



**ILLINOIS LIBRARY ASSOCIATION**

Because Libraries Matter

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**Illinois Library Association**

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**Ashley Johnson and Roz Topolski Selected as 2025 Recipients of the  
Illinois Library Association Innovative Programs and Services Award**

The Illinois Library Association (ILA) has announced Ashley Johnson, Community Engagement and Partnership Librarian, and Roz Topolski, Community Engagement Program Coordinator, at the Vernon Area Library, as recipients of the 2025 ILA Innovative Programs and Services Award.

This award, presented by the ILA Awards Committee and Deiters & Todd Library Consulting, honors an individual, group, department, or library that excels in helping library users access and use information through innovative or specialized programs and services.

Ashley Johnson and Roz Topolski are being honored for their courageous, sensitive leadership and their work to create a model for library programming during times marked by division and uncertainty. Rather than shy away from difficult or controversial topics, Johnson and Topolski have tackled them head-on, working with conviction and intentionality to foster civic engagement, inclusion, and understanding. Their approach has helped transform the Vernon Area Public Library into a trusted and safe haven for open dialogue and community growth.

Serving a diverse population where more than 60 languages are spoken in local homes, Johnson and Topolski have demonstrated exceptional care for the needs of their community. Their

programming has not only addressed pressing issues but also set a new standard for libraries across the state.

A few standout programs include:

**AAPI Community Conversation:** In a climate where discussions of race and representation can be fraught, Johnson and Topolski invited local leaders, including the Lake County Treasurer, to share their stories and discuss representation in leadership. Enhanced by a Smithsonian exhibit highlighting inspiring Asian Americans from *We Are Here*, the program centered marginalized voices and celebrated cultural diversity.

**Book Challenges on the Rise:** Support Your Freedom to Read: With book challenges and censorship threats increasing, Johnson and Topolski organized a high-profile panel featuring the Secretary of State/State Librarian, library leaders, and challenged authors. This virtual event, partnered with over 75 public libraries, empowered participants (primarily non-library staff) to defend intellectual freedom, defend intellectual freedom and reinforced libraries' role as champions of democratic values.

**Political Scientist in Residence Program:** In a highly polarized election year, this yearlong initiative equipped patrons with the tools for informed civic engagement. Through lectures, discussions, and access to unbiased information about elections and local government, the program provided a safe space for political education and empowered patrons to become engaged, informed citizens.

Johnson and Topolski have skillfully addressed challenging topics such as intellectual freedom, diversity, and elections with integrity and compassion. Their approach of care and dedication has established the Vernon Area Public Library as a trusted resource and has inspired both patrons and colleagues. Their community-oriented programming has received national recognition, including recent presentations at Lead the Way, UW Madison, and the Reaching Across Illinois Library System.

The Illinois Library Association Innovative Programs and Services Award will be presented at an awards ceremony during the 2025 Illinois Library Association Annual Conference. The conference will take place October 14-16, 2025, in Rosemont, Illinois.

For more information, contact the Illinois Library Association.

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### **About the Illinois Library Association**

The Illinois Library Association (ILA) is a professional membership organization representing Illinois libraries and the millions who depend on them. Founded in 1896, ILA is the third-largest state library association and a chapter of the American Library Association. It's 2,000 personal and more than 500 institutional members include public, academic, school, and special libraries, librarians, library staff, trustees, students, and library vendors.

