

LIBRARY BOARD OF RHODE ISLAND
The regular meeting of the Library Board of Rhode Island was held
March 17, 2025
at William Hall Library
Lower-level Auditorium
1825 Broad Street, Cranston, RI 02905

Members Attending: Aaron Coutu (Vice Chair), John Bucci, Melody Drnach (Chair), Laura Kohl, Doug Norris, Leslie Page, Cheryl Space, Michelle Steever, Tien Tran, Kate Wodehouse

Members Absent: Jessica David, Kenneth Findlay, Christopher La Roux, Phyllis Lynch (ex officio), Monica Nazareth-Dzialo, Karisa Tashjian

Present from the Office of Library and Information Services (OLIS): Karen Andrews, Nicolette Baffoni, Karen Mellor

Guests: Amanda Chapman, Director, Davisville Free Library; Kathleen Delaney, Board of Trustees, Davisville Free Library; Michael Donohue, Board of Trustees, North Kingstown Free Library; Gregory A. Mancini, President, North Kingstown Town Council; Amy Paulsen, President, Board of Trustees, Willett Free Library; Jennifer Shaker, Director, Willett Free Library; Will Valverde, Chair, Board of Trustees, North Kingstown Free Library; Megan Weeden, Director, North Kingstown Free Library

Materials Distributed:

- Chief Officers of State Library Agencies: State of the Executive Order Impacting the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)
- OLIS Statement on Executive Order on IMLS
- LBRI Legislation Committee Report March 2025
- North Kingstown Free Library Board of Trustees Email & Spreadsheet, Michael Donohue, 03/16/2025
- Attorney Dianne L. Izzo Letter, 03/14/2025
- Davisville Free Library Letter, Board of Trustees, 03/07/2025
- Town of North Kingstown Letter, Gregory A. Mancini, 03/04/2025
- Public Library Standards Draft V4
- Public Library Standards Draft Tracked V4

I. WELCOME

Mr. Coutu called the meeting to order at 4:03 pm.

II. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES from the February 10, 2025, meeting

Moved By: Mr. Norris

Seconded By: Ms. Page

The minutes were approved as presented.

III. REPORT OF THE VICE-CHAIR

Mr. Coutu welcomed members. Members introduced themselves to the guests.

Mr. Coutu emceed a March 6 press conference at the State House in support of the Freedom to Read Act. Senator Mark McKenny of Warwick and Representative David Morales of Providence, the act's primary sponsors in the Senate and House respectively, spoke about the bill. Additional speakers in support of the bill included advocates from the RI Library Association (RILA), representatives from RI Authors Against Books Bans and Penguin Random House publishing company, and students with the Alliance of RI Southeast Asians for Education (ARISE). The bill was heard before the Senate Education Committee on March 12 with several hours of testimony largely in support of the bill; the bill was held for further study. More testimony will be heard at the House bill's hearing when it is scheduled.

IV. CHIEF OF LIBRARY SERVICES REPORT

A. OLIS Updates

i. State Program Report/Biennial State Administrative Report

The annual State Program Report was submitted to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and approved; no corrections were requested. Ms. Mellor extended thanks to Ms. Baffoni for submitting a flawless report for the second consecutive year. The report details Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) fund expenditures including subawards to libraries and other federally funded programs.

The biennial State Library Agency Administrative Survey about agency operations and expenditures was also submitted; OLIS awaits IMLS acceptance.

ii. Voices for Libraries

Ms. Mellor attended the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) library advocacy event, 'Voices for Libraries', on March 3-6 in Washington, DC. Ms. Mellor is co-chair of the COSLA Public Policy Committee, which coordinated the event; the event was attended by 170 library advocates from 35 states. Advocates attended a day of briefing on federal legislative process, background information on federal funding and support for libraries, and COSLA's policy agenda. The policy agenda included federal funding for libraries, fostering strong readers, universal and affordable Broadband Access and support for digital literacy, and the role of libraries as the heart of the community. Ms. Mellor and Ed Garcia, Director, Cranston Public Library, visited all four RI congressional offices. Senator Jack Reed is the country's leading library advocate, and the sponsor of the Museum and Library Services Act (MLSA), which provides national library funding.

iii. Executive Order

The President issued an executive order on Friday, March 14, 2025, to eliminate to the maximum extent the non-statutory functions of 7 federal agencies, including the IMLS. Ms.

Mellor talked with colleagues nationwide about strategic approaches to the order and the impact on libraries. Senator Reed's office is reviewing the executive order's language. Ms. Mellor's opinion, following review of the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) portion of the MLSA which provides funding to state library agencies such as OLIS through the Grants to States program, is that the Grants-to-States program is statutory along with multiple other IMLS programs. The IMLS has until March 21 to submit its compliance plan to reduce the department to its statutory functions.

Ms. Mellor was contacted by the RI Attorney General's office, following Ms. Drnach's inquiry to that office, to discuss impacts to OLIS. The Office of Attorney General Peter F. Neronha co-led the lawsuit contesting the January federal funding freeze and is investigating the new executive order's impact to RI. Ms. Mellor will email all public library directors with an update. Unless Washington directs otherwise, OLIS will continue business as usual. Thus far OLIS has not experienced issues accessing federal funds. A balance of \$710,000 remains on OLIS' current LSTA grant. OLIS may draw down only 30 days of advance funds or may draw down funds for reimbursement of past expenditures. OLIS is expediting projects to draw down funds as fast as possible in accordance with US Code governing the program and plans to move forward with programs such as the Summer Reading Program (SRP), the Professional Field Experience (PFE) grants, and other federally funded programs. OLIS awaits word from the IMLS about the order's implications.

Ms. Steever inquired about the impact to OLIS-funded school databases. Ms. Mellor advised that AskRI databases and municipal grant-in-aid (GIA) are funded by the state and not impacted. Governor McKee's proposed FY26 budget level-funds GIA and the Statewide Reference Resource Center (SRRC) managing AskRI.

V. COMMITTEE REPORTS

Federal & State Legislative Updates (OLIS website [updates](#))

A. State Legislation

- Freedom to Read Act (H5726)

H5726 was introduced and referred to the Education Committee.

- School Libraries Act (H5488)

H5488 was introduced and referred to the State Government and Elections Committee. The bill requires a qualified librarian in every school. The position is sharable by multiple schools and was formerly a requirement of the Rhode Island 2007 Basic Education Program (BEP). The RI Department of Education's (RIDE) interest in opening the BEP prompted the bill. The head of the school committee professional organization expressed concern about municipal costs. If passed, the bill will be implemented over 3 years

Ms. Space requested the LBRI submit letters of support for H5400, State Aid to Libraries, H5488, The School Libraries Act, and H5726, the Freedom to Act. Mr. Coutu and Ms. Drnach will compose draft letters. Ms. Steever previously submitted written testimony for H5488.

Motion to draft LBRI state library legislation support letters:

Moved By: Ms. Drnach

Seconded By: Ms. Steever

The motion was approved.

B. Federal Legislation

Federal legislation was not discussed.

Motion to switch Agenda Item 7A and Agenda Item 6 placement:

Moved By: Mr. Norris

Seconded By: Mr. Bucci

The motion was approved.

VI. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

A. Public Library Minimum Standards: Review of Final Draft

Ms. Mellor reviewed the public library standard changes and review process. The LBRI convened a review committee at OLIS' recommendation. LBRI committee members include Mr. Bucci, Mr. Coutu, Mr. La Roux, Ms. Page, Ms. Space, Ms. Steever, and Mr. Tran. Laurel Clark, Director, South Kingstown Public Library, is the Chair, and Catherine Damiani, Director, Tiverton Public Library, is Co-Chair. Heather Field, Director, Ashaway Free Library, is also a committee member, representing small public libraries. Kelly Metzger, OLIS State Data Coordinator, provided statistics and analysis of current and proposed standards in the context of current and potential future challenges for standards compliance. The committee was divided into two subcommittees to review different areas of the standards. The first subcommittee reviewed governance, facilities, and policies, and the second reviewed staffing, services, and collections. The committee performed a deep assessment of the current standards, most recently updated in 2013. The review resulted in a revised standards draft.

After meetings with public library directors and small libraries to hear concerns, a final draft was posted on March 12. The originally proposed hours requirement of 35 hours was changed to 30 hours after feedback from small libraries in municipalities with more than one independent library. The originally proposed onsite hours requirement for technology staff was eliminated and updated to require an available staff member for management of technology issues. Otherwise, library staffing requirements have not changed from the 2013 standards. Mr. Tran noted that public library standards nationwide were assessed in the revision process. The assessment led to the addition of new standards including minimum education requirements for trustees and library staff. OLIS will provide free training to facilitate compliance with continuing education standards.

The formal promulgation process has not begun. Open sessions for feedback on the standards are part of OLIS' process to ensure that libraries could provide input on the standards prior to the start of the promulgation process.

Motion to allow public comment on the Public Library Minimum Standards draft:

Moved By: Ms. Page

Seconded By: Ms. Wodehouse

The motion was approved.

B. Public Comment:

i. Amy Paulsen, President, Board of Trustees, Willett Free Library

Ms. Paulsen thanked Ms. Mellor for responding to various queries and requested on behalf of the Willett Free Library that the LBRI maintain the current 25-hour and staffing level standards. She stated that the revised standards can't be met without additional funding resulting in an unnecessary and potentially devastating financial burden on the Willett Free Library. The financial burden could force the library to leave the OSL consortium and lose grant-in-aid (GIA) funding. Willett Free Library has noted that the LBRI recognizes the gravity of the situation and believes the merger of the North Kingstown libraries is a potential solution. Ms. Paulsen advised that all possible merger scenarios would result in a reduction of services and/or GIA at Willett Free Library.

Ms. Paulsen explained the century-long investment the Saunderstown community has made in the library and that a merger of any kind would diminish the library's ability to prioritize the community's interests and would diminish the effectiveness and excellence of services. Ms. Paulsen advised that the library does not wish to be marginalized or forced to carry an unsustainable financial burden, and that holding small libraries to a standard they cannot meet is unnecessarily punitive and harmful to those communities. Ms. Paulsen noted that the library's future depends on the board's decision, and that by agreeing to retain the current standards, the continued success of Rhode Island's smallest library will be safeguarded. During the ensuing discussion, Ms. Paulsen inquired if a separate standard category could be created for small libraries with space limitations.

ii. Megan Weeden, Director, North Kingstown Free Library

Ms. Weeden expressed thanks to colleagues for their thoughtfulness in attending the meeting. On behalf of the North Kingstown Free Library, Ms. Weeden requested the current library standards be maintained, and explained how North Kingstown libraries are funded. While North Kingstown Free Library meets the standards and provides a small amount of their GIA funds to the Davisville Free and Willett Free libraries, it does not have resources to provide additional funding to them should the standards be revised. A library merger would provide some benefits but be cost-prohibitive and strain staff and resources, thereby negatively affecting the population.

iii. Will Valverde, Chair, Board of Trustees, North Kingstown Free Library

Mr. Valverde advised that North Kingstown Free Library has been tightening its belt and managing with current resources and will do so for the next few years. Even a few additional open hours will place an undue burden on the smaller libraries. North Kingstown has the 9th

largest area of the RI cities and towns and does not have an excellent transportation system so traveling to other libraries from the areas these small libraries serve can be a hardship. The concern is the impact on the library budgets of the small libraries and the resource strain that will reduce services there. The hours change will cause the community to be poorer.

iv. Michael Donohue, Board of Trustees, North Kingstown Free Library

Mr. Donohue reported that the standards revision discussion has unified the three libraries, and the libraries will coordinate efforts regardless of the LBRI's decision. The hope is that the LBRI will consider the libraries' real concerns, and a solution will allow maintenance of the two smaller libraries as they are the most affected. All the libraries perform outstanding community services and offer phenomenal programs. The directors are dedicated, and the trustee boards are very involved. The two small libraries do a significant amount of fundraising. Mr. Donohue provided and reviewed a spreadsheet about a potential merger which outlined the increased costs to the libraries and the Town of North Kingstown. North Kingstown Public Library respects the non-merger decision of the two smaller libraries.

Mr. Donohue noted that while the LBRI has been working on the standards revision for a year, the libraries are in a difficult position because they have had only three weeks to review the changes. Mr. Donohue requested the LBRI consider the impacts of the proposed changes and allow Willett Free Library and Davisville Free Library to continue meeting the current library standards.

v. Kathleen Delaney, Board of Trustees, Davisville Free Library

Ms. Delany spoke on behalf of the Davisville Free Library and urged the LBRI to consider the impact the revised standards would have on small libraries because they will yield significant library changes. While the revision intent is to expand access to and increase the quality of RI libraries, it would have the opposite effect on the Davisville Free Library. Of primary concern is the financial burden from increased staff costs that would exceed the budget. Staffing costs would increase by \$14,000, and funds would be diverted from essential programs that serve students in the local Title 1 school and the nearby Crossroads RI subsidized housing community.

Standard changes would negatively affect the library and its ability to serve the community. Neighbors often walk to the library and may not have access to transportation to the other libraries. If cutting costs to programs and collections does not cover the cost differences, the library will have to close. The library has been a unique community asset to their section of town for 100+ years. Ms. Delany stated that proceeding with the revisions will doom libraries, and the revision effort appears to be at cross purposes from the intent of libraries.

Motion to enter submitted response letters into the record:

Made by: Ms. Page

Seconded by: Ms. Drnach

The motion was approved.

Mr. Coutu thanked guests for their comments and attendance. Davisville Free and Willett Free libraries reported they do not provide benefits to their staff, and it is difficult to retain library staff because staff leaves upon attaining a master's degree in library science degree. Questions about the staff full-time equivalent (FTE) 35-hour requirement and waivers were raised. Mr. Coutu advised that the FTE definition will not change as it reflects the state definition and it's a federal requirement and has been in place since the 2000 revision of the standards. Ms. Mellor advised that there is a waiver submission process, and any changes to staffing will be phased in incrementally.

Ms. Mellor advised that a final standards revision draft will be posted prior to the next meeting. Other libraries not in attendance have commented on the standards. All comments will be considered, and a decision made that considers these comments and the obligation of the state to ensure access to consistent and accessible library services statewide.

VII. BOARD MEMBER REPORTS

No board member reports.

VIII. NEW BUSINESS

No new business.

IX. PUBLIC COMMENT

No public comment.

X. FUTURE MEETINGS

The next LBRI meeting is scheduled for April 28, 2025, 4-5:30pm, at William Hall Library, 1825 Broad Street, Cranston, RI 02905. Members will be notified of date or venue changes.

XI. ADJOURNMENT

Moved By: Ms. Kohl

Seconded By: Ms. Steever

The meeting adjourned at 6:23 p.m.