

November 5, 2020

To: ILA Public Policy Committee

From: Diane Foote, ILA Executive Director

Re: Proposal for 2021 ILA Legislative Advocacy to Take a Broad Focus

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Dear ILA Public Policy Committee:

We have spent time, both last year and this year, discussing and debating the merits of various particular pieces of legislation, some introduced or potentially-to-be-introduced by ILA; others brought forth externally. ILA's typical approach has been to choose a few changes to statute each fall that form the core of our advocacy each spring. I am proposing we change, for now, this typical focus to a much broader approach highlighting the services libraries have provided, often under duress, during the pandemic; and asking the legislature to support initiatives that enable us to do that, and do it better: primarily, keeping our funding whole, keeping libraries in mind when determining eligibility for programs, checking with us when developing COVID-related legislation and rules, and the like.

This does not mean ILA will not ever again propose specific changes, deletions, or additions to current law; or support or oppose specific legislative proposals. That approach has served us well in the past; however, recent and current debates and experiences are demonstrating that Illinois librarians do not always agree on the merits or drawbacks of particular pieces of legislation, often because our communities are so different. Recent examples include mixed reactions to the minimum wage increase, the Cards for Kids Act, and the legislation regarding public library district trustee qualifications, none of which were ILA proposals, but all of which affect Illinois libraries. Of course, there are also recent examples of legislative successes that benefit everyone, including the increase in the per capita grant amounts for school and public libraries, the successful resistance to libraries' being required to use the accrual system of accounting, and the addition of a librarian to the Broadband Advisory Committee, among others.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought these differences of opinion into sharp relief. Not only is there disagreement among librarians about the substance of what's wanted; there is disagreement about the desirability for statewide solutions versus local control. ILA has traditionally advocated for local control; however, this past year has shown that there is a strong wish among a segment of our members for state action and state guidance with regard to library operations. It should be acknowledged that even if state guidelines are framed as such rather than requirements, rules, or laws, the fact is the state's authority would make it difficult for a library wishing to operate differently from that guidance to successfully do so.

In addition, we are just emerging from a bruising election and, in Illinois, a contentious vote over the graduated income tax, which failed; with many of our elected officials on the state and federal level perhaps new to library issues.

In light of this environment, part but not all of which is attributable to the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, I am proposing that ILA's legislative advocacy approach for the spring 2021 session focus on a broad approach. In particular, the failure of the graduated income tax referendum will require severe budget cutting, since the 2021 budget was predicated on its success. Therefore, we simply must focus our energies on promoting libraries' worth in our communities and advocating to be kept whole in the budget. At the same time, I propose taking internal action, spending this time to intentionally educate our own members about potential legislative initiatives including seeking broad-based input; and educating new and returning members of the Illinois General Assembly about the value of libraries to their constituents and communities.

We do have a few potentially valuable legislative proposals in committee, which have already been voted on here; some but not all also voted on preliminarily by the ILA Executive Committee. Despite the votes, there continues to be vigorous debate about the merits and pitfalls, including unintended consequences, of these proposals, in particular the one addressing library mergers and the one addressing library cards for unserved people under age 18. We already know there is a need for education among our members about Open Educational Resources (OER), and at this point, it is not at all clear that there is consensus statewide either in favor of or in opposition to the mergers and cards proposals; or even, a full understanding of what they mean. The library mergers one in particular contains complicated legal concepts that are not to date well understood among the broad membership of ILA. I propose we take the time to educate ILA members about these proposals beyond the small subset that is represented in PPC, or even on the ILA Executive Board. The Executive Board is elected to represent our membership and needs to make sure it is doing that. There is a new focus on transparency and participatory processes on this committee this year, which is in keeping with the ILA Strategic Plan desired outcome in the Legislative Advocacy goal area that "...informed advocacy at all levels achieve adequate funding for libraries. Governmental decisionmakers increase support for libraries" and in the Culture of Diversity and Inclusion in the Association goal area that "Members recognize their ownership in and have equitable access to participate and be heard in ILA's volunteer structure."

The ILA Strategic Plan also includes the desired outcome that "Access to library service continually expands to increasing numbers of Illinois residents." We do want to work toward this goal, and I'm aware that there have been attempts throughout the years to bridge the gaps in service among Illinoisans. This is a long-term project and deserves to be done right, and with full understanding and broad support across the state.

In sum, I propose a broadly-themed approach this year, with education for and input from our members and representative groups—ideally via the ex officio positions on this committee—to lay the necessary groundwork for a commonly-understood and broadly supported plan to advocate for detailed legislative proposals in 2022 and beyond.