



# Library Profile **CENTRAL ARKANSAS LIBRARY SYSTEM**

PULASKI COUNTY, ARKANSAS

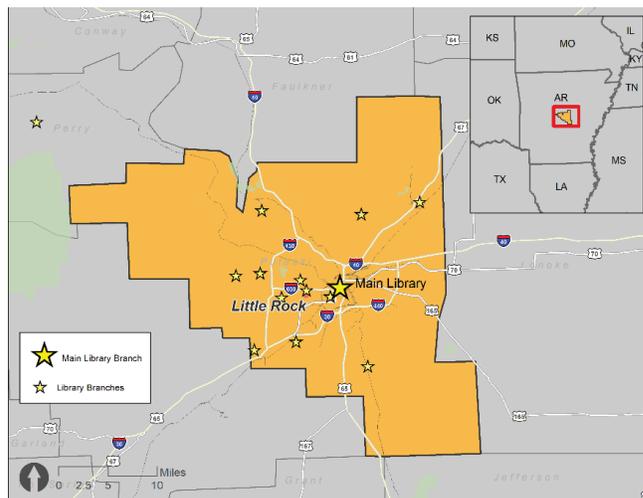
# Library Profile: Central Arkansas Library System



## PULASKI COUNTY, ARKANSAS

The Central Arkansas Library System (CALs) is a large, complex library system that serves the city of Little Rock, some of Pulaski County, and all of Perry County, Arkansas. CALs employs nearly 300 staff at 14 physical locations throughout the city and county, including a large Central Library, and it has an annual revenue of roughly \$17 million. In 2018, CALs hosted 1.8 million in-person visits, and more than 2.6 million items were borrowed in print or online. A total of 244,968 people participated in more than 10,700 programs supported by CALs locations.

CALs's recently updated Strategic Plan includes an overarching mission to provide resources and services that help residents reach their full potential and to inspire discovery, learning, and cultural expression. The first of CALs's seven goals outlined in the new Strategic Plan is "Extending Connection within the Community" to refocus the institutional culture toward more directly helping residents fulfill their needs and potential.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> <https://cals.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/cals-strategic-plan-2019-2022.pdf>

## PULASKI COUNTY

Pulaski County is the largest county in Arkansas, with a population of 391,806, and it is home to the state capital, Little Rock. The median household income is about \$47,101 a year, and the share of families living in poverty is

12.8 percent compared to the national rate of 11 percent. Pulaski County is a racially and ethnically diverse county where 53.6 percent of residents are White, 35.7 percent are African American, and 5.9 percent are Hispanic.

	Population	% Change in Population (2000–2016)	% White	% Black	% Hispanic	% Asian	% Other	Median Household Income	% Families in Poverty
United States	318,558,162	13.2	62.0	12.3	17.3	5.2	3.3	\$55,322	11.0
Pulaski County	391,806	8.4	53.6	35.7	5.9	2.1	2.6	\$47,101	12.8

Compared to other urban counties across the country, Pulaski County residents experience relatively low levels of access to health care and relatively low levels of overall community health. Pulaski County fell in the bottom quartile

of the Community Health Index.<sup>2</sup> The primary industries in the county include Health Care & Social Assistance, Retail Trade, Accommodation & Food Service, and Public Administration, which employ roughly 45 percent of all working adults.

	Total Labor Force	% Health Care & Social Assistance	% Retail Trade	% Accommodation & Food Service	% Public Administration
United States*	131,362,978	14.5	10.9	8.9	4.7
Pulaski County	243,439	20.0	10.0	8.0	7.0

Data Sources: 2012–16 American Community Survey five-year estimates; U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD), 2017.

\*Continental figures for total labor force include the 48 lower states and Washington, DC.

<sup>2</sup> Data elements included in the Health Access and Community Health Indexes, along with measures for Pulaski County, can be found at the beginning of Appendix II.

## SITE VISIT PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

In fall 2019, the study team conducted interviews with 27 current staff and representatives from 10 different partner organizations. Site visit interviews conducted with CALS staff and partners focused on understanding the CALS programming and partnerships that support community and public health in Pulaski County as well as CALS's institutional approaches to assessment and sustainability.

In addition, the following data were used to create network map included in this profile:

- The 2016 Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Public Libraries Survey
- 2019 CALS State of the Library report
- Program evaluations for several CALS programs
- Interview notes and related materials collected by the case study team
- CALS Foundation's Form 990

This site profile includes the following:

- A summary of select CALS programming and partnerships that support community health among library patrons and the broader community
- CALS's institutional approaches to plans for the sustainability of its efforts in the local community
- A descriptive network map that illustrates the scope and variety of connections CALS maintains with local partners throughout the county and beyond

## MEETING COMMUNITY HEALTH NEEDS IN LITTLE ROCK MEANS FIGHTING HUNGER

CALS programming and initiatives to promote the health of its patrons and the broader community respond directly to both the acute need in the Little Rock area and the needs of patrons coming through the doors of CALS branches. Food insecurity and hunger are some of the most immediate concerns for many residents in Little Rock. In early 2019, CALS launched the Be Mighty initiative to meet the nutritional needs of children during the summer months, when schools are not open to serve free and reduced-priced meals. Using a grant from the CHAMPS: Cities Combating Hunger initiative by the National League of Cities (NLC) and the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), CALS partnered with the city of Little Rock,

Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance (AHRA), Rock Region Metro Transit, Little Rock School District, and Equal Heart (a meal vendor in Texas) to dramatically expand the usage of two federally supported year-round feeding programs, the Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP) and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), throughout Little Rock. The success of the Be Mighty initiative was designed into the program itself by leveraging existing programming and partnerships and by bringing new groups together. Rather than developing new programming to meet a need in the community, CALS augmented its existing position as an open SFSP site.

Increasing access to its existing SFSP involved CALS conducting a strategic communications campaign and addressing barriers to transportation. An additional grant from the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) supported distribution of more than 1,200 Rock Region Metro Transit bus passes, accounting for 16,792 rides for young people in the summer of 2019. With CALS branches located throughout the city along Rock Region Metro Transit lines, young people could access free bus passes (picked up at the libraries) and easily get to SFSP distribution sites—either at the libraries or at any other SFSP site throughout the region. Having library branches operate as open SFSP sites also provided Little Rock youth with a safe, air-conditioned place to spend time during the summer months where they could take advantage of the array of resources and activities available in branch locations.

The Be Mighty initiative provided an opportunity for CALS to develop new partnerships in the Little Rock community to augment existing supports for young people facing food insecurity in the summer months. Seeing the results of this collaborative approach provided a template for CALS in thinking about strategic ways to develop partnerships in support of mutually identified goals. It has also provided the broader Little Rock community with a new appreciation for the central role CALS can play in meeting the ongoing needs of local residents.

### **CALS Supports to Address Hunger Extend beyond Distributing Meals to Offering Cooking and Nutrition Classes across the System**

In addition to large, grant-funded initiatives like Be Mighty, CALS branches offer an array of nutrition-focused classes that engage patrons from farm to table. One of the CALS branches operates a community garden, providing space for librarians and other community partners to grow produce to use in nutrition and cooking classes offered at the branch. Multiple CALS branches include their own teaching kitchens to support cooking classes, and a seed library provides residents with access to seeds to start their own garden plots at home.

A number of CALS branches offer Cooking Matters classes to teach participants basic cooking techniques and how to cook nutritious meals on a budget. The Cooking Matters curriculum and courses were developed and provided by No Kid Hungry, a national campaign committed to ending childhood hunger. Staff at the Arkansas Children's Hospital provide some of the classes, while AHRA or AHRA-trained library staff present other classes. In addition, partners from the University of Arkansas (UA) Cooperative Extension program administer Eating Smart, Being Active classes at CALS branches.

Staff from the Arkansas Children's Hospital and UA Cooperative Extension have built assessments into the classes they teach. By establishing participants' baseline knowledge and dietary behavior, these partners can then observe changes among their students around their knowledge of cooking and healthy diets, their behaviors in the dietary changes they make in their lives, and their intentions to try new and different approaches to cooking and nutrition.

## **CALS FACILITIES PROVIDE SAFE, WELCOMING PLACES FOR ALL PEOPLE**

CALS, like many libraries across the country, sees its facilities as critical “third spaces” for individuals and families—a place where they feel welcome and safe and can enjoy the resources that the libraries have to offer. Like many urban library systems, CALS has also begun to offer increased supports for individuals experiencing homelessness and mental illness who frequently visit the library branches.

CALS recently hired a full-time social worker who leads organizational efforts to support patrons experiencing homelessness and/or mental illness and efforts to help other CALS staff to meet these patrons when they arrive at CALS locations. The main branch’s Welcome Mat Chat program provides drop-in hours for individuals experiencing homelessness to socialize and to obtain referrals for an array of supports through CALS’s connections with a network of local shelter providers and the county’s Department of Human Services.

CALS has also provided systemwide Mental Health First-Aid training for all library and security staff to better understand the individual and societal challenges associated with mental illness and homelessness and how to support patrons who may be grappling with these challenges. All CALS facilities have access to Narcan and employ staff who have been trained to administer this lifesaving medicine to patrons who may be overdosing in a CALS facility.

### **CALS Programming Supports Women’s Health and Safety**

In addition to the systemwide approaches to addressing the health and wellbeing of CALS patrons, branch librarians also have the freedom to respond to perceived needs that they observe among their patrons and the broader community. In 2019, CALS branches offered an array of programming, both ongoing programs and new pilot programs, to support women’s health and safety in Little Rock.

A Surviving Sexual Assault programming series was developed to raise awareness among staff and patrons of ongoing challenges faced, primarily by women, throughout the region related to unreported sexual assault. CALS’s Women’s Health pilot project was created by librarians and staff with support from the Arkansas Women’s Outreach Center to promote awareness of women’s reproductive health. They have also made feminine hygiene products available to all library patrons at CALS branches. And staff from the Arkansas Coalition Against Sexual Assault (ACASA) teach Safe Dates classes for teens and tweens to help them understand healthy relationships.

## NEW LEADERSHIP AND AN UPDATED STRATEGIC PLAN CHART THE PATH AHEAD

At the time of the site visit in fall 2019, CALS was very much an institution in flux. CALS had recently updated its institutional Strategic Plan for the first time since 1981. The new Strategic Plan codified CALS's commitment to engaging with the local community to ensure equitable access to library materials, services, and programming while extending the scope of the library's activities to meet the needs of the community who comes through the doors and those who prevail beyond them.

Operationally, this reorientation of the primary mission, vision, and goals for the institution meant the new director had been increasingly plugging CALS into networks all over town—at community-wide conversations, policy discussions, or broad-based coalitions coming together to problem-solve in Little Rock. While it is not common for CALS to lead community-wide initiatives (Be Mighty was an exception), it is widely perceived as an honest, trusted partner with the resources, space, and goodwill to support collaborative efforts across multiple dimensions of wellbeing—health and wellness, education, housing, cultural, and institutional connections.

Steering the institution into this renewed external orientation also creates additional imperatives to understand how these efforts are meeting community needs. At the time of the site visit, data collection and reporting across CALS programming generally aligned with the requirements of the IMLS Public Libraries Survey. That is, CALS does a good job tracking circulation of its materials and collections and counting program participants across different types of programs, but it was not engaged in regular assessment of how participation in these programs affects participants or the broader community. However, many of CALS's partners, particularly medical and academic institutions, regularly conduct internal assessments of their programming offered at CALS locations.

Recognizing the need to know whether its programming efforts have the intended effects on participants and the community, CALS applied for and received four AmeriCorps VISTA positions to help it develop approaches to assessments—specifically, focused community needs assessments—and develop food-security metrics.

Leveraging this type of resource is a pragmatic first step to help steer the institution toward more systematic approaches to assessing contributions to wellbeing in the community. An added advantage of using VISTA positions is the detailed reporting required for CALS's activities, outputs, and outcomes during its term of service. In this way, simply hosting volunteers whose performance is rigorously assessed has provided the CALS staff with hands-on examples of "doing assessments" for their VISTA members, while they develop their own road map for institutional approaches to assessment.

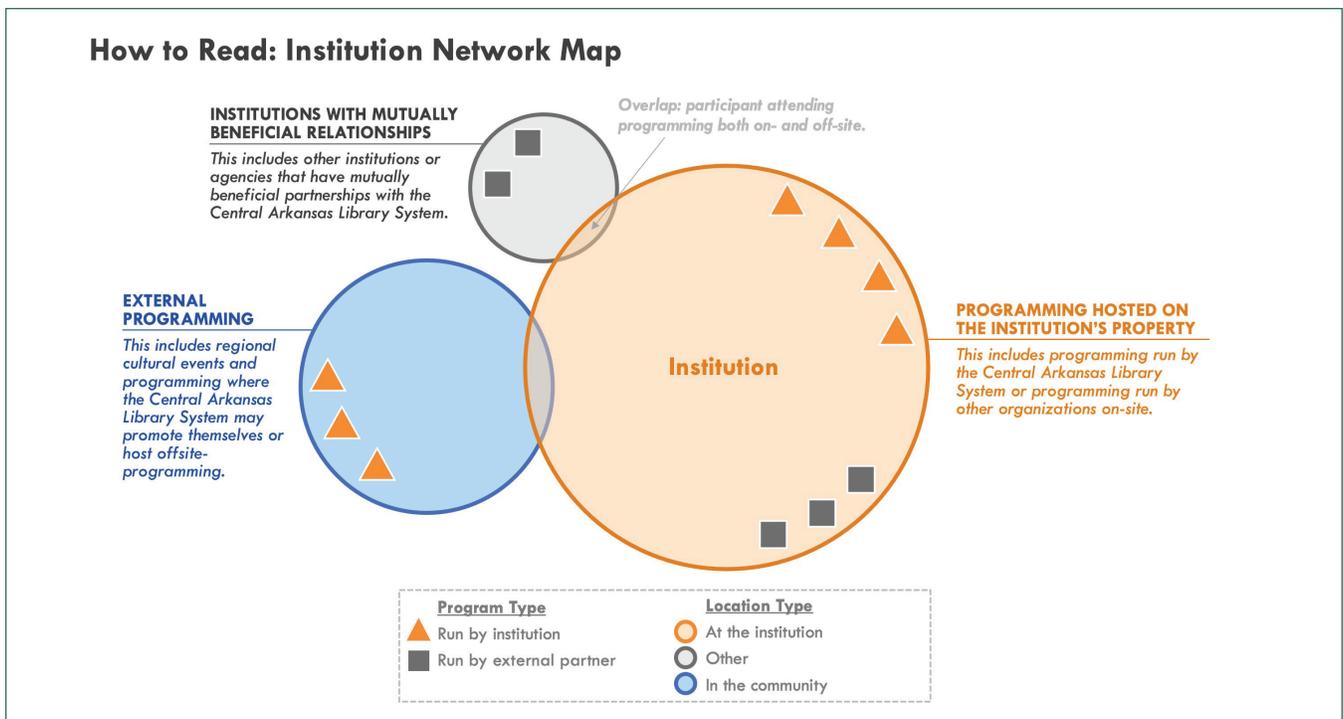
CALS is connected to individuals, organizations, and institutions throughout the Little Rock region. This puts the library at virtually every table where collective responses to meeting community needs take place. The site visit focused primarily on understanding how CALS programming and partnerships support the health and wellbeing of patrons and the broader community—and these efforts were most remarkable for its focus and concentration in meeting one of the most pressing public health needs in Little Rock—food insecurity and hunger. However, the activities and partnership presented in this profile are only a few examples of the ways in which CALS is integrated into different facets of the Little Rock community through the delivery of core services and supports for community health and education throughout the region.

# CENTRAL ARKANSAS LIBRARY SYSTEM NETWORK MAP

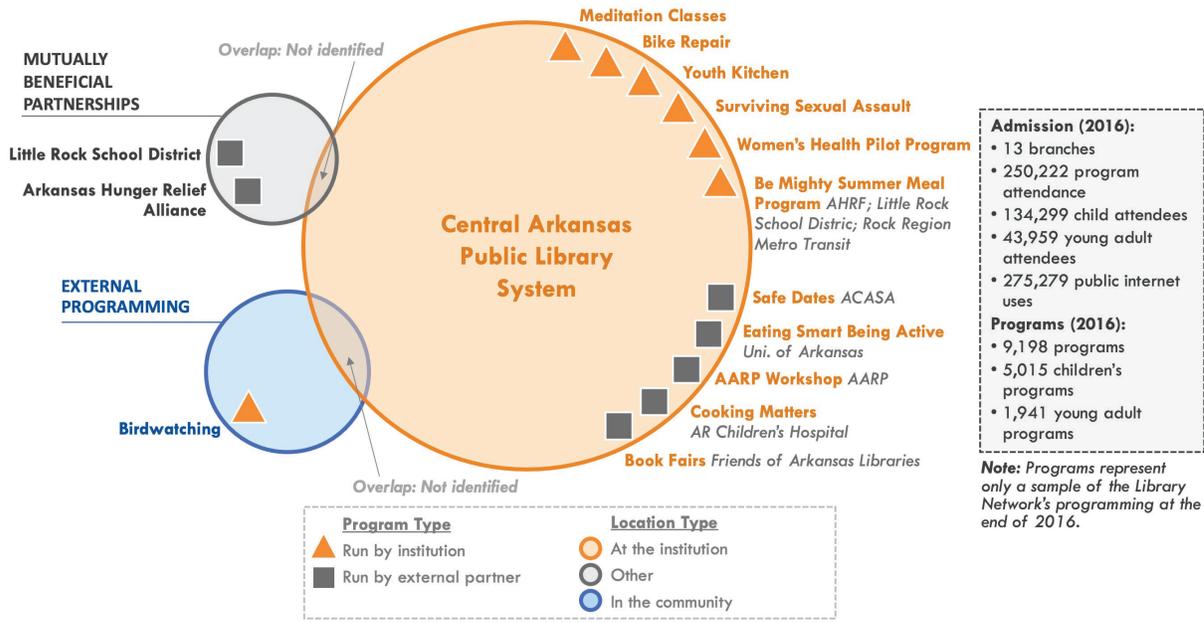
Using data provided by CALS, the study team developed a descriptive network map to highlight the different types of connections CALS maintains with other institutions in the local community. The map illustrates the relationships between CALS and those entities that offer programming at the library itself and

those that support cross-marketing efforts or have reciprocal relationships with the library, and it includes examples of off-site, CALS-led programming. The map does not provide an exhaustive list of the library’s programs but attempts to illustrate a subset of the relationships that the library maintains.

*NOTE: The network map is purely descriptive. The connections represented on the map do not necessarily, and are not intended to, provide estimates of the duration, durability, intensity, or broader economic impact of the relationships between CALS and any single entity, or the broader network itself. The goal of the network map is to represent the range and diversity of different types of institutions that connect to the library in different ways.*



## Central Arkansas Library System Network Map



The figure above illustrates a *sample* of the connections of the 9,198 programs offered across CALS's 14 locations: the main library and 13 branches across the service area. Within the orange circle is a small sample of programs conducted on the physical property of the institution—both programs produced by the institution and those produced by others. Within the blue circle is a sample of programs produced by CALS and offered off-site in the community. The gray circle represents a sample of organizations that have reciprocal relationships with the library.