

# The Future Role of Public Libraries in Pennsylvania

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*An Assessment of Needs and Expectations | September 2025*

## Executive Summary

To effectively serve all Pennsylvanians, libraries must understand residents' needs and expectations in this changing environment so that they are ready to address the emerging needs and developments of the years ahead. This report is the culmination of a major research effort built on an inclusive outreach and learning process that gave voice to everyday Pennsylvanians and stakeholders across the library ecosystem. The research, conducted between October 2024 and June 2025, was guided by a Steering Committee of Pennsylvania library leaders and informed by an extensive literature review on broader trends affecting the role of public libraries within their communities.

## Public Libraries in Pennsylvania: The Lay of the Land

Before assessing the needs and expectations of public libraries in Pennsylvania, we need to understand the context in which public libraries in Pennsylvania now operate and what can be expected for them as they move into the future.

### The Library Ecosystem

Pennsylvania has 444 libraries serving the public. These libraries, through 637 public service outlets (including main libraries, branches, and bookmobiles), collectively serve more than 12.7 million residents, though they vary in their distribution and in the share of the state's population that they serve. Small libraries (defined as serving 10,000 residents or fewer) represent 42 percent of libraries but serve only 7 percent of the state's population; medium libraries (serving between 10,001 and 100,000 residents) represent 55 percent of libraries and serve 57 percent of the state's population; and

large libraries (serving more than 100,000 residents) represent just 3 percent of libraries but serve 36 percent of the state's population.

Perhaps contrary to public perception, public libraries in Pennsylvania are largely independent entities: Eighty-seven percent of the state's libraries are nonprofit 501(c)(3) organizations, each with its own board of directors that hires the library director, oversees operations, and assists with fundraising. The remaining libraries are either part of a local government (9 percent) or another entity such as an authority (4 percent).

Notably, the smaller the library, the more likely it is that the library is a nonprofit and the less likely that it is part of local government.

In aggregate, public libraries in Pennsylvania are primarily funded by local sources. Local governments provide an average of 63 percent of total funding.

Revenue that libraries generate themselves, such as fines, fees, or donations, accounts for an average of 20 percent. Not surprisingly, given that smaller libraries are more likely to be nonprofits, the smaller the library, the more it tends to rely on self-generated income and the less support it receives from local government. State funding accounts for just 16 percent, and less than one percent comes from the federal government.

Pennsylvania's public libraries are supported and advised by the Office of Commonwealth Libraries (OCL), a deputate of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and the Governor's Advisory Council on Library Development (GAC), whose 12 members are appointed by the governor. Administratively, public libraries in Pennsylvania are organized into 29 library

districts with every library included in a district, and 33 county-based library systems, though some independent libraries are not part of a system. Library districts are designated by OCL and GAC and receive state aid to provide leadership, coordination, and consultation to local libraries, while library systems are cooperative networks of libraries that share resources and services.

## **Trends Affecting Public Libraries in Pennsylvania**

Three Pennsylvania-specific trends—related to the population, the workforce, and broadband access—are already playing major roles in how public libraries operate and most likely will continue to affect them into the future.

### ***Trend #1: Pennsylvania's population is changing in dramatic ways.***

The population is projected to become less rural and more urban and suburban in the coming decades.

Pennsylvania's population is also aging rapidly, with a projected decline in the working-age population and becoming more diverse.

### ***Trend #2: Demand for digital skills in Pennsylvania's workforce is high.***

Today, 45 percent of jobs in Pennsylvania clearly require digital skills and another 45 percent likely do, closely mirroring national averages. At the same time, the digital skill divide is wide: Nationally, nearly 48 million U.S. workers—about one-third—lack foundational digital competencies, such as basic Excel proficiency and typing skills, which are needed for in-demand jobs across a range of industries and job levels, not only in tech-specific roles.

### ***Trend #3: Reliable high-speed internet is now essential for work, accessing services, and staying connected in Pennsylvania.***

Broadband is now widespread in Pennsylvania, with 98 percent of households owning internet-capable devices (though for many, this is primarily a mobile phone) and 90 percent subscribing to broadband service. However, nearly half (49 percent) of respondents to the Pennsylvania Broadband Survey

said paying for internet is difficult and 43 percent reported that someone in their household could work remotely if internet speeds improved.

## **What Pennsylvanians Need and Expect from Libraries**

The research for this report gathered input from across the public library ecosystem, specifically from library staff (including library directors and district and system administrators), local and state-level library partners, and, most important, the general public, both library users and non-users. This section summarizes state-level findings about the current and future needs of Pennsylvanians—both from the public's perspective and that of library leaders and staff—and then delves deeper into different types of library users.

### **Current Needs and Expectations**

#### ***Finding #1: Slightly more than half of Pennsylvanians are public library users.***

Fifty-one percent of Pennsylvanians use a public library, according to our recent statewide poll. A public library user is defined as someone who used a public library—either in person or online—at least once a year in the past three years. Library usage could have been an in-person visit to a local library or usage of online services such as catalog searches or borrowing of digital materials through apps like Libby or Hoopla. The remaining 49 percent of Pennsylvanians—non-users—used the library at most once every few years, or they hardly ever or never used their public library in the last three years.

#### ***Finding #2: Almost all Pennsylvanians have very positive views of public libraries, even those who do not use them regularly.***

This support for public libraries is multi-dimensional. At the personal level, almost all Pennsylvanians (97 percent) are aware that public libraries are open to everyone and that most services are provided at no cost to the user.

Respondents also see public libraries as welcoming (95 percent) and as a trusted source of information

(93 percent). At the societal level, they believe libraries still serve a legitimate purpose in today's world of ubiquitous online access and content (96 percent). Pennsylvanians also believe in investing in their libraries—91 percent support using public funds, funded by taxes, to ensure that libraries remain financially strong. These positive views are shared by library users and non-users alike.

***Finding #3: There is strong statewide consensus—among everyday Pennsylvanians and library leaders and staff alike—that all public libraries should offer, at a minimum, services and programs in four core areas.***

In the statewide poll, Pennsylvanians were asked about eight areas of services and programs that public libraries could be offering and whether each one was a core service. Four of the eight areas were identified as being core services, and three of them are typically associated with public libraries: encouraging reading; education and lifelong learning; and early childhood learning. Strong consensus around the fourth area, digital inclusion, shows the important role that public libraries have come to play over the last 20 years in bridging the digital divide.

***Finding #4. The remaining four areas of library services and programs are viewed as being discretionary and a way for public libraries to reflect their communities.***

Support for the four remaining areas was still very strong among Pennsylvanians: civic and community engagement; arts, culture, and creativity; economic and workforce development; and supporting language learning. However, library leaders and staff did not see them as being areas that all public libraries should provide as a baseline. Rather, respondents to the statewide survey of library leaders and staff said that public libraries should have the discretion to offer services and programs in these areas based on community needs and in alignment with community assets.

***Finding #5: Navigating the gap between users' needs, available resources, and actual demand is a challenge for library leaders.***

Pennsylvania's public libraries are already responding to user needs by offering programming that goes beyond traditional library services, even though these services and programs can strain library capacity, a reality that is often not visible or well understood by library users. The perception of library services as "free" obscures the strain that these rising costs place on the ability to provide new services. Library leaders also spoke of navigating complex and competing demands: managing staff and volunteers; budgets and operations; public relations; coordination of programs and partnerships; and maintenance of facilities, and repairs and renovations. The work is demanding, multifaceted, and increasingly central to a community's well-being—yet too often unrecognized and under-resourced.

***Finding #6: Rural libraries face additional challenges shaped by topography and other realities of being in smaller communities.***

Many rural communities in Pennsylvania have hilly terrain, narrow roads, and unpredictable weather, which makes travel difficult at certain times of the year and the installation of fiber internet cost-prohibitive. This puts rural libraries in a double bind: They serve as vital technology access points, while simultaneously seeing reduced in-person engagement from the very users they have helped bring online.

***Finding #7: Library staff and leaders are keenly attuned to identifying specific services and programs where there appears to be a lack of awareness or diminished interest.***

Respondents to the statewide survey of library leaders and staff identified several specific programs and services that they felt the public generally was not aware of: media accessible to people with disabilities (e.g., braille, audio, described movies, and large print); interlibrary loan services; reference and information services (in person or via phone or video conference); public access to computers, printers and copiers; and Wi-Fi available on site or through lendable hot spots. Library programs and services that they viewed as being increasingly peripheral to the mission of public libraries included: "one

community, one book” projects; test proctoring; assistance with filling out non-library forms; hosting ballot boxes; citizenship classes; performances, art exhibits, and film screenings; career services and job seeker workshops; meeting space for small businesses; computer training; and English language learning classes. Some librarians were reluctant to get rid of these services and programs altogether, however, knowing the need for them exists in many communities.

***Finding #8: Library leaders and staff view partnerships with outside organizations as opportunities to create added capacity and value for their communities.***

Partnerships with outside organizations whose mission is more directly tied to a service or program have been an effective way for public libraries to meet user expectations. These community partnerships span a wide range of sectors, including education, workforce development, economic development, and social services.

### **Future Needs and Expectations**

***Finding #9: Pennsylvanians want libraries that reflect the digital world we live in now—flexible, connected, and always within reach—but they might not understand the costs of integrating digital services.***

When asked about future approaches for public libraries, 76 percent of statewide poll respondents supported the idea of a fully virtual library that offers digital materials around the clock, and 74 percent of respondents expressed interest in the convenience of mobile delivery services and physical access points such as book lockers and drop-off boxes located in easily accessible community spaces like community centers and along commercial corridors.

***Finding #10: Pennsylvanians largely want LGBTQ+ offerings to remain in libraries amid minor, localized pushback.***

The statewide poll found broad public support for libraries to include LGBTQ+ materials, despite occasional high-visibility objections: Sixty-six percent

of respondents believe public libraries should include LGBTQ+ materials and/or sponsor related programs.

Despite this support, some libraries have experienced controversy. Displays of LGBTQ+ books and programs like Drag Story Hour, in particular, have sometimes resulted in community pushback, book challenges, and even threats of eliminating funding for public libraries. Many library leaders and staff remain committed to providing inclusive services, though libraries in more conservative or rural areas may be approaching these topics with added caution.

***Finding #11: Pennsylvanians want public libraries to evolve with the times, but not change too much.***

When asked whether libraries should serve as a location that resembles a coffee shop (i.e., a comfortable spot that allows for individuals to enjoy drinks and light snacks while reading or working), slightly more than half of poll respondents agreed (53 percent). Similarly, Pennsylvanians are less interested in their public libraries lending out non-traditional items (51 percent), such as games and puzzles, cooking equipment, musical instruments, and tools.

### **Library User Personas**

***Finding #12: The different types of public library users in Pennsylvania can be categorized into personas, using behavior patterns, attitudes, and more, and these personas cut across geography.***

While the poll and survey revealed no statistically significant differences across regions or even counties, there were important differences in how Pennsylvanians use their public libraries. These differences led to our development of eight distinct library user personas, each one representing the goals, behaviors, and needs of a hypothesized group of users, based on patterns observed in the data. Library user personas offer a valuable framework for understanding who uses or could be using public libraries, how to reach them, and what would be the best messages and channels of communication tailored for them. The eight library user personas are: the Book Lover, the Child-Focused, the Youth

Lounger, the Digital Independent, the Community Connector, the Resource Seeker, the Rural Retiree, and the New American. The library user personas can help libraries make decisions about collections and programming, focus resources for staffing and skills development, and inform marketing and outreach efforts.

## **Opportunities and Recommendations**

This section presents five opportunities drawn from the research findings. For each, we outline bottom-up suggestions for public libraries, followed by top-down recommendations for OCL.

### **Opportunity #1: Fully orient toward communities.**

For libraries to truly become community anchors, leaders and staff should ask questions about needs and interests at the community level in a more systematic and consistent manner. These local needs assessments could draw from the set of questions asked at the state level, which would allow for comparisons against the state results, and they could also include questions related to certain topics and questions that are relevant to a specific community. Fully orienting toward communities will help public libraries balance the expectations of the community with actual offerings, especially in the context of constrained resources and staff capacity. With firm data in hand, ideally collected over time, libraries can facilitate an ongoing conversation with their communities and even foster a sense of ownership and inclusion for them.

Recommendations for OCL: Make data collection tools for community needs assessments and program evaluations available to public libraries. Provide technical support and/or funding for data collection, especially for rural and small libraries that lack staff capacity.

Aggregate community-level data to ascertain additional findings at the state level that can be shared widely, potentially as a longitudinal effort. Disseminate best practices and support learning communities around data collection, analysis, and data-driven decision-making.

### **Opportunity #2: Build awareness of public libraries through a statewide campaign.**

Although many Pennsylvanians express deep appreciation for the idea of public libraries, this sentiment does not always translate into direct engagement with the programs and services they offer. The Awareness Campaign we created for OCL is a messaging and outreach strategy designed to promote both the use of and support for Pennsylvania's public libraries. The campaign is anchored by a call-to-action—"Check out the Library!"—which is an invitation to Pennsylvanians to act on their interest, by visiting a public library near them, taking advantage of statewide digital resources, or supporting libraries through volunteer work or donations. To support this campaign, we developed a comprehensive messaging and outreach kit to help libraries reach both current and potential users, grounded in the eight research-based library user personas.

Recommendations for OCL: Support the creation of a central hub, such as a website, where interested Pennsylvanians can easily learn how to engage with public libraries. Develop talking points and action items for local libraries and their boards to use in conjunction with this report and the Awareness Campaign kit.

Distribute the Awareness Campaign kit to local libraries in Pennsylvania and consider offering incentives or rewards for libraries that use the kit as provided or adapted (e.g., for postcards, hanging or standing banners/stanchions at events). Share the Awareness Campaign kit with statewide organizations that have an interest in promoting public libraries, such as Pennsylvania Citizens for Better Libraries, the Pennsylvania Association of Nonprofit Organizations, PaLA, and other partners. Tie the awareness campaign to adjacent and emerging messages and campaigns backed by other entities (e.g., campaigns for restricting access to screens for tweens and teens).

### **Opportunity #3: Develop human capital.**

One vital opportunity for Pennsylvania's public libraries is to strengthen the human capital that

powers them—the library leaders, staff, and trustees whose leadership, skills, and community relationships are central to each library’s success. A recurring theme in the interviews was the need for enhanced support, expanded training opportunities, and sustained strategic investment in library staff. Leaders spoke about the lack of training in areas such as leadership, advocacy, and business management—skills that are essential to overseeing budgets, facilities, and strategic partnerships, yet often absent from formal library education. Interviewees also expressed a need for trustee onboarding, continuing education, guidance on recruiting new members with a focus on board members representative of the community, and access to best practices in areas such as board terms; materials and program challenges, including those related to the LGBTQ+ community; and library advocacy.

Recommendations for OCL: Survey library directors and staff about unmet training and professional development needs, including technical, managerial, and community engagement skills, and survey trustee members to understand expectations, identify strengths and gaps in board performance, and inform trustee-support strategies. Disseminate best practices for library leaders and trustee members to manage challenges to materials and events, including those related to the LGBTQ+ community. Promote workforce strategies, including recruitment pipelines for bilingual staff in some regions.

#### **Opportunity #4: Leverage consortia for digital offerings.**

One of the most promising opportunities for strengthening public libraries in Pennsylvania lies in expanding the use of consortia for purchasing and accessing digital materials, rather than individual libraries each purchasing their own. This is particularly important for the smaller independent libraries. HSLC is already a strong partner to libraries in providing systemwide digital infrastructure through platforms like the Pennsylvania Statewide Catalog (ACCESS PA) and POWER Library, as well as a group purchasing program.

Recommendations for OCL: Conduct a statewide study of local library spending on popular digital

platforms such as OverDrive, Libby, Hoopla, and Kanopy to build a business case for state or regional consortia that negotiate with vendors. Identify initiatives that are successful in other states, including legislative actions, and evaluate their applicability to Pennsylvania. Explore ways to incentivize and provide technical support for libraries to form or join consortia and shared procurement and digital service agreements, especially in rural and under-resourced areas. Support the continued expansion of the statewide platforms POWER Library and the Statewide Catalog (ACCESS PA) to ensure their ability to provide multi-format collections, digitization, and user access across consortia.

#### **Opportunity #5: Engage in cross-sector collaborations.**

To serve as true community anchors, public libraries should aspire to engage in longer-term, cross-sector collaborations organized around larger issues of social impact, which could include workforce development; nutrition, food security, and health; arts and culture; children and youth; and environmental protection, sustainability, and conservation. Such collective impact efforts often align with state priorities and may qualify for state funding from departments and agencies in addition to PDE, including the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Health, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Department of Environmental Protection, and the Department of Community and Economic Development.

Recommendations for OCL: Provide technical assistance and incentives for public libraries to join and/or convene cross-sector collaborations. Publicize opportunities for cross-sector collaborations that include libraries to apply for funding from other state programs.

### **Final Thoughts**

The findings of this research effort are clear: Pennsylvanians love and value their public libraries. They have strong positive views of libraries at the personal and societal levels, they want their tax dollars to fund them, and they have a clear sense about baseline services and programs that all libraries should be offering. Beyond the core services,

they want their libraries to tailor additional services and programs to community needs and align them with community assets. Looking ahead, Pennsylvanians, library leaders and staff, and OCL alike want public libraries to evolve into true community anchors, deeply rooted in their local contexts and reflecting the character and needs of the population they serve. Given this solid basis, public libraries in Pennsylvania have a significant opportunity to contribute to a healthy and successful state.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>[\*PA Public Library Statistics for Reporting Year 2024\*](#)

(data collected from public libraries in 2024, to be released later in 2025), Office of Commonwealth Libraries – Bureau of Library Development (OCL-BLD). An additional 21 System Administrative Units are also listed in the dataset, but these entities do not directly serve the public.

<sup>2</sup>ibid.

<sup>3</sup>ibid.

<sup>4</sup>[\*Closing Pennsylvania's Digital Divide\*](#), National Skills Coalition, 2024.

<sup>5</sup>[\*Pennsylvania Broadband Survey\*](#), Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED), 2023.

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Scan to download the report, this summary, poll and survey instruments and reports, and the Awareness Campaign toolkit on the [Future Role of Public Libraries in Pennsylvania](#) webpage.

