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

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Primary Ethnicity</th>
<th>Household Income</th>
<th>Unemployment Rate</th>
<th>Percent Below Poverty Level</th>
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<td>2,369</td>
<td>White alone 70.0%</td>
<td>$49,501</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
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<td>Clovis</td>
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<td>Firebaugh</td>
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<td>Fresno</td>
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<td>Pinedale</td>
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<td>Riverdale</td>
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<td>34.9%</td>
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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.

Concerns

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.

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/)

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**Aspirations**
- Transportation
- Housing
- Current resources
- Jobs

**Concerns**
- Isolation
- Scams
- Unfair perception
- Lack of compassion

**Transitional Steps**

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

**Trusted to Act**
- City council
- Elected officials
- Police

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**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

Aspirations

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

Concerns

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

Obstacles

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

Actions

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.
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.

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.

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.

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.
Public Knowledge Summary

2018

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.
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
Ask Posters

For all branches of the Central, Salinas, and San Jose branches, libraries asked customers to write their answer to, “What do you wish for your community?”

Four common themes arose among the three locations: Safety, Youth Activities, Social Services, and Libraries.

Site - Specific Aspirations:
While four main themes emerged across all three sites, more community-specific issues were also raised.

Central/Downtown Fresno:
- more shelters
- an end to poverty

Salinas:
- road repair
- more street lights
- clean water
- more stores/restaurants

Libraries:
- Free parking
- More programs in Spanish

Social Services:
- Help for homeless
- Equal access to resources
- Community gardens
- Resources and support for families
# 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.

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.

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.

Trusted to Act

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<tr>
<th>Community Members</th>
<th>Elected Officials/ Local Leaders</th>
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<td>Local Police Departments</td>
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