Membership in the Library System

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

To address the limitations of relying solely on local support and local coordination of library service, the Wisconsin legislature passed legislation in 1971 enabling the creation of regional public library systems. The actual creation 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, as of this writing, all of Wisconsin's 72 counties and 381 public libraries are library system members.

The basic dynamic of library system membership is simple, yet the results can be powerful: a public library agrees to certain membership requirements, including the agreement to serve all system residents equitably; in return, the library system provides a wide range of primarily state-funded services that enhance local library service. Ideally, through this relationship, all residents of the state gain 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.

Cooperation vs. Competition

Competition among municipalities, counties, and other divisions of government is common. Unfortunately, that competition often leads to missed opportunities for cooperation, resource sharing, and economies of scale through cooperative projects.

Libraries, through library systems, have embraced cooperation instead of competition, and local library users (and taxpayers) are the beneficiaries. But, as noted by the Rolling Stones, you can't always get what you want. In all cooperative efforts, sacrifices are sometimes required. Often these sacrifices are for the greater benefit of regional or statewide library users.

In This Trustee Essential

- The benefits of system membership

- The requirements for system membership

- How you and your library can help make your library system stronger

Membership Requirements for Libraries

Your library must meet these statutory requirements to be a member of a library system:

1. Your library must be established and operated according to the requirements of Wisconsin Statutes Chapter 43. Among other things, Chapter 43 requires that a properly appointed library board control the library building, library expenditures, library policies, hiring and supervision of the library director, and determination of the duties and compensation of all library staff. (See other *Trustee Essentials* for details on these requirements, including *Trustee Essential #2: Who Runs the Library* and *Trustee Essential #18: Library Board Appointments and Composition.*)

2. Your county must belong to the library system and must meet the system membership requirements for counties (see below).

3. Your municipal governing body (or county board for a consolidated county public library) must approve a resolution authorizing your library to participate in the library system.

4. Your library board must approve an agreement with the library system to participate in the system and its activities, participate in interlibrary loan of materials with other system libraries, and provide to all residents of the system the same services, on the same terms, that you provide to local residents.

5. You must employ a library director with the appropriate certification from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (see *Trustee Essential #19: Library Director Certification* for details) and whose employment requires that he or she be present in the library for at least 10 hours of each week that the library is open to the public, less leave time.

6. Beginning in 2008, your library annually must be open to the public an average of at least 20 hours each week except that for a library in existence on June 3, 2006, is open to the public an average of at least 20 hours or the number of hours each week that the library was open to the public in 2005, whichever is fewer.

7. Beginning in 2008, your library annually spends at least $2,500 on library materials.

Membership Requirements for Counties

Your county must meet these statutory requirements to be a member in a library system:

1. Your county must approve a county library plan that meets the requirements of Wisconsin Statutes Sections 43.11(3) and 43.13(1) and provides the financial support needed to administer the plan (see http://dpi.wi.gov/pld/legislation-funding/county-library for details of these requirements).

2. Your county board must approve an agreement with the library system to participate in the system and its activities and to furnish library service to county residents who do not live in a library municipality.

Required System Services

Library systems must provide the following in order to receive state aid:

- Technology and resource sharing planning

- Referral or routing of reference and interlibrary loan requests

- Electronic delivery of information and physical delivery of library materials

- Training for member library staff and trustees

- Professional consultant services

- Support for library service to users with special needs

- Backup reference, information, and interlibrary loan services from the system resource library

- Planning with other types of libraries in the system area

- Service agreements with all adjacent library systems

- Agreements with each member library that require those libraries to serve all residents of the system area on the same basis as local residents

The Division for Libraries and Technology monitors compliance with these requirements. Each library system is allowed considerable flexibility in developing specific library system service programs so that each system can best meet the needs of the residents of its particular geographical area and the needs of its member libraries. For example, a system in a largely rural area with many small libraries will probably need to devote more resources to professional consultant services than a system in a largely urban area. Each area of the state will have unique needs that the library system can help address.

How to Be a Good System Member

Your library system must respond to the needs of system member libraries and the residents of the system area. This can be a very difficult task, often requiring the balancing of many competing needs and interests. Your library can help the library system with this difficult task by communicating your local needs effectively and constructively and by cooperating in system planning and problem-solving activities. Your board can help by encouraging your library staff to attend system workshops and contribute their time and talents to system committees. Your board should also budget for paid staff time and travel costs for these activities.

Your board may also decide that your library should participate in shared system services (such as a shared automated system) and cooperative activities (such as the sharing of summer reading program performers). Cooperation can often result in better, more cost-effective services to the public—as well as services that would not even be possible without cooperation.

You, as an individual trustee, can also benefit from attendance at system workshops and can contribute to the strength and success of the system by volunteering to serve on your library system's board and/or the system's advisory and planning committees. (For more information about being a system trustee, see *Trustee Essential #26: The Public Library System Trustee—the Broad Viewpoint*.)

Discussion Questions

1. What are examples of ways your community's residents have benefited from library system services?

2. What are examples of ways your system could better serve your library and your community's residents? How can you and/or your library board influence your system to do those things?

Sources of Additional Information

- Your library system staff (See *Trustee Tool B: Library System Map and Contact Information*.)

- Division for Libraries and Technology staff (See *Trustee Tool C: Division for Libraries and Technology Contact Information*.)