



**"Between the Noses." 2019. By Deborah Geurtze**

# **Mohawk Valley Library System Surveys and Community Conversations Preliminary Results**

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Survey Results: Member Library Staff

**Summary:** <https://bit.ly/21StaffSummary>

**Full Results:** <https://bit.ly/21StaffResults>

Survey Results: Member Library Trustees

**Summary:** <https://bit.ly/21TrusteeSummary>

**Full Results:** <https://bit.ly/21TrusteeResults>

This version contains an Executive Summary and the listening session results for the 2021 MVLS Planning Process. Goals and Objectives are still being refined. The full document will be released in the first quarter of 2022.

# Executive Summary

Every five years, the Public Library Systems in New York State are required to submit a new Plan of Service to the State Education Department's Division of Library Development (DLD). This Plan of Service addresses DLD priorities on how public library systems operate. The planning activities used by MVLS to develop the Plan of Service also provide an opportunity for MVLS to explore member library needs and develop strategic goals and objectives that address those member library priorities. This document presents the MVLS goals and objectives developed during the 2021 planning process.

The 2021 planning process began with a survey sent to MVLS member library staff and trustees, with responses received from all libraries. MVLS then contracted with consultant Elissa Kane to host virtual listening sessions to gather additional input. Four sessions were held in September 2021, with follow-up conversations with library directors who were not able to participate. A total of 35 individuals, representing all MVLS libraries, participated in these sessions.

*“The last 18 months have been wild.”*

The discussions emphasized a world turned upside-down by the ongoing pandemic. “The last 18 months have been wild,” said one of the participants. It is clear that MVLS libraries were not exempt from the disruptions of the last couple of years.

Despite the unprecedented challenges, MVLS libraries responded to the pandemic with creativity and resilience. The listening sessions provided a window into the dramatic shifts that libraries made throughout the pandemic to meet the needs of their communities. MVLS libraries rose to the occasion, providing curbside delivery, offering virtual and shared programming, increasing access to e-resources, and even helping with social and health services.

Still, the past two years have taken a toll. MVLS libraries are experiencing staff shortages, and many staff members are exhausted as they frequently pivot from in-person to virtual programming or services and back again. Libraries continue to adjust to constantly-shifting state guidelines, enforcing mask mandates, managing unruly patrons, and coming up with new fundraising initiatives. Furthermore, trying to connect with patrons is no easy task from six feet away and behind a mask.

MVLS recognizes that libraries, despite their resilience and grace under pressure, need and want help. MVLS staff and Elissa Kane produced a series of goals grounded in information shared by members and observations that will guide libraries toward successful futures. MVLS commits more fully to encouraging and developing collaboration between libraries, and with community partners, while creating and delivering programs and services in such a way that embraces the expertise and individuality of our library leaders and brings people together to collect and refine best practices.

MVLS will also explore ways to assist members with the successful use of technology, social media, and communications tools, so they are prepared to keep their unique communities informed and engaged with library services.

In turn, we hope member libraries will experience MVLS as a supportive, hands-on, and helpful resource, as people who leverage their library expertise to ask the right questions and really listen to the answers. Ideally, members will see MVLS as an essential partner in their library's operational plan, assisting with technology, communications, programming, and the day-to-day business of running a library.

MVLS developed these goals in order to better help libraries thrive in uncertain times. These goals are designed to serve as a framework for the future, a touchstone for times when it feels like we have come so far, yet still have so far to go.

# **MVLS Community Conversations**

Listening sessions conducted via Zoom and phone  
September 2021

14 Libraries represented  
35 Directors, Staff Members, and Trustees participated

*facilitated by Elissa Kane, Kane & Lekakis  
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# The View

## *1. What are you worried about?*

- General uncertainty, change & pivoting
- Having enough staff to keep our library running
- Staff morale
- Safety policies and enforcement
- Kids returning to the library
- Construction projects
- Fundraising
- Recruiting trustees / volunteers

## *2. What's different at your library, and what do you want to bring into the future, since COVID?*

- Vision of the future / planning
- Success and expansion of virtual / hybrid programs
- Curbside service
- Increase in e-resources
- Change in space usage
- Planning for more accurate hours
- Online trustee meetings
- Board governance
- Staff flexibility
- Communications / promotions / marketing

## *3. What help do you need to realize your future?*

### **SHARED SERVICES, PROGRAMMING & COLLABORATION**

- Idea incubator / sharing best practices
- Tech help & training for staff
- Getting young people back in the library

### **INFRASTRUCTURE: TECHNOLOGY & LIBRARY AS A BUSINESS**

- MVLS – consortium / new staff positions
- Human resources – shared services

**TELLING THE STORY**

- Communications / promotions / marketing
- Website development
- Branding

**FOUNDATIONAL: FUNDING & FACILITIES**

- Development / fundraising / grants
- Facilities / construction

# Deeper Dive

## *1. What are you worried about?*

### **General uncertainty, change & pivoting**

- “The last 18 months have been wild.”
- “...it's tough to plan for the best and expect the worse.”
- “I know we can do it. We kind of made it up as we went along - each library individually - I wish there was a more systematic process to it now that we know it can happen and it might happen again.”
- “...we talked at our board meetings and amongst our staff that the silver lining, if you will, that COVID forced us to think outside the box. And once we did, we realized we're not going back in the box.”
- “Managing Expectations - now it's kind of expected, and it just adds to what we're doing and what we're expected to do there, already a lot before the pandemic - and now we have to do it on another platform.”

### **Having enough staff to keep our library running**

- “We have a full docket of programs, but we don't have enough money for more staff, and we're all running, running ragged constantly. My biggest worry is that we make big promises about what libraries have to offer, but then we don't have enough staff to fulfill that.”
- “... the long-term financial stability of libraries, I think, is a significant concern, especially when you're seeing a number of businesses that are able to offer higher wages than what we can offer is becoming quite a challenge in trying to hire even clerks.”
- “Here at Schenectady, we pretty much lost all of our part time people over the past year and a half, it was just full-time staff running everything. And it's, it was too much. It is too much; it still is too much.”
- “As I struggle with staffing issues, I wish there was another pathway that would honor the experiences of a very diverse population that come from all levels of education and life.”
- Director of Schenectady retiring



### **Staff morale**

- "... for staff, we've been going and going and going, and then, now it's like we're just kind of exhausted." "...trying to come up with ways of increasing morale and support for staff as well as training for dealing with difficult patrons."
- "...these last months have been incredibly exhausting and joyless, and I have never in all my time here have I ever had that feeling. This library has hands on approach. And it's hard to keep that up. And it's, it's just been awful. It's been devastating."

### **Safety policies and enforcement**

- "We've had some patrons that totally refuse to wear masks, and it's been very stressful for our director and staff. They're very argumentative."
- "...it concerns me that we will be further alienating a portion of the population unintentionally, even though we're trying to keep everyone safe..."
- "I'm working on a document for the escalation for my front desk clerks, in case of issues with anti-masking harassment."

### **Kids returning to the library**

- "I'm not seeing a lot of younger, parents, and coming in and supporting the library."
- "(Zoom) wasn't really as successful as we hoped because children have limited access to computers"

### **Construction projects**

- "... compounded by rising costs due to COVID and changing timelines from contactors.
- "... trying to find at least \$300,000 for an asbestos abatement project. The DLD grants no longer support asbestos abatement . . ."

### **Fundraising**

- "...we almost made as much with our three letters as we had done with our community involvement. But our concern is we love having the community involved here."

### **Recruiting trustees / volunteers**

- "I worry (about recruiting volunteers) because, honestly, Beth and I are the youngest."

## ***2. What's different at your library, and what do you want to bring into the future, since COVID?***

### **Vision of the future / planning**

- “I'm hoping where we're bringing into a future, a mindset of literally anything is possible. ... break down some walls that even unintentionally might have been there about what we do and how we do it.”
- “How do we prepare ourselves for this? I think there's going to be organizational changes to the way we operate and do things. And I think we're all going to have to spend time really looking at that.”
- “...the resources have to be there and ready to be tapped into when the circumstances change.”
- “If I could leave in the spring with a more stable staffing situation and have regularly scheduled full time people operating the library - the part time workforce has just crippled us.”

### **Success and expansion of virtual / hybrid programs**

- “...when COVID'S done and over, virtual won't go away.”
- there is a huge population that can't get to the library when we're open, adults and families, so that is something that will continue just not as intensely.
- “...patrons are extremely resilient, no matter what age”
- “It's amazing the learning curve that the boomer and silent generation, the greatest generation, have picked up Zoom and technology. Sometimes it feels even better than the millennials or the Gen Xers. I think a lot of it ties back to the fact that that's the only way they can see their family and their grandkids.”
- “We had a professor from a Native American Studies reservation school out in the West contact us because we were doing a book discussion, and through Google search, he came across our library because of keywords.”
- “... kids could actually get on the internet, from our parking lot and do their homework. It was great.”

### **Curbside service**

- “We're not going to get rid of that.”
- “How do you get all the kids out of the car through the snow into the library, pick up your books, or senior citizens that can't get out of their car, or assisted living?”

### **Increase in e-resources**

- "...digital content exploded when people couldn't physically get into our libraries. The numbers went through the roof, and I don't see that going back. I think people who may have been on the fence about it beforehand."
- "...especially children's books because of having Schenectady City Schools right in the mix."
- "It went up during the heyday of the pandemic, but I think it's back to somewhat normal or maybe a tad bit above, but not flying out of the stratosphere."
- "From our survey, we had reasons why people come to use the library, and by far, new and popular books, was the main reason."

### **Change in space usage**

- "I'm not really sure what's coming next after outdoor is no longer a possibility."
- "I noticed people are definitely slow to come back to Central, but at the same time, groups that are clamoring to have a space to use. So, maybe time to think about how we could use our spaces differently to meet those demands."
- "You could sit down at the computer with someone for a while and help them out with something, or you could get down on the floor with that kid and help them, read a book, and see if it was at their level. Things like that are much harder to do now."

### **Planning for more accurate hours**

- "We're really going to be looking at data at all nine locations for what days and hours of operation make the most sense."

### **Online trustee meetings**

- "Continuing to meet remotely."
- "Now that the governor has extended the open meetings to go virtual, we will probably do some sort of hybrid."
- "All of my trustees couldn't wait to go virtual. People who find that it's easier to hear when we're doing the virtual meetings because with the masks and hearing aids, it becomes quite complicated to hear what's going on, plus the HVAC system in our building is kind of loud, so I hear a lot of complaints that people can't hear."
- "I have some trustees with houses in Florida, so I don't see us getting rid of Zoom because it'll make it able for them to participate in the meeting."
- "Also, for young families."
- "Most of our board members have never done Zoom and don't want to, and I can't force them."
- "I offered to show them how to do it. They weren't interested, so we met in people's yards."
- "...our board has no interest in doing meetings virtually."

### **Board governance**

- “We set up a buildings and grounds committee. We have an old Victorian house that's our library, and it is always in need of some repairs and changes, so we decided we really need to have a dedicated committee of board members and a couple of spouses that are not board members to help with this. So, we've begun.”
- “We sat in the parking lot of the library and had a facilitator and began really starting to think about that we're small, but we want to grow. So how are we going to do that.”

### **Staff flexibility**

- “We are forced to be more flexible and be ready to do this, and the staff has been just tremendous and being able to change on a moment's notice. Literally a couple of times we got notice 48 hours before things had to change.”

### **Communications / promotions / marketing**

- “We had a stronger presence on social media; the Facebook site was used to communicate.”
- “Mailchimp – Email newsletter sent by Friends – offer of assistance to learn. Collect emails from patrons.”

### *3. What help do you need to realize your future?*

#### **SHARED SERVICES, PROGRAMMING & COLLABORATION**

##### **Idea incubator / sharing best practices**

- “Sharing trends that are happening nationally, or even within New York State, so we know what some of our adjacent libraries are doing.”
- “Creative desire to meet with other people who talking about library stuff. I would like to see a group of people, that isn't Directors Council, that kind of operates like an idea incubator, where we meet once a month or frequently, and if possible, in person to basically gush about and share all the newest, latest ideas we've seen or come across.”
- “I'm a total obsessive fan of the Salt Lake City Library System. I've been following them for the decade I've worked at this library, and I steal ideas from them all the time, because they are so cool. They're very human and environment forward. I've been watching lectures and talks for several years on how they approach Long Range Planning.”
- “I was really, really unbelievably happy to hear that Kim was meeting with other libraries out in Schoharie County.”
- “More shared programming and more connections - I'm looking for someone to help patrons with social media like Facebook and using their phones.”
- “... pull our resources together and put them out there, so that we're familiar with everything that everybody's doing and what resources we could possibly share.”
- “... a repository of best practices.”
- “In the past at MVLS, Capital Region Adult Programming Librarians would gather periodically at a location, and that was very helpful for sharing ideas. Perhaps a whole Mohawk Valley winter reading challenge, which I used to do years ago, and it was really a lot of fun.”
- “Years ago, we would gather and do more programmatic meetings - sometimes it was at MVLS and sometimes we met at the member libraries. Maybe virtually now as we're all starting to formulate fall and then going into early 2022. Sharing ideas and resources as we look ahead as we're reinventing ourselves and drawing the members of our communities back into our libraries.”
- “More interactions with MVLS staff – come out, visit, be proactive – don't just wait.”

### **Tech help & training for staff**

- “Basic and general production for film and audio.”
- “Videos are really the next step for libraries. We've become really good with social media, and we've all worked on developing websites. Having some background skill to produce our own videos with appropriate audio and editing would be helpful.”
- “... able to pay bills online, or being able to apply for Digital card, like what they do at UHLS. We could still provide library services to both current library users and potential new library users even if we're not physically here in the library.”
- “...a lot of folks in the community are asking for help with things like books on tape.”
- “Guide with recommendations for digital space.”

### **Getting young people back in the library**

- “Our biggest struggle is getting young people, teenagers, young adults back into our program. We really need to mend some relations with our community and really need to get the young people that were once here back in and having a voice in our library and in our collection.”

## **INFRASTRUCTURE: TECHNOLOGY & LIBRARY AS A BUSINESS**

### **MVLS – consortium / new staff positions**

- “Consortium is the best word I can think of where you're really coming out into the light as an institution to help the member libraries be better.”
- “You know, you're an extra pair of hands.”
- “BOCES does for school districts, and School Library Systems do for school libraries.”
- “Polaris assistance with staffing change - more accessibility for staff to be able to do some of that functioning.”
- “I would have loved the people in our service area to have been able to have Hoopla during the pandemic or another foreign language service. So, getting any kind of group discount is dicey when you only have a handful of libraries, but I'm so jealous of knowing that those tools are out there, and I can't bring them to my patrons.”
- “Through the consortium, libraries could share the cost of a full-time employee that might spend one day a week at that library, doing things like PR or social media, or something that they could help out, sharing services that way.”
- “More support from MVLS for staff, volunteers on Polaris.”
- “...the issue is that Sharon is the one person at MVLS who is available to train new employees on the Polaris system and the timing of our staffing transition meant we couldn't get somebody trained quickly on the system.”
- “...something that happens when we're under stress is we're not as creative as we might want to be. And if MVLS stepped up in programmatic way - something like MVLS Magazine Madness. Something we could all just turn on in our own locals, especially since we all have these hybrid things, we could do a little bit more of programming provided by MVLS that takes some of the pressure off staff.”
- “It would be great if there was a list of trained people could be used as substitutes - like a substitute teacher list, so that when you have a crisis you have someplace to go that is able to assist you rather quickly.”
- “Resource Sharing - library policies in a digital format. I believe there's some people on this call who probably have those policies right at their fingertips, so maybe you can send them over.”
- “We actually had a board member who was a human resource director, and she rewrote all of ours, and they are electronic, so I'm sure I can get your email from the web.”

### **Human resources – shared services**

- “We could use a lot of help with HR, especially with all of the changes that have happened with COVID and sick leave.
- “We have to do retirement and sick leave and health care. It's me trying to keep up on a lot of that. The new services through the three R's - the Ask the Lawyer have been very helpful. But still, just trying to keep up on everything and due dates - it's been a bit challenging.”
- “Because of construction project – we're still trying to figure out the correct staffing to staff the building properly and provide services.”

## TELLING THE STORY

### Communications / promotions / marketing

- "...a lot of people out there in the community have no idea about all the wonderful things that a library provides. Educate our public and invite them to come in and visit us."
- "Having a better way to communicate with the public would be nice. We have all the standard Facebook but that doesn't reach everyone, so just classic library communication issues."
- "Need for the consortium to be more consortium. Certainly, group advertising. The ad prices in the Gazette, which now owns the Leader Herald, our local paper, are too high. It would be great if we could advertise summer reading when people are back in movie theaters or on the buses. Something that's organized so we could all be in on that would be fantastic."

### Website development

- "...assistance in educating us to produce websites. They say WordPress is easy, but I don't believe it to be easy at all. For small libraries or large libraries where resources are a challenge, paying someone to do your website is probably not a possibility. And we've just built it in house from scratch. We don't know coding; we don't know any of this. Education about how to seek out the easiest ways to produce good looking websites with the right plugins, with the right connections to social media icons, just to keep ourselves cutting edge, and to continue our branding, I think would be very helpful."
- "...would it be possible for us to have a basic web page built that we could all add our own plugin our own things? Is that a possibility that we would share the basic structure, and then modify it?"
- "...more assistance with our website. I'd like to see MVLS get into website management. It doesn't mean that they're doing all the work, but just coordination assistance, technical stuff. Possibly the new position could assist."
- "...a template, and then you're trained on how to do the infill yourselves, and it looks like the others, but the design is kind of consistent."
- "...shared designs and formats for websites for some of the smaller libraries. Plug ins that show their personality and their resources but have something in the back end that is like others and could be maintained by MVLS. It would be something that each of you would maintain all your own information, but it's understood by everybody."



## Branding

- “Currently, the community library doesn't have a logo and we've been trying to work with different organizations to develop our logo. So far, things have not been very successful. Our best luck has been working with a high school student who had the most creative logo design yet. Getting the board to agree would be good. A good logo is so important for marketing and branding our libraries.
- It might be kind of fun to have a shared design that would tie into the shared programmatic sort of thing. We could all collaborate on some design elements. If we all decided to use a particular font and color for a few months, it might sort of unify us and have us look as coordinated as we really are.
- “Shared marketing across libraries – don’t need to compete.”
- “With the encouragement of Karen at Schenectady, we shared programs by Facebook that were going on at all the libraries. It wasn't just our stuff; we were continually sharing what was going on at all the different libraries. That would be something to try because our patrons go to all the different libraries.”
- “We shouldn't be all out there on our own trying to promote our programs when collectively there are awesome programs to share with our patrons.”

## **FOUNDATIONAL: FUNDING & FACILITIES**

### **Development / fundraising / grants**

- “What sort of national or local grants are available for different programming?”
- “MVLS used to send a list of available grants.”
- “Help with grant writing and with identifying grants.”
- “With state and federal funding increasing for infrastructure, libraries should be included in that infrastructure planning and funding.”
- “I think there needs to be less bureaucracy, specifically at the state level, and specifically about construction grants.”
- “Any information or resources on grants would certainly be helpful, but also building construction expertise.”
- “We've gone a year and a half, almost two years without being able to do our big fundraisers that we normally do. I don't know if anybody else is in the same pickle that we are.”
- “We did an online basket raffle and made more than twice the money, then we did have the craft fair and doing all that labor to prepare it. We're definitely going to try that again.”
- “As a small library, we have difficulty replacing the computers every four years. It's a huge financial burden.”
- “Federal grant assistance.”

### **Facilities / construction**

- “... the big thing that we're looking at is trying to figure out how to get more space. We don't have any private place for the tutors and students, so they can have effective time together while we're also doing a book discussion.”
- “... we're starting to look for another building.”