

# PLA 2026 Conference

## Standout Sessions Summary

This document highlights standout sessions from PLA 2026 based on attendee feedback and observation. At the time of publishing more breakout session information can be found at [placonference.org/confschedule](https://placonference.org/confschedule).

### Highlighted Sessions

***AI Book Clubs and Digital Literacy for Older Adults***

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***Aging Together: Libraries Supporting Older Adults***

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***Boundary Building with Patrons***

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***From Prompt to Productivity: Build AI Agents to Boost Program Engagement***

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***Serious Leaders Play: How Fun Fuels Performance and Productivity***

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***Activating Leaders and Cultivating Your Team***

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***Leading with Intention: Establishing a Healthy Leadership Culture***

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***Navigating Service Dog Access***

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***Designing Accessible and Equitable Library Card Registration Policies***

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***Protecting Patrons' Data Privacy***

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***How Gen Z Use (and Don't Use) Public Libraries***

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***Unleash Your Genius: Employee Development***

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***Overall Observations***

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## **AI Book Clubs and Digital Literacy for Older Adults**

**Presenter:** Autumn Hassett (Cotuit Library)

### **Why it stood out:**

This session successfully bridged multiple priorities at once: digital literacy, traditional literacy, critical thinking, and social connection for older adults. Using a familiar book club format as an entry point, the program integrates generative AI in a way that feels accessible rather than intimidating.

**Key Takeaways:**

- Highly replicable in small and mid-sized libraries
- Minimal technology requirements
- Strong alignment with both AI learning and older adult engagement
- Encourages critical evaluation of AI-generated content

**Potential for NEKLS:** High — strong candidate for replication or training

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## **Aging Together: Libraries Supporting Older Adults**

**Presenters:** Rani Snyder (Moderator, John A. Hartford Foundation), Amy DelPo (Denver Public Library), Rosanna McGinnis (Opelika Public Library) [Also: Witt Salley & Janie Haremann]

**Why it stood out:**

This panel combined strategic framing with practical implementation. It positioned older adult services as a core library function rather than a niche offering.

**Key Takeaways:**

- Libraries should design services across the full lifespan
- Partnerships with area agencies on aging are critical
- Removing barriers (e.g., registration) increases participation
- Iterative program design is essential, especially in smaller libraries

**Potential for NEKLS:** High — strong candidate for webinar or invited session

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## **Boundary Building with Patrons**

**Presenter:** Kaitlin Matesich, Assistant Director (Benzie Shores District Library)

**Why it stood out:**

Received the strongest individual praise in survey responses. Attendees noted high engagement and immediately usable resources.

**Key Takeaways:**

- Clear communication strategies for setting expectations with patrons
- Practical tools staff can apply immediately
- Reinforces balance between access and safety

**Potential for NEKLS:** High — staff-ready training opportunity

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## **From Prompt to Productivity: Build AI Agents to Boost Program Engagement**

**Presenter:** Arnessa Dowell, Library Administrator

**Why it stood out:**

Represents the next phase of AI adoption in libraries—moving from awareness to implementation.

**Key Takeaways:**

- Practical applications of AI for program development
- Focus on workflow efficiency and engagement
- Indicates growing demand for deeper AI training

**Potential for NEKLS:** Medium to High — valuable for libraries ready to advance beyond introductory AI

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## **Serious Leaders Play: How Fun Fuels Performance and Productivity**

**Presenter:** Beck Messick, Learning and Development Manager (Tacoma Public Library)

**Why it stood out:**

Generated strong interest suggesting unmet demand around leadership approaches that incorporate joy and creativity. Several attendees remarked that this was a favorite session.

**Key Takeaways:**

- Play as a legitimate leadership and culture-building tool
- Opportunity to reframe staff engagement strategies

**Potential for NEKLS:** Medium — strong fit for director or leadership retreats

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## **Activating Leaders and Cultivating Your Team**

**Presenters:** Cristy Moran, Kieran Hixon (Colorado State Library)

**Why it stood out:**

Focused on internal application of community engagement strategies, with an emphasis on recognizing staff strengths.

**Key Takeaways:**

- Leadership is distributed, not positional
- Engagement tools can be applied internally to staff culture
- Strength-based approaches increase effectiveness

**Potential for NEKLS:** Medium — adaptable for leadership development programming

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## **Leading with Intention: Establishing a Healthy Leadership Culture**

**Presenter:** Skokie Public Library team

**Why it stood out:**

Praised for being practical and grounded, particularly around building shared understanding and expectations.

**Key Takeaways:**

- Importance of clarity in leadership communication
- Establishing shared frameworks for decision-making

**Potential for NEKLS:** Medium — useful for foundational leadership training

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## **Navigating Service Dog Access**

**Presenter:** AM Dillon, ADA Coordinator (St Mary's County library)

**Why it stood out:**

Highly practical and easy to translate into staff training.

**Key Takeaways:**

- Clear guidance on ADA compliance

- Scenarios staff are likely to encounter

**Potential for NEKLS:** Medium — strong operational training topic

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## **Designing Accessible and Equitable Library Card Registration Policies**

**Presenter:** Gabby Fuentes, Neighborhood Libraries Equity Manager & Lesley Caldwell, Collections and Technical Services Manager (Tacoma Public Library); Megan Albee, Circulating Services Coordinator (Denver Public Library)

**Why it stood out:**

Prompted reflection on barriers to access and how policies can unintentionally exclude.

**Key Takeaways:**

- Policy design directly impacts access and equity
- Importance of reviewing and updating policies regularly

**Potential for NEKLS:** Medium — policy-focused workshop opportunity

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## **Protecting Patrons' Data Privacy**

**Presenter:** Dorothea Salo (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

**Why it stood out:**

Raised important questions about how libraries educate patrons on data collection and privacy.

**Key Takeaways:**

- Libraries play a role in digital privacy education
- Need for proactive communication with patrons

**Potential for NEKLS:** Medium — aligns with digital literacy initiatives

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## **How Gen Z Use (and Don't Use) Public Libraries**

**Presenter:** Kathi Inman Berens & Rachel Noorda (Portland State University)

**Why it stood out:**

Data-driven insights into a key demographic, highlighting both engagement and gaps.

**Key Takeaways:**

- Challenges assumptions about younger users
- Identifies opportunities for service redesign

**Potential for NEKLS:** Medium — useful for strategic planning discussions

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## Unleash Your Genius: Employee Development

**Presenter:** Kelly Sitzman, Alisa Green, & Lisa Wells (Pioneer Library System)

**Why it stood out:**

Highlighted as a strong candidate for system-level facilitation training.

**Key Takeaways:**

- Focus on staff development and internal capacity building
- Potential for scalable training models

**Potential for NEKLS:** Medium — explore facilitation training applications

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## Overall Observations

- Strong demand for practical, implementable training
  - AI and older adult services emerged as intersecting priorities
  - Leadership development is most effective when grounded in real application and accountability
  - Policy and safety topics resonate when immediately applicable to staff workflows
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This document is based on conference attendee observations and used AI to analyze feedback and aid in formatting. It is intended to inform future NEKLS continuing education planning and potential speaker outreach.