The Role of Rural Public Libraries in Providing Access to Online Government Services

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public libraries have increasingly taken roles in their communities beyond those traditionally associated with book repositories. Public libraries are safe, accessible spaces where people expect to find a wide range of resources and assistance. In some cases, librarians have become *ad hoc* social workers, helping citizens obtain access to government services, as well as employment and mental health services.

According to the Office of Commonwealth Libraries, Pennsylvania has 603 public libraries with approximately one-half of these libraries in rural counties, as defined by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania public libraries are governed by the Public Library Code (24 C.S. §§ 9301-9376), which provides the requirements for public libraries, including basic and minimum standards required to receive state aid, as well as certification requirements for librarians.

Research Background

This research, conducted in 2019 and 2020, used a mixed-methods approach to examine rural public library services, identify barriers and opportunities to providing assistance with government services, identify innovative practices used by rural libraries that emphasize access to government services, and develop policy considerations related to service provision.

The research began with a review of recommendations from the 2010 Joint State Government Commission’s report, *The Pennsylvania Public Library Code: Findings and Recommendations*. The researchers then analyzed data from 2007 through 2017 collected by the Pennsylvania Office of Commonwealth Libraries to assess library service provision, staff numbers and training, and revenues received from all sources. They also used data collected by the Institute of Museum and Library Services through the Public Library Survey to compare Pennsylvania public library revenues, staff, and other indicators with those of libraries in other states. The data were supplemented by online surveys completed by library staff and patrons between October and December 2019.

Finally, the researchers conducted focus groups with staff at six rural public libraries for a more in-depth examination of rural libraries. The researchers conducted interviews with
Research Findings

After reviewing the report, *The Pennsylvania Public Library Code: Findings and Recommendations*, the researchers concluded that the majority of recommendations were followed. The most significant of these recommendations was the codification of the Public Library Code into consolidated statute form. One recommendation in the 2010 report addressed the need for libraries to adapt to technology changes. While this has been done to some extent, with the addition of electronic journal databases and e-books, the Public Library Code still requires district library centers to maintain a minimum of 300, 16 MM file titles. Recommendations related to providing improved and consistent funding have not yet been realized.

The data analyses revealed that, over the past 10 years, libraries have experienced budgetary challenges. The 2008 recession and demands for other services meant less discretionary money at all levels of government. While Pennsylvania library revenue grew at a rate of 8.7 percent over the 10-year period, when adjusted for inflation, Pennsylvania library revenue fell by 8 percent. The Public Library Survey indicated that the federal government provides little money to public libraries, representing about 0.5 percent of revenue. States have an array of funding mechanisms for public libraries, with some states providing almost all funding, while in others, almost all funding comes from local government. When compared with other states, Pennsylvania ranked in the top 15 for state library funding; however, it ranked as the second lowest in terms of local government funding. Pennsylvania libraries are increasingly reliant on funding from other sources, primarily donations from individuals and community groups, with some grant funding.

When comparing rural and urban Pennsylvania libraries, the research indicated some differences. Per capita operating revenues for rural libraries were substantially lower than urban libraries over the 10-year period. Rural libraries relied more on funding from state government than local government, and, consequently, a reduction in state funding hit rural libraries harder than urban libraries. Rural libraries needed to turn to other sources to pick up the slack in state government support.
To supplement the publicly available data, the researchers conducted surveys with library staff and patrons. Libraries in the survey sample were slightly more rural and slightly larger than the entire sample of reporting libraries in Pennsylvania; however, the responses represented a cross-section of Pennsylvania by region. Library staff were asked about the services provided to patrons and training associated with those services. Traditional library functions were evident, with a heavy emphasis on assisting patrons with finding reading materials and DVDs. Assistance with digital library services, including e-books, reflected the growing influence technology has on library services. While most library staff reported that they only occasionally assist in locating information on health issues, substance abuse, and wellness and mental health issues, nearly one-fifth reported having to assist patrons with these areas often or all the time. Library staff reported having high levels of training associated with fulfilling traditional library functions, but less training to address patrons’ questions about health issues, substance abuse, and mental health and wellness. The results did not differ based on whether the library was rural or urban.

Library staff were asked specifically about assisting patrons with online tasks. Over half said they were often called upon to assist patrons with completing job applications, preparing tax forms, and completing Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) forms. Respondents from rural libraries reported more staff time devoted to the completion of PennDOT forms and applications for public assistance when compared to libraries in urban counties. Respondents at urban libraries reported helping with voter registration more often than their rural counterparts. Library staff said their training was adequate to assist patrons in operating public computers, completing job applications, and completing forms from PennDOT. Perceptions of training to assist with tax preparation, immigration questions, and legal aid were lower. Except for immigration services, where staff at rural libraries reported slightly less training, there were no statistically significant differences between responses from urban and rural libraries.

Beyond training, libraries face challenges in other areas when dealing with funding, physical space, and equipment. Funding was reported as the most significant issue with close to three-fourths of library staff seeing this as a problem. On average, respondents reported spending 20 percent of their time on fundraising for the library. Library staff typically reported the library was meeting the demands of its patrons when it came to providing public computers with adequate internet access and bandwidth; however, they expressed challenges in meeting patrons’ needs for meetings or workspace. Library staff from rural counties more often reported that
funding was a problem, with about half responding it was a significant problem. Respondents from rural libraries more often saw information technology support and transportation as problems than respondents from urban libraries.

Seventy patrons, largely from rural libraries, completed an online patron survey gauging the services provided by their library. Respondents believed that the library staff members were trained to answer their questions; and minor problems existed with public computers, Wi-Fi, and the hours of operation. Patrons saw their library as having an expanded role within their communities, noting that their library was a place where people gather and can receive help with various issues. This perception is important as governments consider where people are willing to go to seek help with obtaining public services.

The research team conducted focus groups with staff at six rural libraries. Thirty-seven staff members (both full- and part-time) participated in the focus groups. Library staff members described their interactions with patrons, with an emphasis on the assistance they provided in accessing online materials. Staff members reported helping patrons access PennDOT drivers’ license and vehicle registration services. In the case of vehicle registration, the assistance often revolved around the need to print documents. Staff emphasized the development and promotion of children’s programming. Beyond children’s programming, library staff emphasized their community focus; five of the six libraries had a dedicated community room that served various groups ranging from the Audubon Society and Trout Unlimited to local leadership programs.

Library staff discussed challenges associated with broadband access within the libraries and their communities, staffing needs, and facilities. The constant need to engage in fundraising produced an array of creative programs, each of which demanded time and effort from staff members. Library directors mentioned highly specific, and perhaps outdated, requirements in the Public Library Code that libraries are required to meet to receive state funding. Library directors at each of the six libraries mentioned challenges associated with counting how many patrons are using technology provided by the library. Reporting requirements need to be updated to reflect changes in what libraries now do.

The research team conducted individual interviews with 51 patrons at the six rural libraries, asking them to describe their experiences at the library. Over half of the participants reported visiting the library at least once each week, with many of the patrons reporting visiting a library since they were children. These individuals visited the library to borrow books or other materials,
use the printer or fax, read newspapers or magazines, attend a children’s program or community event, make social connections, or use the Wi-Fi. Patrons reported using the computers for work-related activities, to search for jobs or related employment-seeking activities, to access PennDOT services, to obtain tax information or forms, and for entertainment. Patrons described their libraries using descriptive terms such as beautiful, quiet, and cozy; their descriptions of the staff were equally complimentary. Beyond the responses to the individual interview questions, conversations with patrons revealed the important place the library fills within their communities.

**Policy Considerations**

Based on the review of publicly available data, data collected through surveys of library staff and patrons, focus groups with library staff, and individual interviews with patrons, the research has identified the following policy considerations.

**Initiate action on the remaining recommendations from the Joint State Government Commission’s 2010 report**

One of the recommendations not yet addressed is the consolidation of the district library centers into regional cooperatives. Following the model from Maryland, six to 10 regional cooperatives could be established with clearly defined functions. These functions should include, but not be limited to, maintaining online catalog systems for staff and patron use; developing training programs for library staff; developing online programming for patrons; and negotiating contracts with vendors.

A second recommendation from the 2010 report to address is the definition of “operating budget.” This regulatory change would have little to no cost implications and would provide clarity for library directors.

The final recommendations in the 2010 report relate to funding, a source of increasing concern for rural libraries. Local governments need to employ a broader range of revenue options to support public libraries, particularly in rural areas. Allowing only the use of general appropriations or a tax on real property has not produced sufficient support for rural libraries. Alternatively, legislation could be enacted to mandate a minimum level of county funding for public libraries.
Continue to promote partnerships that emphasize shared resources, such as the PA Forward initiative of the Pennsylvania Library Association

The research results indicated that Pennsylvania’s public libraries now have 10 percent less purchasing power per resident than they did a decade ago. At the same time, these libraries continue to be trusted resources in their communities. Promoting partnerships and shared resources, such as the PA Forward initiative of the Pennsylvania Library Association, may help libraries to continue meeting demands. This initiative recognizes that libraries are meeting community needs and strengthening individual human capacity within communities. PA Forward promotes basic literacy, information literacy, civic and social literacy, health literacy, and financial literacy with community libraries as partners for this information sharing. Shared resources will help libraries meet demands over the coming decade.

Additional partnerships that focus on community well-being should also be encouraged and perhaps incentivized with funding from the Commonwealth.

Finally, community engagement and recruiting individuals to serve on library boards should be encouraged.
INTRODUCTION

In dedicating his legacy to the creation of more than 1,600 community libraries in the United States, Andrew Carnegie said: "A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people" (Alter, 2016). Now, more than 100 years later, the American Library Association's (ALA) (2018) annual survey reports that 55 percent of voters consider a library an essential community institution. Almost two-thirds of Americans who participated in a study by the Pew Research Center reported that closing their local public library would have a negative impact on their community (Horrigan, 2016).

A recent Gallup poll (December 2019) confirms the ongoing importance of libraries within communities. According to the poll, Americans were more likely to go to the library than to a movie theater, museum, zoo, or national park. The poll reported that women are more likely than men to visit a library, with an average of 13.4 visits as compared to men’s 7.5 visits. Nearly two-thirds of library visitors borrow print books; roughly half come to the library to read periodicals, work, or use media materials. Individuals with household incomes of less than $40,000 are more likely to visit the library, averaging about one visit per month; individuals with household incomes above $100,000 visit libraries less frequently (average 8.5 visits per year).

Public libraries have increasingly taken on roles beyond those traditionally associated with book repositories. As Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen (2003) noted: “neighborhood library[ies] function … as a kind of community center, a place where people get to know one another, where communities find themselves” (p. 49). Public libraries are safe, accessible spaces where people expect to find a wide range of resources and assistance. Librarians have become ad hoc social workers, helping citizens obtain mental health services, housing resources, and employment (Cabello and Butler, 2017).

According to the Office of Commonwealth Libraries, Pennsylvania has 603 public libraries, with approximately one-half of these libraries in rural counties as defined by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Public libraries in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are governed by the Public Library Code (24 C.S. §§ 9301-9376). The Public Library Code

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1 In addition to public libraries that receive support from municipalities and the state, there are libraries that operate without this support. An example of this type of library would be the Orangeville Public Library in Columbia County.
provides the requirements for public libraries, including basic and minimum standards required to receive state aid, as well as certification requirements for librarians.

Basic standards required to receive state aid are established by the State Librarian and the Advisory Council on Library Development; they are related to funding under Sections 9334 (quality libraries aid)\(^2\) and 9336 (equal distribution grants). Minimum standards are established using the same process, but are related to funding under Section 9335 (incentive for excellence aid). Certification requirements for librarians are monitored by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. In order to qualify for state aid under Section 9334, library directors are required to attend at least 8 hours of approved continuing education annually. To qualify for state aid under Section 9335, any paid staff who work at least 20 hours per week in direct support positions must complete at least six (6) hours of approved continuing education every 2 years.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) (2013) reported that Pennsylvania had 456 public libraries\(^3\) with approximately 21 percent (N = 94) located in rural areas. For this study, except as noted in specific analyses, the definition of rural versus urban libraries was based on the Center for Rural Pennsylvania’s definition.

While national studies document trends in the demands of library patrons and for service provision at libraries, rural libraries face unique challenges as noted by Griffis and Johnson (2014). This study provides a valuable snapshot of rural Pennsylvania public libraries and the role these institutions play within their communities.

**GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

This research examined the services provided by rural public libraries, assessed the challenges they face, and explored opportunities that exist to provide additional support for these institutions.

\(^2\) The specific requirements associated with each type of library funding are enumerated in the Public Library Code. See Appendix A for details about quality libraries aid, incentive for excellence aid, and equal distribution grants.

\(^3\) According to the Office of Commonwealth Libraries, Pennsylvania has 603 public libraries with approximately one-half of these libraries in rural counties as defined by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. IMLS is a federal agency that provides support to public libraries; it conducts the Public Libraries Survey that served as the basis for this longitudinal data analysis. The number of libraries differs because of the voluntary nature of reporting.
Goal 1: Complete an assessment of the services (face-to-face and online) requested from and provided by rural public libraries in Pennsylvania.

- Objective 1: Obtain information on library use, equipment, training, staffing, and funding from publicly available data and reports.
- Objective 2: Assess staff training in rural public libraries, specifically related to efforts to improve access to online government services by patrons.
- Objective 3: Evaluate funding streams for rural public libraries, including monies available from local, state, and national resources.

Goal 2: Identify barriers and opportunities in providing assistance with government services in rural public libraries.

- Objective 1: Determine the levels and types of assistance with government services provided at urban versus rural libraries.
- Objective 2: Compare resources available to urban and rural libraries for assistance with online government services.
- Objective 3: Collect information from stakeholders at rural libraries about the challenges facing their operations, specifically those related to technology and access to online services.

Goal 3: Identify innovative practices used by rural public libraries in Pennsylvania, other states, and potentially Canada, which emphasize access to government services.

Goal 4: Develop policy considerations for rural Pennsylvania public libraries related to service provision, funding, and public-private partnerships.

METHODOLOGY

This research used a mixed-methods approach that began with a review of the recommendations in the report, The Pennsylvania Public Library Code: Findings and Recommendations (Joint State Government Commission, 2010).

The researchers then analyzed data from 2007 through 2017 collected by the Pennsylvania Office of Commonwealth Libraries to assess library service provision, staff numbers and training, and revenues received from local, state, and federal governments and other sources. The Pennsylvania Office of Commonwealth Libraries annually collects data on each public...
library that receives state aid. This information includes hours open, staff/volunteer complement, collection size, PC availability, revenue and expenses, as well as other operating information (Pennsylvania Department of Education, Office of Commonwealth Libraries, 2017). The office also maintains demographic profiles by library district, accounting for age, race, income, and other characteristics of district residents (Pennsylvania Department of Education, Office of Commonwealth Libraries, 2014).

The researchers also used data collected by the Institute of Museum and Library Services through the Public Library Survey to compare Pennsylvania public library revenues, staff and other indicators with those of libraries in other states. Each year, all 50 states and the District of Columbia send out the Public Library Survey (PLS) to every library to collect data on items including staffing, expenditures, revenue and revenue sources, users, visits, programs, and purchases. Some 17,000 libraries report data with approximately 450 libraries reporting from Pennsylvania. These data provide a glimpse into how libraries are doing nationwide, and, given that the PLS has been administered annually for 20 years, allows for cross-year comparisons. This study examined the past 10 years of available data (2007-2017).

The data were supplemented by online surveys completed by library staff and patrons between October and December 2019.

For the staff survey, the researchers developed an original survey to send to each public library (libraries that receive state funding as well as those that do not) to further assess the services provided and requested. (See Appendix B for the Library Staff Survey and its accompanying informed consent form.) Survey questions addressed the use of technology, specifically web-based applications, training related to information literacy, and issues related to communication with patrons. A section of the survey addressed specific library initiatives to help patrons use online services provided by the Commonwealth (e.g., Pennsylvania Department of Transportation’s, or PennDOT's, online vehicle registration services). The survey asked for information related to barriers to service as well as

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4 Under the Public Library Code, Section 9314, the State Librarian, with approval from the Governor's Advisory Council on Library Development, has the power to designate up to 30 libraries as district library centers. As of 2019, there are 29 district center libraries.

5 Because of the time associated with data collection processing, there is a lag in publishing data, making 2017 the last year for which data are publicly available.
information on partnerships that have assisted libraries in providing access to online services.

The link to the survey was available for individuals who attended the Pennsylvania Library Association’s annual meeting in Erie in October 2019. The researchers sent the survey link to district library coordinators in late October 2019. A final push to increase the response rate took place in late January 2020 through a personalized e-mail to all library directors who had not yet responded.

A total of 144 respondents completed the survey out of a population of 453 target libraries (Public Libraries Survey dataset), with 75 percent of respondents indicating that they were library directors. However, only 114 surveys could be linked to a library. Several respondents (N = 6) did not report the name of the library, likely to maintain confidentiality; several libraries (N = 6) were not in the database. There were also multiple responses (N = 18) from the same library; in most cases, the respondents listed themselves as the library director, suggesting the surveys represented various branch libraries. Noting these data anomalies, the survey results report responses from all 144 respondents. However, the sample shrinks to 136 when making urban versus rural comparisons. Only 114 responses could be linked to a unique library in the Public Libraries Survey dataset to allow library demographic and operational comparisons. The response rate for the staff survey was between 25 percent and 30 percent. Libraries in the sample were slightly more rural and were slightly larger than the entire sample of reporting libraries in Pennsylvania. This is true for both the urban and rural county libraries. However, the responses represent a cross-section of Pennsylvania by region.

The research team also developed a survey to determine patrons’ satisfaction with library services. Patrons from the six focus group libraries were asked to participate in the patron survey. And, the researchers provided information on the patron survey to interested librarians who attended the October 2019 Pennsylvania Library Association annual meeting. Because the respondents were self-selected, their responses do not represent library users across the Commonwealth, and they do not necessarily represent their own libraries.

Finally, the researchers conducted focus groups with staff at six rural public libraries for a more in-depth examination of rural libraries. The focus group libraries were selected to represent various regions of Pennsylvania. The researchers also conducted interviews with
patrons at the focus group libraries to learn more about their experiences and the services they used.

With the assistance of the Pennsylvania Library Association (PaLA), the researchers sent an e-mail to members of PaLA to recruit libraries for participation in the focus groups with staff members, volunteers, and patrons. Four libraries were recruited using this method; the fifth and sixth libraries joined the project following outreach targeted to individual directors. The six libraries that participated in the research project were: Annie Halenbake Ross Library (Lock Haven, Clinton County); Barrett Paradise Friendly Library (Cresco, Monroe County); Bellwood-Antis Public Library (Bellwood, Blair County); B.F. Jones Memorial Library (Aliquippa, Beaver County); Fulton County Public Library (McConnellsburg, Fulton County); and Warren Public Library (Warren, Warren County). While the B.F. Jones Memorial Library is in an urban county, it serves rural municipalities; it was approved for inclusion in the study by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania staff.

The library directors and the research team also agreed on meeting dates with library staff between August and October 2019; the library directors determined which staff members to invite to the focus group sessions. Initial conversations with the library directors prompted the researchers to include volunteers in the group with patrons. From the library directors’ perspective, volunteers had flexibility in their schedules as well as different perceptions of the library when compared to paid staff.

Following discussions with the library staff, the research team modified its approach to collecting information from patrons. Library staff noted the challenges they had faced in recruiting individuals to participate in focus groups associated with the development of strategic plans. The research team decided to collect information from patrons through an online survey as well as individual interviews.

Both the focus groups with library staff members and the individual interviews with patrons were analyzed using an attribution analysis as well as a pragmatic content analysis (Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook, 2007). While the attribution analysis examines the frequency of terms and phrases used to describe the processes, places, and behaviors, the pragmatic content analysis is more holistic and includes an assessment of causes and effects.
RESULTS

Review of the Work of the Joint State Government Commission

In December 2010, the Joint State Government Commission issued its report, *The Pennsylvania Public Library Code: Findings and Recommendations*, which provided potential changes to the Library Code of 1961 and related laws. When the Pennsylvania General Assembly took action on the Joint State Government Commission’s report, it proposed eight changes to the Library Code. They were:

- Codify The Library Code in consolidated statute form.

- Direct the State Librarian and the Advisory Council on Library Development to conduct a complete review of the regulations issued under Title 22 of the Pennsylvania Code, with the goal of re-issuing the regulations to delete obsolete regulations and to recognize and reconcile them to changes to the Code that have occurred since most of the regulations were issued.

- Designate the Deputy Secretary for Libraries as the State Librarian. Within the Department of Education, the Deputy Secretary has administratively been assigned the role and duties of the State Librarian.

- Change the composition of the Advisory Council on Library Development to include six professional librarians, three trustees, and three laypeople, to provide more experienced leadership.

- Provide service standards that reflect current and evolving technologies, and include staffing, collections, facilities, and accessibility. Service standards that are tied to specific numbers of periodicals, titles and other library materials should take into account e-books, electronic journal databases, and other forms of media in collections, in recognition that a modern library consists of more than bound volumes.

- Provide more flexibility in enforcement of standards in the face of libraries having difficulty meeting criteria for funding. All libraries would be able to apply for waivers if faced with a reduction in state funding, and the State Librarian would have discretion in formulating a waiver that provides flexibility in the application of statutory and regulatory standards.

- Apply the funding formula in the Code uniformly from year to year.

- Mandate continuing education for all librarians. The State Librarian would be given the authority to establish continuing education requirements for library directors and library assistants.

In the intervening period since the enactment of the legislation and subsequent regulations, the majority of these recommendations have been implemented. The Public Library Code (24 Pa. C.S. §§ 9301 - 9376) now appears in consolidated statute form; the Deputy Secretary for Libraries within the Pennsylvania Department of Education is the State Librarian. The composition of the Governor’s Advisory Council on Library Development now includes six professional librarians, three trustees, and three laypeople. The State Librarian has discretion to approve waivers for library’s not meeting standards; the State Librarian has established “Continuing Education (CE) Guidelines for Public Library Staff.”

It is difficult to determine if the remaining three recommendations have been fully implemented. For example, service standards may have been modified to reflect technology changes, but the Code still requires that district library centers maintain a minimum of 300, 16 MM file titles (see 22 Pa. Code § 141.22). While the elements of the funding formula have been consistent, it cannot be stated with certainty that the funding formula in the Public Library Code has been applied consistently since the changes initiated by the Joint State Government Commission’s report.

The report outlined seven additional recommendations that required further consideration. Four of these recommendations focused on improving library revenues, including efforts to provide increased local government support for libraries (i.e., mandatory minimum levels of county funding and a greater range of revenue-raising options). Two recommendations addressed service provisions, including consolidation of district library services and integration of public library services with academic and school libraries. The final recommendation addressed the need for a statutory definition of “operating budget.”

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While the Joint State Government Commission recognized the need for further consideration of these recommendations in 2010, none of these changes has been implemented.

**Analysis of Publicly Available Data**

**National and Pennsylvania Operating Revenue Trends**

Over the past 10 years, libraries have experienced budgetary challenges. The 2008 recession and demands for other services meant less discretionary money at all levels of government. Despite these challenges, the 50-state average library operating revenue grew from $215 million to about $260 million from 2007 to 2017, a 20.5 percent increase. Pennsylvania library revenue grew after experiencing a post-recession dip, but at a slower rate of 8.7 percent over the 10-year period. While inflation was moderate over this period, the Consumer Price Index shows a total 18.2 percent increase in prices from 2007 to 2017. Thus, as Figure 1 shows, examining the trend in inflation-adjusted dollars is less encouraging. While the 50-state average showed about a 2 percent increase, Pennsylvania revenues fell in “real” dollars by 8 percent.

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9 There are a variety of indicators one could examine to measure the financial health of a library; the researchers chose library operating revenues since the researchers believed they were the best indicator of a library’s ability to operate over time and a sound measure of a library’s capacity.

10 For comparison purposes, the 50-state average was used as the research was comparing what Pennsylvania was doing versus other states – not necessarily the country as a whole. For this figure, the 50-state average (it is actually the 50 states and D.C.) and the nationwide trend are the same (to get the nationwide total, multiply by 51.) However, for the subsequent figures, each state has equal weight. This ensures that what is happening in the large states (California, New York, and Texas) does not overwhelm the smaller states. In the next figure, the 50-state average per capita operating revenue figure is calculated by summing the per capita figure for each state (revenue for that state divided by population of the state) and dividing by 51, as opposed to the total revenue nationally divided by the country’s population.

11 The inflation-adjusted dollars used 2007 as the base year.
Part of the reason Pennsylvania has not kept pace with the country as a whole is because its population has not grown at an equal rate. A different way to look at this is to examine operating revenue on a per capita basis by dividing total operating revenue by the number of people in a state. This gives us a better idea of how states’ efforts compare.

Figure 2 shows that in 2017, Pennsylvania’s library operating revenues were about $29.00 per resident, a 5 percent increase from 2007. The 50-state average was about one-third higher in 2017 at $41.00 per resident, a 17 percent increase from 2007. The data show that while Pennsylvania operating revenues were $28.00 per person in 2007, this amount declined to about $25.00 in 2017 in inflation-adjusted dollars – an 11 percent decline. In 2017, Pennsylvania’s libraries had about 10 percent less purchasing power per resident than they did a decade earlier.\(^{12}\)

\(^{12}\) One of the librarians made this contention during the focus groups with staff who expressed frustration with having to provide the same, if not more, services in 2019 with purchasing power from a decade ago.
The 50-state average more or less showed no change. Thus, Pennsylvania’s per capita operating revenue was substantially lower than the rest of the country and the gap grew.

**Funding Sources**

As reported by the PLS, libraries receive funding from three sources: state government, local government, and other sources.\(^{13}\) “Other sources” include library fees, private grants, business donations, individual donations, and library fundraising. The federal government provides little money to public libraries, representing about 0.5 percent of revenues. Each state has a different balance of state and local government funding for libraries. In some states, the state government provides almost all funding while in others almost all funding comes from local government.

\(^{13}\) Local government includes all local government funds designated by the community, district, or region and available for expenditure by the public library. It does not include the value of any contributed or in-kind services or the value of any gifts and donations, library fines, fees, or grants. It also does not include state, federal, and other funds passed through local government for library use. These funds are reported state government revenue or federal government revenue, as appropriate. Other is all operating revenue other than that reported under local, state, and federal. This includes monetary gifts and donations received in the current year, interest, library fines, fees for library services, and grants. It does not include in-kind services or the value of any nonmonetary gifts and donations (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2018, *FY2018 Public Libraries Survey PLS Web Portal Users Guide*, accessed at: https://www.imls.gov/sites/default/files/pls_users_guide_fy2018.pdf).
While Pennsylvania was more generous than other states and ranked in the top 15 for state funding of libraries, it ranked as the second lowest for local government funding. Only Maine, in which libraries receive no state funding outside of grants for specific initiatives, raised more other-source money than Pennsylvania. This means Pennsylvania is much more reliant on state government and other sources of funding than other states. This was a major reason why the 2008 recession hit Pennsylvania library revenues harder than other states.
Figure 3 shows the trend (50-state average and Pennsylvania) for per capita operating revenue from local government. The trend line is positive for both. From 2007 to 2017, the 50-state average per capita revenue grew from $28.93 per resident to $35.21 per resident, an increase of $6.28. Pennsylvania local government library revenue grew from only $16.21 in 2007 and to $19.39 in 2017. Both increases roughly matched the inflation rate. Thus, Pennsylvania libraries received much less from local government sources when compared to the average of their state peers; the change in the per capita contribution was 3.5 percent lower from 2007-2017 than the per capita average for the 50 states.

Figure 4 shows a different story when it comes to state funding. The solid lines in Figure 4 show library operating revenues from state government (50-state average and Pennsylvania). Pennsylvania state government was more supportive of libraries than other states. Yet both
Pennsylvania and other states saw a decline. In 2007, Pennsylvania provided state funds of $6.85 per resident; this fell to $4.48 by 2017, a $2.37 decline ($3.06 adjusting for inflation). This equaled a 44.7 percent inflation-adjusted reduction. The 50-state average started at $2.81 per resident, and only decreased slightly to $2.73 in 2017. However, when adjusting for inflation, this represented a 17.8 percent decline in purchasing power.

With declining state government funds and stagnant local government funds, Pennsylvania libraries are now more reliant on other sources. In terms of raising revenue from other sources, Pennsylvania libraries did better than libraries in other states and increased their efforts. In 2007, Pennsylvania libraries raised $4.00 per person in other funds. This grew to $5.15 in 2017. On average, states were less dependent on other sources, raising $3.20 in 2007 but only $2.93 by 2017. This shows a growing divide between Pennsylvania and others states with Pennsylvania libraries relying increasingly on other sources of funding. This trend may be problematic, as it requires more time and effort from staff to obtain funding from other sources when this time and effort could be used to help library patrons.
Examined another way, one can look at the percent of revenues that came from the three different sources: local government, state government, and other. Figure 5 shows, on average, the 50 states have seen a shift in funding toward local government. In 2007, the ratio of funding between the three sources was 82 percent local, 8 percent state, and 9 percent other; in 2017, it was 85 percent local, 7 percent state, and 7 percent other. In Pennsylvania, the ratio in 2007 was 60 percent local, 25 percent state, and 14 percent other; while in 2017, it was 67 percent local, 15 percent state, and 18 percent other. In Pennsylvania, funding from other sources and local
governments increased to offset some of the reduction in state funding. As stated earlier, this was not enough to avoid an 11 percent decrease in inflation-adjusted per capita revenue.

**Other Library Indicators**

Library operating revenue is only one way to look at library health over time. The inflation rate for operating a library might not have increased as fast as the overall rate of inflation, therefore, services may not have declined with a decline in revenue. Improvements in technology help libraries reach more people, at a faster rate, and for less money. Another way to assess libraries’ health is to examine the number of staff, holdings, computers, and materials.
Figure 6 presents operational factors for the 50-state average and Pennsylvania. In general, Pennsylvania does not perform as well. The Pennsylvania data are statewide and calculated by dividing the state total for each factor by Pennsylvania’s population for the year and then multiplied by 1,000 for a per-one-thousand-population figure. This was done for each state, with the average for the 50 states calculated and reported. These standardized figures are given for each factor except salary and benefits (the average per librarian) and the average number of hours a state’s libraries are open per week.

Two important factors are users and visits. Users are those “who have applied for and received an identification number or card from the public library,” and visits are the total number of persons entering the library for whatever purpose during the year. Online visits are calculated separately. In 2017, Pennsylvania libraries reported 420 users, on average, while the 50-state average was 531. This represented a 10 percent decline for Pennsylvania and a 3 percent decline for the 50-state average from 2007. Pennsylvania had about 1,000 fewer visits per capita than the 50-state average in 2017, and both showed about a 12 percent decline from 2007. The number of physical visits may have been offset by an increase in online visits. While these data were not reported in 2007, the 2017 online visits more or less matched the decline in face-to-face visits.

---

14 As with Figures 2 through 5, this calculation gives states equal weight and allowed the researchers to compare Pennsylvania with other states.
15 The definitions for each factor were found in the IMLS FY2018 Public Libraries Survey PLS Web Portal Users Guide. Survey results were collected at the local library level and then compiled at a higher level. One can assume that some libraries were better equipped, in terms of time and staff resources, to count computer users, wireless users and program attendees. For other libraries, it might have been more like educated guess work. As an example, if libraries do not track the number of users on a daily basis, libraries are encouraged to track the number of users over a seven-day period in October and multiply by 52. In addition, there might be incentives for some states or localities to show high numbers. Finally, one assumes the data were entered correctly; this was not always the case. For example, in Philadelphia (2016), the local capital revenue figure was entered instead of local operating revenue resulting in a large anomaly in the data. This was easily noticed and corrected in this analysis (the error appeared in both the national dataset and state dataset), but other data-entry errors may not have been noticed.
Pennsylvania reported fewer librarians, staff, circulation, print material, public computers, and public computer users than the 50-state average. However, Pennsylvania had more e-books and this has increased substantially since 2007. Salaries, benefits, programs, and children’s programs were similar for Pennsylvania and the 50-state average in both periods.

The trend line in many areas is consistent with anecdotal evidence. The amount of programming has grown considerably, especially for children. While the number of users and visitors has decreased for libraries, general attendance at programs has risen by around one third for most categories.

The loss of staff and librarians in Pennsylvania libraries is cause for concern. However, the decline in staff and librarians matched the decline in users and visitors. Library hours did not decrease substantially.

One could argue that the decline in visitors and users means libraries do not need as much funding and that the shift to e-books and wireless searches requires fewer resources. At the same
time, libraries have moved into providing more programs for their constituents and, as shown later in this report, have substantial demands beyond traditional library functions.

*The Pennsylvania Experience*

While national and state data are important to provide context, they provide limited information on the health of individual Pennsylvania libraries and the extent to which rural and urban libraries face different demands and challenges. This section first looks at overall rural and urban trends and then focuses on individual libraries.

The current situation and the 10-year trends show experiences have been different for libraries in rural and urban counties. Figure 7 shows that per capita operating revenue for rural county libraries were substantially lower than urban county libraries over the 10-year period.\(^{16}\) In 2017, operating revenues for urban county libraries were about $30.00 per capita, on average, while operating revenues for rural county libraries were about $20.00 per capita, on average. While rural and urban libraries both experienced a modest increase over the 10-year period (about $4 more for urban and $1.50 more for rural), their operating revenues decreased in inflation-adjusted dollars. Adjusting for inflation, average library operating revenues decreased by 2.54 percent for urban county libraries and 8.62 percent for rural county libraries.

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\(^{16}\) Per capita revenue was calculated by taking total revenue for each library and dividing it by the population of the library service areas. The population service area of a library is the population within the geographic boundaries in which the library was established to serve.
The best explanation for the larger rural decline is that libraries in rural counties rely more on funding from state government than from local government. Thus, the reduction in state funding hit rural county libraries harder than urban county libraries.

Figure 8 shows operating revenues for urban and rural libraries over time by revenue source. Libraries in urban counties started with less reliance on state support and greater support from local government. Therefore, when the Commonwealth cut funding, it was easier for urban
libraries to increase local government funds to close the gap. Rural libraries needed to rely more on other sources as local government funds were less forthcoming.

As Figure 8 shows, the ratio of state to local to other funding for libraries in urban counties shifted from 28 percent state, 48 percent local, and 24 percent other in 2007 to 17 percent state, 54 percent local, and 29 percent other in 2017. The decline in state funding was offset by a 6 percent increase in local governments’ share and a 5 percent increase in other sources’ share of funding.

Rural libraries faced a different situation. The state government to local government to other sources split went from 35 percent state, 28 percent local, and 35 percent other in 2007 to 23 percent state, 31 percent local, and 45 percent other in 2017. For rural libraries, the share of funding from other sources accounted for an additional 10 percent, picking up the bulk of the decrease in state government support. This means an increased emphasis on raising non-government funds occurred at the expense of performing other library functions. Both urban and rural libraries increasingly find themselves in this position – just more so for rural libraries.
### Figure 8

**Percent of Library Operating Revenue by Revenue Source**

Average for Pennsylvania Urban and Rural Libraries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Urban County Libraries</th>
<th>Rural County Libraries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State Gov Revenues</td>
<td>Local Gov Revenues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Public Library Survey
Differences in the Characteristics of Rural and Urban Libraries

Libraries in Pennsylvania typically have few staff and small budgets. In 2017, the median number of librarians was one and the median staff was four (see Figure 9). Thus, half of the libraries had one or fewer full-time librarians and four or fewer staff members. Over half of the libraries had total operating revenue of less than $215,000 and fewer than 4,500 users.\(^\text{17}\)

Figure 9: Average Urban and Rural Library by Characteristics for All Pennsylvania Libraries (2017) and Libraries in Staff Survey Sample (2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Reporting Pennsylvania Libraries (N = 453)</th>
<th>Libraries in Staff Survey Sample (N = 114)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Libraries</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban (240)</td>
<td>Urban (51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural (213)</td>
<td>Rural (63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarians Mean</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarians Median</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Paid Staff Mean</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Paid Staff Median</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Revenue Mean</td>
<td>$816,519</td>
<td>$1,028,247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$1,310,882</td>
<td>$1,831,957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$259,489</td>
<td>$372,683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$1,310,882</td>
<td>$372,683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Revenue Median</td>
<td>$214,632</td>
<td>$238,913</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$339,172</td>
<td>$372,683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$115,029</td>
<td>$372,683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$1,831,957</td>
<td>$372,683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$377,624</td>
<td>$372,683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Users Mean</td>
<td>11,763</td>
<td>15,059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16,568</td>
<td>23,082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6348</td>
<td>8,564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Users Median</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>5,370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6,592</td>
<td>8,173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2901</td>
<td>3,618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8,173</td>
<td>3,618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visitors per Week Mean</td>
<td>1,793</td>
<td>2,292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2,655</td>
<td>3,670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>822</td>
<td>1,173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visitors per Week Median</td>
<td>772</td>
<td>819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,313</td>
<td>1,567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>374</td>
<td>499</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Public Library Survey, 2017; Shippensburg University, Library Staff Survey, 2020.

As expected, libraries in urban counties were larger, with an average of more than $1 million in revenues, about five librarians, and 15 paid staff members. Large systems, like Philadelphia, tended to skew the data. If one looks at the median, the typical urban county library had two librarians, six staff members, and $340,000 in revenue. This was larger than rural counties, where over half of the libraries had fewer than one full-time librarian, two and a half staff members, and $115,000 in revenues.

\(^{17}\)Data were not collected at the branch level. Therefore, a library with three branches is treated as one library even though their librarians, staff, and revenue are spread out among the three branch libraries and the central library. Therefore, the size of libraries was exaggerated because of the data collection method. In rural counties, only 7 percent of libraries had branches, and in urban counties, 15 percent had branches, including the Philadelphia Library System with 52 branches. These libraries skewed the means upward, so the median is a better indicator.
To summarize, most Pennsylvania libraries are small operations with few paid staff and professional librarians. These libraries are increasingly relying on private funds, as government sources, particularly those from the Commonwealth, have not kept up with inflation. Overall, libraries lost more than 10 percent of their purchasing power, with an even greater loss for libraries in rural counties. While Pennsylvania libraries are serving fewer users and have fewer visitors, there has been a large rise in electronic media and programming for both adults and children.

Up to this point, this research has focused on overall average trends. The problem with this approach is that statistics from larger libraries tend to overwhelm those from smaller libraries. Salaries and benefits from the Philadelphia Library System make up a large percentage of the Commonwealth’s expenditures. While these libraries serve a greater number of people, they do not give a clear picture of how the approximately 450 individual libraries are doing. Therefore, Figure 10 examines operational factors on a per capita (1,000-person) basis. Furthermore, because of curious data entries for some libraries, resulting in substantial data outliers, Figure 10 uses the medians (the 50 percentile) to mitigate extremes and give a better idea of a library’s experience, on average. By using these techniques, a smaller library receives as much weight as a larger one. All factors, except salaries, benefits, and hours open per week were calculated per capita (1,000 persons in the service area).
Figure 10: Urban and Rural Library Characteristics, per Capita, 2007 and 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Urban County Libraries (N = 240)</th>
<th>Rural County Libraries (N = 213)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>0.395</td>
<td>0.373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarians</td>
<td>0.129</td>
<td>0.131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Salaries</td>
<td>$25,915</td>
<td>$31,961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Benefits</td>
<td>$4,601</td>
<td>$4,555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Users</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits</td>
<td>4,092</td>
<td>3,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation</td>
<td>5,353</td>
<td>5,550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print Material</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>2,367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e-Books</td>
<td>1,065</td>
<td>1,065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Computers</td>
<td>709</td>
<td>469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Computer Users</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wireless Users</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Attendance</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Programs</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Program</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Figure 10 shows that, in 2017, rural libraries had fewer staff per 1,000 residents (0.373 urban versus 0.326 rural) than urban libraries, and both libraries had similar numbers of librarians at about 0.13. Salary and benefits were higher for urban libraries, perhaps reflecting a higher cost of living. Salary increases over the 10-year period appeared in line with inflation, although benefits did not keep pace. Given the educational requirements associated with positions in libraries, overall salaries and benefits were not high.18

Rural counties lagged in library circulation, but have more print materials per capita. Rural libraries had fewer e-books as well. Interestingly, rural libraries only had slightly fewer programs than urban libraries, but the attendance gap was larger. Transportation to libraries poses a bigger challenge for individuals in rural areas simply because public transportation options are not as readily available. In both groups, there was a substantial increase in programs, but urban libraries matched this increase with increased attendance.

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18 The lack of health care benefits, even for the library director, was raised during the staff focus group at one library.
Survey of Library Staff

As noted in the Methodology section, a total of 144 respondents completed the library staff survey, with 75 percent of respondents indicating that they were library directors. However, only 114 of the surveys could be linked to a library; six respondents did not report the name of the library, likely to maintain confidentiality; and six libraries were not in the database. There were also multiple responses (N = 18) from the same library; in most cases, the respondents listed themselves as the library director, suggesting the surveys represented various branch libraries. The results that follow use responses from all 144 respondents. However, the sample shrinks to 136 when making urban versus rural comparisons. Only 114 responses could be linked to a unique library in the Public Libraries Survey dataset to allow library demographic and operational comparisons, such as those in Figure 9.19

As Figure 11 illustrates, the responses for the library staff survey cover the Commonwealth, with the north central and northeast regions appearing under-sampled. Given the response rate, which was between 25 and 30 percent, the regional diversity, and the similar characteristics to the Commonwealth as a whole, the results fairly represent libraries across Pennsylvania.

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19 This equates to a 7 percent margin of error with 144 respondents, assuming a dichotomous variable with a 50 percent value.
The first set of questions dealt with how much time staff spent assisting patrons in various areas. These were broken down into traditional library roles, help with personal issues, and help with governmental and related tasks. Figure 12 and Figure 13 present these results.²⁰

Traditional library functions were evident with a heavy emphasis on assisting patrons with finding reading materials (reading advisories) and DVDs. Assistance with digital library services, including e-books, reflected the growing influence technology has on library services. While most library staff reported that they only occasionally assist in locating information on health issues, substance abuse, and wellness and mental health issues, nearly one-fifth reported

²⁰ The numbers reported in Figure 12 and 13 are the percentages responding in each category. For example, 16 percent of respondents reported never helping patrons with information requests associated with homework. Rows add to 100 percent, plus or minus 1 percent due to rounding. The number of respondents ranged from 140-144, as not all respondents answered every question.
having to assist patrons with these areas often or all the time. The results did not differ based on whether the library was in an urban or rural county.²¹

**Figure 12: Percentage of Time Spent Assisting Patrons by Specific Assistance Type²²**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff Time Spent On:</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>All the Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading advisories²³</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping with research on specific subjects</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locating DVDs and entertainment software</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital library services or e-books</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on health issues</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on substance abuse</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on wellness and mental health</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Shippensburg University, Library Staff Survey, 2020.

The second set of survey questions deals with time spent helping patrons with work-related and government-related tasks. Apart from the time spent helping with computers, it is striking how much effort goes to helping with job applications, preparing tax forms, and completing PennDOT forms. Over half of the library staff members reported they were often called upon to assist in these three areas. Certification renewal was heavily reported, as was the need for help with public assistance. Figure 13 shows the wide variety of tasks that library staff address regularly.

²¹In each urban versus rural analysis, the researchers set the level for statistical significance at the 0.05 level, meaning that the differences are not likely to happen by chance 5 percent of the time.

²²The number of responses for almost all questions ranged from 142-144 in the staff survey used for the construction of Figures 12 through 20.

²³According to Saricks and Brown (1997), a reading advisory involves a librarian assisting a patron with finding a book, typically fiction, that meets the reader’s needs.
Figure 13: Percentage of Time Spent Assisting Patrons with Government and Work-Related Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff Time Spent On:</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>All The Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning to use computers</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job applications</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification renewal</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completing forms for PennDOT</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessing information on public assistance</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax preparation</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voter registration</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal aid information</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration information</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information for other government services</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Shippensburg University, Library Staff Survey, 2020.

Library staff in rural counties reported spending more time helping with certification renewal than staff in urban counties, with about 50 percent of rural staff helping often or all of the time and 25 percent of urban staff helping often or all of the time. Respondents from rural libraries reported more staff time devoted to the completion of PennDOT forms and applications for public assistance when compared to libraries in urban counties. Staff at urban libraries reported helping with voter registration more often than their rural counterparts. For the other services, there was no significant difference between rural and urban libraries.

The wide variety of requests by patrons makes training an important issue. Figure 14 shows that, for traditional library functions, such as reading advisories and digital library services, staff reported a high level of training (responses 4 or 5 on the scale). This was not the case for several areas, particularly those relating to health issues, substance abuse, and mental health and wellness. For these three areas, less than 20 percent reported that they were well trained.
(responses 4 or 5 on the scale) and between 36 percent and 47 percent of staff reported that they were not adequately trained (responses 1 or 2 on the scale) to assist patrons in these areas.

Given the opioid epidemic’s impact in Pennsylvania, it is important to note that more than one-third of the respondents reported they do not think they are adequately trained to help patrons address these issues. However, when linking the training responses to how often they dealt with the issue (Figure 12), most of the respondents who reported dealing with these issues thought they were adequately trained. Staff members who reported never or only occasionally addressing questions in these three areas also reported their training was less than adequate. There are no statistically significant differences in training between staff at urban and rural libraries.
### Figure 14: Assessment of Training for Traditional Library Functions and Emerging Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training in:</th>
<th>Not Adequately Trained 1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Very Well Trained 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading advisories</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping with research on specific subjects</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locating DVDs and entertainment software</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital library services or e-books</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on health issues</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on substance abuse</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on wellness and mental health issues</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Shippensburg University, Library Staff Survey, 2020.

In the areas of work and government-related services, respondents gravitated to the middle of the scale, indicating some training (Figure 15). Library staff expressed that their training was adequate to assist patrons in operating public computers, completing job applications, and completing forms from PennDOT. Perceptions of training to assist with tax preparation, immigration questions, and legal aid were lower. Except for immigration services, where staff at rural libraries reported slightly less training, there are no statistically significant differences between responses from urban and rural libraries.
Figure 15: Assessment of Training for Assisting Patrons with Work- and Government-Related Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training in:</th>
<th>Not Adequately Trained 1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Very Well Trained 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning to use computers</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job applications</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification renewal</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completing forms for PennDOT</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessing information on public assistance</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax preparation</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voter registration</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal aid information</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration information</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information for other government services</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Shippensburg University, Library Staff Survey, 2020.

Beyond training, libraries face challenges in other areas when dealing with equipment and physical space; Figure 16 summarizes some of these challenges. Figure 16 presents the results of respondents’ assessment of whether their library was meeting patron demand. The pre-survey belief was that libraries are not meeting patron demands in three areas: number of hours the library is open, accessibility of public computers and Wi-Fi, and Internet service speed. However, library staff respondents reported that these demands were being met.
Close to three-fourths of library staff who responded reported the library was meeting the demands of its patrons (a 4 or 5 on the scale) when it came to providing public computers with adequate internet access and bandwidth for entertainment, accessing information, completing job applications, and using other online services. Library staff more often reported challenges in meeting patrons’ needs for meetings or workspace.

The comparison of rural and urban libraries on access to the Internet and adequate bandwidth found that while most rural libraries thought they were meeting patrons’ demands, the staff at urban libraries more often reported that they were totally meeting demand (5 on the scale). This was the only area where urban and rural libraries differed.

Figure 17 shows the areas of concern expressed by library staff in the survey. These concerns are more specifically addressed in the later section discussing the results of the focus groups with library staff.
Figure 17: Areas of Concern Expressed by Library Staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Not a Problem</th>
<th>Somewhat a Problem</th>
<th>A Problem</th>
<th>A Significant Problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical space</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information technology support</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of staff</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff turnover</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of volunteers</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer turnover</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate materials</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation for patrons</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall funding</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Shippensburg University, Library Staff Survey, 2020.

Funding was reported as the most significant issue with close to three-fourths of library staff seeing this as a problem or a significant problem. This is followed by physical space, the number of staff, and information technology support. Interestingly, transportation also stood out as a major problem. Staff turnover, the number of volunteers, volunteer turnover, and the adequacy of materials were not seen as problems by most respondents.

Library staff from rural counties more often reported that funding was a problem, with about half responding it was a significant problem. Respondents from rural county libraries more often saw information technology support and transportation as problems than respondents from urban libraries.

Figure 18 shows library staff members’ perceptions of the library’s importance within their community. While library staff may be biased, an overwhelming majority of respondents saw their library’s importance as being a center for people to gather. Over half of the respondents saw the library as the primary outlet for people who needed assistance. Few respondents thought that their library was not important within their community (1 or 2 on the scale). The question of whether the library acts as a shelter or limited housing option received the most mixed response. We expected rural libraries to have a more prominent role in this for their community, given the few public alternatives that exist; however, there was no significant difference between rural and urban counties. Libraries played a major role in providing shelter for urban and rural communities alike.
As discussed in the earlier analysis of the Public Libraries Survey, funding was a major concern for libraries and the trend data support this assertion. While libraries rely mainly on government sources for revenue, they have the most control over private donations and fundraising (the “Other” category). Figure 19 reports library staff members’ perceptions of the importance of these other funding sources to the library. Respondents from urban libraries were more likely to report municipal tax levy as a revenue source and to use “Friends of Library” groups to raise money.
Figure 19: Library Staff Reporting on Revenue Sources Beyond State Funding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which of the following is a revenue source for your library?</th>
<th>Not a Revenue Source</th>
<th>Minor Revenue Source</th>
<th>Major Revenue Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Municipal tax levy</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funds raised by library's Board of Directors</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funds raised by &quot;Friends of Library&quot;</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business donations</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual donations</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grants</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Shippensburg University, Library Staff Survey, 2020.

Respondents indicated a wide variety of fundraising efforts as shown in Figure 20. No single area dominated the reported fundraising efforts. While not many staff selected the “enormous effort” response, significant percentages of respondents reported efforts on the higher end of the scale (responses 3 and 4), indicating that effort was being made by most libraries. On average, respondents reported spending 20 percent of their time on fundraising; the median was 15 percent, indicating that half of the library staff responding spent 15 percent or more of their time on fundraising. These were typically not volunteer hours by paid library staff: respondents said less than 20 percent of time spent on fundraising was volunteer time. While not excessive, the hours dedicated to fundraising reflect substantial time away from other library functions.
For the most part, urban and rural county libraries were similar in terms of library characteristics. Figure 21 compares responses using two different definitions to categorize urban and rural. The first is the Center for Rural Pennsylvania county definition used thus far throughout this report. The second comes from the survey where the researchers asked respondents to self-identify whether their library was rural or urban. Interestingly, 40 percent of respondents in urban counties felt their library was rural. Only 8 percent of those in rural counties thought their library was urban. Therefore, the self-identifiers classified their library as rural 79 percent of the time and as urban 21 percent of the time. Figure 21 uses both definitions and only includes questions that showed a statistically significant difference (5 percent level.)

Staff task requests and training did not show a clear pattern. There was greater demand for personal issue assistance in respondent-identified urban libraries and greater demand for government-type services (i.e., certification, PennDOT, public assistance) in respondent-identified rural libraries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In a typical month, how much effort is spent raising money through the following means:</th>
<th>No Effort</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Enormous Effort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appealing to local government for more funds</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing grants</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soliciting business donations</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soliciting individual donations</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holding fundraisers</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renting out physical space (either hourly or long-term)</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Shippensburg University, Library Staff Survey, 2020.
The Role of Rural Public Libraries in Providing Access to Online Government Services

The clearer patterns emerge in the responses for problem areas. It is clear that rural areas had more issues with the Internet, transportation, and funding. This is consistent with anecdotal evidence and are areas to examine further for rural libraries.

When it comes to fundraising, libraries in urban areas relied on municipal taxes more than rural libraries; this finding is consistent with revenue data. Rural libraries had a great emphasis on private donations and holding fundraisers. It is not surprising that self-identified rural libraries spent 23 percent of their staff time fundraising, on average, while self-identified urban libraries only spent 14 percent, on average. When applying the rural and urban county designations from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, the difference is much smaller, with rural county libraries

---

Figure 21: Urban versus Rural Differences in Staff Survey Responses Using the Center for Rural Pennsylvania's Definition of Rural versus Respondent's Self-Identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Specific Areas</th>
<th>Rural (CRPA)</th>
<th>Self-Identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time assisting patrons with:</td>
<td>Health Issues</td>
<td>Not Statistically Significant</td>
<td>Urban Greater Demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Substance Abuse Issues</td>
<td>Not Statistically Significant</td>
<td>Urban Greater Demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voter Registration, Immigration, Other</td>
<td>Not Statistically Significant</td>
<td>Urban Greater Demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Certification Process</td>
<td>Rural Greater Demand</td>
<td>Not Statistically Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PennDOT Forms and Public Assistance</td>
<td>Rural Greater Demand</td>
<td>Not Statistically Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training to deal with:</td>
<td>Job Searches</td>
<td>Not Statistically Significant</td>
<td>Rural Less Well Trained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other Services</td>
<td>Not Statistically Significant</td>
<td>Rural Less Well Trained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Immigration</td>
<td>Rural Less Well Trained</td>
<td>Rural Less Well Trained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Areas</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Rural More Problems</td>
<td>Rural More Problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>Rural More Problems</td>
<td>Rural More Problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff Turnover</td>
<td>Not Statistically Significant</td>
<td>Urban More Problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>Rural More Problems</td>
<td>Rural More Problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising Sources and Time Spent</td>
<td>Municipal Tax</td>
<td>Urban Larger Source</td>
<td>Urban Larger Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friends of Library</td>
<td>Urban Larger Source</td>
<td>Urban Larger Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Rural Larger Source</td>
<td>Rural Larger Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fundraising Events</td>
<td>Rural Larger Source</td>
<td>Rural Larger Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Renting Space</td>
<td>Urban Larger Source</td>
<td>Urban Larger Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percent of Time Spent</td>
<td>Not Statistically Significant</td>
<td>Rural More Time Spent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

24 For the self-identifiers, the number of cases is typically 144. However, using the Center for Rural Pennsylvania’s definition entails linking each respondent to a county, the number of respondents shrinks to 136.
having spent 21 percent of their time, on average, to urban county libraries 20 percent, on average.

A few library staff members reported spending over 75 percent of their time on fundraising, thus skewing the results. For this reason, the median is a better indicator. Self-identified urban libraries spent 10 percent of their time on fundraising as compared to 20 percent for self-identified rural libraries; applying the Center for Rural Pennsylvania’s definition, libraries in urban counties spend 12 percent of their time compared to 15 percent for libraries in rural counties.

Overall, this survey shows a diverse set of demands on both staff and libraries. Library staff members were not always well trained in this diverse set of tasks, but appeared to become more trained as demand warrants. Libraries’ greatest challenge appeared to be funding, staffing, and keeping up with technology and support. The respondents confirmed the notion that the role of the library has shifted, such that they are now community centers for people to gather and places to find help on a multitude of issues.

**Survey of Library Patrons**

As noted in the Methodology, respondents for the survey were self-selected. Therefore, their responses do not represent library users across the Commonwealth, and they do not necessarily represent their own libraries. Keeping this in mind, Figures 22 and 23 show how the respondents (N = 70) viewed their library.
Respondents were generally pleased with the services provided at their libraries, with no factor standing out as a problem. Minor problems existed with public computers, Wi-Fi, and the hours of operation. Respondents believed that the library staff members were trained to answer their questions. Some patrons reported having a few problems with government forms. Patrons saw their library as having an expanded role within their communities. Figure 23 shows that patrons viewed the library as a place to gather where people can receive help with various issues. In an era of distrust of government and public institutions generally, it is nice to know that librarians
are highly trusted (Smith, 2019). This perception is important as governments consider where people are willing to go to seek help with obtaining public services.

**Figure 23: Patrons’ Perceptions of Their Library’s Role in the Community**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither Agree or Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The library is the most important area for people to gather in my community.</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The library is a place for people to go when they have problems.</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The library is the primary place in my community for people to go when they have problems.</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My librarian is a trustworthy resource.</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Analysis of Focus Groups with Library Staff**

**Our Unique Rural (OUR) Libraries**

Before presenting the results of the focus groups and individual interviews, it is imperative to point out a central finding of this study: each rural library is unique because of the community that it serves, its physical space, its library staff, and the services that bring patrons to the library. Data from the focus groups with library staff and patrons provide only a glimpse into the life of each of these six libraries. During the focus groups, library staff shared anecdotes that could fill volumes. Individual interviews with patrons provided poignant stories about not only what the library means now but also what the library has meant across generations.

**Library Facilities and Their Communities**

While the six libraries that agreed to participate in this project (by hosting focus groups with library staff and promoting the individual interviews with patrons) were self-selected, the six libraries represent geographic diversity and diverse system models. The analysis begins by examining the libraries’ facilities.

Three of the six libraries included in this study are in historic buildings.
The Annie Halenbake Ross Library is located within the City of Lock Haven. The original portion of the structure was the home of Annie Halenbake Ross; she bequeathed her home to the city to establish a free public library. The library opened in 1910 and additions to the library took place in 1916, 1964, and 1978.\textsuperscript{25}

The B.F. Jones Memorial Library in Aliquippa opened to the public in February 1929; it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and in the Pennsylvania Inventory of Historic Places. The library is named after Benjamin Franklin Jones, Sr., who was one of the founders of Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation.\textsuperscript{26} The ninety-one-year-old building is on the main street of Aliquippa, a town whose population has declined from its historic high of 27,116 in 1930 to 8,908 according to the 2018 Census estimates.\textsuperscript{27}

The Warren Library Association was founded in 1873 and was housed in the Struthers Library Theatre Building located in the City of Warren, with the theater providing financial support for the library. In 1916, the library moved to its current location in the city.\textsuperscript{28}

The remaining three libraries moved from their original locations into dedicated library facilities within the last 40 years. At two of these three libraries, the library directors spearheaded the public effort for the new facility.

The Fulton County Public Library was initially housed in the former American Legion within the Borough of McConnellsburg. In 1989, the building moved to its current location.\textsuperscript{29} The Fulton County Historical Society Library was moved to the library during its most recent renovation.\textsuperscript{30}

The Bellwood-Antis Public Library was created in 1965 and was housed in a small building along the main street in Bellwood. As the library grew, demands for additional physical space emerged. In 1980, a new facility opened just down the street from the original space. The space was designed to promote increased

\textsuperscript{25} For additional information about the Annie Halenbake Ross Library, visit the library’s website: http://www.rosslibrary.org/Annie_Halenbake_Ross_Library/.
\textsuperscript{26} The B.F. Jones Memorial Library provides additional information about its historic building at its website: https://bfjoneslibrary.org/.
\textsuperscript{27} U.S. Census Bureau, 1950, 1950 Census of Population: Volume I, Number of Inhabitants: Pennsylvania, p. 38-10; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020, Quick Facts: Aliquippa City, accessed at: https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/aliquippacitypennsylvania.\textsuperscript{28}
\textsuperscript{29} Additional information about the Warren Public Library can be found on its website at: https://www.warrenlibrary.org/.
\textsuperscript{30} For additional information about the Fulton County Public Library, visit the library’s website at: https://fultoncountylibrary.org/.
\textsuperscript{30} By housing the Historical Society’s research room in the library, the community gained more access to the collection and the library gained an annual contribution of $1200 from the Historical Society.
use by the community; the library expanded again in 1997 and 2007, adding space for more community programs and a dedicated children’s room.\textsuperscript{31}

The Barrett Paradise Friendly Library was founded in 1909. As the library was outgrowing its space, the library director and a team of community members fought for a dedicated library tax; the tax was adopted in the 1990s. The library’s current location opened in 2008.\textsuperscript{32}

**Library Staff**

The library director invited library staff members to participate in the focus groups; as such, some staff did not participate because of work schedules, parental leave, or the need to have staff providing library services. The number of paid staff (both full- and part-time) participating in this project varied at the six libraries from two to nine, for a total of 37 staff expressing their views during the focus groups.\textsuperscript{33} At the start of the interview, researchers asked library staff the number of years they had worked at the library. The longest-serving librarian had worked 49 years at her library,\textsuperscript{34} while one staff member had worked for two months at his library. The number of hours worked each week by focus group participants varied. Full-time library staff reported working between 35 and 40 hours each week; part-time library staff worked between 4 and 30 hours per week.

Job responsibilities varied across the six libraries, with more specialization being evident when the size of the staff was larger. At the library with only two full-time staff, each reported to completing virtually all tasks, with the exception that one staff member did more of the cataloging than the other. At one of the libraries with more full-time staff, the responsibilities of each librarian was more specific: circulation, inter-library loan, administrative, cataloging, outreach, history and genealogy, children, and youth. One library had a dedicated IT specialist; this library also had one staff member who was responsible for marketing and adult programming.

\textsuperscript{31} Additional information about the Bellwood-Antis Public Library can be found on its website at: http://bapl.lib.pa.us/.

\textsuperscript{32} Additional information about the Barrett Paradise Friendly Library is available at: http://barrettlibrary.org.

\textsuperscript{33} The dates and the number of staff members participating in the focus groups at each library are as follows: Annie Halenbake Ross Library, October 10, 2019, eight staff; Barrett Paradise Friendly Library, August 21, 2019, five staff; Bellwood-Antis Public Library, August 4, 2019, two staff; B.F. Jones Memorial Library, August 8, 2019, nine staff; Fulton County Public Library, four staff; and Warren Public Library, September 10, 2019, nine staff.

\textsuperscript{34} The physical location of the library moved during the librarian’s tenure, but it was still operating under the same name.
Library staff members described their interactions with the patrons, with an emphasis on the assistance they provided in accessing online materials. Staff members reported helping patrons access PennDOT drivers’ license and vehicle registration services. In the case of vehicle registrations, the assistance often revolved around the need to print documents.\textsuperscript{35} Staff at one library reported that the library had the only photocopier and fax machine available to the public in the community.\textsuperscript{36}

Beyond assisting patrons with accessing online services, library staff reported an array of interactions with the public. Much of the emphasis at the six rural libraries was on developing and promoting children’s programming. Tours of the six libraries provided evidence of this. Each of the six facilities had dedicated space for children’s programming. Library directors reported spending at least one-third of their collection development monies on resources for their children’s collections.

During tours, the library directors and staff took great pride in showing the research team its children’s collection and space for children’s programming. Two examples show the efforts the libraries have placed on these spaces. At one library, staff had created a “train station” for children to use the materials. This was particularly fitting because an active railroad line runs immediately behind the library and can be easily heard within the facility. At another library, a gift from an NFL player supported the renovation of the children’s area; the player had ties to the library from when he was a child.

An example of children’s programming that one of the libraries reported was its annual show featuring snakes and exotic animals. Attendance at this event stretches the library’s physical and parking capacity to such an extent that the library made this a ticketed (but still free) event.

Efforts to engage adults and young adults varied across the group of libraries. While several libraries promoted after-school programs targeting young adults (i.e., assistance with homework), the bulk of the programming was directed toward weekend or summer activities. Libraries reported receiving grant funding from various sources to support art programming, coding workshops, and STEM activities. Library staff discussed the array of programs regularly hosted for adults. While each of the libraries hosted a book club or a reading group, the diversity

\textsuperscript{35} During the individual interviews with patrons, 21 reported that they visited the library to print documents, including those from PennDOT, Medicare, Medical Assistance, and tax forms.

\textsuperscript{36} This community does not have public transportation available.
of programming demonstrates that libraries have gone beyond their traditional functions and serve more as a community center.

Examples of the libraries’ reach into their communities abound among these six libraries; two examples are provided to illustrate this point.

One library often hosts community lectures in the evenings. Library staff reported hosting a candidate forum for local elections, a discussion led by Fair Districts Pennsylvania, and an environmental forum within the month when the focus group occurred.

Trivia night at one of the libraries is a community event. When library staff described this event, they reported it was the event with the highest number of participants. Multiple patrons mentioned trivia with one patron noting that online registration for the event closed within hours of the link opening.

Library staff did not report many efforts to provide formalized training or educational programs. While library staff reported offering the occasional program that supported local economic or small business development (i.e., a small business development workshop hosted by Saint Francis University), libraries were much more likely to allow community partners to use their public spaces free of charge for these purposes. The research team observed this during visits at two libraries with representatives from Career Link working with clients at one location and a direct service worker interacting with her clients at another.

Each of the six libraries reported significant efforts to bring the community to the library not just to borrow books, as library staff stressed the need to serve as a community center. Five of the six libraries had a dedicated community room that served various groups ranging from the Audubon Society and Trout Unlimited to local leadership programs. Four of the six libraries planned for significant community use of the facilities when the facilities were renovated or moved to their current locations. Typically, community groups could use the libraries’ facilities at no charge, with many of the organizations annually donating to the library.

Focus groups discussed broadband access within the libraries and their communities. Library staff reported improvements in their broadband connection, but in the libraries located in historic buildings, service was not consistent within the facility. Within the communities they serve, library staff noted inconsistent Internet service, particularly in more remote areas. Library staff, as well as patrons, noted the expense associated with access to broadband technology. To assist patrons, libraries had purchased mobile hotspots to place on loan. Libraries with mobile hotspots had varying policies associated with the length of time for the loan and charges.
Library staff addressed the difficult topics of staffing needs and facilities candidly. Providing services to patrons, particularly those who need additional assistance with technology, poses challenges to those rural libraries with fewer staff. For example, one library staff member reported working with a patron for an entire afternoon to complete online job applications, leaving them little time to complete their regular duties.

Library directors have discretion to align their staffing with their program needs, but only once the library covers its traditional functions, including cataloging and circulating materials. The number of staff dedicated to technology support varied across the six libraries, with one library having approximately 1.5 of its full-time positions designated as information technology positions, and another relying on a local school district to provide its information technology needs.

One library director reported that her library did not have resources to hire a housekeeper or maintenance person, so these tasks fell to librarian staff. At another library, one part-time staff member reported that he worked in the children’s area, at the circulation desk, and as the housekeeper during his 29 hours each week.

As noted in the introduction of this section, the libraries’ facilities differed and these differences produced challenges for individual libraries. For example, in one of the libraries located in a historic building, capital expenditures for a new heating system became an emphasis of the library’s fundraising efforts, taking up staff time to write grants and seek support from community partners. Another library noted that, to come into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, it had to expend significant capital on renovations. Only one library among the six included in this study reported having sufficient capital to undertake large-scale projects, such as the replacement of a roof.

As the previous paragraph hints, each focus group raised the need to constantly engage in fundraising for the library’s needs (e.g., to improve or maintain the physical facilities or to meet ongoing costs associated with staffing and resources). At each of the six libraries, staff members reported on the development of creative fundraising efforts. Examples include events with adult beverages and hors d’oeuvres (cleverly called “Sips and Snacks in the Stacks” at one library), a murder-mystery program with the library staff as the actors, and ghost tours in the community. During the visits to the six libraries, the research team saw evidence of other fundraising efforts, including sales of local artwork, handicrafts, and costume jewelry as well as basket bingo raffles.
Library directors responded to the final question about potential changes to the Public Library Code. These comments were wide-ranging; however, the emphasis was on the rules associated with meeting the requirements to receive state funding. For example, one library director discussed the requirement that libraries spend at least 12 percent of their operating budgets on materials. She reported that when she approached the question of a waiver of this requirement, she was unable to get a clear answer from her district library consultant. Another library director pointed out the requirement that district library centers maintain a minimum of 300 16MM film titles in their collection, even though the Joint State Government Commission recommended its removal in 2010.

Library directors at each of the six libraries mentioned challenges associated with counting how many patrons are using technology provided by the library. Examples illustrate this point with one library reporting that, to count the number of individuals who use the public computers, a library staff member makes a tick mark on a chart. At another library, staff reported that patrons often do not need to enter the library to use the Wi-Fi services because the library’s signal is strong enough that they can remain outside the building; library staff debated whether to count these Wi-Fi users when reporting statistics. According to library directors, reporting requirements need to be updated to reflect changes in what libraries now do.

Analysis of Individual Interviews with Patrons

Across the six libraries, 51 individuals participated in an individual interview with a member of the research team. Researchers asked participants to describe their experiences at the library in a four-question structured interview.

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37 The research team initially planned to include library volunteers in the focus groups with library staff. After conversations with staff members at two libraries, the research team determined that volunteers would be included within the patron portion of this study.
38 The dates and times of the patron interviews, as well as the number conducted at each library, are as follows: Annie Halenbake Ross Library, Tuesday, December 10, 2019, 4:00 PM – 7:00 PM, eight interviews; Barrett Paradise Friendly Library, Tuesday, February 4, 2020, 11:00 AM – 2:00 PM, 10 interviews; Bellwood-Antis Public Library, Saturday, February 1, 2020, 9:30 AM – 12:30 PM, six interviews; B.F. Jones Memorial Library, Saturday, December 7, 2019, 9:00 AM – 12:00 PM, seven interviews; Fulton County Public Library, Thursday, November 21, 2019, 10 interviews; and Warren Public Library, Monday, January 27, 2020, 4:30 PM – 7:30 PM, 10 interviews.
39 Information about the online patron survey was provided at each of the six libraries where the patron interviews were conducted. Initially, the researchers had hoped that patrons would complete the online survey and the interview would provide additional details. During the initial series of interviews, the research team realized that this approach was not practical because computers were located in another section of the library away from the interview location.
While specific demographic data were not collected about the individual respondents, the research team made an effort to interview a diverse group of patrons and volunteers. Based upon the research team’s observations, the individuals who participated ranged in age from their early 20s to late 80s; 35 females and 16 males participated in the individual interviews. The research team began the interview by asking the participant how often they visited the library. Of the 51 participants, 27 (52.6 percent) reported visiting the library at least once each week. Many of the patrons reported visiting a library since they were children, often the library where the interview was taking place or its previous location within the community. Eleven patrons (22 percent) reported visiting other libraries besides the one participating in the research study.

When asked about what services or resources they used when they visited the library, the answers ranged from borrowing books, borrowing audio or video materials, using the printer or fax, reading newspapers or magazines, attending a children’s program, attending a community event, making social connections, to using the Wi-Fi. Unique responses showed other uses as well. For example, one woman discussed at length her work with the library staff to obtain materials to homeschool her daughter.

In response to the question about using the library’s computers, the most common answers from patrons were that they used the computers for a work-related activity, to search for jobs or related employment-seeking activities, to access PennDOT services, to obtain tax information or forms, and/or for entertainment.

When asked about the library facilities, patrons typically shared their appreciation of the building using descriptive terms such as beautiful, quiet, and cozy. Patrons were equally complimentary about the staff, using descriptors such as helpful, friendly, patient, knowledgeable, and welcoming. At several libraries, patrons commented that the staff was particularly helpful to older adults who need assistance with either the computers, smartphones, or electronic reading devices; one patron noted the staff’s positive treatment of volunteers. Two patrons at the same library offered perspectives that the staff needed to purchase materials that are more ideologically conservative; one male patron labeled the staff as “liberal.”

Patrons rarely expressed concerns about the library’s condition, but in a few cases, noted that the library needed a new heating system or lacked air conditioning. Patrons at two libraries pointed out the need for additional maintenance, including water damage at one library. Patrons
at two libraries lamented about the lack of a dedicated library parking lot or the poor condition of the existing parking lot.

Researchers asked patrons about additional services they thought the library could offer. Three patrons at three different libraries would like the ability to print a list of books they have borrowed so that they do not borrow the same books again. Patrons who visited other libraries offered suggestions based upon those experiences. These suggestions included hosting legal services within the library, specific types of classes or camps, literacy programs, and having a place to eat (either a snack bar or an area where patrons could bring a brown bag lunch). Only two patrons provided comments related to technology, with one requesting more tech support and the second noting the need to update the computers (the computers are “slow”). Patrons expressed a desire for increased hours at four of the six libraries.

Beyond the responses to the individual interview questions, conversations with patrons revealed the large number of roles that the library fulfills within its community. A comment from a patron at each of the six libraries supports the central role of the library.

Annie Halenbake Ross Library – Patron 8 – “Being a rural area, this is a very valuable asset to the community. At any given time, there are people in here.”

Barrett Paradise Friendly Library – Patron 1 – The library “has a good fan base in the community.”

Bellwood-Antis Public Library – Patron 5 – “I think the community is fortunate to have it.”

B.F. Jones Memorial Library – Patron 3 – “It needs to survive for the community; it is a mainstay. It is stable; people feel an attachment.”

Fulton County Public Library – Patron 5 – “Rural libraries are the marketplace of ideas. It is a safe place.”

Warren Public Library – Patron 4 – “If this library closed, the soul of our community would be gone.”

CONCLUSIONS

The focus groups with library staff and the individual interviews with patrons reinforce the unique nature of rural libraries. While they are unique in terms of their physical facility, the level of staffing, and the resources available to provide services, one commonality they share is that they are a place of trust within their communities.
Given this role, sufficient funding for rural libraries must be addressed. The data from the Public Library Survey (PLS), as well as the Shippensburg University Library Staff Survey, present adequate evidence to conclude that Pennsylvania’s public libraries now have 10 percent less purchasing power per resident than they did a decade ago. Compared to the rest of the country, Pennsylvania’s per capita revenue is substantially lower and the gap is growing.

Figure 21 summarizes the differences between rural and urban libraries in Pennsylvania. Rural libraries need additional support for staff professional development and internet services. Rural libraries are less likely to receive revenue from a municipal tax and support from a “Friends of the Library” organization. Rural libraries also often provide community space free whereas their urban counterparts can rent the space for a fee, even if the fee is nominal.

Staff turnover, while a challenge for urban libraries, is not an issue for libraries in rural areas. The data collected from the library staff focus groups support the lack of staff turnover, as 40 percent of staff indicated they had worked at the library for 10 or more years.

Patrons interviewed uniformly shared positive experiences with their libraries; if there is a missing piece of data in this project, it is that researchers have no indication about non-patrons’ perceptions of the library within their community. Library staff shared an abundant number of efforts designed to bring more patrons to the library. Data from the PLS bear out these efforts with an increased number of participants in library programs despite an overall decline in the number of visitors and borrowers.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

*Initiate action on the remaining recommendations from the Joint State Government Commission’s 2010 report.*

One of the recommendations not yet addressed is the consolidation of the district library centers into regional cooperatives. Following the model from Maryland, six to 10 regional cooperatives could be established with clearly defined functions. These functions should include, but not be limited to, maintaining online catalog systems for staff and patron use; developing training programs for library staff; developing online programming for patrons; and negotiating contracts with vendors.
A second recommendation to address from the 2010 report is the definition of “operating budget.” This regulatory change would have little to no cost implications and would provide clarity for library directors.

The final recommendations from the Joint State Government Commission’s report relate to funding, a source of increasing concern for rural libraries. Local governments need to employ a broader range of revenue options to support public libraries, particularly in rural areas. Allowing only the use of general appropriations or a tax on real property has not produced sufficient support for rural libraries. Alternatively, legislation could be enacted to mandate a minimum level of county funding for public libraries.

**Continue to promote partnerships that emphasize shared resources, such as the PA Forward initiative of the Pennsylvania Library Association** (see Pennsylvania Library Association, n.d.)

The research results indicated that Pennsylvania’s public libraries now have 10 percent less purchasing power per resident that they did a decade ago. At the same time, these libraries continue to be trusted resources in their communities. Promoting partnerships and shared resources, such as the PA Forward initiative of the Pennsylvania Library Association, may help libraries to continue meeting demands. The PA Forward initiative recognizes that libraries are meeting community needs and strengthening individual human capacity within communities. The initiative promotes basic literacy, information literacy, civic and social literacy, health literacy, and financial literacy with community libraries as partners for this information sharing.

Additional partnerships that focus on community well-being should also be encouraged and perhaps incentivized with funding from the Commonwealth. For example, libraries could be encouraged to use their community space for events with health care providers and social workers (see Cabello and Butler, 2017). State and county government agencies that serve at-risk populations could host “pop-up” events at libraries to promote their services.

Community engagement and recruiting individuals to serve on library boards should also be encouraged.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Public Library Code Requirements for Quality Libraries Aid, Incentive for Excellence Aid, and Equal Distribution Grants

All sections are under Title 24 of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes (2019).

§ 9334. Quality libraries aid.

(a) Regular financial effort required.--To qualify for quality libraries aid, a local library or library system shall make a minimum financial effort of $5 per capita for each person residing in the municipalities that will be part of the direct service area in which the library is applying for aid.

(b) Exception for economically distressed municipalities.--A local library or library system which applies for State aid on behalf of an economically distressed municipality, as defined in section 9340(b) (relating to equalization aid), shall expend a minimum of $2 per capita for each person residing in the municipality.

(c) Standards.--To receive aid under this section, a local library or library system shall meet the following basic standards:

(1) The local library or library system shall participate in the Access Pennsylvania Statewide Library Card Program, as provided by rules and regulations promulgated under this chapter.

(2) The local library or library system shall lend materials free of charge on a reciprocal basis to all types of libraries in this Commonwealth.

(3) The local library or library system shall provide interlibrary loans free of charge to residents of the library’s direct service area.

(4) Unless the State Librarian promulgates rules and regulations after the effective date of this section that require different hours of operation, the local library or library system shall be open for service for the following minimum number of hours:

   (i) At least 26 hours per week during those times best suited to the needs of residents of its service area, including at least six hours during the weekend period beginning on Saturday and ending on Sunday.

   (ii) Weekend hours may be reduced to four hours during time periods as community-use patterns warrant, for a maximum of ten weeks per year.

(5) The library director of the local library or library system shall annually attend at least eight hours of continuing education programs approved by the Office of Commonwealth Libraries.
(6) The local library or library system shall participate in the county library plan for the coordination of countywide services. In the absence of a county library, the local library or library system shall participate in the development of a coordinated county services plan with the district library center serving the municipalities in which the local library or library system is located. The State Librarian may on a case-by-case basis grant a waiver of participation in certain provisions of the plan.

(d) Allocation method.--Quality libraries aid shall be allocated to qualifying local libraries and library systems on a per capita basis in the following manner:

(1) The annual allocation of funds available for quality libraries aid shall be divided by the total population on which all libraries and library systems qualify for State aid to yield a per capita amount of quality libraries aid.

(2) The per capita amount of quality libraries aid calculated in paragraph (1) shall be multiplied by the total population residing within the municipalities served by a library or library system which qualifies for aid.

§ 9335. Incentive for excellence aid.

(a) Regular financial effort required.--To qualify for incentive for excellence aid, a local library or library system shall make a financial effort greater than $5 per capita for each person residing in the municipalities that will be part of the direct service area in which the library is applying for aid.

(b) Standards.--To receive aid under this section, a local library or library system shall meet the following minimum standards:

(1) The local library or library system shall qualify for quality libraries aid under section 9334 (relating to quality libraries aid).

(2) The local library or library system shall annually spend not less than 12% of its operating budget on collections, excluding costs of an unusual, emergency or nonrecurring nature. A local library or library system that spends more than 12% in the year in which it qualified for incentive for excellence aid shall increase the total amount spent on collections each succeeding year by the lesser of:

(i) five percent of its operating budget; or

(ii) the percentage increase in the appropriation for improvement of library services.

(3) Unless the State Librarian promulgates rules and regulations after the effective date of this section that require different hours of operation, the local library or a member library within a library system shall be open for full services for the following minimum number of hours:
(i) At least 45 hours per week during those times best suited to the needs of residents of its service area, including at least seven hours during the weekend period beginning on Saturday and ending on Sunday.

(ii) Weekend hours may be reduced to four hours during time periods as community-use patterns warrant, for a maximum of ten weeks per year.

(iii) A local library or member library within a library system may reduce total weekly hours by three hours per week during the ten-week period of reduced Saturday and Sunday hours if approved by the State Librarian.

(4) The local library or member library within a library system shall require at least six hours of continuing education every two years for paid staff working at least 20 hours per week in direct support of the library service.

(c) Allocation method.—The annual allocation of funds available for incentive for excellence aid shall be allocated proportionately to qualifying local libraries or library systems as follows:

(1) Tier 1 funding, which is up to 80¢ for each $1 per capita or portion thereof of surplus financial effort that a local library or library system shows that exceeds 100%, but does not exceed 150%, of the minimum financial effort required to receive quality libraries aid.

(2) Tier 2 funding, which is up to 10¢ for each $1 per capita or portion thereof of surplus financial effort that a local library or library system shows that exceeds 150%, but does not exceed 300%, of the minimum financial effort required to receive quality libraries aid. Eligibility for Tier 2 funding does not preclude receipt of Tier 1 funding.

(d) Offsets prohibited.—The following shall apply:

(1) Unless the State Librarian accepts evidence of substantial curtailment of financial ability of the community, a local library or library system may not use incentive for excellence aid to reduce its financial effort for normal and recurring operating costs.

(2) A plan for the use of incentive for excellence aid by a local library or library system may not be approved if the plan projects a decrease in local government support for normal and recurring operating costs from a previous level unless the State Librarian determines that the decrease is:

(i) directly attributable to a gift or endowment to a local library; or

(ii) there is a substantial decrease in the financial ability of the municipality on behalf of which the library or library system applied for aid.
§ 9336. Equal distribution grants.

(a) Eligibility.--The following libraries shall be eligible for equal distribution grants:

(1) Each district library center which, in its capacity as a local or county library, has a population in its local or county direct service area that is 12% or less of the population of the designated direct service area of the entire district library center.

(2) Any local libraries and library systems that meet the eligibility requirements for quality libraries aid under section 9334 (relating to quality libraries aid).

(b) Additional funding.--After all eligible county libraries have been paid the total amounts for which they qualify under section 9337 (relating to county coordination aid) for the fiscal year, any funds remaining from the allocation for county coordination aid under section 9333(e)(2)(iv) (relating to State system of aid to libraries) shall be transferred and made a part of the allocation for equal distribution grants.

(c) Allocation method.--The following shall apply:

(1) Each eligible district library center shall receive 5¢ per capita for each person residing in the entire district.

(2) The balance of the funds available for equal distribution grants shall be divided equally among local libraries and library systems as determined in subsection (d).

(d) Calculation of grants to local libraries and library systems.--A local library and library system shall receive equal distribution grants determined as follows:

(1) The total amount of money allocated shall be divided by the number of local libraries, branch libraries and bookmobiles in this Commonwealth which achieve or exceed the applicable basic standards.

(2) Each library system shall receive an equal grant for each qualifying member local library, branch library and bookmobile.

(3) Each local library shall receive an equal grant for the central library and each qualifying branch library and bookmobile.
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