

Best Practices Review:
Public Library Services

April 2008

Report Highlights ■

In 2006, libraries received \$230.0 million in municipal, county, state, and other funds.

Regional library systems provide interlibrary loans, reference assistance, and other services to libraries.

Circulation of library materials increased 11.8 percent from 2002 to 2006.

DPI has issued standards to help libraries plan for future activities and assess their relative performance.

Local governments have the statutory authority to establish libraries that are supported primarily by public funds and are intended for use by the general public. These public libraries provide a variety of services that commonly include lending print, audio, video, and other materials to the public, as well as providing research services and Internet access.

Under s. 13.94(8), Wis. Stats., the Legislative Audit Bureau is required to conduct reviews to identify local government practices that can save costs or provide for more effective service delivery. Best practices reports seek to build upon successful local efforts by identifying and publicizing efficient approaches. This report, which focuses on the provision of library services:

- summarizes funding and statutory requirements for libraries and regional library systems, which provide specific services and programs that may not be offered by local libraries, under ch. 43, Wis. Stats.;
- analyzes financial and other data that libraries and regional library systems are statutorily required to report to the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), which provides support to libraries and regional library systems;
- includes information from interviews with 21 public library and all 17 regional library system directors, as well as representatives of the Wisconsin Library Association and League of Wisconsin Municipalities; and
- reports results from 180 of the 388 library and all 17 regional library system directors who responded to our online surveys.

Key Facts and Findings

Every library in Wisconsin is a member of 1 of the 17 regional library systems.

Operating expenditures for libraries and regional library systems totaled \$210.4 million in 2006.

Counties and municipalities provided 80.8 percent of total funding for public library services in 2006.

Universal Service Fund funding for regional library systems has increased steadily since 2005.

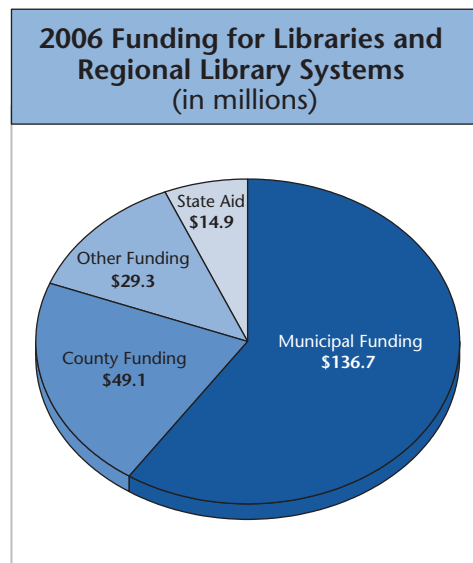
Continuing education and cross-training of staff help libraries address staffing shortages.

One of the most popular services libraries provide is access to public computers and the Internet.

Funding Library Services

Libraries and regional library systems are funded with municipal and county taxes; state and federal aid; income from contracts, donations, gifts, fees, fines; and special fund-raising activities by “friends” and foundation groups.

Funding for library services increased 14.0 percent over the five-year period from 2002 through 2006, from \$201.7 million to \$230.0 million. In 2006, municipalities provided 59.4 percent of total funding, or \$136.7 million. Expenditures for library services totaled \$210.4 million, of which 70.6 percent was for employee salaries and benefits.



Wisconsin’s 17 regional library systems were established to increase access to library materials and

services for Wisconsin residents and to promote resource sharing among public libraries. They are funded by state aid, which includes general purpose revenue (GPR) and segregated revenue from the Universal Service Fund and is distributed by DPI. Each system receives the same percentage increase in funding each year. The Milwaukee County Federated Library System receives the largest share, which was \$2.7 million in 2006.

Regional Library Systems

Under state statutes, regional library systems are required to provide services such as interlibrary loans of materials, reference assistance, and consulting services to member libraries.

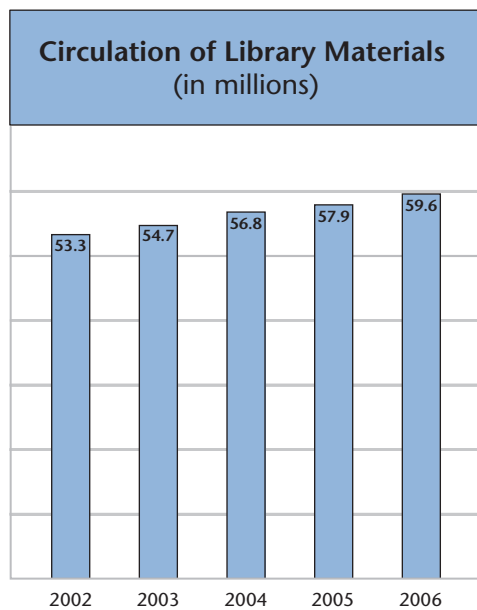
Most member libraries provide access to online catalogs that allow patrons to view collections and request materials from other member libraries within their system. More than one-half of libraries responding to our survey indicated that these online catalogs are the most valuable service provided by systems.

The regional library systems also offer assistance with technology support, administrative issues, public relations, and collection development. These services may be provided directly by the system, by a resource library

within the system, or collaboratively among systems. For example, four systems currently collaborate to provide online catalogs, and most systems work together to provide joint workshops for training library staff.

Providing Library Services

Statewide, the number of library materials circulated increased 11.8 percent in five years, from 53.3 million in 2002 to 59.6 million in 2006. Libraries have responded to the increase by installing self-checkout machines, cross-training staff, and using volunteers to address staffing needs.



Libraries have also developed their collections and services to address the needs of various groups of users and demographic shifts within

communities. For example, some libraries have begun purchasing more large-print and audio books or providing materials to local nursing homes and senior centers. Others maintain special collections in Spanish or Hmong, or offer a bilingual story hour, because of an increase in non-English speaking residents.

Providing computers with Internet access is one of the most popular services offered by libraries. The number of public-access computers at libraries increased 20.3 percent, from 4,477 in 2002 to 5,386 in 2006, and 53.9 percent of the libraries that responded to our survey indicated a need for additional Internet-connected computer terminals to meet patrons' needs.

More than 50.0 percent of libraries responding to our survey have provided wireless Internet service for patrons with their own computers or set time limits on the use of existing computers in order to meet demand.

Library Service Standards

In 2005, DPI issued service standards to help local libraries plan for future activities and assess their performance relative to all public libraries in Wisconsin. We found that 32 libraries, or 8.4 percent, did not offer basic levels of service for any of the four standards we reviewed. In contrast,

three libraries met the highest levels of service for all of the standards we reviewed.

Best Practices

It is a best practice for regional library systems to:

- ☑ encourage all member libraries to participate in systemwide online catalogs of library materials (*p. 34*);
- ☑ assist their member libraries in maintaining current information technology (*p. 36*);
- ☑ periodically identify services needed by member libraries' patrons (*p. 39*);
- ☑ periodically evaluate the type and amount of services provided by resource libraries and assess whether the amounts paid for these services are appropriate (*p. 41*); and
- ☑ explore additional opportunities for collaboration with other systems that can lead to more efficient and lower-cost delivery of services (*p. 42*).

It is a best practice for libraries to:

- ☑ support their services with an array of funding sources and consider the formation of friends and foundation groups to assist with fund-raising and provide volunteer support (*p. 26*);

- ☑ periodically evaluate cross-training and centralizing responsibilities as means for staff to serve patrons more effectively (p. 44);
- ☑ assess the extent to which volunteers can be effectively used to assist in providing library services (p. 45);
- ☑ periodically review their collections to identify and remove materials that are not being circulated, and use rotating collections or other means to provide access to more extensive or specialized materials from other libraries (p. 46);
- ☑ periodically assess and modify their services in order to best address the changing needs of patrons (p. 48);
- ☑ encourage the use of electronic resources, such as online databases and library catalogs, and participate in their regional library system's online catalog (p. 49);
- ☑ periodically evaluate the use of technology and automation for serving patrons and reducing the need for additional staff, as well as the availability of technology support from both library and system staff (p. 51); and
- ☑ inform local officials and the general public, through local media outlets and the Internet, about the programs and services they provide (p. 52).

It is a best practice for libraries, library boards, and local governing bodies to:

- ☑ use DPI library standards to help assess the adequacy of current library services and assist in planning efforts (p. 54).

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Additional Information

For a copy of this best practices report, call (608) 266-2818 or visit our Web site:



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