

**The American Library Association Task force on Rural School, Tribal and Public Libraries**  
Final Report to the Council of the American Library Association  
Sunday, June 27, 2004

I. The Task force

The American Library Association Task force on Rural School, Tribal and Public Libraries was charged by Council in December 2002 with a two-fold aim: *“To identify and study issues and challenges facing rural school, tribal and public libraries, and to make recommendations on possible solutions.”* The duration of the task force was for eighteen months with the final report to be delivered publicly at ALA’s June 2004 National Conference in Orlando, Florida.

The following individuals initially accepted Council’s invitation to serve:

- Dwight McInvaill, Director of the Georgetown County Library, SC (Chair)
  - Helen R. Adams, High School Media Specialist, Rosholt Public Schools, WI
  - John D. Berry, Native & Comparative Ethnic Studies Librarian, University of California at Berkeley
  - Diedre Conkling, Lincoln County Library District, OR
  - Eric Hansen, Executive Director, Kansas Library Network Board
  - Dr. Jane Moore McGinn, Associate Professor, Southern Connecticut State University
  - Victor Lynn Schill, Assistant Branch Manager, Children’s Services, Fairbanks Branch, TX
  - Dr. Bernard F. Vavrek, Director, Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, Clarion University of Pennsylvania
  - Anne Wick, Library Media Teacher, Foothill Middle School, CA.
  - Other ALA members were not appointed to the task force but supported its efforts through comments, suggestions and dissemination of its work
- Satia Orange, Director, Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS) of the American Library Association was named as Staff Liaison to the task force

At the 2003 Midwinter Meeting, the task force formulated a timeline to complete its mandate and divided the labor amongst three work groups: rural school, rural tribal, and rural public libraries. By spring 2003, brainstorming was occurring regularly through two communications methods that had been established for the task force: a listserv and a blackboard site. In addition to developing a survey (see below, Section II, “The Survey”), the task force researched and contributed information and links to a new ALA web page for rural school, tribal and public libraries. In addition, at its 2004 Midwinter Meeting in San Diego, the task force named Jane Moore McGinn as Co-Chair for her special leadership contributions during the winter of 2003.

II. The Survey

To address the first part of the mission, *“to identify and study issues and challenges,”* the task force began in mid-summer 2003 to develop a survey. The task force initially developed 10 open-ended queries for the questionnaire. It then requested a critique of this instrument by seven electronic discussions lists, two for school libraries, two for tribal libraries, and three for public libraries. From these seven lists, the task force received about 40 responses.

The bulk of these replies simply commended the task force for its efforts with such comments as “I applaud your committee for reaching out to an underserved constituency;” “these questions are very good; they address most of the things that I would want in a survey;” and “thanks for your assistance and perseverance.” Sixteen librarians (five school, two tribal, seven public, and two academic contributors) nevertheless provided 41 specific suggestions for changes, some minor and others major. To supplement the tribal information, the task

force reviewed handouts, agendas and other materials from the Tribal College Librarians Professional Development Institutes from 1996 to 2003.

In mid-September, the results of this collaboration were submitted to Mary Jo Lynch, director of the ALA Office of Research and Statistics. She assisted the task force in reducing the number of questions from 27 to 14. She also reviewed the remaining queries carefully to ensure that they were written in the best way to maximize responses while avoiding the influencing of results. Concomitantly, she also worked with the task force to change the questions from open-ended ones to ones with check boxes beside multiple-response answers. She convinced us that this alteration would encourage a higher rate of response and would likewise aid in the tallying of data.

By late fall 2003, with the help of ALA's Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS), the task force was able to post the survey on a newly created website. The task force then advertised the existence of the survey to the seven discussion lists that had initially helped in the formulation of this questionnaire. Task force members and OLOS staff also distributed the survey at a number of national meetings, including one for the American Association of School Librarians and another for the Association of Rural Librarians, both in the fall of 2003. By December 15, 2003, the deadline for responses, the survey had garnered 1,122 replies. Due to a low response from the tribal libraries sector, the task force extended the deadline for a direct mailing to 208 rural tribal librarians in order to increase their participation. The result was a doubling of tribal contributions from 20 to 40. By April 2004, overall participation had increased from 1,122 to 1,165. The task force appreciates the work of Evan Leach, Ph.D. of TAP, Inc. for compiling the survey data for this report.

### III. Survey Results

The survey is, first of all, a preliminary portrayal of responses from the rural libraries that have some connections with ALA. However, a general overview of replies can now be presented.

#### Who were the respondents?

Analysis of the responses revealed that the majority of the respondents were female (1084 or 92%); and most were between the ages of 45 to 54 years old (495 or 42%).

The other age groups were represented as follows:

- 25 to 34 (80 or 7%)
- 35 to 44 (206 or 17%)
- 55 to 64 (343 or 29%)
- 65 and over (54 or 5%)

Professional characteristics of the respondents were also clearly shown through the survey results. Most were rural public librarians (695 or 59%).

- Rural school (377 or 32%)
- Rural tribal (50 or 5%)
- Other (62 or 5%)

Interestingly, most of those identifying themselves as "other" were junior and tribal colleges.

The majority of titles were evenly distributed between those identifying themselves as staff/media specialist/librarian (508 or 43%) and directors/principals (515 or 42%).

#### Where do they live?

Most were residents of the Great Lakes and Plains (888 or 41%). (IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND,

OH, SD, WI)

Other representation was from:

- West and Southwest (363 or 31%)(AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, NM, OK, OR, TX, UT, WA, WY)
- North Atlantic (209 or 17%) (CT, DE, DC, ME, MD, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT)
- Southeast (104 or 9%). (AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV)

The majority came from rural areas with a population under 2,500 (439 or 38%).

Others lived in communities with populaces from:

- 2,500 to 4,999 (249 or 21%)
- 5,000 to 9,999 (216 or 18%)
- 10,000 to 19,999 (137 or 12%)
- 20,000 to 29,999 (53 or 4%)
- 30,000 to 39,999 (22 or 2%)
- 40,000 to 49,999 (16 or 1%).

Only 35 or three percent identified locations with residents exceeding 50,000, still considering themselves as rural.

What are the challenges facing their communities?

Poverty (356 or 30%) and depopulation (298 or 25%) were the overwhelming majority of challenges facing the respondents' communities.

Interestingly, however, were the 175 or 15% of respondents who indicated challenges of rapid population growth, with another 114 or 12% listing illiteracy.

Challenges facing libraries

The unsurprising majority (718 or 61%) of the respondents identified lack of money as the greatest challenge to their libraries, with old buildings, lack of qualified staff, poor collections, equipment and "other" being the remainder.

Computer knowledge for staff and customers (543 or 46%) was identified as the greatest training need, with almost half of the remaining needs for basic library skills for staff and customers (217 or 18%), and

- Library degree programs for staff (135 or 11%)
- Financial support through scholarships and loans (155 or 13%)

The need for current nonfiction (395 or 33%) represented a majority of the respondents' explanation of collection development needs, followed by:

- Current fiction (201 or 17%)
- School curriculum materials (202 or 17%)
- Local history, reminiscences, folklore, and tradition (154 or 13%)
- Selection tools (69 or 6%)

Needs in technology was identified in hardware (computers, printers, etc. (401 or 34%), followed by technical support (283 or 24%) and training of staff and customers (259 or 22%). The need for quality of connectivity to the Internet (84 or 7%) and software (77 or 7%) followed.

Library collaborations showed that more than one third of the respondents cooperate with colleges and universities (438 or 37%), government agencies (593 or 50%) and civic organizations (802 or 68%). Fewer (150 or 13%) collaborate with religious groups. More than one answer was allowed, providing opportunities to express multiple collaborations.

Association membership results in cited national associations reflected some confusion, since membership in #1 is required before joining #2 and #3. The American Indian Library Association is an affiliate of ALA, and does not reflect the larger membership:

1. American Library Association members (465 or 58%)
2. Public Library Association (218 or 27%)
3. American Association of School Librarians (91 or 11%)
4. American Indian Library Association (13 or 3%)

These numbers overwhelming support the task force's opinion that only one third of the respondents are members of ALA, substantiating an generally accepted position of rural library experts. .

Beneficial resources, the final issues addressed in the last question on the survey, also with multiple responses allowed, noted interests benefiting from in every resource listed, in order:

- Advocacy for library funding and support (public policies, lobbying, etc.) (839 or 71%)
- Staff development events (conferences, institutes, etc.) (584 or 49%)
- Online communication (electronic discussion lists, online resources, online continuing education) (571 or 48%)
- Graphics and other marketing resources (447 or 38%)
- Publications (408 or 34%)

Sometimes haunting, often desperate, and frequently angry-sounding were the several hundred additional comments added to the survey. Words and phrases like "remoteness," "inadequate space; no automation," "many dysfunctional families" suggested pervasive alienation -- geographical, institutional, and social, although the respondents were considered more "connected" to ALA than normally thought of rural library staff.

Other messages were more directly and personally poignant:

- "[I am] attempting to keep the library open - no funds"
- "I run 2 libraries so services are only ½ time"
- "We have no space for a second computer"
- "I am afraid financial constraints will keep them from replacing me when I retire."

And what were the stated attitudes towards ALA, were often illustrated by remarks like:

- "We do not belong to ALA because the yearly fee is too high"
- "The cost to send staff to national conferences is prohibitive"
- "Make publications affordable"
- "ALA provides NOTHING for small libraries and I don't see that changing in the future" "ALA has nothing for small libraries to participate; once again we were left behind!"

The intent of this task force is to address these and other concerns, with encouraging acknowledgement that rural voices were, in fact, heard and cry to be considered.

#### IV. Current ALA Services

Since the United States Office of Management and Budget (OMB) classifies 61.7 million (25%) of the total population of our country as rural ("What is Rural? Defining Rural: Available Resources." USDA.

<<http://www.nal.usda.gov/ric/faqs/ruralfaq.htm>>, one could reasonably expect to find a wealth of material concerning rural school, tribal and public libraries on the ALA website. Such is not the case. The reverse holds true. There exists only a paucity of data for the one in four of our nation's citizens served by rural libraries of all types.

While the task force could provide many examples, this fact is illustrated by an easily replicable key-word search of the ALA website. If one enters the term "rural libraries" on the appropriate field of the ALA homepage, one receives 540 records sorted by relevance. Only seven of these entries have ratings higher than 40%. After that, the level of pertinence declines sharply to 29% and below. Of the top seven items, ALA's Office of Literacy and Outreach Services features them all exclusively. Three of the seven refer to a single library, the Georgetown County Library of South Carolina. Two deal with the task force for Rural School, Tribal and Public Libraries. One is a statistical chart. And the one with the most relevance at 84% concerns a listserv of an association for rural libraries that has no institutional relationship to ALA. When one does a similar search under "academic libraries," the result show a tremendous increase of 1,000 hits with 96 having a relevance of over 40%. Is this variance justified? The student population served annually from 1994 to 2001 by U.S. colleges averaged, according to "Chart 280" of the Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2003 at 15,291,875 individuals or less than 25% of the total populace for our country's rural areas. ALA thus does not presently serve some populations, such a rural ones, in proportion to their number of patrons. This severely skewed focus can nevertheless be remedied.

## V. Recommendations

The preliminary survey produced more questions than answers. This result is not surprising considering the questionnaire's intended scope. To begin to create a change in ALA's relationship to rural school, tribal and public libraries, the task force would like to fulfill the second part of its charge - "to make recommendations on possible solutions" - by suggesting the following list of possibilities as a starting point:

1. Demonstrate leadership toward support of rural school, tribal and public libraries! ALA leadership must take steps to ensure availability of necessary personnel, operating and capital monies for meaningful support of rural libraries and library workers:
  - a. Permanently assign responsibility for implementation of rural and tribal library initiatives to the OLOS office (or another body—but this responsibility needs a home)
  - b. Provide, by reorganization of personnel if monies are not available for new hire, staff time necessary to implement rural and tribal library initiatives.

The task force understands that, at this period in the economy, ALA cannot fund additional staff to implement these recommendations. However, the members feel it imperative that the task force goes on record requesting additional staff support to effectively increase professional service delivery options to rural school, tribal and public libraries.

While current online resources, conference programs and publications document that the ALA Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS), in addition to committees in PLA, AASL and other units, do consider rural library issues the task force sees a need for a higher level of ALA commitment.

2. Create a more visible environment for rural and tribal staff *within* the Association:
  - a. Establish an ALA Special Committee on Rural and Reservation Library Services to expand the work of the task force, and to implement and annually assess progress toward task force recommendations. In addition, the task force asks that the American Indian Library Association (AILA), an ALA affiliate, be included in this and any other related initiatives, with

the additional goal of greater implementation of the ALA Policy 60.3 (Goals for Indian Library and Information Services).

- b. Designate American Library Association-Allied Professional Association (ALA-APA) as lead organization to initiate online “solo” librarian staff development modules in cooperation with state libraries, ALA divisions and other units to accommodate affordable staff development for rural and tribal library staff with travel constraints
  - c. Initiate a mentoring program with ALA members of similar library focuses.
  - d. Restructure ALA’s dues to support rural and tribal librarians and other library workers.<sup>1</sup>
3. Collaborate on a national survey of rural and tribal librarians and libraries to allow for a more global response from the country’s rural libraries:

The task force recognizes the value of the fall 2003 survey as a first step in executing its charge. However, the task force members see a need for a more comprehensive national survey of rural and tribal school and public library issues. The 2003 survey clearly reflects the input of rural and tribal libraries with connections through ALA membership, or related electronic discussion or mailing lists.

The task force has accepted Dr. Bernard Vavrek’s offer to conduct a national survey to address the preliminary findings of the fall 2003 survey, with a report to the Special Committee on Rural & Reservation Library Services by June 2005. Dr Vavrek is the director of the Center for Rural Librarianship at Clarion University of Pennsylvania, a member of the PLA Committee on Rural Library Services and an appointee to this task force.

The survey will specifically target more “unconnected-to-ALA” rural libraries, which did not participate in the initial survey.

4. Develop a national advocacy campaign to emphasize the contribution of rural and tribal libraries:
- a. Initiate an audit of ALA internal resources and external organizations and agencies, which support rural and tribal libraries and staff in funding and advocacy.<sup>2</sup>
  - b. Seek funding, in cooperation with the ALA Development office, from/with organizations, institutions, businesses and foundations to finance ALA’s service delivery initiatives that benefit rural and tribal libraries and library staff.
  - c. Create and deliver, in cooperation with the ALA Washington Office, advocacy materials that specifically target representatives from districts with rural and tribal libraries. One specific focus should be continued IMLS support.
  - c. Secure ALA partnerships with other national or regional organizations, agencies and online resources whose staff development and advocacy resources impact rural and tribal libraries and library staff recruitment and retention.
  - d. Utilize ALA chapter councilors to advocate outreach to rural/tribal librarians in all state associations.
  - e. Expand the resources hosted at OLOS to reflect the task force’s advocacy for additional electronic resources for rural and tribal libraries staff and communities<sup>3</sup>
  - f. Extend the @ your library campaign to have a rural and a tribal flavor, i.e. “... from the Heart @ Your Library!

## VI. Budget Considerations for FY 2005

Demonstrate leadership toward support of rural school, tribal and public libraries!

Recommendation 1: No budget request

Demonstrate leadership toward support of rural school, tribal and public libraries!

Recommendation 2: No budget request

Collaborate on a national survey of rural and tribal librarians and libraries

Recommendation 3: No budget request

Develop a national advocacy campaign to emphasize the contribution of rural and tribal libraries

Recommendation 4: \$40,000

Development of advocacy materials	\$25,000
Online resource dissemination	\$15,000

## VII. Summary

Committing ALA to achieving these recommendations should be a mandate for the identified 61.7 million rural citizens of our nation to ensure that the profession considers their needs seriously. It will help also to restore ALA's credibility among workers in the thousands of rural school, tribal and public libraries that exist across the United States. The fall 2003 survey documents clearly that such communities and their libraries are struggling for survival. Equitable access to information is key for these communities. The American Library Association's activism is needed desperately to ensure library services for all.

Members: Dwight McInvaill, chair; Jane Moore McGinn, co-chair; Helen Adams, Carol Barta, John D. Berry, Deidre Conkling, Eric Hansen, Susan Reymer, Victor Lynn Schill, Bernard F. Vavrek, Ann Wick, members.

<sup>1</sup> Acceptance of the library worker category (\$35), effective September 1, allows consideration for rural and tribal librarians, who may choose this category, although task member preference was mentioned for salary-related categories.

<sup>2</sup> Including, but not be limited to AASL, PLA, ALA Washington Office, Center for Rural Librarianship, WebJunction.org (OCLC), Association of Rural and Small Libraries, Rural Library Project, state library agencies, organizations, Gates Foundation

<sup>3</sup> The task force appreciates the efforts of OLOS staff in continuing their focus on resources for rural and tribal libraries. In addition, the task force hopes that consideration be given in the FY 2006 for additional funding or through the ALA Development Office to support a more global dedicated page on the ALA website for that addresses rural and tribal library resources and communication.