Community Conservation Pilot: A Community Conservation Initiative project

Pilot and Initiative Co-Directors: Anisha Gupta and Joelle Wickens at info@community-conservation.org

The Community Conservation Initiative's central goal is to make conservation guidance and hands-on skills training freely available, in person, to people who want to be more hands-on in caring for their own belongings— demonstrating that it is possible and enticing to provide equitable access to conservation information and skills.

Pilot Overview

During the Community Conservation Pilot, grant funding will support two full-time community conservators and the programming, resource development, and partnership-building needed to launch, evaluate, and prepare this model for national replication. Specific goals for the two-year pilot period include:

- Embedding two full-time community conservators in a Wilmington, Delaware library and demonstrating that conservation can operate as a public library service.
- Helping communities thrive by providing venues and programs where members can collaborate to preserve individual and shared cultural heritage.
- Producing a toolkit, web-based how-to guides, and facilitator guides that will help other libraries and community-focused organizations implement the model in a right-sized format for their specific situation.
- Building the workforce and infrastructure — trained students, volunteer conservators, and National and Local Advisory Boards — needed to sustain and grow community conservation as a field beyond this project.

The two-year project (November 2026–October 2028) will run in three phases. The primary focus of Phase 1 is recruiting, establishing a digital framework for resource development and sharing, and outfitting the conservation workspace in the library. The primary focus of Phase 2 is full-time implementation of the community conservator concept. The primary focus of Phase 3 is two-fold. One aspect is finalizing and disseminating resources that will support the further development of the community conservator program in institutions throughout the country. The other is continuing the implementation work, setting it up to continue once the grant funded period ends.

Phase	Timeframe	Key Activities
Phase 1: Building the Foundation	November 2026 – February 2027	● Recruit an assistant conservator. More details under the subheading Roles. ● Work with development consultant Allison Budschalow to further define the work and make-up of the 10-member National and Local Advisory Boards and recruit the board members. ● Work with Creative Repute to brand and build out the digital platform that will serve as the center for resource sharing. ● Set up the Community Conservation workspace which will require acquisition and organization of equipment and materials.

Phase	Timeframe	Key Activities

Phase 2: Full Implementation	March 2027 – April 2028	● The community conservators work full-time within the Wilmington, Delaware public library system offering:
		  o Weekly individual and group consultations on caring for the vast and diverse items that hold meaning for individuals and communities.
		  o Monthly or quarterly workshops on material and object repair, emergency preparedness, disaster response, digitization, and other preservation techniques and skills for a variety of combinations of library patrons, supported by Workshop Assistants (see subheading Roles).
		  o House calls for objects and collections too large to move.
		  o Weekly open studio hours for anyone to work on conserving an object with the guidance of a Studio Assistant (see subheading Roles).
		● The Local Advisory Board meets monthly, and the National Advisory Board meets quarterly.
		● Web-based how-to-guides and videos will be developed on a continual basis and made freely available on the Community Conservation Initiative website, by both community conservators and the Resource Developers (see subheading Roles)
		● Community Conservation Facilitator Guides and *Embedding a Community Conservator in Your Public Facing Institution: A Toolkit for Rightsizing Conservation as a Public Service in Your Institution* will be drafted.
		● The project will be presented at conferences and other convenings, building awareness and actively recruiting institutions to develop their own community conservation programs.
		● The work will be shared through social media, listservs and other local, national and international platforms.

Phase 3: Disseminating the Model	May 2028 – October 2028	● Continue the work described in Phase 2. ● Facilitate the handover of the program from the grant funded conservators to others. ● Complete and make freely available Community Conservation Facilitator Guides and *Embedding a Community Conservator in Your Public Facing Institution: A Toolkit for Rightsizing Conservation as a Public Service in Your Institution*.

Roles

- **Co-Principal Investigators** (Anisha Gupta and Joelle Wickens) As co-PIs they co-lead hiring, shaping the program evaluator's and development consultant's work, guidance of web and graphic designers work on resource design and branding, and vision sharing at conferences and across other platforms. This work is the primary focus of the first four months of the project and continues more intermittently throughout.
- **Community Conservation Program Director** (Anisha Gupta) This is a full-time position from March 2027 through October 2028. In this position, Gupta oversees the development and leadership

of all consultations, workshops, house calls, and open studio sessions. She supervises the Assistant Community Conservator and the Open Studio and Workshop Assistants. She signs off on all, and creates many, of the how-to resources for the program.

- **Advisory Board and Resource Director** (Joelle Wickens) Wickens dedicates 20% of her 9-month academic-year time, as Associate Professor at the University of Delaware, and 40% of her 3-month summer to the project. In her role as Advisory Board and Resource Director she leads the recruiting of board members, the planning and facilitating of meetings, and signs off on all and creates much of the Community Conservation Facilitator Guides and *Embedding a Community Conservator in Your Public Facing Institution: A Toolkit for Rightsizing Conservation as a Public Service in Your Institution*.
- **Assistant Community Conservator** (to be filled with a successful applicant beginning employment on 3/1/27) The position will be filled by someone with knowledge of a wide variety of materials, their properties and degradation, some experience teaching and/or leading workshops, a love of diverse types of cultural heritage, and a passion for sharing knowledge and empowering others. Recent graduates from art conservation masters degree programs, artists with strong material knowledge, conservation and archivist technicians, and all others with the required skills will be welcome applicants. The Assistant Community Conservator will work alongside the Community Conservator Program Director to lead workshops, carry out consultations, develop materials and, as appropriate, conduct this work independently as well.
- **Program Evaluator Consultant** (Claudia Ocello) As described in *Assessing Impact,* this role will create and administer post-program surveys, lead participant focus group discussions, conduct interviews with advisory council members, process and analyze all collected data, share results with program staff in a discussion forum, and produce a final report.
- **Development Consultant** (Allison Budschalow) This position will focus on creating materials and infrastructure to design a development strategy to support the long-term sustainability of the project after the completion of the grant. The Development Consultant will do this through the design and creation of impact storytelling materials, extensive prospect research, shaping of Advisory Board membership and experience, and strategic visioning with the co-PIs.
- **Open Studio and Workshop Assistants** will assist with workshop and open studio leadership throughout Phases 2 and 3. They will be recruited locally, through college and university contacts, the Philadelphia Area Conservation Association, word of mouth, NCC and other methods as appropriate. They will be supervised by the Community Conservation Program Director. This is a paid opportunity for local conservation and collection care students, artists, librarians, and conservators who possess the necessary skills. Providing these opportunities expands the project's capacity and the future community conservation workforce.
- **Website Development/Brand Designer** (Sandra Skinner) This position will create a searchable, resource-driven website to host the conservation information that is created as part of this project, such as handouts, how-to guides, and step-by-step videos. The brand identity design will create a distinct visual identity, including a brand style guide which will be utilized when creating handouts, guides, and other materials.
- **Videographer** (to be determined) A videographer will be employed to create 3 to 5 short, impactful videos for fundraising and promotional purposes. The videos will capture the breadth of programming, impact on the community, and potential for other host organizations.
- **Resource Developers** will create conservation how-to articles, flyers and videos for the resource-driven website developed by Sandra Skinner of Creative Repute. This work can be done remotely making it possible to recruit developers across the nation. They will be recruited through postings on conservation listservs, mailings to conservation graduate program alumni lists, word of mouth, and eventually a continually evolving list of topics to sign up for on the CCI website. As with

the Open Studio and Workshop Assistants, providing these paid opportunities expands the project's capacity and the future community conservation workforce.

- **National Advisory Board** This will be a 10-member board. It will be made up of librarians, conservators, and community development professionals representing a wide variety of communities: rural, suburban, urban, well- and minimally resourced, serving a wide variety of economic and social populations. This board will focus on two tasks. They will guide the development of the resource, *Embedding a Community Conservator in Your Public Facing Institution: A Toolkit for Rightsizing Conservation as a Public Service in Your Institution*. They will also help shape plans for disseminating the story and recruiting other organizations to embed community conservators in their institutions.
- **Local Advisory Board** This will be a 10-member board. Specific individuals in each of the following categories will be recruited:
    - Two people who were active participants in the 2023 - 2025 pilot programs.
    - Two people from small, local heritage organizations who are likely to utilize the community conservator resources.
    - Staff members from other local libraries, including one who works in a current makerspace.
    - Two people from local businesses or non-profit organizations.
    - The state representative from the area of the host library will be asked to join the board or suggest a member of their constituency who could be designated to report back to them.

Assessing Impact

The project directors, Gupta and Wickens, piloted informal evaluation methods during initial, proof of concept workshops in 2023–2025. They recorded participants' goals at the start of each session and revisited them at the close, tracked which how-to guides were most frequently requested, and asked participants which of 15 values — among them community, connection, and knowledge — the experience fostered for them. The Community Conservation Pilot will continue to use these and other informal evaluation methods, as well as expand assessment through the work of a program evaluator consultant, Claudia Ocello, and two advisory councils. Ocello will create and administer post-program surveys, lead participant focus group discussions, and conduct interviews with advisory council members. She will process and analyze all collected data, share results with program staff in a discussion forum, and produce a final report. The Local Advisory Board will meet in-person monthly to review past activities and shape future ones. The National Advisory Board will meet quarterly via Zoom to review the developing toolkit and facilitator guides, focusing on making them useful for individuals and organizations centered in a wide variety of communities, including but not limited to rural, suburban, urban, well-resourced, and minimally resourced. This ongoing evaluation will track whether the project is achieving its goals, and modifications to the work will take place throughout the two-year period based on these assessments.