

August 2019 Unserved Survey Analysis November 2019

Introduction

In August 2019, RAILS conducted a survey of our 412 public libraries to ensure that we had accurate information on the scope of the unserved issue in our area, to discover what services libraries currently offer to unserved individuals, and to explore activities RAILS might undertake to help our members face challenges related to the unserved.

We asked for one response per RAILS public library. We received a very good response to the survey as the following table indicates:

Number of RAILS public libraries	Number of survey responses	Response rate
412	238	58%

The survey included factual questions, and many opportunities for respondents to include written responses as well. A summary of the factual survey responses is attached. The analysis below focuses in large part on the written responses, and identifies trends, areas where members need further information/education, additional steps RAILS can take to help members provide better service to the unserved, and other recommendations for moving forward.

Major Findings/Trends Identified from Written Comments

Respondents provided a number of very helpful written comments to most survey questions. A few comments are highlighted under each finding/trend below that are representative of several other similar respondent comments as well.

Libraries need help with intergovernmental agreements (IGA's).

An IGA allows a public library to contract with a municipality, school district, or other group to provide services to untaxed (and unserved) residents. The survey asked libraries to indicate whether they had entered into an IGA or whether they were considering this course of action. About 20% of libraries have entered into an IGA or are considering one.

For those considering an IGA, there is confusion and additional help is needed as indicated by the following responses:

- *The template for the IGA is daunting, very legal and above my knowledge. I have known I needed to do this, but because I feel inadequate, I have put it off.*
- *Would like a good model for agreements*
- *I would like to see a better way to reach households without school age children. Many of the intergovernmental agreements I have seen apply only to school children.*
- *Our library had discussed an intergovernmental agreement with the school district to provide*

library cards to students in the unserved area. However, we struggled to agree on an equitable way for that service to be provided. The school district was hesitant to provide any sort of funding for the cards and the library felt it unfair to provide service without receiving some sort of remuneration.

Possible RAILS actions:

RAILS provides information about IGA's on our website, including a template, frequently asked questions, and additional information. RAILS staff have also consulted with members interested in forming an IGA. As indicated by one survey respondent:

- *I am so happy we were able to get support from RAILS as we crafted our IGA with our public schools. The response from the community has been amazing!*

Judging from the number of survey comments on IGA's, it appears that a number of libraries are not aware of the assistance RAILS can provide. RAILS can make this information clearer and easier to find on our website, and publicize the availability of this information more widely and heavily.

RAILS can also investigate the possibility of building a repository of existing IGA agreements our members have formed to provide examples for other libraries.

RAILS can also find ways to distribute more information about IGA's via our continuing education offerings. For example, we could have a panel discussion featuring libraries that are currently using IGA's to serve the unserved, and/or an attorney providing general advice about considerations to keep in mind when establishing an IGA.

There is great confusion about laws related to the unserved.

Written survey responses indicated confusion about how to interpret the law related to the unserved, and libraries are following a wide variety of different practices. The following comments represent this confusion and the varied practices related to different nonresident card issues.

Selling nonresident cards (10% of libraries said they do not sell nonresident cards)

- *We will sell a nonresident card to anyone who requests one.*
- *We will sell a card to anyone in our school district even though other libraries are closer, because we are the main library offering service to that district. Our neighboring library doesn't agree with this. We also have gotten conflicting info on whether we can sell cards to our Chicago neighbors.*
- *One of the areas we are seeing an increase in NR card purchases is from library card holders (from other libraries) who would like access to eMaterials that we subscribe to. Their library (city, district, whatever) does not take the particular service (Overdrive, eMagazines, whatever) that the patron likes, so they are willing to purchase a library card to get access to these*

items.

- *This is still unclear among libraries in our area and we would love to have a more definitive answer as to who we can sell to - i.e. someone for whom it is more convenient for their needs. Would love to see a state sponsored card available to any who live in unserved areas.*
- *For years (okay prior to 2010) the state library has said the nonresident fee could not be prorated or paid by installments. Has that changed?*

Nonresident educator cards (20% of libraries offer educator cards-most to K-12 educators, some to college/university educators-typically for classroom purposes only)

- *We moved from school cards to individual teacher cards because it greatly improved accountability--we get almost everything back now.*
- *I would love to do this, but an IGA is not feasible with our school district and I thought that is the only way we can legally offer teacher cards.*
- *We are considering giving nonresident cards to all K-12 teachers.*
- *The law on this is difficult to work with. My understanding is that we have to have an agreement and that puts the schools in the difficult place of collecting money from teachers if they do not return things.*

Nonresident student cards (10% of libraries offer student cards –most to K-12 students, some to college/university students)

- *We would like to offer student cards and the school has shown interest, but our attorney has advised that the schools must agree to be financially responsible for materials checked out on such cards, and their board has been unwilling to agree to this provision.*
- *We are working to align this practice with our educator cards, so that students have cards to use for any purpose.*
- *We have spoken to a few schools and offered discounted cards to their students for the summer months, but they wanted it to be free.*
- *We offer cards to families with school age children who are unable to afford the out-of-district fees.*

Business/nonprofit organization cards (70% of libraries offer this type of card to the owner of the property, regardless of where they live. Most often, only one card is distributed.)

- *Per Ancel Glink and P.A. 100-0875, we cannot charge a nonresident fee to anyone who owns or leases property taxed for library service, and multiple owners or lessors at a single property are eligible for a card.*
- *Under the law, an individual or business that pays property taxes to the public library is entitled to a library card. It is valid for one year. And only one individual from the business can have the card. A year or so ago, the ISL clarified this to include both renters and owners of business property.*
- *We offer up to 5 accounts per business.*
- *We offer business/nonprofit cards for up to 3 employees at the business/nonprofit.*
- *The only real nonprofits we have in our town are the churches. The card is good for the entire*

family of the pastors who don't live in town, but we only offer that amenity to the pastor, not to other employees of the church.

Temporary cards (25% of libraries offer this type of card-percentage varies slightly depending on the situation. 10% of libraries allow children living in unserved areas to participate in their summer reading program.)

- *We offer a nonresident summer reading card which is valid from June 1 - Sept. 1 and allows non-residents to participate in the library's summer reading program. The cost of the card is 1/4 of the cost of a full year non-resident card.*
- *Extended stay residents place a \$50 deposit down which is returned at the end of their stay if all items have been returned and there are no outstanding fines.*
- *Our temporary cards are limited to 3 months.*
- *My understanding is that these are illegal, appealing though they might be.*
- *I believe the attorney at PUG Day advised against issuing any type of temporary card.*

Possible RAILS actions:

RAILS plans to work with the Illinois State Library on an FAQ that will help clarify the law related to unserved issues, including the specific points referenced in the comments above. Once finished, we will publicize the FAQ to Illinois libraries far and wide.

Many respondents thought that RAILS was sanctioning the different practices referenced in survey questions.

In constructing the unserved survey, RAILS researched the practices of many different libraries in our area. Even though some of these practices seemed contrary to the law governing the unserved, we included them on the survey because we wanted to get a very clear picture on what our libraries were doing to help the unserved.

In their survey responses, some libraries pointed out that RAILS should not be condoning “illegal” actions. Others were excited to try some of the practices mentioned since RAILS was condoning them. The following sample comments also indicate the confusion about the unserved law described above.

- *I didn't realize that we had an option of discounting the cost of the nonresident card. I thought we needed to follow the formula for determining the cost.*
- *It is good information to know that we could offer a temporary card, because I didn't even realize that a temporary card was acceptable. I also didn't know that we could offer a card for free to a nonresident who has difficulty affording the cost.*
- *I didn't know that we could offer free library cards to veterans who live in unserved area...however if I had known about this – we would gladly offer free cards.*

- *I understand this is a survey, but some of the questions asked are practices that are clearly against current state law. I think there should be some disclaimer that these aren't necessarily things that people should adopt without considering the laws.*

Possible RAILS actions:

RAILS has clarified via the *RAILS E-News* and quarterly member update sessions that we are not sanctioning any of the practices referenced on the survey that may be contrary to Illinois law. RAILS may also want to work with other stakeholders on trying to expand the law to include some of the practices libraries are interested in implementing or that others have already implemented successfully.

Libraries are finding innovative and different ways to provide services to the unserved

Survey results indicated that libraries have found many different ways to serve the unserved. The legality of some of these practices is not always clear as referenced above, but the ultimate goal for all of these libraries is to provide better service as indicated by comments in the following areas:

Providing help with nonresident card fees – particularly for those who cannot afford them

- *2 out of 3 of our surrounding townships cover the fee for their residents*
- *Our Friends of the Library offers a program to subsidize the cost of nonresident cards for low income families who attend schools in our district. Families are referred to us by the local school principals so that we don't have to deal with income documentation or determine who should qualify for the subsidized cards.*
- *Our Board just voted to allow 5 families who live outside the taxing district to apply for a library funded 1 year nonresident card. Next year we shall have a lottery for these 5 cards.*
- *The library would be willing to offer waiving the fee or reducing the amount.*
- *We offer cards at a discount for everyone who lives in the unincorporated areas near our library.*
- *Nonresident card fees are paid by the Lion's Club [or Rotary, or book sale money, or a private memorial fund, donations, etc.]*

Nonresident educator and student cards

- *All of the students in the elementary school district are residents of our library district. Instead of selecting, checking out, and delivering books to the classrooms, we allow the teachers to come in and select the books, even if the teacher is not a resident or reciprocal patron.*
- *We give free cards to any child that signs up for our summer reading program.*
- *The district has a grant for public school kids that live in unserved areas. The entire family receives cards. Once this grant money runs out, we will not be able to pay/offer for cards to unserved areas.*

Business/nonprofit organization cards

- *The City, Library, and Park District offer reciprocal deals to employees of these entities.*

Possible RAILS actions:

Clarifying the law as proposed above will help with some of these issues. RAILS would also like to find ways to work with the Illinois State Library and other stakeholders to possibly expand the laws related to the unserved as many libraries already have ideas for expanding library service and have successfully implemented them.

RAILS can also use our various communication channels (e-news, podcast, social media, member update sessions, etc.) to share some of these innovations that do not go against current laws related to the unserved. This would help spread the word about best practices and give other libraries ideas on things they might try to provide better service to the unserved.

RAILS can also investigate the possibility of proposing/organizing a panel discussion at the 2020 Illinois Library Association conference focusing on some of these innovative practices.

RAILS can also explore the option of offering a grant program in FY2020 or beyond to offer funding for libraries that want to offer additional innovative services to nonresidents.

Library Programs/Services Available to the Unserved

Survey respondents were asked to indicate which services (other than checking out library materials) offered to library card holders were also available to unserved individuals who do not have a nonresident card. Most libraries indicated offering the same in-house services available to regular card holders to nonresidents without a library card. Major exceptions were being able to use online library databases from home, and using e-resources (e-books, e-audiobooks, etc.) without charge in the library or from home. Most respondents did not make these services available to those who did not purchase a nonresident card.

Possible RAILS actions:

Since the majority of libraries are already offering most of the in-house services they offer to cardholders to nonresidents without a library card, there is no need for RAILS action in this area at this time.

Publicizing Nonresident Services

Over ½ of respondents publicized the availability of nonresident cards on the library's website. Over ¼ posted information in the library or provided flyers, brochures, etc. for library visitors to take.

Approximately ½ of respondents publicized the availability of other library programs/services to nonresidents who do not have a nonresident card. Over ½ included this information on the library's website. Slightly less than ½ posted information in the library or provided flyers, brochures, etc.

A far fewer number of libraries are using outreach strategies to promote the availability of these programs/services to nonresidents outside of the library and specifically to unserved areas. If libraries do not promote the value of library service to the unserved, as well as all of the programs/services that are available to those with a library card, these individuals will never know what they are missing.

Possible RAILS actions:

Through our My Library Is ... campaign, RAILS could provide suggestions for libraries on how to effectively reach out to unserved populations. We could also provide information on the value of library programs/services and ROI, and explain how residents are taxed for library service on their tax bills and what they get for this small investment.

And to follow a suggestion from a survey respondent: *Any literature or posters, etc. with reasons that farmers might want library service and what it can do for them would be greatly appreciated*

How RAILS Can Help Member Libraries

Survey respondents were asked to rank a series of possible actions RAILS could take to help them with the challenges they face related to serving the unserved.

Top vote-getters were:

- Help lead efforts to achieve universal library service in Illinois (79% of libraries)
- Work with the Illinois State Library, Illinois Library Association, and other stakeholders to plan for legislative action to mandate tax-supported public library service (79%)
- Develop strategies for promoting the value of universal library service to legislators (79%)
- Work with Illinois real estate associations to require disclosure on whether or not public library service is included for residential real estate (75%)
- Provide more information on intergovernmental agreements and/or Provide basic legal assistance on how to establish an intergovernmental agreement (74%)

The following are representative written comments on additional ways that RAILS can help members:

- *Provide more information and/or basic legal assistance on how to annex unserved areas.*
- *Have a lawyer go over the IL Statutes and break down for librarians what we can legally do for the unserved and similarly: Provide clarity on the State Library's rules relative to nonresident cards*
- *Work with community colleges on expanding the library services they offer to the general public*

Possible RAILS actions:

Working with the Illinois State Library on an FAQ re the law related to the unserved as mentioned earlier in this document can help resolve confusion over many of the issues uncovered by this survey. Offering continuing education on some of these topics, as well as enhancing the information available on the RAILS website and making it easier to find can also be effective.

RAILS can continue to work with the Illinois State Library and other stakeholders to seek additional state funding to offer statewide database access for all who live in Illinois. We can also continue to provide/promote BiblioBoard services that are available to anyone in Illinois whether or not they have a library card.

RAILS can also develop talking points for our members to use when talking to legislators about issues related to the unserved, focusing on numbers and how the lack of library service affects the constituents in their specific legislative district.

Universal Service Committee members and RAILS staff attending the Illinois Library Association's legislative meetups can discuss unserved issues with legislators in attendance (using the above talking points as a guide).

The Universal Service Committee may also wish to discuss additional ways for following up on the ideas generated by this survey.