



NATIONAL LEADERSHIP GRANTS FOR LIBRARIES

Sample Application LG-259571-OLS-26
Project Category: Forum

Southwest Center for Educational Excellence

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$198,860
Amount of cost share:	\$0

The Southwest Center for Educational Excellence in Missouri will develop a project to strengthen rural school librarian workforce capacity and Artificial Intelligence (AI) readiness. The project will convene rural librarians, subject matter experts, and education partners through a structured forum model to address professional isolation and emerging technology integration. Through four forums, structured peer exchange, and collaborative model documentation, the project will develop a Rural Librarian AI Readiness Forum Model, instructional toolkit, and facilitator guide for national replication. The primary beneficiaries of this project will be rural school librarians who currently lack sustained, role-specific professional learning networks and structured guidance in emerging technology integration. By strengthening librarian capacity in instructional leadership, ethical AI implementation, and collaborative problem-solving, the project seeks to enhance the quality and consistency of library services in high-need rural communities.

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.



Grant: National Leadership Grants for Libraries (NLG-Libraries-FY26)

Institute of Museum & Library Services (IMLS)

Project **LIFT: Librarian Innovation & Forum for Technology**

Submitted by the Southwest Center for Educational Excellence (SWC)
with a consortium of 42 SW Missouri Rural Schools

1. **Introductions**

The Southwest Center for Educational Excellence (SWC), a regional education consortium serving 42 rural school districts in Southwest Missouri, requests \$198,860, with \$0 in cost share, in Institute of Museum and Library Services funding through the National Leadership Grants for Libraries program to implement Project ***LIFT: Librarian Innovation and Forum for Technology***. ***LIFT*** is a two-year national forum initiative designed to convene rural school librarians, technology experts, and education leaders to address the growing need for artificial intelligence readiness and emerging technology leadership in rural library environments. SWC's 25 year history coordinating professional learning across a 42 district rural consortium uniquely positions the organization to develop, test, and disseminate scalable models for rural education systems. The project will develop and disseminate a replicable Rural Librarian AI Readiness Forum model, instructional toolkit, and facilitator guide that together form a fully transferable national model for strengthening rural librarian workforce capacity and responsible AI integration.

Table 1: SW Missouri Participating LEA School Districts

Aurora, Avilla, Bronaugh, Carl Junction, Carthage, Cassville, Crane, Diamond, East Newton, El Dorado Springs, Everton, Exeter, Galena, Golden City, Greenfield, Humansville, Hume, Hurley, Jasper, Joplin, Lamar, Liberal, Lockwood, Marionville, McDonald County, Miller, Monett, Mt. Vernon, Neosho, Nevada, Northeast Vernon County, Pierce City, Purdy, Sarcoux, Seneca, Sheldon, Southwest, Verona, Walnut Grove, Webb City, Westview, Wheaton

2. **Project Justification**

Need and How It Was Identified

Rural school librarians across Southwest Missouri operate within structurally isolated professional environments characterized by limited role-specific collaboration, constrained local funding, and geographic distance from sustained professional learning networks. In many participating districts, a single librarian serves an entire building or multiple schools, functioning as the sole information specialist, instructional partner, and technology resource for students and faculty. These conditions are intensified by high regional poverty rates, low achievement scores, and limited access to state and national professional development (PD) opportunities ([Supporting Document: 11. School Data](#)). Through SWC's 25 years of coordinating a 42-district rural consortium, ongoing monthly engagement with district leadership, and formal needs assessment feedback from librarians ([Supporting Document: 7. Needs Assessment](#)), a clear and consistent workforce challenge has emerged: rural librarians lack structured, sustained opportunities for peer exchange and specialized training in emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence.

This local need mirrors national research. Research consistently identifies professional isolation as a defining characteristic of rural education systems, where limited access to specialized colleagues and sustained professional learning networks contributes to workforce instability and reduced role-specific support (Showalter et al., 2019; Johnston, 2018). In many rural districts, school librarians serve as the sole certified information and instructional specialist in their building or district, limiting collaboration and mentorship opportunities (Johnston, 2018; Lance & Kachel, 2021). Rural library systems provide ideal environments for testing scalable professional learning models because practitioners often operate with limited local support, requiring adaptable solutions that can function with minimal infrastructure. Because these conditions mirror those experienced by thousands of small and geographically isolated districts nationwide, solutions successfully developed in rural environments often translate effectively across a wide range of library settings. At the same time, artificial intelligence and emerging technologies are

rapidly reshaping research practices, information literacy, and instructional design, creating urgent expectations for librarians to guide ethical and effective AI use without structured training or peer networks. Because more than one-third of U.S. public schools are located in rural communities, these workforce and technology readiness challenges extend far beyond Southwest Missouri and affect thousands of school libraries nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Educators in rural settings often rely on episodic workshops or informal networks rather than structured, facilitated models of ongoing peer exchange (Trust et al., 2017). Yet evidence demonstrates that sustained, job-embedded professional development that integrates peer collaboration with expert guidance leads to stronger instructional practice and higher implementation fidelity (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Kraft et al., 2018). Access to these high-quality models remains uneven in rural contexts, particularly for specialized roles such as school librarians (Showalter et al., 2019).

As expectations expand for librarians to lead artificial intelligence integration, digital literacy, and ethical technology use, the gap between responsibility and preparation has widened. Without sustained, role-specific support, rural librarians are left to navigate rapidly evolving technologies in isolation, increasing workforce strain and limiting their capacity to serve students effectively. Project *LIFT* directly responds to this documented gap by creating a structured forum model that combines facilitated peer exchange with expert guidance tailored specifically to rural library contexts. The project will directly engage approximately **35 to 42 rural school librarians serving more than 53,000 students across 42 school districts**, while producing tools designed for adoption by rural library systems nationwide. Through expert-facilitated forums, structured peer exchange, and intentional documentation of tools and processes, *LIFT* will produce an openly accessible forum framework, AI readiness toolkit, and facilitation guide designed for adaptation by state agencies, regional consortia, and rural library systems across the country. The project advances the NLG-L Program Goal to develop, enhance, and disseminate replicable practices that strengthen library services for the American public and directly supports Objective 1.1 by increasing rural librarians' capacity to serve the learning needs of students through responsible technology integration and strengthened information literacy leadership. The *LIFT* initiative is intentionally designed as a national model development effort rather than a regional professional development program. By documenting the forum structure, facilitation strategies, and implementation tools, *LIFT* will produce a fully transferable national model for strengthening rural librarian workforce capacity and responsible artificial intelligence integration.

How This Project Builds on and Differs from Existing Models

Within the library field, many school librarians serve as the sole certified professional in their building or district, limiting opportunities for collaborative reflection, mentorship, and shared innovation (Johnston, 2018). National research underscores the expanding instructional and technology leadership expectations placed on librarians, particularly in areas such as digital literacy and artificial intelligence integration, while simultaneously documenting the scarcity of sustained, role-specific professional learning structures (Johnston, 2018; Trust et al., 2017). Although state conferences, webinars, and national association meetings provide valuable exposure to emerging ideas, these opportunities are typically episodic, short-term, and financially or geographically inaccessible to many rural practitioners. They rarely produce sustained peer networks, structured implementation support, or documented, replicable models tailored to rural contexts.

LIFT builds upon SWC's 25-year consortium infrastructure but intentionally advances beyond traditional professional development (PD) formats. Unlike typical conference sessions or isolated workshops, the project creates a structured forum model that integrates sequenced meetings, facilitated peer problem-solving, expert guidance, and systematic documentation of emerging practices. The innovation of *LIFT* lies in transforming PD into collaborative model development. Participating librarians will not only receive training but will collectively test, refine, and document AI integration strategies that are translated into a replicable national framework.

This approach directly advances the National Leadership Grants for Libraries program goal to develop, enhance, and disseminate replicable practices that strengthen library services for the American public. By positioning rural communities as pilot laboratories for innovation rather than peripheral

participants in national conversations, *LIFT* contributes a scalable, rural-centered model for workforce development and emerging technology readiness that extends well beyond Southwest Missouri.

Emerging Technology and Artificial Intelligence Context

Artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies are fundamentally reshaping information ecosystems, research practices, and instructional design (Greenhow et al., 2021). AI-enabled search tools, generative text systems, and algorithmically curated content are transforming how students locate information, assess credibility, construct arguments, and engage in inquiry. Scholars emphasize that information literacy frameworks must evolve to address algorithmic bias, machine-generated content, data privacy, and ethical decision-making in technology-rich environments (Hobbs, 2020). These shifts are not peripheral to library services; they are central to the instructional mission of school librarians.

School librarians are uniquely positioned to lead this transition as instructional partners and information literacy specialists (Johnston, 2018). However, research and practitioner feedback indicate that many lack structured preparation, policy guidance, and sustained professional support for integrating AI responsibly into instruction and library operations (Greenhow et al., 2021). In rural districts, where librarians often work in isolation and with limited access to advanced technology training, the gap between expanding expectations and available preparation is particularly acute. This disconnect represents a significant workforce development challenge with direct implications for student learning. Without sustained, role-specific support, rural librarians must navigate rapidly evolving technologies independently, increasing professional strain and limiting their ability to guide students in ethical, critical, and informed use of AI. Because rural schools educate millions of students nationwide, the need for structured, replicable AI readiness models extends well beyond Southwest Missouri. *LIFT* responds to this national imperative by coupling facilitated peer exchange with expert guidance to build durable capacity for responsible emerging technology integration in rural library contexts.

Who Benefits and National Significance

The primary beneficiaries of *LIFT* are rural school librarians who currently lack sustained, role-specific professional learning networks and structured guidance in emerging technology integration. By strengthening librarian capacity in instructional leadership, ethical artificial intelligence implementation, and collaborative problem-solving, the project directly enhances the quality and consistency of library services in high-need rural communities. Because school librarians serve as instructional partners in research, digital literacy, and information evaluation, increased professional capacity translates into improved student access to credible information, stronger inquiry skills, and more informed engagement with rapidly evolving technologies.

Secondary beneficiaries include the students and educators served by participating districts. As librarians gain confidence and structured tools for responsible AI integration, students benefit from clearer guidance on evaluating machine-generated content, understanding algorithmic bias, and engaging in ethical research practices. In rural communities where school libraries often serve as central hubs for literacy and digital access, strengthening librarian expertise has system-wide instructional implications.

Beyond supporting participating librarians, *LIFT* will generate practical knowledge for the national library field about how structured peer learning networks can strengthen emerging technology readiness in rural contexts. The project is intentionally designed to generate practical field knowledge about how rural professional learning networks can support responsible artificial intelligence integration in school libraries. By documenting forum design, facilitation strategies, and implementation outcomes, the project will contribute a tested model for rural workforce development that can be adapted by state library agencies, regional consortia, and professional associations across the United States.

3. Project Work Plan

The project will be implemented over a 24-month period as a structured forum initiative designed to convene rural school librarians, subject-matter experts, and partner organizations around workforce development and emerging technology adoption, with a specific emphasis on artificial intelligence. Activities are intentionally sequenced to move from structured needs validation and network formation to facilitate knowledge exchange, applied tool development, model documentation, and national dissemination.

Year One will focus on establishing a sustained professional learning community and building foundational AI literacy capacity through expert-facilitated convenings and guided peer exchange. Year Two will shift toward applied integration, collaborative refinement of tools and frameworks, and formal documentation of a replicable Rural Librarian AI Readiness forum model. Throughout the project period, each convening and virtual engagement will be documented, synthesized, and translated into adaptable digital resources ([Supporting Document: 4. Digital Products Plan](#)), ensuring that the work results not only in participant growth but in tangible, shareable products designed for national replication.

This phased design ensures that **LIFT** functions not merely as a series of professional development (PD) sessions, but as a structured model-development initiative aligned with the National Leadership Grants for Libraries program goal to create and disseminate replicable practices that strengthen library services nationwide.

Activities and Sequencing

In Year One, the project will launch with structured planning and stakeholder engagement activities designed to establish a durable professional learning network and validate priority needs. Activities will include confirmation of participating librarians from the 42-district consortium (Table 1), finalization of expert facilitators, and refinement of forum themes based on formal needs assessment data and baseline surveys. Baseline measures will assess professional isolation, AI instructional readiness, and confidence in ethical technology integration. A virtual launch convening will establish shared goals, documentation protocols, and a clear focus on national model development. Two in-person forums will be held during Year One. Forum 1 will focus on rural professional isolation, collaborative problem-solving structures, and network formation strategies. Forum 2 will emphasize foundational AI literacy, ethical frameworks, and instructional implications for research and information evaluation. Each Forum will include facilitated dialogue, structured peer exchange, applied tool exploration, and expert-led sessions designed to move beyond awareness toward practical implementation planning. Between forums, participants will engage through a shared digital collaboration platform that houses curated resources, session syntheses, reflection prompts, and emerging tools. Participation analytics and engagement metrics will be tracked to inform continuous improvement.

In Year Two, the project will host two additional forums that shift from foundational knowledge-building to applied practice and model codification. Forum 3 will emphasize AI-informed research instruction, using AI to engage in civic literacy, respectful civil dialogue, and instructional integration strategies aligned to student learning outcomes. Forum 4 will focus on policy implications, district-level leadership strategies, and sustainability planning for rural professional learning networks. Throughout Year Two, facilitators and participants will collaboratively refine tools, frameworks, and documentation templates to ensure clarity, usability, and adaptability for external replication.

Across both project years, all convenings will be systematically documented and translated into structured digital deliverables, including session frameworks, implementation guides, AI instructional toolkits, facilitation protocols, and a codified Rural Librarian AI Readiness forum model. Documentation will follow a standardized template to ensure materials are modular, transferable, and accessible to state agencies, regional consortia, and rural library systems nationwide.

Table 2: Project Activities and Timeline ([Supporting Document: 8. Sample Agenda](#))

Phase 1: Planning, Recruitment & Framework Development	
Months 1-3	● Finalize forum design framework, including AI readiness focus and rural workforce objectives ● Confirm partnerships with participating districts, DESE, MASA, and subject matter experts ● Recruit and confirm participating rural school librarians, participation is expected from 35-42 librarians ● Conduct baseline data collection on professional isolation, AI readiness, and instructional confidence ● Establish digital collaboration platform for resource sharing and communication

	● Convene virtual launch meeting to establish goals, norms, and national impact focus
Phase 2: Quarterly Forums & Expert Facilitation	
Months 4-18	● Forum 1: Rural librarian isolation, collaborative problem solving, and network formation ● Forum 2: Artificial intelligence literacy, ethical frameworks, and instructional integration ● Forum 3: AI-informed research instruction, civic literacy and respectful civil dialogue, and information evaluation ● Forum 4: Policy implications, district leadership strategies, and sustainable implementation models
Phase 3: Model Development & Resource Production	
Months 12-22	● Document forum facilitation structure and replicable convening model ● Develop AI Readiness Framework for Rural School Libraries ● Create curated AI instructional modules and implementation guides ● Produce Facilitator Guide for regional replication ● Compile case examples and field-tested tools ● Conduct midpoint evaluation and integrate findings into final model refinement
Phase 4: Dissemination and National Impact (Supporting Document: 2. Schedule of Completion)	
Months 20-24	● Publish open-access digital toolkit and facilitation guide ● Host statewide virtual dissemination meeting ● Present findings at state (Missouri Association Rural Education, MARE) and/or national library conferences (National Rural Education Association, NREA) ● Distribute resources through professional associations and rural education networks ● Collect download metrics, external inquiries, and replication interest data ● Complete final evaluation and publication of forum impact report

Staffing and Project Management

SWC will serve as the lead applicant, fiscal agent, and project administrator. SWC will oversee financial management, scheduling, partner coordination, compliance reporting, and adherence to all IMLS requirements. This structure mirrors SWC's successful management of prior federally awarded grants: MHSP, TQP, SLP, and NSF grants, which all received high technical reviews ([Supporting Document: 10. SWC Grant Success](#)). With more than 25 years of experience managing federal and state grants across a 42-district rural consortium, SWC maintains established infrastructure for fiscal oversight, PD delivery, multi-district coordination, and performance monitoring. Executive leadership will provide institutional oversight to ensure alignment with federal grant standards and long-term sustainability planning.

Table 3: Project Management and Implementation Structure

Lead Organization: SWC	SWC will serve as the fiscal agent and administrative lead. With over 25 years of experience managing federal and state grants across 42 rural districts (Table 1), SWC has established infrastructure for fiscal oversight, PD delivery, and consortium coordination. (Supporting Document: 10. SWC Success)
Key Personnel (Supporting Document: 5. Resumes)	
Project Director (0.5 FTE) Dr. Trish Wilson	Responsible for overall project leadership, forum design oversight, partner coordination, curriculum alignment, supervision of consultants, and compliance. The Project Director will oversee national dissemination strategy and ensure alignment with the selected NLG-L objective.
Forum Coordinator (0.5 FTE) Becky Crowe	Responsible for convening logistics, participant communication, digital collaboration platform management, speaker coordination, documentation of forum proceedings, and resource compilation for toolkit development.
Fiscal Oversight: (0.1 FTE) Dr. Melissa Massey	Responsible for all fiscal management and compliance, including budget monitoring, procurement oversight, expenditure approval, financial reporting to IMLS, and adherence to federal grant regulations.

Subject Matter Expert	Chris Bozarth: <i>AI Literacy, Digital Ethics, Rural Instruction Leadership, Technology Integration</i> . Chris has provided professional learning for educators and school leaders on the instructional implications of AI and digital information systems. Responsible for expert facilitation during convenings, development of AI readiness frameworks, contribution to training modules, and consultation on national model design.
External Evaluator (Contracted)	Dr. Zach Harris & Dr. Jan VanGilder: Responsible for independent evaluation design and implementation, including baseline and post data collection, analysis of forum effectiveness, documentation of model replicability, monitoring of implementation fidelity, documentation of replicability indicators, and preparation of interim and final evaluation reports. The evaluator will operate independently of project management to ensure objectivity, credibility, and rigor.
Partner Organizations	SWC Rural School Districts (Table 1), DESE, MASA: Partners will support participant recruitment, provide feedback on implementation feasibility, assist with dissemination through professional networks, and advise on state-level alignment and replication opportunities.

Stakeholder Input and Engagement

Stakeholder engagement is intentionally embedded at each stage of project design, implementation, refinement, and dissemination. Rural school librarians will serve not only as participants but as co-developers of the forum model. During Phase 1, baseline surveys and structured needs validation sessions will inform final topic selection, AI readiness benchmarks, and documentation priorities. Following each convening, facilitated reflection protocols and structured feedback instruments will guide iterative adjustments to session design, resource development, and facilitation strategies.

Throughout the two-year project period, librarians will contribute directly to the development of discussion frameworks, implementation templates, and AI readiness tools. Select participants will serve on advisory working groups tasked with reviewing draft materials to ensure clarity, feasibility, and applicability in rural contexts. This structured participatory approach ensures that project outputs reflect field-tested realities rather than abstract recommendations.

Partner organizations, including participating districts, DESE, and MASA ([Supporting Document: 6. Letters of Commitment](#)), will provide additional perspectives on policy alignment, implementation feasibility, and dissemination strategy. Subject-matter experts will contribute insight from emerging technology research and instructional leadership practice, ensuring that the forum integrates practitioner experience with national standards and evolving AI guidance. By embedding stakeholder input into both decision-making and model documentation, *LIFT* strengthens implementation fidelity while enhancing the credibility and adaptability of its national deliverables. This collaborative design approach ensures that the resulting forum framework reflects authentic rural conditions and is positioned for meaningful replication beyond Southwest Missouri.

Evaluation and Demonstrating Impact

LIFT will implement a comprehensive, independent evaluation plan aligned to the NLG-L performance measures of effectiveness, quality, efficiency, and timeliness. In addition to producing project deliverables, the forum will measure changes in participant confidence and capacity to evaluate and implement emerging AI tools in their library programs. Evaluation will examine both participant-level outcomes and field-level impact, ensuring that the project produces measurable workforce development gains and documented, replicable models.

An external evaluator will design and administer baseline, midpoint, and final assessments measuring AI instructional confidence, professional isolation, and implementation readiness. Pre- and post-surveys, self-efficacy scales, implementation logs, and instructional artifact reviews will assess changes in librarian knowledge, applied practice, and instructional leadership aligned to Objective 1.1. Qualitative data from structured reflection protocols and focus groups will be coded to identify patterns in AI integration strategies, peer network development, and policy alignment. Quality and relevance of

convenings will be evaluated after each session using standardized feedback instruments and rubric-based analysis. Participation rates, engagement metrics, and cost-per-participant analyses will assess efficiency. Project milestones will be monitored quarterly to ensure timely completion of deliverables, with evaluation findings informing iterative refinements to convening design and resource development.

National impact will be measured through dissemination analytics, including toolkit downloads, website engagement metrics, conference presentation reach, and documented external replication inquiries. The evaluator will assess the clarity, usability, and adaptability of the Rural Librarian AI Readiness forum model to determine its transferability beyond Southwest Missouri.

Table 4: Evaluation Plan ([Supporting Document: 3. & 12. Performance Measurement Plan](#))

Evaluation Focus	Key Questions	Data sources	Methods
EFFECTIVENESS	• To what extent did the forum increase librarian knowledge and confidence in AI and emerging technologies? • To what extent did the forum improve instructional practices related to digital and information literacy?	• Pre and post surveys, self efficacy scales, implementation logs • Participant reflections, artifact review, sample lesson plans	• Baseline and post assessments, comparative analysis • Rubric scoring, qualitative coding
Timeline: Baseline (Month 1-3); Midpoint (Month 12); Final (Month 24)			
Responsible Party: External Evaluator			
QUALITY	Were the convenings and expert sessions relevant, rigorous, and responsive to rural needs?	Session feedback surveys, focus groups	Survey analysis, facilitated interviews
Timeline: After each convening; annual summary			
Responsible Party: External Evaluator			
EFFICIENCY	Were project resources used effectively to maximize participation and engagement?	Attendance records, cost analysis, participation tracking	Descriptive statistics, cost per participant analysis
Timeline: Ongoing; quarterly review			
Responsible Party: Project Director with Evaluator validation			
TIMELINESS	Were project milestones completed according to the Schedule of Completion?	Project management documentation	Milestone tracking and progress review
Timeline: Quarterly review; final assessment			
Responsible Party: Project Director with Evaluator validation			
NATIONAL IMPACT	Is the forum model adaptable and usable beyond the participating region?	Website analytics, download metrics, external inquiries, dissemination tracking	Analytics review, stakeholder interviews
Timeline: Months 18-24; post-publication tracking			
Responsible Party: External Evaluator			
Key Performance Indicators by Project End: • 80% of participants demonstrate measurable increases in AI instructional confidence • 75% report reduced professional isolation and strengthened peer networks • 75% implement at least one or more AI-informed instructional strategies aligned to digital literacy outcomes			

- 90% rate forums as high quality, relevant, and applicable to rural contexts
- All major deliverables completed within the approved project timeline
- Public toolkit and facilitation guide are accessed by users beyond participating districts, with documented external dissemination and replication interest

By integrating rigorous evaluation with structured documentation and dissemination tracking, *LIFT* ensures that outcomes extend beyond participant growth to field-level contribution. Evaluation findings will directly inform refinement of the forum framework, strengthening its credibility as a scalable, rural-centered model for librarian workforce development and responsible emerging technology integration nationwide.

4. **Project Results**

LIFT will produce a defined set of tangible, publicly accessible deliverables that address documented gaps in rural librarian workforce support and emerging technology readiness. Through a sequenced series of facilitated convenings, structured peer exchange, and collaborative model development, the project will generate both participant-level outcomes and field-level resources designed for immediate implementation and long-term national adaptation.

Primary outputs will include a codified Rural Librarian AI Readiness forum model, a structured AI Readiness Framework for school libraries, modular instructional toolkits, and a facilitator guide detailing convening protocols, documentation templates, and implementation strategies. These deliverables will directly strengthen librarians' capacity to support student learning in digital literacy, ethical AI use, and information evaluation, advancing Objective 1.1 of the NLG-L Grants for Libraries program. By prioritizing documentation, usability, and modular design, *LIFT* ensures that results extend beyond the participating districts. All resources will be developed for replication by state agencies, regional consortia, and professional associations serving rural and remote communities nationwide, contributing a scalable model to the national library field.

Intended Results and Deliverables

LIFT will produce a structured set of tangible, field-ready deliverables designed to strengthen rural librarian workforce capacity and support responsible artificial intelligence integration in library services. The central product will be a codified Rural Librarian Leadership and AI Readiness forum model that documents convening structure, facilitation protocols, sequencing guidance, and implementation benchmarks. This model will be accompanied by a modular AI Readiness Framework outlining competencies, ethical considerations, and instructional integration strategies aligned to digital literacy and student learning outcomes.

Additional deliverables will include curated AI-focused instructional modules, practitioner-informed discussion frameworks, implementation templates, and a comprehensive facilitator guide to support replication in other regions. Convening outputs will be translated into structured resources, including session agendas, applied case examples, synthesized discussion summaries, and, where appropriate, recorded expert presentations. A practical AI toolkit tailored to school library instruction and operations will provide adaptable tools, policy considerations, and classroom integration strategies. All materials will be developed through a collaborative design process integrating practitioner experience with expert guidance. Deliverables will be modular, clearly documented, and formatted for transferability to ensure usability by state agencies, regional consortia, and professional associations nationwide. Collectively, these outputs advance Objective 1.1 by strengthening librarians' capacity to support student learning in information evaluation, ethical AI use, and emerging technology literacy. Ultimately, the codified Rural Librarian AI Readiness forum model and toolkit will serve as a foundational roadmap to inform future applied research or national implementation grants across the library field.

Table 5: *LIFT* Project Results ([Supporting Document: 13. Project Logic Model](#))

Results Category	Intended Results	Measurement Indicators	Target Outcomes
Workforce	● Increased AI literacy &	● Pre and post AI readiness	● 80% report increased

Development	- instructional confidence among rural school librarians • Reduced professional isolation through sustained peer networks • Strengthened capacity to serve as instructional leaders in emerging technology integration	- survey scores • Professional isolation scale comparison • Participant self-assessment of leadership confidence • Implementation logs documenting AI-informed practices	- AI instructional confidence • 75% report reduced professional isolation • 75% implement at least one AI-informed instructional strategy
Instructional & Service	• Improved integration of AI literacy and civic literacy and respectful civil dialogue in rural school libraries • Support for student research, information evaluation, and ethical technology use	• Sample lesson artifacts • Instructional reflection narratives • Administrator feedback • Implementation case summaries	• Documented AI-informed instructional practices in participating districts • 75% participants report measurable improvements in instructional delivery
Field-Level & National Impact	• Development of a replicable Rural Librarian forum model • Publicly accessible AI Readiness Framework and facilitator guide • National dissemination of tools and model documentation	• Toolkit downloads and website analytics • Conference presentations • External inquiries and replication interest surveys • Dissemination tracking logs	• Publication of open-access digital toolkit and facilitation guide • Dissemination through at least two state or national venues • Evidence of external access & engagement beyond participating districts
Organizational & Sustainability	• Establishment of a sustainable rural librarian convening structure within SWC • Integration of forum components into ongoing PD infrastructure	• Post-grant implementation plan • Partner commitments • Continuation strategy documentation	• Formal sustainability plan adopted by SWC • Commitment from partner organizations to continue convening structure beyond grant period

Addressing the Identified Need

These results directly address the documented professional isolation of rural school librarians and the limited availability of sustained, role-specific professional development in emerging technologies. By integrating facilitated peer exchange with structured expert guidance, **LIFT** reduces professional isolation while building measurable capacity in artificial intelligence literacy, ethical decision-making, and instructional leadership. Rather than relying on episodic workshops or self-directed exploration, the project establishes a sequenced pathway for applied learning, collaborative problem-solving, and shared implementation.

The resulting forum model and AI readiness tools provide rural librarians with structured guidance for integrating emerging technologies into instruction and library operations without requiring extensive additional staffing or local funding. By strengthening librarians' confidence and decision-making capacity, the project enhances their ability to guide students in evaluating information, understanding algorithmic bias, and engaging responsibly with AI-enabled tools. In this way, **LIFT**

addresses both immediate workforce challenges and long-term instructional implications, advancing equitable access to high-quality library services in rural communities nationwide.

Adaptability and Generalizability

All project deliverables will be intentionally designed for structured replication beyond the Southwest Missouri context. The Rural Librarian AI Readiness forum model will include clearly articulated implementation phases, facilitation protocols, documentation templates, competency benchmarks, and evaluation instruments, enabling external organizations to replicate the model with fidelity while adapting it to local needs. Materials will be modular and tiered, allowing for implementation at varying scales, including single-district networks, regional consortia, state-level initiatives, or multi-state collaborations.

The design emphasizes scalable core components such as sequenced convenings, facilitated peer exchange structures, shared digital collaboration platforms, and expert-guided applied learning sessions. These elements are not dependent on a specific geographic region or funding structure and can be implemented within existing professional development systems. Adaptation guidance will outline recommended staffing configurations, cost considerations, and partnership strategies to support implementation in diverse governance contexts. By codifying both process and content, *LIFT* contributes to a transferable model rather than a localized program. The resulting framework is designed to support rural and remote library systems nationwide in strengthening workforce capacity and advancing responsible emerging technology integration in sustainable and context-responsive ways.

Dissemination & Sustainability Strategy

Project findings and deliverables will be disseminated nationally to ensure broad field impact and replicability. SWC will present project results and implementation lessons, and the Rural Librarian AI Readiness Framework at regional library leadership meetings and state and national conferences such as Missouri Association Rural Education and the National Education Association (NREA). The project team will host at least one national webinar to introduce the Forum model and share evaluation findings with rural and underserved districts across the country by distributing project resources through national professional networks including state library agencies and professional listservs such as AASL and IMLS project communities. All major digital deliverables, including the forum facilitation guide, AI Readiness Framework, implementation toolkit, sample agendas, and evaluation templates, will be made openly accessible through SWC's online platform. Resources will be distributed through professional listservs, state library networks, and partner organizations to maximize reach. Dissemination metrics, including downloads, webinar participation, presentation attendance, and external inquiries, will be tracked to document national engagement and interest in replication.

Sustainability is built into the design of *LIFT* through integration into SWC's long-standing professional development infrastructure. At the conclusion of the grant period, the Rural Librarian AI Readiness Forum will transition from grant-supported development to a standing consortium embedded within SWC's annual regional services. Annual convenings will be incorporated into the existing professional learning calendar, and digital collaboration spaces will continue to be hosted and maintained through SWC's established systems. Because the Forum model relies on documented facilitation protocols, peer leadership, and shared resources rather than high-cost external programming, ongoing operation requires minimal additional funding. SWC leadership and member districts have committed to sustaining participation through existing consortium structures and district partnerships. By embedding the Forum within established operational systems and maintaining open access to all materials, SWC ensures continued regional impact while preserving national availability of the model beyond the federal funding period. SWC already maintains regional professional learning networks for multiple educator roles across its 42-district consortium, providing an established infrastructure that allows the Rural Librarian AI Readiness Forum to continue with minimal additional cost.

Grant: National Leadership Grants for Libraries (NLG-Libraries-FY26)

Institute of Museum & Library Services (IMLS)



★ Project **LIFT: Librarian Innovation & Forum for Technology**
Submitted by the Southwest Center for Educational Excellence (SWC)
with a consortium of 42 SW Missouri Rural Schools

SCHEDULE OF COMPLETION

Project Period: September 1, 2026 - August 31, 2028

YEAR 1: September 1, 2026 – August 31, 2027	
September - October 2026	● Finalize advisory committee ● Conduct baseline needs survey of participating rural librarians ● Confirm speakers and AI specialists ● Develop detailed curriculum framework
November 2026	Forum Meeting #1 ● Topic: <i>Rural Librarian Leadership and Professional Isolation</i> ● Collect participant feedback
December 2026 - January 2027	● Develop and publish initial online resource hub ● Upload session materials and toolkits
February 2027	Forum Meeting #2 ● Topic: Practical AI Tools for Library Instruction ● Hands-on implementation workshop
March - April 2027	● Peer networking cohort meetings (virtual) ● Ongoing AI tool pilot implementation in districts
May 2027	Forum Meeting #3 ● Topic: Emerging Technologies and Ethical AI Use ● Refinement of shared implementation models
June - July 2027	● Develop replicable Rural Librarian Forum Toolkit ● Draft dissemination materials
August 2027	Forum Meeting #4 ● Topic: Sustainability and Scaling the Model ● Year 1 evaluation report completed

YEAR 2: September 1, 2027 – August 31, 2028	
September - October 2027	● Refine forum model based on Year 1 evaluation ● Expand outreach to additional rural districts
November 2027	Forum Meeting #5 ● Advanced AI integration strategies
January 2028	Forum Meeting #6 ● Topic: Digital literacy and community engagement strategies
February - March 2028	● Update and expand online repository ● Develop national dissemination webinar
April 2028	Forum Meeting #7 ● Case study presentations from participating districts
May - June 2028	● National dissemination webinar ● Conference proposal submissions ● Release final Rural Librarian Leadership and AI Readiness Toolkit
August 2028	● Final report preparation and submission ● Sustainability plan implemented