RAILS
REACHING ACROSS ILLINOIS LIBRARY SYSTEM

RAILS Universal Service Plan

December 2024

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 RAILS 2022-2025 Strategic Plan objective to: "Collaborate with the Illinois State Library, the Illinois Heartland Library System, and other partners to develop a plan and timeline for achieving universal service" RAILS updated the Universal Service Plan.

The goals in this plan were developed in collaboration with the 2024 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. This plan is intended to serve as an update and extension to the goals created and established in 2020.

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

Rationale: Approximately 1,008,000 of an estimated 12.8 million Illinois residents are untaxed for public library services; in RAILS, the number is approximately 500,000. The total number of the unserved represents about 7.9% 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 1: 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. Gain an understanding of exactly who is unserved in Illinois and why.

Action 2: Further define what universal service, the unserved, and nonresidents mean in the face of access to the database package from the SoS and Illinois State Library.

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

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 (ie. Cards for Kids and the Cards for Kids expansion), 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 legislation related to the unserved to incorporate these practices would increase and improve services to the unserved statewide.

Action 3: 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 templates with schools for teacher cards, reciprocal borrowing between schools and public libraries, 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 4: 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 5: Provide more information, CE opportunities, and/or basic legal assistance on how to annex unserved areas.

Action 6: Work with community colleges to help them expand and extend library services to the unserved.

Action 7: Continue to work with Illinois real estate associations to require disclosure on whether or not public library service is included for residential real estate. Annually contact real estate associations to see if they can assist with this effort. Investigate similar associations that market to residential renters to include this information.

Action 8: Simplify nonresident card laws and rules to eliminate confusion and to extend service to unserved residents through innovative projects and regulation changes**.** Pursue legislative solutions for financial support for libraries offering services to non-residents.

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

Rationale: Approximately 36,750 of the estimated 1,008,000 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 9: 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 10: Develop strategies and talking points for promoting the value of universal library service to legislators.

Action 11: 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 12: 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 13: Promote the value of extending library services to the unserved and encourage libraries to undertake public awareness campaign efforts promoting nonresident services. Provide templates for publicity materials to help with these efforts.

Action 14: Support access to the statewide database program, especially for the otherwise unserved.

Action 15: Continue support for broadband for libraries through the BEAD and digital equity act.