R A I L S

REACHING ACROSS ILLINOIS LIBRARY SYSTEM

April 11, 2022

TO: **RAILS Consortia Committee**
FROM: **Grant Halter, Anne Slaughter**
SUBJECT: **RAILCAR data collection project to support assessment of LLSAP affordability**

As discussed in the last Consortia Committee meeting, the LLSAP Sustainability Working Group has had discussions of LLSAP affordability, the potential issues that can arise when a library cannot afford or is otherwise not well suited for LLSAP membership, and measures RAILS can take to ensure that our members have the tools they need to make informed decisions about their automation and resource sharing options. In response to these discussions, RAILS has made plans to produce a guide to RAILS-supported automation options, paired with some refined criteria for the Catalog Membership Grant, in order to support a comprehensive and realistic assessment of whether LLSAP membership is the best decision for an individual library. As part of this work, we have identified the need to develop an instrument for collecting additional data from the LLSAPs.

Guide to RAILS-supported Resource Sharing Options

The guide's starting point will be nonautomated libraries, but accessible to libraries in any automation situation. Potential content includes a listing and comparison of RAILS-supported automation and resource sharing options (LLSAPs, Find More Illinois, the future Verso consortium), an annotated list of the necessary components of automation (supplies and equipment, ongoing financial and technical support requirements, patron and MARC records), and information regarding useful data points for the library to use in their investigation. The guide will be posted on the RAILS website for independent use, paired with the Catalog Membership Grant as a pre-requisite for application, and provided to LLSAP Directors for their own use in conversations with potential libraries. In addition to requiring the use of this guide, Catalog Membership Grant requirements will be refined to more rigorously document a library's active engagement with the LLSAP and a full understanding of the costs, responsibilities, and practical realities involved with automation and consortium participation. These criteria may be phased in over multiple fiscal years as the available options and data collection tool evolve.

Useful data points for library assessment

To complement the above, we'd like to provide a guide to data that would be helpful for a library to use in determining what they're able to afford, and other factors they should look at in assessing their most suitable option. Ideally, this would be accomplished using easily attainable data along with guidance in the form of thresholds or other indicators of affordability, from which the library can make meaning. This has presented quite a challenge, primarily due to inconsistencies in fee formulas, service offerings, overhead costs, and disproportionate library investment in fees both across and within LLSAPs. Most importantly, we believe that we do not currently have the data points needed to observe potential patterns that could then be used to identify useful indicators of affordability.

RAILCAR plans and possibilities

The Reaching Across Illinois Library Consortium Annual Report (RAILCAR) is a proposed data collection project in which LLSAPs would provide easily accessible data to aid in the analysis and comparison of the LLSAPs, their member libraries, and prospective member libraries. The report will consist of a combination of quantitative and qualitative data related to LLSAP operations and member libraries, and will supplement the data collected via

the zILLANE report. We believe this data will help position libraries and LLSAPs to be well supported to make informed decisions for the best of their organization, and will also help RAILS better understand and support the LLSAPs. We anticipate the report will evolve as information becomes more available and the needs of the organizations change over time. The timing of the report's development is to be determined, and may be ready for a pilot test during the application period for the FY2024 LLSAP Support Grant.