

## Executive Summary

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

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September 2020

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 patrons at the focus group libraries to learn more about their experiences and the services they used.

## 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 codifi-



This project was sponsored by a grant from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a legislative agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania is a bipartisan, bicameral legislative agency that serves as a resource for rural policy within the Pennsylvania General Assembly. It was created in 1987 under Act 16, the Rural Revitalization Act, to promote and sustain the vitality of Pennsylvania's rural and small communities. Information contained in this report does not necessarily reflect the views of individual board members or the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. For more information, contact the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 625 Forster St., Room 902, Harrisburg, PA 17120, (717) 787-9555, [info@rural.palegislature.us](mailto:info@rural.palegislature.us), [www.rural.palegislature.us](http://www.rural.palegislature.us).

cation 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.

### *Secondary data results*

The data analyses revealed that, over the 10 year study period, 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.

### *Library survey results*

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.

#### *Patron survey results*

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.

#### *Focus group results*

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.

#### *Patron interviews*

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**

##### ***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.

Visit [www.rural.palegislature.us](http://www.rural.palegislature.us) for the full report, *The Role of Rural Public Libraries in Providing Access to Online Government Services*.

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