A Look Back

In 2006, the Blue Ribbon Task Force on the Future of the District of Columbia Public Library System released a report that led a DC Public Library transformation and a significant public investment to improve an underfunded library system. The following achievements exemplify this transformation:

- Launched the Sing, Talk and Read program to engage parents in their young child's literacy development. The program includes workshops, tips and instructional videos for parents and a free book every month for parents who register.
- Increased public access computers almost 150 percent since 2008, from 409 to 1,000 computers, and began to offer free Wi-Fi in every library location.

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The District of Columbia is a growing city that proudly embraces its unique history, identity and culture. It is home to families whose roots here are centuries old, a thriving community of professionals committed to public service, a vibrant and expanding arts scene, and a large and growing immigrant population. The District is a vast and diverse mosaic of residents of all ages, backgrounds, careers and lifestyles. With the great growth, prosperity and diversity of D.C., there still are residents whose economic and educational aspirations remain unfulfilled. Many residents find it difficult to secure and sustain jobs or grow in their careers. Stubborn achievement gaps remain between students in underserved communities and those in more affluent communities.

In light of these disparities, the District of Columbia Public Library’s goal is for all District residents, regardless of income, educational attainment or geographic area, to have the opportunity to grow, excel and become successful contributors to their communities and society.

The vision of the Library’s five-year strategic plan is centered on a core principle: Know Your Neighborhood. Each neighborhood library’s programs and resources must be responsive to and reflective of their own distinctive communities. Everything from the collections of books and materials to services to the layout of
the branches should be tailored to each neighborhood’s needs and aspirations. Crucial to this service customization is a new focus on inclusion and equity, in the hope that DCPL may help address persistent challenges faced by many in the District.

Over the past 10 years, District taxpayers have made tremendous investments in new library buildings, new technologies, more books and longer hours that have resulted in significantly increased use of library services. Neighborhood libraries are community unifiers that attract residents from all corners of the District. Whether they check out library books and digital resources, attend cultural events, participate in literacy and job seeker workshops, acquire new computer skills, or discover how to start a business or use a 3-D printer, District residents know that they can rely on DCPL to meet their diverse information and learning needs. During a time of great changes across the city, rapidly changing neighborhoods may prioritize branch library services differently, but they share the common experience of the library as a haven for education and civic expression. While the Library is very proud of all it has accomplished in the past decade, as one of the few institutions that serves residents through all stages of life, DCPL is compelled to do more.

Perhaps the greatest indicator of any public library’s success is the degree to which residents voluntarily choose to avail themselves of its programs and services. This will be the key measure of success for DCPL’s new strategic plan. As the Library endeavors to reach new and existing users in innovative ways — and encourage their continued engagement — it is the Library’s hope that D.C. residents will grow ever more satisfied with the library, continuing its legacy of relevance and impact as a cornerstone of District life.

If the Library is successful, more District residents will be job-ready, literacy rates will rise, and residents across D.C. will gain a greater appreciation for the rich history and culture of our communities.

We would like to thank everyone who has dedicated their time and talents to the creation of this strategic plan, including DCPL employees and volunteers, Friends of the Library and the DC Public Library Foundation. Most of all, we would like to thank the thousands of D.C. residents who took the time to share their ideas and perspectives.

It is our sincere hope that you appreciate the vision and direction we have laid out.

• From 2008 to 2016, increased the overall number of materials borrowed annually by 250 percent, from 1.8 million to 4.4 million.
• Increased use of the Library’s digital collection, growing from 7,000 items downloaded in 2008 to 1.2 million in 2016.
• Increased active library accounts by more than 60 percent from 2008 to 2016.
• Opened the Digital Commons at the MLK Library with public computers, co-working and meeting spaces, and a self-publishing book printing machine. Later opened the Fabrication, Studio and Memory labs.
• Hired the Library’s first ever social worker to serve its most vulnerable visitors, including customers experiencing homelessness. Opened a library in the D.C. Jail.

In 2017, DCPL is one of the largest library systems in the country that is open seven days per week in all locations. Sixteen of its 26 buildings are new or fully renovated. The system boasts four million annual visits from individuals who use the library’s technology, meeting rooms, books and digital resources in record numbers. The Library looks to build on this progress in the years to come.