Small Public Library MANAGEMENT

SECOND EDITION

Cindy Fesemyer *and* Christina Jones

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INTRODUCTION

Small Library, Big Job

Welcome! Thanks for delving into the second edition of *Small Public Library Management*. This book exists to support library directors, staff, and trustees, both by building confidence in their roles and responsibilities and by increasing understanding of how governance impacts library operations.

Today's public libraries are vibrant, innovative, welcoming, responsive, and deeply connected to the communities they serve. They are community centers, play areas, meeting spaces, social hubs, community partners, and learning organizations. Sure, today's library still circulates materials, but now those materials might include power tools, cake pans, sewing machines, gaming consoles . . . so much more than books. Of course, books and literacy remain at the heart of public libraries' missions across the globe. In short, today's libraries listen to community needs and flex to do all they can to meet those needs.

To help *you* flex within your own community, this is what you can expect of this second edition of *Small Public Library Management*:

- *This book will be honest and equitable to the best of the authors' abilities.* This second edition reflects the changing face of librarianship. As diversity of library leadership is an important issue in the profession, with more librarians and library workers representing various races, cultures, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds, the authors strive to represent diverse professional viewpoints in an effort to encourage a new generation of leaders.
- *This book is timely, reflecting librarianship in a post-pandemic world.* Everything changed in 2020. Small and rural libraries adapted to the COVID pandemic and have permanently adopted some of those on-the-fly practices as they move forward.

Updates to this new edition also include more detailed sections on current topics, including materials and program challenges, strategic planning, and policy development. There are also many insets (or text boxes) of various types that offer useful approaches and practices:

- "Success Stories" by librarians that describe real-life successes in libraryland
- "Try It" insets that suggest homework opportunities for the reader
- "Adapt and Use" insets that provide useful templates and ideas
- "On the Job" insets that offer words of wisdom

Getting Started with Your Library and This Book

Whether you started at your library years ago and were just promoted to its director or you relocated for the job, seeing the building anew through the eyes of a library director can be overwhelming. There's nothing in that building that you aren't in charge of. That includes the library's presence in the community and its virtual presence via the website and social media accounts. Some of the things you notice through your director's eyes might seem daunting and some might be a walk in the park. Everyone brings a different set of skills and areas of expertise to the job; yet virtually no one is an expert at everything. This book is intended to introduce directors to many different aspects of the job. For a deeper dive into particular subjects, we recommend that you look for additional resources.

Before you jump in, the authors have a few suggestions on how you might make good use of this book. Just as you can't fix everything in the building all at once, it might also be daunting to take in all of the information in this book in one reading. Take small bites, and find useful chapters as things happen. For example, if you are bringing on a new library board member, take a look at chapter 2 on library governance. If it's budget time and you need a little background on what that entails, look at chapter 3 on finances and budgets. Feel ownership over your library through the use of this book.

TRY IT: Share This Book with Your Board

This book is a resource for both small public library directors and their boards. Chapter 2, especially, may be a great chapter to share with your board members, particularly when they start as new trustees or need a refresher. Chapters 1–11 all contain information for both library directors and library trustees, as they hold details pertinent to both positions, but are mostly geared to directors as the primary readers.

Small libraries are mighty and numerous, but they receive very little national recognition for their innovative approaches to twenty-first-century librarianship. The trustees at small libraries receive little acknowledgment, and the staff at small libraries are clearly not in it for the paycheck. And yet small and rural libraries change people's lives. They change whole communities. The authors deeply believe small libraries deserve the same kudos as their urban counterparts.

A Note About the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS)

During the course of writing this book, IMLS was threatened with elimination. In March 2025, on the same day that Congress passed a resolution to continue funding IMLS through fiscal year 2025, "President Trump issued an Executive Order intended to dismantle the only federal agency dedicated to funding library services, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), as well as six other agencies."[1] Two lawsuits have been filed to halt the dismantling—*ALA v. Sonderling* and *State of Rhode Island v. Trump*—both of which are ongoing. Additionally, in May 2025, the president's fiscal year 2026 budget request proposed to eliminate IMLS. While the future of IMLS is uncertain, this isn't the first time IMLS has faced potential elimination. During each year of the previous Trump administration, there were attempts to eliminate IMLS, and "in each instance, the library community was able to block those efforts."[2] We write about IMLS in this book in the present tense, with the hope and belief that IMLS will continue.

NOTES

1. American Library Association, "FAQ: Executive Order Targeting IMLS," updated June 10, 2025, ala.org/faq-executive-order-targeting-imls.
2. Nathalie op de Beeck, "Executive Order Targets the Institute of Museum and Library Services," Publishers Weekly, March 17, 2025, publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/97343-executive-order-targets-the-institute-of-museum-and-library-services.html.

CHAPTER 1

An Overview of Public Libraries

Ask a random group of people to describe a public library, and you are likely to receive a wide variety of responses. One person may appreciate the variety of print and audiovisual materials that are available for loan. Another person may feel they'd be lost without the library's public access Wi-Fi or computers to keep them connected with family and friends in distant locations. Parents of small children may point to the importance of storytimes and family programs. Others might look to adult programs as a way to remain social and connected to the world.

By the time a dozen people have offered their perspectives, they'll have created a varied and detailed picture of the informational, educational, recreational, and cultural needs of the community that the library meets. From these interviews, we can obtain a subjective definition of a public library—what this vital organization means to an individual.

As the federal agency that helps support libraries and museums nationwide, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) publishes annual reports and public library statistics on its website. (Please see the note in the Introduction about the status of IMLS at the time of publication of this book.) IMLS also provides us with a concise, objective, five-point definition of a "public library":

> A public library is an entity that is established under state enabling laws or regulations to serve a community, district, or region, and that provides at least the following:
>
> (1) an organized collection of printed or other library materials, or a combination thereof;
> (2) paid staff;
> (3) an established schedule in which services of the staff are available to the public;

(4) the facilities necessary to support such a collection, staff, and schedule; and
(5) is supported in whole or in part with public funds.[1]

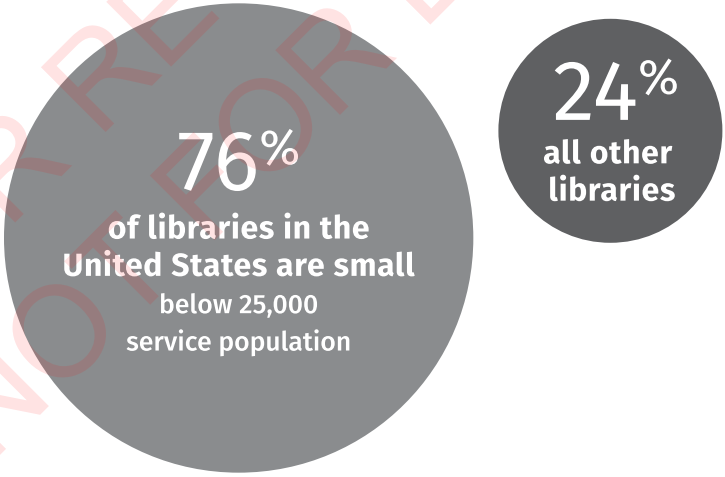
Small Library Defined

No two libraries are alike. The size of the library depends on the population served by the library and the municipal budget that supports the library. Even within the different size categories as defined by IMLS, there will be a great difference from library to library.

Library size is defined officially by IMLS and the American Library Association (ALA), but your state may define sizes in different ways. For example, in the state of Wisconsin, a library serving 10,000 people is considered a small library by IMLS and ALA, but medium-sized by the state of Wisconsin.[2] For the most current data, visit the IMLS Data Catalog for Public Libraries.

Overwhelmingly, the majority of public libraries in the United States are small libraries. In 2022, 76 percent of public libraries in the United States were small (i.e., serving a population of fewer than 25,000 people), according to IMLS data (see figure 1.1). Of the 9,248 public libraries in the country, 7,064 serve a population of fewer than 25,000 people.[3]

FIGURE 1.1: Small libraries vs. total libraries in the United States



Public Library Organizational Overview

Public libraries are for the most part local organizations. They typically exist as parts of local governments and are overseen by the communities they serve, whether it be a city, county village, tribe, a combination of those, or another agency. How exactly public libraries can be structured locally is usually determined by state statute. For its reporting purposes, the IMLS organizes a public library's government structures into the following groups:

- CC—City/County. A multi-jurisdictional entity that is operated jointly by a county and a city. City/county combinations are included here, rather than in the "Multi-jurisdictional" category.
- CI—Municipal Government (city, town, or village). A municipal government is an organized local government authorized in a state's constitution and statutes and established to provide general government for a specific concentration of population in a defined area.
- CO—County/Parish. An organized local government authorized in a state's constitution and statutes and established to provide general government.
- LD—Library District. A library district is a local entity other than a county, municipality, township, or school district that is authorized by state law to establish and operate a public library as defined by FSCS. It has sufficient administrative and fiscal autonomy to qualify as a separate government. Fiscal autonomy requires support from local taxation dedicated to library purposes (e.g., a library tax).
- MJ—Multi-jurisdictional. An entity operated jointly by two or more units of local government under an intergovernmental agreement which creates a jointly appointed board or similar means of joint governance; to be distinguished from a library which contracts to serve other jurisdictions and from special library districts.
- NL—Native American Tribal Government. An organized local government authorized and established to provide general government to residents of a Native American reservation. Native Alaskan villages are included in this category.
- NP—Non-profit Association or Agency. An entity privately controlled but meeting the statutory definition of a public library in a

given state, includes association libraries and libraries with a 501(c) designation.

- SD—School District. An organized local entity providing public elementary, secondary, and/or higher education which, under state law, has sufficient administrative and fiscal autonomy to qualify as a separate government. Excludes "dependent public school systems" of county, municipal, township, or state governments.
- OT—Other.[4]

The variety of library structures means that libraries' funding and governance models vary according to the IMLS organizational category coupled with the state statute.

While public libraries are created and governed locally, there are also regional, state, and federal organizations that provide them support and funding. The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the government agency that provides federal funding for public libraries. The mission of IMLS is to advance, support, and empower America's museums, libraries, and related organizations through grant-making, research, and policy development.

Each state in the United States has a state library agency, which provides support to public libraries located in that state. IMLS provides annual funds to each state library agency, making funding decisions for each state based on the Public Libraries Survey annual report. IMLS funds are then further allocated by the state library agency. Depending on the administrative structure of the state's public libraries, the funds are given by the state library agency to a library system, a consortium, or a similar organization. At that point, the system,* consortium, or other organizations may allocate funds to individual libraries, like your library.

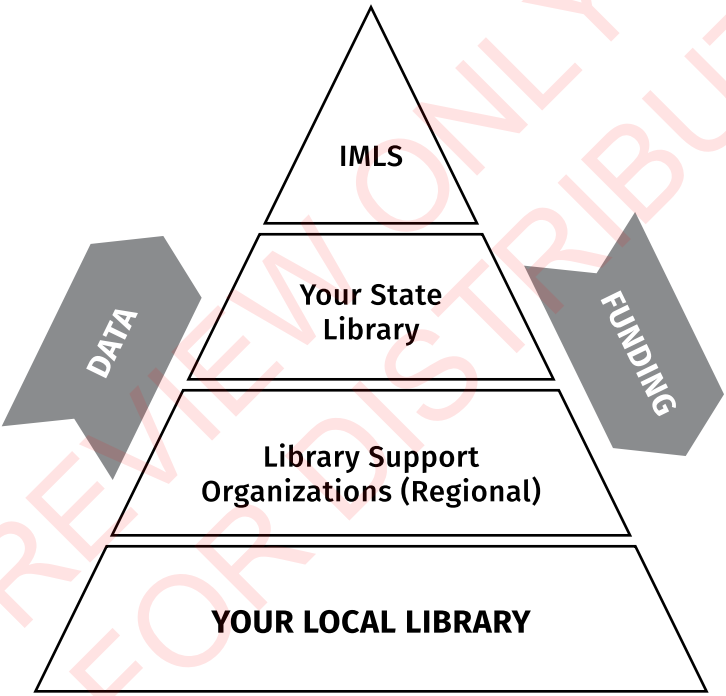
Sometimes, via a number of robust grant-making programs, IMLS will allocate grant project funds directly to an individual library or a library system, bypassing the state library agency.

Historically, federal funding has trickled downward in this hierarchy, from IMLS to state library agencies, and then down to particular library systems, consortiums, and so on. The methods that state library agencies

*_System_ is a confusing word because it might refer to a public library and its branches but also, as in this case, to a group of autonomous libraries joined by formal or informal agreements to perform various services cooperatively, such as resource-sharing or technology support. Systems may include multi-type library systems or public library-only systems. A library may be required to meet certain standards to be eligible for system membership. Some states may require individual libraries to belong to regional library systems.

use to disseminate their federal IMLS appropriations vary from state to state. Some state libraries turn over the majority of their federal funds to regional systems or consortia, while others disseminate their funds directly to individual libraries. In some states, individual libraries may get a high percentage of federal funding, while others receive no direct federal funding. As previously noted, the status of IMLS funding may have changed since publication of this book.

FIGURE 1.2: The hierarchy of federal funding and annual report data



While federal funding trickles down the hierarchy, national data filters up (see figure 1.2). In addition to providing funding to libraries, IMLS collects data on public library services, demographics, and other activities from state libraries. This data is compiled annually into the IMLS's Public Library Survey (PLS) data report. Individual libraries' annual report data goes upward through a number of agencies each year before it is aggregated into the PLS report. Each public library, large or small, produces an annual

report; historically, these are collected by the state library agency and are then submitted annually to IMLS. Your library's annual report may first be sent to your local system or consortium before it goes on to the state library, depending on your state's annual report submission guidelines. Again, the method of reporting data may have changed since publication of this book.

As you can see from the earlier data, the vast majority of libraries in the United States are small libraries. And small libraries have a lot in common with each other, despite the variances between them individually. Regardless of where your library is located or its size or budget, you are not alone.

NOTES

1. Marisa Pelczar et al., "Data File Documentation: Public Libraries in the United States, Fiscal Year 2022," Institute of Museum and Library Services, June 2024, imls.gov/sites/default/files/2024-06/2022_pls_data_file_documentation.pdf.
2. "Libraries Transforming Communities: Accessible Small and Rural Communities – FAQ," American Library Association, ala.org/tools/librariestransform/libraries-transforming-communities/access/faq#EligibilityQ3.
3. "Public Libraries Survey (PLS)," Institute of Museum and Library Services, imls.gov/research-evaluation/surveys/public-libraries-survey-pls.
4. Pelczar, "Data File Documentation."

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