

Framingham History Center



Community Engagement Plan Adopted February, 2022



“The holdings of the Framingham History Center are physical proof that our community was built on the systemic disenfranchisement and dehumanization of Black people, Native people, and generations of immigrants. It is essential that we face our own past with clarity in order to inform the hard work of justice in the present.”

– Framingham History Center Statement of Anti-Racism

Introduction

The Framingham History Center (FHC) has long been aware that neither our organizational leadership, our membership, nor our audiences – outside of school aged children – reflect the demographics of the city of Framingham. The COVID-19 Pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, public health disparities, and the inequality that we see around us, especially among our immigrant population, has compelled the FHC to reckon with this failure to reach the diverse constituencies that make up our city. The current times demand a holistic approach to institutional change in order to better serve the needs of those who have been historically disenfranchised in Framingham.

Background

At the end of 2019, the FHC began to look forward to an exhibition focused on the immigrant experience in Framingham, but had very little material to represent the stories of modern immigrants in the City. Aware of the pitfalls of extractive program development, the organization set the goal to create an exhibition that will feature the stories of immigrants in Framingham told in their own voices. To this end, the FHC obtained a grant from the Foundation for MetroWest to create a Community Engagement Plan designed to connect the FHC with all communities whose histories have been overlooked or misinterpreted by the organization in the past. The ultimate goal of the project was to create a plan that will develop trust and dialogue with these underrepresented demographics. Trust is key to showcasing a more honest and equitable history of our community and informs the hard work of social justice moving forward.

This document is a result of a year’s worth of work, but it is only the beginning of this work. Implementing all of the recommendations contained within will take time, but the FHC is making an institutional commitment to invest its resources in this ongoing process.

At the beginning of 2020, the FHC found and adopted a toolkit created by the Ontario Museum Association called *Engaging Your Community: A Toolkit for Museums*, which included a prescriptive process that we adapted to match our needs and available resources. This process involved convening a Working Group comprised of staff, board members, and volunteers who are familiar with the workings of the FHC. This Working Group participated in an orientation and then a self-assessment that examined the FHC’s current operations and how they help or hinder developing closer relationships with the community. These actions were in preparation for the real centerpiece of this process, which was to hold one or more Community Listening sessions where community members would come together and help develop a vision of Framingham, its different constituencies, and the kinds of programs they would

like to see from their local history center. The FHC held two of these sessions, one in person and one remote, with 50 community members participating.

One vision of Framingham that occurred again and again at these sessions was that Framingham is “diverse but divided.” We believe the FHC can become a space where these divided communities can come together to develop a greater understanding of themselves, each other, and our city, past and present. From its base of operations on the Historic Centre Common, part of a cultural district that literally spans Framingham’s prominent North-South divide along Route 9, the FHC is perfectly placed to bridge this partition and to become present in all neighborhoods throughout the city.

Objectives

From the feedback at these sessions, the Working Group derived objectives for the future of the FHC’s programming and operations. To reach the greater goal of deeper, more effective engagement with Framingham’s diverse community, FHC activities should be centered on achieving these objectives:

- 1. Change culture of the board/leadership of the FHC:** Change must come from within, and the board and staff of the FHC need to embody a strong commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- 2. Break down barriers to participation/engagement:** There are many barriers to participation that prevent constituents from participating in FHC activities: language, accessibility, transportation/location, culture, lack of free time, or lack of childcare. Some of these barriers run deep and seem nearly insurmountable. Nonetheless, FHC leadership has proven itself capable of creative thinking, and we should use that thinking to make access to FHC content, programs, resources, and leadership as easy as possible.
- 3. Help community members develop personal connections to history:** An understanding of history is key to understanding our communities and ourselves. It fosters empathy, understanding, and a vision for the future. Helping individuals find their own personal connection to the past helps them find and define their own place within the city of Framingham and makes them personally invested in our community’s future.
- 4. Build more representative collections and develop community-created content:** The collections of the FHC primarily reflect the stories of middle or upper-class white families. They do not reflect the incredible diversity of the city’s current or past population. The collection, which is one of the FHC’s greatest resources, should be representative of the city’s history. Not only should diverse stories be represented in the FHC collections, but diverse perspectives should be represented in FHC content. Our work must not be extractive, the people of Framingham deserve to have a voice in telling their own stories, and the FHC cannot and should not be the sole authority on these stories.
- 5. Increase awareness of our activities and resources:** The FHC as an organization has a great deal of resources (access to information, to gathering space, to a community platform, etc.) that could be of value to many different kinds of people, although very few seem to be aware of these resources. Those who are do not always associate them directly with the FHC.
- 6. Create a positive public experience for all:** The FHC is known for creating positive experiences for its existing (largely white, older, and affluent) audience, but a positive experience for this audience is not the same as a positive experience for another. We need to take this existing

value and expand it to new target audiences so that all truly feel seen and welcomed by the FHC.

Strategies

To achieve these objectives, the Working Group recommends:

1. **Incorporate Suggested Core Values into the FHC Strategic Plan.** To begin the process of internal change, the working group recommends the Board of Directors revisit the FHC's Mission Statement and Strategic Plan with the following core values in mind:
 - **Honest History:** Honest history admits the complexity of the past and the people who came before us. It is inclusive of all people who live(d) in our community, and it is clear-eyed about the unequal ways local, state, and national institutions affected different communities along demographic lines such as race, socio-economic status, culture, or place of origin.
 - **Creating Trust:** Sharing family and community history with the FHC is an act of trust. There are many Framingham communities that are underrepresented in FHC collections, exhibitions, and programs because they are unfamiliar with the organization and are not willing to place their trust in it. The FHC must establish meaningful, trusting relationships if we want all communities in Framingham to be a part of our work. We look forward to continuing the tradition of community dialog that began with our Listening Sessions.
 - **Partnerships:** Partnerships (with organizations or individuals) are the keystone to successful community engagement. Partnerships come in many forms, from research collaborations with individuals, to programming partnerships with other organizations, to participation in community-wide festivals and events. Developing relationships with partners who are trusted by other members of the community helps increase our network, engenders trust in our own organization, and expands available resources.
 - **Accessibility:** There are many barriers to participation that prevent people from engaging with the work of the FHC, and to overcome these, the organization must become more widely accessible, in all senses. This includes but is not exclusively: ADA compliance, language diversity, offering programming in a variety of locations and times.
 - **Public Experience:** As noted above, the FHC is known for creating positive experiences for its existing audience, but this positive experience needs to be expanded to other constituencies. To successfully adopt this as a core value, may necessitate studies and training in DEI and cultural sensitivity.
 - **Youth as History Makers:** The youth of Framingham are the keepers of its future history, and their participation in the study of history is key to a sustainable future for the FHC.
 - **Diversity of Perspectives:** To meet all of the above core values, the FHC must embrace a diversity of perspectives in its programming, exhibitions, collections, and general operations.
2. **Increase diversity in organizational leadership.** The Board of Directors and staff of the FHC are not representative of the demographics (race, age, socio-economic status) of modern

Framingham. The Working Group recognizes that a commitment to diversifying the FHC's leadership necessarily requires a financial commitment. It will likely be necessary to do higher level thinking about diversifying funding sources and considering long-range planning to make such a commitment financially viable.

3. **DEI/Anti-Racism training.** While diversifying leadership may be a longer term goal, in the short term, it would benefit the organization to have existing board and staff undergo DEI and/or Anti-racism training to make the organization more culturally competent, empathetic, and self-aware. This training would be a helpful first step in making a cultural shift in the organization, and may need to be followed up in the future with other DEI initiatives.
4. **Create a Community Engagement Advisory Group.** A new and diverse group of interested community members emerged from the FHC's Community Listening Sessions and agreed to serve on a Community Engagement Task Force. This group could form the core of an advisory group that will help the FHC develop a community engagement rubric that will track the progress of this Community Engagement plan and inform the FHC's actions in the future. Working with this group on a continued basis will ensure that the FHC remains accountable to the community as it takes these steps.

Tactics

Program ideas and action plans: The Community Listening Sessions also produced potential programs and activities that would meet the core values and objectives laid out above. Staff, in conjunction with the working group, has developed high-level action plans for these programs that could be implemented over the next two years. These programs are not a replacement for the leadership-level actions mentioned above, but are activities that will reflect the cultural shift towards diversity, equity, and inclusion within the organization as those actions are taken.

- **Coming to America Stories:** This is a storytelling/moth-like event with immigrant students and adults that could be anchored to the upcoming immigration exhibit. Participants would receive coaching in story development and public speaking.
 - Objectives Met:
 - Break down barriers to participation/engagement
 - Help community members develop personal connections to history
 - Create more representative collections and community-created content
 - Core Values to incorporate: Honest History, Youth as History Makers, Creating Trust, Positive Public Experience for All, Partnerships, Diversity of Perspectives
 - Potential partners: Framingham High school, Framingham Adult ESL, BRACE, model storytellers, ATAC, Chica program
 - Resources needed: Staff time to create and run workshop (or work with high school teachers on it), multilingual interpreters, venues, AV equipment
- **History Pop-up:** This is a program that would pop up around town to collect objects and stories from the people who live and work in Framingham's different neighborhoods. When we invite people to tell their stories in their own voices, the community has a stronger voice in the FHC's content development. The initial pop-ups could be anchored to the upcoming immigration exhibit, but the model for the program has the potential to continue running long-term.

- Objectives Met:
 - Break down barriers to participation/engagement
 - Help community members develop personal connections to history
 - Create more representative collections and community-created content
 - Make access to FHC content/programs as easy as possible
 - Increase awareness of our activities and resources
 - Core Values to incorporate: Honest History, Creating Trust, Partnerships, Accessibility, Positive Public Experience for All, Diversity of Perspectives
 - Potential partners: Neighborhood groups, community centers, well connected individuals in different neighborhoods, ATAC, MetroWest Nonprofit Network, Churches, MetroWest Health Foundation - Voices of the Community
 - Resources needed: Oral History Training, recording equipment, pop-up set up, manpower (volunteers or staff) to set up and run the program, translators
- **History Road Show/Traveling Mini Exhibits:** Traveling mini exhibits would move around the city. These could be installed for a day-long event like a community festival, or for longer periods of time at different community centers, high traffic businesses, etc. An initial traveling exhibit curated by FSU students is currently proposed for the spring of 2022.
 - Objectives Met:
 - Break down barriers to participation/engagement
 - Increase awareness of our activities and resources
 - Create a positive public experience for all
 - Core Values to incorporate: Honest History, Partnerships, Accessibility, Diversity of Perspectives
 - Potential Partners: FSU, Framingham Public Library, City Hall, BRACE, Community Centers, Local Businesses, Schools, Mutual One, Middlesex Savings Bank, Churches
 - Resources needed: staff time working on exhibits, traveling exhibit infrastructure (have a grant proposal out for this), printing costs
- **History “in the Wild”:** This program would leverage the landscape and streetscape of Framingham to make historical information available throughout the city. This could be either high tech (QR Codes, smart boards) or low tech (banners, image wraps, wayfinding signage) according to our resources and imagination.
 - Objectives Met:
 - Break down barriers to participation/engagement
 - Help community members develop personal connections to history
 - Make access to FHC content/programs as easy as possible
 - Increase awareness of our activities and resources
 - Core Values to incorporate: Honest History, Partnerships, Accessibility, Diversity of Perspectives, Positive Public Experience for All
 - Potential Partners: Neighborhood associations, Downtown Framingham Inc., the City of Framingham
 - Resources needed: Printing, staff time