



LAURA BUSH 21st CENTURY LIBRARIAN PROGRAM

Sample Application RE-259035-OLS-25
Project Category: Planning

Association for Rural and Small Libraries, Inc

Amount awarded by IMLS: \$149,842

The Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL) will deepen the field's understanding of the challenges faced by solo librarians in order to create tailored continuing education opportunities. Key activities include conducting focus groups with solo librarians to gather input and designing and deploying a comprehensive nationwide survey. Based on this formal landscape review, ARSL will disseminate the results through an open-access publication, provide presentations to key library organizations, and host ongoing discussions with the ARSL Solo Librarian Networking Group. The survey data will be used to produce a comprehensive report to guide library support organizations in developing targeted, effective programs that ensure access to PD and educational opportunities for library staff working solo or with limited support. This effort will benefit solo librarians, their communities, and the broader library profession.

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.

Overcoming Obstacles: Enhancing Access to Professional Development for Solo Librarians

Introduction

The Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL) requests \$149,842 to support a two-year planning project to identify the obstacles preventing "solo librarians" from accessing professional development (PD) opportunities through formal and informal in-person and online educational coursework available to the field. ARSL defines a "solo librarian" as a library professional who works in a library staffed by three or fewer staff members, typically in a small, resource-limited community. Many of these libraries are staffed by a sole employee covering all library duties at any given time, other libraries employ a few part-time workers who combined cover operating hours of less than 40 hours per week. Solo librarians are professionals who exemplify resourcefulness as they independently manage libraries in rural locations (e.g., towns, remote hamlets, villages). They are the driving force behind their small libraries, demonstrating remarkable innovation as they stretch limited budgets to create programs and services that truly connect with their communities' unique needs. Through a multifaceted approach, this research aims to deepen our understanding of the challenges faced by solo librarians, a group often unaccounted for in PD initiatives, to create more accessible and comprehensive continuing education. The insights gained from this effort will be utilized to enhance educational offerings and ensure a far-reaching impact through collaboration with other library support organizations (such as Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA), WebJunction (WJ), Public Library Association (PLA), San Jose State University's iSchool (SJSU), the Association for Bookmobiles and Outreach Services (ABOS), and the American Library Association (ALA)). By emphasizing collaboration and shared ownership with national partners, this project can magnify the reach and impact of its discoveries. This work will identify critical insights into the realities of this segment of the library profession to help shape the development of future supports and interventions. By identifying obstacles and working to create tailored workforce development programs, this project has the potential to deepen the skills and capacity of solo librarians, empowering them and directly benefiting their communities.

Project Justification

In the most recent 2022 IMLS Public Libraries Survey (PLS), 3,887 public libraries reported having fewer than three full-time staff members. 84% of those libraries lacked degreed librarians, and 63% were operating on annual budgets of less than \$100,000¹. Of those libraries, 1,688 were staffed with only one full-time or part-time staff member. These constraints make it difficult for solo librarians to find the time and resources to participate in ongoing education, highlighting the urgent need for PD tailored to this crucial segment of the U.S. library workforce.

This planning grant will be utilized to focus on an audience of library staff working in small and rural libraries who may be unable to access more formal educational pathways through an MLS or MLIS degree or other time-intensive synchronous training opportunities. The survey aims to collect responses from at least 350 library staff members (representing ~10% of libraries reporting three or fewer FTEs through the 2022 PLS) across all levels (e.g., directors, librarians, technicians, and pages). In the long-term, this undertaking will benefit not only library workers but also the communities they serve, ensuring their access to well-trained professionals who can continue to effectively support their information needs and provide programs that support their community's well-being.

ARSL provides PD opportunities through an annual conference, webinars, and partnerships with other library organizations that offer practical skill-building directly applicable to the daily work of rural and small library workers. Our organization fosters a strong sense of community through peer networking and resource-sharing

¹ Pelczar, M., Li, J., Alhassani, S., & Mabile, S. (2024). *Data File Documentation: Public Libraries in the United States Fiscal Year 2022*. Institute of Museum and Library Services: Washington, D.C. https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/2024-06/pls_fy2022_csv.zip

platforms that help librarians connect, collaborate, and exchange ideas—an essential service for those who may feel isolated. As the subject matter expert in this area, ARSL consistently encounters anecdotal evidence highlighting challenges such as a lack of financial resources, staff capacity/lack of coverage, geographic isolation, lack of broadband service, and limited technology access. However, there has not been a concerted effort within the profession to conduct formal, systematic studies to corroborate those findings. This research will help to formalize our understanding of the experiences of solo librarianship and the obstacles it presents to participating in meaningful, ongoing professional development. This project will address this crucial knowledge gap by launching the first comprehensive survey dedicated to studying this segment of the library profession.

This undertaking through its focus on professional development and skill enhancement for a sizable population of library workers nationally, which marks a significant milestone in the field, directly aligns with:

- LB21 Goal 2: Train and retain current library and archives professionals, faculty, and staff.
- Objective 2.1 Develop or enhance professional development and training programs to enable the library and archival workforce to meet the needs of their communities.

Project Work Plan

ARSL envisions this project requiring approximately 2 years to complete, which will allow sufficient time for planning and execution of a national survey, thoughtful collection of data and experiences, and deep analysis of results. From this newfound knowledge, the information uncovered in this project can be used to update and expand education offerings to deepen workforce skills, leading to more targeted community-centered programs, enhanced customer service, and community partnership building.

This work plan consists of four phases: **Phase 1** will focus on project initiation by the project coordinator and facilitator and selection of advisory committee members. Outreach will begin to invite solo librarians to participate in online or in-person focus groups. **Phase 2** will gather input from solo librarians working in the field through focus group sessions. In addition to in-person focus groups, online sessions will also be held to allow more members of this segment to participate remotely. This data will then inform the development of a valid survey based not just on assumptions but on true experiences in an effort to successfully capture the realities of this community at large. **Phase 3** will involve designing a comprehensive, nationwide survey followed by deployment with structured outreach to drive participation. **Phase 4** will center on analyzing the gathered data, drafting a final report of the findings, and disseminating the completed report to solo librarians and key library partner organizations to drive future improvements to curriculum development based on this newfound knowledge.

With detailed activity planning, dedicated personnel, and consistent progress tracking, this multi-phased approach will ensure the successful identification of obstacles and help to define strategies that support the development of a more robust library workforce that address the circumstances impacting their abilities to grow and enhance their knowledge base.

Key Staff

Executive Director Kate Laughlin will oversee the project team. The effort will be led by a project coordinator, Lucy Pekovich, who will manage the project timeline, budget, administrative oversight, and communication plan, ensuring the smooth execution of the project. A contracted facilitator, Kathy Zappitello, will create a welcoming space, using active listening and transparency to foster open dialogue, build trust, and deepen participant engagement at the focus group sessions. All activities will be reviewed by an advisory committee of members from this segment of the profession who can guide and refine the process, ensuring alignment with the unique needs of solo librarians. Once the survey has closed, Assistant Director Megan Fontaine will

complete data analysis duties of compiling the results and developing the outcomes report of this effort for dissemination to a broad audience.

Phase 1: Planning and Development (Award July 2025, Funding begins August 1, 2025)

Objective: Launch project, build a team of subject matter experts and prepare for focus group sessions.

Project Coordination and Recruitment (July - September 2025)

Staff: Project Coordinator and Executive Director

Activities:

- The project coordinator will engage a facilitator.
- The project coordinator will interview and select an advisory committee of 8 subject matter experts who adequately represent solo librarians nationally.
 - Advisory committee members will be selected from members of the ARSL Board, solo librarian networking group, Solo Librarian of the Year award nominees and winners, and other key library organizational stakeholders.
 - ARSL membership will not be a requirement for participation.
 - The final member selections will be made in consultation with the executive director.
- The project coordinator will communicate a call for focus group participants in the solo librarian community through awareness campaigns utilizing ARSL and key partner organization (WJ & ABOS) channels. ARSL membership will not be a requirement for participation.

Resources:

- Project Coordinator contracted hours
- Executive Director contracted hours
- Facilitator contract
- Partner organizations (2) stipend for marketing and awareness campaigns
- Outreach communications, newsletter content, social media campaign

Progress Tracking:

- The project coordinator will establish a project timeline with milestones, a regular check-in schedule with the advisory committee, and ongoing progress reporting to the ARSL executive director.

Focus Group Development (August - September 2025)

Staff: Project Coordinator, Advisory Committee, and Facilitator

Activities:

- The advisory committee, led by the project coordinator and facilitator, will develop, review, and approve the focus group discussion guide. The focus group discussion guide will cover a variety of topics such as financial resources, hours available for training, local legal/policy considerations, programs specific to solo librarianship, etc.
- The advisory committee will conduct personal outreach campaigns to identify and invite focus group members who are representative of the solo librarian community nationally.
- The facilitator will prepare and finalize focus group discussion materials.

Resources:

- Project Coordinator contracted hours
- Advisory Committee (8) honorariums

Progress Tracking:

- Project management of timeline for discussion guide development and participant selection.
- Final review and approval of the focus group discussion guide by the advisory committee before the sessions.

Phase 2: Hold Focus Group Sessions

Objective: Gather in-depth insights and foundational knowledge to inform the development of a robust, large-scale national survey.

In-Person Focus Group Events (September 17-20, 2025)

Staff: Project Coordinator, Facilitator, 36 Participants.

Activities:

- At the 2025 ARSL National Conference in Albuquerque, NM, selected solo librarians will join dynamic, in-person focus groups. To reduce obstacles to in-person attendance, financial support for travel and staffing coverage will be provided.
 - These focus groups are designed to provide a platform for solo librarians to discuss the real-world obstacles they face and how they've successfully overcome some of those challenges personally. The insights from these discussions will be crucial in shaping the national survey.
- The project coordinator will handle all aspects of scheduling, electronic materials prep, event management, and data capturing and compiling from sessions.
- The facilitated focus groups will provide input based on lived experiences to suggest appropriate survey questions. The focus group members will help to identify the most effective methods and channels for survey outreach, ensuring the findings and recommendations reach the intended audience to collect data that can drive meaningful change.
- Membership with ARSL will not be a requirement.

Resources:

- Project Coordinator contracted hours.
- Focus group participant support expenses which include a stipend for their participation time, conference registration fees, and a stipend to provide library staff coverage while participants are away from their libraries.
- Stipends for travel, meals, and 2-nights lodging are provided for the Project Coordinator, Facilitator, and 36 participants.

Progress Tracking:

- Successful completion of focus group sessions
- Data effectively captured and compiled from focus group sessions

Online Focus Group Events (October 2025 - November 2025)

Who: Project Coordinator, Facilitator, 18 Participants

Activities:

- To gain robust participation from solo librarians who may not have the ability or opportunity to attend the conference in person, the facilitator will lead three (3) virtual focus group sessions
- The project coordinator will handle all aspects of scheduling, electronic materials prep, virtual session technology support, and data capturing and compiling from sessions.
- Membership with ARSL will not be a requirement.
- The insights collected will then guide the development of a national survey to capture a broad range of lived experiences and ensure that as many perspectives as possible are captured.

Resources:

- Virtual focus groups will be hosted and led by the facilitator using the Zoom platform.
- Project Coordinator contracted hours.
- Participant support expenses - stipend for 1 hour

Progress Tracking:

- Successful completion of focus group sessions
- Data effectively captured and compiled from focus group sessions
- Progress reporting to key library partner organizations from both in-person & virtual sessions

Phase 3: Survey Development and Roll Out

Objective: Design a comprehensive, nationwide survey that works to uncover the real-world challenges preventing solo librarians from accessing training to develop future methods that more adequately support skills advancement.

Survey Development Based on Focus Group Insights (December 2025 - February 2026)

Staff: Project Coordinator, Executive Director, Facilitator, Advisory Committee

Activities:

- The project coordinator will develop an online research survey to be distributed nationally, using information gathered during the in-person and online focus groups and in collaboration with the advisory committee.
- The advisory committee and facilitator will review and approve the survey questions, ensuring that the varied perspectives of solo librarians are accurately reflected and represented.
- The project coordinator will review and refine the final survey, which will be approved by the executive director.
- Before dissemination, the project coordinator will prepare the survey using MemberClicks software and test functionality.

Resources:

- Project Coordinator contracted hours
- Executive Director contracted hours
- MemberClicks Forms Survey development & testing

Progress Tracking:

- Completion and approval of survey questions and readiness for deployment through MemberClicks Forms.

Nationwide Survey Deployment (March - May 2026)

Staff: Project Coordinator, Survey Participants.

Activities:

- The nationwide survey will be launched to gather responses.
- The survey aims to collect responses from approximately 350 library staff members nationally.
- Broad distribution will include library staff beyond the ARSL membership base, with ongoing awareness campaigns during the survey collection period (4-6 weeks) by ARSL and partner organizations (WJ and ABOS).
- The advisory committee members will continue to conduct extensive personal outreach to ensure robust participation, leveraging personal networks, membership directories, and monthly networking meetings (e.g., solo librarian networking group, leadership meetings, and library conferences).
- Gift card incentives will be offered to drive more participation.
- The survey window may be extended if responses are insufficient for an adequate sample.

Resources:

- Project Coordinator contracted hours
- Advisory Committee outreach time
- Gift card incentive for survey participants

Progress Tracking:

- Weekly monitoring of response rates and ongoing data collection.
- Progress report to partner library associations following survey closure date.

Phase 4: Data Analysis and Strategy Development

Objective: Analyze and formally present collected survey data at the conclusion of this planning grant. The learnings identified can then be used to inform future development of training programs and strategies to overcome the identified obstacles uncovered in this effort.

Data Analysis and Preliminary Reporting (May 2026 - December 2026)

Staff: Project Coordinator, Data Analyst, Advisory Committee.

Activities:

- The data analyst will review the collected survey data to identify key trends, themes, and obstacles, which will lead to documentation outlining formal findings.
- The project coordinator will convene the advisory committee to draft potential strategies that may inform future professional development coursework from ARSL and key partner organizations.

Resources:

- Project Coordinator contracted hours
- Data Analyst contracted hours
- Advisory Committee hours

Progress Tracking:

- Completed data analysis
- Production of a final summative report.

Final Reporting and Organizational Outreach (January 2027 - July 2027)

Staff: Project Coordinator, Executive Director, Advisory Committee, Partner organizations

Activities:

- The final report will be published and hosted on the arsl.org website. The published report will include acknowledgement of IMLS support.
- The final report will be shared through a series of virtual discussion meetings with leaders from key library organizations: WJ, ALA, PLA, COSLA, ABOS, SJSU, WebJunction, American Library Association (ALA), Public Library Association (PLA), University of Washington's iSchool, and the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums (ATALM).
- The executive director and advisory members will share the findings virtually with the ARSL Solo Librarian Networking Group.
- The executive director, project coordinator, and two advisory committee members will present findings at the 2027 ARSL Conference in Milwaukee, WI. Members of key library organizations and industry leaders will be invited to attend as well as conference attendees.

Resources:

- Project Coordinator contracted hours
- Executive Director contracted hours
- Advisory Committee hours
- Report published and hosted on ARSL website; member login will not be required to access
- Outreach communications, newsletter content, social media campaign
- Travel, meals, and 2-nights lodging stipends for ARSL staff and key members of this project to present findings at the 2027 ARSL Conference. Conference fees will be reimbursed for the two advisory committee members (non-staff).

Progress Tracking:

- Electronic hosting and distribution of the final report. The raw data set will be made available upon request.
- Successful completion of meetings with partner organizations.
- Documentation and incorporation of key library organization feedback.

To ensure knowledge is shared broadly for other applications within the profession, leaders from key library organizations will be kept abreast of the findings throughout the project, fostering a sense of shared ownership and responsibility. The project products will be made freely accessible and openly available to all at the end of this project.

Project Results

This project focuses on solo librarians who face obstacles that typically differ from those encountered by their counterparts in larger institutions with access to broad infrastructures, financial resources, and personnel support. By leveraging input from subject matter experts and obtaining data through focus groups and a national survey, the project will identify the true challenges which can then lead to actionable strategies to bridge gaps in access to skill enhancement.

ARSL will leverage the findings to refine and adapt current and future professional development coursework, ensuring this workforce segment can quickly access and begin implementing their newfound knowledge. The resulting insights will shape the creation of curricula and resources that address the realities of these librarians' environments, positively impacting their professional practices and growth and ultimately empowering them to serve their communities better.

At the end of this planning grant cycle, the final results will be published with open access on ARSL's website. ARSL's Board President and Executive Director will host in-person and virtual meetings with key leaders from partner organizations (e.g., COSLA, WebJunction, PLA, ALA, ABOS, ATALM) to discuss the findings and begin discussions to develop practical applications. These presentations will raise awareness, foster strategic partnerships, and provide a roadmap for addressing the challenges identified, encouraging the adoption of supportive measures for this group of library workers. Expanding the project's reach through partnerships aims to create a more cohesive and supportive professional community, ensuring that improvements are sustainable and the needs of solo librarians are ingrained in future program development.

The ARSL team will also review the findings with their members through the Solo Librarian Networking Group and attendees of the 2027 ARSL Conference. Sharing this knowledge will create a collaborative atmosphere of transparency and shared understanding. This data will catalyze solo librarians to connect on their shared experiences and utilize it to advocate for their professional development needs locally.

The Board of Directors, staff, and members of the Association for Rural & Small Libraries are grateful for the opportunity to propose this project and we look forward to your review.

Schedule of Completion

Year 1

[illegible]

[illegible]

Year 2

[illegible]