



**PLA President’s Report  
Michelle Jeske, 2020-2021**

The Public Library Association (PLA) envisions a future where public libraries serve at the intersection of vibrant communities and a strong democracy. Our association works to strengthen public libraries and their contribution to communities. Our groundbreaking initiatives do more than develop new skills – they move our profession to ever more innovative places. And our continuing education opportunities don’t just improve public library services, they build public library leaders. Even as the COVID-19 crisis created uncertainty for PLA and public libraries, we responded powerfully, helping libraries navigate through great risks and reinforce their essential roles in communities. We know that wherever public libraries are working, possibility lives.

PLA makes ALA a stronger organization by aligning our strategic priorities with ALA’s; by contributing to ALA’s bottom line through revenue generation, membership, overhead, and increased staff capacity and expertise; and by strengthening library networks. We’re stronger together.

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## COVID-19 Response

### COVID-19 and PLA

A few weeks after PLA’s hugely successful 2020 Conference in Nashville, PLA and public libraries nationwide found themselves in uncharted waters, with great risk and huge needs, due to COVID-19.

Inspired by the innovative shifts libraries made to continue to meet community needs during this time, PLA shifted, too. We adapted programs and developed new initiatives to meet the unique challenges of 2020 and 2021. We continued to serve as your voice to the media, partners in education and health, and policymakers. We helped libraries navigate through great risks and reinforce their essential roles in communities. We continued to build on work at the beginning of the pandemic, leveraging national surveys in April and May 2020 to inform media interviews and [broadband equity policy](#). In collaboration with ALA Publishing staff, PLA published “Pivoting during the Pandemic: Ideas for Serving Your Community Anytime, Anywhere” in 2021.

PLA’s stated commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion and social justice (EDISJ) became even more foundational to the association’s work during a year that saw both deepened inequalities brought on by the pandemic, as well as renewed calls for racial justice. Through it all, PLA worked to provide members with timely and relevant support.

## Organizational Excellence

### A Change in Leadership

PLA said goodbye to long-time executive director [Barb Macikas upon her retirement in August 2020](#). Since 2009, Macikas led the division and inspired innovative programs and initiatives that have empowered public library staff and strengthened their contributions to their communities. Through her leadership and in partnership with the PLA Board of Directors, members and staff, she helped transform the association and the field. Her notable achievements included growing PLA’s focus areas to include equity and social justice, leadership development, and performance measurement.

After a nationwide search, PLA was thrilled to find its next executive director close to home. [Mary Davis Fournier joined PLA in June 2021](#). Fournier is a 20-year veteran of ALA, having served in various roles including, most recently deputy director of the Public Programs Office. At ALA, she spearheaded dozens of groundbreaking projects that have paved the way for innovation in the library field, including Libraries Transforming Communities and the National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment (NILPPA),



Building Common Ground: Discussions of Community, Civility and Compassion, and the first “One Book” resource, Planning Your Community-Wide Read. She is the co-editor of Act, Listen, Empower: Grounding Your Library Work in Community Engagement (ALA Editions, 2020), which documents the field’s transformational shift toward library-led community engagement.

Her work, which has illuminated and leveraged the unparalleled power of libraries to support the most vulnerable and in-need populations through excellence in programming and community engagement, has been supported by a range of national partners including the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Fetzer Institute, the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, among others.

PLA also recognizes the invaluable contributions of PLA’s interim director, Mary Hirsh, who has ably served the association for more than a decade and provided leadership throughout the search process.

### Strategic Plan Implementation

2020 marked the mid-point of PLA’s current strategic plan, which was finalized and approved by the board of directors in June 2018. While PLA continues to make great strides toward achieving our goals, the pandemic has changed the ways libraries engage with their communities and with PLA. PLA took the opportunity presented by this disruption to revisit the strategic plan and make necessary adjustments. A revised plan is anticipated for release in the coming months.

- **Goal 1 - Transformation:** PLA advances public libraries’ transformation from a library focus to a community focus, to meet the specific needs of people and communities.
- **Goal 2 - Leadership:** PLA builds and supports leadership for public libraries that is reflective of the needs of each community and the profession.
- **Goal 3 - Advocacy & Awareness:** PLA leads in public library advocacy and influencing perceptions of public libraries.
- **Goal 4 - Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Social Justice (EDISJ):** PLA advocates for equity, diversity, inclusion and social justice in order to enable every member, library, and community group to fully and equally participate in a society mutually shaped to meet their needs.
- **Goal 5 - Organizational Excellence:** PLA is entrepreneurial, resilient, and successful in the sustaining and growing of resources to advance its mission and work.

### Council Outreach

PLA strives to engage with ALA Council members, particularly those who work in public libraries and/or are PLA members. While in-person meetings were not possible, PLA engaged Councilors virtually in January for a discussion of the ALA Operating Agreement and in June to review the work of the Forward Together Resolutions group. PLA values these connections with members and appreciates the care Councilors showed by engaging with PLA.



## 2021 Election

In April, PLA announced the results of its [2021 election](#). PLA elected [Dr. Maria Taesil Hudson McCauley](#), director of Libraries at the Cambridge (Massachusetts) Public Library to the office of 2022-2023 PLA president. McCauley will serve a three-year term beginning this June and including one-year stints as president-elect (2021-2022), president (2022-2023), and immediate past-president (2023-2024). Also elected to the PLA Board, as directors-at-large, [Erica Freudenberger](#), outreach, engagement & marketing consultant, Southern Adirondack Library System (Saratoga Springs, New York) and [Candice Wing-ye Mack](#), Administrator, Young Adult Services, Los Angeles (California) Public Library. Each will serve three-year term beginning in July 2021. PLA thanks all the candidates who stood for election, as well as all the members who voted.

## Supporters

In addition to our members, PLA is grateful for the financial support receives from library vendors, corporate and foundation partners, and government agencies. This support is critical to the success of the PLA Conference every other year and has helped PLA launch many new initiatives, including our performance measurement work, health literacy and promotion activity, and support to libraries to connect communities to technology and skilling resources. In 2020-2021, PLA was pleased to have the support of funders including AT&T, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Community Catalyst, Google, Facebook, Institute of Museum and Library Services, the John L. and James S. Knight Foundation, Microsoft, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

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## Transformation

### Digital Literacy and Workforce Development

Throughout 2020 and into 2021, PLA expanded existing digital literacy programs and introduced new partnerships to benefit libraries. Started in 2019, [Libraries Lead with Digital Skills](#) is an initiative of ALA and PLA, sponsored by Google, to ensure that public libraries across the nation receive ongoing access to free tools and resources to help everyone across America grow their skills, careers, and businesses. ALA and Google began 2020 by continuing to hold free, one-day events at libraries across the country for job seekers, small businesses, and library staff. When COVID-19 required changing course, many libraries were

supported to hold virtual events. PLA and ALA ultimately issued awards of \$1,000 to \$3,000 to over 300 public libraries to fund workforce programming, outreach, and education in their own libraries.

In May 2020, in response to the COVID-19 crisis, PLA and Microsoft created a new opportunity, the PLA and Microsoft Public WiFi Access Point Micro Grant Program, to provide WiFi access points to rural libraries to extend their signals into public spaces outside the library. Over 200 libraries applied for the program, suggesting a strong need. By spring 2021, over 70 individual access point locations were up and running, with dozens more library branches in the process of setting up their signals.

In September 2020, PLA and Microsoft launched a new collaboration, [Skilling for Employment Post COVID-19](#). This initiative will help libraries identify existing and new tools for community members to gain skills for jobs that are well positioned to grow in the future. Nearly 500 people joined the kick-off webinar, [150 Million New Technology-Oriented Jobs and the Skills Needed to Get Them](#). The initiative is promoting free and discounted resources on LinkedIn, GitHub, Microsoft Learn, and other sites. Additionally, partnerships between libraries, workforce development agencies and technology refurbishers in Cleveland (Ohio), El Paso (Texas), Memphis (Tennessee) and New York City are providing in-depth training to individuals impacted by COVID-19 – and giving them free Microsoft Surface tablet computers!

PLA entered into a collaboration with AT&T to improve digital literacy and promote broadband adoption among families and communities, particularly those who are newly connected and struggling with home schooling, employment and other challenges due to the COVID-19 crisis. By September 2021, PLA and AT&T will offer a specially curated collection of digital literacy courses so parents and families can build the skills and confidence they need to help children navigate distance learning and participate effectively and safely in today's digital world. Based on content from PLA's [DigitalLearn.org](#) training site, courses will address critical, basic skills such as searching, navigating a website, using passwords, and avoiding scams. New content will also be developed focusing on using mobile devices and video conferencing. All courses and related classroom training materials will be available in both English and Spanish.

## Early Childhood Literacy

PLA updated its [Early Childhood Literacy Activity Calendar](#) for 2021, providing libraries and families with twelve months of learning activities, book lists and nursery rhymes. Based on the core practices of [Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library](#), PLA's parent-education initiative, the publication emphasizes activities involving reading, writing, singing, talking, playing and counting.

## Family Engagement

The term “family engagement” describes a shared responsibility among families, educators and communities to support children's learning and development. PLA's [family engagement](#) experts offered a second sold-out cohort of the [Advancing Family Engagement in Public Libraries](#) professional development series, consisting of eight highly interactive, virtual classroom sessions that explore the PLA family engagement framework.

To further support family engagement, the [Institute of Museum and Library Services](#) (IMLS) awarded PLA and the [National Center for Families Learning](#) (NCFL) a planning grant (September 1, 2020–June 2021) under the National Leadership Grants for Libraries category. This planning grant, [“Exploring a Program Co-Design Approach to Better Serve and Engage Low-income, Latinx Communities,”](#) supports projects that address significant challenges and opportunities facing the library field and have the potential to advance theory and practice with new tools, research findings, and models. Throughout 2020-2021, PLA and NCFL conducted surveys, a literature review, and community conversations at pilot libraries to inform the final report, which will be released in September 2021.

## **Health Literacy, Reference and Programming**

PLA completed its third year of the initiative [Promoting Health Communities: Libraries Connecting You to Coverage](#), sponsored by the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) and [Community Catalyst](#). To date, the project has provided nearly 200 grants to libraries to promote enrollment in the [Affordable Care Act](#) (ACA). PLA’s work during the 2020-2021 enrollment period was particularly exciting due to a few factors. In addition to hundreds of libraries receiving ready-made materials to promote the ACA as usual, 18 libraries took the additional steps to become designated as Certified Application Counselor Designated Organizations (CDOs), and then proceeded to certify 48 library staff as Certified Application Counselors (CACs). Many of them also completed cultural competency training, to better serve different segments of their communities. Finally, extension of open ACA enrollment through September 2021 due to COVID helped extend the work of this grant project outside the traditional enrollment period in November and December. In addition, PLA, the National Network of Libraries of Medicine Greater Midwest Region, and the University of Iowa Prevention Research Center (UIPRC) explored how public health and public libraries can collaborate through a literature search, surveys, and focus groups. This work led to a series of webinars and podcasts that kicked off in early 2021.

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## **Leadership**

PLA launched a new, online course in early 2021, [Leadership Lab: Embedding EDI in Public Library Leaders](#). Plans for an in-person [Leadership Academy](#) and several [Equity Starts with Us](#) workshops were scuttled by COVID-19. At the same time, skills from both were needed more than ever as library workers navigated growing inequities and shifting demands. Leadership Lab was designed to explore transformational leadership through the lens of the current social crises, emphasizing equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice (EDISJ) principles and approaches, supplemented by leadership development and asset-based community development tools. Understanding the great demand for this content, PLA is

exploring creative options to scale the program in 2022, while hoping to bring back live Leadership Academy and Equity Starts with Us workshops.

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## Advocacy & Awareness

PLA was proud to support the efforts of the ALA Public Policy and Advocacy office in successfully advocating for library inclusion in the [American Rescue Plan Act \(ARPA\)](#). Libraries are eligible to receive an allocated portion of recovery funding as part of the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act passed by Congress on March 10, 2021. The package includes \$200 million for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the largest single investment in the agency's 25-year history, providing emergency funding for budgetary expenses brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The package also includes billions of dollars in academic, public and school library-eligible programs, including the [Emergency Education Connectivity Fund](#) (ECF) through the federal E-rate program. The ECF will provide more than \$7 billion in funding for public and tribal libraries and K12 schools to bridge connectivity gaps for millions of Americans lacking home internet access and technology devices.

A joint PLA and PPA task force also concluded its work promoting the [2020 Census](#). Members of the 2020 Census Library Outreach and Education Task Force developed and reviewed diverse resources, including the Libraries' Guide to the 2020 Census; provided training via webinars and conference programs; and helped to select mini-grant recipients to boost awareness and support to improve participation among hard-to-count communities in the 2020 Census. Data collection ended in October 2020.

Public libraries were well represented in the national media, through interviews with PLA member-leaders in media outlets ranging from the [Washington Post](#) to the [New York Times](#) to [Governing Magazine](#).

## **I Love My Librarian Award Winners**

In December, ALA announced the recipients of the '[I Love My Librarian](#)' Award for 2020. This prestigious award is presented annually to ten librarians from academic, public and school libraries who were nominated by patrons nationwide for their profound impact on the lives of families, students, teachers and information-seekers in their communities. ALA has received more than 20,000 nominations since the award's inception, but only 130 librarians have received this distinguished honor. For 2019, the following three public librarians were selected: **Jayanti Addleman**, director of library services at Hayward (Calif.) Public Library; **Adilene Estrada-Huerta**, bilingual outreach youth services librarian at Sacramento (Calif.) Public Library; and **Elizabeth Moreau Nicolai**, youth services coordinator at Anchorage (Alaska) Public Library

## **Census Data Literacy Initiative**



The Census Data Literacy project is an initiative of PLA in partnership with ALA's [Public Policy and Advocacy Office](#). It aims to build data literacy skills among library staff to enhance their services, programs, and initiatives with the overall goal of promoting awareness and use of Census data in their communities. In 2021, this [initiative](#) will include six free webinars and complementary online resources. This effort builds on and continues engagement with the U.S. Census Bureau and other stakeholders begun in 2019 to strengthen the visibility of public libraries' civic engagement work and expand resources available to public library staff to engage patrons and use data to better understand and meet the needs of diverse communities.

## **Performance Measurement and Benchmark Briefs**

To support the public library field's peer benchmarking needs, PLA has invested in research to identify ways to better communicate and display key metrics related to internal decision-making, resulting in a suite of [Benchmark Briefs](#). These metrics, reported annually by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), are freely and publicly available, but the data are not typically utilized to their full potential. Key measures include expenditures, staff, collections, and programs. The Benchmark Briefings are a first step in PLA's work to support greater adoption and understanding of this annual data set.

## **Public Library Technology Survey**

U.S. public libraries serve as a digital equity hub in communities of all sizes, with roughly 17,000 locations managed by more than 9,000 administrative entities. In Fall 2020, PLA fielded the 2020 Public Library Technology Survey to a national sample of public library directors at the administrative entity level. The results, to be published in July 2021, are the most recent and representative data related to about public access technology infrastructure, technology-related programming, and technology-related funding streams at U.S. public libraries.

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## **Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Social Justice**

### **Call to Action**

Recognizing and supporting [ALA's statement condemning violence against BIPOC, protesters and journalists](#), and ALA's statement [acknowledging ALA's role](#) in perpetuating structural racism, PLA issued a [call to action](#) to public library workers to commit to structural change and to taking action to end systemic racism and injustice. PLA applauds the creation of a working group to create recommendations on restorative justice practices and the use/presence of police in libraries. As an immediate follow-up activity, a series of Twitter chats were held on July 1, August 5, and September 2, on topics such as recruiting a diverse workforce, partnerships that center equity in services, and health disparities. PLA gained more than 500 new followers, and the top Tweets from each session had over 6,000 impressions.



The pandemic forced a pause to PLA's key EDISJ initiatives: Equity Starts with Us and the Inclusive Internship Initiative. PLA quickly pivoted to offer the Leadership Lab as an online series, see above.

At the June 2020 Annual Conference, PLA organized and hosted a [live chat session](#), Racial Equity in Library Institutions, in response to calls for racial justice.

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## **Conferences and Professional Development**

In the absence of regional events, PLA upped its [online presence](#) this year. Nine webinars over the course of the year reached over 1200 participants. An additional 40 free webinars attracted over 6000 participants.

PLA solicits topics and speakers from the membership through two annual "calls for proposals," and mines the expertise of PLA committees and task forces for topics. Webinars are offered both for free and with modest registration costs, and they are available on demand via the PLA web site after presentation.

Public library interests were well represented at the [2020 ALA Virtual Event and Exhibit](#) through four programs organized by PLA. Fourteen programs supported by PLA will be presented at the [2021 Virtual Annual Conference](#).

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## **Publications and Media**

PLA works hard to cover concepts in its publications that align with the organization's strategic goals of Organizational Excellence; Leadership; Advocacy & Awareness; Transformation; and Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Social Justice.

### ***Public Libraries Magazine, Website and Podcasts***

*Public Libraries Magazine* is published bimonthly and sent to nearly 9,500 PLA members plus almost 500 subscribers.

In 2020-2021, In an effort to be more sustainable and in response to supply-line issues caused by the pandemic, *Public Libraries* introduced digital issues. Two issues in the 2020 volume year were available only in the digital format. In the 2021 volume year, three issues were or will be (Sept/Oct, May/June, and

July/August). In 2020 we saw a cost savings of nearly \$28,000 and in FY 2021 we will see a cost savings of approximately \$54,000 as a result of moving to digital for those issues.

During the past twelve months, *Public Libraries* has addressed trending and challenging topics for public librarians through themed issues, listed below:

Issue	Theme
May/June 2020	Design-Thinking
July/August 2020	Library as Third Place
September/October 2020	Civic Engagement
November/December 2020	Psychological Well-Being Staff and Patrons
January/February 2021	COVID-19 and Public Libraries
March/April 2021	Library Funding
May/June 2021	Partnerships

Two feature articles were chosen to receive the Public Libraries Advisory Committee’s Feature Article Award for the 2020 Volume Year: [Define & Design: The Bookstore Model of Customer Service](#) and [Learning from our Statistics](#).

Like the print iteration, [PLOnline](#) focuses on issues and topics that matter to public libraries and public librarianship. Updated several times per week, the site features selections from the print magazine and unique content and averages approximately 8,000-10,000 views per week. PLOnline continue to offer COVID-19 related articles among other important topics, including [Gaining Patron Cooperation on Mask-Wearing](#) , and [Helping a Community Coping with Loss and Grief](#). In 2016, PLA started [FYI: The Public Libraries Podcast](#) as another way to explore a variety of library-world topics in-depth. To date, we have recorded 49 podcasts. From June 4, 2020, to June 4, 2021 FYI podcasts had 9,805 individual plays. Since beginning the podcast, there have been over 55,000 individual plays. There are nearly 70,000 subscriptions via RSS and other apps

## PLA Publications

PLA released [Pivoting during the Pandemic: Ideas for Serving Your Community Anytime, Anywhere](#). This book, co-authored by Kathleen M. Hughes and Jamie Santoro offers real-life examples of what it means to be a 24/7 library, sharing how several libraries transitioned to virtual and socially distanced services during the pandemic.

In October 2020, PLA introduced its new Learning Tapas as a free member benefit with two short videos and guidebooks on [Effective Networking Skills](#) and [Finding a Mentor or a Coach](#).

## Looking Ahead

PLA is looking ahead with optimism as we determine which “new normal” approaches to our work to retain while planning for a successful [2022 Conference](#) in Portland, Oregon.

Melanie Huggins will assume the PLA Presidency on July 1, 2021. Later in the summer, PLA will publish a comprehensive Strategic Planning toolkit for public libraries.

On the advocacy front, PLA continues work with the ALA Public Policy & Advocacy office to include public libraries as part of federal infrastructure conversations. The Build America’s Libraries Act would provide \$5 billion to repair, modernize, and construct library facilities in underserved and marginalized communities. It would fund upgrades to the nation’s library infrastructure to address challenges such as natural disasters, COVID-19, broadband capacity, environmental hazards, and accessibility barriers. PLA members can learn more and join this campaign at [www.ala.org/advocacy/buildlibraries](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/buildlibraries).

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