

# In Practice

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FINANCE | DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY

## Strategy and Evaluation Leads to Trust and Better Decision-Making

BY ADAM POWELL

**T**he work of the Strategy and Evaluation Team at the Denver Public Library (DPL) is based on collaboration and innovation. The team, which has been around since 2018, works with staff throughout DPL's 27 locations to help the organization make plans, tell the story of the impact it has on the city, and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its service to the community. To fulfill this mission, the team also helps identify risks that should be addressed in the future.



For FY 2022, DPL had a \$51 million budget ([denverlibrary.org/content/facts-figures](https://denverlibrary.org/content/facts-figures)). Voters approved a referendum in 2022 that will provide an additional \$32 million a year.

### About the team

Kirsten Decker, manager of strategy and evaluation, leads the Strategy and Evaluation Team, whose primary goal is to manage the implementation of the strategic roadmap and the new DPL fund. Some of the key questions they address include how the team can improve its intake processes, provide a better level of service, and mitigate some of the problems and risks they've identified that haven't been addressed yet.

Eric Ward joined DPL at the end of 2022 as a senior management analyst. When employees come to the Strategy and Evaluation team with processes they'd like to improve, he teaches teams about problem solving using the Lean framework. He also provides management research projects that help executive leaders at DPL make better informed decisions on pressing topics, explaining the implications of potential decisions. This often includes the landscape in which DPL operates—or would like to.

Aileen Ayala is the lead data analyst on the team and has been with DPL

since February 2022. Ayala's primary focus is on developing best practices in data analysis and data management. She explained that she works "on creating complex models for strategic-level decision-making, deriving system-wide policy and/or procedure recommendations, managing our data collection process and our data once we have it, and then training departments and teams on understanding and utilizing their own data effectively."

Allie Benz is a data analyst for the team. She works to make data accessible and understandable so DPL staff can do their jobs better. Benz said that ensuring that the data is accessible is important because "many people are super skilled in what they do, but numbers aren't necessarily their thing. I try to make that less intimidating, so they can take the data they have and work with it."

Cole Hwa Davis is a project coordinator who's been with the team since February 2023. Cole works to shepherd the funds from a 2022 ballot referendum that will provide the library with that



additional \$32 million a year (for more information, see [denverlibrary.org/stronglibrary\\_strongdenver](http://denverlibrary.org/stronglibrary_strongdenver)). Hwa Davis “handles internal communications, project management, tracking, reporting, and meeting facilitation.”

Katie Fox is a senior evaluator for the DPL, and she enjoys working on projects that measure a program's effectiveness and community responsiveness. For example, one of the first questions the team addressed was the extent to which the library was creating welcoming environments for immigrants and refugees. “The research ends up being pretty qualitative most of the time, but that boundary gets a little fuzzy at times,” she explained.

Hanna Jackovich is a management analyst on the team, and she works on the Evaluation sub-team. She noted, “We help with the evaluation over time of newer programs, and we’re actually going back now to look at programs that have never been evaluated.”

Celia Gottlieb is an AmeriCorps Evaluation Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) member and works with Jackovich and Fox, focusing on the evaluation of youth services and developing equity-centered practices. Gottlieb and the team “do a lot of developing structures to build intentional programs and then teaching it to folks across the organization, so they can align their programs and practices with the promising practices we’ve identified. This enables strategic policies and programming and sets us up well to perform evaluations.”

Fox explained that the Evaluation sub-team also helps staff articulate the purpose of various services and programs. “We spend a lot of time discussing questions like, ‘What is the goal of this program? How would you know if it was working?’ So we do get into some of the metrics as well,” she said.

“This is where collaboration with the data team and with employees across the organization comes in to make sense of the qualitative insights,” Gottlieb explained. Fox agreed and said that’s why it’s so valuable to have a mix of skillsets on the Strategy and Evaluation team.

### New strategies

The DPL Strategy and Evaluation Team goes to great lengths to ensure that departments can communicate and collaborate with each other. Decker noted that this was an issue going back to the years before she came aboard. “There have been occasional issues with departments feeling siloed, so one of my tasks has been to make sure those get broken down and folks are talking to each other.”

A key example was implementing the DPL Fund at the library. The team, led by Cole, worked with subject matter experts and specialists across the system to identify priority investment areas that would be aligned with the objectives of DPL’s Strategic Roadmap, which includes focusing on capacity, infrastructure, compensation, and collection. When the library is making investments, there is continuous communication and intentionality that DPL’s values of welcoming, curiosity, connection, equity, and stewardship are maintained.

In addition to touching on core values and equity, the Strategy and Evaluation team works to maintain focus and streamline its efforts. Decker noted this can be challenging and requires balance. “How do we streamline without jeopardizing our accessibility or the trust that we have gained from the organization because of our accessibility?” she said.

### Challenges and pitfalls

During new efforts for collaboration, some individuals may not always accept the new recommendations and may be resistant to change. “Kirsten has a philosophy that I really appreciate,” Fox said. “We’re not going to force ourselves on anyone who’s not interested because you can’t really do the work with folks who are actively resisting.”

Fox explained that building trust and addressing concerns needs to happen throughout the project, but it can be easier to manage concerns at the beginning. If you don’t take time throughout the project to address issues and encourage honesty, you can create a situation where you think everything went great, but when you reach the end of the project, the team doesn’t accept the results.

If there’s any doubt about the accuracy of the results toward the end of the project, Fox noted, being able to look back and see how the recommendations and conclusions were made is invaluable. She added that it is helpful to remind folks of their specific efforts to get to this point and remind them of the decisions made collectively by the project team.

It’s possible to misjudge new relationships and trust after a successful project, Gottlieb said. “Sometimes a project is going well, and we have established relationships with the people we’re working with. Then we come in hot with the same gusto to new projects with new folks who may not work the same way.” This can be an issue after the team completes a very successful project, and they’ve learned that it’s important to keep in mind that each project is different and “requires a humble attitude and an understanding that new trust-building efforts need to happen.”

To change those feelings of mistrust, Gottlieb said, the team establishes new relationships by asking questions. “I try to ask a lot of questions and be genuinely curious about what somebody might be feeling,” she said. This helps her identify pain points and opportunities for process improvement.



Paying close attention to detail helps overcome these challenges, Decker said. “Not everybody comes to the project with that same understanding of the real commitment that something’s going to take. It’s not that they don’t care—it’s just that is not how their work works,” she explained.

Building knowledge and skills is a key challenge, Decker added. For example, the team has a strong collaborative relationship with Finance to support managers in understanding their budgets. “Our team coaches the planning that comes after the idea, and we’re there to support the implementation once funding is awarded,” she explained. “We can’t just expect them to be successful at managing the complexity of their finances if they don’t have the tools to do it.” Therefore, they need to help managers build the necessary skill sets.

Finally, Decker pointed to the challenge of knowing when to step back from certain projects. Sometimes projects can’t be completed, for a variety of reasons. One example is when the key stakeholders are resistant to change and are unwilling or unable to accept the recommendations for change. “That’s the hard part of this work. You have to be willing to say, ‘the right answers are not enough, so I’m stepping back,’” she said.

### Collaboration and trust

One of the team’s core beliefs is that trust and collaboration go hand-in-hand. Without efforts to build trust among team members, adopting their

proposed recommendations becomes much more difficult. The “foot in the door strategy” is one of the best ways to ensure trust between new team members on a project, according to Benz. “Making yourself open and vulnerable to feedback is incredibly helpful, and then from there you can ratchet it up toward creating and building that more collaborative framework and working on larger projects,” she said, adding that this strategy is much more likely to work than immediately discussing the multi-month project schedule and associated to-do list. Working on small endeavors first helps build trust between new team members.

Ayala tries to ensure that new team members understand their value to the project. “I try to present myself as someone who isn’t an expert in what you do, but someone who is an expert in the analytics piece. The question becomes how we can work together to evaluate or answer the questions you have,” she said. This strategy helps ensure that new team members feel comfortable in the beginning phases of the project and that trust can be built from there.

Hwa Davis agreed about the importance of reiterating that the team is working together toward one goal. “Even if we have different perspectives or needs during the project or process, we are all working together to do something to provide for the community or to better our services,” he explained. This strategy has worked well for him,

as it helps ensure that all members of the team understand what the primary goal is and reinforces a feeling of commonality and togetherness.

The team also highlighted the importance of understanding other peoples’ experiences. “Things feel different for people depending on where they’re at in the organization and what their job is,” Fox said, adding that diverse viewpoints should always be considered when working on a new project. Differences in opinions and experience should not only be considered, but also validated, she explained.

### Last words of advice

The Strategy and Evaluation team consistently attempts to engage with different departments and begin new projects, ensuring that data is a part of the decision-making process in a variety of different areas. “Don’t give up,” Hwa Davis said. “Improving services for local government, using data to drive your decisions and improve services to the community is incredibly important. It can have major impacts on a number of critically underserved communities. The work is important. It’s hard, and it’s challenging. It doesn’t always go the way you want, but it can have a real positive impact on your community and to people’s lives. My advice would be to keep going.”

Jackovich added that you can’t guess what the other team members know and can contribute—go into meetings with no expectations for how individuals might be able to contribute, she advised. “I’m really trying to stop guessing what I think people can help me with or contribute to.”

Finally, Decker is a strong believer in clear communication with the public. It helps build a sense of trust with constituents, especially since the surrounding community often sees libraries as a place of refuge. “It’s imperative to identify and articulate the impact of our more traditional services, as well as the services that have evolved,” she said. “We can be a partner at the table when the library is tackling large issues in our community.”

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Kirsten Decker hosts a panel at DPL Staff Day.