



NATIONAL LEADERSHIP GRANTS FOR LIBRARIES

Sample Application LG-259456-OLS-26
Project Category: Community-Centered Implementation

Pottsboro Area Public Library

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$94,024
Amount of cost share:	\$0

The Pottsboro Area Public Library in Texas will implement, evaluate, and document a practical civic engagement framework with artificial intelligence-assisted listening designed specifically for small and rural public libraries. In partnership with Cortico, the library will facilitate small-group dialogue sessions engaging approximately residents, use ethical artificial intelligence assistance to identify recurring themes, and publish validated Community Insight Reports and audio medleys that transparently show how a community's perspectives relate to one another. The primary beneficiaries will be Pottsboro-area residents, with emphasis on expanding participation among working adults, caregivers, youth, and geographically distant residents in formal civic processes. Features of this project will be an open-access, practitioner-focused national toolkit for replication, with implementation tiers, budget models, ethical artificial guidelines, consent templates, and cost-per-session documentation; and youth artificial literacy experiences integrated into community dialogue sessions.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program to which you are applying.

POTTSBORO AREA PUBLIC LIBRARY

A Replicable Civic Listening Framework with Ethical AI for Small and Rural Libraries

National Leadership Grants for Libraries | Community-Centered Implementation | FY2026

INTRODUCTION

The Pottsboro Area Public Library requests \$96,560 in IMLS funds through the FY26 National Leadership Grants for Libraries program to implement a two-year Community-Centered Implementation project (September 1, 2026 - August 31, 2028). This project is rooted in one of America's oldest democratic traditions: the belief that self-governance depends on citizens genuinely hearing one another. As our nation marks 250 years of independence, rural communities across America face a structural paradox - residents want to participate in decisions shaping their communities, but existing civic processes collect individual comments without producing the shared understanding that real self-governance requires.

The Pottsboro Area Public Library, a trusted institution serving 932 square miles of rural North Texas, will adapt two established models - ALA Libraries Transforming Communities facilitation practices and Cortico's conversation-based listening methodology (developed with the MIT Center for Constructive Communication) - into a documented, replicable workflow sized for small-library staffing and budgets. In partnership with Cortico, the library will facilitate 15 structured small-group dialogue sessions engaging approximately 150 residents, use ethical AI assistance to identify recurring themes, and publish validated Community Insight Reports and audio medleys that transparently show how a community's perspectives relate to one another.

The project will produce an openly licensed, practitioner-focused national toolkit enabling libraries nationwide to replicate this model without specialized research capacity, demonstrating that public libraries can serve as trusted civic infrastructure for the kind of civil dialogue that unites communities around shared understanding - fulfilling the founding vision of libraries as pillars of an informed, self-governing citizenry.

PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

The Need and How It Was Identified

Across rural America, civic participation is structurally broken - not for lack of interest, but for lack of infrastructure. This challenge strikes at the heart of American democratic life. The town meeting, the community deliberation, the shared determination of local priorities: these are not recent inventions but founding-era practices that have sustained American self-governance for 250 years. Yet today, the rural residents who most strongly embody these traditions are the least likely to have their voices meaningfully heard and synthesized in civic processes.

The evidence is clear. The National Conference on Citizenship's Civic Health Index documents that rural residents report lower confidence than their urban counterparts that public input influences local decisions, even while expressing comparable or higher interest in community affairs. The Pew Research Center has found that trust in local government, while stronger than trust in federal institutions, has declined significantly over the past decade, with transparency about how public input is used cited as a leading driver of that erosion. A 2021 ALA survey found that more than 70 percent of rural libraries reported interest in expanding civic engagement programming but lacked the staff capacity or analytic tools to move beyond event-based programming toward sustained community listening.

The Pottsboro Area Public Library identified this gap through nine years of hosting civic forums and community discussions across Grayson County, Texas. Those events confirmed strong public trust in the library as a convening institution but also consistently revealed a structural absence: voices were being gathered without any systematic process for synthesizing, validating, or transparently reporting what the community expressed

collectively. Working adults, caregivers, youth, and geographically remote residents remained chronically underrepresented. Participants repeatedly expressed uncertainty about whether their input influenced decisions. Local institutions lacked any mechanism for receiving a structured account of community priorities, leaving them to interpret public preferences based on incomplete, anecdotal information.

Connection to America's 250th Anniversary and Civic Traditions

This project is conceived explicitly in the spirit of the America250 moment. Benjamin Franklin's vision of libraries making ordinary Americans as informed and capable of self-governance as the educated elite has never been more relevant. The Pottsboro Area Public Library's work takes that vision seriously: by giving rural Texans not just a place to gather but a structured, validated process for understanding what their community collectively thinks, the project strengthens the civic sinew of American democracy at the local level where it matters most. Community Insight Reports are, in essence, a modern expression of the deliberative democratic practices - open debate, honest synthesis, shared conclusions - that shaped the American founding.

President Trump's inaugural call to ensure that "the forgotten man and woman will be forgotten no longer" resonates directly with this project's purpose. Rural Grayson County residents - working adults, farmers, caregivers, young people - have long been structurally excluded from formal civic processes not by choice but by design. This project builds the infrastructure to include them.

Responsible AI Education for Youth

Five of the project's 15 structured dialogue sessions will engage youth participants. Beyond civic participation, these sessions will provide hands-on, applied AI literacy: youth participants will experience how AI assists in identifying patterns across recorded conversations, discuss the ethical commitments that govern its use (human oversight, consent, validation), and develop critical frameworks for evaluating AI's role in public life. This aligns directly with the goals of Executive Order 14277, "Advancing Artificial Intelligence Education for American Youth," by grounding AI education not in abstract technical instruction but in a real civic context where young people can see, question, and understand how AI tools are used responsibly in their own community.

How This Project Differs from and Builds Upon Existing Models

This project integrates three proven models that have each, in isolation, fallen short of what small rural libraries need. The ALA Libraries Transforming Communities initiative has equipped libraries with facilitation frameworks and dialogue practices but does not provide a method for synthesizing perspectives across multiple conversations into a documented community understanding. Cortico's conversation-based listening methodology, developed with the MIT Center for Constructive Communication and field-tested through initiatives including the Teen Dialogue Accelerator with PBS FRONTLINE, offers AI-assisted thematic clustering that can surface patterns across recorded dialogue at a scale no single facilitator could achieve manually, but it has been deployed primarily in research and urban contexts. Open-source deliberative analysis tools provide additional analytic support but lack the facilitation scaffolding and practitioner guidance needed for library implementation.

This project does not replicate any one model. It integrates their complementary strengths - structured facilitation, ethical AI-assisted sensemaking, and open-source qualitative analysis - into a documented, transparent workflow that library staff can sustain without specialized training. The human-in-the-loop approach to AI reflects emerging best practice for responsible technology use in public institutions: AI scales the work; people remain accountable for its meaning. Participants require no technical knowledge, the technology operates in the background, and participation is identical to a normal community conversation.

The project advances IMLS Agency Goal 2, Objective 2.2 (Support community collaboration and foster civic discourse) and NLG-L Program Objective 1.2 (Improve community prosperity through community and civic dialogue). When institutions can access a validated, structured account of community priorities, they are better

positioned to respond effectively - linking civic participation directly to community prosperity outcomes in workforce development, public services, infrastructure, and youth opportunity.

Who Will Benefit

The primary beneficiaries are Pottsboro-area residents, with emphasis on expanding participation among working adults, caregivers, youth, and geographically distant residents historically underrepresented in formal civic processes. Youth participants will develop civic dialogue skills, leadership experience, and responsible AI literacy aligned with current national priorities. Local institutions - including municipal government, school districts, and community organizations - will benefit from validated Community Insight Reports that give them a clearer, more complete picture of community priorities than conventional public comment allows. At the national level, small and rural libraries - the majority of the approximately 17,000 public libraries in the United States - will benefit from an openly accessible toolkit that makes this model replicable without grant-funded infrastructure.

PROJECT WORK PLAN

Phase 1 – Capacity Building (Months 1–6)

Project Director Renee Nichols will complete advanced facilitation training and work with Cortico to configure the recording, transcription, and AI-assisted thematic clustering workflow for small-library use. Nichols, Dianne Connery (development director), and Thea Gordon (library staff) will be trained in session facilitation support, recording oversight, and transcript review. The team will finalize informed consent procedures, conversation guides tailored to Grayson County civic topics, and data governance guidelines.

A newly formed Community Advisory Group - comprising residents representing the service area's geographic, generational, and demographic diversity, with deliberate recruitment of residents historically disengaged from public civic processes - will be convened in Month 2. The Advisory Group will review and refine conversation guides, advise on participant recruitment strategies, review draft Community Insight Reports before public release, and provide feedback at every project phase transition. This structure ensures ongoing community accountability and authentic stakeholder governance, not token consultation.

Deliverable: Written implementation workflow, ethical AI use guidelines, finalized conversation guides, and Community Advisory Group charter.

Phase 2 – Community Conversations (Months 7–14)

The library will facilitate 15 structured small-group sessions - 10 with adult community members and 5 with youth - engaging approximately 150 participants. Sessions will prioritize residents not typically reached by public meetings, using participant support funds (stipends, light meals, youth incentives) to reduce access barriers. Geographic distribution across Grayson County's 932 square miles will be ensured through varied session locations.

Each session will be recorded with informed consent, transcribed, and processed through Cortico's AI-assisted thematic clustering tools. Nichols, Connery, and Gordon will review transcripts, validate AI-identified themes against facilitation notes, and draft plain-language summaries showing how perspectives across sessions relate areas of agreement, disagreement, and the lived experiences shaping each viewpoint. The Community Advisory Group will review all drafts before public release, ensuring community validation of synthesized findings.

Youth sessions will include an explicit AI literacy component: facilitators will walk participants through how thematic clustering works, what consent and data governance practices are in place, and how to critically evaluate AI-assisted synthesis. Staff will maintain detailed time logs, as session-level hour documentation is central to the replication guidance produced in Phase 4.

Deliverable: Session documentation, demographic participation analysis, and topic-specific draft Community Insight Reports.

Phase 3 – Public Review and Validation (Months 15–18)

Two public forums will present Community Insight Reports and online audio medleys to the broader community, inviting residents, including non-participants, to respond, correct, and affirm the synthesized findings. This validation step is what distinguishes Community Insight Reports from conventional meeting summaries and builds the public trust necessary for local institutions to act on findings with confidence. Forum feedback will be incorporated into final report revisions. The Community Advisory Group will approve final validated reports before institutional distribution.

Validated reports will be shared with Grayson County government, local school districts, and community organizations. Structured follow-up will be scheduled at six and twelve months post-publication to document institutional engagement with and response to findings.

Deliverable: Final validated Community Insight Reports and institutional distribution documentation.

Phase 4 – Documentation and Dissemination (Months 19–24)

Dianne Connery, in collaboration with the independent Evaluation Consultant, will synthesize implementation experience and evaluation data into a practitioner-focused national toolkit. The toolkit will include: a step-by-step implementation guide; budget models and staffing templates scaled to three implementation tiers (solo librarian, 2–3 staff, larger team); ethical AI use guidelines; consent procedures and conversation guide templates; cost-per-session documentation; guidance on where implementation is straightforward and where skill-building is required; and the final evaluation report. All materials will be ADA-compliant and published in multiple formats (PDF, video tutorials) as open-access resources.

Deliverable: Publicly accessible national toolkit and final evaluation report.

Project Team

Renee Nichols, Project Director, builds on nine years of civic programming experience at the Pottsville Area Public Library and direct participation in Cortico’s Teen Dialogue Accelerator, a national initiative with the MIT Center for Constructive Communication and PBS FRONTLINE. Through this pilot, Nichols has already received hands-on training in Cortico’s full methodology: designing structured conversation guides, facilitating recorded small-group discussions, obtaining informed consent, managing recordings, reviewing AI-assisted thematic clustering, and preparing community-facing summaries. This existing experience substantially reduces implementation risk. Nichols will oversee all project management, facilitation leadership, partnership coordination, evaluation integration, and dissemination.

Thea Gordon and Dianne Connery, library staff members, will support session scheduling, recording oversight, participant communication, transcript review, summary drafting, and documentation across all phases. Their sustained involvement ensures the workflow is institutionally owned, not consultant-dependent, essential for post-grant sustainability.

Cortico will serve as Technology Consultant (\$12,000), providing workflow refinement, AI-assisted thematic clustering configuration, data governance advising, and technical documentation support. The existing Cortico partnership means this relationship is operational rather than prospective. An independent Evaluation Consultant will be competitively selected prior to project launch (\$10,000) and will design assessment instruments, analyze data, calculate cost-per-session and staffing metrics, and prepare the final evaluation report anchoring national replication guidance. A position description for the Evaluation Consultant is included in Supporting Documents.

Stakeholder Involvement

Stakeholder engagement has already shaped this project. Nine years of civic programming surfaced the structural gaps it addresses. The Cortico partnership is active and tested. During project planning, library leadership consulted with Grayson County government officials, local school district representatives, and community members to identify relevant civic topics and assess appetite for structured dialogue. These conversations confirmed both the need and community trust in the library as convening institution.

During implementation, the Community Advisory Group serves as the primary vehicle for ongoing stakeholder accountability. Input will be solicited at every project transition: before conversations begin, during draft summary review, at public validation forums, and during toolkit development. Advisory Group membership will explicitly include residents who have historically disengaged from public civic processes - the people this project is most designed to serve.

Evaluation

Evaluation will be designed by the independent Evaluation Consultant in collaboration with Renee Nichols, using a mixed-methods approach organized around the IMLS performance measures of Effectiveness, Efficiency, Quality, and Timeliness.

- Effectiveness will be assessed through changes in participant understanding across differences, shifts in trust toward local institutions, and the extent to which institutions engage with and act on Community Insight Reports — tracked through pre/post participant surveys and structured institutional follow-up at six and twelve months post-publication.
- Efficiency will be documented through staff time logs and cost-per-session calculations, producing the honest operational benchmarks that make replication credible for libraries of varying size and capacity.
- Quality will be measured through participant satisfaction surveys and Community Advisory Group feedback on the accuracy and usefulness of Community Insight Reports.
- Timeliness will be monitored through the Project Director's ongoing comparison of actual versus projected activity completion dates against the Schedule of Completion.

The Evaluation Consultant will conduct independent analysis of all data and prepare a final evaluation report addressing both Pottsboro outcomes and the broader question of replicability at libraries of similar size and capacity. Evaluation findings will be integrated directly into the national toolkit, grounding replication guidance in evidence rather than aspiration.

PROJECT RESULTS

Intended Results and Deliverables

By project completion, the Pottsboro Area Public Library will have delivered the following results:

- Approximately 150 residents engaged across 15 structured civic dialogue sessions, with documented representation from groups historically underrepresented in local civic processes, including working adults, caregivers, youth, and geographically remote residents.
- Topic-specific Community Insight Reports produced, publicly validated through two community forums, and shared with local institutions including municipal government, school districts, and community organizations.
- A documented, staff-operated conversation-to-summary workflow tested and independently evaluated across the full project period - demonstrating feasibility for small-library implementation.

- An open-access, practitioner-focused national toolkit for replication, with implementation tiers, budget models, ethical AI guidelines, consent templates, and cost-per-session documentation.
- Youth AI literacy experiences integrated into five community dialogue sessions, aligned with EO 14277 goals for applied, contextual AI education.
- An independently evaluated cost-per-session benchmark providing concrete operational data for prospective adopting libraries.

All toolkit materials will be openly licensed and permanently hosted on a dedicated resource hub.

Addressing the Identified Need

Community Insight Reports give residents and institutions something that no existing small-library civic process has been able to provide - not a transcript of who said what, but a structured, human-validated account of how perspectives across an entire community relate to one another: areas of agreement, areas of disagreement, and the lived experiences shaping each viewpoint. For residents, this makes participation visibly meaningful. For local institutions, it provides the kind of civic intelligence typically available only to large municipalities with research staff. For young people, it models what responsible AI use looks like in practice. For the library field, the toolkit closes the gap at scale by giving small and rural libraries a practical, evidence-grounded path to offering this service without developing their own analytic infrastructure.

Adaptability, Generalizability, and Usability

Replication has been a core design commitment from the outset, not a final-phase deliverable. Every project decision - staffing allocations, technology selection, session structures, consent procedures - has been made with sustainability and portability in mind. The project uses open-source deliberative tools and Cortico's accessible platform, ensuring no proprietary barriers for adopting libraries. Budget models will be presented in three tiers reflecting different staffing configurations and service area scales - from a solo librarian implementing a single conversation series to a larger team running a full multi-topic program. Implementation guidance will candidly document where the work is straightforward and where it requires skill-building, so adopting libraries can accurately assess feasibility before committing resources.

The independent evaluation's cost-per-session and staffing benchmarks will provide the concrete operational data prospective adopters need to budget realistically. The toolkit will be structured so libraries can implement the full model or begin incrementally with a single conversation series, creating a low-barrier entry point for the smallest rural libraries.

Dissemination

Dissemination begins in Phase 2 and continues beyond the project period. Renee Nichols will submit proposals to present at the American Library Association Annual Conference, the Public Library Association Conference, and relevant regional library gatherings, prioritizing sessions that engage peers working on civic programming, community partnerships, and responsible AI integration. The library will host at least one practitioner webinar during Phase 4 to walk staff from other libraries through the toolkit, answer implementation questions, and build a cohort of early adopters. Cortico's national network will extend reach to libraries and civic organizations already engaged in conversation-based listening work. The library will pursue publication of evaluation findings in a peer-reviewed library or public administration journal to contribute an evidence base to the field.

Sustainability

Within the Pottsboro Area Public Library, sustainability will be achieved through permanent facilitation training embedded in staff roles, continued use of open-source and low-cost tools that require no ongoing grant funding, and integration of structured civic dialogue into regular programming. The Community Advisory Group will

continue in an oversight capacity after the grant period, ensuring ongoing community accountability. Because the workflow is documented in sufficient operational detail to be run by trained staff without consultant support, the library will not face a funding cliff at project end.

At the national level, sustainability is built into the toolkit's design. Openly licensed materials hosted on a permanent resource hub can be discovered, downloaded, and implemented independently, without the Pottsboro library or any intermediary managing adoption. Tiered budget models allow libraries to plan for this work within existing operating budgets. If the project demonstrates, as expected, that library-facilitated community listening is feasible within small-library constraints, it will have made the case for this service to be supported through ordinary library budgets: the most durable form of sustainability any library program can achieve, and the surest path to fulfilling public libraries' founding promise as pillars of American civic life.

Schedule of Completion

Project Period: September 1, 2026 – August 31, 2028
Lead Applicant: Pottsboro Area Public Library

Major Activity	Sep–Dec 2026	Jan–Jun 2027	Jul–Dec 2027	Jan–Jun 2028	Jul–Aug 2028
Phase 1: Capacity Building & Setup	■■■■■	■			
Staff training & workflow configuration	■■■■■				
Consent procedures & Advisory Group formation	■■■■■				
Evaluation design	■■■■■				
Phase 2: Community Conversations (15 sessions)		■■■■■	■■■■■		
Recording, transcription & AI-assisted analysis		■■■■■	■■■■■		
Draft Community Insight Reports			■■■■■		
Phase 3: Public Validation & Final Reports			■	■■■	
Two public validation forums			■		
Finalize Community Insight Reports				■■■	
Phase 4: Toolkit & Dissemination				■■■■■	■■■
Final evaluation report				■■■	
Toolkit development & formatting				■■■■■	■■■
Webinar & conference dissemination				■■■	■■■
Ongoing Project Management & Monitoring	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■