

Boston Public Library

FY21 Overview

Prepared for the Boston City Council

May, 2021



Overview

Although an unprecedented year in terms of impacted Library operations, FY2021 was also a year that the BPL will be able to point to with pride. Far from being stymied by the continuing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, BPL staff brought their most creative and innovative thinking to ways in which the library could continue to provide critical services to our patrons, with a special focus on those most in need. Work continued on ongoing projects and initiatives, including new strategies, capital projects, and a continued commitment to growing, learning and becoming an anti-racist institution.

We are pleased to present this brief overview of the BPL's FY2021 accomplishments to the Boston City Council, and look forward to discussing this at our hearing.

FY21 Major Accomplishments

Innovative COVID-19 programming and services

Book Bundles – With patrons unable to enter branch libraries and browse for the books they needed, library staff quickly took to creating bundles of books based on genre, subject, and reading level to have on hand for circulation. For example, if a parent of a four-year old came to a branch and asked for some books for their child, the library could respond with a pre-selected bundle of books that could just be checked out. Similarly, if a patron wanted some dystopian science fiction and a few graphic novels, that could be supplied as well. Library staff created an innovative way to get patrons what they needed without necessitating in-person browsing.

Craft Kits – Many of the programs geared toward children involved a craft. While librarians focused on incorporating simple crafts into their virtual storytimes that only necessitated basic household items, they also recognized that there was a need to provide materials for crafts, especially to households that might not have this type of material on-hand. Children's Librarians in branches have been creating kits with craft materials related to storytimes and distributing them through BPL to Go and at Storywalks around the City.

Virtual access to the McKim Building – With the popular Art & Architecture tours on pause during the pandemic, staff created virtual ways for the public to enjoy our historic building and learn more about some of the key design features. With the new video tour "[Highlights of the McKim Building](#)" and the beautiful [Art & Architecture Virtual Booklet](#), visitors near and far can virtually

explore our National Historic Landmark and learn more about the BPL's stunning spaces and world class library services.

Digital Equity Initiatives:

As part of BPL to Go, the BPL's program of services available during the pandemic, BPL launched the ***Public Computer Access*** program, which allowed residents to sign up for a two-hour appointment to use library computers in a socially distanced space within the Central Library in Copley Square.

At the same time, working with the Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics, BPL also expanded its Wi-Fi access to create the ***Outdoor Wi-Fi Program***, providing 24-hour outdoor internet access at nine BPL branch locations across the city, allowing users to socially distance while accessing the Internet for free.

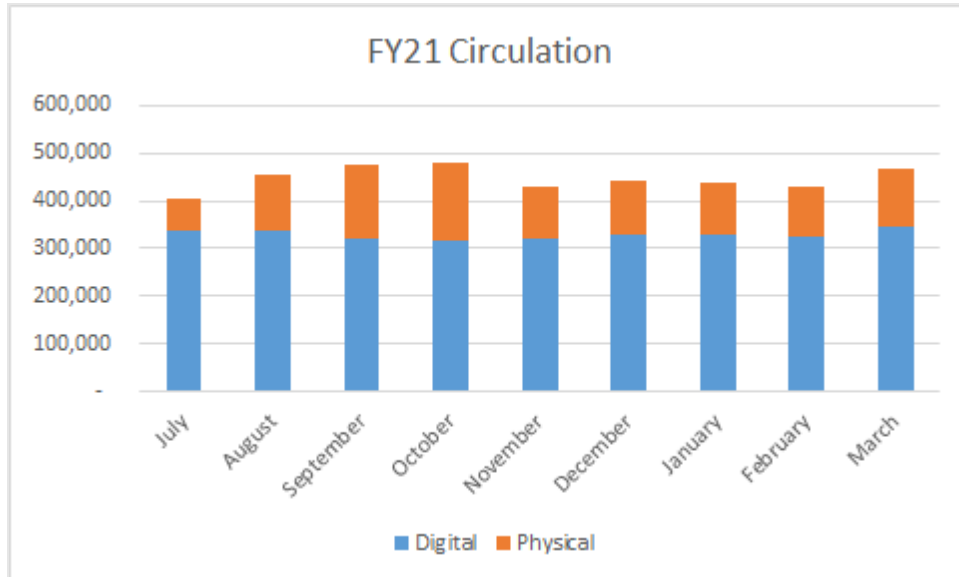
BPL also created and rolled out ***Printing To Go***, a free print-on-demand service, to all open BPL branches. Patrons can upload documents they need printed by filling out a [form](#) at bpl.org/printing-to-go, selecting their location, and picking up their print jobs 72 hours later at the branches, or 24 hours later at the Central Library in Copley Square.

BPL's most recent expansion of its digital initiatives came with the recently launched ***Connectivity Kits***. Connectivity Kits are designed to help patrons bridge the digital divide by providing free, reliable internet access in any location. The kits include a 14" Chromebook, a hotspot, and a mouse, as well as the necessary chargers and a quick start guide, all in a BPL bag for easy access and transportation. While the BPL continues to offer Public Computer Access at the Central Library in Copley Square, Connectivity Kits extend this service into patrons' homes and neighborhoods, on a schedule that works for them.

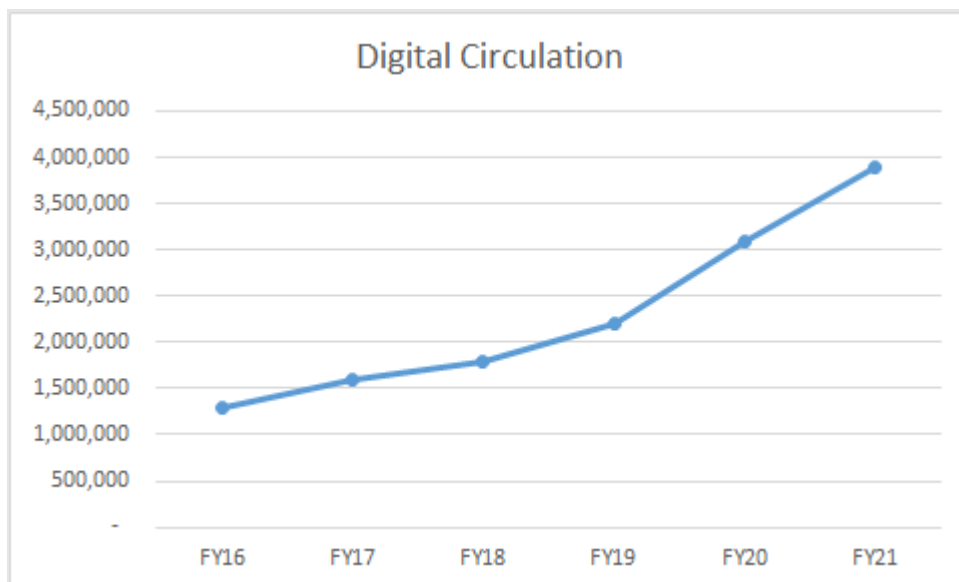
Continued robust demand for services

Record levels of circulation

It is remarkable to note that even with our buildings closed to in-person service for the last year, BPL's total circulation -- physical and digital combined -- for FY21 is estimated to be our **highest total at 5.2 million**.



In recent years BPL has also seen a growing demand for digital content. When the pandemic hit and library doors temporarily closed, digital collections became the only materials we could lend, and demand skyrocketed. **In FY21, we expect to double the circulation of digital items from just 3 years ago.**



Physical circulation

FY17	3.3 million
FY18	3.0 million
FY19	2.8 million
FY20	2.0 million
FY21	1.3 million (est)

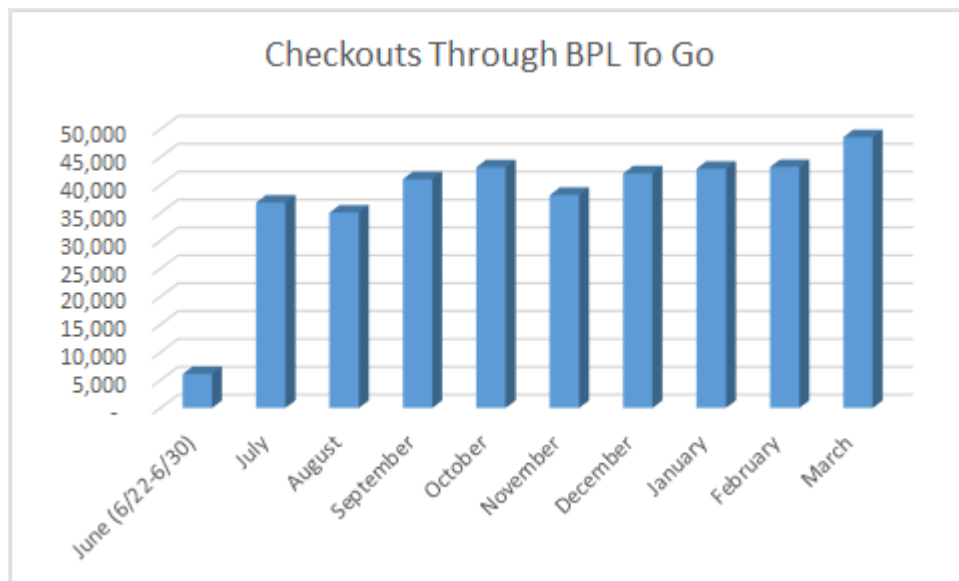
Digital Circulation

FY17	1.6 million
FY18	1.8 million
FY19	2.2 million
FY20	3.1 million
FY21	3.9 million (est)

BPL to Go

Locations with the most physical checkouts through the BPL to Go program

1. Central Library
2. Jamaica Plain
3. West Roxbury
4. Brighton
5. Connolly



Since the launch of BPL to Go at the end of June, BPL has seen a steady increase of materials checked out. In March we saw the highest total, with 48,555 items picked up at locations across the city.

Visitors to the Library

FY16 3.5 million
FY17 3.8 million
FY18 3.5 million
FY19 3.5 million
FY20 2.4 million

New library cards issued

In FY21, the primary way that people signed up for a new library card was online through BPL's e-card program. More than **77,000** patrons signed up for new e-cards in the last 12 months, which is an increase of **66 percent** over the previous year.

FY16 74,737
FY17 82,911
FY18 85,902
FY19 93,994
FY20 97,364
FY21 50,952 (*through March 31*)

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

In November, the Board of Trustees of the Boston Public Library unanimously ratified the Library's [Statement and Action Plan on Racial Equity](#). This document, drafted to align with City of Boston's declaration of [racism as a public health crisis](#), was created with the input of Library staff, the Board of Trustees, and the City's Chief of Equity. It establishes the BPL's commitment to becoming an anti-racist organization and outlines clear next steps in this work.

The Library has also reviewed its acquisition policy to ensure the BPL's collections are developed with an intentional focus on raising the voices of people of color through representation, inclusivity, and diversity. In support of this effort, [the Boston Public Library Fund](#) (BPLF) — the primary philanthropic arm of the BPL — sought and received an anonymous \$75,000 grant to support expanded access to the BPL's [Antiracist reading list](#). This funding allowed the BPL to add additional digital copies of books on the Antiracist reading list, significantly reducing patron wait times and increasing accessibility to these items.

Following the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing national and local conversations, the Library saw an increase of more than 500 percent increase in checkouts and holds on the most popular Black Lives Matter and anti-racism titles. Wait times on many of these titles had risen to more than 12 weeks, while hold queues for two of the most popular titles - [*White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*](#) by Robin DiAngelo and [*How to be an Antiracist*](#) by Ibram X. Kendi reached more than 1,200 patrons at one point. To that end, the BPL had already spent \$75,000 on purchasing more than 2,000 new works and additional copies and licenses of in-demand titles for all ages.

In September, the Library also began working with [YW Boston](#), consultants in leading organizations through change as they focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. This engagement will assist staff and Library administration to incorporate an equity perspective into all of the BPL's services, programs, offerings, and policies.

The Library has also committed to analyzing its recruitment strategies to develop better practices and programs as part of this work. Currently, the BPL is further exploring professional development opportunities that prepare staff for potential career advancement

Improving neighborhood presence & services through purposeful capital projects

Working with the Public Facilities Department, we are currently executing a 5-year, 130 million capital plan. We are grateful for the City of Boston's support, which means that when completed, every branch in the system will have received meaningful improvements, if not a complete renovation. Although slowed by the pandemic, we were able to continue significant capital progress in FY21, including reopening the Roxbury Branch for BPL to Go services. A complete list is to be found further down in this document.

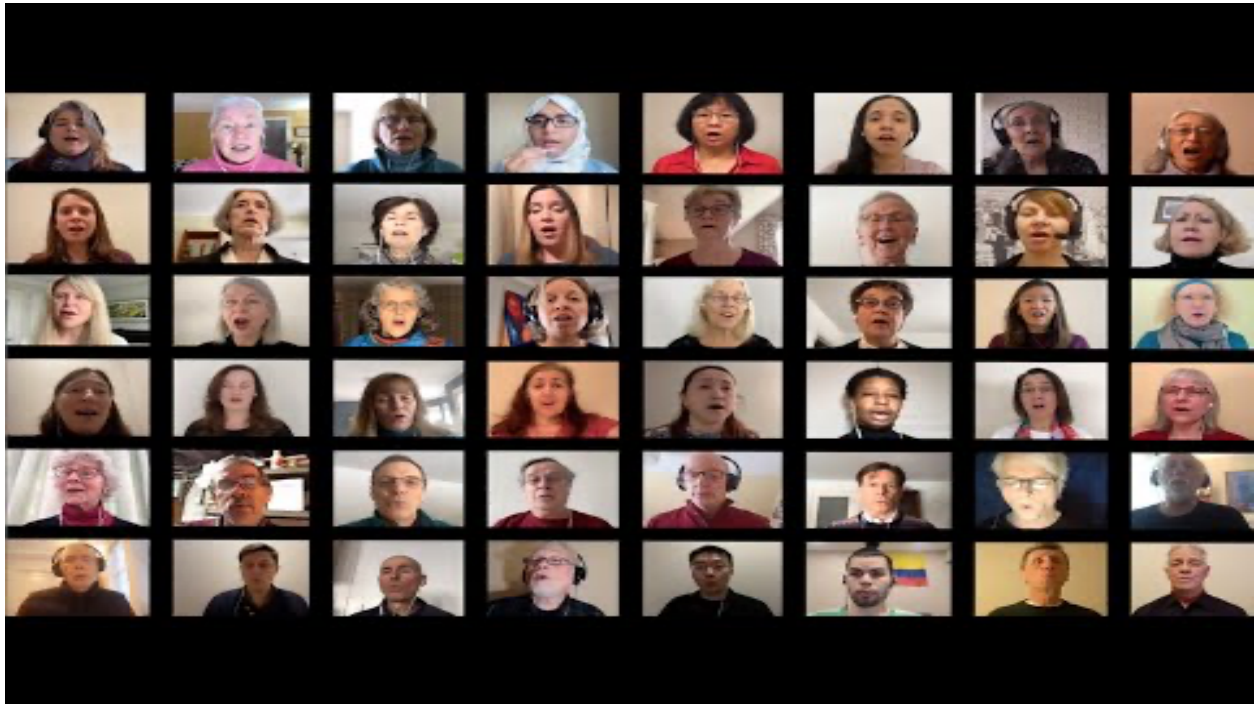
Increased service to underserved and vulnerable communities

Tech Goes Home, a partnership that provides digital literacy skills and a deeply discounted Chromebook to participants after completing 15 hours of basic computer training, pivoted from an in-person to an online learning experience. To facilitate this program, the discounted cost of the Chromebook was waived for the participants, and they were delivered in advance of the computer training. The challenge was helping first-time computer users to set up their equipment and prepare for virtual learning. Library staff made themselves available to provide

set up assistance over the phone, or sometimes, from the street to a learner at their second-floor apartment window.

ESL Conversation Circles flourished during the pandemic as participants could join virtually to keep their English language skills practiced, and to combat isolation. Virtual English practice sessions swelled beyond capacity and the library significantly increased the number of volunteers available to facilitate these sessions.

Even the Back Bay Bridges Chorale group, a partnership between the BPL and the Back Bay Chorale, soldiered on through the pandemic, providing our ESL community an innovative opportunity to connect and practice their English through singing. [Bridges ESL Chorus: "We Shall Overcome", arr. Tesfa Yohannes Wondemagegnehu](#)



Despite having to pivot to virtual learning and spend hours experiencing through school through Zoom, the library's *Homework Assistance Program (HAP)* made a successful transition to an online experience. The program, where teen mentors are provided special training and are available to work with younger students who need help with their homework, started off slowly, but as the days grew colder, and promotional efforts through the BPS increased, more and more students found their way to the virtual HAP space to get help with their homework, participate in

a fun and educational program after their homework was completed, or just to talk with their mentor and maintain some social connections.

The Library successfully pivoted most of its *programming to an online experience*, from Concerts in the Courtyard and Friday morning Yoga to Author Talks and Small Business Assistance clinics. Children's Services led the way, taking their storytimes online almost immediately after shutting down.

The Library also launched the [Future Readers Club](#), a program promoting the importance of early literacy. Special storytimes branded as Future Readers Club, explained the importance of reading to younger children to the caregivers watching, and directed them to a special app that encouraged children to read 1,000 books before entering kindergarten, and provided tools to assist them. While all the library's storytimes were successful, those marked as Future Readers Club sessions drew significantly more views, climbing into the hundreds over the course of three to four weeks.

The library also launched [Repairing America](#) as an overarching theme for the majority of its programming and services for the year. Racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, homophobia, and other forms of intolerance have divided our nation, while basic issues of public health and pandemic response have become politicized. Massive gaps between the haves and have-nots are nearly impossible to cross. As one of the United States' last truly democratic institutions, the BPL has a responsibility to help bridge these divisions. This year, the library is focusing its institutional priorities on finding ways to help Americans become more resilient and able to face the challenges of today.

Marquee speakers included:

[January 14, 2021, Lowell Lecture: Alicia Garza](#) (*founder, Black Lives Matter*)

The Purpose of Power: How We Come Together When We Fall Apart

[January 26, 2021: Lindsay Peoples Wagner](#) (*editor, Teen Vogue*)

The Pandemic & Black Lives Matter: How Young People Are Building A New Normal

[February 9, 2021, Lowell Lecture: Sybrina Fulton](#) (*Trayvon Martin's mother*)

We Are All Trayvon

[February 25, 2021: Neha Sangwan, MD](#)

How to Use the Disruptive Energy of a Pandemic to Make Your Business Thrive

[March 9, 2021, Lowell Lecture: Esther Choo](#)

Racism as a Public Health Crisis

[March 25, 2021: Nomi Prins](#)

Central Bank Collusion & the Financial Crisis: A Decade Later

[April 6, 2021, Lowell Lecture: Seema Yasmin](#)

Inside the Outbreaks

[April 22, 2021: Debra Lee](#)

Embracing Change & Triumphant Over Disruption

Creation of a five-year roadmap

The work of the BPL requires a strong, stable institution. To best serve our patrons and staff, BPL is putting a plan in place to guide us through the next five years in order to further strengthen the institution, its culture, and its offerings and clarify our mission, priorities, and initiatives. This plan will allow the library to fully and successfully serve all patrons -- regardless of age, identity, ability, physical need, economic status, or how they connect to the library.

The roadmap provides a bridge from the previous 'Compass' Strategic Plan to a future strategic planning exercise with deep and robust stakeholder engagement.

The roadmap outlines seven key priorities:

Becoming an anti-racist organization

We will do everything in our power to become an organization that recognizes our challenges and fulfills our obligations to staff and patrons alike with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion. We commit to following all actions outlined in the BPL Statement on Racial Equity, and building a staff culture for all based on respect and professional development.

Delivering programs and services that build and maintain equity

We will continue providing opportunities, programs, and services for all patrons, while growing our special focus on the challenges and inequities faced by people of color, immigrants, and other underserved or disenfranchised communities.

We will specifically focus on the areas of workforce preparedness and development, civic engagement, and public health. We will continue to foster the love of reading in children from birth to 18; and to engage youth in education, culture, civics, STEAM, and social and emotional learning.

Building and maintaining our collections

We will maintain, build, and make accessible collections that are diverse, inclusive and geared to understand and close equity gaps, that anticipate users' interests and needs, and will practice responsible stewardship of all our collections.

Expanding our impact

We will raise awareness on the local, regional and national level of our value as a preeminent urban public library and research institution. Through promoting our collections, programs, and services, and telling the story of their impact, we will also support efforts to increase private funding – funding that secures and expands our ability to play a role in patrons' lives.

Providing inspiring spaces to all

We will provide welcoming spaces for patrons and staff that are safe, clean, and sustainable, while incorporating the latest and most appropriate technologies and strategies to do so.

Creating connections through technology

We will develop and implement an innovative technology plan that will support our programs and services, enable the Library's operations to run seamlessly, and help eliminate the digital equity gap. We will deliver a range of accessible online offerings and digital collections, balancing preservation of our collections with increased accessibility and user engagement.

Expecting the unexpected

We will expect -- and plan for -- the unexpected, so that our library can continue to operate with minimal disruptions to patrons, even when we face operational or communications challenges.

Expanded digital access to collections

Work from home projects transformed the way the public can learn about and interact with some of our previously hidden collections. Even though many staff couldn't interact with our physical collections, they spent the last year making information about our collections available online and searchable for the first time.

Because of this work, patrons can learn about our materials without having to come into the building. BPL was able to make about virtually every manuscript and manuscript collection in the BPL Rare Books and Manuscripts department findable online for the first time. To make this happen, staff created 30,000 new entries in our database, covering an estimated 100,000 individual manuscripts.

Key FY22 Goals: Ongoing and New Initiatives

Fine elimination

On March 18th, the Board of Trustees of the Boston Public Library is expected to vote to move forward with the permanent elimination of overdue fines. As part of the City of Boston's proposed budget, this removal of late fines is supported by \$125,000 of 'revenue relief' in the FY22 budget and will go into effect on July 1, 2021. The policy change will remove barriers and increase access to BPL resources for patrons across the City of Boston.

Under this policy change, BPL will also remove all pending overdue fines from patrons' accounts. Moving forward, patrons will not face monetary penalties for returning books late, although they will still be required to return any overdue books in order to check out additional materials. While card holders will no longer incur fines for late returns, they will still be responsible for replacement costs if a book is lost or not returned.

Library Services

- Define a plan for youth engagement work, including expanding the Homework Assistance Program, and developing school support programs to improve children's scholastic success in a virtual world.
- Expand a client-based service model piloted by Community Learning to better assist patrons with their life goals.
- Expand programs and services that support patrons who need assistance in the areas of workforce development, and the health and human service needs of our vulnerable communities, both virtually and in person where possible.
- Expand early literacy programs through the Future Readers Club, including books for newborns, and explore new, innovative ways of promoting the importance of early literacy.
- Work with the BPL Fund to further expand services to support workforce development and economic recovery by increasing outreach services, partnership opportunities, and career placement services.
- Focus on adding additional out-of-school time programs, with a focus on non-users and underserved populations.
- Explore stronger collaborations with the Boston Public Schools to better provide scholastic support and racial equity.

Collections

- Plan for successful completion and reopening of new Rare Books & Manuscripts Department space and program, Central Library
- Conduct assessment of collection storage needs through the capital – funded Research Collection Space and Storage Study.
- Improve the security of our collections, especially in preparation for the return of Special Collections by developing and implementing a Collections Security Policy and procedures
- Continue work of defining goals and principles to guide our collections strategy in order to more formally incorporate our diversity, equity and inclusion values.
- Develop digital preservation plan and identify short term measures to address collections most in need.

President's Office

Reopening, recovery, and renewal: The key systemwide activity of the next several months will be our continued focus on Covid response, the transition to reopening, and then beyond into renewal. The library looks forward to playing a vital and critical role in the City of Boston's recovery with key priorities focused on youth engagement, workforce development, and equity.

Development Support and Affiliate Collaboration: While the library hopes to enjoy continued support from both the City of Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, we expect that the greatest promise for substantially increased support will come from private philanthropy. BPL will continue to deepen its collaboration with the relaunched Boston Public Library Fund, as its primary philanthropic partner, while also strengthening its relationships with the major affiliates: The Normal Leventhal Map and Education Center, the Associates of the Boston Public Library, as well as the Citywide Friends of the Boston Public Library and local branches' Friends groups.

Equity Work: Launch of new Budgeted Equity Coordinator Position. The work of Summer 2020 culminated in a strong racial equity statement and a commitment to an equity action plan. The past year led to an engagement with YW Boston as experts in leading meaningful organizational change through a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens.

These activities will deliver a refined and convergent action plan, the execution of which will be led by the Library's new Equity Coordinator, a new position proposed in the City of Boston's FY22 Budget. In parallel, the library continues to participate in the City-wide efforts for employee training on racial equity.

Develop a more transparent and clear ***strategic partnerships program***. A strong and healthy partnership program is key to the library's future success. The library is in the process of defining and strengthening a variety of ways in which national and local organizations could potentially partner with the BPL, along with clarifying what "strategic partnership" will mean across a number of areas of specialization, such as programs, collections, and fundraising.

Trustee Engagement: The President's office also looks forward to working with five new recently appointed Trustees, the existing members of the Board of Trustees, and uncovering opportunities for deeper Trustee engagement under the leadership of newly elected Board Chair, Priscilla Douglas. Already, it is clear that these new initiatives will include the creation of a strategic planning and community engagement committee.

Operations and Technology

The new BPL ***Technology Plan*** was completed and approved by the BPL Board of Trustees in 2021. At a high level it serves to create alignment and understanding across the organization of how the IT department operates and what it is focused on by sharing our mission and goals around technology. Each goal is subsequently broken down into various initiatives that are being done or are being planned in support of the department's goals.

Continued enhancement of ***security*** posture including the adoption and implementation of best practices in the protection of physical collections and assets.

- Created a new position dedicated to collection security. This position will be critical to the reopening of the Rare Books and Manuscripts department.
- Awarded our security contract to a new vendor for officer and patrol services throughout the library system.

Modernization of methods, tools, equipment and the enhancement of ***facilities management technology***

- Realized the long-term goal of having a dedicated custodian at each of neighborhood branches. Previously we had multiple branches where one custodian was covering 2 locations. This will result in cleaner buildings and better experiences for our staff and patrons.
- In addition to adopting and carrying out all the COVID 19 cleaning requirements, the custodial staff has taken advantage of the time with limited patrons in the buildings refinish and shampoo floors throughout the Central Library and neighborhood branches in preparation for reopening.

Successful ***completion*** of all ***capital projects, major projects, and systemwide initiatives***

Multi-Year Projects or Investments:

FY22 ramp up/wind down + future plans

Continuation and completion of capital projects

Projects anticipated to be completed in FY22:

- Adams Branch (new construction)
- Roslindale Branch Renovation
- Central Library Rare Books Renovation
- Central Library McKim Master Plan Programming Study
- West End Programming Study
- Egleston Branch Programming Study
- Central Library McKim Fountain Renovation
- Central Library Womens Locker Room Renovation

Projects that will continue in FY22

- Faneuil Branch Renovation
- McKim Fire Panel Replacement
- Codman Square Branch Programming Study
- Research Collections Preservation and Storage Plan
- Chinatown Branch (new location)
- Uphams Corner Branch (new location)

Projects to kick off in FY 22

- Fields Corner Design
- South End Branch Programming Study
- North End Branch Programming Study
- South Boston Branch Programming Study
- Central Library Facade Study and Repairs

Additional Projects at the BPL that are run by other departments

- Percent for the Arts
 - Jamaica Plain Branch
 - Roxbury Branch
 - Adams Branch
 - Mattapan Branch
- Renew Boston Trust Energy Projects (HVAC Updates)
 - Central Library
 - Honan Allston Branch
 - Hyde Park Branch
 - Lower Mills Branch
 - Brighton Branch
 - Charlestown Branch
 - Mattapan Branch

Collections

The Library has received \$2.1 million in private funding to revitalize the library's ***Founding Research Collection***. These funds will enable the library to clean, catalog, and preserve 400,000 volumes of the collection, making them fully accessible to the public for the first time in the digital era. The initial stage of the project will soon be underway and we anticipate phase one will continue through 2023. Once the first phase of the project is complete, the BPL intends to continue this important work with the remainder of the Founding Research Collection.

Library Services

In FY22, the library will focus efforts on a ***transition from virtual service*** to a hybrid of virtual service and full in-person service.

- The library will be phasing in in-person public services in all locations through the end of FY21 and the beginning of FY22. Programs and services will be enhanced by the best practices learned while providing virtual services during the shut-down to expand our reach to include a hybrid model of in-person and virtual service.

Revamp and implement a ***system-wide outreach plan*** based on library priorities

- The library will begin gathering information on the existing community partners we are working with, explore opportunities to create more in areas where we prioritize. The Community Learning and Youth Services Teams will work with Neighborhood Services to

begin a comprehensive plan on providing services and programs directly in the community through our outreach partners.

Working with multiple City of Boston departments, we will launch the *Library as Economic Hub pilot* in three branches

- Workforce preparedness and development will be the focus of a pilot project in the East Boston, Mattapan, and Roxbury branches. The library is working with the Boston Public Library Fund to support expanded workforce development support and in conversation with the City to create a placement/case management support system at the library

Working with the Boston Public Library Fund to *expand services to patrons in need of social services* at the library.

- The Library seeks to create a Peer Navigator program to help vulnerable populations that incorporates a social worker, and peer navigators, certified individuals who have overcome hardships in their own lives and use their experiences to assist other.