

Executive Summary

This needs assessment was conducted to inform CALL leadership decision-making about how to best support professional learning and development for California library workers. It identifies key workplace conditions shaping library work, along with priority learning needs, gaps in preparedness, and opportunities to better support staff working across roles, library types, and communities. Findings draw on a mixed-methods study representing 137 library jurisdictions and more than 350 staff voices.

Workplace Context

Library work in California is a field in motion. Staff are actively working to understand, adapt, and respond to community needs while navigating evolving expectations around technology, data, and public service. At the same time, the conditions of work, including limited time, staffing turnover and shortages, and aging infrastructure, shape how learning happens and what is possible day to day. The most significant common barrier to professional growth is a lack of time (85%), followed by emotional fatigue and burnout (38%).

Learning Needs and Preferences

Staff learning needs reflect both immediate demands and longer term development, clustering into three interconnected areas:

Responding to urgency | **How to navigate complex, real-time situations.** Staff are making decisions about safety, conflict, and community support. They are expected to act in complex circumstances but may not always feel they have clear permission or institutional backing to do so. When high-stakes disruptions occur—such as the arrival of enforcement agents—this can create uncertainty about how to respond or who should lead. There is a strong demand for practical guidance and real-world examples to support making judgement calls without clear policy, setting boundaries and understanding role limits, and responding to community needs, library incidents, and external systems.

Strengthening practice | **How to build skill and confidence in core roles.** Staff continue to seek support in areas such as supervision and staff management, communication and messaging, project and program management, navigating policies and governance, building community partnerships, and foundational systems such as cataloging, reporting tools, and digital resource management.

Preparing for the future | **How to engage with emerging expectations and orient around purpose.** Staff are preparing for shifts in library work, including AI and emerging technologies, data use for decision-making, and changing expectations for community engagement and public service. Many are looking for guidance not only in using new tools but in understanding how these changes connect to the broader purpose and direction of their work. Staff are also seeking to understand how libraries operate within city and civic systems so they can move from reacting or waiting for leadership to making informed decisions and championing community needs inside institutional constraints.

Across these domains, several patterns shape how staff want to learn. In short, there's a mismatch between what's feasible and what is most meaningful for staff learning and development.

- Learning must be **flexible and responsive** to time and workload constraints
- **Peer insight, shared experience, and reflection** are central to meaningful learning
- Staff value learning that **clearly connects to their roles, responsibilities, and purpose**

While these patterns are consistent statewide, how they show up varies by role, library type, and community context, highlighting the importance of flexible, context-aware approaches to professional learning

Future Directions

Findings point to several priorities for professional learning that can support immediate needs while strengthening practice and building future capacity.

Reinforce professional foundations and shared purpose

Staff need support not only in building skills, but in developing shared language, confidence, and clarity about their role—connecting daily work to the broader value and future of libraries. Exploring the why of service and libraries can be integrated in learning.

Make learning more visible, organized, and easier to act on

Staff often experience learning as fragmented or difficult to navigate or feel uncertain if opportunities pertain to them and their context. A more clearly structured and communicated learning portfolio, where opportunities are easy to find, labeled by topic and audience, and connected to real work and roles, can increase engagement and use. Clearly positioning CALL within a statewide learning ecosystem (including how content is selected and how resources connect) can strengthen coherence and trust.

Elevate staff expertise as a core learning resource

Staff are already developing knowledge through practice. Making staff experience visible through stories, examples, and shared practice, can strengthen learning while positioning staff as knowledgeable, agentic contributors. This includes reframing specialized sectors (e.g., Correctional, Tribal, Rural) not as outliers, but as critical sources of insight, particularly in navigating trust, constraints, and complex community relationships.

Strengthen the role of directors and systems in enabling learning

Access to meaningful learning is shaped by organizational conditions. Directors and supervisors play a critical role not only in encouraging participation, but in organizing learning locally, using resources like CALL to support team-based reflection, discussion, and application. Effective approaches will combine flexible entry points with structured opportunities for deeper engagement.

“We need inspiration to keep moving forward.”

“I’d really like help in making meaningful progress towards UN Climate Sustainability goals and balancing this with digital innovation/AI and the environmental demands that these require.”

“I’m a big fan of communities of practice... it feels motivating and encouraging to hear what others are doing.”

“Thank you for continuing to support CALL! It has been extremely valuable to my career growth.”