



NATIONAL LEADERSHIP GRANTS FOR LIBRARIES

Sample Application LG-259991-OLS-26
Project Category: National Implementation

New Jersey State Library

Amount awarded by IMLS: \$299,250
Amount of cost share: \$0

The New Jersey State Library in partnership with the Montana State Library, the Hawai'i State Public Library System, and InnovateUS, a project of The Governance Lab (The GovLab), will implement a project to address the gap in practical education and training on Artificial Intelligence (AI) for the public. This project will develop a replicable and scalable model for educating and engaging members of the public about AI while also bolstering civic engagement in selected communities. As a result, the status of public libraries as community hubs for civic engagement and digital learning will be strengthened, and more residents will benefit from an easy-to-use set of training tools that demystify AI. This project will position residents to leverage the strengths of AI to improve communities and hopes to encourage librarians to learn about AI, work with local government officials, and to help younger people re-connect with their communities in a way that furthers the work of local governments.

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.

INTRODUCTION

The New Jersey State Library (NJSL), an affiliate of Thomas Edison State University, together with its partners the Montana State Library (MSL), the Hawai'i State Public Library System (HSPLS), and InnovateUS, a project of The Governance Lab (The GovLab), requests a three-year, \$299,250 National Leadership Grant for Engaging Communities with Artificial Intelligence (Engaging Communities). Designed to address the gap in practical education and training on artificial intelligence for the general public, *Engaging Communities* will develop a replicable and scalable model for educating and engaging members of the public about artificial intelligence (AI) while also bolstering civic engagement in selected communities. As a result, the status of public libraries as community hubs for civic engagement and digital learning will be strengthened, and more residents will benefit from an easy-to-use set of training tools that demystify artificial intelligence. Importantly, *Engaging Communities* positions residents to leverage the strengths of artificial intelligence to improve communities. Where most AI literacy initiatives are aimed at computer scientists or technical learners, *Engaging Communities* is aimed at people and communities with no prior technical knowhow and prepares them to develop useful tools for their future.

This unique learning initiative is designed to illuminate AI, normalize its responsible use, and empower ordinary people to apply AI tools for civic participation, community problem-solving, and to learn how to build AI tools for themselves. Through short, engaging videos delivered via mobile phone messaging apps that may include but are not limited to WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger in different languages, *Engaging Communities* is designed to offer families and residents a clear, trusted, free introduction to how AI can help with everyday civic needs—from understanding public benefits to organizing neighborhood improvements to helping with a child's homework. To address the widest set of residents, the course will be developed in English and translated into Spanish. A set of six co-created public events in Montana, Hawai'i, and New Jersey will model how to bring AI literacy, trust, and civic imagination to the public through public libraries.

This proposal addresses IMLS' goal for libraries to “build bridges and further meaningful partnerships with other civic institutions in their communities, including but not limited to local governments and philanthropic organizations” with artificial intelligence as the linchpin. The project is aligned with the IMLS National Leadership Grant program goal to “develop, enhance, or disseminate replicable practices, programs, models, or tools to strengthen library and archival services for the American public.” Specifically, it addresses Objective 1.2 - Improve community prosperity through libraries and archives by increasing access to government services and promoting community and civic dialogue. Situated in state libraries in Montana, Hawai'i and New Jersey, the project will have national impact.

PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

Communities and individuals across the United States are currently struggling to understand what AI is and how they can use it effectively. Libraries are perfectly poised to help close this gap by providing training and real-world experiences. Libraries already provide both training and tools in adjacent technology fields. Communities trust libraries to provide this type of free, platform-neutral educational opportunity, and libraries are recognized for providing expertise and accessible support for their communities.

State Libraries are uniquely positioned to help develop and foster this program. They have connections, trust, and knowledge of local libraries. They have extensive experience innovating and building new projects. In this project, there is a deliberate effort to bring distinct partners into the process to test and refine the mechanics of the prototype, while providing needed education and training in the field of AI. This is also reflected in the variety of communities chosen to test the project.

Needs and Challenges

Artificial intelligence is reshaping how people learn, work, and engage with the world. Yet for most, AI remains confusing, intimidating, or out of reach. According to [Pew Research](#), half of Americans are more concerned than excited about AI and only 10% are more excited than concerned. They want more [control](#) over AI and, especially over how their data is used.

If we want to empower people to take charge of their tools and not, to paraphrase Henry David Thoreau, risk becoming the “tools of our tools,” then citizens need to understand what AI is, how it works, and how to use it well. Early academic discussions of artificial intelligence that have emphasized its extraordinary risks have also tended to cast communities as passive victims rather than active participants in shaping and using technology. AI tools are increasingly embedded in daily life—shaping how people apply for jobs, access benefits, or receive information—but most Americans lack the knowledge or confidence to use these tools effectively or to be critical consumers of the technology. In response to what Sofia Bosch Gomez calls “these deficit framings,” we designed *CivicAI: Powerful Tools for Community Action*, a model platform for AI education.

Complements Existing Models

While governments, universities, and tech companies have launched AI education efforts, nearly all are aimed at technical skills or abstract policy discussions. They overlook the needs of everyday citizens who want to understand and use AI to improve their lives and communities. Across the world, new AI literacy programs have emerged—from university-led seminars to corporate training modules and online micro-courses. Yet nearly all share a narrow focus on technical proficiency, workplace productivity, or abstract ethics rather than practical civic empowerment.

For example:

- **“AI Literacy for All” (Digital Education Council)** is a four-hour course aimed at college students with topics like AI ethics in academia. But nothing bite-sized that showcases how individuals can apply AI tools to real-life civic needs—like accessing benefits, communicating with local governments, or organizing collective action.
- **AI and You** - set out to do AI literacy education but their AI basics video is offline, it’s not mobile-friendly or interactive and there is no focus on civics or democracy.
- **IBM’s “AI SkillsBuild” or Google’s AI Career Cert or Microsoft’s “AI Skills Initiative” and Coursera’s “Generative AI for Everyone”** focus on technical skills for college and community college learners aimed at preparing people for the workforce.

These and other programs are valuable but text-heavy, English-only, and primarily aimed at professional audiences.

Builds on a Successful Model

CivicAI Powerful Tools for Community Action (CivicAI) is the first community-centered AI literacy program designed to teach people how to use AI not just to adapt to change, but to shape it. It is built for families, community groups, and civic learners—people who want to understand how AI can help them navigate systems, advocate for their needs, and solve local problems together. By focusing on civic use cases—especially related to benefits, education, and participation—*CivicAI* is designed to bridge the gap between abstract concept and everyday use of technology to build stronger communities.

Today, *CivicAI* is a free, eight-part, mobile-phone based course that introduces generative AI as a practical civic tool. Each 5-minute video builds understanding and confidence step by step, combining simple explanations with relatable examples. The course is delivered via mobile messaging app for example, WhatsApp—a familiar, accessible platform used by more than two billion people worldwide—making it easy to access and share with friends and family.

Developed in consultation with civic experts, the existing curriculum includes:

1. **Generative AI 101:** What AI is and what it can actually do
2. **Superpowers and Kryptonite:** AI's strengths and limitations
3. **Getting Started:** Finding free and affordable tools
4. **The Art of Asking:** How to write clear prompts for better results
5. **Talking with AI:** Using voice, images, and documents
6. **AI for Civic Action:** Simplifying government and organizing for change
7. **Using AI Responsibly:** Protecting privacy and ensuring fairness
8. **Your AI Toolkit:** Next steps for continued learning and community impact

The tone is friendly and practical. Every example ties directly to real-world civic tasks—writing to a landlord, translating a community announcement, understanding a zoning notice, or organizing a neighborhood clean-up.

The current project will adopt this friendly, practical tone and adapt these modules for local community needs. And with the framework in place, communities and individuals will also be invited to create and share new modules for peer-to-peer learning.

Beneficiaries

In each state beneficiaries will vary based on an assessment of community needs. A particular focus across all states will be young adults age 16-26 who were born into a world where artificial intelligence is a given and the expectations of the ability to engage with it will be higher than for other demographics. *Engaging Communities* will also benefit staff at public libraries, providing them with a bridge to deeper understanding of AI and the ability to deliver educational opportunities to residents. As happens with the introduction of new knowledge through libraries, communities in each state will also benefit.

The focus on young adults (ages 16-26) is intentional. Just 52% of young people reported no or little trust in government institutions. They feel discouraged about the future. A [National Association of State](#)

[Boards of Education report](#) goes on to discuss the role that state governments can play, and one thing it encourages is providing opportunities for civic engagement.

While *Engaging Communities* aims to increase the AI knowledge and skills of young people, its second phase is designed to help them apply what they learned to work with local and state government officials. It gives them a real-world opportunity to civically participate in their community through meaningful projects.

This is an age group that both values libraries, and one that libraries need/want to connect with into the future. [A Pew Research report](#) shared that while younger people value libraries, they are using them less. This is partially due to modern life, work, and school schedules, but it is also about relevance. Librarians want to better serve this age group. There are areas of alignment between libraries and young people—the desire for community, for connection with others, and a desire to make a difference. This project brings all of those together with its focus on the practical education of young people and librarians.

This project encourages librarians to learn about AI, work with local government officials, and young people to help younger people re-connect with their communities in a way that furthers the work of local governments. Librarians applying their increased AI knowledge and ability to connect with community/government partners allows them to:

- increase the relevance of the library
- improve their services to younger adults
- leverage their traditional role as connector and information literacy expert to work with others to address community needs

PROJECT WORK PLAN

The project work plan has two distinct yet interrelated components: assessment, testing, refinement, and implementation of current *CivicAI* learning modules and the co-design, development, planning, and conducting *Community Solutions to Community Needs* workshops in three states.

AI can help communities develop and provide engagement, education, public services, and further digital literacy. The *CivicAI* model leads small groups through a step-by-step process to do this and then show how that can be linked to other groups, reproduced for similar circumstances, or shared with their wider community. While participants learn to use AI tools, they are also building practical models and transferable skills. While building on libraries' actual role in communities, it also expands it significantly the field of community co-design. By advancing the model of community-centered learning that unites people in a participatory practice to use AI to further develop and build the community.

Engaging Communities will support the strategic priorities of the community in areas like workforce preparation, civic engagement, and the development of digital knowledge and access that best serve each community. The tools become their tools, and they decide together what results their community wants and needs. This community-led method of determining and designing solutions strengthens the community and reinforces their ability to use emerging technology.

Specific Activities

Module assessment, refinement, and deployment

The first step is raising awareness of the project in Hawai‘i, Montana and New Jersey. This will be accomplished with and through public libraries. It may happen in the form of virtual programming sessions where an individual from the GovLab presents to librarians and community members. It may also come in the form of newsletters, social media posts, and traditional public relations methods. This first step is designed to provide a solid foundation for later activities.

Next, through the auspices of the New Jersey, Hawai‘i and Montana state libraries, local libraries will each engage 25 - 30 community members in pilot testing and review of the existing eight modules through facilitated virtual conversations. In each state, sessions for library patrons will assess learning experiences and any barriers to completion of the modules. A particular focus will be on any gaps in content or unique local needs. Following the sessions, the product team will adapt the modules as needed for final deployment.

In this activity, *Engaging Communities* becomes a collaborative workshop where community members help further shape the course itself. Educators, caregivers, after-school leaders, and teens gather at a public library for an energetic, highly interactive, virtual co-design session to co-create the course. Participants preview draft videos, try version 1 of the modules, and share what resonates, what confuses, and what is missing. Guided by facilitators and youth leaders, the room becomes a testing ground where participants directly influence the learning experience—ensuring the course is culturally relevant, accessible, and rooted in the realities of everyday civic challenges. Not only does this model improve the course, but it also demonstrates the idea that communities should have agency in how technology is built and how it serves them.

The state libraries will then launch the CivicAI modules to all libraries across the states to drive adoption. Through educational sessions at their state conventions, for example, state libraries will raise awareness and increase interest through statewide marketing. These sessions can inform state library staff by giving librarians time to ask questions, share concerns and ideas for having a successful program. Learners will complete pre- and post-course surveys to measure learning, confidence gains, and share stories of impact. Once the revised and updated modules have been widely deployed, *Community Solutions to Community Needs* workshops will commence.

Community Solutions to Community Needs Workshops

Two public libraries in each state will be selected through a vetting process to host and co-design an in-person *Community Solutions to Community Needs* workshop with the GovLab. Throughout, staff at NJSL, MSL and HSPLS will provide marketing and communications support to public libraries to interest local community members with *Engaging Communities*.

The selected local libraries will work with the GovLab’s AI for Impact program, where community college and university students build civic AI products, to co-create local events (Community Solutions to Community Needs) that bring the spirit of the course to life: practical, hands-on, participatory, and designed to demystify AI for young people, families, and community members.

Below are two examples of possible events – each offering a different way to build public trust, spark civic imagination, and create pathways for real impact. These are placeholders designed to spark the collaboration. The actual events will be co-designed together with community members.

Example 1: A Community Solutions to Community Needs CivicAI “Makeathon” for Course Graduates

This version centers on young people who have completed the *CivicAI* course in a library-based session or independently. It is a celebratory and forward-looking gathering where learners apply their new skills to identify real civic problems and imagine AI-powered solutions. After a short welcome and demonstration from AI for Impact, youth participants break into small groups to brainstorm tools that could help with local priorities—such as improving neighborhood communication, supporting literacy for multilingual families, or addressing recycling at the street or school level. Youth facilitators guide idea generation, while civic partners help ground the ideas in real community needs. The most promising 3–5 concepts are selected for follow-up development by AI for Impact students, creating a direct bridge from learning to building.

Example 2: A Community Co-Design Session for Emerging AI Tools

In this model, *Community Solutions to Community Needs* becomes a public design review for real tools the state libraries are developing with AI for Impact. Library users are invited to test early prototypes—such as tools related to collection access, digital products, or community engagement—and provide direct feedback to developers and library partners. Participants explore demos, share what would make the tools more trustworthy or more useful, and identify opportunities to improve accuracy, fairness, and accessibility.

Community Engagement

NJSL, HSPLS, and MSL bring similar strengths in providing leadership to public libraries to the project. All three have wide networks of public libraries from which to draw organizations that will be engaged in the project. While the first part of the project – revising, developing, and deploying the learning modules – relies on the extensive knowledge and experience related to AI and civic engagement that The GovLab brings on board; the second aspect – community engagement – hits the sweet spot for public libraries.

The existing eight modules were developed with significant community engagement from families in California and Massachusetts who then went on to co-design a new AI education product together called [AIEP](#). The module topics and choice of content distribution platform were collectively considered and decided. Moving into the New Jersey, Hawai’i and Montana phases of the project, initial activities will focus on engaging the public, virtually through public libraries, in reviewing the modules’ content for relevance and fit. The delivery platform will also be confirmed. Community analyses will confirm languages that Spanish is the preferred language for translation. Later, local communities will be engaged throughout the development and delivery of locally planned and executed events, *Community Solutions to Community Needs*.

In addition to community members, local partners in each state will be engaged. Local partners may include State University Extension Services, the Leagues of Cities and Towns, and County Associations. Local government officials, especially in Montana, are interested in leveraging AI to increase efficiencies, meet the needs of their community, and perhaps address the challenges that come with a small population base and large geographic distances. Local government officials are also concerned

about the lack of civility and are interested in finding ways to build community. The community engagement piece of this project gives librarians an opportunity to address community/local government concerns. They can facilitate conversations, provide space, and connections to bring local stakeholders of all ages together to benefit the community.

Staff and Organizational Experience and Skills

The Governance Lab

Beth Simone Noveck is a professor at Northeastern University, where she directs the Burnes Center for Social Change and its partner project, The Governance Lab (GovLab), a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center focused on innovation in governance and civic engagement. In 2024, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy appointed her as the state's first Chief AI Strategist. Previously, she served as New Jersey's Chief Innovation Officer, founded the White House Open Government Initiative under President Obama, worked with the United Kingdom government at 10 Downing Street, and served on German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Digital Council.

Noveck is also the founder of InnovateUS (formerly The GovLab Academy), a leading provider of online training in innovation, data, and AI skills for public servants that has trained more than 110,000 professionals. She also founded the AI for Impact Co-op program, where university students build AI tools for social good in partnership with public and civic organizations.

Allison Wan, Research Fellow, primarily conducts impact evaluations for InnovateUS. She is also a PhD candidate at Northeastern's Network Science Institute studying topics related to online political behavior, social networks, and the impact of generative AI on access to government services. Allison previously served as the Data Consultant for the Boston Area Research Initiative.

Dr. Gregory A. Porumbescu, Senior Fellow, is an Associate Professor in the School of Public Affairs and Administration at Rutgers University–Newark. His research focuses on the influence of technology on the democratic anchorage of public organizations and has been supported by the National Science Foundation, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, and the New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education. He also co-founded the New Jersey State Policy Lab and served on Governor Murphy's AI Task Force Equity and Digital Literacy Working Group.

Dhruv Kamalesh Kumar, a Generative AI Engineer, leads the technical development of AI solutions designed to foster public innovation and social equity. He holds a Master of Science in Artificial Intelligence from Northeastern University and a degree in Computer Science from Visvesvaraya Technological University. Dhruv's work focuses on making advanced technology usable for non-experts. As the Lead AI Engineer for AIEP, Dhruv architected an open-source platform that simplifies Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for families. He engineered the system's robust backend, utilizing vision-based OCR to parse complex documents and multi-agent pipelines to translate legal terminology into accessible, family-friendly insights. To protect sensitive student data, he designed a privacy-first architecture that ensures the platform is both secure and scalable.

Anirudh Dinesh, Chief Technology Officer, leads the design and development of community-centered AI tools to strengthen democracy and improve governance. In this role, he supports the strategic

technology needs of all Center programs and its global community of high-impact faculty, students, and staff. Among the many products he and his team have created, AIEP is a free, open-source, generative AI platform that simplifies and translates Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Co-designed with parents, caregivers, and teachers, AIEP helps families better understand and advocate for their children's educational needs while modeling a participatory approach to AI development.

New Jersey State Library

Jen Nelson, New Jersey's State Librarian, brings a deep history of developing innovative library programs and services, having been an early champion of teen technology programming in the early 2000s. Her early work focused on digital inclusion and technology training for public library patrons, including those for whom English is a second language and those who use assistive technology. More recently, she has worked to adapt New Jersey's student information literacy standards into teachable units that reflect the needs of public library patrons as much as learners in K-16 environment.

As the recipient of two IMLS National Leadership Grant awards, *Media MashUp*, 2008-2011 and *Teaching Information Literacy*, 2023 -2026, she is well-placed to serve as project manager for this initiative.

Montana State Library

Jennie Stapp is a native of Montana and has served as Montana's State Librarian since 2012. She brings a system's mindset to thinking about how to solve challenges of all kinds, and particularly technology challenges, frontier libraries face in a state like Montana.

Tracy Cook is the Lead Consulting & Learning Librarian at the Montana State Library. She oversees consulting, continuing education, and lifelong learning services and assists public and tribal college libraries.

Savanna Sill is the Montana Library Network Coordinator at the Montana State Library. She oversees statewide projects utilized by local Montana communities, such as the Courier Program, MontanaLibrary2Go Digital Library, OCLC Services, and other small programs/services.

Hawai'i State Public Library System

Stacey Aldrich is the State Librarian of Hawai'i and brings 30 years of experience in developing technology training programs and implementing them across four states. She helped to build the Hawai'i State Public Library Systems Digital Framework for supporting the community. Most recently, she has been able to partner with other state agencies to bring Digital Literacy Classes and a Digital Navigators program to all 50 public libraries branches in Hawai'i.

PROJECT RESULTS

Anticipated project results fall into three primary categories: Learning and Literacy, Reach and Engagement, and Partnership and Innovation. Taking place in Montana, Hawai'i and New Jersey, residents representing a wide range of demographics will benefit. Moreover, the network of state library

administrative agencies is tightly knit, and the program will suggest a model for civic and community engagement that could be adopted in any state and by any public library.

Community Solutions to Community Needs participants will understand how to employ AI tools for organizing and forging community participation in reaching common goals. The following deliverables will equip the participants to continue to use this knowledge, and other state library administrative agencies and independent libraries to apply the project results in models that can be successfully and straightforwardly recreated.

- Eight-part *CivicAI* Beta Course, curriculum, and modules
- Marketing designs and video production assets
- Original, integrated surveys in each module to assess knowledge, skills, and confidence attained
- Pilot report evaluation with learner feedback data
- Co-designed *Community Solutions to Community Needs* workshop framework
- Documentation of 3-6 community-generated project ideas
- Public-facing report

These results will address the need to understand and be able to use AI by making the curriculum and assets created for the literacy modules in the first phase of this project. readily and freely available to others. The full project report will show how to adapt and use everything created, including workshop setup. In addition to publishing everything on a website, there will be presentations at regional and national convenings.

Highlights include:

Learning and Literacy

- At least 1000 learners complete the course, achieving a 25% improvement in AI literacy and confidence scores
- 90% of participants report that CivicAI made AI feel “more understandable” and “more relevant”

Reach and Engagement

- 1000+ course views
- 2 languages launched
- 180+ attendees across six *Community Solutions to Community Needs* workshops
- Strong media and social engagement from MSL, HSPLS, NJSL and The GovLab channels

Partnership and Innovation

- At least three community-generated AI project ideas selected for follow-up development
- Published report as a model for community-centered AI learning through public libraries

Engaging Communities with Artificial Intelligence is poised to help residents across the country overcome barriers to understanding and using artificial intelligence in their daily lives. The United States is at the cusp of tremendous sociological, educational, and economic change driven by the widespread use of AI tools. It is incumbent on public libraries to provide opportunities for community and individual growth, as it traditionally has in times of great change – most notably the introduction of early literacy story times to support public education in the 1920s, the advent of the paperback book in the 1950s, and the internet in the 1990s.

Engaging Communities with AI Year 1

[illegible]

Engaging Communities with AI Year 2

[illegible]

Engaging Communities with AI YEAR 3

[illegible]