

Libraries
Take
Action!

The State of
AMERICA'S
LIBRARIES
2024

TOP 10
Most Challenged
Books of 2023
PAGE 7

A report from **ALA** American
Library Association

From the Interim Executive Director

by LESLIE BURGER



Library workers never cease to amaze me, and that's saying something because I've been in the field for quite some time. Toward the end of 2023, I joined the American Library Association (ALA) in a new capacity, as interim executive director, at a time when book bans were plaguing school and public libraries and when library workers were being threatened and attacked for defending the First Amendment freedom to read. The first thing I noticed was that so many libraries across the country were bursting with new programs, new displays, new services, and new ways to serve their communities, whether patrons or students. In the face of adversity, library workers were taking action.

Let's look for a moment at the hot topic of artificial intelligence (AI) and libraries. Well over 1,000 people took advantage of ALA's continuing education sessions on AI in 2023. Library workers are learners, first and foremost. When something new looks to shake up library processes, our members eagerly search for answers. When it comes to AI, many library workers are fascinated by the possibilities and determined to avoid the pitfalls. In this edition of the State of America's Libraries, Leo S. Lo, dean and professor of the College of University Libraries and Learning Services at the University of New Mexico, talks about exciting advancements made possible by AI, such as automated cataloging and chatbots for user support.

Libraries found support at every level of government for efforts to increase access to high-speed internet connectivity. Tribal libraries took advantage of programs that offer deep discounts on broadband infrastructure. The Learn Without Limits proposal, introduced in 2023, offers library patrons and students access to hotspots off-premises. Libraries continue to serve as hubs for people living in areas that lack high-speed internet.

Partnerships with community organizations help put libraries at the center of their communities, and 2023 was full of fascinating examples. For instance, Cleveland Housing Court worked with Cleveland Public Library to open videoconferencing kiosks in four libraries to bring the court closer to the people. In Baltimore County Public Library, a Pop-Up Shops program for local vendors—from candle makers to photographers—provides free space and offers vendor-preparation classes for aspiring entrepreneurs. Schools innovate constantly, including one in El Cerrito, California, where librarians and teachers worked with students on an award-winning global human rights research project. Some librarians at universities, including University of Iowa and University of Puerto Mayagüez in Puerto Rico, help people apply for trademarks.

It's heartening to find library workers doing amazing work even as they face a barrage of challenges. Libraries have always been magical places, filled with stories, hopes, and dreams. Library workers are the magicians who create that magic.

Leslie Burger is interim executive director of the American Library Association.

The State of AMERICA'S LIBRARIES 2024

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INTRODUCTION

These Are Not Ordinary Times

by EMILY DRABINSKI



One Saturday afternoon this winter, I did what millions of Americans do each week: I went to the library. The Windsor Terrace branch of Brooklyn Public Library is just a 10-minute walk from my home, an anchor for my diverse community. As a couple of us browsed new fiction, two men played a tabletop card game while a couple of people tapped away at their laptops, drawing on the ample free Wi-Fi offered in the branches. Every seat in the computer lab was taken. A handful of children sat in a circle, chattering away in the brightly colored children's section. Just an ordinary day at the library.

But these are not ordinary times. The unprecedented wave of organized censorship intensifies, particularly in our public libraries. Adverse legislation that would undermine librarian agency and authority is getting a hearing in legislatures across the country. Climate change continues to impact libraries, damaging buildings in some areas and turning libraries into recovery centers in others. Budget cuts and staffing challenges undermine our ability to fulfill our missions. In these extraordinary times, libraries take action.

Libraries take action in urban centers like Brooklyn, New York, where branch manager Nicole Bryan celebrates local businesses and local moms with an annual Mother's Day celebration.

Libraries take action in rural communities like Donnelly, Idaho, 200 miles from the nearest fast-food restaurant, where Donnelly Public Library director Sherry Scheline supports local families with after-school programming.

Libraries take action in Fairfax, Virginia, where school librarian Maura Madigan at Springfield Elementary School leads students in fashion shows featuring recycled materials.

Libraries take action in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where academic librarian Chulin Meng from Lehigh University integrates AI and large language models into library search and retrieval systems.

And when libraries take action, community members do, too. When school librarian Martha Hickson at North Hunterdon High School in Annandale, New Jersey, addressed concerns about one of her collection development decisions at a school board meeting, 400 community members showed

up to defend her expertise. In Danvers, Massachusetts, 350 people formed a Wall of Love around the library, preventing disruption of the library's Drag Queen Make-Up Hour outreach event. When legislators attempted to change the language of an Iowa law that would allow municipalities to defund their libraries, residents showed up, making calls and sending emails that led the proposed rule change to be pulled off the table.

As we continue to work together toward the better world we all know is possible, let's remember that we are all in this together. Across party lines and across the political spectrum, the vast majority of people love their libraries for the ordinary and extraordinary work we do each day: connecting people to reading and resources, building businesses and communities, expanding literacy across

the lifespan, and making great Saturday afternoons.

See you in the stacks! ●

Emily Drabinski is 2023-2024 president of the American Library Association and associate professor at the Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Studies.



ALA's Celebrate National Library Week poster.

Libraries Take Action: Resisting Censorship, Fighting for the Freedom to Read

by DEBORAH CALDWELL-STONE



Throughout 2023, librarians and library supporters throughout the United States documented the impact of organized censorship campaigns on America's libraries and librarians and on library users' right to read by reporting censorship attempts to the American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF). [These reports](#)—1,247 in 2023—detail how demands to censor library books, programs, and displays have resulted in the removal or restriction of untold numbers of diverse books in school and public libraries, denying students and library users alike the opportunity to read books that raise important issues, challenge the status quo, and lift up the voices of those who are often underrepresented on library shelves.

In 2023, [OIF recorded demands to censor 4,240 unique book titles](#) in libraries, the highest number of books challenged since ALA began compiling data about censorship in libraries. This reflects a 65% increase over the 2,571 unique titles targeted in 2022, the previous high. To understand how extraordinary this figure is, we can look at the average number of unique book titles challenged between 2001 through 2020. During that time, the average number of unique book titles targeted for censorship each year was 273. The highest recorded number of unique titles challenged during this period was 390 in one year. In that entire two-decade span, only 3,637 unique titles were challenged by censors—more than 600 fewer titles than in 2023.

Driving the extraordinary number of challenged titles in 2023 was the phenomenon of groups and individuals demanding the censorship of multiple titles, often listing dozens or even hundreds of titles as candidates for censorship all at once. Indeed, 93.4% of the titles challenged in 2023 were included in demands to censor multiple titles, with many of those seeking to remove books from libraries using lists of

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titles drafted by organized pressure groups seeking to empty library shelves of all books they deem inappropriate for readers. Though the total number of censorship incidents reported to OIF declined 1.7% from its peak in 2022, the number of titles challenged in 2023 actually increased by 31.4% due to the growing prevalence of multiple title challenges.

Demands to censor books from public library collections jumped from 16% of the total titles targeted in 2022 to 32% in 2023. Again, the significant factor driving this change was organized pressure groups' efforts to censor the same books in public libraries that they had previously targeted for censorship in school libraries. Half of all challenges reported to OIF were challenges to titles recommended for censorship by websites maintained by these same organized pressure groups, whose lists of "bad books" disproportionately target those books reflecting the voices and lived experiences of those who are LGBTQIA+, Black, Indigenous, or persons of color.

The threats to the freedom to read in 2023 were not simply threats to deny access to books. Many brave and committed

Voters, too, are beginning to reject discriminatory book ban rhetoric by electing moderate board members committed to preserving the right to read freely in school and public libraries . . . Across the country, election results in states as diverse as Virginia, Illinois, Idaho, and Minnesota showed that **most people oppose censorship in libraries.**

library workers faced loss of their jobs for defending the freedom to read. Reports filed with OIF documented an alarming number of threats directed at libraries and library workers. These threats included calls to close or defund libraries, attempts to criminally prosecute librarians and teachers for providing books and library resources to minors, and even bomb threats that closed down libraries and schools. Supporting many of these threats were legislative proposals by state lawmakers, who introduced 151 bills that would authorize the criminal prosecution of librarians, threaten library funding, or that imposed unconstitutional content-based restrictions on books for children and adolescents. The introduction—and passage—of many of these bills was driven by the falsehoods circulated by organized pressure groups that claim that access to diverse books and ideas harms young people.

Countering Censorship Campaigns

Yet there is good news to report in 2023. Librarians and library users are pushing back against calls to censor books and close libraries, joining a growing resistance movement to counter the censorship campaigns pursued by organized pressure groups.

Virginia librarians, led by Virginia Library Association president Lisa Varga, spoke out at local board meetings about the costs and harms of government suppression of ideas, while supporting readers' access to books at risk of censorship. One of these efforts was the creation of "book résumés" that counter

misinformation about challenged books by summarizing each title's literary significance and educational value. Their efforts also led to the creation of a nationwide database of [book résumés](#) supported by publishers, librarians, and the [Unite Against Book Bans campaign](#).

Library supporters across the country came together to support their local librarians and defend school and public libraries in their communities.

In Louisiana, the Louisiana Citizens Against Censorship and the St. Tammany Library Alliance called out censorship in Louisiana libraries, challenged state legislation, and provided crucial support to librarians attacked by partisan pressure groups. In the North Hunterdon-Voorhees School District in New Jersey, more than 400 students and parents turned out to speak out against the censorship of school library books and to support school librarian Martha Hickson. In League City, Texas, the Galveston County Library Alliance continued to advocate for the freedom to read in their public library, while the citizens of Llano County, Texas, are steadfast in pursuing their First Amendment legal challenge to the county's decision to remove more than 60 books addressing race and gender identity from the Llano County Public Library system.

Voters, too, are beginning to reject discriminatory book ban rhetoric by electing moderate board members committed to preserving the right to read freely in school and public libraries.

Citizens voting in the Central Bucks School District school board race in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, repudiated past efforts to ban books from school libraries, voting in five new board members who promised to return banned books to library shelves. In Pella, Iowa, voters similarly rejected a proposed resolution that would have authorized the Pella City Council



to remove and restrict books and resources in Pella Public Library. Across the country, election results in states as diverse as Virginia, Illinois, Idaho, and Minnesota showed that most people oppose censorship in libraries.

Elected officials and legislators also stepped up to challenge censorship in America's schools and libraries.

Federal legislators held hearings to highlight the harms of censorship, and state and federal legislators began to craft legislation intended to stem the tide of unconstitutional and discriminatory book bans. Illinois led the way, passing the first anti-book ban law for public libraries, while California passed the first law protecting books and library collections in school libraries. And through the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR), the current administration began to address the hostile educational environments created by efforts to censor books in K-12 school libraries. It encouraged students and parents to report discriminatory book bans to the OCR and welcomed Deputy Assistant Secretary Matt Nosanchuk as the first "anti-book ban czar" appointed by President Biden.

Courts in the United States are rejecting the claims of elected officials and advocacy groups that are defending the censorship of library resources. The citizens of Llano County, Texas, led by plaintiff Leila Green Little, obtained a preliminary injunction from the federal district court that ordered Llano County commissioners and the library board to return some 60 banned books to the shelves of the public library. In Arkansas, libraries, librarians, and library users joined to challenge Arkansas Act 372, a law passed in 2023 that would restrict minors' access to books in bookstores and libraries located within the state and allow any person residing in Arkansas to demand the removal or relocation of a library book if that person believes the book to be "inappropriate." Judge Timothy L. Brooks of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Arkansas enjoined enforcement of the law, finding that the plaintiffs were likely to demonstrate that the law infringed their First and Fourteenth Amendment rights. Similar lawsuits are pending in Florida, Iowa, California, and Iowa.

These legal victories are important, as it is clear that these partisan attacks on librarians, readers, and the right to read

Through the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, the current administration . . . encouraged students and parents to report discriminatory book bans and welcomed . . . the first "anti-book ban czar."

may not end until the courts uphold the rule of law and make it plain to governments and elected officials that the First Amendment and Fourteenth Amendment bars censorship of library materials and discriminatory attacks on books and the persons who read them.

"[T]he public library is not to be mistaken for simply an arm of the state. By virtue of its mission to provide the citizenry with access to a wide array of information, viewpoints, and content, the public library is decidedly not the state's creature; it is the people's. It is the purpose of the First Amendment to preserve an uninhibited marketplace of ideas in which truth will ultimately prevail.... It is the right of the public to receive suitable access to social, political, esthetic, moral, and other ideas and experiences which is crucial here."

— Judge Arthur Brooks, Memorandum Opinion and Order, *Fayetteville Public Library, et al. v. Crawford County, Arkansas*, July 29, 2023 Case Number 5:23-cv-05086 ●

Deborah Caldwell-Stone is director of ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom.

TOP 10 MOST CHALLENGED BOOKS OF 2023

The American Library Association documented **1,247 attempts to censor** materials and services at libraries, schools, and universities in 2023. Of the **4,240 unique titles** that were challenged or banned in 2023, here are the top 10 most frequently challenged.



1



GENDER QUEER

by Maia Kobabe

REASONS: LGBTQIA+ content, claimed to be sexually explicit

2

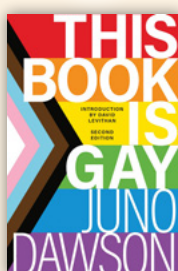


ALL BOYS AREN'T BLUE

by George M. Johnson

REASONS: LGBTQIA+ content, claimed to be sexually explicit

3



THIS BOOK IS GAY

by Juno Dawson

REASONS: LGBTQIA+ content, sex education, claimed to be sexually explicit

4



THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER

by Stephen Chbosky

REASONS: claimed to be sexually explicit, LGBTQIA+ content, rape, drugs, profanity

5

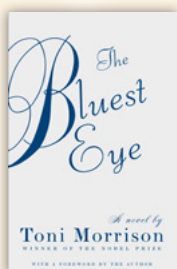


FLAMER

by Mike Curato

REASONS: LGBTQIA+ content, claimed to be sexually explicit

6

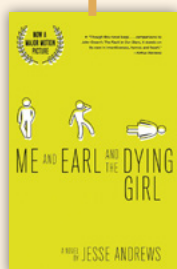


THE BLUEST EYE

by Toni Morrison

REASONS: rape, incest, claimed to be sexually explicit, EDI content

7/8



ME AND EARL AND THE DYING GIRL

by Jesse Andrews

REASONS: claimed to be sexually explicit, profanity

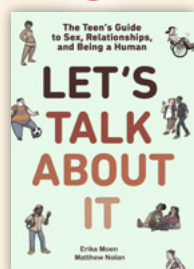


TRICKS

by Ellen Hopkins

REASONS: claimed to be sexually explicit, drugs, rape, LGBTQIA+ content

9



LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

by Erika Moen and Matthew Nolan

REASONS: claimed to be sexually explicit, sex education, LGBTQIA+ content

10



SOLD

by Patricia McCormick

REASONS: claimed to be sexually explicit, rape



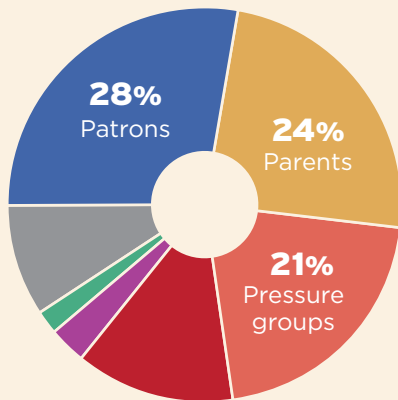
OFFICE FOR
Intellectual Freedom
American Library Association

CENSORSHIP BY THE NUMBERS

In 2023, the American Library Association documented the highest number of titles targeted for censorship since ALA began compiling data more than 20 years ago. 4,240 unique titles were challenged last year, up from 2,571 targeted in 2022. **Learn more at ala.org/bbooks**



WHO INITIATES ATTEMPTS TO CENSOR BOOKS?



- 13% Board/administration
- 3% Librarians/teachers/staff
- 2% Elected officials/Government
- 9% Other/Unknown

Statistics based on 954 cases.

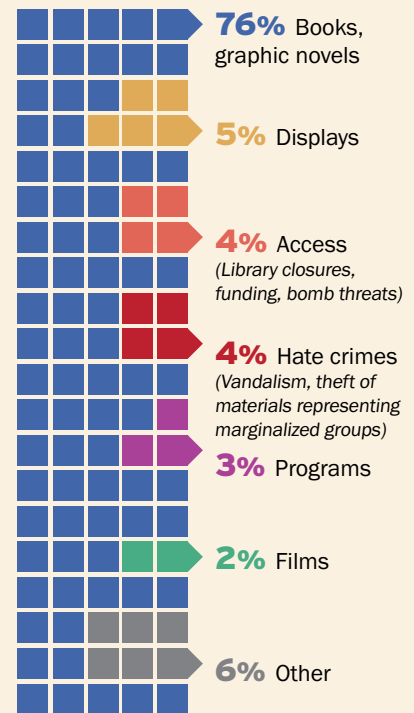
WHERE DO CENSORSHIP ATTEMPTS TAKE PLACE?



Statistics based on 1,247 cases with known locations.

BOOKS AND BEYOND

ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom tracked **1,247 censorship attempts** in 2023. Here's the breakdown:



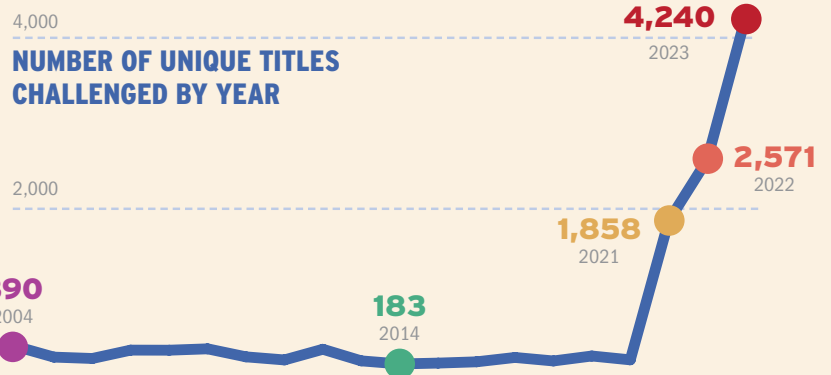
CENSORSHIP ON THE RISE

The unparalleled number of unique titles targeted in 2023 marked a 65% increase over 2022. During the two decades prior to 2021, the average number of unique titles targeted per year was 273.

CENSORSHIP STATISTICS COMPILED BY:



OFFICE FOR Intellectual Freedom American Library Association



A Year of Innovation

edited by PHIL MOREHART

2023 was a tumultuous year for libraries. Book bans dominated headlines as well as city council and school board meetings, threatening the access of information to readers of all ages and the livelihoods and safety of library workers across the country. Despite these upheavals, libraries soldiered on to provide critical services to their communities—and developed truly innovative programs along the way.

Building bridges to social and health services

The economic impact of the past few years has disproportionately affected renters across the country. Rents rose at an unprecedented pace in the second half of 2021 (when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lifted its pandemic-era eviction moratorium) with typical asking rents rising 11% year over year nationwide that September, according to the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University.

Since May 2020, when Cleveland Housing Court’s pandemic-related pause on the processing of nonemergency evictions ended, more than 18,200 evictions were filed in the city. As of November 2023, the city’s eviction filing rate was 6%, or nearly 6,600 filings over the past 12 months. To help address this urgent community issue, Cleveland Public Library (CPL) opened four Neighborhood Housing Court kiosks at branches across the city, in partnership with Cleveland Housing Court. The videoconferencing kiosks are available by registration or on a walk-in basis for individuals who need to appear before the court and need a more convenient hearing location.

Kiosk locations were selected based on eviction rate data. Their availability at CPL branches has removed barriers for residents, many of whom are unable to travel to the courthouse downtown for various reasons to meet their court date. Since the launch of the first kiosk, bailiffs’ sign-in sheets have registered dozens of users.

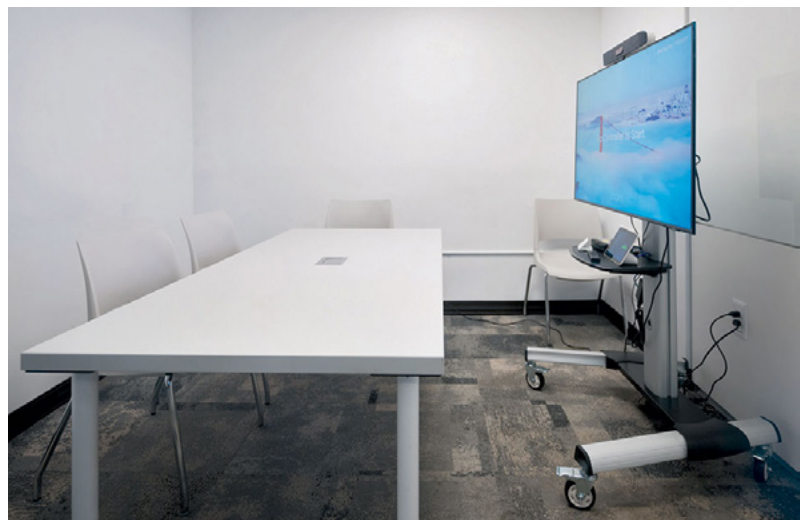
“CPL can be a bridge between justice and accessibility, providing vital resources to our neighborhoods,” [wrote Felton Thomas, Jr.](#), CPL executive director and CEO, and Tana Peckham, CPL chief strategy officer, in *American Libraries*. “By working with partners, we can make a brighter and more just future for all.”

Bridging the digital divide is one of the Network of the National Library of Medicine’s (NNLM) national initiatives, and it partnered with public libraries to enact a new initiative to help bring online medical services to the community.

The NNLM created its Telehealth Interest Group in 2021 in response to the accelerated use of telehealth services during the COVID-19 pandemic, and public library workers were active participants. The interest group saw an opportunity to support library and other health information workers in understanding their potential roles in the broader digital health landscape.

In June 2023, the interest group launched “Telehealth 101: What Libraries Need to Know,” a free, national online course that amplifies different approaches and models libraries may use to provide telehealth services; identifies infrastructure-related resources available to libraries interested in providing such services; explores privacy and policy considerations for offering telehealth services within libraries; and more.

“We’ve all benefited from the generous knowledge of library telehealth pioneers like the Pottsville Area Library in Texas, to Delaware Libraries #GetConnectedDE initiative, and Hawai’i State Public Library’s strategic telehealth collaboration,” [said Liz Morris](#), outreach and access coordinator, NNLM Region 5, University of Washington Health Sciences Library.



A kiosk at Cleveland Public Library’s (CPL) South branch. CPL has four Neighborhood Housing Court kiosks throughout the city to assist residents who need to attend hearings.

“We’ve highlighted emerging research about the telehealth infrastructure capabilities of libraries in Virginia. We’ve learned about programs like Libraries Health Connect supported by the Maine State Library, and Telehealth in Libraries led by the Idaho Commission for Libraries. We know that there are many other library telehealth programs already operating or preparing to operate and are eager to share learning as it emerges.”

To date, 88 information professionals from public libraries, academic libraries, health science libraries, hospital libraries, and other stakeholder organizations have participated in the course. The interest group has also started a webinar series to continue sharing emerging research and best practices for library workers interested in telehealth.

Creating accessible spaces

Penn State University Libraries launched three sensory rooms at its Berks, Brandywine, and University Park campuses to support student wellness and belonging through the libraries’ [LibWell initiative](#).

The rooms are designed to provide a safe, inviting space for neurodivergent students who may struggle in traditional study spaces. They are equipped with noise-reducing chairs, specialized lighting, yoga mats, weighted lap blankets, and other features to help reduce stress and anxiety. These sensory-sensitive elements are particularly helpful for students with autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

“There is a strong need for therapeutic spaces at colleges that can help students block out harmful sensory distractions and relieve the huge burden of anxiety many students bear,” said [Brett Spencer](#), reference and instruction librarian at Penn State Berks’ Thun Library. “We want to make sensory-safe places that can help students maximize their wellness and learning.”

To advance its ongoing mission to provide resources and “an environment that encourages scholarship, creativity and intellectual freedom, while supporting the diverse needs of all users,” the University of Colorado Colorado Springs (UCCS) Kraemer

Family Library created an endowed Storytelling Professor position.

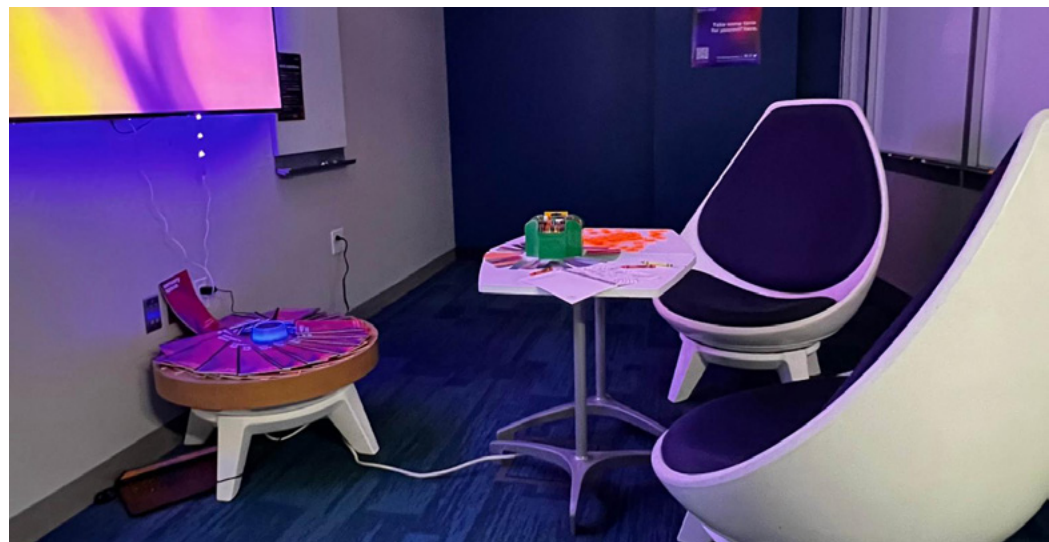
Currently held by assistant professor of Native American and Indigenous studies, ‘Ilaheva Tua’one, PhD, the position, which rotates every three years, provides an interdisciplinary opportunity for community engagement and celebration of a diverse range of storytelling histories and experiences.

The position, as well as other initiatives, earned the library an Insight Into Diversity Library Excellence in Access and Diversity (LEAD) Award by “Insight Into Diversity” magazine, the largest and oldest diversity and inclusion publication in higher education.

“The program not only enriches the academic environment but also serves as a beacon for inclusivity and cultural richness, reflecting a deep commitment to celebrating a wide array of perspectives and narratives,” wrote *Communique*, the official publication of UCCS.

Medina County (Ohio) District Library (MCDL) used its \$20,000 Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC): Accessible Small and Rural Communities grant from the American Library Association (ALA) to install hearing loop technology at its location in Medina, Ohio.

Hearing loops serve as wireless loudspeakers for people who use hearing aids. An induction loop system delivers clear, customized sound by transmitting magnetic energy through a wire that surrounds an area. The system can link to most hearing assistive devices via Bluetooth, allowing individuals with hearing devices connected to the loop to hear the transmitted sound while within the area.



The Sensory Room in Pattee Library’s Collaboration Commons, on the University Park campus. Penn State University Libraries is piloting two such rooms that offer dedicated space to help meet the varied sensory needs of neurodiverse students.

PHOTO: JENNIFER CIFELLI / PENN STATE. CREATIVE COMMONS

“[The hearing loop] will be installed in our community rooms and at the customer service and adult reference desks to help those with hearing loss benefit from library events and services at a higher level,” Sue Schuld, MCDL technology manager, [told Cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com).

MDCL’s project is one of 240 LTC-funded proposals, representing 43 US states and the Northern Mariana Islands. To be eligible for the grant, a library must have a legal service area population of 25,000 or less and be located at least five miles from an urbanized area, in keeping with the Institute of Museum and Library Services definitions of small and rural libraries. Of the selected libraries, 65% serve communities of fewer than 5,000 people.

When Indianapolis’ newest library opened in August 2023, it was the first in the state to be a Certified Autism Center.

Indianapolis Public Library’s Fort Ben branch was designed with the needs of neurodivergent visitors in mind. It offers a comfort room, sensory kits, and other resources to enhance accessibility. Library staffers also completed an autism-specific training program to receive the certification.

Fort Ben branch manager [Shelby Peak told Axios](#) that the training helped her staff understand how to create a more welcoming experience for neurodivergent individuals and their families, from regular interactions to specific programming, like sensory-friendly storytime.

“Having that label on there makes it a judgment-free zone,” Peak said. “Families know that if they come to this, they’re going to be accepted no matter what happens.”

Food and housing help

Spartanburg County is the fifth most populated county in South Carolina, and it is growing. In 2022, it had close to 346,000 residents, but nearly 14% of them were living at or below the federal poverty line, with an estimated 11% of children experiencing food insecurity. To help address these issues of affordability and access, Spartanburg County Public Libraries (SCPL) started its Bags of Hope initiative in 2021, connecting food and other essential items to those in need.

SCPL’s Bags of Hope program requires little or no library funding and is similar to other efforts that have been implemented by nonlibrary community organizations across the country to provide bags of food and other necessities to individuals who may be facing poverty. Library patrons, staffers, and other donors drop off individually packaged



Anna Pilston (right), branch librarian at Spartanburg County (S.C.) Public Libraries’ Landrum Library, holds a Bag of Hope alongside a member of Operation Hope, a local nonprofit.

PHOTO: SPARTANBURG COUNTY (S.C.) PUBLIC LIBRARIES

food and hygiene products—including granola bars, cups of soup, crackers, mini-toiletries, and utensils—at their local library branch. The goods are then packed up and delivered to 11 designated partner organizations across the county—food pantries, soup kitchens, community centers, and other nonprofits—to be distributed to those in need.

In 2023, SCPL donated more than 740 gallon-sized zipper storage bags’ worth of items, 47 large sacks and 16 boxes of food and supplies that were too big to fit into the bags.

“The program is more than worthwhile, both for its service for our patrons in need and for the opportunity it creates to enhance community connections,” wrote Todd Stephens, SCPL county librarian, in [American Libraries](#).

Many libraries across the country are helping to address food insecurity by installing community fridges stocked with fresh foods and perishables with the goal of nourishing their neighborhoods and reducing the stigma around food assistance.

Charleston County (S.C.) Public Library (CCPL) installed its Free and Fresh Fridges inside three of its 18 branches to strategically reach the highest level of need. At any given time, an assortment of potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers, and other fresh produce is available free of charge.

Des Moines (Iowa) Public Library (DMPL) has installed fridges at two branches. Nikki Hayter, supervising librarian at DMPL, was inspired to act after local data indicated that her library’s zip code had one of the highest concentrations of food pantry use in Des Moines from July 2021 to June 2022.

“Our mission is to strengthen our community by connecting people with the ideas and tools they need to enrich their lives,” says [Nikki Hayter](#), supervising librarian at DMPL’s Franklin Avenue branch. “I don’t know what could be much more enriching than food.”

Teaching social justice

Prospect Sierra School (PSS) in El Cerrito, California, developed a program to engage students in social justice issues and increase collaboration between librarians and teachers—and it is winning awards for its success.

PSS’s “Global Human Rights Research Project” was the recipient of the 2023 American Association of School Librarians’ Roald Dahl’s Miss Honey Social Justice Award for its “Global Human Rights Research Project.” The award recognizes collaboration between school librarians and teachers in the instruction of social justice using school library resources.

In a six-week collaboration between PSS middle school librarians Julia Bourland and Mia Gittlin, and seventh-grade humanities teachers Lauren Konopka and Matthew Williams, students became experts and advocates for change on at least one human rights violation central to the theme of a historical novel of their choosing. At the end, the librarians attended the students’ multifaceted presentations, which included a book review, an infographic explaining the historical incident they studied, and a call to action on how others can speak out about similar human rights violations happening today.

“The works of Roald Dahl offer students inspiration for becoming the heroes of their own stories who fight for justice and work together to create a better world for themselves and for others,” Bourland said. “The primary objectives in this collaboration were for students to make connections between human rights violations that occurred in the past and current ones, to increase student agency in understanding global injustice, and to help them find their voice inspiring others to learn about the issue and take action.”

Libraries are supporting small businesses and budding entrepreneurs with everything from pop-up marketplaces to intellectual property and patent guidance.

Revvng an economic engine

Small business is big business in America, and libraries are making an investment in their future.

[According to the U.S. Small Business Administration](#), there are 33.3 million small businesses in the United States, accounting for 99.9% of all U.S. businesses and nearly half of the country’s workforce. Libraries are supporting small businesses and budding entrepreneurs with everything from pop-up marketplaces to intellectual property and patent guidance.

Baltimore County (Md.) Public Library’s (BCPL) [Pop-Up Shops program](#) invites local vendors—from jewelry and candle makers to photographers to tutors—to participate in a pop-up marketplace at several of the library’s branches. Along with providing free space to participate, the library also conducts vendor preparation classes with tips on organizing a vendor table, developing a sales story, and more.

BCPL’s Pop-Up Shops attract many vendors who participated in the library’s [Entrepreneur Academy](#), a collaboration between BCPL and the Enoch Pratt Free Library that teaches many of the fundamentals of starting a small business, including market research, business structure, insurance and legal issues, and more. The program began in 2019 and was one of 13 projects to receive a [Libraries Build Business](#) grant from ALA.

While some libraries are supporting existing small businesses, others are helping potential ideas get off the ground.

Last year, the University of Iowa’s [Lichtenberger Engineering Library](#) became a designated Patent and Trademark Resource Center (PTRC) by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. The library now offers myriad ways for students and faculty to learn more about intellectual property and how to access patent records, including one-on-one assistance, trainings and workshops, and courses covering intellectual property topics as part of its information literacy program.

At the University of Puerto Mayagüez in Puerto Rico, librarian Gladys López-Soto has been supporting the entrepreneurial aspirations of the university community and Puerto Rican citizens for decades in the library’s PTRC. To date, she has helped thousands of people navigate the patent and trademark application process to protect their ideas while also providing resources in Spanish that reach communities across the U.S. López-Soto was awarded a [2024 I Love My Librarian Award](#) from ALA for her impactful work in intellectual property. ●

Phil Morehart is a communications manager in ALA’s Communications, Marketing, and Media Relations Office.

Leveraging Generative AI: A Proactive Approach for Future-Ready Libraries

by LEO S. LO

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI), especially following the widespread availability of advanced tools like ChatGPT, represents a watershed moment in the realm of technology. This surge in AI capabilities has had a profound influence in the library sector, which not only reshapes existing practices but also compels a thorough reevaluation of the roles and competencies of library professionals. In this rapidly evolving landscape, library workers need to develop and enhance their skills to be aware of the potential of AI.

What is generative AI?

“Generative AI” refers to artificial intelligence technologies that can generate new content, insights, or data based on the training and information they have received. The strengths of generative AI in libraries are diverse, offering potential enhancements in efficient information management, personalized user experiences, and bolstered research assistance. However, its limitations warrant equal attention. [My recent survey of academic library employees](#) reveals urgent concerns over ethical issues such as data privacy, algorithmic bias, and notably, the risks of AI generating inaccurate information or “hallucinations.” These findings emphasize the crucial need for libraries to not only leverage AI’s strengths but also to conscientiously address and mitigate its limitations through judicious use and principled implementation.

Proactive use of AI in libraries

Based on [surveys of Association of Research Libraries library directors](#), libraries are using AI for a variety of tasks, including instruction on evaluating AI responses, automated cataloging and metadata generation, chatbots for user support, supporting AI user communities, AI-assisted research instruction, streamlining library operations, enhancing discovery services,

and preservation and conservation. In addition to these specific applications, libraries are also using AI to develop new and innovative services, such as virtual reality tours of their collections and personalized reading recommendations.

AI literacy and action-oriented upskilling

The survey results also revealed a significant demand for professional development and training in AI literacy. Library workers are increasingly aware of the need to upskill to stay abreast of these technological advancements. In fact, in-person events on AI at LibLearnX24 were some of the most well-attended and popular sessions with strong engagement from attendees. Well over 1,000 people took AI-related e-learning offered by the American Library Association last year. AI literacy extends beyond understanding how to use AI tools; it encompasses a comprehensive knowledge of their underlying mechanisms, ethical implications, and practical applications in library settings. Consequently, investing in AI education and training is imperative for libraries, ensuring that their staff are equipped not only to adopt AI technology but also to lead its ethical application in the information sector.

Call to action

As we navigate the age of AI, the call to action for libraries is clear: Prioritize AI literacy and invest in the reskilling and upskilling of library staff. This is more than keeping pace with technology; it is about actively shaping libraries as dynamic, inclusive, and ethically responsible information centers in the digital age. ●

Leo S. Lo is dean and professor of the College of University Libraries and Learning Services at the University of New Mexico.

Washington Works for Libraries

by SHAWNDA HINES

While libraries in some parts of the country were embroiled in conflict over materials in their collections, federal policies that govern some other aspects of information access and library services improved in 2023.

Decision makers at every level of government expressed support for library services that increase Americans' access to high-speed internet connectivity. With several successful pandemic-era programs approaching sunset in 2024, federal policymakers continued to look to libraries to fill gaps in high-speed internet connectivity nationwide. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) improved E-rate rules and processes, making more Tribal libraries eligible for deep discounts on broadband infrastructure afforded by the program. At the 2023 American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference, [FCC Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel unveiled the Learn Without Limits initiative](#), a proposal that would allow libraries and schools to use E-rate funds to purchase Wi-Fi hotspots and services for patrons and students to use off-premises. The proposal would create a sustainable funding solution that builds on a decade of library hotspot and device lending expertise. FCC proceedings continuing into 2024 seem promising.

Elected leaders in Congress recognized libraries' role in providing opportunities for people to build skills and find employment, especially for those in underserved communities. [The Prison Libraries Act](#), introduced by Reps. Emanuel Cleaver (D-MO-05), Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX-18), and Shontel Brown (D-OH-11), would establish a grant program within the Department of Justice to provide funds for prisons to update materials, hire qualified librarians, and support digital literacy and career readiness training. The bipartisan [Adult Education Workforce Opportunity and Reskilling for Knowledge and Success Act](#), introduced by Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI) and Sen. Todd Young (R-IN), would leverage the reach, expertise, and resources of public libraries to empower job seekers to access employment services and training. The House companion bill was introduced by Reps. Lucy McBath (D-GA-07), Kathy Manning (D-NC-06), and Frank Mrvan (D-IN-01). Among other provisions, the bill would update the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act to make public libraries eligible one-stop sites for workforce development and provide



support for college and career navigators at public libraries. In another piece of legislation, three members of Congress with backgrounds in social work proposed to strengthen public libraries as community hubs through a paid social worker internship program. The [More Social Workers in Libraries Act](#) would develop a program to provide competitive grants to institutions of higher education that would be used to fund an internship for social work university students and employ a qualified social worker in a public library to oversee social work student interns.

For school libraries, the most significant legislation in 2023 was the [Right to Read Act](#), reintroduced by Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI) in the Senate and Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ-03) in the House of Representatives. The bill would ensure every student has access to an effective school library staffed by a certified school librarian and provide a much-needed infusion of funding for school libraries. The bill also would constitute a major step forward in the fight against censorship by extending liability protections to librarians and educators facing threats when providing access to certain controversial reading materials.

While many in Congress and the Administration recognize that supporting school libraries supports education, it was

The Right to Read Act . . . would ensure every student has access to an effective school library staffed by a certified school librarian and provide a much-needed infusion of funding for school libraries.

school libraries that bore the brunt of attacks from Capitol Hill on the right to read. The Parents Bill of Rights (H.R. 5), reintroduced and passed in the House on a party line vote in March 2023, would have required school libraries that receive federal funding to provide a list of available materials to parents upon request and develop a new system to allow parents to challenge materials. The bill was not introduced in the Senate.

In response to the escalating challenges to books in school libraries and classrooms, the White House announced in June 2023 that the Department of Education would appoint a new coordinator to address the growing threat that book bans pose for the civil rights of students, among other steps to protect the rights of LGBTQIA+ Americans. Weeks later, Matt Nosanchuk began his tenure as a deputy assistant secretary in the Office for Civil Rights by leading a training session, in partnership with ALA, for librarians on how to handle book challenges.

Following on the Biden Administration's appointment of a book ban czar and the introduction of the Right to Read Act in Congress, school librarians are receiving renewed attention and support in Washington. Another bill, the Fight Book Bans Act, led by Rep. Maxwell Frost (D-FL-10), Rep. Federica Wilson (D-FL-24) and Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD-08), would take a different tack toward supporting libraries: providing grants to school districts to cover expenses incurred by fighting off book bans.

To date, none of the library-supportive legislation introduced in 2023 has received a vote in the current session of Congress. Neither have any of the 12 Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 federal appropriations bills, including the one containing funding for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). At an impasse on spending and many other issues, Congress passed numerous temporary measures maintaining FY 2023 funding levels. IMLS and other library-eligible

programs are likely to face cuts when those measures expire (March 2024, as of this writing), thanks to an agreement between White House and congressional leaders on an austere two-year budget calling for small decreases in domestic spending. The silver lining is that the compromise will avoid steep cuts urged by some House conservatives. ALA continues to advocate for robust funding for the IMLS Library Services and Technology Act and for the Education Department's Innovative Approaches to Literacy program.

To protect federal funding for libraries in all contexts, advocates must continue to spotlight the value of libraries throughout a dysfunctional federal appropriations process. Advocating for systemic improvements is also necessary. For example, the [Advancing Research in Education Act](#) would reauthorize and improve the Education Department's statistical and research activities to ensure more accurate federal statistics to bolster school and academic library services. The bill would also improve data collection from Historically Black Colleges and Universities and other minority-serving institutions. These measures may seem like policy minutiae, but every bill that improves data about and increases awareness of library programs and services can impact future funding decisions. Moving forward, especially in an increasingly rancorous political environment, library advocates must engage to protect the federal funding we already have to serve our communities. ●

Shawnda Hines is deputy director of communications at ALA's Public Policy and Advocacy Office.

The White House announced in June 2023 that the Department of Education would appoint a new coordinator to address the growing threat that book bans pose for the civil rights of students, among other steps to protect the rights of LGBTQIA+ Americans.

Obama Extends Support to American Librarians

by PHIL MOREHART

Barack Obama professed his love for libraries—and his opposition to book bans—in a major way in 2023.

The former President of the United States [penned an open letter](#) July 17 extending his and former First Lady Michelle Obama’s support to America’s librarians in an era of rising book challenges and growing personal attacks against those who resist them.

“Today, some of the books that shaped my life—and the lives of so many others—are being challenged by people who disagree with certain ideas or perspectives,” he wrote. “It’s no coincidence that these ‘banned books’ are often written by or feature people of color, indigenous people, and members of the LGBTQ+ community—though there have also been unfortunate instances in which books by conservative authors or books containing ‘triggering’ words or scenes have been targets for removal. Either way, the impulse seems to be to silence, rather than engage, rebut, learn from or seek to understand views that don’t fit our own.

“I believe such an approach is profoundly misguided, and contrary to what has made this country great. As I’ve said before, not only is it important for young people from all walks of life to see themselves represented in the pages of books, but it’s also important for all of us to engage with different ideas and points of view.”

Obama stressed that no one understands that better than libraries.

“In a very real sense, you’re on the front lines—fighting every day to make the widest possible range of viewpoints, opinions, and ideas available to everyone,” he wrote. “Your dedication and professional expertise allow us to freely read and

consider information and ideas, and decide for ourselves which ones we agree with.

“Whether you just started working at a school or public library, or you’ve been there your entire career, Michelle and

I want to thank you for your unwavering commitment to the freedom to read,” he continued. “All of us owe you a debt of gratitude for making sure readers across the country have access to a wide range of books, and all the ideas they contain.”

Days later, Obama made waves on social media with guest appearances in TikTok videos for public libraries across the United States.

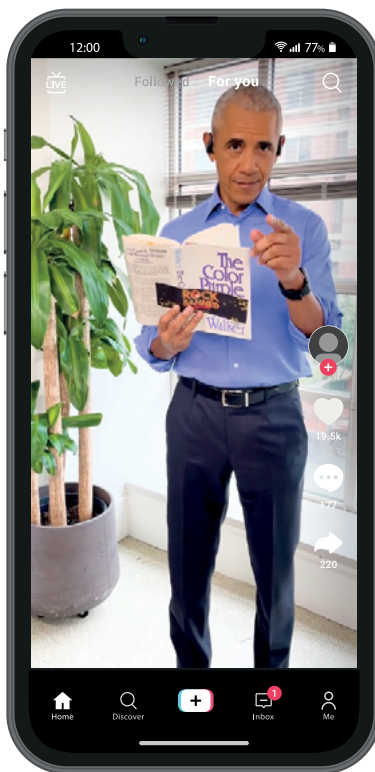
In a video for Kankakee (Ill.) Public Library (KPL), the former president appears along with KPL librarians as they highlight books that have faced calls for censorship on the shelves of schools and libraries.

For Harris County (Texas) Public Library (HCPL), [Obama joined HCPL promoter Curbside Larry](#) to promote the library’s Library for All Initiative, which strives to make reading more accessible to all Houstonians, including those who need special accommodations or who speak a language other than English.

For Woodland (Calif.) Public Library’s TikTok, Obama appears with library staffers—and the library’s cat, Henrietta—as they tout the myriad things available to guests at the library.

And in a video for Prince George’s County Memorial Library System in Maryland, Obama rocks out to Elton John’s “I’m Still Standing,” while reading “The Color Purple” and proclaiming that the library, “Rocks banned books. Do you?”

Thanks for your support of libraries and the freedom to read, President Obama. ●



Barack Obama’s guest appearance on Prince George’s County Memorial Library System’s TikTok account.

PHOTO: PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY MEMORIAL LIBRARY SYSTEM, VIA TIKTOK.

About This Report

Production Team

Production Team Authors: Leslie Burger, Interim Executive Director, ALA; Emily Drabinski, 2023-2024 President, ALA and Associate Professor at the Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Studies; Deborah Caldwell-Stone, Director, Office for Intellectual Freedom, ALA; Leo S. Lo, Dean and Professor of the College of University Libraries and Learning Services at the University of New Mexico; Phil Morehart, Communications Manager, Communications, Marketing, and Media Relations Office, ALA; Chase Ollis, Communications Manager, Communications, Marketing, and Media Relations Office, ALA; Shawnda Hines, Deputy Director of Communications, Public Policy and Advocacy Office, ALA

Content editor: Jean Hodges, Director, Communications, Marketing, and Media Relations Office, ALA

Project coordinator: Jan Carmichael, Senior Communications Manager, Communications, Marketing, and Media Relations Office, ALA

Design: Lauren Ehle, Senior Production Editor, Production Services, ALA

About ALA

The American Library Association (ALA) is the foremost national organization providing resources to inspire library and information professionals to transform their communities through essential programs and services. For more than 140 years, ALA has been the trusted voice of libraries, advocating for the profession and the library's role in enhancing learning and ensuring access to information for all. For more information, visit ala.org.



Press Contact


Reporters should contact:

Communications, Marketing, and Media Relations Office
American Library Association; cmomedia@ala.org

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