
Illinois Library System Directors' Organization

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A Brief History of Efforts Concerning the Unserved Residents of Illinois

For decades, the majority of Illinois residents have enjoyed quality library services. In Illinois, library service is locally supported by a specific property tax for public libraries and public library districts. This tax is paid by residents of municipalities, townships, counties and library districts who have chosen to establish and support public library service.

However, not every citizen of Illinois has access to public library services. Fewer than one million residents of the state are not served by a public library because they reside outside of library taxing boundaries. These residents are known in the library profession as non-residents or the unserved/untaxed. Some of these non-residents have expressed a desire for library service by purchasing a non-resident library card. Other non-residents have chosen not to participate in library service and have voted against inclusion in a public library. Many non-residents, especially families with grade school aged children, feel they have a legal right to full library access without providing any monetary support. However, the Illinois Compiled Statutes are clear on this subject. If an individual residing outside the library's service area wishes full access, the individual is charged an amount at least equal to the cost paid by library residents. (See 75 ILCS 5/4-7(12) or 75 ILCS 16/30-55.60)

A cautionary word concerning the number of non-residents. While the reported number of non-residents seems stagnate, hovering around one million, the number of non-residents has actually decreased over the past 50 years. When taken in conjunction with the State's population increase, the ratio of non-residents is a better reflection of the work done to bring library service to the whole state. For example, the State's population in 1960 was 10,081,158 with an unserved population of 2,109,554; in 1980 the population was 11,426,518 and the unserved was 1,810,359; and in 1990 the population was 11,430,602 with an unserved number of 1,707,531.

The Illinois State Library and Illinois Library Systems have worked to reduce the number of non-residents through out the state. During the late 1970's, Systems hired Library Development Consultants specifically to bring library service to unserved areas. Today, each System continues to have a staff member assigned to work with the unserved. The State Library has awarded grants to Systems and local library districts with focus of establishing public library service in unserved areas.

A variety of reports have been commissioned to study and resolve the non-resident issue. In 1963, the Library Development Committee of the Illinois Library Association published. *A Plan for Public Library Development in Illinois* (Robert H. Rohfl, project director). 1963, the Library Development Committee of the Illinois Library Association published. *A Plan for Public Library Development in Illinois* (Robert H. Rohfl, project director). This document is

considered the conception of Illinois Library Systems. Interestingly, the study's discussion of citizens living outside a public library service (non-residents) is nearly word for word the non-resident discussions in 2005. "... (Non-residents) feel that it is their right to use the library services free regardless of whether or not they actually are residents within the library tax area..." (Page 11) At that time, the non-residents/unserved was estimated at 2,109,554 of the population.

During the 1970's and 1980's, the Illinois State Library used portions of its LSA/LSCA monies to fund Project PLUS and Project LIME programs. Project PLUS grants were awarded to 1) libraries wishing to annex unserved areas to an existing public library districts or 2) Systems working with unserved communities hoping to establish public library districts. Project LIME grants were awarded to libraries considering voter-approved mergers into larger service areas. After Projects PLUS and LIME were discontinued, Demonstration Grants were developed for use by Systems and/or local library districts.

Vision 1996: a plan for the Illinois Library Systems in the next decade (also known as the HBW Report, 1986) dedicated a chapter to the untaxed/unserved situation by incorporating *Access to Information in Unserved Rural Areas*, by the Illinois Library Committee (1986) into the longer report. The HBW Report, while discussing several alternatives to bring service to the unserved, does say, "Perhaps most persons who live outside the jurisdiction of a public library are content with their choice, and any major campaign to reduce their number would be money not wisely spent." *Access to Information in Unserved Rural Areas* published in the October 1986 *Illinois Libraries*, states that 1,810,359 of the Illinois population is unserved by public libraries in 1984.

An example of System-based activities towards the reduction of the unserved is the Lincoln Trail Libraries System project. In 1990, they developed the County-wide Rural District: a cooperative approach to providing library service to citizens in unserved areas. The concept was to concentrate extensively on bringing full public library service to one county. The unserved areas would form one public library district, contracting for service with the existing public libraries/districts within the county.

In 1989, the Secretary of State empanelled the Illinois State Library Task Force on Rural Library Services. The task force recommendations deal with providing adequate library services to rural areas in Illinois. At the time, an estimated 1,707, 531 citizens did not have tax-supported public library service or about 3.3% of the 1989 state population. One task force option was mandated tax-supported libraries through out the state.

The Rural Library Panel, appointed by the Secretary of State in 1992, strongly recommended that all Illinois citizens have tax-supported public library service in their *Strengthening Library Services in Rural Illinois*. By the 1992 Panel, an estimated 1.4 citizens did not have tax-supported public library service. The full report was published in *Illinois Libraries*, January 1993 issue.

In 1994 the General Assembly Task Force on Library Finance held a series of hearings concerning library funding. While not specific to the unserved situation, this task force did touch

on the issue during its discussions of property taxes as nearly the sole support of Illinois public libraries. The Final Report was printed in the Spring 1996 issue of *Illinois Libraries*.

Regional Planning Panels were established in 1995 under Illinois Law to study the unserved situation. The Illinois Library Systems each had 1 or more panels, each panel developing solutions for their specific unserved issues during 1996 and 1997. In 1998 the panels' reports were reviewed and summarized. The most common recommendations from the Regional Planning Panels were 1) mandate tax supported public library service and 2) find alternate sources of tax revenues for public libraries reducing the dependence upon property tax.

Public Library Service for All: a report from the Summit on the Unserved (October 2000) summarized the two-day summit. Participants were asked to consider 7 issues relating to the unserved situation.

1. What are the overriding principles that needed to be addressed regarding solutions to the unserved?
2. Are non-resident cards workable in the 21st century?
3. Should we look at different solutions for different areas of the State or is a one size fits all solution a rational goal?
4. What are the biggest barriers to statewide public library service?
5. Should statewide library services for children be the first priority?
6. What can we do to encourage legislators, citizens in general, the unserved and the underserved to be more interested in public library service?
7. Based on the overview of the regional planning panel reports, prioritize your group's top five solutions for addressing the unserved issue.

The Illinois State Library released *Universal Library Service by 2010* in February 2002. This was a plan based on the Unserved Implementers' Group recommendation from the October 2000 Summit on the Unserved. A two-step plan, the document recommended county-wide library service with a voter approved library tax levy on unserved areas within the county. In 2010 (or sooner) legislation would be proposed to require the remaining county boards to levy a tax on its unserved residents.

A common theme of the unserved/ non-resident reports over the past 40 years is mandated library service. However, this option has not been palatable to the legislators. They, along with many in the library and other fields, feel that the non-residents have chosen to live outside library services areas. Those non-residents wishing for library services are eligible to purchase a library card or to band together to form/join a library service area. Interestingly, with about a million non-residents in Illinois, less than a 100,000 have chosen to purchase library cards. Some individuals choose not to purchase a non-resident card as they feel the fee, as determined by the State Library's formula, is too high. Even though the amount is comparable with what local residents are paying in tax support for the library, the majority of non-residents choose not to purchase the card. The relatively low number of non-resident cards purchased is a major factor why the legislators are not interested in mandating library service.

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