

# Café LOUIE (Louisvillians Organized, United, Involved and Engaged)

[Louisville Free Public Library](#)

Young Adult

|

Adults

|

Intergenerational

## **Café LOUIE (Louisvillians Organized, United, Involved and Engaged)**

Sep 21, 2017

**Free**

☐☐

Your name

Chandra Gordon, Executive Director, Library Foundation, Louisville (Ky.) Free Public Library

[Café LOUIE](#) gives Louisville residents the opportunity to meet with state and local elected officials at their local library branches.

Constituents, legislators and council members gather in each branch for a casual forum and moderated question-and-answer session.

## **Advanced Planning**

The primary goals of Café LOUIE include facilitating communication between constituents and their elected officials and situating the public library as a space for civic engagement.

The 2017 series was planned to coincide with the state legislature's session, so it started in late January and ran through the end of April. Contacting of the elected officials began in November 2016.

A library programs coordinator contacted elected officials to invite them to participate in the Café LOUIE that was in or closest to their district. After the initial invitation to all officials, we focused on RSVPs for the upcoming programs on a rolling basis. We used phone calls and email to communicate with the officials and/or their staff. After the scheduling was done, Friends groups helped coordinate refreshments and set-up for the day of.

Challenges included: some officials were difficult to reach and/or hesitant to commit to weekend morning programs. A few officials RSVP'd yes and did not show up, and a few did attend without having RSVP'd. Besides inconsistencies with the marketing materials, these instances caused little disturbance; the programs are meant to be flexible. Some sites drew large crowds that strained the time limit and the volunteer moderators' abilities.

## **Marketing**

Once the branches' schedules were finalized, our library produced one flier listing all 18 Café LOUIE dates. We then produced individual fliers for each branch's program as we secured RSVPs from the pertinent elected officials. The fliers included the program date and time, along with headshots of all participating elected officials and the logos of our partnering organizations.

One interesting partnership is with a very popular local coffee shop, Heine Bros. Coffee. They provided coffee for all our events and we have included their logo on all materials. Since we've begun this relationship they have allowed our Friends of the Library organization to put book collection boxes in their stores, library staff have hosted pop-up libraries in their shops, they have become "Library Champions" (corporate donors) and they have advertised our Friends membership drive on their social media/website with a discount given to members of the Friends.

We shared the fliers with our partnering organizations — both physical and electronic copies — and displayed them in the library and throughout the community. In email communications with the elected officials, we shared the fliers and requested that their office include them in email newsletters and on social media. Many of them did. **(See sample fliers under Attachments at right.)**

At most branches, and for the program as a whole, attendance for the 2017 series of Café LOUIE increased from 2016. This could be attributed in part to growing familiarity with the program, but certainly also to improved outreach and communications efforts. Attendance ranged between fewer than 10 and up to more than 100, among the programs at our 18 branches.

## **Budgeting**

Our library did not spend money on this program. The local coffee shop chain donated coffee and coffee supplies. Friends of the Library groups purchased light breakfast and index cards, if cards were not already available at the branch. Providing breakfast refreshments was a draw, but they are not necessarily essential to the event.

## **Day-of-event Activity**

The set-up for Café LOUIE included tables for refreshments, chairs for patrons and, if desired, chairs for the elected officials. (At some of the events the officials stood during the program.)

Depending on the layout of each branch, some programs were held in meeting room spaces with rows of chairs; others were held in more public areas of the library with a few chairs but also room for patrons to stand and mingle with each other and the officials. We provided index cards and pens for patrons to write down and submit questions before and during the program, and the questions were read by a moderator (usually a Friends representative).

Friends of the Library members and Library Foundation staff assisted with facilitating the program. With their help, two or three library staff members were generally required at each event. This usually included the branch manager, who provided a brief welcome to the program.

One challenge was that, due to contested pieces of legislation being debated at the time, certain program dates saw unexpectedly large turnouts, media coverage and heated discussions between the constituents and certain elected officials.

Charter schools were a huge issue this year. There was very intense discussion surrounding this topic. We had instances in which audience members very obviously filmed the entire conversations with representatives and discussion at times became emotional. No one was disruptive, but discussion was intense. At times this was an uncomfortable situation for our less experienced moderators.

## **Program Execution**

Thirty-eight total elected officials participated in the series, with 13 of them attending multiple Café LOUIE's (5 state senators, 12 state representatives, 19 metro council members, and 2 other city officials).

Our most engaged sessions had close to 100 community participants. Café LOUIEs that were in less politically engaged areas typically had 20 to 30 attendees. I noticed that after the official state session ended we had less of a turnout for the sessions.

The majority of feedback we received from patrons and elected officials was positive, with requests to continue the series next year. A recurring suggestion we received was to extend the program length. For next year, we will plan to keep the program itself one hour in length, but schedule additional mingling time afterward so that the elected officials may plan to spend more time at the branch and have more opportunities to converse with their constituents. We also plan to spread the events out throughout the year, instead of concentrating them during the state legislature's session.

With plans to continue this program on an ongoing basis, we are on the way to achieving our goals of increasing constituent engagement with elected officials and positioning the library as a civic engagement venue.

There is no formal evaluation component in place at this time. Anecdotal feedback from participants and elected officials was overwhelmingly positive.

As a result of the series' second year, we are in the process of establishing new relationships with several local civic-oriented organizations to improve and expand Cafe LOUIE for 2018. Some ideas we are considering include:

- Increased training for moderators and/or using professional moderators (This is an absolute!)
- Three formal panel discussions - Our state and city officials have differing areas of focus. Depending on the "hot" topic of the day, one or the other group could be perceived as left out of the discussion. This year we will focus the events at three of the largest libraries on the whole Jefferson County state delegation, with a more formal program and panel discussion. Our remaining 15 branch events will continue as general discussions with emphasis placed on an equal distribution of questions between city and state officials. This will be part of the training referenced in the first bullet point.
- Fall programming will focus on engagement with Metro Council, who's calendar is year-long, and enabling voters to communicate with state reps prior to session at the start of the calendar year.

## **Advice**

Communicate early and often with the elected officials, and be prepared for them to have last-minute schedule changes regardless of their RSVP.

Arrange for or train moderators who will be able to effectively manage the flow of questions, answers and discussion.

There is a bright side to small turnouts: those in attendance get more face time with the elected officials who attend.

Reiterate to patrons that the program is meant to be a starting point for engagement between constituents and elected officials — in order to be effective, that communication should continue after the program ends.

Some ways to encourage ongoing engagement include: providing a flier with information about how to contact elected officials (at the local, state and federal levels); book displays that illustrate library resources related to civic participation, US history, etc.; and scheduling related programs in conjunction with the elected officials program. (In 2017, we hosted sessions on the electoral college and media literacy/how to identify fake news.)

## Supporting Materials

[Download this Program as a PDF](#)

- Feedback (Coming Soon!)
- [Programming Librarian Facebook Group](#)

## Slideshow Images





## More Programs

Apr 24, 2015

Adults (21 and up)+ | \$

[Image](#)



## Coffee & Conversation

### **Audiences:**

Adults (21 and up)

Oct 21, 2016

Young Adult (17 - 20)+ | \$\$\$

[Image](#)





## [American Muslims in Indiana: A Community Discussion](#)

### **Audiences:**

Young Adult (17 - 20)

Adults (21 and up)

Intergenerational

Jul 27, 2017

Young Adult (17 - 20)+ | \$\$\$

[Image](#)



## Truth & Reconciliation in Our Community

### **Audiences:**

Young Adult (17 - 20)

Adults (21 and up)

Intergenerational