail, and social media from individuals who have adverse reactions to what they perceive to be ideologically-progressive programming and topics. The presenters understand where this valid concern is coming from, as a wide range of political, ideological, and faith-based perspectives are found in Prince George’s County. PGCOHR’s mandate to advance civil rights education and the Library’s vision for advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracism, as rooted in its “Strategic Framework 2021-2024,” justifies the focuses of the agencies’ joint programs. One opportunity to address the criticism going forward will be to program more panels and roundtable discussions with speakers with a broader range of ideological perspectives. The presenters will not provide high-profile platforms for hate speech or blatant disinformation; however, there is most certainly value in representing a more comprehensive range of perspectives on pressing topics, like antiracism, to accomplish shared goals.

Leadership in Public Librarianship and the Human Rights Discipline

In keeping with the spirit of the PGCMLS and PGCOHR collaboration, key staff from both agencies invest time in sharing lessons learned with their respective professional communities. This effort takes multiple forms, including conference presentations, blogs for national service organizations, magazine articles, and informal consultations with external organizations. This collaborative approach to librarianship reflects a broader commitment to building community through partnerships that transcend industry silos. PGCMLS staff members with previous experience in nonprofits, education, and performing arts have extensive experience with collaborative programming. In almost all cases, working together yields more substantial reach, higher visibility, and deeper qualitative engagement over the long term, especially when partners serve the same audiences.

The team was asked to present at the November 2020 EEOC Regional FEPA Conference for Indianapolis and Philadelphia Districts. PGCOHR Executive Director Battle-Brooks, Hanington, and Brown spoke to federal and regional leaders about effective outreach and programming strategies for diversity programming in the virtual platform. The audience included human rights agency leaders from across the United States, many of whom do not have comparable existing partnerships with their local public libraries. One of the themes that emerged from the question-and-answer portion of the session was that agencies should embrace expansive possibilities to leverage creative approaches to programming. Often, individual hesitancy or local agency cultures may impede efforts to experiment with programs that do not have any local precedent.

In the library field, the PGCMLS and PGCOHR partnership has been featured in several settings as a model for creative social equity programming in resource-scarce environments. Representatives, along with colleagues from local partners Joe’s Movement Emporium and Prince George’s Community College’s Center for Performing Arts, delivered a statewide presentation to Maryland library workers and educators during the October 2020 Maryland Tech Connect conference, which is supported by the Institute for Museum and Library Services, Maryland State Library, and the Special Library Association Maryland Chapter. This presentation focused on “Maximizing Reach: Antiracism Virtual Programming.” It highlighted some of the significant technical production challenges that arose during the Ibram X. Kendi event, as well as how the virtual programming environment facilitated rapid collaboration with four local agencies and over twenty-four public libraries in
Maryland to maximize the reach of open-community dialogue around antiracism around the height of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests.

The professional lives of both Hanington and Brown have changed because of the collaborative partnership, as both have been approached by other agencies for information, support, and idea-sharing. Brown has taken on many new roles, functioning as a resource for other library systems, educational institutions, collaboration partners, the Office of Human Rights, and more. He serves on various boards, and his leadership in the areas of equity and inclusion are recognized both regionally and nationally. Hanington has received numerous calls from the directors of human rights agencies across the country about virtual programming, platforms, and best practices; was invited to join as an outside member of PGCMLS’ equity audit and has been approached by several local and national institutions about joining their boards. While this may be personally gratifying, what is most important about this work is information sharing and enhanced collaboration, as key players share their experiences, provide mentorship, and assist other agencies and institutions with problem-solving as they examine and address diversity and inclusion efforts. Throughout conversations with external partners PGCMLS and PGCOHR share best practices and experiences with confronting operational challenges to boost confidence in others to see past perceived barriers to develop meaningful programs that will authentically expand their audiences’ diversity, equity, and inclusion competencies.

The Ripple Effect

The approach to collaborative librarianship described in this case study depends on momentum for expanding the scope and impact of programs. This is understood as a ripple effect, as programs, author events, and individual series—like “The Elephant We Don’t See”—have garnered a strong audience. PGCMLS and PGCOHR are increasingly recognized as a desirable destination for high-profile speakers, including trending national and international bestselling authors, civic leaders, scholars, and policy experts. Whereas the partnership began pre-COVID-19 with book discussion groups and programs featuring local speakers, the cumulative effect of the joint programs with PGCOHR has led to PGCMLS becoming a preferred public library for book launch events, such as Clint Smith’s June 1, 2021, national launch of *How the Word is Passed*, presented in partnership with Loyalty Books. Smith has a connection to Prince George’s County, as a former local high school English teacher; however, he and his publisher saw great value in having PGCMLS host his launch event, which is no small feat considering that the book was one of the most highly anticipated books in 2021 for the antiracism and Black history categories. PGCMLS and PGCOHR can reach sizable virtual audiences based on the consistently high caliber of speaker events that provide viewers with opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of how they can advance change.

Meaningful and ongoing collaborative programs, whether they are small-scale interactive discussions or blockbuster author events, can raise awareness about current events and local community issues and promote the services of the participating organizations. The Ibram X. Kendi event, for example, led to national editorial opportunities through *Library Journal* and the American Library Association’s *Intersections* blog, where PGCMLS was invited to share successes as well as challenges of the statewide joint effort to advance antiracism programming. PGCMLS was also recognized with an Innovation Award for Social Equity by the Urban Libraries Council for the “Pride at PGCMLS” programs and online outreach, including joint PGCMLS and PGCOHR intersectional pride events.
By combining efforts, PGCMLS and PGCOHR have expanded their individual agencies’ capacity for booking speakers, producing high-quality virtual programs, promoting programs, and enriching local life. As a smaller agency that is not as obviously public-facing, PGCOHR has significantly benefited from the partnership with the Library. The increased visibility elevates the message of PGCOHR’s work, teaching community members about the agency’s mandate and providing them with practical and theoretical knowledge about how to address discrimination and access support. The Library’s platforms provide PGCOHR with immediate access to hundreds of thousands of county residents who would otherwise not have regular interaction with the agency and its work.

Joint programming by the two agencies has greatly benefitted from the range of speakers, from local debut authors to headliners like Dr. Kendi. While prominent national authors draw attention to Prince George’s County’s social justice education work, the opportunities to connect our audiences with these high-profile figures also facilitates elevating the work of local creators and civic leaders. For example, PGCMLS and PGCOHR invited local bookstagrammer Lupita Aquino to interview prominent Latin writers, Julia Alvarez, Angie Cruz, Reyna Grande, and Juan Felipe Herrera, about how Latin identity is reflected in contemporary literature. Aquino is a local force on the literary scene who has cultivated physical and virtual spaces for community members to deepen critical understanding of the lived experiences of BIPOC and Queer women in the area. The approach of bringing local and national voices together highlights the way that national issues like immigration and race relations play out at the local level, providing attendees with a chance to explore how their daily lives fit into a broader context. Featuring local speakers is also an essential part of how libraries support creativity in the community. Debut author Bassey Ikpi (I’m Telling You The Truth But I’m Lying, 2019) came to Prince George’s County as an immigrant from Africa. At the Prince George’s County Memorial Library System she cultivated her love of reading and writing. Ikpi states “[Prince George’s] libraries were a haven when I was a kid. I lived in the Greenbelt and the New Carrollton Libraries. I also wrote a portion of the book in the Bowie [L]ibrary.” Libraries provide an inclusive and welcoming environment for customers to discover their interests and achieve their dreams, and Ikpi’s journey is a prime example.

Collaborative Programming Lifecycle Practicalities

Library and agency leaders work to keep staff engaged, provide quality access to resources, maintain meaningful and effective relationships with board members, manage limited budgets, and support their local communities. These are oft-conflicting pressures. An internal working environment of openness allows for agility throughout the system. Open society fosters greater creativity, greater accomplishments, and greater impact; a closed environment/attitude creates burn-out and loss of dynamism among personnel and fundamentally the institution. Creating an attitude of openness and creativity in the agency ensures a dynamic and long-lasting institution, doing relevant work with staff that feels engaged, supported, and valued.

Library systems hoping to realize similar community impact can find success through the same simple principles that have worked so effectively for PGCMLS: developing partnerships with other agencies; an encouraging institutional attitude of how can I help?; positive brainstorming sessions with like-minded partners; and keeping a foundational tenet of librarianship by providing open access to meaningful, trustworthy information resources and services at the heart of community engagement efforts.
Directors can recognize how effective diversity and community-building programming positively reflect on the institution and further cement its necessary place in the community. All public service institutions should strive for relevance, and having the flexibility to adapt to a changing world—be it a pandemic, shifting demographics, or the recognition of various ways of learning—allows agencies to continue as robust and dynamic community leaders and community sanctuaries, in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Funding

Historically, PGCMLS is strapped for programming funding, with grants, the Library’s foundation, and Friends of the Library groups often providing support to address needs for balanced thematic and educational programming. PGCMLS has a modest general programming budget of between $30,000-$44,000 annually that must support programming at 19 branches and systemwide special programs and initiatives, like social equity programming. Local government human rights agencies, including PGCOHR, generally do not have programming funding within their operating budgets. By combining efforts on joint programming, PGCMLS and PGCOHR leverage the limited funding resources they have, pursue joint grant applications, and take advantage of staff programming expertise from both agencies to be very nimble with the funding that does exist. By leveraging in-kind support from each agency, their programmers can maximize efforts with booking authors during their initial book tours, when authors typically appear for publicity purposes and in some cases with financial support from their publishers. PGCMLS’ funding and external funding is then applied judiciously to speaker events that align with strategic programming goals on a seasonal, annual, or multi-year basis.

Given their limited financial resources, PGCMLS and PGCOHR develop and use their collective networks to enhance programming potential. They also recognize and celebrate their respective and differing strengths. A key player who is a strong speaker may host more programs, while one who is strong at graphic design may do more work creating advertising. The team also uses connections throughout the region and nation to develop and present meaningful programs, ensuring that a wide variety of viewpoints, experiences, and peoples are included. Representation matters: the more voices we hear from the more opportunities we have to learn, develop understanding, and build increasingly connected communities.

Of critical importance is what the collaboration offers authors and panelists. There must be something in it for the people who offer their time, energy, and effort, and the wide-reaching partnership between PGCMLS and PGCOHR offers those authors, speakers, and panelists a powerful platform for their work. The partners work to bring their words, art, and insights to people who might not otherwise be aware of their efforts and expand both their reach and their audience. Those agencies with limited financial resources are encouraged to realize they have space, audience, recognition, and elevation of efforts to offer—all of which are of great value.

One of PGCMLS’ greatest strengths and strategic decisions in the partnership has been its generous sharing of programs via cross-promotion and giving credit to partner organizations. At times, Brown has secured high-profile speakers and been quick to add not only PGCOHR as a partner but other community stakeholders as well, even if those agencies have not made significant (or any) contributions to that specific event. This credit giving across agencies has a profound effect. First, it encourages and enhances existing collaborations. It also rewards agencies and individuals for their participation. In frankest terms, it is well known that people do their best work when they feel appreciated.
Harvard Business Review’s summary of recent scholarship on employee motivation, including during the COVID-19 pandemic confirms this general sentiment.

…helping employees feel more valued and supported is important not just for those individual employees’ wellbeing, but also for the organization as a whole…when employees are more satisfied with their organization, they are more productive and less likely to leave….30

Sharing credit with others and inviting agencies into meaningful partnership, builds positive relationships and inspires greater and more productive work. The generosity of PGCMLS encourages other agencies to be generous; that inclusiveness has a positive impact that ripples across communities. Just as individuals blossom with honest praise, so do institutions flourish by acknowledging individuals’ contributions and efforts. PGCMLS is proof that a generous spirit changes communities.

What Next?

As Prince George’s County, Maryland approaches the start of the third year of COVID-19 pandemic operations, joint programs presented by PGCMLS and PGCOHR continue to evolve. Audiences for virtual programs are declining, and as of December 2021, PGCMLS was not able to safely resume indoor in-person programs. The two agencies continue to present a robust lineup of virtual author and speaker programs that focus on civil rights education, though the frequency and format of individual programs and series adapt to current audience trends and customer interest. The goal is to resume in-person programs, and offer hybrid live streaming access, when public health conditions are safer for customers and agency staff. From a curatorial perspective, fall 2021 is a period of creativity, as programmers are experimenting with new programming formats and content to reengage viewers who have virtual event or “COVID fatigue.”

In November 2021, the two agencies and a network of partners launched the first-ever Prince George’s County Reads initiative, which invites residents to participate in a nine-month community-wide read of William G. Thomas III’s A Question of Freedom: The Families Who Challenged Slavery From the Nation’s Founding to the Civil War” (Yale University Press, 2020). The book follows the history of enslaved Black residents of Prince George’s County who challenged slavery in the courts as early as the late eighteenth century, connecting local history to the national issues of race in America that have existed for over 400 years and have been at the forefront of public discourse since the spring 2020 social justice movements. This series of monthly discussion events began virtually in November 2021 and will transition to in-person and hybrid presentations when public health conditions allow.

PGCMLS and PGCOHR are fortunate to have agency leaders who fully support the role that programming plays in advancing the community. Without the strategic, broad, and encouraging vision of their respective leaders, the agencies would not realize such success. Thanks to the support of leadership, the agencies can develop, create, and promote regular and meaningful programming that enhances communities in the region and around the country by bringing diverse and robust events free of charge to residents no matter where they may live.

Conclusion

The case study of the PGCMLS and PGCOHR collaborative approach to programming may be applied in any public library or public service organization, nonprofits included. At a fundamental level, this example serves as a roadmap to success for public library workers who wish to learn new tactics for expanding the scope and qualitative impact of programs in an environment with lean resources. Many library workers
may encounter bureaucratic hurdles in innovating within their local context. Bureaucracy is a reality in any government, academic, or institutional setting. However, it does not have to squash creativity. Strength in numbers (e.g., working together with partner agencies) and being rooted in mission alignment, with a clear justification at the ready when requested by governing bodies or superiors, will at minimum help gradually move the needle. In the seemingly permanent budget austerity that public libraries encounter, innovation is especially possible when staff can think beyond the status quo to advance their library’s mission in a way that minimizes the financial burden, spreads the workload out amongst partners, and ultimately benefits customers.

The PGCMLS and PGCOHR collaboration results are not innovative, but instead reflect a total commitment to exploring and pursuing what is possible based on mission and values alignment. There are, however, clear conditions that continue to facilitate the effectiveness of PGCMLS and PGCOHR collaborations:

- Clear and open regular communication
- The support of each organization’s stakeholder groups and leadership
- A nimble approach to utilizing financial and technical resources
- Demonstrated expertise with developing programs that meet the shifting needs and interests of the targeted audiences.

In an open environment, such as is supported by the Prince George’s County government, creativity is encouraged for the ultimate benefit of residents. A focus of the partners in the coming years needs to be deepening the formal relationship between agencies to ensure that the substantial work of the past eighteen months is sustainable regardless of future environmental, staffing, and societal circumstances. In public libraries, modeling the level of cooperation between PGCMLS and PGCOHR will require a commitment to cultivating new partnerships and reframing existing partnerships so that customer needs may be satisfied in the short term, adapted for the medium term and anticipated and radically reinvented over the long term. As these two agencies prepare for the post-COVID-19 pandemic world, public libraries have the potential to strengthen their roles as purveyors of the programs that contribute to the overall well-being of the communities that they serve, regardless of the funding resources that may or may not be available to them.

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2 This study refers to Latin and Hispanic populations together using the broadest possible de-gendered terminology possible. There are distinct nationalities that are represented under Latin or Hispanic, but are not considered part of both diasporas. U.S. Census Bureau, “Quick Facts: Prince George’s County, Maryland,” U.S. Census, July 1, 2019, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/princegeorgescountymaryland.

4 Prince George’s County Health Department, “PGC Health Zone,” Prince George’s County Health Department, 2020, http://www.pgchealthzone.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=416&localeId=1260.


17 Source: PGCMLS Eventbrite account dashboard.

18 Used with permission of Ink Factory Studio. Visit inkfactorystudio.com.


21 Prince George’s County Memorial Library System Race and Social Equity Team. “PGCMLS Race and Social Equity Framework 2021 to 2023.” Prince George’s County Memorial Library System [Internal Document], June 23,

23 The Maryland standards for virtual program tracking were announced by Maryland State Library (Yana Demireva, email message to Maryland Association of Public Library Administrators List Serv, May 22, 2020). The national guidelines for tracking virtual program attendance were revised in April 2021 by the Institute for Museum and Library Services in preparation for the FY21 Public Libraries Survey, which aggregates public library service data consistently for all jurisdictions across the country (Yana Demireva, email message to Maryland Association of Public Library Administrators List Serv, June 8, 2021).


29 Bassey Ikpi (@BasseyWorld), “This is so exciting for me…,” Twitter, August 17, 2020, https://twitter.com/Basseyworld/status/1295456641828237312.
