

Western Massachusetts Regional Library System Small Library Study Report

Executive Summary

There are a total of 69 public libraries that serve less than 2,000 people in Massachusetts. Almost eighty percent (79.71%) of these are in the western region. Over fifty-five percent (55.74%) of Massachusetts' libraries serving fewer than 5,000 people are in the area served by the Western Massachusetts Regional Library System (WMRLS).

While some consolidation of services would offer the people of western Massachusetts a good number of benefits, our interaction with the people and libraries in the area suggests that many, if not most, small town residents in the region would reject the concept of combining forces to create fewer, but larger, libraries. One of the characteristics that draw people to western Massachusetts is the small town way of life. People move to the area to avoid suburban sprawl, "big box" stores, and homogeneous institutions. The local (town) public library, no matter how small, is an integral part of that way of life. Furthermore, the majority of the funding for library services in these communities comes from town government and the consultants seriously doubt whether a majority of these town funds would flow to regional library facilities. The weakness of county government in the Commonwealth makes that unit of government an unlikely source of replacement funding.

Because of these factors, the consultants have focused their attention on finding mechanisms to strengthen these very small public libraries rather than on consolidation of services. As we have said, some consolidation makes sense; however, we believe that any attempt to force mergers would fail miserably. Instead, we have recommended a course that attempts to strengthen existing libraries and to build alliances between and among libraries.

In the course of the study, the consultants conducted site visits and interviews in 14 different small libraries in the region. Five focus groups for library directors were held at sites throughout western Massachusetts. A web-based survey was conducted that attracted 300 responses from residents of 58 different towns. A comparative analysis of peer libraries in other states with large numbers of small libraries was also carried out. These comparisons used Fiscal Year 2003 data available through the Federal - State Cooperative System (FSCS) of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

Findings of the study include:

- Western Massachusetts is not alone in having small libraries (almost one-quarter of U.S. public libraries serve 2,000 people or less)
- In peer comparisons, WMRLS small libraries fall in the middle of the pack on most common input and output measures
- Small libraries in western Massachusetts are heavily used (8.43 items per capita for libraries serving 5,000 or less – Massachusetts average is 7.68)
- Collection turnover rate is poor (likely indicating that many collections need to be weeded)
- People in the region use their “home town” library but they often use other libraries as well
- High speed Internet connections are very important (quite a number of communities lack general public access to high speed connections such as cable and DSL)
- The local “town” library is a treasured community institution

The study describes three different levels of service that can be used to characterize the future of small libraries in western Massachusetts. They are:

- Survivability
- Viability
- “Thrivability”

Survivability is merely keeping the doors open. This is **not** an acceptable model of library service. There are a handful of libraries in the western Massachusetts area that fall into this category. The consultants believe that minimal effort should be exerted to artificially prop up these marginal libraries.

Most libraries in the western region fall into the viability category. They are alive and function reasonably well given their very limited funding. With the assistance of WMRLS, they remain relevant to their communities. Nevertheless, they fall short of 21st century standards for library service.

The small libraries of western Massachusetts need to be striving to attain “thrivability.” The study recommendations are aimed at helping viable libraries reach this higher level of service.

Recommendations include:

- **Work to maintain the “customer service” edge often associated with small libraries**

- **Work to ensure that small libraries are “fully connected” (including both high speed Internet service and participation in a regional shared automation system)**
- **Develop cooperative collection development and resource sharing mechanisms that ensure that libraries have vital collections**
- **Create a model for 21st century small libraries and work to attain foundation and grant funding to create a number of exemplary small libraries in the region**
- **Seek mechanisms to enable libraries to recruit and maintain highly qualified staff (explore shared positions, temporary services such as “BiblioTemps,” and mechanisms to offer affordable access to employee benefits**
- **Seek additional “targeted” funding from the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners, foundations and other granting organizations, and from local libraries and their townships**

Background

Approximately 800,000 people reside in the historic and scenic areas that make up western Massachusetts. While most of these people live in the region’s urban areas, many reside in the small towns that are scattered about the territory. Primary public library service for over 63,000 of these people comes from 55 small libraries, each of which have service populations less than 2,000 people. There are a total of 69 public libraries that serve less than 2,000 people in Massachusetts. Almost eighty percent (79.71%) of these are in the western region. Over fifty-five percent (55.74%) of Massachusetts’ libraries serving fewer than 5,000 people are in the area served by the Western Massachusetts Regional Library System (WMRLS).

While the number and percentages of small libraries in the western region may seem large, it must also be remembered that the western region of the Commonwealth is, by Massachusetts standards, relatively large. In fact, the area served by WMRLS represents almost thirty-six percent of the state’s total land mass. Although the number of library facilities is high, the region has fewer libraries per square mile (.04) than any of the five other library service regions. Taking the region as a whole, each library in western Massachusetts serves approximately 27 sq. miles.

Town government is a far more important unit of government in Massachusetts (and in much of New England) than it is in other parts of the United States (U.S.). Moreover, compared to most other portions of the U.S., county government is relatively weak. The strength of the association that people feel toward their hometown coupled with relatively weak counties and the fact that most of the

funding for small libraries comes from local (town) taxes leads the consultants to a different set of conclusions than might be the case if the circumstances were different. In most cases, we would feel comfortable recommending a concerted effort to form what are often referred to as “larger units of service.” Many library facilities very successfully serve populations of 35,000 – 60,000 very efficiently. Furthermore, facilities of this size are among the most efficient since they offer economies of scale that often allow them to be open longer hours, to have more extensive collections, and to offer services and amenities that are difficult, if not impossible, to provide in very small libraries.

While some consolidation of services would offer the people of western Massachusetts a good number of benefits, our interaction with the people and libraries in the area suggests that many, if not most, small town residents in the region would reject the concept of combining forces to create fewer, but larger, libraries. One of the characteristics that draw people to western Massachusetts is the small town way of life. People move to the area to avoid suburban sprawl, “big box” stores, and homogeneous institutions. The local (town) public library, no matter how small, is an integral part of that way of life. Furthermore, the majority of the funding for library services in these communities comes from town government and the consultants seriously doubt whether a majority of these town funds would flow to regional library facilities. The weakness of county government in the Commonwealth makes that unit of government an unlikely source of replacement funding.

Because of these factors, the consultants have focused their attention on finding mechanisms to strengthen these very small public libraries rather than on consolidation of services. As we have said, some consolidation makes sense; however, we believe that any attempt to force mergers would fail miserably. Instead, we have recommended a course that attempts to strengthen existing libraries and to build alliances between and among libraries.

The Western Massachusetts Regional Library System (WMRLS) exists to help the libraries of the entire region provide quality library and information services to the people of the area. It is important for WMRLS to know how well the small libraries of the region are meeting the needs of the people they exist to serve and to consider whether there are more effective mechanisms WMRLS could use to improve services. To this end, WMRLS applied for and received a small federal Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant through the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners (MBLC) to study the services offered by the small libraries in Western Massachusetts and the effectiveness of the ways in which the regional system serves them. WMRLS enlisted the help of Himmel & Wilson, Library Consultants, a nationally known consulting firm to conduct the study.

The Study

The consultants felt that the study had to be more than simply an analysis of statistical data. Himmel & Wilson's work with small libraries throughout the United States has given the consultants an appreciation for the fact that public libraries in small towns are more than simply outlets for the circulation of books and other library materials. Consequently, the study's design involved a considerable amount of on-site time in the region and in its libraries.

The consultants visited 18 public libraries in the region in the course of the study. Fifteen of these libraries have service populations of less than 2,000 people. Three of the libraries serve between 2,000 and 10,000 people.

The consultants conducted site visits in fourteen libraries. The libraries visited were located throughout the region. The site visits involved a tour of the facility and an interview with the library director. The interviews explored the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the libraries involved, an identification of major challenges facing the libraries, and an assessment of the services provided by WMRLS.

The consultants also held five focus groups in libraries scattered throughout the region. The sessions were well attended. Thirty-eight different people, all but a few of whom were directors of small libraries, participated in the sessions.

The consultants also conducted a web-based survey in an effort to secure information from the users of Western Massachusetts' small libraries. Three hundred individuals participated in the survey. The 300 respondents to this survey represented 58 different towns in the area.

Finally, the consultants looked at statistical data for the small libraries in the region and compared the performance of Western Massachusetts libraries in comparison to small libraries in five other states that have a considerable number of small libraries. These comparisons used Fiscal Year 2003 data available through the Federal - State Cooperative System (FSCS) of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

Findings

Western Massachusetts is not alone in having small public libraries. In fact, nearly a quarter (24.33%) of America's public libraries (not including branch libraries) serve populations of fewer than 2,000 people. However, it should also be noted that the trend is the U.S. is away from small units of service and toward larger, more regionalized governance and facilities.

When compared to peer libraries from other states (Iowa, Maine, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Vermont were used), WMRLS' small libraries are generally toward the middle of the pack. For example, they place third of the six in terms of total income per capita; third among the six in circulation per capita, third in collection turnover (the number of times an average item in the library's collection is checked out each year) and fourth among the six on library visits per capita. The performance of WMRLS' small libraries is typically above the median but falls short of the top ranking.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the small libraries in the WMRLS area (and small libraries as a group nationally) often fall below national averages. For example, WMRLS small libraries received \$ 16.56 per capita from local tax sources in Fiscal Year 2003 (the latest year for which national comparative data is available). This compares to a Massachusetts' average of \$ 30.00 per capita and a U.S. average of \$ 24.93 per capita. The WMRLS' small library mean for visits per capita was 4.07 compared to a Massachusetts' mean of 5.57 and a national figure of 4.58.

While people don't visit their libraries quite as often as in the rest of the Commonwealth or in the nation as a whole, those who use small libraries in Western Massachusetts use them rather heavily. The WMRLS' small library mean for circulations per capita was 8.02 (service population under 2,000) and 8.43 (service population under 5,000) compared to a Massachusetts' average of 7.68 and a national mark of 7.01.

On the downside, library collection turnover rate (the number of times an average item circulates in a year) among WMRLS' small libraries was 1.03 (service population under 2,000) and 1.12 (service population under 5,000) compared to a Massachusetts' average of 1.49 and a national rate of 2.25. Low performance in this area is usually an indication that library collections contain too many old, dated books and other materials.

While the web survey results make it clear that regular users of WMRLS' small libraries love their libraries, it is also obvious that their expectations and perceptions of service are being influenced by Barnes & Noble and Amazon.com as well as by their familiarity with small, "hometown" libraries. In short, library users want it all. They want ambiance, large collections, long hours of service, and high speed Internet connections.

At the same time, it is somewhat disturbing that many believe that what they want is unattainable. Many comments point out that getting funding from town governments is difficult. Little hope is offered that adequate funding will ever be provided. This was the prevailing attitude among the directors in interviews as well. Directors appeared to be thankful for the funds they were receiving from

local governments but resolved to the fact that the Towns were doing about as good as they could.

Web survey results also pointed out that many library users utilize more than one library. While the last library visit by web survey respondents was largely to the public library located in their own town (86.24%), almost sixty percent (59.12%) of respondents said that they used other libraries as well. Many named multiple other libraries. The other libraries they used tended to be larger libraries such as the Jones Library in Amherst, the Greenfield Library, and the Forbes Library in Northampton. It is clear that while the small libraries are meeting a need, they are not meeting all of the library and information needs of small town residents.

One factor that threatens the viability of some small libraries in the region is the availability of high-speed Internet connections. The consultants can truthfully say that the number and percentage of libraries they visited in Western Massachusetts that **lacked** high-speed Internet connections was the highest that we have encountered in recent years. Furthermore, it isn't an instance in which high-speed connections are readily available but haven't been tapped. Many communities in Western Massachusetts do not have DSL and/or cable service.

In a good number of instances, libraries have the best and fastest Internet connection that is available in the Town (the only Internet service that isn't dial-up). The libraries that are in this situation recognize that having this service brings in residents that they otherwise would not see.

Another important finding is that although people want their libraries to have non-print resources and bestsellers (they vote for DVDs, audio books with their feet and with their library cards), people also want their libraries to have quality non-fiction resources. The WMRLS bookmobile certainly helps the libraries of the region meet the public's insatiable appetite for non-print; however, budget cuts have decimated the ability of WMRLS to assist libraries in offering quality non-fiction titles.

Finally, the consultants found that the small libraries of Western Massachusetts highly value WMRLS, and particularly, treasure the WRMLS staff. Library directors were virtually unanimous in their praise of the assistance that they receive from the regional system. Directors cited isolation as one of the major challenges they face; however, it was clear that WMRLS was the most important resource that they have that helps them stay connected to the larger library community.

Recommendations

The consultants believe that three words can be used to describe the possible future of public libraries in Western Massachusetts. They are:

- Survivability
- Viability
- “Thrivability”

Survivability

Survivability relates merely to keeping the doors open and the lights on. The primary ingredient that the small public libraries in Western Massachusetts need to survive is the “will to live.” Everything that the consultants saw and heard in the course of conducting the study would indicate that the vast majority (perhaps not all) of the small libraries in the region will continue to survive for a good time to come. Almost every small library has a core group of users who place a high value on the institution of the public library and the importance of the institution to their community.

Furthermore, the consultants don’t believe that this core group will disappear anytime soon. One of the questions asked of directors in the focus groups was “Where will the next generation of library users come from?” Many of the focus group participants said that one of the groups that would be important was young retirees – people in their fifties and early sixties who are retiring or will be retiring in the near future. The web survey results seem to support the fact that this group will be very important. Over forty-five percent (46.46%) of the survey respondents fell into the 35 – 54 year age range and another twenty-two percent (22.22%) were between the ages of 55 and 64 years of age. While nearly all web-based surveys tend to “skew young,” it is clear that WMRLS’ small libraries have a constituency that is not entirely composed of young children and seniors. Retiring baby-boomers will be critical in keeping small libraries alive.

Viability

We have indicated that all that is needed to survive is the “will to live.” In our mind, viability goes a step beyond mere survival. The small public libraries of Western Massachusetts will need more than just the will to live if they hope to be truly viable institutions. We believe that viability = the will to live + relevance.

Survival depends most on the symbolic importance of the public library as an institution. The institution is maintained because it represents the fact that a community places a value on education, culture, and civility.

However, a truly viable public library transcends symbolism. The library is not just a powerful symbol; it is a useful organization as well. The library is relevant

to the people of the community. It addresses specific needs of the community's residents.

The majority of the libraries that the consultants visited are viable public libraries. Our interaction with the directors of many other libraries in the focus groups that were held leads us to believe that many of the libraries we didn't visit are viable as well. We believe that the existence of WMRLS and the services it provides are major factors in the fact that most of the small libraries are viable. The bookmobile service provides a steady flow of new and different materials; interlibrary loan turns a small local collection into a huge one by providing access to much deeper resources. The system plays a vital role in introducing new technologies and growing the technological infrastructure. Continuing education, the physical delivery of resources and consulting assistance (from hand-holding to high-tech) make the difference between survivability and viability.

What will be required to ensure that WMRLS' small libraries remain viable is that the WMRLS remain strong. While it may be seen as rather quaint in the 21st century, the bookmobile is an important component in creating local libraries that are more than simply symbols. Ways must be sought to continue this service and to restore at least some of what the service used to do in terms of non-fiction materials.

Thrivability

Thriving goes well beyond surviving and being viable. It represents the provision of 21st century services that are not only relevant but that position public libraries to remain important civic institutions for the long term. In a word, libraries are not just relevant; they are "indispensable."

The consultants do not believe that WMRLS' small libraries can thrive on their own. However, we do believe that they can be part of the picture. In order for the small public libraries in Western Massachusetts to justify their existence in the long term, they will need to do several things well. First, they will need to maintain their customer service edge. Small libraries are known for being user friendly and accessible in terms of locations. The libraries will need to maintain and enhance their user friendliness and they will need to increase their accessibility both in terms of physical accessibility (ADA) and in terms of hours.

Second, if the small libraries of Western Massachusetts are to thrive, they will need to be well connected to a larger universe of resources. Every WMRLS small library will need high-speed Internet connections, state-of-the-art technology (computers and peripherals) and they will need to be **full** participants in a regional or statewide integrated library system. The small libraries must serve the "last mile" function of getting library resources from other libraries into the hands of potential users.

Third, the small public libraries of Western Massachusetts must have vital collections. The collections do not need to be particularly large (in fact they can be smaller than they are today); however, they will need to be up-to-date and extremely well chosen.

The \$64,000 question is of course, how can small libraries with limited resources achieve this “thrivability” level? While the answer isn’t an easy one, the consultants believe it is possible.

First, the small public libraries must not be seen as standalone institutions. An effort must be made to transform the small libraries into a network of service outlets. Separate, higher standards will need to be established for libraries and communities that are willing to participate in a 21st Century Libraries initiative. A new model of the small town library must be presented. This new model will build on what small libraries have traditionally done well but will also bring the traditional into the 21st century. A model of facilities that are charming and fit the region must be paired with buildings that are ADA accessible and that offer amenities such as comfortable seating areas, meeting space, and space for cultural and civic displays and performances.

The consultants believe that, if an appropriate vision is created, that foundation and grant funding could be found to supplement assistance from the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners in transforming small town library facilities. This initiative might be built on the Friends of WMRLS effort but the appeal will need to be truly regional and will need to extend beyond “the choir.” The average citizen of Western Massachusetts will need to know that something extraordinary is happening in its libraries.

Another aspect of creating a network of libraries is connecting the small libraries with the larger libraries of the region. New alliances and working agreements need to be formed between and among the libraries of the region. This might be done on a sub-regional basis (Pioneer Valley, Hill Country, Berkshires, etc.) or it might be done on a County basis; however, small libraries need to align themselves with the larger libraries and will need to coordinate their services with those offered by their neighbors. For example, a regional approach should be taken to programming. A “one book” type of program where all libraries in a sub-region or in a county participate in a joint programming effort would be an excellent starting point.

Another avenue for sharing could involve WMRLS serving as a conduit to allow multiple libraries to share staff. For example, multiple libraries could agree to jointly fund a “circuit-riding” youth services specialist. The position could be funded by individual libraries but the individual could be a WMRLS employee for

purposes of benefits. Even shared directorships are not out of the question and should be explored.

Secondly, libraries will need to be connected electronically. WMRLS should seek grant and foundation funding to develop a content-rich electronic web template for small libraries in the region. A robust electronic presence for small libraries serves to increase their visibility **and** their accessibility. There is no reason that every small library in Western Massachusetts shouldn't be accessible electronically 24/7/365.

Another component of electronic connectivity is participation in a regional or statewide integrated library system. Libraries that are not connected may survive and they may even remain viable in the short term. However, they will never thrive unless they are part of a larger system that can access and deliver materials quickly and efficiently. Library users must be able to search broadly, initiate their own holds and designate where they want materials delivered. This approach in fact builds on one of the strengths of the local library – the fact that it's local and therefore convenient. The consultants believe that this is a challenge that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts must confront. We believe that MBLC needs to work with libraries and with the State Legislature to develop a statewide integrated automation system that is state funded. In the short term, ways must be sought to bring small libraries into the fold as full participants in regional automation systems such as C/W MARS.

The importance of developing enhanced technology support services to sustain technology-based services is obvious. WMRLS is in the best position to provide these services; however, it lacks the funds to perform the function adequately. The consultants believe that this issue needs to be addressed in upcoming discussions regarding state aid to libraries.

Providing convenient access to library services involves more than just facilities. It also involves hours of accessibility. The consultants believe that several things can be done to address this challenge. First, libraries can be equipped with "book lockers" that are accessible 24 hours a day. Some libraries have installed secure lockers that are the modern day equivalent of the post office box. Reserved materials for a patron are placed in the box and an e-mail is sent to the patron telling them which locker number the item is in and what "PIN number" can be used to open the locker. An alternative approach might use the emerging baby boomer retirees to personally deliver materials to the door.

Volunteers are another way in which small libraries might extend their hours and their services. While volunteers should **not** be seen as a way of providing basic services, the effective use of volunteers can enable small libraries to offer some of the desirable programs and services usually associated with larger libraries.

A 2006 study conducted by Deloitte & Touche concluded that very few organizations use the skills of their volunteers well. Most organizations, including libraries, assign volunteers to low skill/low reward tasks. The key to a good volunteer program comes in recruiting volunteers who possess useful skills and giving them responsibilities that are commensurate with their skills (for example, recruiting a person with exceptional computer skills to act as a computer instructor two afternoons a week). Libraries should think of using volunteers more in programming and outreach activities rather than as shelvers and desk assistants.

Student internships and work study programs can also be an asset to libraries. Involving students in early childhood education in story hour or summer reading program activities or those studying to be reading specialists in literacy programs can be beneficial to the students as well as to the public.

The final component that the consultants believe is critical to creating libraries that will thrive is collections. A first step is a weeding of outdated materials from the existing library collections. Some libraries would find that they have much more “people space” if they were to eliminate the need for “spinner racks” and other add on shelving that is necessary only because their regular shelves are filled with materials that are no longer useful.

The turnover rate in the WMRLS’ small libraries is only a bit over 1.0. Furthermore, this doesn’t take into account the fact that many of the libraries generate a significant amount of circulation using bookmobile materials which aren’t counted as locally owned materials in the equation (this means that the true turnover rate is actually lower than 1.0). Weeding is a top priority for many of the libraries.

The second portion of the effort involves finding ways in which the buying power of the small libraries can be maximized. The consultants believe that the most feasible way to accomplish this is to move from a local ownership model to a cooperative ownership model. In other words, instead of all of the local collection development funding going toward the purchase of books that will be locally owned, libraries need to pool a portion of their materials budgets to purchase materials that will be jointly held. This would serve to rebuild the bookmobile collection and WMRLS could continue to perform the role of being the distributor of these materials among the libraries.

It is clear that a question of fairness would arise if some libraries indicated a willingness to contribute to the rebuilding of the bookmobile collection and others did not. The consultants believe that WMRLS should seek a short term method of subsidizing this effort (grant or foundation funds) to enable virtually all of the

small libraries to participate initially. The local contribution to the fund for purchasing materials could then be ratcheted up to reflect actual costs after the value of the service becomes obvious. Making it easier for libraries to temporarily add bookmobile items to their automation systems for circulation purposes is also a high priority for making this new model work.

Furthermore, the consultants believe that WMRLS should continue to support bookmobile service. The region should continue to bear the cost for the physical housing and delivery of materials. Over time, it would be hoped that the majority of the materials in the small library collections would be jointly owned and that the number of items stored at the WMRLS headquarters facility would be minimal. The consultants also believe that a virtual selection system (selecting materials online) should be implemented. There is significant resistance to this approach on the part of the small libraries because the bookmobile's visit is an important event in some communities. However, we think that an online selection tool that provides cover art, and reviews (Amazon.com style) could be an acceptable substitute and could make the delivery process more efficient. This greater efficiency might also allow more frequent deliveries of materials to each library.

WMRLS is an important and highly valued organization. The consultants discovered that libraries within the region are extremely enthusiastic about the support they receive from WMRLS. Furthermore, the small libraries of the region believe that WMRLS staff members understand small libraries and that they respect the important work done by small libraries. Unfortunately, funding for WMRLS falls short of what the organization needs to offer a full complement of services at the level necessary to help all small libraries in the region reach the "thrivability" level. Previous cuts have left WMRLS with little latitude for readjusting priorities.

The consultants believe that additional funding will be required if the small libraries in western Massachusetts are to thrive. We recognize that this may sound like a simplistic declaration that urges "throwing money" at the problem. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Vital services have already been cut to levels that are unacceptable. Unless new sources of funding are found, we believe that some libraries in the region will begin to fall from their current "viability" state into the "survivability" chasm.

The process of gaining additional funding must begin with the effort to describe and create a 21st century model for small libraries. Once this is done, there are at least three funding sources that need to be pursued. They are:

- The Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners (MBLC)
- Foundations and other grants

- The libraries and townships

The funding priority for MBLC should relate to enabling full high-speed access to Internet services and an affordable mechanism for all libraries to participate in a statewide or regional “real-time” shared automation system. Foundations and grants should be pursued to develop a major pilot project aimed at creating a model for 21st century public library service to small communities. Finally, local libraries and their townships should be encouraged to fund their libraries at levels commensurate with U.S. averages for local support. Some of these dollars should be used to support services (such as enhanced bookmobile services). These services would continue to be provided by WMRLS but would be subsidized to a much larger extent by participating libraries. Demonstration grants could be used in an initial phase to show the benefits of these shared services.