

Director's Report for March 27, 2025

Main Remodeling: I was disappointed to learn that our contractor, CDI, has informed Jo and Gonzalo that they are pushing back their estimated date for substantial completion from late June to August 1, 2025. Matthew will be at the meeting to explain and answer questions. What I understand is that they have encountered some site issues that required modifications to the steel that will support the new east stairwell you can see from the parking lot. I have made it clear that we must get the library reopened to the public in September, two years after it was closed for remodeling. CDI thinks that is “aggressive,” but assures me we can get there. We will be able to do some moving in and reassembly of the library before the new completion date. The furniture installation is scheduled to start on July 21 and to take approximately a month. Gonzalo is starting to look at the move in schedule to coordinate with CDI. The Communications Department is trying to finalize the grand reopening dates for mid to late September. We will have a decision on that soon.

Other Capital Improvements: The branch improvements at Fletcher and Thompson are underway now. This work will be finished sometime in April.

LR Visitor Center Coming to Roberts Library: Last week the Advertising and Promotion Commission approved a resolution at its monthly meeting authorizing Gina Gemberling, the President and CEO of the Little Rock Visitors and Convention Bureau (LRCVB), to lease approximately 2500 square feet of storefront space in Roberts Library on Clinton Ave. The LRCVB will make minor changes to the layout and configuration of the leased space to accommodate a state-of-the-art visitor center for Little Rock. LRCVB will bear the cost of these changes and advise CALS in advance of such changes. They have accepted CALS's proposal for a 10-year lease at the rate of \$11.00 (eleven dollars) per square foot. This rent would include utilities. LRCVB would be responsible for its own Housekeeping and internet connectivity in the leased space. In furtherance of the partnership, for as long as the lease is in place LRCVB will make unrestricted contributions of \$10,000 a year to the CALS Foundation to support the Six Bridges Book Festival. We will need a resolution authorizing the administration to enter the lease reflecting these agreed upon terms.

Clinton School of Public Service to Leave Roberts Library: In other real estate news, the Dean of the Clinton School has indicated that they wish to terminate the lease they have had for office space on the third floor in the Roberts Library since it was opened in 2009. Under the lease the Clinton School, which is a part of the University of Arkansas system, pays CALS no rent but shares some of the cost of the utilities and housekeeping. The lease has a 6 month notice provision, but CSPS would like to leave sooner, by June 30, 2025, which is the end of the university's fiscal year. I have indicated to Dean Vicky DeFrancesco Soto that CALS could accommodate that request. The space they will vacate includes two large meeting rooms and a third, smaller one. We can utilize these for public meeting rooms to offset the loss of public meeting space on the first floor of Roberts as a result of making room for the work of volunteers who sort the donated books in between our periodic used book sales. In addition to the three meeting rooms, there is a suite of three offices on the front of the building that we will be able to lease when the university vacates them.

IMLS & Arkansas State Library: If you follow local and national news involving libraries you might have noticed a couple of items that have indirect but significant potential implications for CALS. At the state level a bill filed last week would abolish the state library and limit state funds to public libraries that did not collect any material that would be harmful to the youngest minors. This is separate from an earlier bill sponsored by the same state senator to eliminate the state library board. His new bill, SB 536, would eliminate the state library. The *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* contacted us for a statement when the new bill was filed. After reviewing SB 536, I provided a statement identifying the bill's potential adverse implications for CALS. That statement is linked [here](#). The ADG article about the bill is [here](#). I've appended to this report a summary of the programs of the State Library prepared by their staff.

All of those programs that benefit libraries across the state, including ours, are funded by the only federal government agency devoted to library support, the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS). The total funding for IMLS in the FY 2025 federal budget is about \$250M, or .03% of the total budget. AR receives about \$2.2M of that in the form of a block grant that the AR State Library uses to support AR libraries, primarily in the form of acquiring digital content subscriptions accessible to all libraries and their patrons. Two weeks ago President Trump signed an executive order that will effectively shutter IMLS. Under that order, most of the agency's 75 employees have been notified that they are being terminated.

When I heard about this on the Saturday morning after the E.O. was signed the night before, I contacted Congressman Hill by text message. He is a frequent user of CALS and responded promptly by connecting me to his legislative director. She has followed up with me and indicated that Congressman Hill supports IMLS. She reported to me that IMLS has had "a lot of bipartisan support." But she also noted "they are not getting much response from DOGE/the administration on how to proceed with funding for the CR." That is a reference to the recently approved continuing resolution (CR) to keep the federal government open through September. That legislation, signed by the President, contained the same level of Congressional funding for IMLS as was in the original FY 2025 budget. All six members of the Arkansas Congressional delegation voted for this CR. I'm a participant in a group of approximately 50 concerned stakeholders around the country who are having conversations about this subject to see how we may help Congressman Hill and others. I would encourage you to let his office know that you appreciate his support for IMLS and Arkansas libraries. At the end of this report is a summary of some of the programs IMLS has funded. Included among these are library programs helping home school families in MS, projects enabling rural connectivity in MT, and a preservation project for a 300+ year old Bible in OH.

Update on USCT Sculpture Project: Several weeks ago I received a call from the Vinnie Bagwell, the artist selected last year by the committee to create the public art celebrating the 5500 Black soldiers who fought in Arkansas for the U.S. in the Civil War. The artist wanted my help in resolving a handful of issues that were delaying approval of the final design. Several days later, the chair of the committee that selected the artist came to see me. It was clear there was a logjam over a handful of issues. I asked Karama to help me mediate those and, if possible, get to an agreement over the final design. The committee had designated one of its members, Ronnie Nichols, as the "model" for and expert on all things associated with the appearance of the soldier, particularly the details of the uniform and its adornments. Garbo Hearne, another member of the

committee and the owner of Pyramid Art, Books, and Custom Framing in Little Rock, had also agreed to help with fundraising for the amounts needed above the \$150,000 of CALS bond proceeds committed to this project when it was announced two years last month. Karama convened a call with Ronnie, Garbo, and Vinnie. I'm happy to report that they ironed out the lingering issues. Ronnie has approved the final design. The approved design has been sent to the vendor handling the wax casting which will take about 30 days. That casting will be used by the foundry for casting the bronze sculpture. The soldier figure will stand on a granite base which will be made separately. We are on track for having the statue up before the end of fall. Images from the final design are at the end of this report.

Strategic Planning: The Strategic Planning Team met on March 19 to discuss the first draft of the strategic plan. The draft, with their suggestions incorporated, will be presented to the senior leadership team and the admin council for their comments. The final draft will be presented to the board at the April meeting, with the goal of gaining the board's final approval in May.

Program Updates: We have two exciting programs coming up in April that highlight the work of libraries and their benefit to the community. On April 1, we will host a screening of the new PBS documentary *Free for All: The Public Library* at Ron Robinson Theater followed by a panel discussion featuring three Arkansas library directors. The panel will be moderated by Karama Neal. The event will also feature library-themed door prizes, a photo booth, and a pop-up used book sale in the theater lobby ([more info here](#)). On April 17, CALS will host Louisiana school librarian Amanda Jones who is the bestselling author of *That Librarian: The Fight Against Book Banning in America*. The program will be moderated by Rep. Tippi McCullough and honors Rabbi Ira E. Sanders and his commitment to intellectual freedom ([more info here](#)).

A few years ago, CALS formed a Green Team, a group of staff members who were interested in working on library projects related to sustainability. One project that's come from this team is the expansion of Earth Day programming to include the entire month of April rather than being confined to a single day. These programs range from upcycling/recycling materials into new crafts to celebrating the outdoors and the natural resources of Arkansas. This year we have several programs to highlight in April as well as the third annual Native Plant Sale which will be held in May instead of April. You can find more info about all the Earth Month programming [here](#).

Development: We continue to focus on raising funds for the renovation of the Main Library. Total pledges and gifts to the campaign now total almost \$975,000. Tuesday, April 1, is Library Giving Day, the annual giving day similar to Giving Tuesday that is just for public libraries. We will encourage general donations on that day (via social media and e-mail appeals) then encourage folks to join us that evening for the screening of *Free for All: The Public Library*. (The screening and related expenses were funded with a grant from Independent Lens.) Finally, we are also securing sponsors for library programs, such as the Rock Paper Run 5K and the Six Bridges Book Festival.

In addition to raising funds for CALS programs and projects through individual and corporate donations, grants, and sponsorships, the development department also oversees the CALS volunteer program, managed by Volunteer Coordinator Polly Deems. Volunteers provide critical support to countless events and programs throughout CALS, and they strengthen connections

between community members and their library. We had impressive levels of service from our volunteers last year. By the end of 2024, CALS had a total of 1,551 volunteers on file; this is a ~20% increase in number of volunteers on file compared to 2023. Overall, in 2024, we had 804 volunteers donate 10,205.75 hours to CALS. Volunteers serve our branches, participate in system-wide programs like the CALS Used Book Sale, Be Mighty, and the Six Bridges Book Festival. They make events possible all year long. We are grateful to all our volunteers, especially our volunteer members of the CALS Board of Directors!

Communications: The Rock Paper Run 5K has reached its capacity of 300 participants, and registration is now closed. The event has generated nearly \$11,000, including \$10,005.75 from registrations, \$447.00 in donations, and \$479 from shirt sales. The race will take place on Sunday, April 6, at 7:30 a.m., kicking off National Library Week. The week will conclude with a celebration at North Little Rock's Laman Library on Saturday, April 12, from 10 a.m. to noon. The event will feature the CALS Cruiser and the NLRPLS Rover, hands-on activities with the Innovation Hub, interactive stations with games, crafts, and genealogy, opportunities to learn about the Memory Lab, and a selection of local food trucks.

The Communications staff have also focused on other upcoming programs, including the Speaker Series, Library Giving Day, and the annual Prom Dress Drive. Donations of dresses, shoes, and accessories, are being accepted through March 31, and the free "shopping" day at McMath Library is on April 5. And a big congratulations and thank you to Community Engagement Coordinator **Maria Aguilar**. She received the Downtown Spotlight Award at Downtown Little Rock Partnership's annual meeting attended by over 500 supporters of downtown earlier this month. It would be difficult to overstate Maria's contributions to CALS and our patrons, particularly those in the Spanish Speaking communities. She has been the driving force behind events such as the upcoming Children's Day/El Día del Nino at Maumelle Library on April 26, and the highly successful Día de Muertos Festival.

Circulation and Traffic: Circulation in February followed the pattern we've seen in recent months—while physical circulation continues to trend lower, digital circulation is still growing. Digital circulation includes the following formats: eBooks, eAudiobooks, digital magazines, music, and streaming video. CALS uses five providers of digital content in these formats: OverDrive, Freegal, Hoopla, Kanopy, and Flipster. While digital circulation has grown each year, some providers contribute more to that growth than others. In 2024, our total digital circulation grew by 17% over that of 2023. Freegal and Flipster use declined in 2024, Freegal by 12% and Flipster by 15%. Freegal is the source of most music downloads and streaming for CALS patrons, while Flipster includes a very small number of popular magazines that are unavailable through OverDrive's digital magazine collection. OverDrive, Hoopla, and Kanopy, on the other hand saw strong growth in 2024. Kanopy use more than doubled over the 2023 numbers, from 6,686 to 15,860. Hoopla's use nearly tripled in 2024, from 13,138 to 37,446, in large part because we began offering eBooks and digital audiobooks about halfway through 2023. We also raised the budget for Hoopla early in 2024, allowing more items to be checked out per day. OverDrive is the primary driver of digital circulation. In 2024, total OverDrive use rose 20% over 2023. We expect that OverDrive alone will see more than 1 million checkouts in 2025.

Next Board Meeting: The next board meeting will be on April 24, 2025, at Rooker Library on Stagecoach.



Federal Funding in Arkansas Libraries



The Arkansas State Library uses its Library Services and Technology Act funding to provide enhancements to library services that are available to all Arkansans.

SUMMER READING

Through the Summer Reading project and its activities, the Arkansas State Library supports the vital efforts of public librarians and educators to promote literacy during the summer months. The State Library provides materials, trainings, and tools to make Summer Reading a fun and enriching program across Arkansas' public libraries.

ARKANSAS DIGITAL LIBRARY CONSORTIUM (ADLC)

The Arkansas Digital Library Consortium (ADLC) pools the buying power of Arkansas public libraries to purchase eBooks and digital audiobooks. In 2022, ADLC's open consortium had 42 members with 144 individual library branches. Users of those member libraries have access to over 99,000 titles.

LIBRARY FOR THE BLIND AND PRINT DISABLED (LBPD)

The Arkansas State Library is the local network operator of the National Library Service (NLS) at the Library of Congress. The NLS is a free library service for people with temporary or permanent low vision or blindness, or have a physical disability that prevents them from reading or holding the printed page. Eligible patrons may receive books and magazines in braille or audio format through free mail delivery or digital download.

E-RATE & TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT

The E-Rate for Public Libraries at the Arkansas State Library directly assists libraries in applying for the Universal Service "E-Rate" program for schools and libraries, as well as the Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) program.

TRAVELER STATEWIDE DATABASES

Traveler provides reputable digital resources for every Arkansas resident. Resources provided include language learning, encyclopedias, STEAM curriculum support, journals, and a variety of others. The Arkansas State Library is the only state library agency in the nation providing exceptional online digital resources to every resident of the state through its K-12, academic, public, and special libraries. With an annual budget of just over \$850,000, the State Library's subscriptions to the Traveler resources provide a return on investment of over \$53 million.

DIGITAL SERVICES

The Arkansas State Library provides all Arkansans with access to government information through its roles as the official State Documents Depository, State and Local Government Publications Clearinghouse, and the Regional Federal Depository Library for the state of Arkansas.

MOCKINGBIRD VIRTUAL UNION CATALOG

Mockingbird provides a platform for Arkansas libraries to share their catalogs with all Arkansas residents. Users can view multiple libraries' catalogs and collections, making it possible for library users around the state to discover items and request them through their local libraries.

ARKANSAS CENTER FOR THE BOOK

This affiliate of the Library of Congress Center for the Book provides programs such as the Book Club Project, Arkansas Gems, and If All Arkansas Read the Same Book. The Book Club Project offers 12 copies of more than 250 titles to 60 adult and teen library book clubs throughout the state.

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PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The Pillars of Our Communities



The **Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)** provides vital funding through grants that strengthen communities across the United States, and understanding how these funds directly impact Americans in communities of all sizes is critical. Through state grants under the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), IMLS efficiently distributes funds nationwide, ensuring **resources are tailored to local needs and priorities**. From literacy programs to workforce training, support for homeschool families and to entrepreneurs, **IMLS funding translates into tangible benefits for millions of Americans through locally-driven initiatives that address specific community needs while advancing national priorities in education, workforce development and digital inclusion**.

Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Funded Programs

- **Resources for Homeschool Families: Choctaw County Library (MS).** The Choctaw County Library System is creating educational kits for homeschool families based on parent input. Organized by subject area and grade level, these resources will be catalogued and available for checkout. The library also is establishing a twice-monthly homeschool group with supporting program materials.
- **Connectivity in Rural Communities: Whitefish Community Library (MT).** Before the project, wireless download speeds were only 12 Mbps. After the upgrades, speeds increased to 522 Mbps, enabling community members to engage in virtual job interviews, online classes, and research at the library. Last year, the network supported 6,417 Wi-Fi and public computer sessions. Libraries in Montana often serve as the only free, reliable internet in rural areas where connectivity is critical.
- **Small Business Education: Gwinnett County Public Library (GA).** The New Start Entrepreneurship Incubator (NSEI) supports the formerly incarcerated with business education through in-person classes, online coursework and a robust network of mentors. A pitch event at the end of the program offers participants the chance to win funding for their business ideas.
- **Bible Preservation: Germantown Public Library (OH).** Germantown Public Library will conserve a 1719 German Bible translated by Martin Luther. The Bible contains handwritten family history records and a portrait of Colonel George Irbin Gunckel, who originally donated it to the library.
- **Future-Ready Communities and AI (NY).** The University at Albany's Center for Technology in Government is partnering with Urban Libraries Council (ULC) to examine how libraries can empower communities to better understand Artificial Intelligence. This three-year research project includes case studies, a comprehensive report and a practitioners' guide for libraries.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The Pillars of Our Communities



- **Literacy and STEM Education: Virginia Beach Public Library (VA).** The Environmental STEM: Play and Learn initiative provides increased access to STEM learning opportunities for preschool-age children.
- **Books for the Blind: The State Library of Louisiana (LA).** The State Library of Louisiana used LSTA funds to loan 207,681 braille, large-print, digital, and audio books to patrons who have a temporary or permanent disability. The Crib to Crayons program helped parents work with their blind or visually-impaired children to develop critical skills for reading success.
- **Science of Reading: Toledo Lucas County Public Library (OH).** Building on its decades-long commitment to early literacy, Toledo's librarians take part in an intensive two-year training that focuses on teaching essential skills all kids need to learn to become good readers. Reading specialists also meet with families in the community, offering ideas for things families can do at home.
- **Homework & Education Support for All Ages: St. Martin Parish Library (LA).** LSTA funds support HomeworkLouisiana (HomeworkLa), an online, after-school tutoring program available to all students in Louisiana from kindergarten through basic college level, and adult education in more than 60 subjects, including preparation for the GED. In addition, services offered include test preparation and job search assistance and resources.
- **Safe Routes to Public Libraries.** ULC, in partnership with the Association for Rural & Small Libraries and the Safe Routes Partnership, has a grant from IMLS to research how the Safe Routes to Schools model can be expanded to ensure there are safe routes to the public library for all children. Libraries provide the access to learning, programs, homework help and safe afterschool spaces.

Support IMLS and reauthorize the Museum and Library Services Act (MSLA)

Who We Are | Urban Libraries Council

The Urban Libraries Council is dedicated to strengthening and advancing the essential role of public libraries as dynamic, accessible places for opportunity, learning and innovation. We connect public library leaders and drive transformative change to enrich the lives of individuals and urban communities across North America.

ULC represents 189 member libraries across the United States and Canada, including in 40 states. Member libraries in the United States serve more than 86 million residents.





