



HIGHWOOD
LIBRARY &
COMMUNITY
CENTER

ANNUAL REPORT

FISCAL YEAR 2026 · MAY 2025-APRIL 2026

Rooted in Community. Growing Together

A LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

As our community has faced economic pressures, uncertainty, and rapidly changing needs, Highwood Library & Community Center has responded with the same commitment that has always guided our work: listening first, and showing up with care.

This year, our Case Management services grew into a comprehensive network of support. What began as a targeted effort to provide toiletries and grocery gift cards to community members expanded to include food staples like rice, beans, and oil. We launched our first Summer Lunches at the Library, providing 1,396 lunches to food-insecure children and teens. In March 2026, we began distributing 15 bags of fresh groceries each day we are open. None of this work happens alone. It happens because of our extraordinary partners, volunteers, and donors who believe, as we do, that every family deserves to feel valued, safe, and supported.

Our counseling and mental health services continued to impact lives this year. When people experience healing in one area of their lives, transformation becomes possible throughout. This year, we were moved by the continued progress of community members impacted by the Highland Park Parade shooting. Four years later, individuals are arriving at a place in their journey where, for the first time, they are able to focus on their own healing. It is a privilege to walk alongside them.

FY26 also marked the adoption of our three-year Strategic Plan, a significant milestone for our organization. This plan charts a clear course across five objectives – from expanding adult and youth programming to optimizing health equity services and strengthening our operations. Through this plan we adopted the guiding values of being inclusive, innovative, responsive, and restorative. These values represent the library's commitment not just to what we do but to how we do it. Extensive community input ensured that this plan was grounded in equity and the dignity of the voices of the residents we serve.

What gives me the most pride is not any single program or number. It is the fact that HLCC is a place where Highwoodians can come together, where a young mother finds relief from a burden she has carried alone, where a senior can find connection after years of loneliness, and where a new resident discovers the skills and confidence to build a life he never thought possible. We have worked hard to build a space that is truly welcoming to everyone who walks through our doors. Rooted in this community, we are growing together.

Thank you to our staff, volunteers, Board of Trustees, Friends of the Library, partners, and donors. Your generosity and belief in this work makes everything possible.



Laura Ramirez, Executive Director, Highwood Library & Community Center



STRATEGIC PLAN

Adopted October 2025 **FY26-FY28**

In October 2025, HLCC adopted a three-year Strategic Plan to guide our growth through FY2028. Shaped by data and rooted in community voice, this plan reflects our commitment to expanding access, deepening impact, and building a more connected Highwood.

MISSION

Highwood Library & Community Center is an innovative anchor that enriches, empowers, educates, and embraces the community it serves.

VISION

To uplift, inform, and grow the community through the library's collections, programs, and engagement strategies.

VALUES

Inclusive · Innovative
Responsive · Restorative

A place for community for all.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

1

EXPAND ADULT OFFERINGS

Broaden adult programming to be more inclusive of diverse topics, interests, and community needs.

2

EXPAND COMMUNITY USE

Increase the library's role as a civic and community gathering space for Highwood residents.

3

CHILDREN'S & TEEN ACCESS

Increase accessibility and reach of youth programming for children and teens across all ages.

4

OPTIMIZE HEALTH EQUITY

Strengthen and expand bilingual health equity services, including mental health, food access, and senior wellness.

5

OPTIMIZE OPERATIONS

Strengthen internal systems, staffing, and sustainability to ensure long-term organizational effectiveness.

CHILDREN'S SERVICES

3,529
Total Program
Attendees

1,622
Early Childhood
Participants

556
Total Programs
Offered

Listening to Our Community

The Children's Department responded directly to community input by creating two new programs this year: Shhh! Silent Book Club and Mindful Thursdays, both designed to nurture literacy, wellness, and a love of learning in a welcoming and joyful space.

Mindful Thursdays

On Thursdays, the Children's Department becomes a calm and joyful space focused on self-awareness and mindfulness. Sessions alternate between Calm Play, featuring sensory toys, weighted plushies, a toy aquarium, a star nightlight projector, and calming music, and mindfulness art projects like personality boards, bubble dough, yarn painting, and sensory bottles.

Shhh! Silent Book Club

Created to support literacy and encourage kids to take ownership of their reading, each session invites children to build their own cozy reading forts using giant beanbags, oversized plushies, and fabric sheets. Each child receives a keychain flashlight to read in the dark, which they get to keep at the end. For one hour, the Children's Department transforms into a quiet, magical reading sanctuary.

Community Partnerships That Inspire

The Lake County Astronomical Society (LCAS) returned with their beloved Astronomy Under the City Lights program, where astronomers bring telescopes and guide community members through stargazing. LCAS also donated a telescope two years ago that has been added to our Library of Things and continues to circulate widely. Our partnership with The Art Center of Highland Park brings inclusive, all-ages family programs to HLCC, including one of our most popular projects to date, the Fairy Houses.



TEEN SERVICES

6,636
Total Program
Attendees

480+
3D Print
Hours

282
Total Programs
Offered

Makerspace and 3D Printing

Over the course of the year, the Teen Services department provided over 480 hours of 3D printing time in the Makerspace, resulting in 158 individual projects printed for free. From fidget toys to figurines, teens used technology to bring their creativity to life.

Level Up! Summer Reading

Getting kids excited about reading is one of the most important things we can do. This past summer, the Teen Services department transformed into a Pokémon Gym as part of the broader iRead theme of "Level Up," meeting reluctant readers where their interests already were and inviting them to "level up" their Pokémon by completing reading challenges. 42 youth participated over the course of the summer, reading a total of 335 books over 2.5 months. The enthusiasm was so strong that it led directly to the launch of the Teen Services department's first ever Winter Reading Program.

Inaugural Winter Reading Program

In its inaugural year, the Winter Reading Program welcomed 18 youth who read 51 books over just three weeks, proving that the love of reading extends well beyond the summer months.

Mental Health and Wellness Partnerships

The library partnered with CYN and OMNI to introduce 56 tweens and teens to stress management techniques and simple coping strategies, while also destigmatizing mental health and encouraging young people to seek support.



ADULT SERVICES

4,246
Total Program
Attendees

300+
Laptops
Provided

2,190
Voters Served during
Early & Election Day Voting

New Adult Programs & Community Connection

New hands-on workshops launched this year including crocheting, painting, and slime-making. Opportunities to make connections with others took place through Bingo, Lotería, a Spanish Book Discussion Group, and trivia nights. Adult program attendance grew by 193%, reflecting the community's enthusiasm for gathering, learning, and connecting at HLCC.

Computer Basics and Digital Skills

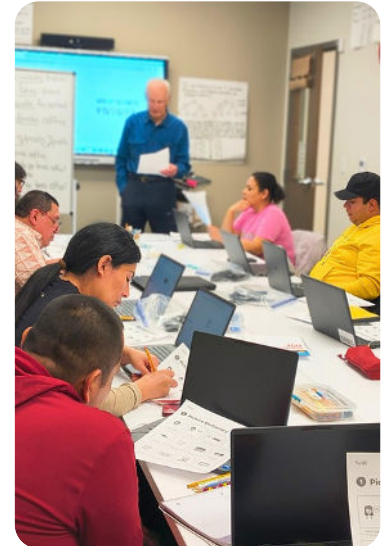
For many residents, a laptop is the first step toward a life fully connected to opportunity. This year, over 300 Lake County residents earned a laptop by taking digital navigation classes. Through 376 Computer Basics classes, community members learned to set up devices, navigate the internet, and access the digital tools that connect them to jobs, healthcare, and education.

English Language and High School Diploma Success

HLCC supported 88 students in their English learning journey this year, with 82 participants demonstrating significant progress. Nine students went on to earn their High School Diploma, reflecting the deep commitment of our community to lifelong learning and opportunity.

A Trusted Site for Civic Engagement

In March 2026, HLCC proudly served as both an Early Voting and Election Day site for the primary midterm election. 2,190 voters came through our doors, reinforcing HLCC's role as a civic anchor in the community, and introducing many residents to our programs and services for the first time.



COMMUNITY IMPACT · DIGITAL NAVIGATION

A LAPTOP CHANGES EVERYTHING

"I appreciate everything you give us. The books, the laptops, the teachers, and the notebooks. These resources are very important." -Wilbert, Sous Chef & ESL and Digital Navigation Graduate

When Wilbert arrived in the United States three years ago, his world revolved around work and home. He was afraid to do more because he could not communicate with anyone. Language was a barrier, but so was technology. Through HLCC's ESL and Digital Navigation programs, he earned a laptop and the skills to use it. That laptop became more than a device. It became a bridge, allowing him to practice English, communicate with suppliers, and build the confidence to take on greater responsibility at work.

Today he manages a kitchen as a sous chef and encourages every coworker to visit the library. "Continue coming to the library and ask for the resources you need," he shared. For Wilbert, access to education and technology was not just about learning or devices. It was about the freedom to pursue possibilities he once thought out of reach.

Story shared with Wilbert's permission.

Bridging the Digital Divide

For many Highwood residents, a laptop and the skills to use it can open doors that once felt out of reach. HLCC's Digital Navigation program provides hands-on, one-on-one and small group instruction to help community members set up devices, navigate the internet, and access the digital tools that connect them to jobs, healthcare, education, and family.

This year, the program reached 1,450 unique Lake County residents, a 181% increase over the prior year. Through 376 group sessions and 1,218 one-on-one sessions, totaling over 207,000 minutes of instruction, HLCC ensured that no resident was left behind in an increasingly connected world.

Made possible by: Lake County Digital Equity Initiative · HLCC Digital Navigation Team · Community Volunteers



HEALTH EQUITY SERVICES

678

**Case Management
Sessions**

94%

**Reported Increased
Access to Resources**

91%

**Decreased Symptoms Related
to Mental Health Concerns**

Food Distribution

From June to August 2025, HLCC launched its first Summer Lunches at the Library, providing 1,396 lunches to food-insecure children and teens. HLCC's Case Management Essentials supplied families in financial crisis with toiletries and groceries. In March 2026, with private funding, HLCC began providing 15 daily bags of fresh groceries to community members, ensuring that families have consistent access to nutritious food throughout the week.

Case Management

HLCC's bilingual case management services connect community members to essential resources including food, housing, healthcare, and financial assistance. Our team works one on one with individuals and families to navigate complex systems, remove barriers, and ensure that no one faces their challenges alone. In FY26, 94% of case management clients reported increased access to resources.

Counseling and Mental Health

Our bilingual counselors provide culturally responsive individual and group support to community members facing stress, trauma, and mental health challenges. In FY26, 91% of counseling clients demonstrated decreased symptoms related to mental health concerns, such as stress, anxiety, and depression. This year, we continued to walk alongside community members impacted by the Highland Park Parade shooting. Four years later, some of these individuals are walking through our doors for the first time, only now able to focus on their own healing. HLCC remains a steadfast, safe space for those seeking healing.

NAMI Familia a Familia

HLCC hosted NAMI's eight-week Family-to-Family program, supporting families affected by a loved one's mental illness. Participants gained the tools for communication, crisis management, and compassionate support.



COMMUNITY IMPACT · FOOD INSECURITY

A WEIGHT LIFTED

"Being able to support this client in meeting her basic needs opened the door to deeper healing she never thought possible." -Viri Gonzalez, Lead Case Manager

For one Highwood mother, the library's food assistance program was a turning point. As a single-income head of household, financial stress had become all-consuming, disrupting her sleep, her health, and her ability to seek the support she needed. Night after night, the worry of providing for her family had become too heavy to carry alone. Through HLCC's Case Management Essentials program, that burden was lifted.

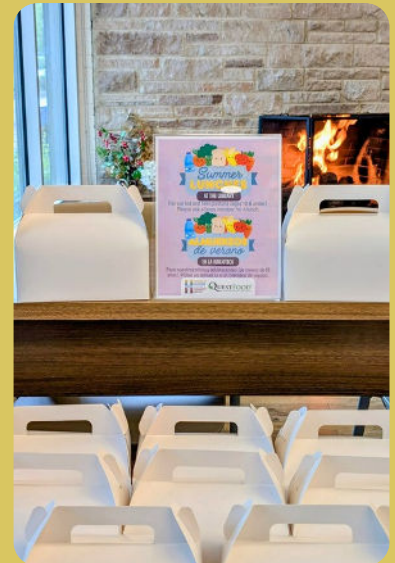
With the critical need of food addressed, she was able to engage more deeply in counseling, process complex trauma, and begin to see herself with strength and hope. As a result, her depression symptoms have decreased significantly, and she is moving forward with a renewed sense of self. This is just one example of what is possible when care, service coordination, and compassion come together.

Details anonymized for privacy

Supporting Families with Compassion and Dignity

HLCC's Health Equity department offers bilingual case management services connecting community members to food, housing, healthcare, financial assistance, and legal resources. This work is made possible by more than 70 volunteers and the generous support of community partners. Every Friday, St. James Food Pantry of Christ Our Hope Parish donates excess food to HLCC, ensuring that community members have access to food when they need it most. During the library's Winter Fest, Moraine Township provided 86 pozole kits for local residents, bringing warmth, culture, and nourishment to families during the holiday season.

Made possible by: North Shore Unitarian Church · Church of the Redeemer · Endeavor Health · Moraine Township · St. James Food Pantry · Private Supporters



COMMUNITY IMPACT · SENIOR WELLNESS

CONNECTION CHANGES EVERYTHING

"This group helped me get through the days during a time that was really difficult for me. I lost my long-term employment among other things that happened. Seeing you all show up and put your best effort gave me encouragement as well." -Senior Wellness Participant

Wellness, Connection, and Belonging

For many older adults in Highwood, isolation is a daily reality. HLCC launched Bienestar para Adultos Mayores (Senior Wellness Program) in June 2025 to change that. Seniors participate weekly in activities that promote overall health and community building, making this a special place for connection and healing.

Recognizing that wellness extends beyond physical health, our team designs programming that addresses the social, emotional, and cultural needs of older adults in our community. This year that included chair yoga, technology navigation, painting, a visit to the Chicago Botanic Garden, and a book club.

Week after week, participants show up not just for the programming, but for each other. Friendships are formed. Burdens are shared. And for many, coming to HLCC marks the first time in years they have felt truly seen and supported. Through private funding, the library also ensures that no one leaves empty handed, providing bags of fresh groceries to seniors each week.

"Prior to finding this group, for many years (20+) I did not have a social life. I would just work, take care of the things I needed to and do it all over again. By coming here I have made new friends and I feel better." -Senior Wellness Participant



LIBRARY SERVICES

IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS



47,518

TOTAL NUMBER
OF VISITS



18,765

TOTAL PROGRAM
ATTENDEES



11,951

PHYSICAL MATERIAL
CHECKOUTS



1,653

ACTIVE LIBRARY
CARD HOLDERS

PROGRAM ATTENDANCE

Children's  **3,529**

Teens  **6,636**

Adults  **8,600**

DIGITAL ACCESS



Wireless Sessions

51,922



Computer Uses

6,221



Minutes Logged On

356,234



Digital Checkouts

3,204

GROWTH IN THE PAST YEAR

Adult Program Attendance



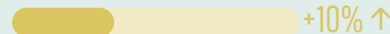
Youth (Children's + Teen) Program Attendance



Computer Uses



Wireless Sessions



BOARD & FRIENDS OF THE LIBRARY

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

The Board of Trustees generally meets at 7:00pm on the fourth Monday of each month. Meetings are open to the public.

Lucy Hospodarsky, President: president@highwoodlibrary.org

Janell Cleland, Vice-President: vicepresident@highwoodlibrary.org

Nancy Pastroff, Treasurer: treasurer@highwoodlibrary.org

Catherine Regalado, Secretary: secretary@highwoodlibrary.org

Bertha Chavez: trustee1@highwoodlibrary.org

Nora Loredo: trustee3@highwoodlibrary.org

Paul Martinez: trustee5@highwoodlibrary.org

Jason Muelver: trustee6@highwoodlibrary.org



FRIENDS

The Friends is a 501(c)(3) organization that supports quality library services through fundraising, and volunteering.

Gayle Meyers, President

Maureen Chertow Miller, Vice-President

Marty Rosenthal, Treasurer

Vicki Newman, Secretary

Jennifur Condon, Board Member

John Rood, Board Member

Laura Singer, Board Member

Noemi Ventura, Board Member

Lourdes Gomez, Board Member

Learn about our Friends: www.friendshighwoodlibrary.org

CONTACT INFORMATION

Questions?

Connect with us!



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