

The Public Library System Board—the Broad Viewpoint

This Trustee Essential covers:

- *Background on the creation of public library systems*
- *System services and accountability*
- *Responsibilities of the library system board*

Note: This *Trustee Essential* is primarily addressed to library system trustees.

As a library system trustee, you occupy a unique position in Wisconsin's pattern of library services. You can benefit from virtually all the other *Trustee Essentials* and the *Trustee Tools* (see in particular *Trustee Essential #1: The Trustee Job Description*), yet you must deal with relationships, authorities, and specific responsibilities that deserve separate treatment. Perhaps most important of all, when you represent the library system, you need to consider not only your community or your county, but the entire region served by your library system and the many libraries and users of that region.

Background

Before the development of public library systems in Wisconsin, many state residents had no legal access to any public library. In addition, many other state residents only had access to substandard library service. The goal of library systems has been to provide all Wisconsin residents with access to the high-quality library service needed to meet personal, work, educational, and community goals.

To address the limitations of relying solely on local support and local coordination of library service, the Wisconsin legislature passed legislation in 1971 enabling the creation of regional public library systems. The actual creation and development of public library systems in Wisconsin was a voluntary and gradual process. No county or public library is required to be a member of a library system; yet, as of this writing, all of Wisconsin's 72 counties and 387 public libraries are library system members.

The basic dynamic of library system membership is simple, yet the results can be powerful: a public library agrees to certain membership requirements, including the agreement to serve all system residents equitably; in return, the library system provides a wide range of primarily state-funded services that enhance local library service. Ideally, through this relationship, all residents of the state gain improved library service, as well as the ability to use whichever library or libraries best serve their needs. Municipal libraries participate in library systems because their communities' residents benefit from this arrangement.

In return for agreeing to the membership requirements, membership in a system brings benefits to libraries and their patrons because state aid:

- expands and improves the interlibrary loan network
- provides specialized staff assistance and continuing education opportunities to local library staff and trustees
- facilitates delivery services and communications
- guarantees mutual borrowing privileges
- expands the use of new technologies
- supports various other cooperative services and projects

The creation of public library systems fostered the establishment of a strong network of resource sharing and mutually beneficial interdependence. Wisconsin's seventeen public library systems developed in distinct ways in response to the needs of their member libraries and area residents. The systems have continued to evolve as changes in society, resources, and technology create new demands and opportunities.

System services and accountability

In Section 43.24(2) the statutes clearly state the services a public library system must provide. (For a list of these services, see *Trustee Essential # 17: Membership in the Library System*.) However, considerable flexibility is allowed in setting priorities so that each system can meet the needs of its particular geographic area and member libraries. As a system trustee, you are called on to use your insight and judgment to the fullest in establishing your system's priorities.

The fact that systems receive significant funding directly from the state sets them apart from other public library institutions. It means that system boards are accountable to the Division for Libraries, Technology, and Community Learning and must focus on the mandates of service itemized in Wisconsin Statutes Section 43.24(2). In addition to its participation in a statewide sharing network, the system's accountability to the state for funding means that system boards must maintain a broader view of the development and provision of services.

Many of you will also be serving on the boards of member libraries or on county governing boards. (See also *Trustee Essential # 17: Membership in the Library System*.) Each of you has a responsibility to represent your constituency by bringing questions or concerns to the attention of the system board. At the same time, when that board deliberates and acts, it does so on behalf of the entire service area; and that service area is part of the larger statewide network. Thus, to be effective as a system trustee, you must strive for fairness and consider systemwide goals and the interests of all residents served by the system.

Responsibilities of the public library system board

A public library system board of trustees has the same legal powers as a municipal library board with respect to systemwide functions and services that a municipal library board has with respect to local functions and services. Therefore, most of the other *Trustee Essentials* dealing with library board responsibilities also apply to system library boards.

Each public library system board of trustees must hire a thoroughly qualified system director to carry out the system's often-complex responsibilities. The director should possess a detailed knowledge of the profession and of the state's overall library program so that information, options, and explanations can be clearly presented for board deliberation. Library system directors must hold Grade I Certification from the Division for Libraries, Technology, and Community Learning.

(See also *Trustee Essential #5: Hiring a Library Director* and *Trustee Essential #19: Library Director Certification*.)

Library system boards have significant responsibilities for fiscal policy-making, fiscal planning, and fiscal oversight. In single-county public library systems (with the statutory exception of the Milwaukee County Federated Library System) the county's officers maintain custody of most funds and pay system bills. All other library systems, however, must develop and maintain their own policies and procedures for handling fiscal matters. Each operates its own business office, paying bills and wages, keeping personnel records, complying with state and federal tax regulations, and maintaining full records of income and disbursements. Library systems are required to have annual audits of their financial activities. All system employees involved in handling funds should be bonded appropriately. (See also *Trustee Essential #8: Developing the Library Budget*, *Trustee Essential #9: Managing the Library's Money*, and *Trustee Essential #11: Planning for the Library's Future*.)

Under Wisconsin law, public library system employees are eligible to participate in state retirement and insurance programs. If the system does not choose those options, it must provide its own coverage.

Public library systems must comply with Wisconsin and federal laws dealing with equal opportunity and nondiscrimination. In addition, the system must develop its own job descriptions, wage scales, vacation and sick leave policies, and other personnel policies. (See *Trustee Essential #7: The Library Board and Library Personnel* and *Trustee Essential #10: Developing Essential Library Policies*.)

Relationships to member libraries and member counties

Like your counterparts at other service levels, you are policy-makers. As a system trustee, however, you cannot make policies for any system member libraries. You should avoid any unnecessary interference with the autonomy of member libraries. (See also *Trustee Essential #10: Developing Essential Library Policies*.)

On the other hand, public library systems do have the power to expel, or reduce aid or service to, any member municipality or county that does not meet the system membership requirements (see *Trustee Essential #17: Membership in the Library System*).

For purposes of governmental cooperation, a public library system is defined as a "municipality" (Wisconsin Statutes Section 66.30) and therefore is able to enter into contracts with other "municipalities" (cities, towns, villages, counties, other library systems). Contracts entered into by public library systems include those for access and services with all member libraries, counties, adjacent and other systems, and the system's resource library. These contracts form a large part of the operational structure of each system. You should be aware of the content, purpose, and effect of each contract entered into by the board.

You and the other system trustees, together with the system director, should be willing to meet with boards of member libraries whenever invited to explore topics of mutual concern, to explain system objectives and procedures, and to build strong bridges of communication. (See also *Trustee Essential #17: Membership in the Library System*.)

Public library systems are expected to take a leadership role in studying and implementing new capabilities and technologies which can help all members extend and enhance services to their customers. You need to develop your skills as a visionary and an evaluator in order to be open to

opportunities for improvements in regional services. You will also need to help your board determine what priority will be placed on library enterprises of a regional nature which might require system investment. This is an area of responsibility where the broader viewpoint of the library system trustee is crucial.

Additional responsibilities

Effective public library system trustees should be willing to assume a leadership role in legislative lobbying or advocacy at the state and federal level. Like other library trustees, you should recognize that the political process, at all levels, is the means by which scarce financial resources are distributed. Those who make the best case for their funding needs are heeded. “Lobbying” need not carry a negative connotation; informative communications (written and/or in person) to local, state, and federal representatives will keep them aware of citizen concern for access to high-quality library service. These elected representatives are, in the final analysis, just that: representatives. For them to represent the public, they will need to hear about public desires, needs, and values. (See also *Trustee Essential #13: Library Advocacy*.)

Public library systems are firmly in place as examples of effective resource sharing among public libraries. The systems are also vehicles for exploring means of cooperation among other types of libraries. You will need to become familiar with the other types of library organizations in your region.

These types can be defined as follows:

- *Academic libraries* are an integral part of a college, university, or other academic institution for postsecondary education. They are organized and administered to meet the learning and research needs of students, faculty, and affiliated staff of the institution.
- *School libraries / media centers* support the curricular needs of a single elementary or secondary school. Their collections and related equipment serve students, teachers, and affiliated staff.
- *Special libraries* can be found in business firms, professional associations, government agencies, research laboratories, and other organized groups and are established to serve a specialized clientele.

The degree to which formal agreements and contracts have been developed between a public library system and any or all of the other types of libraries within the system’s service area varies greatly. You should recognize that investigations and decisions about this form of cooperation are part of your responsibility as a system trustee.

Sources of Additional Information:

Your library system staff (see *Trustee Tool B: Library System Map and Contact Information*)

Division for Libraries, Technology, and Community Learning staff (see *Trustee Tool C* for contact information)

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