

Community Hub for Allegheny County

STRATEGIC PLAN FOR ALLEGANY COUNTY LIBRARY SYSTEM

OVERVIEW:

Allegany County, located in Western Maryland, is equidistant from Baltimore, Washington D.C. and Pittsburgh. Current 2020 population projections anticipate a county population of 74,150, comprised of 28,821 households. The current median age for county residents is 41.4 years and median household income is \$42,771.

Allegany County Library System (ACLS) was formed in 1960 through the merger of the then independent Cumberland, Frostburg, La Vale, Pennsylvania Avenue School and Westernport libraries. ACLS currently provides library programs and services to the citizens of Allegany County through 6 physical branch locations: Washington Street, Frostburg, George's Creek, LaVale, South Cumberland and Westernport; additionally, library services are available online and through outreach events. Current statistics indicates that 62,000 of the 74,000 Allegany County residents are library card holders with 10,000 of those card holders accessing programs and/or services in the last year.

METHOD:

The strategic planning process included the following elements:

- Online survey, open to the public for completion
- Focus Group sessions
- Individual interviews
- Planning session with ACLS Leadership Team
- Review of Trustees Meeting minutes, Staff Meeting Minutes
- Review of ACLS Statistics and DBED Statistics
- Analysis of comparable library systems in Maryland
- Website and social media analytics

ASSESSMENT:

Allegany County is a community that has been impacted by the same challenges in economic drivers and public health crises that have impacted many communities across the country. The combination of blue-collar job loss and declining access to a changing labor market have contributed to population decline and a foreboding warning that success cannot be found here. Declines post the great recession in 2008, the impact of the opioid epidemic and the isolation that can be present in rural communities has left many in a state of remorse and exhibiting signs of trauma.

Allegany County is a region poised for economic growth and redevelopment focused on the myriad of natural resources, arts and culture activities and growth in niche industry sectors. County level leadership is energized to bring transformational change spearheaded by a re-branding effort and large makerspace project. With two Maryland Main Street, Arts & Entertainment Districts, Cumberland and Frostburg; higher education institutions at Allegany College of Maryland and Frostburg State University; and significant cultural events the county has robust array of resources available for residents.

Allegany County Library System (ACLS) has been impacted by funding setbacks driven by the county's economic challenges. For the past four years the county level funding has not been able to keep up with increases in costs or the need for expanded services. That lack of funding, and the necessary budget cuts to manage the funding losses, have resulted in a reduction in community access to services, drained existing staff resources and undermined innovation.

ACLS Trustees and leadership have been operating from a position of loss for the last few years. Impacts of the budget cuts have been felt in hours of operation, limiting community access to the resources available at the library. Internally, leadership level staff have taken on multiple, disparate roles to maintain operations creating a climate that does not provide the time or bandwidth for planning, assessment or innovation.

Recognizing that Allegany County residents, like counties across the country, are impacted by the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Current statistics indicate that Allegany County has higher than state averages in *Household Substance Abuse* and *Household Mental illness*. ACLS should embrace its role as Community Hub and work with government, nonprofit providers, business leaders and community members to become a trauma informed community.

ACLS maintains its position as a valued asset in the community and there is a desire among partners and community leaders to engage with the library in visioning its role for the future. ACLS must shift its internal focus from the traditional service model it's used in the past to adapt to the changes in community need, available resources and opportunities for growth.

ACLS must use every available outlet to 'tell its story' in a way that conveys the opportunities that currently exist for Allegany County residents, to increase access to the programs and services currently in place, and to ask for support from the community in advocacy efforts. This narrative must also reach decision makers, both locally and at the state level, to inform and educate them of the valued role the library plays in Allegany County.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

This plan is intended to focus on key strategies to increase staff capacity, grow revenue and invest for the future. The key recommendations outlined below, are intended to be prioritized and executed in the next three years.

- I. Recognize that in order to effectively move forward, the organization needs to step back
- II. Invest in telling the library's story
- III. Embrace the role of Community Hub
- IV. Fully engage community members and key stakeholders as advocates
- V. Explore alternative and supplemental funding sources for key initiatives

Recognize that in order to effectively move forward, the organization will need to step back, assess and adjust.

According to the Cambridge dictionary, the expression ‘take one step forward, two steps back’ means “If you take one step forward, two steps back, you make progress but then experience events that cause you to be further behind than you were when you made the progress.” There is reason to be concerned that given the current culture within the organization, the above-mentioned expression may come to fruition.

Often community service organizations operate with a mindset that doing more with less is a badge or honor, or worse, an indication of the organization’s ability to be good stewards of the funding they receive. Those assumptions are neither accurate nor do they contribute to a healthy work environment for the employees. There has been enough research, TED Talks and blog posts to dissect this concept further, the common denominator is that government and community serving organizations must come together and agree to end the discrepancies in pay scales, work-life balance and benefits that exist.

ACLS budgetary restraints has resulted in employees filling multiple roles and at the leadership level roles are often disconnected from the work their role’s focus. In the short term, these steps can be a frustrating but necessary part of a workplace setting. When the short term turns into the new normal, these adjustments can become exhausting and leave employees prone to error and burnout. For ACLS these budget constraints have meant that employees are working at salaries below market average, and for some, below what is considered a living wage. Traditional reviews with performance-based increases have been inconsistent, creating a culture where effort and high performance cannot be recognized in appropriate ways. It should be noted that staff received a 3% salary increase in the current fiscal year, prior to that the last increase had been a 1% increase in 2015.

For the customer, the reduction in hours and inconsistency in when branches are open for operation has led to customer frustration and partner organizations have been forced to look elsewhere for meeting room space and program access.

“Few modern social infrastructures are natural... all social infrastructures require investment, whether for development or upkeep, and when we fail to build and maintain it, the material foundations of our social and civic life erode.” Eric Klineberg, author of [A Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life.](#)

To address the current internal cultural needs an assessment by the Board of Trustees and the Library Executive Director should be completed within the next 45 days to determine how to:

- Reduce service hours and/or days of operation, consistently across all branches, until sufficient funding is restored
- Outsourcing selective services to external providers and/or government agencies
- Providing salary increases to bring staff currently working below living wage up to the state mandated \$15 / hour and COLA adjustments for employees should be included in the 2020 budget.

These steps, to be implemented in January 2020 will provide the organization a necessary pause for ACLS. This pause will allow for internal assessments and any necessary restructuring to be completed, planned updates to operational functions (including the conversion to the Polaris Library Automation System) to be implemented and transition for the LaVale Library renovation process to be completed. During this time meetings with key decision makers can be held to fully assess the anticipated FY2021 county budget and available funds from state resources. This will also allow for the Library Executive Director to work with the leadership team to translate the strategic plan into work plans for all employees with a scheduled roll out in July 2020.

Additional Reading:

<https://hbr.org/2013/05/six-components-of-culture>

<https://www.thebalancecareers.com/how-to-change-your-culture-1918810>

<http://www.compassionfatigue.org/pages/symptoms.html>

Invest in telling the library's story

In the process of completing the community survey it became clear that individuals fell into three distinct categories: the active library user, the passive library user and the non-user.

- The 'active library user' was aware of the programs and services available to them and engaged in them regularly. They often were less familiar with programs and services available that were not directly related to them (for example, a retiree was not fully aware of story times and mothers of young children often had no idea what programs were available for teens).
- The 'passive library user' viewed the library as a valued community resource but often through a removed lens (their experience as a child, or their experience when their children were young).
- The 'non-user' may value the library as a community resource but had no awareness of the depth of programs and services available to them or assumed that the services were only intended for economically disadvantaged members of the community.

None of these perspectives are complete, accurate or beneficial to ACLS. For ACLS to embrace and be recognized for its role as a community hub, the community needs to be fully aware of the opportunities to access resources, in branches, online and through partner events.

Analysis of the website and social media analytics demonstrated some gaps in tracking, reach and response to the data provided. Typical print publications have been reduced or eliminated as a cost cutting measure and larger ad placement opportunities (television, radio, billboard) were not pursued.

There is a quote that says, "Nobody can tell your story the way you can tell your story". Ultimately, it is in any organization's best interest to tell their own story. ACLS has not been effectively telling its story and that has impacted its ability to generate interest in available resources, it is not conveying the depth of programming currently offered nor is it leveraging the current partner relationships to share their story with others.

A robust communications strategy should be developed to engage all residents and includes:

- Planned communication strategy for annual events, programs and services that includes print and online methods of delivery.
- A consistent aesthetic that speaks to the ACLS brand and is implemented in all communication methods.
- Outreach to partner organizations for cross promotion opportunities and website links offering better SEO for both organizations.
- Outreach to local media outlets (radio, television) for opportunities to promote library services to the community.
- Outreach to County Administrator to support and engage in the IN Allegany rebranding effort to promote the library and the county.
- Develop a crisis communication plan and train all staff in their roles should the plan need to be implemented.
- Provide training to key staff on how to engage with the media so that messaging is consistent.
- Senior level staff map out business, nonprofit and key stakeholder events and identify who is best suited to attend and the goal for attendance at the event.
- Clearly defined goals for tracking reach, impact and success measures.
- Outline budget growth to support this effort, include tangible and intangible costs.

In the short term, ACLS should explore how to outsource to a marketing / communications firm to begin the process of re-telling the story and re-imagining the brand. Next step, budget and plan for a Director of Marketing & Communications to provide internal expertise and external engagement in this area.

Additional reading:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/deniselyohn/2019/01/08/marketing-matters-now-more-than-ever/#62fa5a72117a>

<https://www.ready.gov/business/implementation/crisis>

https://static.scs.georgetown.edu/upload/kb_file/csic-storiesworthtelling-infographic2.jpg

<https://www.cdc.gov/socialmedia/tools/guidelines/index.html>

Embrace the role of Community Hub

In 1997 a landmark study by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente interviewed 217,000 adults about their childhood experiences with physical, sexual or emotional abuse; physical or emotional neglect; having a parent or caregiver who died, was divorced or incarcerated; had severe mental illness, or abused drugs or alcohol; or if they had witnessed violence at home. The answers to those questions created an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) score for the participants and those numbers reflect a direct correlation to negative short term and long-term health outcomes. In the years following the study additional research has been completed that validates the studies results and looks at epigenetics and the impact of generational trauma. Currently Maryland, in addition to 41 other states and the District of Columbia administer the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) annually to

adults. This survey asks adults to reflect back on their own childhood experiences and respond to questions meant to gather their ACE score.

Allegany County reported higher than state average numbers in two categories, *Household Substance Abuse* and *Household Mental Illness*. These numbers reflect the consistent response found in our focus group sessions where we asked about current challenges the community was facing. The ongoing challenges of the opioid epidemic has impacted generations of residents both directly and indirectly. There are impacts for community service providers, educators and in workforce development. Long-term community stress, isolation and the impact of generational poverty can certainly contribute to both individual and community mental health. Our focus groups and individual interviewees mentioned both the split mindsets of community members between, “we tell our kids to leave to be successful” and “this is an incredible community filled with opportunity”.

It quickly became clear through the data collection process that respondents see a strength of the library as a place to address community needs by providing a safe space for children and adults to explore, learn and develop themselves.

ACLS also demonstrates a capacity to serve all segments of the population and seeks to provide quality programming, a diverse offering of services and a dynamic offering of online resources. These goals are not defined by economic status, quite the contrary, they are intended to be a resource for all Allegany County residents.

ACLS is committed to working with county government, business, higher education and community stakeholders to promote Allegany County as a place for people to move into for work and live. However, ACLS recognizes that it should equally embrace, encourage and provide resources for the current community residents.

“Today, as cities and suburbs reinvent themselves, and as cynics claim that government has nothing good to contribute to that process, it's important that institutions like libraries get the recognition they deserve. After all, the root of the word "library," liber; means both "book" and "free." Libraries stand for and exemplify something that needs defending: the public institutions that -- even in an age of atomization and inequality -- serve as bedrocks of civil society. Libraries are the kinds of places where ordinary people with different backgrounds, passions, and interests can take part in a living democratic culture. They are the kinds of places where the public, private, and philanthropic sectors can work together to reach for something higher than the bottom line.” Eric Klineberg, author of [A Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life](#).

ACLS will fully embrace its role as the Community Hub, ACLS branches will become the bridges connecting the community to the services and resources to combat the negative outcomes of ACE and move towards being a lead partner in building a trauma informed community.

To fully embrace the role of Community Hub, ACLS should pursue:

- The development of an Information Access Department with targeted programs, services and activities for tween through seniors that focus on education milestones, life skills, workforce development and lifelong learning.
- Implement afterschool drop-in programs at the Frostburg, LaVale, South Cumberland and Washington Street Libraries

- Expand the Story Corps program which serves children from birth through elementary school with engaging, educational activities that promote school readiness and a love of reading.
- Implement consistent daytime and evening story times to meet the needs of working parents and encourage all families to engage with their children in literacy development.
- Work with County Government to place bus stops at all library branches to encourage access to the library.
- Work with the Main Street Associations and Allegany County Tourism to train library staff in the robust offerings available to Allegany County residents in the arts and recreation.
- Provide resources to visitors and patrons connecting them to the appropriate tourism outlets.
- Explore the possibility of an initiative that connects the Great Allegany Passage (GAP) Trail with the Washington Street branch.
- Explore the expansion of the Choose Civility program to bring more partners to the conversation and expand opportunities for connection.
- Work with the Chamber of Commerce and business leaders to identify the appropriate Smart Room technology needed to effectively facilitate virtual meetings and trainings in library meeting rooms.
- Develop partnerships with Economic Development, Allegany College and Frostburg State University to promote workforce development efforts at the library that include resume writing, online job searches, mock interviews and internship opportunities.
- Adapt and offer the Entrepreneur Academy programs, successfully run by Baltimore County Public Library and the Enoch Pratt Free Library Systems, to Allegany County identified library branches.
- Train key staff as onsite IT support to assist patrons with accessing library services online and on a variety of devices. Offer workshops on accessing databases, downloading apps to access streaming services and how to safely engage with social media.
- Partner with current social service providers to expand service offerings at appropriate branches. Programming to include an on-site social worker or lawyer to provide support or advice to community members in need.

There is a significant opportunity with the slated renovation of the LaVale branch to strategically position that branch to reflect a renewed and re-branded ACLS. The branch will need a temporary home during the renovation process and several alternative locations have been considered including the Country Club Mall. There are a number of library systems across the country that have transformed space within their local mall to a permanent library branch, including the Anne Arundel County Public Library's new branch inside the Westfield Mall in Annapolis. These branches or programming spaces within a shopping mall allow the library to focus on a targeted customer base, explore new and innovative programming models and partner with businesses within the mall to generate increased foot traffic. This venture would allow ACLS to target the redesign of the LaVale branch separately from the outreach opportunity at the mall location.

This opportunity has the potential to:

- Be a model public-private partnership for the county and the state

- Build on the county's new Maker Space economic development project by offering a maker space for tweens, encouraging STEM exploration and beginning to nurture the next generations interest in staying in Allegany County.
- Open up space at the LaVale branch for a performance space to meet the needs of the library and community residents for an accessible space for performances and allow the library to bring in speakers, authors and presentations who draw larger crowds.
- Convert passive users into active library users by engaging them in a non-traditional setting.
- Creates what Ray Oldenburg calls a 'third place', places where people gather to exchange ideas, have fun and build community.

Additional Reading:

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acestudy/index.html>

<https://alliance1.org/web/community/strengthen-human-services/web/community/national-imperative-joining-forces-strengthen-human-services-america.aspx>

<https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/sma17-5014.pdf>

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2016/09/14/third-places-as-community-builders/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/14/books/review/palaces-for-the-people-eric-klinenberg.html>

Fully engage community members and key stakeholders as advocates

Whether a community member is an 'active' or 'passive' library user they can be an effective advocate for the library. Being an advocate in this context simply describes a person who recognizes the impact the library has in the community and wants to support the library in achieving its goals.

While ACLS currently has branch-based volunteers and branch specific *Friends of the Library* groups who raise funds to support their local branch, these efforts do not appear to have a cohesive plan nor do they operate consistently across the system.

A robust advocacy building strategy should be developed to:

- Provide opportunities for volunteering across all library branches in program delivery, book shelving and staff support
- Provide opportunities for community members to join the Friends of the Library at their home branch
- Engage active library users as "Brand Ambassadors" to assist with promoting library services and activities.
- Explore opportunities for skills-based volunteers to provide project-based support for the library, perhaps as an example, developing a volunteer handbook or drafting volunteer job descriptions.
- Create opportunities in conjunction with the Director of Marketing & Communications to create READ posters, or other comparable campaigns, for key stakeholders.

- Work with stakeholders to host business, economic development and government events at the library to provide community leaders with the opportunity to engage with the library in a different way.
- Develop consistent methods to track volunteer engagement and ways to recognize and celebrate the time given by others.

In the short term, ACLS should assess where advocates are currently engaged in the library and develop, in conjunction with the Board of Trustees appropriate policies around engaging advocates. Next, work to seek grant funding to kick start the engagement of advocates at the library and determine the appropriate Director to supervise the effort.

Additional Reading:

<https://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/member-and-volunteer-development/strategic-volunteer-engagement-guide-nonprofit-and-public>

<https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/50556/311325-Older-Adults-Engaged-as-Volunteers.PDF>

<https://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/member-and-volunteer-development/sbv>

Explore alternative and supplemental funding sources for key initiatives

Current economic conditions at both the state and county level will likely impact funding for the library in the next few years. While ACLS should use its advocates and communication strategy to demonstrate why budget cuts would negatively impact the community, it will also be beneficial to examine alternative sources of funding to support current initiatives.

This is an area where leveraging the relationships ACLS has with nonprofit organizations and community-based organizations will be critical. Working in tandem with partners, ACLS can leverage grant dollars for literacy initiatives, workforce development, school readiness and access to social services. Funds can be disbursed through the partner organization or through the library, allowing for submission to multiple outlets for funds.

The *Friends of the Library* have the potential to bring funds to specific library branches, and with a staff liaison these groups could be effective fundraisers and advocates for each library branch. Educating these groups about ways funds could be used outside of budgeted initiatives and providing clear and consistent guidelines on how funds can be raised and what items can be funded will contribute to short term and long-term success.

Library systems across the country have successfully established Library Foundations to both support the grassroots efforts of the *Friends of the Library* and provide leadership for system-wide fundraising initiatives. These Foundations have the ability to apply for a broader range of grant funds and can accept philanthropic donations on the Library's behalf.

A comprehensive fundraising strategy should include:

- Review by the Board of Trustees and the Executive Director of any necessary policies and procedures related to fundraising.

- Outreach with the County Administrator for potential support in grant writing through county government.
- Outreach to current nonprofit partners for potential funding opportunities that would benefit by promoting a public / private partnership.
- Engagement with the current Friends of the Library groups to ensure consistency in messaging, activities and goals among the groups. Expand the initiative to every branch to encourage local level fundraising and committed dollars for each library location.
- Outreach to business leaders to determine the potential for fundraising for the library, recognizing that these fundraising efforts may be best suited for capital projects.
- Develop a timeline for the establishment of a library foundation. Explore whether this effort should be separate from or in conjunction with the Friends of the Library.
- Connect with Maryland jurisdictions with established Foundations for best practices and peer support.

Additional reading:

<http://www.ala.org/united/sites/ala.org/united/files/content/foundations/orgtools/library-foundation.pdf>

https://www.urbanlibraries.org/assets/Library_Foundation_Part_Nov13.pdf

<https://libraries.foundationcenter.org/>

CONCLUSION:

“We are an open mixing place for the general public, but we are strongly committed to bringing together people who may not normally spend time together in the hope that they will become friends, seeking deeper relationships with each other and with the community. A sign I once saw in an old café window proclaimed, "There are no strangers here, just friends who haven't met," and that pretty much captures what we're about.” Ray Oldenburg, Celebrating the Third Place: Inspiring Stories About the Great Good Places at the Heart of Our Communities

Allegany County Library System is at an important stage in its rich and long history. It is an organization full of incredible talent and committed to providing the best service to its patrons. It has continued to push itself to provide the best with dwindling resources and increased costs; and while that effort was admirable it has resulted in losses of engagement, depleted morale and diminished innovation. ACLS leadership has recognized this and is committed to taking the short-term action necessary to internally refuel and externally seek assistance.

For the long-term this plan outlines key strategies that will elevate the ACLS story, showcasing the depth of services, programs and resources currently available to all residents of Allegany County. It also provides avenues to build partnerships for enhanced service delivery, fund generation and expanded outreach.

Ultimately, in a few short years, Allegany County Public Library will be positioned as a leader in the community; championing the need to be trauma-informed in its engagement with patrons, and partners; and serve as a catalyst for the county’s resurgence, celebrating the rich and diverse resources available IN Allegany for generational residents and new transplants; demonstrating that libraries truly are the palaces for the people in every community.