

# FUND LIBRARIES

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**#FundLibraries**

## Sharing your story with the media

News outlets in large part base their news coverage (and editorials, for that matter) on the priorities of their readers. Whether print, broadcast or electronic, local media is a key venue for public discourse on issues that impact communities. Reporters value and rely on local input decisions about what news to cover. As libraries provide services and are convening spaces for everyone, the voice of a library professional represents a range of community members. You can be an invaluable source of insight and information for local news providers.

Below are some tips for using your library “capital” to be part of the ongoing conversation about issues that matter to your patrons by building a relationship with news reporters or editors in your local media. These suggestions are geared toward *local* print or online media. For tips on engaging broadcast media, refer to ALA’s [Media Relations Handbook for Libraries](#).

### Decide what story you want to tell.

While journalists want to cover “news” – a new program, new services or a guest speaker – a new angle on an issue or story may also draw their attention. For example, if you can put a human face on how federal budget decisions could impact individuals in your community, that story is worth telling. What would be lost from your community, and who specifically would lose out, if federal funding for libraries were eliminated? Also, showing how your story is part of a trend in your state or in the country adds to the news value, especially if you can include statistics. For instance, if you want to focus on services that strengthen local economies, you might mention that your library, like 73% of public libraries across the country, assists patrons with job applications and interviewing skills.

If your goal is to influence your member of Congress, consider telling a story that would appeal to them. If your representative is on the House Veterans Affairs Committee, a story that highlights your library’s services to veterans would interest them. If your senator is known for being fiscally conservative, highlight library services that promote economic opportunity such as assistance to small businesses, job seekers and people who want to develop new job skills. In any case, make sure the reporter knows how your elected leaders can take action to support libraries, whether it’s by signing a “Dear Appropriator” letter or, if your leader is on an appropriations committee, by ensuring full funding for libraries as they make appropriations decisions. At the same time, if your representative and senators have shown support for libraries, thank them. There’s nothing like public praise to reinforce a leader’s support.

### Decide which reporter you want to cover your story.

Showing how your story enhances a news outlet’s existing coverage increases the chances that they will consider your story idea and pitching your story to a specific reporter is generally more effective than sending a story idea to a general news desk. The best way to identify reporters is to read the news to find out which journalists are covering issues that could be related to your story. Many newspapers have a metro section that regularly covers public services and community institutions like libraries. But consider telling your story to a reporter who covers education or technology if federal funding allows you to offer coding programs for youth, or a business reporter if funding helps your library

provide business development services to entrepreneurs. Most online news outlets provide email addresses for reporters under their bylines (names), either below the title or at the end of an article. If you don't have a specific reporter in mind or aren't sure who to pitch your story to, you can contact a news editor. Don't hesitate to just call a news outlet to get the name and email address of a news editor.

### **Decide who can tell your library story best.**

Clearly, you need someone informed and confident to explain to a reporter how your library benefits federal funding – through the Grants to States program or through an Education Department program such as Innovative Approaches to Literacy. Just as important is showing how those federally-funded services impact real people. When patrons themselves describe how a service makes a difference in their life, it gives an issue a human face. If LSTA provided funding for your computer lab, you could have users describe to a reporter how the free internet and computer helped them find a job or complete their taxes online. If federal library funding helps provide costly databases for research, have a user explain how they use that service and what the outcome of their research will mean for them, perhaps a degree, perhaps a business plan. Showing what federal funding provides to your library patrons is much more interesting than talking about a line item in the federal budget. Before you make your pitch to a reporter, be sure to have your spokespeople – other library professionals, patrons – lined up and ready to tell their stories in advance. It would be disappointing to promise a reporter a specific story and then have the spokesperson fall through at the last minute. More importantly, it could also damage your credibility as a source.

### **Pitch your story** *(see sample below).*

These days, most reporters prefer to receive story ideas initially by email. The goal of your first email is to share just enough information to pique the curiosity of the journalist and inspire them to ask you for more details. Reporters are busy and, depending on the size of the paper, receive dozens of story ideas every week, so they appreciate pitches that are short and to-the-point. One way to keep your pitch succinct is to include hyperlinks where the reporter can go to find more information. Also, timing is important: if you pitch a story on, say, a new coding program at your library, be sure to let the reporter know when the class meets.

### **Be persistent.**

Reporters are busy, so if you don't hear back from them right away, don't be discouraged. Follow up with a phone call and be prepared to give your pitch verbally. It's best to call at the beginning of the day because they are generally working on deadline by 3:00. Be persistent, but don't be pesky. If you call or email multiple times without a response, don't take it personally. Make your pitch to the news editor or to another journalist.

### **Amplify the message when your story gets published.**

- Spread the news as broadly as possible! You can multiply the impact of your story by sharing it on social media. Be sure to tag it with #FundLibraries, and ask as many of your friends as possible to react to your story. Tweet your story directly at your representative and senators, thanking them or urging them to support federal library funding. Social media addresses for your decision-makers is on ALA's website: [ala.org/fundlibraries](http://ala.org/fundlibraries)
- Ask your friends and library supporters to respond to the story by commenting online or submitting a [letter to the editor](#). If you want to see more stories about libraries and the services they provide to your community, show the news outlet that their readers care about their library. The more a story elicits a response from readers, the higher priority the issue takes for news editors, who decide what news to cover.
- If you don't use social media, email or fax your story directly to your congressional office(s) along with a note that reinforces your message, encouraging your leaders' continued support for libraries or urging them to make libraries a priority in federal spending decisions.
- Follow up with the reporter and thank them for covering the story. Also, don't hesitate to let them know if they got something wrong or missed a key part of the story. Journalists, like librarians, care deeply about the integrity of information they provide, and they will appreciate your honest feedback.

### **Sample pitch email to a reporter**

Your pitch email should be brief – no more than about 300 words. The tone should be polite and helpful. Even if the reporter doesn't choose to cover the story you pitch, it's important for them to know that you value their service to your community.

**1. Introduce yourself and why you are writing the reporter/editor.**

*I am Director of Library Services at Everytown Public Library in Anytown. I read the Everytown Courier and appreciate your coverage of national politics. I noticed your story last week about the White House's FY2018 budget proposal and want to suggest a follow-up story about one way that the budget would affect people in Anytown.*

**2. Explain why the story is relevant for the journalist/news outlet to cover.** Be sure to use local examples and, if possible, use numbers. Give just enough information to make the reporter ask for more details.

*The president's proposed budget includes severe cuts to federal library funding. Like many other libraries in our state, Everytown Library benefits greatly from this funding, which provided our two-year small business development project and supports our summer reading programs each year. I agree with the American Library Association that this budget is [counterproductive](#) for our country, and it would have a negative impact on our library and the people we serve.*

**3. Invite them to cover the story and/or contact you for details.**

*A follow-up story would on the federal budget would be particularly timely within the next few weeks as the House Appropriations Committee prepares to take up the FY2018 spending bill. I would like to tell you more about how these proposed budget cuts could impact your readers and what Representative Black can do to protect library funding.*

**4. Thank the reporter/editor.**

*I appreciate your work at the Courier to inform people here Everytown of national policy issues that affect us. I look forward to hearing from you soon.*

Your email pitch is just the first step in the process of proposing a story idea about the local impact of federal library funding. If you don't hear from the reporter within a couple days, that's not unusual. Follow up with a phone call. While it's generally best to start with an email, sometimes a phone call is a more efficient way to explain your idea. Be prepared to present your story idea succinctly. Avoid calling print journalists past 3:00 or so, as they are usually working on deadline then. Remember that you can be a critical source for news reporters in your community; be confident in the value of your voice.