



NATIONAL LEADERSHIP GRANTS FOR LIBRARIES

Sample Application LG-259559-OLS-26
Project Category: National Implementation

Association for Rural and Small Libraries, Inc

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$294,521
Amount of cost share:	\$0

The Association for Rural and Small Libraries will turn its pilot "Library 101" workshops into an annual, competency-based certification program for new and early career staff in small and rural public libraries. The project will develop modular training focused on core librarianship, leadership, and community service skills tailored to low staffed, resource constrained settings. ARSL will test and refine the model through conference-based cohorts, coaching, and ongoing evaluation of participant learning and practice change. The result will be a sustainable national credential, recognized by partners and supported by a sliding scale cost model, that strengthens the rural library workforce and improves services for rural residents.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program to which you are applying.

Libraries 101: Core Learning Certification for Rural Library Staff

Introduction

The Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL) requests \$294,521 in funding through a National Leadership Grants for Libraries/National Implementation grant to expand its successful 2025 *Libraries 101* pilot workshops into a formal, annually offered curriculum and professional certification program for new and early-career rural library staff members across the United States. Rural and small library staff often face barriers to formal training due to limited time, funding, and geographic isolation. Libraries 101 will provide an affordable, high-quality professional development pathway tailored to the unique realities of these settings. Through this effort, ARSL will prepare participants to deliver more effective and innovative community services. This will result in a sustainable annual offering that builds on and elevates the essential work of rural library professionals with the knowledge and confidence they need to effectively lead their libraries. Deepening their foundational skills will create opportunities to level up alongside their urban and suburban peers, and strengthen their communities.

Project Justification

The most recent [IMLS Public Libraries Survey](#) (PLS) from 2023 reports that the U.S. is home to more than 7,600 small or rural libraries that collectively have the potential to reach more than 83 million U.S. residents. This accounts for approximately 83% of our nation's public libraries, which serve a broad segment of the American public. Libraries are currently facing numerous challenges, including budget constraints, funding uncertainty, constantly evolving technology, limited broadband coverage, and staying abreast of shifting community needs. Rural and small libraries encounter unique challenges that amplify these general issues as limited funding is more acute, which impacts their ability to provide a wide range of programs, services, and collections. Rural libraries serve as vital community hubs and effective bridge-builders, yet they must overcome barriers such as geographic isolation and limited staffing. These obstacles can hinder outreach and program development as they have very little time and space to focus on their own educational needs and stay abreast of innovation in the sector. Addressing these needs requires targeted support and creative strategies to ensure rural library workers have the skills and tools necessary to continue to lead their essential, community hub.

Analysis of the PLS data identified significant trends in the educational background and training of staff employed in rural library settings. On average, 87% of staff do not hold a Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS), and approximately 55% of these libraries (roughly 4,200) reported having no staff members with an MLIS. The median library staff size among this population was three full-time equivalent employees, with the most common configuration being a single-staffed (solo) library. Among these solo libraries, not one library reported employing a staff member with a graduate-level library degree. These findings underscore the critical need for affordable, high-quality, and job-specific professional development focused on strengthening core librarianship skills, which are currently acquired inconsistently and largely through informal, on-the-job experience.

In rural libraries, the [2024 PLA Public Library Staffing Report](#) shows that access to professional development in rural libraries is markedly constrained and falls behind urban counterparts: only 74% of libraries provide funding for professional development (compared to over 95% of city and suburban libraries), fewer than two-thirds offer funding for professional association memberships (versus roughly three-quarters of city and suburban libraries), just 28% of libraries provide tuition reimbursement (compared to 70% of city libraries), and

only 7% have mentorship programs (versus 20% of city libraries), leaving rural staff with significantly fewer structured opportunities to build and deepen core librarianship skills.

Feedback from ARSL membership surveys in 2024 and 2025 confirmed that most available training opportunities are designed for larger, better-resourced library systems and do not adequately reflect the realities of small staffs or limited funding. In response, the ARSL Executive Director and Board launched a Libraries 101 pilot program in 2025 to address this persistent gap in core skills training, specifically tailoring it to the unique needs of small and rural community institutions. Rural library staff often learn on the job while simultaneously managing budgets, developing and delivering programs, stewarding collections, overseeing technology resources, and conducting community outreach with minimal access to formal educational pathways that support their professional growth or advancement.

The Libraries 101 pilot was created to provide concise, practical training on core competencies to address these gaps. The first pilot offered 1 hour sessions focused on the foundational skills of working in a small library:

- Budget Management and Financial Planning
- Community Engagement and Outreach
- Staff (or Volunteer) Management and Leadership
- Technology Planning and Digital Services
- Collection Development and Management
- Legal and Policy Essentials
- Fundraising
- Advocacy and more

A post-session survey of the participants strongly affirmed the value of the training: 95% agreed the content was specifically relevant to small and rural libraries, and all participants rated the Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) as highly knowledgeable. Sessions received an average rating of 3.85 out of 4. Participant feedback requested deeper coverage of each topic, more interactive problem-solving activities, and additional turnkey action plans to more easily apply the learning when they returned to their own communities. ARSL will use this feedback to shape a refined certification model that builds on the success of the pilot and responds directly to participant needs and input.

This grant request will allow ARSL to build upon the successful first pilot and adapt it into a structured, nationally scalable model tailored specifically to rural contexts. Rather than duplicating existing programs, this project will complement them by translating core activities into practical modules; elevating rural voices through the use of rural SMEs; and creating a certification framework that state library agencies and consortia will recognize as a premier certification program.

Building on that momentum, a second pilot in 2026 will provide another testing opportunity to uncover additional needs and interests. While the first pilot centered on organizational and leadership skills, this next phase will work to incorporate day-to-day service and people skills.

Proposed topics could include:

- Customer Service and Patron Interaction
- Reference and Readers' Advisory
- Programming Fundamentals
- Digital Literacy, AI fundamentals, and Tech Help
- Marketing and Partnerships
- Safety, Security, and De-escalation Training

Each session would be an opportunity to test which topics resonate as most valuable, what depth is realistic in an hour, and how participants prefer to engage with the training. Simple feedback prompts and optional short reflection activities will inform the design of the formal certification program.

The primary beneficiaries of this project are non-management staff members working in rural and small libraries across the United States who have limited opportunities to gain graduate-level library degrees or access to robust in-house training programs. Through this annual certification program, these staff members will gain practical knowledge, confidence, and a clearer professional pathway, enabling them to lead and sustain high-quality services in their communities. Rural residents who rely on their libraries for connectivity, lifelong learning, workforce development, and civic engagement will benefit from stronger leadership in their backyard. By formalizing Libraries 101 as a repeatable national program and certification, ARSL aims to strengthen the rural library workforce, reduce professional isolation, and create a shared standard that validates and elevates the critical work of rural library professionals.

All libraries provide critical services, but small, rural libraries are particularly ingrained in their communities. They maintain strong neighborly connections with patrons and stakeholders, often being the sole providers of government services, after school programs, healthcare resources, workforce development, and summer educational programs in their area. Libraries also bring adaptability and local responsiveness, crucial in rural areas with distinct histories and social dynamics. Despite often limited resources, rural libraries have demonstrated strong capacity for leading community-driven programs and partnerships that strengthen civic engagement, empower residents, and address local concerns. When we prioritize training for rural library professionals, we strengthen the heart of rural life and open doors to knowledge and possibilities for everyone they serve.

This project advances the NLG Goal 1 and Objective 1.2 by creating a pilot-tested, nationally scalable model that measurably increases the capacity of rural and small library workers to support lifelong learning in their communities. By formalizing Libraries 101 as a certification framework that can be recognized and deployed throughout the country, the project moves beyond individual training events to build enduring infrastructure for workforce development, especially for non-MLIS and early-career staff. The project focuses on testing and improving the program over time, tracking what participants learn, and making the materials easy to use locally, so that IMLS funding leads to lasting gains in staff skills, clearer career paths, and better access to strong library services for rural residents across the country.

Project Work Plan

Through this three-year National Implementation project period, ARSL will use a phased approach to design, implement, and formalize a sustainable certification model for supporting rural library staff all across the United States.

Project Team

ARSL has assembled a project team and partner network with the experience needed to design, implement, and sustain a national rural-focused certification program.

- The project will be led by Executive Director Kate Laughlin, who launched and facilitated the initial Libraries 101 pilot, has a long history of presenting at national and state conferences, and has extensive experience developing professional development programs through her prior roles with Seattle Public Library, Kitsap Regional Library, Port Townsend Public Library, and many others.
- A Project Coordinator will be hired to bring strong project guidance, logistical support, and communication skills to manage timelines, coordinate with presenters and sites, and support participant and evaluation data collection.
- An experienced Instructional Designer & Facilitator with a demonstrated track record in adult learning, curriculum design, and facilitation to translate pilot findings into a sequenced, competency-based curriculum and certification framework will be hired.

ARSL's Board of Directors and key leaders will serve as Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), contributing deep, practice-based expertise from rural libraries representing a wide range of geographic disbursement, governance, and funding contexts. Many of these SMEs led the 2025 pilot sessions, which received high participant ratings and strong qualitative feedback. They will continue to shape and deliver content, review drafted content, and provide coaching that is grounded in real-world rural experience. Together, this combination of organizational leadership, dedicated project and instructional staff, and a national network of rural practitioners positions ARSL to successfully carry out this proposed phased work plan and produce deliverables that are credible, reusable, and sustainable.

Year 1

Phase 1: September–December 2026

Objective: Refining the Training Model

Staff: Executive Director (ED), Program Coordinator (PC), Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)

Activities:

ARSL will conduct a second pilot training full-day event in September 2026 at the annual conference in Montgomery, AL, serving as a foundational step in further testing and validating the updated training model. Participants will be from a variety of geographic regions and represent a wide range of community sizes (service populations up to 25,000). This session will feature approximately 10 rural library leaders who are SMEs as presenters and will be facilitated by ARSL's ED. The ED will lead training sessions and post-event discussions to collect detailed feedback on program content, delivery methods, and relevance to participants' job challenges and needs. A contracted Program Coordinator (PC) will coordinate logistics, oversee awareness campaigns to assist with participant recruitment, and gather feedback for analysis. Phase 1 will produce details that will lead to a refined curriculum framework and instructional blueprint that will address the required competencies.

Resources:

- Program Coordinator contracted hours
- Executive Director contracted hours
- Subject Matter Expert honorariums
- Travel Expenses for 2 staff member

Progress Tracking:

- Post-pilot surveys, short interviews, and presenter debrief notes will be analyzed to further revise the curriculum framework.

Phase 2: October 2026–August 2027

Objective: Curriculum Development and Refinement

Staff: Executive Director (ED), Program Coordinator (PC), Instructional Designer & Facilitator (IDF)

Activities:

ARSL will contract with an IDF to analyze the pilot results and develop and deliver the official training modules and certification framework tailored to rural library settings. Overseen by the ED, the IDF will create seven (7) modules covering core librarianship competencies with defined outcomes, activities, toolkits, and assessments. Additionally, the certification requirements and structure will be developed. SMEs will consult on and review draft materials to ensure national applicability and effectiveness for a variety of small and rural contexts and structures.

Resources:

- Instructional Designer & Facilitator contracted hours
- Program Coordinator contracted hours
- Executive Director contracted hours

Progress Tracking:

- Progress will be tracked using version-controlled drafts, scheduled SME reviews, and milestone reports documenting completion of modules and the certification framework.

Year 2Phase 3: September 2027

Objective: Full Implementation Delivery

Staff: Program Coordinator (PC), Instructional Designer & Facilitator (IDF)

Activities:

In September 2027, at the annual conference in Milwaukee, WI, ARSL will host the first fully realized pilot cohort intensive as a full-day in-person session using the formalized curriculum. The program will allow for 45 spots that will be available to the public during conference registration beginning in May 2027. Ten (10) nationally recognized leaders from rural libraries (SMEs) will deliver presentations on the identified key modules at the conference site. The PC will manage event logistics, coordinate with presenters, and support evaluation data collection. Participants will be offered an optional follow-up virtual coaching session with a SME to receive individualized support in applying the foundational small-library skills from the in-person training.

Resources:

- Instructional Designer & Facilitator contracted hours
- Program Coordinator contracted hours
- Meal and Beverage expenses during training day
- Software expenses
- Travel Expenses for 2 staff members

Progress Tracking:

- Evaluation will include pre- and post-training assessments and satisfaction surveys. Additionally, the project team will track completion rates, participant attributes (state, community type, level of education obtained, etc.), and intent to implement specific new practices in their libraries.
- For the virtual coaching session, data including the number of participants who request coaching sessions, number and completion rate of scheduled sessions, topics addressed during coaching, and participant self-reported confidence or action steps taken in a short post-coaching survey will be collected.

Phase 4: October 2027–August 2028**Objective:** Evaluation and Refinement**Staff:** Program Coordinator (PC), Instructional Designer & Facilitator (IDF)**Activities:**

After the first full implementation, the IDF will conduct a comprehensive internal evaluation to assess effectiveness and identify areas for enhancement. The PC will oversee data collection, analysis, and reporting, with findings informing curriculum revisions, certification standards, and best-practice documentation to support ongoing program success. The IDF will address any remaining refinements and curriculum updates in advance of the next offering in September 2028.

Resources:

- Instructional Designer & Facilitator contracted hours
- Program Coordinator contracted hours

Progress Tracking:

- Evaluation activities will include follow-up surveys at 6 and 12 months to assess application of skills, perceived professional growth, and examples of library-level integration.
- Findings will be drafted into a national implementation guide for organizations that wish to adopt the certification model.

Year 3Phase 5: September 2028–August 2029**Objective:** Sustainability and National Integration**Staff:** Executive Director (ED), Program Coordinator (PC), Instructional Designer & Facilitator (IDF)**Activities:**

In the final project year, ARSL will focus on sustaining and scaling the program. The ED and ARSL Board will work with the PC and IDF to integrate the certification program into ARSL's ongoing professional development offerings. Activities will include refining the cost model for annual in-person delivery and promoting the program nationally through ARSL conferences, national partners, and outreach campaigns. ARSL will position this certification program as a nationally recognized credential for rural library staff. To support the ongoing sustainability of the certification program, a sliding-scale pricing structure will be defined and published for future participants.

Resources:

- Instructional Designer & Facilitator contracted hours
- Program Coordinator contracted hours
- Executive Director contracted hours

Progress Tracking:

- Success will be measured by state agency adoption of the program, participant demand, and evidence from follow-up surveys that participants have achieved new leadership roles or implemented significant practice changes in their libraries.

Evaluation and Impact Measurement

- Formative evaluation will occur throughout curriculum development and implementation, using participant feedback, SME input, and milestone tracking to ensure continuous improvement.
- Summative evaluation will measure the program's overall impact on participant learning and leadership readiness. Data will be collected through pre- and post-training assessments and follow-up surveys.
- Key impact indicators will include: demonstrated gains in participant knowledge and confidence across identified competencies; evidence from follow-up surveys of applied skills and expanded responsibilities; and documented adoption of the certification model by state libraries recognizing it as a recommended qualification.

Project Results

This project will produce a national training and certification model that strengthens the rural library workforce and creates lasting, fieldwide benefits. The intended results and deliverables align with the need for affordable, small community-specific training for rural library staff that has been an identified need through various surveys of the ARSL members over the last several years. This certification program will provide a competency framework tailored specifically to library roles in small communities and buildings; a sequenced curriculum with clearly articulated learning outcomes, assessments, and facilitator materials; a formal certification structure; and evaluation results and recommendations for future practice. Together, these deliverables will form a complete, reusable package that enables ARSL to consistently offer high-quality, ongoing professional development annually at conference locations around the country.

By design, this program directly addresses the challenges of professional isolation, lack of tailored training, and limited access to traditional credentials that rural staff currently face. It does so by offering a curriculum that is grounded in the realities these institutions currently face. The certification component will validate learning in support of career advancement and retention for rural staff. The evaluation findings will document how the program affects participants' knowledge, confidence, leadership readiness, and their on-the-job practice. ARSL will build flexibility and transparency into every stage of development. Each module will address variations for different library structures, staffing levels, and community contexts, with particular attention to solo-staffed and deeply rural areas.

Awareness campaigns will focus on reaching both participants and the organizations that can sponsor the program. ARSL will present the model, lessons learned, and evaluation findings through presentation slots at major national and regional gatherings (such as the Public Library Association, state libraries and associations, etc.) to reach a broad group of leaders and professional development coordinators. Online briefings will be held with state library agencies and regional systems to introduce the certification framework. Key resources

(e.g., program overview, sample module outlines, and evaluation results) will be made freely available on ARSL's website and promoted through newsletters and social media channels.

Following this grant period, ARSL has defined a sustainability plan for this project. ARSL will work with its Board and key partners to integrate the certification program into ARSL's ongoing professional development offerings, ensuring that it becomes a recurring annual opportunity. A low-cost, sliding-scale fee structure, along with scholarship support from state libraries, will help cover the costs of ongoing delivery and content revisions. This will ensure the content reflects the current professional realities while preserving the program's educational focus. By the close of the project, ARSL expects to have a defined cost model, the next group of registered participants, and an established group of experienced facilitators. By defining these sustainability plans, the project's benefits will extend well beyond the grant period and reach more professionals nationwide.

For small and rural libraries where staffing is already thin and each staff member covers everything from circulation to technology help to programming, underinvesting in training doesn't just slow skill growth, it accelerates burnout, turnover, and costly vacancies that can disrupt or even halt critical services. By contrast,

sustained investment in core skills training turns every position into a stronger, more confident generalist, making it more likely that staff will stay and truly thrive in their roles. Over time, this kind of intentional development is what keeps storytimes running, partnerships thriving, and trusted relationships intact. Funding this professional development initiative is a strategic investment in the national library workforce's stability and in the long-term health and resilience of the rural communities these libraries serve.

Year 1

[illegible]

Year 2

[illegible]

[illegible]