



NATIONAL LEADERSHIP GRANTS FOR LIBRARIES

Sample Application LG-260696-OLS-26
Project Category: Community-Centered Implementation

Memphis Public Libraries

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$99,900
Amount of cost share:	\$0

Memphis Public Libraries will enhance and expand its Innovator in Residence program, modeled after the Library of Congress' Innovator in Residence program. Services of the project will include public programs, one-on-one mentorship, building marketable job and digital skills, and the creation of a toolkit outlining project and lessons learned. The project seeks to connect working creative professionals (i.e. "Innovators") in a myriad of fields with library patrons to teach marketable skills, build business savvy, create strategic support networks, and channel passion into a new profession. The project is based on adapted data from the United States Small Business Bureau and the National Skills Coalition. The program features the disciplines of podcasting, event production and planning, online content creation, music production integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI), and digital marketing.

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

Memphis Library Foundation (MLF) leverages the power of private support to make transformative programs and resources available at no cost to the community through the Memphis Public Libraries (MPL). Memphis struggles with higher unemployment and poverty rates, lower levels of educational attainment, and greater socioeconomic disparities than its peer cities. MPL, a Division of the City of Memphis government, serves over 2 million visitors each year across eighteen branch locations. COVID-19 widened economic disparities, and the local digital divide has further diminished access to education and job resources for low-income households. These access barriers are compounded by factors such as the ever-increasing cost of living, the fact that Memphis has subpar public transportation and fewer cars per household than our peer cities. In addition, the unemployment rate in Memphis is 4.8%, as compared to a state rate of 3.4% and national rate of 4.1%. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, December 2025). To combat these disparities and increase economic stability for residents, MLF requests \$100,000 to enhance and expand our Innovator In Residence (IIR) program, modeled after the highly successful Library of Congress' Innovator In Residence program. This initiative was adapted and locally spearheaded by the City of Memphis, Memphis Public Libraries (MPL), and Memphis Library Foundation (MLF), and IIR focus areas are determined by library customer feedback. The program design also incorporated research from the U.S. Small Business Administration (2019) that demonstrated that entrepreneurs with access to mentors were more than twice as likely to still be in business after 5 years when compared to non-mentored organizations. IIRs share their expertise with patrons through programming and mentorship, assist in designing and equipping specialized library spaces, and provide library staff training for long-term sustainability. Innovators also promote their programs and the library itself via their networks and social media, attracting patrons who might not have otherwise discovered the vast array of available library resources. IIR also allows staff to connect participants with other valuable MPL programs that improve educational and career outcomes and create pathways out of poverty. In addition to job skills, digital literacy and inclusion are top priorities for MPL. We offer free Wi-Fi at all 18 branch locations (recently expanded to include the parking lots and green spaces around locations), and there are 1,228 public computers system-wide. The Start Here Mobile Technology Van is also equipped to serve as a traveling hotspot for areas with limited digital resources, and MPL received funding from IMLS CARES grants to have two additional library vehicles equipped to serve as community hotspots. In addition to Wi-Fi access, MPL has a robust continuum of resources targeted to bridging the digital divide for all ages. Staff regularly offers public technology classes to ensure customers have the needed skills to utilize available technology while enhancing career and educational prospects. The Connect Crew mobile outreach team also offers these public technology classes through outreach, including at partner agencies, parks, retail centers, apartment complexes, senior centers, and community centers. MPL also offers access to Udemy online learning to library card holders through our website. This is our most utilized digital database with online lessons offering more than 3,400 courses covering technical skills, creative techniques, business strategies, personal finance, and more.

According to the National Skills Coalition (2023), 92% of jobs, regardless of field, require digital skills. To build upon MPL's successes and utilize the robust data around the benefits of digital skills training, all IIR programs, regardless of subject matter, include digital literacy education. Examples include how our Chef Innovator includes classes on photographing food, social media marketing, and creating menus using Canva. Planned gardening IIR program includes designing landscaping with AI, marketing your business online, and using digital resources to refine gardening skills. By combining the best practices of evidence-based models from the Library of Congress, U.S. Small Business Administration, and the National Skills Coalition, MPL staff will use IMLS funding to create an easy-to-replicate toolkit to be used by any library seeking to launch an IIR program. Because public input shapes the IIR focus area, the model will be customizable to any community, regardless of size or unique dynamics. IMLS support will enable our staff to dedicate the time and resources needed to expand the program and create a roadmap for other public institutions to follow.

Project Justification

MPL has a rich history of offering programs geared towards job-seekers: The employment and workforce development resources available at MPL are some of our most-utilized programs. These offerings include business classes, resume building, technology classes for job-readiness, our award-winning JobLINC mobile career services bus, financial literacy, and career fairs. Other workforce development initiatives include intro to computer courses, resume building, utilizing Microsoft Office suite, writing workshops, Meet The Employer opportunities, Techie Seniors for older adults, and HiSET classes.

Low-income residents of Memphis often face awareness barriers when looking for help. Aspiring and working entrepreneurs often struggle to identify and utilize available free or low-cost community resources to hone marketable skills and business acumen. Many believe there are no support options available to them or simply have no idea how to find them. In addition, low-income aspiring entrepreneurs are more likely to lack successful mentors and networks, although research shows that entrepreneurs with mentors are as much as 70% more likely to succeed than those who go it alone. Many businesses fail not because of a deficit of skill or community need, but because people lack the tools for success. This gap in access to resources and mentorship means that less than half of new businesses are still operating after 3.5 years, compared with the national average of 55.5%. Many entrepreneurs simply do not understand all the facets of transitioning from a worker to a business owner. Because of clear inequalities in available small business resources, MPL makes it a strategic priority to provide a continuum of programs designed to increase access to education and resources and to encourage entrepreneurship. The IIR program provides a personalized, skill-specific deep-dive that connects participants to learn and grow their businesses together, while complementing the myriad of other small business resources and support offered by MPL to address these community challenges.

The Innovator-in-Residence (IIR) program was born out of demonstrated community needs, with direct input and feedback from residents served. MPL front-line staff engaged with customers to determine what types of business and entrepreneurial skills would be most beneficial for program attendees. Using the framework established by the Library of Congress and including a stronger focus on public programming, mentorship, and digital skills training, our team then interviewed, selected, and onboarded successful working creative entrepreneurs to serve as IIRs for an initial period of one year in each chosen discipline. Each Innovator signed a contract that provides them with a stipend and the right to use certain library spaces and equipment in exchange for providing a specific amount of public library programming, individual mentorship hours, and a large-scale “festival-style” event during their residency. While MPL has selected Innovators in disciplines like music production, podcasting and new media, graphic design and animation, film and still photography, and culinary arts, this model can be adapted and replicated for the needs and interests of any population, making it a unique solution with flexible program components.

Unlike most library residency programs where the expert “in residence” might use library spaces to do their own work and perhaps produce a product for the benefit of the library itself, MPL Innovators provide high-quality specialty programs directly to the public while embedding their business operations in the library for at least a year, thereby gaining access to free workspace, equipment, supplies, and a stipend.

All Innovator programming integrates essential digital skills, regardless of the Innovator's field. IIR is an alternative library staffing model that creates a mutually beneficial relationship between the Innovator, the library, and its patrons. Through IIR, MPL provides a unique layer of Memphis’ educational ecosystem, offering a breadth of resources and fostering deep, transformative connections and learning experiences that lead to career success.

IIR is currently hosted at two library branches: Cossitt and Raleigh. Cossitt Library serves Downtown Memphis, where residents face extreme economic disparities, with both wealthy neighborhoods and some of the poorest. Cossitt Library has photo/video and recording studios, a large performance space with professional level audio-visual equipment, and a full-service restaurant. IIR programming at Cossitt has focused on a variety of in-demand digital skills. Five Innovators in the disciplines of podcasting, event production and planning, online content creation, music production integrating AI, and digital marketing walk alongside program participants to not only teach them the technical skills necessary for success, but to help them define their own unique business goals, develop a plan to reach them, and find the resources to make success a reality. MPL expects to add several more Innovators this year in response to community requests, including an Innovator in horticulture and gardening at the Frayser Branch, Innovators in music production and genealogy/digital archiving at the Orange Mound Branch, and an additional Innovator in technology and AI at the Cossitt Branch.

Because MLF and MPL have successfully adapted and piloted this model, staff has valuable lessons learned and a unique framework to share with others. IMLS funding will allow us to further refine our processes and to establish a roadmap for easy replication and customization.

Project Work Plan

The Innovator-in-Residence model is the latest MPL offering to develop out of our customer-driven program design process. IIR was preceded by the creation of Youth Action Councils, committees of 10-15 regular youth customers paired with their local library branch, to give teens a seat at the government decision-making table. These committees designed Teen Innovation Centers (TICs), which piloted at MPL in 2019. TICs are designated teen library program spaces that have formal STEAM and literacy programming and allow young people to use the space informally between programs. Since their inception, TICs have expanded to 16 of our 18 libraries, and each location serves an average of 5,000 at-risk young people annually. Like IIR, each TIC is unique in that customers select the technology, programming, equipment, and furnishings for their center. The TICs have now grown to include (3) Tween Scene centers that serve preteens using the same model. Based on these successes and giving customers buy-in on the front end to ensure library programs are reflective of the wants and needs of the community, IIR was piloted in 2023. This expansion was intentional and based on customer feedback regarding MPL program gaps in reaching opportunity youth and adults who lack the skills and business knowledge to secure employment, increase marketable job skills, launch a side-gig, or establish a new business. By putting the power of choice in the hands of those we serve, MPL is empowering the community to shape their future. We anticipate IIR will, like the TICs, grow at a rapid rate in the coming years to include most, if not all, of our library locations.

MPL's customers love that our libraries are responsive to community needs and that staff engages with them to shape programming. MPL's commitment to customer-driven programming means no two of our libraries are the same, and the programs offered are reflective of the wants and needs of the unique community served. This approach led Smithsonian Magazine to name MPL "The Nation's Most Innovative Library System" and made MPL the only two-time winner of the IMLS National Medal.

IIR was designed in this tradition to increase library capacity for delivering high impact job-readiness and entrepreneurial programs at no cost to participants, while mitigating the cost to the City of Memphis of providing such specialized training. Through their partnership with the Memphis Library Foundation for fundraising and program administration services, MPL currently hosts seven Innovators in selected disciplines, allowing them to embed their own businesses in neighborhood libraries. IIR is a win-win-win-win model that benefits the public, the Innovators, the local economy, and companies seeking qualified job applicants. Through the IIR program, MPL provides access to resources, opportunity, and hope.

By adapting evidence-based models, MPL has developed a unique process for identifying, vetting, engaging, and collaborating with Innovators to meet distinct community needs, as well

as assessment tools for understanding programmatic impact and making ongoing adjustments for continuous improvement. Data currently collected in project evaluation includes the number of programs, number of program participants, sociodemographic information on program participants, and instructor/participant feedback forms. The Innovators also document one-on-one mentoring sessions, and library staff documents program participants using the library spaces, like the podcast studio, content creation space, and photography set up, between formal programming to grow their skills or launch their own business or side gig.

Key milestones for program implementation:

- Use community feedback to identify locations and disciplines for Innovators.
- Edit job descriptions to reflect locations and desired skill sets, post openings on local job boards.
- Vet applications and narrow down applicants into those staff wishes to interview.
- Schedule interviews with selected applicants.
- Use scoring rubric to evaluate interviewees.
- Tabulate scores and offer positions to highest scoring interviewees.
- Execute MOUs with selected Innovators.
- Schedule and conduct onboarding procedures and training sessions.
- Launch new IIR programming.
- Market IIR programs to the community. MPL has a successful marketing system in place for our thousands of annual programs. Each program is placed on our online calendar where customers can easily search by location, age range, and program type, and the City of Memphis communications department handles press releases, flyers, posters, and social media promotion for upcoming programs. In addition, MLF contracts with Obsidian Public Relations to provide additional promotion for grant-funded offerings. Obsidian's promotions have resulted in an average of 250 critical media mentions each year for the past three years of our contract. Programs are also promoted by our Connect Crew mobile outreach team who deliver programs everywhere from laundromats and retail centers to public parks and churches. We will also utilize MPL email newsletters (with a reach of 90,000 email addresses), community partnerships (MPL has over 200 active community partners), and LINC/2-1-1 resource referral staff who handle over 60,000 calls each year.
- Track impact using the established MPL metrics. All statistics stored in the Library's shared OneDrive folder for program evaluation and continuous improvement.
- Modify program offerings, as indicated.
- Connect program participants with other valuable MPL programs like career fairs, technology classes, LINC211 social service referrals, JobLINC programs, collections, after-school youth programs and free school break camps, and more.

- At the conclusion of the grant term, IIR programs will continue with support from Memphis Library Foundation's endowment funding and by soliciting external support from private foundations and corporate sponsors.
- The toolkit and lessons learned from IIR will be shared beyond the grant term at conferences, workshops, and through MPL's website.
- Allowing other institutions to use and adapt our model will foster innovation and a greater focus on career-readiness and digital literacy programs in public libraries.

Key project staff:

- Christine Weinreich is the Executive Director of Memphis Library Foundation and will be providing fiscal management for this project. She holds a BA in Psychology from Kalamazoo College and a law degree from the Western Michigan University Thomas M. Cooley Law School. She practiced law in the Detroit area for nearly fourteen years before relocating with her family to Memphis in 2011 and transitioning into fundraising, community engagement, and nonprofit management. She spent seven years as the Director of Grants and Community Engagement for Southern College of Optometry before assuming her current role as the Executive Director of the Memphis Library Foundation in 2019. Christine believes that education and literacy are keys to individual success and community improvement, and she's passionate about creating access to those critical resources for all in her community.
- Jordan Howard has served as Library Grants Coordinator for Memphis Public Libraries since 2017. Jordan is passionate about finding support for programs designed to overcome socioeconomic disparities. She is a two-time graduate of the University of Memphis with her Master of Public Administration (concentration in Nonprofit Management), B.A. in Political Science, and Certified Nonprofit Professional credentials. She previously served as Director of Communications and Development for the Family Safety Center of Memphis and Shelby County and Operations Manager of ITNMemphis. Jordan was recipient of the 2016 Nonprofit Leadership Collaborative of the Mid-South's (NLC) Harry Shaw Outstanding Alumnae of the Year. She enjoys giving back by volunteering with local organizations like Bartlett's Closet and The Pet Compassion Centers. She also served on the Advisory Board of ITNMemphis, as the President of the PTO Board for Rivercrest Elementary School, and the Outreach Committee for the Hotel Rwanda Rusesabagina Foundation. For this project, Jordan will oversee grant compliance and reporting.
- Brian Lyles is the Senior Manager of Cossitt Library. He received his Executive MBA from the University of Memphis and his BS in Business Administration from the University of Tennessee at Martin. Brian worked as the General Manager with the Version Corporation with 15 years of leadership/management experience and a strong background in customer service management. He is also a team mentor at Grizzlies Prep Charter School, which includes not just engaging youth but also parents and partnering

with administrators and other mentors to create a positive mentee experience for the students. Brian also completed Momentum Nonprofit Academy Bootcamp and completed media training at Archer Malmo Marketing and Advertising Agency headquartered in Memphis.

- Angela Adams is the Senior Manager of Raleigh Library. She previously served as Senior manager of Hollywood Library, where she oversaw extensive community engagement working with the neighborhood Youth Action Council to create a Teen Innovation Center in the Library. Angela has been with MPL for over 23 years, first starting out in circulation and working her way up to management. She received her BS from Colorado State University and volunteers with a number of local community organizations including MIFA Meals on Wheels, East high Athletics Booster Club, and World Overcomers Outreach Ministries.

Project Results

Memphis Public Libraries' (MPL) Innovator-In-Residence program (IIR), modeled on the Library of Congress' program and adapted with data from the United States Small Business Bureau and the National Skills Coalition, connects working creative professionals (i.e. Innovators) in a myriad of fields with library patrons to teach marketable skills, build business savvy, create strategic support networks, and channel passion into a new profession. Keys to entrepreneurial success in this model will include inspiration, specialized skills, funding, business acumen, and a professional network or mentor. From large-scale public programs to small workshops and personalized mentorship, IIR gives people from all walks of life free access to these resources. This builds their confidence as emerging entrepreneurs and sets them on a solid career path. Innovators partner with MPL to acquire relevant equipment and technology, and to train library staff to use equipment and offer programming with selected purchases. These assets remain available for use long after the Innovator's residency ends for ongoing sustainability and impact. IIR's unique model expands organizational capacity without burdening tight staffing budgets, while utilizing a flexible and customer-driven design to meet the unique and multifaceted needs of targeted communities. Launched in April 2023, IIR has been recognized by the Urban Libraries Council with an honorable mention for library innovation in 2024, highlighted as a "launchpad" in a Medium article by Reimagining the Civic Commons in 2025, and lauded in author Bradley Schurman's Population Next blog (February 16, 2026) and upcoming book, *The Geography of Prosperity: A New Map of the American Dream* (MIT Press, 2027). In its short history, IIR at MPL has truly transformed lives in Memphis by connecting and empowering participants while supporting expansion of Innovators' existing small businesses.

The IIR concept was piloted starting in 2023 with an Innovator in podcasting and new media working in the Cossitt Library. Using data from the pilot, the Memphis Library Foundation (MLF) secured grant funding from the State of Tennessee that allowed for program expansion to include five Innovators at Cossitt and two at the Raleigh Library. MLF is preparing to identify and onboard music and genealogy Innovators at the Orange Mound Library and a gardening and

horticulture Innovator at the Frayser Library. Cossitt will likely add a sixth Innovator this year to expand programming into new technology and AI. Other MPL locations are requesting their own Innovators, and we anticipate this program growing rapidly in the coming years. IIR expands library impact without increasing staff numbers, provides clear pathways to entrepreneurial success, and raises awareness of diverse library resources for years to come. While the selected Innovators will be stationed at a “home library” of Cossitt, Raleigh, or Orange Mound Libraries, they can also host programming at any of MPL’s 18 libraries for increased impact and efficiency. This means that, even if all 18 libraries one day have a designated Innovator, sites will not be forced to duplicate services and can have 18 different focus areas and trade Innovators, as needed. This element will allow customers to access a broader range of workforce development skill building. Many of these skills will tie in and make participants more marketable to employers and build expertise in an array of topics needed for those looking to launch or maintain a business. MLF’s Innovator MOU specifies that Innovators must host a minimum of one public program per week to ensure offerings are convenient and accessible and allow for ongoing engagement.

The program provides an easy-to-replicate model that can be based in libraries and other public spaces and be customized to meet the needs of any community. The lessons learned and community-driven program design make MPL an ideal candidate to participate in the IMLS National Leadership Grant Program. This award will give us the opportunity to enhance and expand our programming while formalizing our toolkit for program implementation, which will then be shared online, at conferences, and through workshops. Our hope is to see the IIR program replicated across the globe to enhance learning opportunities, increase marketable job skills, and center human connection as an essential element of business success. In a world of ever-evolving technology and workforce needs, libraries and local governments are uniquely positioned to equip residents with the tools to succeed in business and the workforce. These skills will lead to a stronger economy and more skilled job applicants for employers.

Since 2023, IIR has reached 2500+ residents to teach in-demand and marketable job skills and to offer personalized mentoring for those looking to start their own business. The IIR model will also be highlighted by author Bradley Schurman in his upcoming book *The Geography of Prosperity: A New Map of the American Dream* (MIT Press, 2027). He has already published a blog post and an Instagram reel about IIR as a unique layer of MPL’s robust education and workforce development ecosystem:

<https://www.instagram.com/reels/DU0rMvVDUZH/>

<https://populationnext.substack.com/p/the-complex-american-south>

During the IMLS grant term, MPL will serve an estimated 5,000 community members through IIR programming. At the completion of the grant term, IIR programming will be sustained through MLF’s internal allocations from our endowment, the City of Memphis’ annual operating

budget for Memphis Public Libraries, and external government, foundation, and corporate funding.

Bibliography:

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- National Skills Coalition. *Closing the Digital Skill Divide*. Washington, DC: National Skills Coalition, February 6, 2023. <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/resource/publications/closing-the-digital-skill-divide/>.
- United States Census Bureau. *United States Census Bureau*. Accessed March 13, 2026. <https://www.census.gov/>.
- Library of Congress. “Library of Congress Opens Search for Next Innovator in Residence.” March 3, 2026. <https://newsroom.loc.gov/news/library-of-congress-opens-search-for-next-innovator-in-residence/s/f7712549-f889-421b-82c9-66455a6aa2f1>

IMLS Schedule of Completion 2026**Innovator In Residence**Grant Year 1: September 1, 2026-August 31, 2027

	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.
Identify, onboard, and train (3) IIRs.												
Purchase initial IIR program supplies.												
Present IIR programming at selected libraries (Cossitt, Raleigh, and Orange Mound Libraries). Apply for MPL staff to present IIR model at conferences and workshops, as available.												
Track participant and caregiver feedback and modify upcoming offerings based on this input.												
Purchase additional IIR supplies for the requested programs.												
Evaluate Innovators and extend MOUs for another year if performance and community needs support an extension. Replace any Innovators that have not met expectations, if needed.												

Grant Year 2: September 1, 2027-August 31, 2028

	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.
Present IIR programming at selected libraries (Cossitt, Raleigh, and Orange Mound Libraries). Apply for MPL staff to present IIR model at conferences and workshops, as available.												
Track participant and Innovator feedback and modify upcoming offerings based on this input.												
Purchase additional IIR supplies for the IIR programs.												
Complete grant reporting and use these findings to create a public document for MPL's website outlining our model and lessons learned in implementing IIR programming for emerging entrepreneurs and the under- and un-employed.												