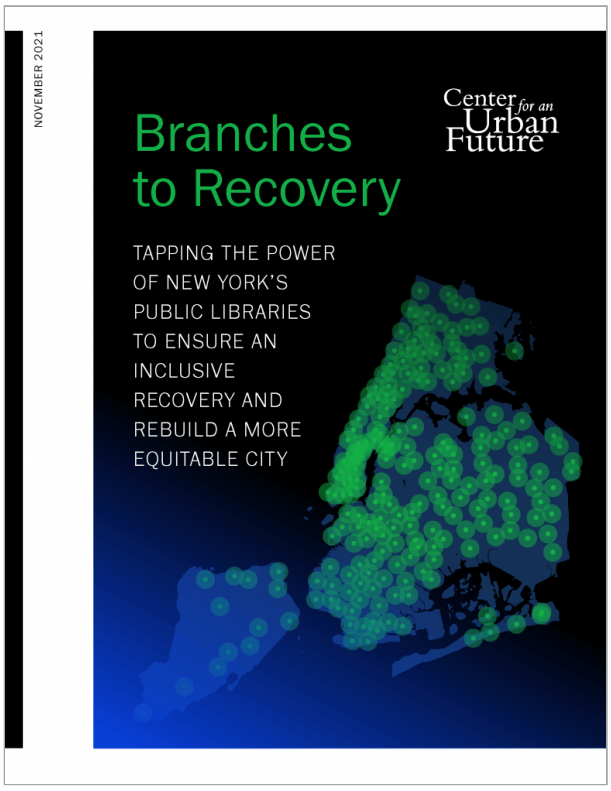

Report - November 2021

Branches to Recovery: Tapping the Power of NYC's Public Libraries to Rebuild a More Equitable City

Libraries are already among the city's largest and most trusted providers of programs and services aligned with New Yorkers' greatest needs. With a clear citywide strategy and a new level of investment, their impact could be even greater.

by John Surico, Eli Dvorkin, and Jonathan Bowles

- The following is an excerpt from *Branches to Recovery: Tapping the Power of New York's Public Libraries to Ensure an Inclusive Recovery and Rebuild a More Equitable City*
- Read the full report (PDF)
- View the recommendations
- Check out this two-minute video about the report.

In the months and years ahead, New York City's leaders will be tasked with helping hard-hit communities across all five boroughs recover fully from the social and economic devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic—and chart a course toward a more equitable future. Fortunately, elected officials and policymakers have an incomparable asset and ally in nearly every New York neighborhood: the city's 217 public branch libraries.

Although many other entities will be pivotal to creating a fairer city—including hundreds of community-based nonprofit organizations—no institution is better equipped than the public libraries to make progress toward a more equitable city in so many critical areas, from expanding access to early education and closing the digital divide to strengthening minority-owned businesses and bolstering the language, literacy, and technology skills needed to access the good jobs of tomorrow.

Libraries aren't just on the ground in nearly every community across the city. In many of the neighborhoods hit hardest by the pandemic, libraries are among the only trusted resources for immigrants, teens, older adults, and those on the wrong side of

the digital divide. For example, in 64 percent of the city's neighborhoods, branch libraries are the sole public hub for career services and support for jobseekers.[1] Libraries are the only local, public resource for small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs in 67 percent of the city—including many neighborhoods where minority- and immigrant-owned businesses are still reeling from the pandemic—at a time when thousands of lower-income New Yorkers are turning to entrepreneurship out of necessity.[2] And as the city faces the consequences of widespread learning loss, libraries are the only local, public provider of family literacy programs in over one-third of city neighborhoods—and among the only options for free, drop-in homework help.

While libraries have long served as a go-to resource for New Yorkers seeking opportunity, with more resources and deliberate planning from City Hall, they could be doing so much more. Today, the city's public libraries serve over 35 million visitors annually, with program attendance increasing 178 percent over the past decade and WiFi usage more than tripling.[3] But libraries accomplish all this with less than 0.44 percent of the city budget. The city currently allocates about $432 million annually for public libraries—30 percent less than the Department of Parks and Recreation, 63 percent less than the Department of Corrections, and 92 percent less than the Police Department.[4]

One effect of this underinvestment is that many of the libraries' most popular and successful programs have long waiting lists or have only been rolled out to a small portion of branch locations. For instance, libraries have become the city's largest public provider of technology training in recent years, serving well over 160,000 patrons annually. But new seats in coding classes are filled up within ten minutes of registration opening, and the waitlist for one sought-after course had to be suspended because it had grown to over 6,000 people. A branch library is the only free place to use a computer, borrow a laptop, or access the Internet in many of the city's lowest-income communities, from Soundview to Canarsie. But the city's libraries collectively have just 2,277 laptops available to loan. Similar opportunities exist throughout the system to expand high-demand services in hard-hit communities—for older adults and immigrants, jobseekers and entrepreneurs, families with young children, and teens facing an uncertain future.

It's time to fully harness New York's branch libraries—and make them a centerpiece of the social infrastructure needed to cultivate an inclusive recovery and build a more equitable city.

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This study provides a detailed vision for how policymakers can harness the full potential of New York's 217 branch libraries—operated by the city's three library systems, Brooklyn Public Library (BPL), New York Public Library (NYPL), and Queens Public Library (QPL)—to ensure an inclusive recovery and build a more equitable city for the long term. It was informed by an extensive data analysis and more than 100 interviews with national and local experts on issues ranging from early childhood education and technology training to support for jobseekers and older adult services; library officials and front-line library staff; and leaders in philanthropy, government, and the private sector. Funded by the Charles H. Revson Foundation, the report expands on CUF's previous research examining the critical role of New York City's branch libraries as engines of economic mobility and social cohesion, including the 2013 report *Branches of Opportunity* and 2014 report *Re-Envisioning New York's Branch Libraries*.

Branch libraries are uniquely well-positioned to support an equitable recovery

There is broad consensus among city policymakers, including many of those who won elections earlier this year, that New York City will need to take aggressive steps in 2022 and beyond to address two defining challenges: 1) ensuring that New York's hardest-hit neighborhoods and residents can fully recover from the coronavirus pandemic; and 2) building a more equitable economy over the long run.

If the city is going to succeed in meeting these dual challenges, New York's branch libraries will need to play a key role.

This report homes in on ten policy areas that will be critical to ensuring an inclusive recovery and building a more equitable city—and where libraries are uniquely positioned to make a difference. But in nearly every instance, they are doing so with limited resources and meeting only a fraction of the demand.

Ensuring Children and Teens Overcome COVID Learning Loss

Although most young people are now back in school in person, experts believe that a large majority of the city's public school students need significant help catching up academically after a school year in which more than 60 percent of students learned exclusively from home.[5] With their free drop-in homework help and after-school enrichment programs, libraries present an unmatched opportunity to counter COVID-related learning loss and keep students from falling further behind. Libraries saw enormous demand for homework help even before the pandemic, especially among the many students in lower-income and immigrant communities who aren't enrolled in after-school programs but spend many of their afternoons in libraries.

But these programs are hardly meeting demand. For example, in early 2020, NYPL offered a drop-in homework help and enrichment program at 4 of its 88 branches. The program is expanding to 20 branches in fall 2021. But with more resources, NYPL officials say they would be able to expand to 30 to 40 sites for the 2022–2023 school year, serving dozens of children per site and focusing on neighborhoods where the impact of learning loss from the pandemic is especially high. Likewise, the STACKS program at Queens Public Library offered homework help and structured enrichment activities at 23 of its 63 branches in 2019 and rapidly shifted to a virtual model during the pandemic. With more resources, QPL could expand these crucial services and continue running virtual programming alongside in-person offerings.

Strengthening Minority- and Immigrant-Owned Businesses

Although the city has strong infrastructure to help the thousands of small businesses that are working their way back to profitability after a cataclysmic year, libraries are the only convenient resource for entrepreneurs in many of the communities where small businesses have been hit the hardest during the pandemic. In 37 of the city's 55 Census-defined neighborhoods—or 67 percent—libraries are the only public provider of support for small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs. Indeed, relatively few communities of color across the city are home to city-run Business Solutions Centers or chambers of commerce, and many also lack business improvement districts.

The lack of small business support infrastructure in these communities is one of the main reasons that so many minority- and immigrant-owned businesses were financially vulnerable heading into the pandemic, with strikingly few of them taking advantage of e-commerce or other technology tools and too many operating with flawed bookkeeping practices.

"New York needs to make sure that the Linden Boulevards and Springfield Boulevards all over the city have the same access to small business and entrepreneurial support that places like Bell Boulevard do," says Dennis Walcott, president and CEO of Queens Public Library. "One of the best ways to scale up that support infrastructure is through the city's more than 210 branch libraries, including new partnerships between public libraries and other strong community-based organizations providing small business and entrepreneurship assistance."

Expanding Access to Tablets, Laptops, and High-Speed Internet

As it becomes clear that the ability to work and study from home will remain an essential part of life in the city even aftermost employers, universities, and public schools have resumed in-person operations, New York will need to ensure that far more

of its residents are equipped with tablets, laptops, and home Internet service. Branch libraries are uniquely positioned to help.

Libraries are already among the largest providers of free Internet-enabled devices and broadband access across the city. In addition to the 15,000 public computers for use at branches across the city, the three library systems have more than 18,500 Internet-enabled devices to lend, including 2,277 laptops and 16,468 tablets. But the demand for these devices is several times greater in a city where nearly 260,000 Black New Yorkers only have home Internet access through a smartphone, more than 777,000 New York City households lack a laptop or desktop computer at home, and over 893,000 households do not have home broadband access.[6]

Helping New Yorkers Get Back to Work

Although employment in most higher-paying occupations has already bounced back to pre-pandemic levels, nearly 400,000 city residents are still out of work, including a disproportionate number of New Yorkers of color.[7] Branch libraries will be the first place many of these New Yorkers turn for assistance, whether it is help preparing a resume, getting connected to a nonprofit workforce training provider, or upgrading their skills by enrolling in one of the libraries many career-enhancing classes. In fact, in most neighborhoods across the five boroughs, branch libraries are the only public provider of in-person resources for jobseekers. Only 21 of the city's 55 Census-defined neighborhoods are home to a public hub for career services—such as a Workforce1 Center or a Jobs-Plus program site.

Libraries are already a go-to resource for jobseekers, but with additional resources, they could fill a crucial gap in the employment services infrastructure in the months ahead as unemployment benefits run out for many out-of-work New Yorkers and industries that previously provided ample job opportunities for New Yorkers without college degrees—including restaurants, hotels, retail, and transportation—have been slow to recover. The three systems served over 46,000 adult New Yorkers with job assistance resources in 2019, and that was when the city's unemployment rate was under 4 percent—compared to nearly 9 percent today. But the systems' ability to scale up these crucial services is limited by staffing needs. For instance, Brooklyn Public Library has just four career specialists on staff to serve all 60 branches, and the other systems report similar staffing levels.

Fostering Economic and Civic Inclusion in Immigrant Communities

Any successful effort to ensure an inclusive recovery and create a more equitable economy over the long run will need to incorporate the city's 3 million immigrants, and libraries—the only public institution trusted by most immigrants—arguably offer the best opportunity to help at scale.

Immigrants were among the hardest hit by the pandemic, with as many as half of all immigrant New Yorkers losing their main source of income during the crisis and neighborhoods like Elmhurst and Corona suffering some of the deepest health impacts.[8] At the same time, even prior to the pandemic, too few of the city's immigrants were earning a living wage—34 percent of employed foreign-born New Yorkers earned less than $35,000 compared to 18 percent of employed native-born residents.[9]

But even as government considers supporting new programs and services to bolster immigrant New Yorkers, it's far from clear that those initiatives will be able to effectively reach them. Libraries have proven they can. A disproportionate number of the branches with the highest circulation and program attendance numbers are in immigrant communities, including Flushing, Sunset Park, Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, and Chinatown.

The problem is that libraries have lacked resources to expand services. For example, the Queens Public Library Adult Learning Center at Flushing library receives approximately six applicants for every available seat in its ESOL programs. Meanwhile, the city offers free legal services to immigrants through the innovative ActionNYC program, but those services are currently only available remotely. (The program's predecessor, NYCitizenship, which provided citizenship application assistance, ended in June 2020 and was only available at 12 branches citywide.)

Closing Academic Achievement Gaps Through Early Education

Creating a more equitable city over the long run will also require dramatic progress in closing racial achievement gaps in education. Libraries present the city with a largely untapped opportunity to help, particularly in the area that research has shown to be the biggest difference-maker: early learning. Although the de Blasio administration deserves enormous credit for its investments in Universal Pre-Kindergarten and 3-K for All, libraries offer a chance to complement those vital classroom efforts with its highly regarded early learning programs offered after school, on weekends, and over the summer.

Libraries are already the largest provider of early literacy programs citywide. But their programs aren't offered at many branches across the city. Brooklyn Public Library's early learning programs reached 125,000 toddlers in 2018—but the system has just one part-time employee in charge of coordinating with all informal childcare groups in the borough. Queens Public Library's Kickoff to Kindergarten (K2K) program, an eight-week, research-based program to improve literacy skills for kids ages 3-5, served 400 families in 2019. However, the program is only in 15 of 63 branches so far and could double its impact with additional funding and staff support.

Although many community-based organizations also provide valuable childhood literacy programming, over a third—19 of 55—of the city's Census-defined neighborhoods have no dedicated, publicly funded adult or family literacy centers other than branch libraries.[10] This includes Norwood, Parkchester, and Wakefield in the Bronx; Brownsville and Canarsie in Brooklyn; and Ridgewood, Richmond Hill, and Cambria Heights in Queens.

Renewing the College and Career Dreams of New York's Teens and Young Adults

In 2020, 27 percent of New Yorkers between the ages of 18 and 24 were out of school or out of work—the highest share in more than a decade.[11] At the same time, many young New Yorkers have at least temporarily dropped out of the City University of New York or deferred plans to attend college. Helping these young adults get reconnected will be essential to an inclusive recovery in New York, and libraries undoubtedly have an important role to play.

In the years leading up to the pandemic, libraries demonstrated that by offering spaces and programs that appealed to teens, they could reach young people where others could not. But it's also clear that they were just scratching the surface. At NYPL, there are only ten dedicated teen spaces across 88 branches. Queens boasts the city's only branch library exclusively for teens, the Queens Public Library for Teens in Far Rockaway, but it's open just 17.5 hours a week and closed on weekends. Dedicated teen spaces exist at only four other branches across Queens. BPL has provided a teen space in its recently opened Greenpoint Library with more planned for other new branches and a first-in-the-city teen tech center at the Kings Highway branch, where teens can explore multimedia production and robotics—but it's open just 20 hours a week. Similarly, Brooklyn's innovative Today's Teens Tomorrow's Techies program can only accommodate 100 teenagers per year.

Additionally, NYPL's College and Career Pathways program has seen its attendance nearly double since launching in 2019. The program offers teens college prep workshops, large-scale college and career events, and one-on-one counseling sessions facilitated by trained young adult librarians. The programming helps high schoolers research and apply to college programs, certificate courses, scholarships, and financial aid and boosts career readiness through resume workshops and job interview prep. Library officials see enough demand to expand from 15 to 30 sites, but the program currently lacks sustained funding.

Supporting NYC's Fast-Growing and Increasingly Diverse Older Adult Population

New York's branch libraries are arguably the best-positioned institution to help the city expand services and supports to the fastest-growing segment of New Yorkers living in poverty: older adults. The city is now home to 1.7 million New Yorkers aged 60 and over, roughly half foreign-born and one in five living below the poverty line.[12] This record-high and increasingly diverse population of older New Yorkers faces an array of challenges—from financial insecurity and social isolation to workplace discrimination and limited digital literacy—but is woefully underserved by the city's senior centers.

While many of the city's 275 senior centers are outstanding, just 12 percent of the city's older adults make use of these centers, many of which provide meals but not enough of the other activities and services that older New Yorkers want and

need today.[13] Libraries already serve large numbers of older adults, offering a wealth of programs, free space to read and socialize, and a sense of community that spans all ages, including thousands of older New Yorkers who don't want to visit senior centers. But the city's libraries could be doing even more to serve this population if they had the resources to expand programming tailored to older adults and increase their hours of operation.

Building Pathways to the Well-Paying Tech Jobs of the Future

Developing a more equitable economy in New York will take more than simply reconnecting New Yorkers to the workforce; it will also require a sustained effort to significantly expand access to the good jobs being created in fast-growing industries like tech. Here, too, libraries have the potential to fill a glaring gap in services.

Although the city boasts a number of excellent tech training programs, 11 percent of the city's Census-defined neighborhoods have just one program or none at all. In several lower-income neighborhoods outside of Manhattan—including East Elmhurst, East New York, Parkchester, Wakefield, and Stapleton—libraries are one of the only local providers of free technology training classes for adults.[14]

The city's libraries serve well over 160,000 patrons in tech training classes annually—far more than any other organization in New York. But that's only scratching the surface of the demand. All seats for NYPL's TechConnect coding programs are filled up within ten minutes of registration opening, even though the branch system doesn't do any outreach or promotion. Prior to 2020, NYPL had a waitlist of more than 6,000 for seats in the program—the waitlist has since been suspended because it had grown so long.

Empowering NYC's Growing Independent Workforce and Preparing At-Risk Workers for a More Automated Economy

City efforts to build a more equitable economy will almost certainly need to include new resources and supports for the roughly 1.3 million New Yorkers now working as freelancers and gig workers, far too many of whom struggle with financial insecurity but lack a support system to turn to.[15] Libraries have the potential to fill an important gap in the infrastructure for this large and growing population. While some benefit from resources and services offered at coworking spaces, tens of thousands of independent workers either can't afford membership in a coworking space or don't have one in their neighborhood. Indeed, our analysis shows that 60 percent of the city—33 out of 55 Census-defined neighborhoods citywide—currently lack any coworking space options other than a library.

Branch libraries already function as the only coworking spaces for lower-income New Yorkers, providing free space to work, including for many who make use of free laptop lending. Importantly, Libraries also help independent workers connect to a variety of important free resources, from help with tax preparation to entrepreneurship workshops.

"There are a huge number of New Yorkers working independently today," says Rafael Espinal, executivedirector of Freelancers Union, the largest national nonprofit organization representing independent workers. "Libraries are very well positioned to help support their recovery from the pandemic by providing the free resources and coworking opportunities they need to succeed."

But most libraries lack specialized branches, spaces, or programs dedicated to supporting independent workers. There are just four branches that allow patrons to book soundproof rooms—all in Brooklyn. And few branches are open long enough hours to meet the needs of many independent workers.

In addition to the growth of freelance work, another seismic shift is rippling across the city's economy: the acceleration of automation. This phenomenon is likely to disproportionately impact many of the same New Yorkers who were hardest hit by the pandemic, as 76 percent of highly automatable jobs in the city are currently held by people of color.[16] Getting ahead of these trends will require major new investments in lifelong learning and upskilling, and few institutions are better positioned to play a role than the city's public libraries.

Experts say that preparing workers for automation doesn't necessarily require retraining people for entirely new jobs; more

important will be helping those in the workforce to gain new skills that make them “automation-proof” or give them the technological fluency to work alongside machines. Libraries are a good fit. They already function as natural hubs of lifelong learning, providing age-appropriate technology classes for everyone from children to older adults and offering free access to valuable skills-building resources. They’re also well equipped to help New Yorkers assess their current skills and needs—and navigate the city’s complex landscape of free training programs to acquire new industry-recognized credentials.

Tapping branch libraries to build back a more equitable city

New York’s branch libraries offer an unmatched opportunity to help city policymakers succeed in ensuring an inclusive recovery and building a more equitable economy. But realizing this opportunity will not be possible without new city investments in libraries and a new commitment to make libraries a key partner in city plans for tackling a range of policy challenges, from early education to digital literacy.

To unlock the full potential of the city’s public libraries to create and sustain a more equitable city for the long term, city leaders should commit to investing $1 billion annually—and focus that investment on achieving the following seven priority recommendations:

1. **Fund a major expansion of libraries’ hours of operation to extend access to far more working New Yorkers.** Expanding open hours will be essential for reaching many of the New Yorkers in greatest need of library services: working families whose only free hours are at night, early in the morning, or on the weekend. Despite considerable improvement in recent years, New York City’s libraries are still open fewer hours than many of the largest library systems in the nation—including Chicago, Dallas, San Diego, and San Antonio—and most of the large counties in New York State. Currently, fewer than 9 percent of the city’s branch libraries are open seven days a week. In fact, New York City’s branch libraries were open fewer hours per week, on average, in the year before the pandemic hit than they were during the Great Depression.[17] An annual investment of $1 billion in the city’s library systems—about 1 percent of the city’s annual budget—can ensure that New York City’s branch libraries lead the nation in weekly hours of operation, making these critical spaces and their resources accessible to far more New Yorkers. In addition, we recommend that at least one branch in each borough be opened 24/7, creating continuous access points to a range of vital services.
2. **Provide targeted funding for libraries to ramp up their most effective and promising programs and partnerships, reinvent underutilized spaces, and invest in expansion.** Policymakers should make targeted investments in specific library programs to keep pace with high need and growing demand—and meet the challenges of the post-pandemic recovery. In addition to keeping libraries open longer, an investment of $1 billion annually could dramatically expand early literacy programs and digital skills training, create a network of drop-in homework help centers, launch business plan competitions in multiple languages, expand one-on-one support for jobseekers and small business owners, and reconnect thousands of older New Yorkers after more than a year of painful isolation. Sustained public investment could eliminate waitlists for high-demand programs, maintain popular virtual programming even while returning to in-person service, and enable libraries to act quickly when emergencies arise—whether due to a public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic or an environmental catastrophe like a hurricane or flood. This level of investment would also enable the city’s three library systems to reimagine underutilized spaces by implementing and expanding the “kit-of-parts” approach piloted successfully at the Flatbush branch and other architectural solutions to maximize the functionality of small and aging branches.
3. **Create a dedicated maintenance fund enabling libraries to make critical building fixes before problems can grow.** The city’s three library systems face nearly $900 million in repairs and upgrades, including renovations to overhaul heating and cooling systems, fix leaking roofs, patch crumbling masonry, upgrade aging plumbing, and improve accessibility. Capital shortfalls total $418 million at New York Public Library, $251 million at Queens Public Library, and $227 million at Brooklyn Public

Library. Although the mayor and City Council have gradually increased capital support for libraries in recent years, libraries are still routinely forced to divert limited public funding away from operations in order to fix leaks, repair boilers, and keep aging branches functioning. The mayor and City Council should create a dedicated maintenance fund to support state-of-good-repair needs across all three systems and help catch smaller problems before they grow.

4. **Build the future of branch libraries into the city's 10-year capital plan—and commit to expanding most of the city's smallest branches by 2033.** For the city to fully harness the power of branch libraries in every community, capital investment will need to do much more than chip away at the systems' mountain of state-of-good-repair needs. Expanding branch-level capacity to offer everything from early literacy programs and dedicated teen spaces to ESOL programs, business plan competitions, and robotics teams will require far more useable space than exists today. Currently, 100 branches across the five boroughs are under 10,000 square feet, severely restricting their capacity and range of use. These branches should be a top priority for rebuilding and expansion in the city's long-term capital plan. But current 10-year capital funding is largely intended to cover state-of-good-repair needs for the current system and leaves very little room to invest in much-needed branch expansions and replacements. The city should solicit plans from all three systems to expand most of their smallest and most overcrowded branches and commit sufficient funding in the next 10-year capital plan to achieve this.
5. **Integrate libraries into agency plans to tackle key challenges and ensure an inclusive recovery.** Given libraries' unmatched reach and trust, city agencies should take full advantage of libraries as natural partners to expand uptake for a range of services and develop new programs in high-need communities. But to do so effectively, agency leaders should involve the city's library systems from the beginning of the planning process and treat branches as true partners in addressing the city's major challenges. Prior to the pandemic, this rarely happened. Although many city agencies did seek out libraries to help meet their policy goals, too often libraries were brought in at the end of the planning process, missing critical opportunities for libraries to help craft effective partnership strategies. And rarely were libraries given funds to expand services beyond what they were already doing. The Department of Education should look to libraries as a powerful ally in addressing learning loss caused by the pandemic, with the potential for year-round enrichment programs, teen mentorship for younger children, and drop-in homework help throughout the school year. Likewise, the Department of Small Business Services or NYC Economic Development Corporation should make libraries a key partner in plans to boost entrepreneurship in hard-hit communities—sparking the city's next wave of small business owners and job creators.
6. **Increase expense funding to support key staff roles that maximize impact.** During the course of our research for this report, one key challenge emerged repeatedly: branches need more librarians and staff resources in order to maximize the impact and reach of their programs and services. But even as demand for key programs has surged, libraries are operating with 15 percent fewer staff members than a decade ago.[18] Additional baselined expense funding can enable libraries to hire dedicated outreach librarians in every community and facilitate more partnerships with local community-based organizations, bringing compassionate, culturally competent programming—from early literacy to entrepreneurship training—directly into the spaces and neighborhoods where the New Yorkers hit hardest by the pandemic live, work, and learn.
7. **Help libraries take some of their vital resources on the road—to homeless shelters, laundromats, public housing complexes, senior centers, and playgrounds.** While millions of New Yorkers make their way to branches every year, the city's branch libraries can deepen their impact by bringing some of their invaluable services—and community partnerships—into parts of their neighborhoods where there are unmet needs. This might entail regular storytime readings at homeless shelters and in NYCHA playgrounds or book club discussions and digital learning sessions at senior centers and in naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs). New York's libraries had begun to do this on a small scale prior to the pandemic, but there are opportunities to expand these nascent efforts if provided the resources. The mayor and City Council should consider funding a large-scale pilot program to bring library services into community spaces in 2022 as part of efforts to help New Yorkers still reeling from

the COVID crisis.

To support this strategic expansion of library capacity, programs, and infrastructure, the next mayor and City Council should allocate $1 billion annually to the city's three library systems—about 1 percent of the city's annual budget. Absent that level of investment, the current allocation of approximately $431 million will prove inadequate even to maintain existing levels of virtual programming while integrating the full return of in-person services. But with a new level of sustained investment, policymakers can tap the full potential of this unmatched social infrastructure and ensure a lasting and equitable recovery in communities across New York City.

In addition to these priority recommendations, the report includes 26 issue-specific recommendations that, if implemented, would help libraries make further progress on each of the ten policy opportunities (outlined above) that will be crucial to ensuring an inclusive recovery and building a more equitable city. These ideas include everything from building out the libraries' free drop-in homework help programs to establishing an NYC Skills Pass that would allow anyone with a library card to attend a tech training class offered by a participating private training provider—essentially, a Culture Pass but for career skills training.

New York City's public libraries contain nearly limitless potential to help spur a full recovery from the pandemic, strengthen hard-hit communities in a time of immense need, and grow the social infrastructure needed to cultivate a more equitable city. But this vision can only be realized by fully integrating libraries into a comprehensive recovery strategy, investing in their unique ability to meet New Yorkers where they are with the programs and services they need. This report examines the library systems' greatest strengths, explores where new investment could have the most transformative impact, and lays out a blueprint for harnessing branch libraries to rebuild a more equitable city.

Notes

1. Center for an Urban Future (CUF) analysis of NYC Department of Small Business Services (SBS) and Department of Social Services (DSS) career services locations and branch library locations. (This and all other location-data derived findings will only be cited on first mention within this report.)

2. CUF analysis of NYC SBS Business Solution Center locations, NYS Entrepreneurship Assistance Centers, and branch library locations.

3. All non-budgetary data on the New York Public Library (NYPL), Queens Public Library (QPL), Brooklyn Public Library (BPL), and their respective branches and programs has been provided by the library systems themselves.

4. CUF analysis of NYC Office of Management and Budget (OMB) FY 2022 Adopted Budget data

5. Reema Amin, "NYC's budget deal pilots smaller class sizes, dedicates millions to COVID learning loss," Chalkbeat New York, June 30, 2021. https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2021/6/30/22558104/nyc-budget-deal-2022-smaller-class-size-covid-learning-loss

6. CUF analysis of data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2015-2019 American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates.

7. CUF analysis of BLS Local Area Unemployment, August 2021 and labor force statistics from the Current Population Survey (CPS).

8. CUF, "Under Threat and Left Out: NYC's Immigrants and the Coronavirus Crisis." (June 2020). https://nycfuture.org/research/under-threat-and-left-out

9. CUF analysis of data from ACS 2015-2019 five-year estimates.

10. CUF analysis of NYC Department of Youth and Community Development Family Literacy Center location data.

11. JobsFirstNYC, "1 in 4 Young Adults in New York City Were Out of School and Out of Work in 2020," August 2021. https://jobsfirstnyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2021.08.12_Brief_CPSCOVID_FINAL-3.pdf

12. CUF analysis of data from ACS 2015-2019 five-year estimates

13. CUF analysis of data from the NYC Mayor's Management Report (MMR), FY2019.

14. CUF, “Plugging In: Building NYC’s Tech Education & Training Ecosystem,” February 2020. https://nycfuture.org/research/plugging-in

15. Freelancers Union, Upwork, and the Mayor’s Office of Media and Entertainment (MOME), “Freelancing in New York City in 2019,” September 2019. https://www.freelancersunion.org/resources/freelancing-in-nyc/

16. CUF, “Upskilling for an Equitable Recovery: Hardest Hit New Yorkers Most Vulnerable to Automation,” March 2021. https://nycfuture.org/research/automation-and-equitable-recovery

17. Ann Thornton, “Open Doors, Open Minds: The New York Public Library During the Great Depression and Today’s Economic Crisis,” March 11, 2009. https://www.nypl.org/blog/2009/03/11/open-doors-open-minds-new-york-public-library-during-great-depression-and-today

18. CUF analysis of data from the NYC MMR, FY 2009 and FY 2019.

- The following are recommendations from Branches to Recovery: Tapping the Power of New York’s Public Libraries to Ensure an Inclusive Recovery and Rebuild a More Equitable City
- Read the full report (PDF)

Equipping NYC’s Branch Libraries to Rebuild a More Equitable City

Over the next five years, New York’s leaders should harness the unparalleled reach, trust, and capabilities of the city’s branch libraries to tackle the greatest challenges facing New Yorkers.

Priority Recommendations

To unlock the full potential of the city’s public libraries to create and sustain a more equitable city for the long term, city leaders should commit to investing $1 billion annually—and focus that investment on achieving the following seven priority recommendations:

1. **Fund a major expansion of libraries’ hours of operation to extend access to far more working New Yorkers.** Expanding open hours will be essential for reaching many of the New Yorkers in greatest need of library services: working families whose only free hours are at night, early in the morning, or on the weekend. Despite considerable improvement in recent years, New York City’s libraries are still open fewer hours than many of the largest library systems in the nation—including Chicago, Dallas, San Diego, and San Antonio—and most of the large counties in New York State. Currently, fewer than 9 percent of the city’s branch libraries are open seven days a week. In fact, New York City’s branch libraries were open fewer hours per week, on average, in the year before the pandemic hit than they were during the Great Depression. An annual investment of $1 billion in the city’s library systems—about 1 percent of the city’s annual budget—can ensure that New York City’s branch libraries lead the nation in weekly hours of operation, making these critical spaces and their resources accessible to far more New Yorkers. In addition, we recommend that at least one branch in each borough be opened 24/7, creating continuous access points to a range of vital services.
2. **Provide targeted funding for libraries to ramp up their most effective and promising programs and partnerships, reinvent underutilized spaces, and invest in expansion.** Policymakers should make targeted investments in specific library programs to keep pace with high need and growing demand. In addition to keeping libraries open longer, an investment of $1 billion annually could dramatically expand early literacy programs and digital skills training, create a network of drop-in homework help centers, launch business plan competitions in multiple languages, expand one-on-one support for jobseekers and small business owners, and reconnect thousands of older New Yorkers after more than a year of painful isolation. Sustained public investment could eliminate waitlists for high-demand programs, maintain popular virtual programming even while returning to in-person service, and enable libraries to act quickly when emergencies arise—whether due to a public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic or an

environmental catastrophe like a hurricane or flood. This level of investment would also enable the city's three library systems to reimagine underutilized spaces by implementing and expanding the "kit-of-parts" approach piloted successfully at the Flatbush branch and other architectural solutions to maximize the functionality of small and aging branches.

3. **Create a dedicated maintenance fund enabling libraries to make critical building fixes before problems can grow.** The city's three library systems face nearly $900 million in repairs and upgrades, including renovations to overhaul heating and cooling systems, fix leaking roofs, patch crumbling masonry, upgrade aging plumbing, and improve accessibility. Capital shortfalls total $418 million at New York Public Library, $251 million at Queens Public Library, and $227 million at Brooklyn Public Library. Although the mayor and City Council have gradually increased capital support for libraries in recent years, libraries are still routinely forced to divert limited public funding away from operations in order to fix leaks, repair boilers, and keep aging branches functioning. The mayor and City Council should create a dedicated maintenance fund to support state-of-good-repair needs across all three systems and help catch smaller problems before they grow.
4. **Build the future of branch libraries into the city's 10-year capital plan—and commit to expanding most of the city's smallest branches by 2033.** For the city to fully harness the power of branch libraries in every community, capital investment will need to do much more than chip away at the systems' mountain of state-of-good-repair needs. Expanding branch-level capacity to offer everything from early literacy programs and dedicated teen spaces to ESOL programs, business plan competitions, and robotics teams will require far more useable space than exists today. Currently, 100 branches across the five boroughs are under 10,000 square feet, severely restricting their capacity and range of uses. These branches should be a top priority for rebuilding and expansion in the city's long-term capital plan. But current 10-year capital funding is largely intended to cover state-of-good-repair needs for the current system and leaves very little room to invest in much-needed branch expansions and replacements. The city should solicit plans from all three systems to expand most of their smallest and most overcrowded branches and commit sufficient funding in the next 10-year capital plan (FY2024-FY2033) to achieve this.
5. **Integrate libraries into agency plans to tackle key challenges and ensure an inclusive recovery.** Given libraries' unmatched reach and trust, city agencies should take full advantage of libraries as natural partners to expand uptake for a range of services and develop new programs in high-need communities. But to do so effectively, agency leaders should involve the city's library systems from the beginning of the planning process and treat branches as true partners in addressing the city's major challenges. Prior to the pandemic, this rarely happened. Although many city agencies did seek out libraries to help meet their policy goals, too often libraries were brought in at the end of the planning process, missing critical opportunities for libraries to help craft effective partnership strategies. And rarely were libraries given funds to expand services beyond what they were already doing. The Department of Education should look to libraries as a powerful ally in addressing learning loss caused by the pandemic, with the potential for year-round enrichment programs, teen mentorship for younger children, and drop-in homework help throughout the school year. Likewise, the Department of Small Business Services or NYC Economic Development Corporation should make libraries a key partner in plans to boost entrepreneurship in hard-hit communities—sparking the city's next wave of small business owners and job creators.
6. **Increase expense funding to support key staff roles that maximize impact.** During the course of our research for this report, one key challenge emerged repeatedly: the need to invest in local branch library staff in order to maximize the impact and reach of library programs and services. Even as demand for key programs has surged, libraries are operating with 15 percent fewer staff members than a decade ago. Additional baselined expense funding can enable libraries to hire dedicated outreach librarians in every community and facilitate more partnerships with local community-based organizations, bringing compassionate, culturally competent programming—from early literacy to entrepreneurship training—directly into the spaces and neighborhoods where the New Yorkers hit hardest by the pandemic live, work, and learn.
7. **Help libraries take some of their vital resources on the road—to homeless shelters, laundromats, public housing complexes, senior centers, and playgrounds.**

While millions of New Yorkers make their way to branches every year, the city's branch libraries can deepen their impact by bringing some of their invaluable services—and community partnerships—into parts of their neighborhoods where there are unmet needs. This might entail regular storytime readings at homeless shelters and in NYCHA playgrounds, or book club discussions and digital learning sessions at senior centers and in naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs). New York's libraries had begun to do on a small scale this prior to the pandemic, but there are opportunities to expand these nascent efforts if provided the resources. The mayor and City Council should consider funding a large-scale pilot program to bring library services into community spaces in 2022 as part of efforts to help New Yorkers still reeling from the COVID crisis.

Issue-Specific Recommendations

Ensuring Children & Young Adults Overcome COVID Learning Loss

- **Build out drop-in homework help at branches in every hard-hit community.** Even before the pandemic, libraries saw exploding demand for their free drop-in homework programs. Today, drop-in help holds even more potential to counter COVID-related learning loss and keep public school students from falling further behind. With city support, this small-scale program should be expanded to branches in every hard-hit community.

Strengthening Minority- and Immigrant-Owned Businesses

- **Grow the libraries' unique business plan competitions.** Libraries are home to the city's only start-up competitions focused on lower-income entrepreneurs, providing a crucial spark to aspiring business owners in many of the communities hit hardest by the pandemic. With additional funding, the libraries' business plan competitions could take place multiple times per year—instead of just once annually—and new competitions could launch in multiple languages, including Spanish, Chinese, Bengali, Korean, Russian, and Haitian Creole.
- **Hire business services librarians to expand in-branch programming and community outreach** Each year, thousands of aspiring entrepreneurs from underserved backgrounds—including women, immigrant, and minority entrepreneurs—seek out free small business and entrepreneurship counseling at the city's branch libraries. But the library systems are only funded to provide business services at fewer than half of the branch locations citywide. An investment of $1 million annually could triple the number of business outreach librarians and help bring these vital services to every branch across the city.
- **Partner with NYCEDC to launch new business incubators in branches citywide.** To help spark economic development and new business formation in the communities hit hardest by the pandemic, NYCEDC should partner with libraries to launch new small business incubators. EDC should start by launching five library-based business incubator programs in food, fashion, education, wellness, and home services.

Expanding Access to Tablets, Laptops, and High-Speed Internet

- **Expand library capacity to lend laptops and hotspots and provide extended WiFi** In a city where nearly 780,000 households lack a desktop or laptop computer at home and many more don't have home Internet access, branch libraries can help close the divide. The city should provide libraries with the funding to triple the number of Internet-enabled laptops and tablets available for home lending. In 2019, the three library systems combined had just 18,500 Internet-enabled devices to lend. The city can also help close the broadband gap by investing in libraries' ability to provide expanded WiFi outside the walls of every branch—a resource that fewer than one-quarter of branches across the city are able to provide today.
- **Scale up teen tech training programs.** Branch libraries are one of the only places where New York City teens can learn hands-on tech skills for free—and gain confidence in pursuing tech-related degrees and careers. But capacity is

extremely limited: for instance, each year just 100 teens can participate in BPL's innovative Today's Teens, Tomorrow's Techies program, which teaches teens to help library patrons with their tech needs. City leaders should scale up this program from 100 to 1,000 teens annually and help the other systems launch and scale teen tech training programs of their own.

- **Create ten new STEM Centers in branch libraries citywide**. Libraries play a critical role in introducing young New Yorkers of all backgrounds to STEM careers—an essential prerequisite for increased diversity among STEM graduates and in STEM jobs. But these initiatives have a lot of room to grow. City leaders should replicate the existing STEM Center at the Washington Heights library—in partnership with the nonprofit NYC FIRST—in ten more branches across the city, expanding free, hands-on instruction in digital fabrication, mechanical engineering, and robotics to thousands more young New Yorkers.

Helping New Yorkers Get Back to Work

- **Bring career services to every branch and target additional support to communities with the highest rates of unemployment**. Libraries are already among the largest providers of career services, filling major geographic gaps in the city's landscape of public career support services. But libraries are stretched thin even as demand increases. City leaders can help support far more jobseekers by doubling the number of full-time career services staff at the three systems. A modest additional investment could ensure that libraries have the resources to provide onsite career services specialists in all of the neighborhoods citywide experiencing above average rates of unemployment.
- **Make libraries a central hub in the city's wider network of career services**. With the city's unemployment rate hovering near 9 percent, agency officials should look to libraries as a natural partner in scaling up programming for jobseekers. The next mayor should direct the Department of Small Business Services to launch pop-up Workforce 1 Career Center programs at branches without nearby Centers, greatly expanding the reach of these services. With additional funding to hire staff, branch libraries could host more regular job fairs, expand job search assistance services in multiple languages, and work with industry experts to host intensive career coaching in growing fields like healthcare, tech, construction, and more.

Fostering Economic and Civic Inclusion in Immigrant Communities

- **Make ActionNYC available in-person and expand to 25 branches**. Recent years have inflicted one crisis after another on New York City's immigrant communities, from increasing anti-immigrant sentiment to the disproportionate toll of the pandemic. One important source of support is the city's ActionNYC initiative, which offers free legal services and counseling, but is currently only available virtually. In order to meet growing demand for these services and better support immigrant New Yorkers, city leaders should maintain virtual services while expanding the program to at least 25 branches citywide.
- **Replicate popular library programs in multiple languages**. Libraries already offer a wide range of programs and services that appeal to many immigrant patrons, from business plan competitions and family literacy workshops to financial aid assistance and career counseling. But the systems have limited resources to offer these programs in multiple languages. City leaders should allocate funding so many of the most popular library programs can be expanded to branches in immigrant communities and provided in languages other than English—and so popular programs already offered in languages from Spanish to Haitian Creole have the capacity to expand.
- **Double the number of seats for intermediate and advanced ESOL and expand opportunities for blended online/in-person learning**. Scaling up free, career-oriented ESOL training will be essential to expanding access to economic opportunity and mitigating the disproportionate harm done by the pandemic to immigrant communities. Today, the three branch systems provide ESOL training to more New Yorkers than any other institution, but demand for seats—especially for intermediate and advanced adult literacy programs—and blended in-person/online programs far exceeds supply. City leaders should make a targeted investment in doubling the seats for these higher-level ESOL classes, expanding access to tech platforms that support blended learning instruction, and ensure that more immigrant New Yorkers who learn English at the library are able to move into more intensive, career-oriented language classes.

- **Extend hours and launch nights and weekends programming in immigrant communities**. The reach of branch library programs and services is hampered by hours that limit the ability of many working New Yorkers—especially immigrants—to visit and participate. City leaders should work with the three systems to fund expanded night and weekend hours, especially for branches located in immigrant-dense communities, and ensure that popular programs like intermediate/advanced ESOL are offered during those times.

Closing Academic Achievement Gaps Through Expanded Early Education

- **Invest in libraries to help close the gap in early learning for children ages 0-3**. Our report identifies nearly 200,000 children ages 0 to 3 who are at risk of falling behind in early childhood development—with effects that drive inequality into adulthood. The Department of Education (DOE) has been tasked with expanding support for early learning, but to date, the DOE has not fully integrated the city's branch libraries into this effort. The next mayor should make libraries a centerpiece of a citywide early learning campaign and fund the creation and expansion of library programs targeted at children 0-3 and their caregivers.
- **Create enhanced early literacy programs at nearly every branch**. Libraries have seen a surge in demand for early literacy services in recent years. But to ensure equitable access to high-quality early literacy, every branch that regularly serves young children and their families should be equipped with the staff, space, and materials needed to deliver high-quality early literacy programs. A targeted city investment could enable the library systems to scale up baby, toddler, and preschool storytimes to nearly every branch while expanding outreach services to preschools, daycares, NYCHA developments, and homeless shelters.

Renewing the College and Career Dreams of New York's Teens & Young Adults

- **Create 10 new Teen Centers in hard-hit communities**. To help address the acute challenges facing teens and young adults resulting from the pandemic and put more young New Yorkers on the path to college and career success, the city should greatly expand spaces exclusively for teens at the city's libraries. The dedicated teen spaces that exist in libraries today are well-used and in many cases give young people access to invaluable career resources, but there are fewer than 20 of them across the city today. Given pervasive space constraints across all three systems, achieving this may require an influx of capital funding to help expand some of the city's smallest branches, either by adding floors and additions or developing larger libraries on the same sites.
- **Establish College and Career Pathways programs in all five boroughs**. To create a more equitable economy in New York, the city will have to help many more students get on the path to a postsecondary credential. Fortunately, city leaders have a workable model in the form of NYPL's College and Career Pathways initiative, which provides one-on-one college and career counseling, financial aid assistance, and resume workshops tailored to teens. City leaders should support the expansion of this program to branches in all five boroughs and grow the number of teens served from about 4,200 to 15,000.

Supporting NYC's Fast-Growing & Increasingly Diverse Older Adult Population

- **Invest $5 million annually to expand programs and services for older adults in public libraries**. Libraries are the most popular and trusted community institution among older adults in neighborhoods citywide, but to date, the city has yet to fully enlist libraries in support of its rapidly growing older adult population. Popular programs like Creative Aging are only available in about 13 percent of branches citywide, and while nearly half of all participants in NYPL's Tech Connect program are ages 55 and over, the system has little capacity to add more seats as demand among older adults grows. City leaders can realize these missed opportunities by investing $5 million annually to scale up high-demand in-person programs, make existing programs fully accessible via phone and video, pilot new older adult and intergenerational programming, and make libraries a centerpiece of the Age-Friendly NYC initiative.
- **Invest in greater capacity for homebound outreach**. The pandemic laid bare the challenge posed by social isolation for New York's rapidly aging population—a public health threat with serious consequences for New Yorkers' physical and mental wellbeing. Libraries play an important role in connecting with those residents most at risk of social

isolation, including the city's more than 216,000 homebound older adults. But with stretched staff and limited funding, the three library systems are serving approximately 18,000 patrons citywide with mail-a-book programs today. City leaders should dedicate funding to scale up and expand these and other programs aimed at reaching homebound New Yorkers with books, technology, and opportunities to participate in a wealth of virtual events.

- **Make all branch libraries fully accessible by 2025**. Without new investment in physical accessibility upgrades, the vital programs and services provided by branch libraries will remain inaccessible to hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers with disabilities, including a growing number of older adults. But today seven branch libraries are not ADA compliant, ten more are only partially accessible, and 44 others need new upgrades to improve accessibility. The city should set a goal of funding and implementing all accessibility-related renovations at branch libraries by 2025.

Building Pathways to the Well-Paying Tech Jobs of the Future

- **Build the city's branch libraries into the Tech Talent Pipeline**. Since 2014, the city's Tech Talent Pipeline (TTP) has worked to train for and connect New Yorkers to well-paying tech jobs. But while the libraries are the city's largest provider of basic and intermediate digital skills training, they have yet to be harnessed to grow the reach of the Tech Talent Pipeline into underrepresented communities. Drawing inspiration from Providence Public Library's Rhode Coders initiative, which prepares library patrons to enroll and succeed in career-oriented tech training boot camps, the next mayor should make public libraries a key partner of the Tech Talent Pipeline and allocate funding to create bridge programs for library patrons into TTP's existing and future training programs.
- **Incentivize partnerships between libraries and private training programs in the next round of city RFPs for tech training**. In the months ahead, city leaders will almost certainly continue to expand efforts to enroll New Yorkers in tech training programs. In future RFPs, officials should incentivize partnerships between libraries and other training providers focused on basic digital skills and entry-level, career-oriented training programs aligned with employer needs. Although libraries are not known for advanced level tech training, they are unmatched for providing introductory and beginning-level digital literacy programs—and their unparalleled reach, with branches in every community, make them important entry points into the broader tech training ecosystem.
- **Expand the library-run Queensbridge Tech Lab to at least one NYCHA development in every other borough** QPL's Queensbridge Tech Lab provided roughly 3,000 NYCHA residents with hands-on access to hardware and software training in 2019 and served more than 3,400 patrons during Open Lab hours. To address the glaring opportunity gap for tech careers, city policymakers should provide the modest funds needed to expand this promising model to other NYCHA developments across the five boroughs.

Empowering NYC's Growing Independent Workforce & Preparing At-Risk Workers for a More Automated Economy

- **Open Freelancers Hubs at a branch in each borough**. New York City's growing independent workforce lacks the infrastructure needed to upskill, boost earnings, and access the benefits typically associated with full-time work. The Department of Small Business Services and the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment should open satellite locations of the Freelancers Hub, formerly based in DUMBO, at a designated branch library in each borough. These hubs should include a "kit of parts" to help librarians adapt underused spaces to include flexible seating, power supply, and prefabricated meeting rooms; expand training in freelance business skills; and host workshops on accessing benefits, legal assistance, and other topics of growing interest to the city's freelance workforce. This approach should be coupled with additional capital funding to make the space expansions needed to incorporate dedicated facilities of this kind.
- **Establish an NYC Skills Pass to give library cardholders access to private training classes—for free** Modeled on the successful Culture Pass, which offers anyone with a library card the ability to gain free entry to dozens of participating cultural institutions, our proposed Skills Pass would give library card holders free access to a limited number of career training classes offered—outside the libraries—by nonprofit and for-profit workforce providers. The Skills Pass would greatly expand access to skills building, tech training, and lifelong learning programs that are increasingly important for economic mobility in today's labor market.

- **Tap libraries to help implement an Automation Preparation Plan**. Many of the New Yorkers hit hardest by job losses during the pandemic are also the workers most vulnerable to automation, a process that has only accelerated over the past 18 months. To get ahead of these forces and mitigate the future dislocation of low-income New Yorkers, the next mayor should launch an Automation Preparation Plan: a major new fund to build lifelong learning infrastructure. This plan should leverage the power, reach, and knowledge of the library systems to help accelerate the development of upskilling pathways for at-risk occupations; scale up technology training and digital literacy programs; and guide a major expansion of online and hybrid short-term credentials aligned with industry needs.

This report is a publication of the Center for an Urban Future (CUF). Researched and written by John Surico. Edited by Eli Dvorkin and Laird Gallagher. Additional research by Sara Bellan, Michelle Chen Hsia, Charles Shaviro, Guy Mika, Mengyue Sun, Borge Feliz, Mitul Arora, Mingqi Song, Marco Antonio Torres, Isaac Landman, Justin Helmkamp, Devin Borg, Erin Garrett, Julia Farley, and Alyssa Cortez Peralta.

The report was made possible by the **Charles H. Revson Foundation,**

Center for an Urban Future is a leading New York City-based think tank that generates smart and sustainable public policies to reduce inequality, increase economic mobility, and grow the economy.

General operating support for the Center for an Urban Future has been provided by **The Clark Foundation**, the **Bernard F. and Alva B. Gimbel Foundation**, and the **Altman Foundation**.

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