

Community Conversations: Fresno County



Prepared by Fresno County Public Library



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Introduction

Located in the heart of California's agriculturally-rich Central Valley, Fresno County covers over 6,000 square miles of rural, mountain, and urban communities. Still recovering from the recent drought and recession, the County has a 25.2% poverty rate and an 8.7% unemployment rate. Many communities have limited access to technology and connectivity. Fresno County is home to 41,619 veterans, and homelessness continues to be a struggle for many in the community. Fresno County has a number of pockets of poverty that experience food insecurities, with mini marts and convenience stores often being the only nearby option for feeding families. Over 70% of youth in the County qualify for free or reduced-cost meals during the school year. Pockets of poverty throughout the County also experience "book deserts," or areas of primarily low-income where youth lack access to books of their own at home. Despite obstacles, Fresno County consists of caring communities with friendly people known for stepping up and helping each other. With a long history of welcoming immigrants and refugees in the community, Fresno County is proud of its rich diversity and culture.



Fresno County Public Library (FCPL) received in-depth training through the California State Library with coaches from the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. The Harwood practice of 'Turning Outward,' is an approach to gaining public knowledge that includes facilitating conversations with a community about shared aspirations, concerns, and possible actions. The practice includes being more intentional in decision-making for a community, setting realistic expectations, and collaborating with partner organizations that are aligned with a similar purpose and vision. Through over 20 community conversations spanning two years, FCPL has heard wishes and concerns of over 200 people in Fresno County. Themes emerge from the conversations for specific communities as well as for the County as a whole. The following document is a public knowledge summary, sharing back to the communities what we heard through multiple conversations.

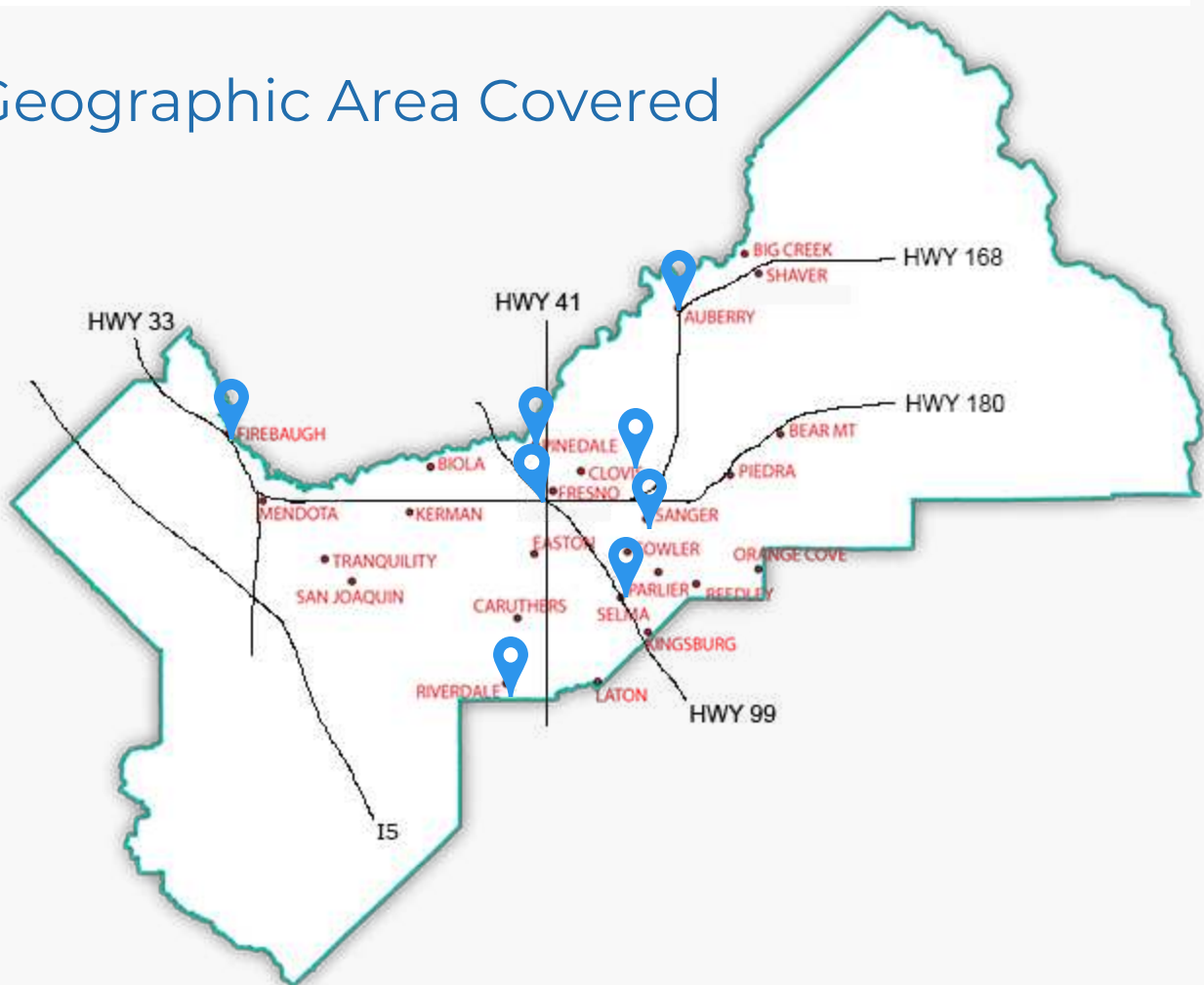
The Harwood Institute's 3 A's of Public Life

- ✓ **Authority:** Being able to reflect back to a community their needs and aspirations, being seen as a trusted, concerned member of the community.
- ✓ **Authenticity:** Listening and reflecting the reality and best interests of the community through words and actions.
- ✓ **Accountability:** Taking action rooted in purpose and meaning, setting realistic expectations and following through on promises.

Community Demographics

Community	Population	Primary Ethnicity	Household Income	Unemployment Rate	Percent Below Poverty Level
Auberry	2,369	White alone 70.0%	\$49,501	9.1%	15.1%
Clovis	102,189	White alone 53.5%	\$65,976	6.2%	13.2%
Firebaugh	7,549	Hispanic 91.2%	\$38,347	28.5%	38.8%
Fresno	522,053	Hispanic 49.3%	\$44,905	9.1%	33.5%
Pinedale	4,229	Hispanic 55.4%	\$37,537	12.1%	26.1%
Riverdale	3,153	Hispanic 66.8%	\$49,100	16.0%	31.1%
Selma	23,283	Hispanic 81.9%	\$43,546	6.8%	23.1%
Sanger	24,270	Hispanic 85.1%	\$45,332	9.6%	23.0%
West Fresno	41,165	Hispanic 60.5%	\$21,991	10.9%	34.9%

Geographic Area Covered



Phase I: Three Diverse Communities

For the first phase of implementation, FCPL focused on three diverse communities within Fresno County: an agricultural town from the southern boundary (Riverdale), a mountain community northeast of Fresno (Auberry), and a metropolitan suburb adjacent to the city (Clovis).



Process

FCPL formed teams of two or three people to focus on each community. On each team, one person had attended the Public Innovators Lab training, one person lived and worked in the chosen community, and a community librarian occasionally completed the team. The teams completed a total of nine conversations in the selected areas, plus three additional conversations with other communities of interest.



Phase I: Public Knowledge Summary

From conversations with diverse geographical communities in Fresno County, common themes emerge on a macro level. Throughout the County, people want to live in safe, connected communities with equal access to services and resources. When people talk about safety, they hope for more police presence, neighborhood watch programs, and more positive activities for youth. A wish for more connected communities includes better communication among neighbors as well as increased access to WiFi and technology. A need for resources includes increased access to jobs, reliable transportation, accessible social services, and a trusted central hub for information about community programs and events.

Recurring concerns include a feeling of isolation, both in rural and urban communities. Gang and drug activity are safety concerns, along with a perceived lack of pride in community and too much growth/ sprawl. People also mention a lack of communication among communities, with the added obstacle of language barriers. A lack of funding, trust, and community involvement are additional challenges hindering progress. Communities would trust elected officials, police/ sheriff and fire departments, libraries, and community members to take action and influence change.

Phase I: Themes from Community Aspirations



Community Conversations in

Auberry, CA

Auberry is a rural community located in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains about 37 miles northeast of Fresno. The town has a population of just over 2,000.



Aspirations

The people of Auberry want a [safe](#) town with more [connectivity](#) among communities, increased [access to social services](#), more [local jobs](#), better [transportation](#) to the city, and more activities for youth.



Concerns

When people talk about these issues, there is concern about [isolation](#), lack of [communication](#), too much [growth](#) causing a loss of small-town feel, slow response time for emergencies, and long commutes to work for young parents.



Actions

Ideas for overcoming barriers include creating a [community calendar](#), offering local satellite offices for [social services](#), and offering local [adult education classes](#).



Authority

The people of Auberry would trust the [library](#), [schools](#), [rotary club](#), and [community members](#) to take action.



Community Conversations in

Riverdale, CA

The town of Riverdale sits along the Kings River, 23 miles south of Fresno with a population of just over 3,000 people. This agricultural area is home to many farms and dairies.

Aspirations

Riverdale hopes for increased **safety** and more positive **activities for local youth**. More **community involvement** is desired, as well as better **communication** among neighbors.

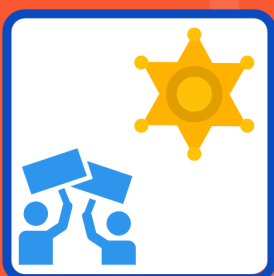


When the community talks about safety, they mention concern surrounding **gang** and **drug activity** in the area. Community involvement includes an increased sense of **pride**, increased **police presence** and **neighborhood watches**, and more investment in **local education**.

Concerns

Obstacles

Barriers to progress include a lack of **funding**, lack of **communication**, and **language barriers** within the community. A lack of connectivity and low **community involvement** are additional obstacles to positive growth.



Implications

The people of Riverdale believe we need to focus on community boards for **communication**, more **activities** and opportunities for **volunteering for youth**, and increased **security** from the trusted **Sheriff's and Fire Departments**.

Community Conversations in Clovis, CA

The city of Clovis has a population over 100,000 and is located 6.5 miles from downtown Fresno. Clovis is proud of its school system, annual rodeo, walkable downtown, and the 'Clovis Way of Life.'



Aspirations

Residents of Clovis want to live in a **safe, friendly, and active community**.

They hope for **healthy children**, easy **access to parking**, **transportation** and convenient, **local events**.



Concerns

The community is concerned about too much **growth** affecting neighborhood **pride** and **quality of life**.

People mention **high stress levels** for students, lack of **parking downtown**, and too much **traffic** without adequate **street signs**.



Actions

People would like to see **parking shuttles** or a **structure** downtown. They would also like to see a **carpool lane** or **incentives** for **ride sharing**.

They would like **neighborhood watch programs**, increased **police presence**, and more **community involvement**.



Trust

The community would trust the **City Manager, City Council, PTAs, Senior Center, Library, and School Board** to take action.



Phase I: Additional Conversations

While theming by definition requires multiple conversations, FCPL's individual conversations in additional communities provide important information when drawing similar themes from communities across Fresno County.

A Conversation with the Dakota EcoGarden Community

Founded in 2013, Dakota EcoGarden aims to 'empower formerly homeless individuals with skills needed for self-sufficiency, health, happiness, and success.' (<https://ecovillagefresno.org/dakotaecogarden/>)



Aspirations

- Transportation
- Housing
- Current resources
- Jobs

Transitional Steps



Concerns

- Isolation
- Scams
- Unfair perception
- Lack of compassion

Actions

- Reliable bus system
- Better police response
- Lists of resources
- Compassion

Trusted to Act

- City council
- Elected officials
- Police

Friends of the Betty Rodriguez Regional Library

The Betty Rodriguez Regional Library serves a diverse and transitional area within the city of Fresno. The FOL is a concerned group of citizens that cares deeply about the library and its community.

A Community Conversation



ASPIRATIONS

- Respect of neighbors, property, and community
- Safety
- Diversity
- Trust
- Improved communication
- Functional infrastructure



CONCERNS/BARRIERS

- Hostility and lack of shared values
- Gang activity and crime
- Lack of community events
- Obstacles in communication
- Lack of responsibility



ACTION STEPS

- Community/ town hall meetings
- Neighborhood watch programs
- Multicultural/ intergenerational library programs
- Increase police presence

A Conversation with

Central Valley Immigration Integration Collaboration

The CVIIC aims to help immigrants fully participate in life in the Central Valley through strong, vibrant, inclusive communities. (www.cviic.org)



ASPIRATIONS

Help for homeless
Healthy food
Support for parents
Mediation programs
Safety
Activities for youth



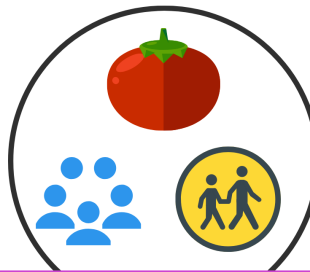
CONCERNS

Transportation
Language barriers
Access to resources
Enforcement
Fear of government
Isolation/assimilation
Health



OBSTACLES

Trust
Advocacy
Access to resources
Communication
Transportation
Health care



ACTIONS

Safe conversations
Awareness of resources
Networking
Farmers markets
Support groups
Volunteer advocates

ADDITIONAL CONVERSATIONS: EMERGING THEMES AMONG LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

ASPIRATIONS



People wish for safe neighborhoods and communities with better access to public transportation, housing, and social services.

CONCERNS



There is shared concern about isolation, crime, lack of police presence, lack of positive activities and community support for children and families.

BARRIERS



Barriers include a lack of compassion and trust. Communication is also an obstacle, along with a lack of awareness of local resources.

ACTIONS



Actions toward positive growth include creating a safe space for conversations, increasing awareness of resources, and improving the local bus system.

Phase II: Expanding the Practice

For the second phase of implementation, FCPL utilized the public services librarians working in each of its six geographically-grouped clusters of branches.



Process

FCPL formed six teams for the second phase to spread the Harwood practice further within Fresno County. Each team consisted of an adult librarian from the Public Services Division and staff from the Programming, eServices, and WoW Departments of the Community Services Division. At least one person on each team was involved in Phase I and had successfully completed conversations. This prior experience boosted the teams' confidence levels and provided mentoring opportunities. The six teams completed over ten conversations. Communities were selected based on geography and/ or subject areas. The teams spoke with people in Firebaugh, Pinedale, Sanger, Selma, West Fresno, and with local veterans and their service providers.



Phase II: Public Knowledge Summary

As in Phase I, common themes emerged countywide from conversations with six different communities in Fresno County. People want to live in safe and clean communities with improved infrastructure. They wish for equal access to services and resources, especially for seniors and veterans. The communities hope for improved communication and connectivity. When the communities talk about infrastructure, they hope for better roads, transportation, more local jobs, access to health care, improved parks, and more activities for youth. People want better communication with elected officials and improved connectivity through access to broadband and technology. They also wish for increased career and vocational training opportunities.

As people talk about these issues, they are concerned about a lack of funding, a lack of volunteers and dwindling community involvement. People also mention a concern about bureaucratic 'red tape' slowing potential for growth. An additional concern is the lack of communication among community members and with leaders and elected officials.

Suggested action steps include a focus on redevelopment with improved bus systems and local parks. Communities hope to create local directories or databases of services and providers to increase awareness of local resources and help spotlight local businesses in a central hub of information. They want to increase training in computer literacy and job readiness skills, and increase community involvement by creating a volunteer base. People would like conversations in English and Spanish to increase trust and communication with officials. The police and fire departments, libraries, and community members are trusted to act.

Phase II: Themes from Community Aspirations





West Fresno

Community Conversations



The West Fresno community wishes for better **infrastructure**, increased **communication** with officials, more **jobs**, and **safer neighborhoods** with more **activities for youth**.

Aspirations



When people talk about infrastructure, they mention better public **transportation**, improved **roads**, more **parks**, and increased **access to businesses and stores**.

Concerns



Barriers to growth and improvement include a lack of **communication**, insufficient **funding**, lack of **police presence**, and **urban sprawl** to the north.

Obstacles



Actions include a focus on **redevelopment**, improving the **bus system** and local **parks**. People want **city officials** and **community organizations** to step up and show **leadership** in the area.

Actions

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS in PINEDALE, CA



Pinedale is a community rich in local history that is gradually becoming swallowed up and surrounded by retail stores as Fresno continues its urban sprawl to the north.

A ASPIRATIONS

The people of Pinedale hope to live in a **safe** and **clean community** where everyone has **free access** to **local parks**, **technology**, and **jobs**. The community sees its **youth** as the future, and wishes for quality **education**, **activities**, and **mentoring** opportunities.



C CONCERNS

Yet, they are concerned about building **trust** and **long-lasting relationships** while maintaining a sense of **community**. People are concerned about **gang members** in the area influencing **youth**, as well as a lack of **funding** and **community involvement** in the area. People would like access to **free cell phones** and **connectivity**, but are concerned about how to recognize **scams**. They want to be seen as a **community** rather than a neighborhood, and are concerned about a **lack of pride** in **local history**.

A ACTIONS

The Pinedale community believes we need to increase the **investment** in **community** and seek more **funding** opportunities to better **market** Pinedale as a **strong, family-friendly community**. People would like better **signage** to help increase **awareness** of **local services**, and seek a **central hub for information** about **resources** in the area. They trust **long-term community members**, the **library**, and **local government agencies** that offer programs to act and inspire change.



Community Conversations in Selma, CA

Selma sits 16 miles southeast of Fresno, with a population over 23,000. Proud of its agriculture, this growing area is known as the 'Raisin Capital of the World.'



ASPIRATIONS

When the community talks about Selma, they hope for a **clean, safe community** with **access to health care, jobs, social services,** and **community information.** They talk about improved **parks and recreation, support for the arts,** and **programs and activities** for **teens.**



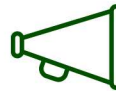
CONCERNS

People talk specifically about needing better **access to community information** and **awareness of social services** to help with **poverty, homelessness,** and **unemployment.** They would like to see an increase in **public safety** and **programs** to help **teens succeed after high school.**



BARRIERS

People are concerned that a **lack of volunteers, funding,** and **community involvement** are standing in the way of achieving these aspirations. People would like to see more **communication among organizations,** and more **partnerships** between the **Library and local schools.**



ACTION

They believe we need to focus on more **community involvement** with an **increased volunteer base.** A list or **database of services available** in Selma was also mentioned. The community would trust **business leaders** and **community organizations** to take action.

Community Conversations in **SANGER, CA**

Sanger is a city of over 24,000 people 15 miles southeast of Clovis. Rich in local history, Sanger is known for blossoming orchards and quality schools.

ASPIRATIONS



The Sanger community wants improved **city infrastructure** and improved **pride** in the city and its **local history**. People talk about **isolation**, **connectivity**, **education**, and **local employment**. They mention a need for local **access** to **social services**, especially for **seniors** and **veterans**.

CONCERNS



As people talk about these concerns, they mention better **access** to **transportation**, improved **sidewalks** and **streets**, and a **cleaner community**. They see a need for supporting **local businesses** while offering **computer training** and **career/ vocational education**.



ACTION STEPS



The Sanger community wants to increase **education** and **awareness** surrounding **resources** and **social services** through a **local directory** and spotlight on **local businesses**. People talk about maintaining a consistent **brand** and **image** for the town. They speak of increasing **leadership** from both **community members** and **government officials**, and desire **shared responsibility** for **beautification** of the area.

TRUSTED TO ACT



The people of Sanger would trust **community members**, the **Sanger Task Force**, and the **Chamber of Commerce** to take action. They believe if the **library**, **police department**, and **fire department** played a part in these actions there would be more trust in the efforts. The community also mentioned **Habitat for Humanity** and the **Red Cross** as trusted organizations.

Community Conversations with

Veterans

and their Service Providers

ASPIRATIONS



Veterans and their service providers want **increased awareness** and **easier access** to **current information**, **resources**, and **services**. They seek better **communication** between **veterans** and **community organizations** and **policy makers**, more **community recognition**, and easier **navigation of benefit programs**.

CONCERNS

The community is concerned with a lack of **reliable transportation** options that limit **access to services**. They are concerned with challenges in finding **employment** and gaining **support of employers**. People are also concerned with a lack of **volunteers** or **community commitment** to help. Many feel an **'information overload'** from too many varied sources of **information** and **services**.



SPECIFIC ISSUES



As they talk about these issues, they specifically mention a lack of **access to housing**, **health care**, and **legal aid**. Other issues of concern include a lack of **access to mental health care**, **technology** and **training**, and a perceived **stigma** in hiring people with veteran status. People are especially concerned with the difficulty in obtaining **current, accurate information** in one **easy location** about **resources** and **services** available to veterans.

ACTIONS

The community believes we need to focus on **education** and **training** for veterans, including **job readiness** and **computer literacy**. People want to improve **communication** among veterans and **community organizations** and build **trust**, especially with **homeless veterans**. They want **forms** that are **easier to navigate** and **faster to process**, and a **central hub** for **information about services** and **resources**.



TRUSTED GROUPS



Veterans and service providers trust established **community organizations** such as the **Poverello House**, **Fresno Rescue Mission**, **Turning Point**, and the **VA Administration**. Other trusted organizations include the **San Joaquin Valley Veterans/ Vocational Rehab Specialists** and **Fresno County Veterans Service Office**. People also said they trust those **organizations** and **individuals** that **get results**.



A conversation in Firebaugh, CA

Firebaugh is an agricultural community of 7,500 people, 40 miles west of Fresno.



ASPIRATIONS

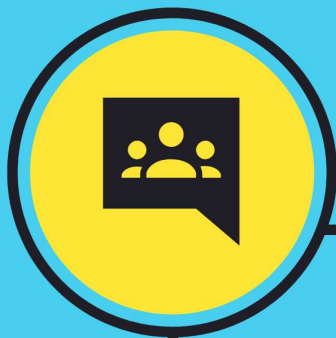
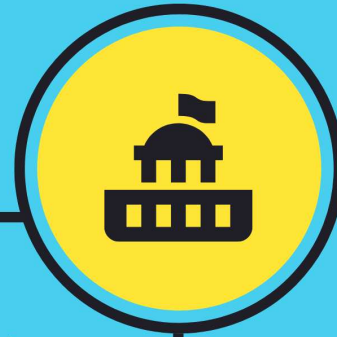
PEOPLE WANT FAIR AND EQUAL ACCESS TO:

- Services
- Housing
- Community spaces and better infrastructure
- Internet/ Broadband

CONCERNS

BARRIERS TO REACHING ASPIRATIONS INCLUDE:

- Bureaucracy/ red tape
- Lack of funding
- Lack of communication from government/ elected officials



ACTION

TO ACHIEVE POSITIVE CHANGE:

- Conversations in English and Spanish
- Better communication with all people in community
- Trust

Turning Outward from Within

In addition to gaining more public knowledge about the hopes and concerns of the diverse communities in Fresno County, FCPL has also 'turned outward' internally to hold important conversations about the organization as a community with library staff and customers. Recurring themes have emerged common to FCPL as its own community.



Process

FCPL created 'Ask Posters' to seek input from library customers about wishes for their communities. The posters were placed in high traffic areas within three library branches, and customers were encouraged to write directly on the poster. Even though the locations chosen were three very different communities with the County, four common themes recurred. FCPL has also started implementing a more 'turned outward' approach to internal operations and the Library as a community, facilitating important conversations with library staff. By increasing communication about shared wishes and concerns, and by providing space for reflection on the current status and future goals of the organization, FCPL has started breaking down organizational silos to work more collaboratively as one team with a shared purpose. Turning Outward and being more intentional with choices and decisions has also allowed FCPL to plan more relevant and meaningful programs, services, and partnerships to align with community need and strategic priorities.



'Internal' Public Knowledge Summary

From the 'Ask Posters' in three library branches, four main themes emerged with much similarity to community conversations from Phases I and II: safety, more activities for youth, better access to social services, and some library-centric aspirations. A conversation with librarians about FCPL as its own community showed a need for better internal communication and resource sharing, more support for staff and professional development, and improvements to facilities. When talking about FCPL's role in the community, librarians spoke about a need for more bilingual offerings, especially in Spanish. They perceived a need for more bilingual staff, programs, and resources. Increasing public access to and training with technology was mentioned, along with more inclusive and teen-friendly environments in library branches. A conversation with public service/ cluster supervisors about Fresno County as a community revealed hopes for quality education for all ages, safe neighborhoods, reliable and eco-friendly public transportation, and better access for all to social services.

Aspirations from the FCPL Community





A Conversation with FCPL Librarians

The Library as a Community

Aspirations



When librarians talk about FCPL as a community of coworkers, they wish for more support for staff, more inviting facilities, and an improved system for sharing internal communication and resources.

Specific Issues



When people talk about support for staff, they mention smaller clusters and/or an increase in staffing, more training opportunities, mentoring possibilities, and more staff events for networking. Inviting facilities include upgrades to buildings and designated spaces for holding public computer instruction.

Action Steps



FCPL's librarians believe we need to focus on better use of platforms like SharePoint, Office 365, and social media for more effective cross-training and communication within the organization. People would like a return of the 'Who Does What' directory, and more opportunities for professional development.

The Library in the Community

Aspirations



When librarians talk about their hopes for public service, they wish for more bilingual offerings, access to technology, and a more inclusive environment for all ages and abilities.

Specific Issues



Librarians would like to meet every customer in their own language, have bilingual staff in each branch, and have more programs and marketing materials in Spanish. People would like more access to technology for customers, including basic computer classes, class sets of laptops, and better storage. People also want more teen-friendly locations and more inclusive programs.

Action Steps



FCPL's librarians feel that community partnerships could be better leveraged for more bilingual and inclusive programming. They would like to bring more adaptive technology into branches while also taking inventory of existing technology for repurposing and utilizing the Digibus for added space for computer classes.

A Conversation with CLUSTER SUPERVISORS at FCPL



ASPIRATIONS

When FCPL's cluster supervisors talk about their community, they hope for **quality education for everyone**, **safe neighborhoods**, better **transportation**, and improved **social services**.

When they talk more about education, they mention a lack of **money** or family **support** for **teens** to attend **college**, a lack of **public vocational schools**, a high **dropout rate**, and a need for training in **life skills** for future success.

Better **transportation** includes a more **eco-friendly** and **reliable public transit**.

Improved **social services** means an **easier process** for accessing help, especially for **homeless individuals**, **low-income families**, and people seeking help for **mental illness**.



CONCERNS

The supervisors are concerned by a **lack of funds**, a **lack of awareness**, and a **lack of collaboration** between the **grass roots** organizations and **community leaders**.

People are concerned that **youth** in Fresno County don't have enough fun and **safe activities** in their communities. They are concerned about a lack of **safe streets**, and would like to see **cleaner air** and **water** for everyone.

They are concerned that a **lack of reliable public transportation** contributes to individuals relying on their own vehicles.

The cluster supervisors are also concerned by a perceived **lack of collaboration** between **local city** and **county departments**.



ACTIONS

Cluster supervisors believe we need to focus on increasing **awareness** and **understanding** of how to navigate the process for **accessing social services** for individuals and library customers.

They would like to increase affordable **educational options** in the area and showcase more possibilities for **vocational training for teens**.

They believe we need to focus on **better communication** and fun opportunities for people to **interact with their neighbors** in **clean and welcoming environments**.

The supervisors would trust the **Library** to organize resources, the **United Way**, **Fire Department**, **faith-based programs** and **community-based organizations** to act.



Implications

From the first two phases of conversations, FCPL spoke with many concerned and caring members of diverse communities throughout Fresno County. We are grateful to all participants who selflessly shared their time and hopes with us for this project. Despite the varied geography and demographics of the communities, several key unifying themes emerged from the conversations. People in Fresno County want to live in a safe, clean, caring community. They want fair and equal access to resources and services, with a trusted central source for finding local information. They hope for more connectivity, both through access to technology and through improved communication with their neighbors. A strong recurring theme is a wish for more positive activities for youth to keep children and teens safe, away from negative influences, and better prepared for future success.

Priorities for FCPL

- ☒ More Spanish/ bilingual programs, resources, and staff.
- ☒ More afterschool activities for kids and teens.
- ☒ Increased access to technology and training.
- ☒ Create open spaces for dialogue to build respect and community.
- ☒ Serve as trusted hub for information about local services.

Conclusion

Public knowledge belongs to the public - to the members of the community. FCPL is honored to be a trusted steward of this information, and to share it openly with the people of Fresno County. Multiple conversations mentioned the importance of community pride, investment, and involvement to create safe, clean, and welcoming places to live. Using shared aspirations, we can join together and address concerns as we influence positive change. Below are people specifically mentioned in conversations as trusted to act in the best interest of the community. As community members, we can all take personal responsibility and ownership to make our neighborhoods friendlier, brighter, and welcoming places to call home.

Trusted to Act

Community Members

Local Police Departments
Fire Departments
Fresno County Public Library
Fresno County Sheriff Department

City Councils

Elected Officials/ Local Leaders
Chamber of Commerce
Rotary Clubs
Local Agencies



FRESNO COUNTY PUBLIC
LIBRARY

A place to grow.