

23 July 2021

**TO: RAILS Board of Directors**

**FROM: Deirdre Brennan**

**SUBJECT: Universal Service**

In your packet, you will find the RAILS Universal Service Plan, revised in March of 2020.

The [Illinois System Act](#) specifically directs library systems to

provide library service for every citizen in the state by extending library facilities to areas not now served.

In pursuit of this goal, RAILS established a Universal Service Committee in 2018 and developed a Universal Service Plan.

We have worked with IHLS and state library staff over the past few years to discuss how to achieve universal service. Historically, many studies have been done and efforts have been made to achieve universal service, but none came to fruition due to lack of funding. We have been focusing on projects that provide incremental improvements such as:

- Temporary cards
- Cards for minors
- Intergovernmental agreements between school districts and libraries
- Legislation related to library mergers and unserved areas
- Analysis of tax bill formulas and fees for non-resident cards
- Provision of digital resources to unserved residents

You will note that Goal 3, Action 2 bullet of our plan calls for RAILS to:

*Continue to work with ISL, IHLS, ILA on efforts to issue a statewide library card and to lead efforts to achieve universal library service in Illinois.*

At the last Universal Service Committee meeting in June, the group agreed it is time, again, to develop a long range, statewide plan to achieve universal service, and asked the RAILS board to

make a statement to this effect and to specifically ask the state library to lead the effort. RAILS has worked hard on this issue, but we cannot solve it alone.

I will provide further information at the board meeting so that we can discuss next steps.



## RAILS Universal Service Plan

### February 2020

#### Introduction

The [Illinois Library System Act \(75 ILCS 10/3\)](#) establishes rules and regulations for library systems to guide their delivery of services including to “provide library service for every citizen in the state by extending library facilities to areas not now served.” In addition, the Illinois Compiled Statutes ([75 ILCS 16/30-55.60](#)) include laws related to the use of a public library by nonresidents.

Recognizing the importance of this legislation, and to help achieve our [strategic plan](#) objective to “expand access to library resources and services by addressing issues related to unserved and underserved Illinois residents and continuing to work toward a statewide library card,” RAILS created this Universal Service Plan.

The goals in this plan were developed in collaboration with the [RAILS Universal Service Committee](#), and in response to widespread feedback from RAILS member libraries, including responses to an August 2019 survey designed to uncover the challenges libraries face related to the unserved. RAILS received 238 responses to that survey from a possible total of 412 responses, for a response rate of 58%.

This plan includes three major goals, with a number of specific actions for each goal.

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#### Goal 1: Gain an understanding of exactly who is unserved in Illinois and why

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**Rationale:** Approximately 950,000-975,000 of an estimated 12.7 million Illinois residents are untaxed for public library services, in RAILS the number is approximately 700,000. This represents about 8.8% of the state's population. While we can identify specific regions of the state that do not currently receive public library service, we do not know as much about the specific characteristics of people who live in those areas. For example, how many are adults? How many are children? What is their education and income level? Do they have internet access at home? The more we can find out about the unserved and their needs, the better equipped we will be to demonstrate how public library service can help meet those needs and improve the overall quality of their lives.

Action: Analyze data from the Illinois Department of Revenue/Illinois State Library (ISL) Library Service Areas map and the U.S. Census Bureau’s map data to get a clear picture of the different demographic characteristics of unserved areas and develop a complete demographic profile of unserved areas in Illinois.

Action: Develop materials to educate/inform system members, funders and other stakeholders about who is unserved in Illinois.

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**Goal 2: Simplify nonresident card laws and rules to eliminate confusion and to extend service to unserved residents through innovative projects and law and regulation changes**

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Rationale: Responses to the August 2019 RAILS survey and other feedback gathered from RAILS members indicates that there is great confusion about Illinois law related to the unserved and how to interpret this law. Libraries are currently following a wide variety of different practices. Some of these would be considered “legal,” others may not be. There have also been changes to the law in recent years, and many libraries are not aware of these changes. RAILS libraries are already engaged in a number of innovative practices to serve the unserved. Finding ways to share these innovative practices with other libraries and to expand current laws related to the unserved to incorporate these practices would increase and improve services to the unserved statewide.

Action: Work with ISL to create an FAQ for Illinois libraries with information about nonresident cards and current laws related to serving the unserved. Ensure that common questions raised by RAILS members are included in the FAQ. Gather input from the Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS) on questions that should be included.

Action: Once developed, publicize the availability of the FAQ to all Illinois libraries. Post the FAQ on the RAILS website and share it with IHLS.

Action: Streamline and improve access to the information on the RAILS website re nonresident cards and services to the unserved, and make it easier to find. As a part of this process, develop a “Library Pulse” page on the unserved to include on the RAILS homepage.

Action: Use different RAILS communication channels (website, *E-News*, podcast, member updates, library visits, conference exhibit booths, and other member encounters) to share innovative library practices related to the unserved.

Action: Propose a panel discussion at the 2020 Illinois Library Association (ILA) conference focusing on innovative library practices related to the unserved.

- Action: Explore the option of offering a RAILS grant program to offer funding for libraries that want to offer additional innovative services to nonresidents.
- Action: Work with the RAILS attorney, ISL, and other stakeholders to expand the law related to the unserved to include some of the innovative practices libraries have already implemented. Prioritize offering library cards without fees to unserved children as an initial effort.
- Action: Work with the RAILS Universal Services Committee and ISL to legalize some of the many current practices that provide temporary teacher or seasonal library cards to the unserved.
- Action: Work with the Universal Services Committee and ISL to expand the definition of reciprocal borrowing so a public school card could be used to check out materials at a public library.
- Action: Work with the Universal Service Committee and ISL to establish a regional or system-wide tax formula for assessing non-resident card fees.
- Action: Continue to work with ISL and ILA on a proposal for annual statewide funding of a core suite of electronic databases that would be available to all system member libraries and unserved residents.
- Action: Continue to provide/promote BiblioBoard services that are available to anyone in Illinois whether or not they have a library card. Target these promotional efforts at unserved areas.
- Action: Continue to provide and expand RAILS website information about forming intergovernmental agreements (IGAs) to provide service to the unserved, including templates, frequently asked questions, IGA examples from other libraries, and other information. Publicize the availability of this information to all Illinois libraries on a regular basis and continue to consult with RAILS members interested in forming an IGA and investigate the possibility of providing basic legal assistance.
- Action: Offer continuing education (CE) opportunities to help members form IGAs, including a possible panel discussion featuring libraries that are currently using IGA's and/or an attorney providing general advice about considerations to keep in mind when establishing an IGA.
- Action: Conduct an awareness campaign aimed at school districts where an IGA would be helpful, and ensure that some RAILS CE opportunities are tailored to school libraries.
- Action: Continue to work with ILA's Public Policy Committee to enact an amendment to the Public Library District Act designed to remove barriers to libraries merging.
- Action: Provide more information, CE opportunities, and/or basic legal assistance on how to annex unserved areas.

Action: Work with community colleges to help them expand and extend library services to the unserved.

Action: Continue to work with Illinois real estate associations to require disclosure on whether or not public library service is included for residential real estate. Contact bar associations to see if they can assist with this effort.

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### **Goal 3: Demonstrate the economic and societal value of extending library service to the unserved**

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Rationale: Approximately 69,000 of the estimated 950,000 - 975,000 residents that are currently not taxed for library service in Illinois choose to purchase a public library card. It is unclear how many of the remaining number are aware of just how public library service can benefit them. In addition, most of the respondents to RAILS survey only publicize library services available to nonresidents via the library website and promotional materials available in the library. If libraries do not use outreach strategies to promote library service directly to the unserved, these individuals will never know what they are missing.

Action: Continue to work with ISL, IHLS, and ILA on efforts to issue a statewide library card and to lead efforts to achieve universal library service in Illinois.

Action: Develop strategies and talking points for promoting the value of universal library service to legislators.

Action: Develop talking points for library staff 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.

Action: Through RAILS' [My Library Is... campaign](#), provide suggestions on how libraries can effectively reach out to unserved populations, including providing information on the value of library programs/services, how residents are taxed for library service on their tax bills, and what they get for this small investment.

Action: Promote the value of extending library service to the unserved and encourage libraries to undertake public awareness campaigns promoting nonresident services. Provide templates for publicity materials to aid with these efforts.