

PARTNERS FOR EXCELLENCE

Public Library Systems and Local Public Libraries

Background

The goal of library systems is to provide all Wisconsin residents with access to the high-quality library service needed to meet personal, work, educational, and community goals. Before the development of public library systems, many state residents had no legal access to any public library; many more only had access to substandard library service.

The Wisconsin legislature approved legislation in 1971 enabling the creation of public library systems to address the limitations of relying solely on local support and local coordination of library service. The actual organization and development of public library systems in Wisconsin was a voluntary and gradual process. No county or public library is required to be a member of a library system, yet all of Wisconsin's 72 counties and 387 public libraries are library system members.

The creation of public library systems fostered the establishment of a strong network of resource sharing and mutually beneficial interdependence among community public libraries. Wisconsin's seventeen public library systems developed in distinct ways in response to the needs of their member libraries and area residents. They continue to evolve and respond as changes in society, resources, and technology create new demands and opportunities.

Benefits to local library service

Local public libraries appear “on the screen” as the public face of community service while public library systems “run in the background” as the underlying operating system. System support rarely steps out from behind the curtain in the public consciousness; it is designed to allow local libraries to occupy center stage.

The basic dynamic of library system membership is simple. A **public library** agrees to certain membership requirements, including the commitment to serve all system residents equitably. In return, the **library system** provides a wide range of primarily state-funded services, tailored to regional needs that enhance local library service. This relationship provides all residents of the state with improved library service, as well as the ability to use whichever library or libraries best serve their needs. Municipal libraries participate in library systems because their communities' residents benefit from this arrangement.

In return for agreeing to the membership requirements, local libraries and their patrons benefit from system membership because state aid enables systems to:

- expand and improve the interlibrary loan network through management of automated, shared catalogs
- provide specialized staff assistance and continuing education opportunities to local library staff and trustees
- facilitate delivery services and communications
- guarantee mutual borrowing privileges and monitors reimbursement for service to residents across county lines
- expand the use of new technologies
- support other cooperative services and projects in response to regional needs
- encourage enhanced, regional networking opportunities among public, school and academic libraries

(This summary is an edited and expanded version of material from Trustee Essential 26 at http://pld.dpi.wi.gov/pld_te26)