

## Themes Report | Community Conversations | March 2021

### 2022-2026 Plan of Service Development

In March 2021 MHLS staff<sup>1</sup> conducted eight (8) live “Community Conversations” with member library directors and provided a survey opportunity for those unable to attend the live sessions. The questions asked in the sessions and the survey were consistent, designed by modifying the American Library Association’s Turning Outward program to help focus research to inform the new MHLS Plan of Service on the aspirations of member library leaders for the next several years.<sup>2</sup>

Seventy-five percent (75%) of member library directors participated in the Community Conversations exercise with 90% participating in the live sessions and 10% participating via survey.

All MHLS Staff involved with the events took notes and merged their notes in order to generate the raw data from which to draw conclusions. From this exercise, five themes emerged which are itemized here.

#### 1. **Sustainable Funding**

The top theme that emerged is the goal to grow reliable operating and capital funds for libraries. This was a topic of conversation across all five counties and libraries with service populations of all sizes.

Within this theme there are clear budget areas that directors have identified for focused growth in order to meet the needs of their communities:

- a. Staff wages, this is driven by both the unfunded mandate of a rising minimum wage as well as efforts to recruit and retain qualified staff

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<sup>1</sup> MHLS Staff present for all Community Conversations: Rebekkah Smith Aldrich, MHLS Executive Director; Laurie Shedrick, MHLS Assistant Director/Technology Operations Manager; Casey Conlin, MHLS Library Sustainability Coordinator

<sup>2</sup> Questions: (1) What kind of library are you working to create?/What goals do you have for your library in the coming year?; (2) What is that important to you?; (3) How is that different from how you see your library now?; (4) What are some of the things that need to happen to create that kind of change?

- b. Increased number of staff, particularly in the areas of administration (assistant directors, managers, administrative assistants), programming and PR/Social Media
- c. Digital or “e” Collection Development, specifically ebooks and downloadable audiobooks (OverDrive)
- d. Facility renovation and expansion

## **2. Addressing Digital Inequities**

### **a. At the library:**

- i. While dependent on geography and funding, we see a majority of libraries in the System are still not operating with the recommended broadband speeds. As reported by directors, in some cases, this is due to accessibility, in others, affordability due to lack of competition in their area or lack of commitment in the library’s budget for this item as a priority. There were also hints of low-adoption of the federal E-rate program which is designed to help underwrite the costs of broadband connectivity.
- ii. Directors identified a need to help more existing member library staff reach acceptable levels of competency when it comes to assisting patrons with basic tasks done online (e.g. establish and email account, information literacy basics, filling out an online form) and to connect with libraries’ digital resources (e.g. Libby/OverDrive, database products)

### **b. In the Community:**

- i. Access to Affordable Broadband in the home and in the form of Wi-Fi networks in the community
- ii. Broadband Adoption/Digital Literacy

## **3. Collaborations/Collective Impact Efforts**

A strong theme that emerged was a desire among directors for their libraries to be, and to be seen as, more engaged in collaborative efforts in the community, working with others – neighbors, municipalities, agencies, nonprofits – to make a difference in people’s lives on social, environmental and economic challenges facing community members.<sup>3</sup> Library directors are also looking to cultivate their libraries’ reputation as community centers that cultivate and facilitate connections within the

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<sup>3</sup> This aligns with the “Collective Impact” trend identified by the American Library Association’s Center for the Future of Libraries which connects the role of libraries to join forces with organizations from different sectors to assist with “big social issues (hunger, poverty, violence, education, health, public safety, the environment).” <http://www.ala.org/tools/future/trends/collectiveimpact>

community.

#### 4. **Connecting with New Residents & Non-Users**

During the pandemic, the Hudson Valley has seen a significant rise in new residents moving from urban areas such as New York City as well as family members moving into the area to be close to other family members. The anecdotal reports of house sales in all five counties of the Mid-Hudson Library System are notable and indicate both a large number of new residents to connect with library services as well as a large number of new families looking for social connections that librarians may be able to facilitate.

#### 5. **Professional Development**

While professional development is a perennial issue for our System, insights provided by the directors indicate areas of focus where MHLS can have an impact in the next several years:

##### a. **Staff:**

##### i. Technology Competencies

1. Sierra & Discovery Platform
2. Digital Resources (e.g. Libby/OverDrive)
3. Patron Assistance (e.g. establish and email account, information literacy basics, filling out an online form)

##### ii. Navigator Role, this is a newer term for a traditional reference activity but specific to helping patrons connect with and access government services/programs online. (e.g. Lifeline, Health Marketplace/Affordable Care Act, Vaccine Appointments, etc.)

##### iii. Program Planning & Management

1. Planning and implementing
2. Fostering partnerships with other agencies and neighboring libraries

##### b. **Trustees**

- i. Essential roles and responsibilities of the board
- ii. Core values and ethics
- iii. Financial Planning

iv. Ambassador role in the community

c. **Friends:**

i. Building membership

ii. Fundraising