

The State of AMERICA'S LIBRARIES

a Snapshot of 2025

FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF READERS.
FOR THE CORNERSTONES OF OUR COMMUNITIES.
FOR ACCESS TO INFORMATION FOR ALL.
FOR THE FREEDOM TO READ.
FOR THE PEOPLE WHO POWER POSSIBILITY.
FOR THE FUTURE OF LEARNING.

FOR OUR LIBRARIES.

ALA150
American Library Association

NATIONAL LIBRARY WEEK

April 19–25, 2026

"There are so many library kids and library grown-ups who have yet to fully embrace their library joy, and I am so excited for them! When they enter the world of libraries and stories, I am confident they will find not only their library joy but their courage to believe in their own story and maybe even share it with others."

MYCHAL THREETS
NATIONAL LIBRARY WEEK HONORARY CHAIR



Photography courtesy of Association Studios

Visit your library or [ilovelibraries.org](https://www.ilovelibraries.org) to celebrate!

The State of AMERICA'S LIBRARIES

a Snapshot of 2025 Produced April 2026

Contents

- 4** Introduction
- 5** The Architecture of Democracy: Choosing the Future of America's Libraries
- 6** Standing Together for the Freedom to Read
- 9** Top 11 Most Challenged Books of 2025
- 10** Censorship by the Numbers
- 11** Libraries as Enduring and Evolving Literacy Hubs
- 13** Libraries Increase Services for Incarcerated People
- 15** Libraries Take on a Tumultuous Washington
- 19** About This Report



ALA's Celebrate National Library Week poster.

INTRODUCTION

A Clarion Call

by DAN MONTGOMERY



It's a true joy to introduce this year's State of America's Libraries report. Since I started in November, I have been amazed at the incredible work ALA and its member libraries and library workers do each day. When I was a high school English teacher, I used to say that the entire world comes into the high school, and I feel the same way about our libraries. This report on the state of America's libraries is in a very real way a report on the state of our nation. Unsurprisingly, then, there is much to be deeply concerned about in these pages, and much to bring hope. Ultimately, this report can serve as a clarion call to those who love libraries and our republic.

ALA was successful in defending our libraries and our free speech rights on a number of fronts: in the courts, as we won back funding for the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and in state houses around the country. In several states, we fought back against pernicious legislation and won protections for free speech. We held advocacy trainings for hundreds of library workers and worked with many free speech partners in defense of academic and intellectual freedom. Wasn't it Frederick Douglass who said that "power concedes nothing without a fight?" Well, this report certainly elucidates the fight for freedom we must keep waging.

The work of libraries in 2025 is not to be ignored. Library professionals continued to lead the way in their communities, and libraries continued to be the bedrock of our democracy.

Here are some major trends from the year.

Censorship

ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom recorded attempts to censor more than 4,200 unique titles in 2025, nearly 2,000 more titles than 2024 and only five fewer than 2023's record. We also found that most of these challenges come from large politically-driven entities working across jurisdictions. Approximately 91.7% of the titles challenged in 2025 were targeted by pressure groups and government decision makers. By comparison, only 2.7% of challenges came from parents, and 1.4% came from individual library users.

Despite these challenges, we also saw states working to protect libraries and people showing up for our libraries.

Serving Incarcerated People

As Jeannie Austin notes in this report, we are at a pivotal moment for library services for people who are incarcerated or in reentry, with libraries across the U.S. building from recently developed resources to develop new services. Austin, jail and reentry services librarian with the San Francisco Public Library, details the work being done in collaboration with ALA as part of the Expanding Information Access for Incarcerated People grant project.

Funded by the Mellon Foundation, the project identifies existing library services for incarcerated people and builds networks and resources to solidify those services for people who are or have been incarcerated.

Community Literacy Hubs

Libraries are serving as community literacy hubs, viewing literacy from a high-level that helps adults get the support they need and younger generations to continue learning amid a rotating array of disruptions, from budget cuts and technology shifts to learning loss brought on by the pandemic.

To help foster this work, ALA partnered with World Education in 2025 to support libraries as place-based literacy mainstays. In this report, Rachel Riggs from World Education outlines three strategies that libraries use in their roles as literacy hubs.

This report reflects the world we are in today: momentous and whirlwind changes, political and budget pressures unlike those we have seen in a long time, roiling attacks on free speech, and, in the midst, inspiring work of those defending democracy and building stronger, more equitable communities. Our libraries and their workers are in the center of it all. And ALA is positioned to thrive for another 150 years in support of those libraries and workers, and, indeed, in support of our foundational democratic values of freedom. ●

Dan Montgomery is executive director of the American Library Association.

The Architecture of Democracy: Choosing the Future of America's Libraries

by SAM HELMICK



For two and a half centuries, the story of America has been inextricably linked to the story of its libraries. As we approach the nation's Semiquincentennial in 2026, we are reminded that the American experiment relies on a singular, powerful concept: that an informed

citizenry is the surest guardian of liberty. From the early subscription libraries that fueled the debates of our Founders to the public institutions that welcomed waves of immigrants, and now the digital community hubs of today, libraries have served as the intellectual infrastructure of our nation. They are the places where the American story is both housed and written.

However, as we review the landscape of the past year, it is evident that we have arrived at a pivotal moment. The events of 2025 are marked by intensified debates over access to information and shifting fiscal priorities which have forced a reckoning. We the People are now tasked with answering a fundamental question that will define our trajectory for the next century: Are libraries merely a civic "nicety?" Are they a pleasant, nostalgic amenity to be maintained only when budgets are flush and times are quiet? Or are libraries a true American value, essential to the health and survival of our republic?

If we decide they are the former, we accept the slow erosion of free public thinking, endless attainability of learning, and easily accessible assembly. But if we affirm that libraries are indeed a core American value, then we must move beyond slogans or sentimentality with shoestring budgeting. Valuing libraries requires tangible, vigorous commitment in three critical areas: use, resourcing, and supportive policy.

First, we must champion use. A value is only real if it is practiced. In the last year, we saw communities turn to libraries for books, telemedicine, workforce development, and safe harbor during crises. We must continue to demonstrate that libraries are not museums of the past, but active, vital workshops for the future where every person can access the tools of the digital age.

Second, we must secure resourcing. Values must be funded. Treating libraries as optional leaves them vulnerable to the first cut of the red pen. Treating them as a value means ensuring they have the sustainable, robust funding necessary to maintain modern infrastructure, retain skilled staff, and keep the doors open to all, regardless of economic status.

We must continue to demonstrate that libraries are not museums of the past, but active, vital workshops for the future where every person can access the tools of the digital age.

Finally, libraries require supportive policies. We need legislative frameworks that protect the freedom to read and the professional autonomy of library workers. Library workers must have a seat at the table to protect the privacy, consumer, and algorithmic rights of their patrons. Policy is the shield that ensures our institutions remain nonpartisan sanctuaries of information, free from the shifting winds of political ideology or economic enticements to detour from American rights and justice.

As we look toward the next 250 years, the choice is ours. We can let our libraries fade, viewed as charming relics of a bygone era. Or, we can choose to invest in them as the bedrock of our future. Let us decide, right now, that libraries are not optional. They are the very breath of a free society and they are worth fighting for. ●

Sam Helmick is 2025-2026 President of the American Library Association.

Standing Together for the Freedom to Read

by SARAH LAMDAN



Threats to intellectual freedom continued in 2025. Yet, even in the face of unrelenting efforts to censor library materials, library workers and communities across the United States demonstrated their commitment to protecting the freedom to read. While the scale of attempted censorship remained significant, 2025 yielded something equally powerful: a widespread and determined defense of intellectual freedom.

The American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom recorded attempts to censor 4,235 unique titles, nearly 2,000 more titles than 2024 and only five fewer than 2023's record. These numbers stand far from the baseline of 273, which was the average annual number between 2001 and 2020. Of the 4,235 titles targeted in 2025, 1,671 represent the lived experience of LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC people.

The discrimination implicit in focusing on banning certain people's perspectives is clear, and it underpins current censorship efforts in and beyond libraries. The coordinated effort to erase people's stories makes it all-the-more important that library workers, educators, advocates, and community members continue to monitor and respond to attempts to limit access to library materials. As the ugly goals of contemporary censorship come into view, communities are overwhelmingly showing up for libraries.

Library Challenges Aren't Coming From Concerned Parents

One key finding of 2025's censorship landscape was the identity of intellectual freedom challengers. Contrary to common narratives suggesting that book challenges originate primarily from concerned parents, our data shows otherwise. Approximately 91.7% of titles challenged in 2025 were targeted by pressure groups (20.8%) and government decision makers (70.9%). By comparison, only 2.7% of challenges came from parents, and 1.4% came from individual library users.

Contrary to common narratives suggesting that book challenges originate primarily from concerned parents, our data shows otherwise. Approximately 91.7% of titles challenged in 2025 were targeted by pressure groups and government decision makers.



ALA's 2026 Banned Books Week posters.

This represents a dramatic shift from previous years. In the past, pressure groups and government officials accounted for roughly 12.9% of book challenges, averaging about 46 titles per year. In 2025 alone, those same actors targeted 7,884 books. That number includes 4,235 unique titles, which means that many titles were targeted multiple times. This duplication reflects a large-scale, coordinated effort. Today's censorship campaigns are not spontaneous expressions of community concern; they are organized initiatives driven by political actors and well-funded book banning movements.

Censorship Campaigns Target Materials That Tell Our Stories

Another thing that's clear is that 2025's censorship campaigns weren't about protecting children—they were about erasing realities. A tiny cohort of people are trying to remove people's lived experiences from library shelves. In 2025, these people used terms like “harmful” and “inappropriate” to describe stories reflecting LGBTQIA+ identities or themes related to equity and inclusion. Having families that look different than theirs is not obscene, regardless of their well-funded efforts to convince us otherwise.

Government officials in states like Kansas and Tennessee sent letters ordering school and public libraries to review their collections and limit access to LGBTQIA+ inclusive materials. A judge ordered the Department of Defense libraries that serve students in military families to return nearly 600 books related to gender and racial equality to library shelves after they were removed in response to an Executive Order. The most consistent factor in all of these censorship efforts was political or religious disagreement with the perspectives represented in the library materials.

Protecting children isn't done by censoring library materials. It is done by creating safe learning spaces where children can explore a range of ideas and concepts. Libraries exist to provide access to a wide array of stories and thoughts, not just those that align with a single worldview.

Overwhelming Support for Intellectual Freedom

It turns out that people don't like the government telling them what they can and can't read based on the preferences of religious and ideological activists. In 2025, library workers and freedom-to-read advocates showed remarkable resilience and dedication. The small-but-coordinated push for censorship was met with widespread and passionate opposition. 2025 saw a growing public awareness and resistance to state and federal attempts to limit the freedom to read in our nation's libraries. People see libraries as places where they can reach for their favorite books, explore new perspectives, and access reliable information. The broad coalition defending libraries—spanning political affiliations, professions, and generations—demonstrates that support for intellectual freedom remains



A still from the documentary, “The Librarians.”

PHOTO: AMY BENCH

2025 was also a year of coalition-building. Grassroots activists, advocacy organizations, writers, authors, publishers, teachers, parents, and library workers came together to celebrate libraries and the joy of reading.

strong. The story of library censorship in 2025 is therefore not only about the challenges libraries faced, but also about the resilience of the people who stood up for them.

Legal victories and new state-level protections emerged in several regions, reinforcing longstanding principles of intellectual freedom and reaffirming libraries' role as institutions that serve all members of their communities. Coalitions of library workers, authors, educators, and community members successfully advocated for right to read laws in Connecticut, Delaware, and Rhode Island that protect intellectual freedom, libraries, and library workers. Courts across the nation held that censorship legislation was unconstitutional. Judges declared that laws including Florida's HB 1069 and Iowa's SF 496, which provide for the removal of books containing certain viewpoints, were unconstitutionally vague and overbroad. Courts also affirmed the First Amendment right to read in libraries. Voters in states including Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas rejected censorship-focused school and library board candidates, electing board members who promised to protect people's right to read and learn.

2025 was also a year of coalition-building. Grassroots activists, advocacy organizations, writers, authors, publishers, teachers, parents, and library workers came together to celebrate libraries and the joy of reading. They joined together to support freedom to read protections and policies. They hosted rallies, read-ins, and showings of *The Librarians*, an award-winning documentary following the experiences of librarians including Martha Hickson, Carolyn Foote, Becky Calzada, Julie Miller, Audrey Wilson-Youngblood, Amanda Jones, and Suzette Baker. Thousands of people pushed back on the political operatives who threatened intellectual freedom.

Censorship Pushers Lost in Some Jurisdictions, but the Fight Continues

Despite the efforts of library workers, communities, advocates, and educators across the nation, the politically and ideologically motivated attacks on intellectual freedom have succeeded in creating a patchwork of laws that disrupt the freedom to read in some parts of the U.S.

In May 2025, the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals issued an opinion in the *Little v. Llano County* case that contradicted well-established law affirming a First Amendment right to read in public libraries. In December, the Supreme Court declined to hear the case, leaving public library users in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas with fewer First Amendment rights than library users in the rest of the nation.

In 2025, some states implemented laws allowing, or even requiring, the removal of certain viewpoints from library collections, leading to thousands of books being eliminated from school libraries in states like Florida, South Carolina, and Utah. The lists of books selected for removal are large and include classic literature and scientific texts about psychology and physiology. As a result of these coordinated efforts, even long-established works—such as Anthony Burgess's 1962 novel *A Clockwork Orange*—appear on our top ten most censored book list for the first time.

We are also seeing the spread of censorship beyond school and public libraries and into academic libraries. Academic and intellectual freedom are both under attack from government operatives hoping to wipe out certain schools of thought from colleges and universities. University employees, including library workers, are facing limits on what they are permitted to teach, write, and speak about.

The challenges facing libraries today are significant, but so is the resolve of those who believe that access to ideas is a cornerstone of a healthy society. ALA will continue to document censorship efforts, support libraries and library workers on the front lines, and advocate for policies that defend intellectual freedom. Most importantly, we will continue to affirm that libraries are places where the full range of human experiences can be explored—not restricted—and where every reader has the opportunity to encounter stories that reflect the diversity and complexity of our shared world. ●

Sarah Lamdan is executive director of ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom.

TOP 11 MOST CHALLENGED BOOKS OF 2025

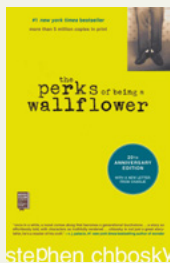
The American Library Association documented **487 attempts to censor** books at libraries, schools, and universities in 2025. The reasons most commonly cited for censorship were false claims of illegal obscenity for minors; inclusion of LGBTQIA+ representation; covering topics of race, racism, social justice, and diversity; and presenting political or religious views with which the challengers disagreed. Of the **4,235 unique titles** that were challenged or banned in 2025, here are the top 11 most frequently targeted.

1



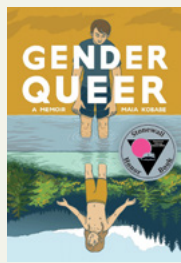
SOLD
by Patricia McCormick
Why this book matters:
bit.ly/soldBR

2



THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER
by Stephen Chbosky
Why this book matters:
bit.ly/wallflowerBR

3



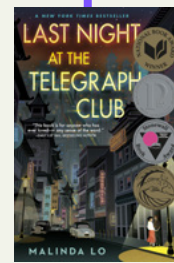
GENDER QUEER: A MEMOIR
by Maia Kobabe
Why this book matters:
bit.ly/genderBR

4



EMPIRE OF STORMS
by Sarah J. Maas
Why this book matters:
bit.ly/empireofstormsBR

5
(TIE)

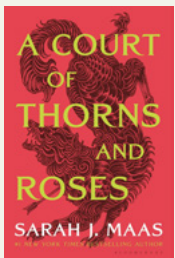


LAST NIGHT AT THE TELEGRAPH CLUB
by Malinda Lo
Why this book matters:
bit.ly/telegraphclubBR



TRICKS
by Ellen Hopkins
Why this book matters:
bit.ly/tricksBR

7

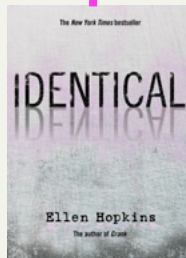


A COURT OF THORNS AND ROSES
by Sarah J. Maas
Why this book matters:
bit.ly/thornsBR

8
(TIE)



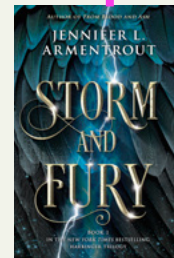
A CLOCKWORK ORANGE
by Anthony Burgess
Why this book matters:
bit.ly/clockworkorangeBR



IDENTICAL
by Ellen Hopkins
Why this book matters:
bit.ly/identicalBR



LOOKING FOR ALASKA
by John Green
Why this book matters:
bit.ly/alaskaBR



STORM AND FURY
by Jennifer L. Armentrout
Why this book matters:
bit.ly/stormBR

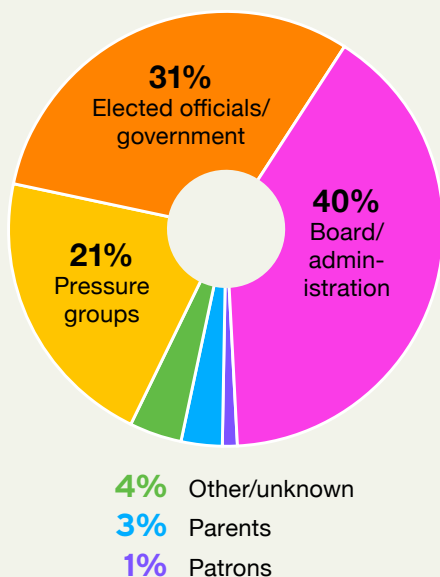
CENSORSHIP BY THE NUMBERS

In 2025, the American Library Association documented the second highest level of book censorship attempts ever and the continuation of an organized effort to systematically suppress voices and ideas that began in 2021. Last year, **4,235 unique titles** were challenged, only five titles short of the highest number ever documented by ALA and significantly exceeding the annual average of 273 unique titles over the period from 2001–2020.

LEARN MORE AT [ALA.ORG/BBOOKS](https://www.ala.org/bbooks)

WHO CHALLENGES BOOKS

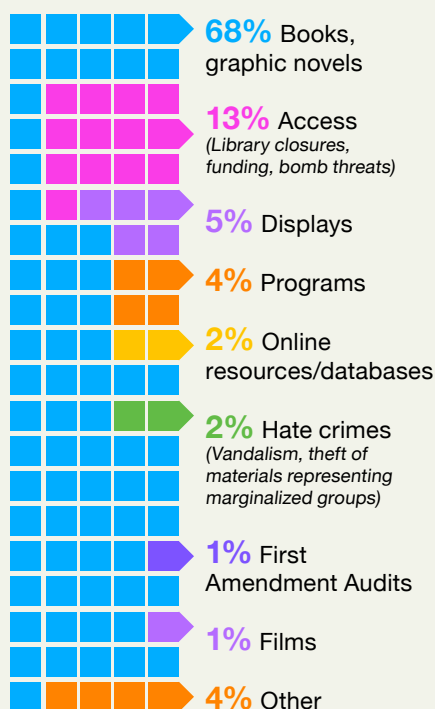
Nearly **92% of censorship attempts** in 2025 were initiated by pressure groups and decision makers swayed by them. This marks a 20-point increase over 2024.



Statistics based on 8,596 total titles targeted for censorship.

BOOKS AND BEYOND

ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom tracked **713 distinct censorship incidents** in 2025. Here's the breakdown:



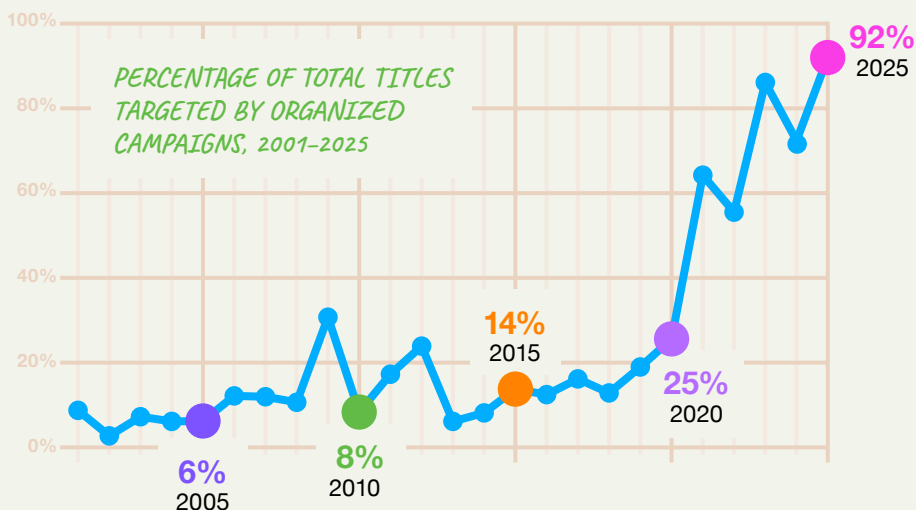
WHERE CHALLENGES HAPPEN



Statistics based on 696 incidents with known locations and include challenges to all materials and services. About 1% of censorship attempts took place in other locations.

CENSORSHIP TRENDS

The majority of library censorship remains tied to organized campaigns. Pressure groups and the decision makers they influenced targeted **7,884 total titles** in 2025. From 2001–2020, this constituency tried to remove an average of 46 titles per year. From 2021–2025, they targeted an average of 5,238 total titles annually.



CENSORSHIP
STATISTICS
COMPILED BY:



OFFICE FOR
Intellectual Freedom
American Library Association

Libraries as Enduring and Evolving Literacy Hubs

by RACHEL RIGGS



Beyond learning to read and write, today's society demands new kinds of literacy for learners of all ages. Public libraries have used their roles as enduring, high-trust, low-barrier institutions to provide critical infrastructure for adult and family literacy. Operating at the

intersection of formal education and essential social services, modern libraries approach literacy in a community-driven, responsive way to meet today's rapidly evolving and growing literacy needs. Libraries are:

- **Fostering family literacy.** Using two-generation and whole-family literacy frameworks, libraries are simultaneously supporting children and the adults in their lives to dismantle intergenerational cycles of low literacy. They're also supporting schools and aligning with shifting K–12 legislation by rapidly integrating the evidence-based Science of Reading into their collections and programs.
- **Addressing digital inclusion.** From teaching digital literacy classes to providing shoulder-to-shoulder digital navigation to acting as local digital access hubs by loaning devices and laptops, libraries are keeping communities connected to critical services and valuable opportunities. This is crucial given the abrupt cancellation of the federal Digital Equity Act grant programs in May 2025, which forced states and municipalities to scramble to sustain local inclusion plans.

As community literacy hubs, libraries are poised to maintain a birds'-eye view of literacy across the lifespan, so that adults get the support they need today and the next generation maintains quality learning amid disruptions such as pandemic learning loss, policy shifts, and digital transformation.

Libraries as Literacy Hubs

The 2025–2026 operational period tested the financial architecture of the library ecosystem, demanding intense resilience from the sector. The Institute of Museum and Library Services faced serious budget challenges and emerged with

Public libraries have used their roles as enduring, high-trust, low-barrier institutions to provide critical infrastructure for adult and family literacy.

\$291.8 million for Fiscal Year 2026, affirming the vital necessity of museums and libraries. As federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funding pivots toward stricter employer-aligned outcomes, libraries are actively formalizing alignments with local Workforce Development Boards and adult education programs to ensure adult learners can access broader cross-agency support streams. As mentioned earlier, alignment with the Science of Reading requirements and loss of funding from the Digital Equity Act have also caused uncertainty.

The American Library Association has partnered with World Education to support libraries in their endeavors as place-based literacy mainstays. In a recent landscape scan, we outlined three strategies that libraries use in their roles as literacy hubs.

Strategy	Description	Key Services
Conveners	Acting as the connective tissue of the local social safety net, libraries align decentralized literacy efforts and establish bidirectional referral networks to connect patrons with specialized external agencies.	Needs assessments, warm handoffs to embedded social workers, coordinated community outreach matrices.
Venues of Instruction	Libraries leverage their trusted physical infrastructure to offer safe, central, and accessible spaces for external educational partners to deliver formal academic programming.	English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, GED preparation, High School Equivalency testing.
Direct Service Providers	Library staff delivers end-to-end instructional services directly, typically focusing on "just-in-time" learning, individualized support, and technology access.	Digital literacy and navigation, basic troubleshooting, and foundational tech classes.

These three strategies are mixed and matched in libraries as they address adult and family literacy needs. For example, in our landscape scan, we found that libraries typically act as direct service providers for digital literacy, whereas they tend to be venues of instruction for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes for adults. There is no one-size-fits-all blend of strategies for a given library. Rather, it's most important that libraries assess local needs and available resources and adapt their strategy to fit that landscape.

Redefining the Return on Investment

While economic impact studies consistently validate library funding—demonstrating massive return on investments (ROI) in business revenue and educational outcomes—the most hopeful shift in the sector is a move toward a learner-centered valuation.

When adult learners evaluate their own goals, their motivations transcend mere employment. In a [recent study on ROI for adult literacy](#), a survey revealed that 48.3% of learners seek literacy support to build personal confidence, and 46.7% engage in adult education to directly support their children's learning. Following program participation, learners

As community literacy hubs, libraries are poised to maintain a birds'-eye view of literacy across the lifespan, so that adults get the support they need today and the next generation maintains quality learning amid disruptions such as pandemic learning loss, policy shifts, and digital transformation.

cite performing everyday tasks more easily (44.6%) and feeling more satisfied in life (42.5%) as their primary benefits.

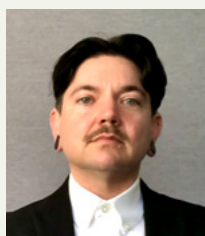
By capturing these social, psychological, and intergenerational triumphs, we highlight the value of libraries. They are an active, indispensable part of the infrastructure for American civic resilience and human dignity. ●

Rachel Riggs is a technical adviser at World Education.



Libraries Increase Services for Incarcerated People

BY JEANIE AUSTIN



We are at a pivotal moment for library services for people who are incarcerated or in reentry, with libraries across the U.S. building from recently developed resources to develop new services. The American Library Association’s (ALA) recent “[Investing in Prison Libraries](#)” report makes clear that it is critical to support funding for the libraries that do this work.

Foundational Resources Provide Guidance

The [Expanding Information Access for Incarcerated People](#) grant project, based at San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) and funded by the Mellon Foundation, has developed foundational materials that support new or increased services in this area. The grant work involves identifying existing library services for incarcerated people and building professional networks and resources with the goal of solidifying library services for people who are or have been incarcerated as a focused area of professional concern.

Since 2022, SFPL has created:

- [virtual training materials on topics across library specializations](#),
- [an interactive tool that positions information about academic, legal, and public library services in the area alongside state-by-state statistics about incarceration](#), and
- [reports on trends and concerns related to library services and incarceration](#) and the [limitations and opportunities that technologies present for librarians doing this work](#).

The grant has supported a robust professional community of hundreds of practitioners, advocates, and Library and Information Science (LIS) students through virtual and in-person events.

As a collaborator on the grant work, ALA has solidified the importance of library services for people who are incarcerated or in reentry through the creation of the [Standards for Library](#)

[Services for the Incarcerated and Detained](#) and [T.E.C.H. for Reentry: Digital Literacy and Public Library Programming for Formerly Incarcerated Community Members](#).

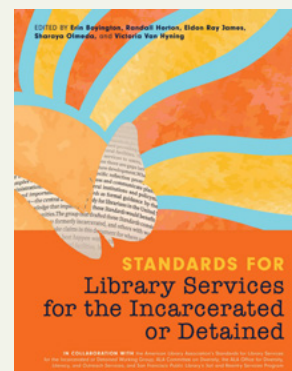
Patron-Responsive Services and Programs

Expanding Information Access for Incarcerated People facilitates patron-responsive services by sharing the testimony of people who have been incarcerated. One contributor to a training video—who was once incarcerated—shares that

“...access to reading materials or information, being able to explore ideas that one is interested in or wants to learn more about, beyond what’s just provided in the facility or given guidance on where to look for something or what to read to start to better understand themselves and their interests is quintessential to the growth of an individual while they’re currently incarcerated.

“I think we can start doing this by allowing access to librarians or those out in the community, like librarians and libraries out in the community that can engage in either conversation or access to individuals who are currently incarcerated. I think it allows one’s mind to expand beyond the walls that the body is currently confined to. And it will translate to better outcomes for individuals upon their release.”

Even as more library services for people who are incarcerated or in reentry are established, the circumstances remain dire. The training video contributor also stated that “[d]uring my four



Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated or Detained (ALA Editions, 2024 Revised Edition)

years incarcerated, I was able to access the (prison) library four times.” Most of the two million people incarcerated in the United States face similar limitations to accessing information and libraries. This has negative ripple effects for their families and communities.

Materials developed through the grant project support libraries as they respond to the impact incarceration has on their communities. Libraries across the country have done this through programs large and small, ranging from library programs and art exhibits featuring formerly incarcerated creators and authors (such as the [PRISM: Seeing Beyond Mass Incarceration](#) project at Cleveland Public Library) to programs where libraries facilitate family virtual visitation and reading programs for people who are incarcerated and their children (such as The New York Public Library’s “Let’s Read Together” program, which has provided almost 330 books to more than 300 children during family reading programs over the last five years).

The Desire Is There

Library and information professionals want to create meaningful services for incarcerated people and people in the process of reentry. Respondents to the [2020 Library Services and Incarceration Survey](#), which explored how library workers respond to incarceration in their communities, were enthusiastic about these services. One respondent stated, “I want to leverage the resources at the library to help people more. It feels like I’m sitting on a pile of gold that nobody will let me give away.”

LIS students and early-career professionals are engaged in this area of librarianship, and LIS instructors are increasingly incorporating information about library services and incarceration into their classrooms. The grant has directly provided professional development in this area through the Expanding Services Together learning cohorts, where professionals develop proposals for library services and initiatives. Cohorts have been limited in size; hundreds of librarians and information workers expressed interest in being part of the cohorts in 2025 and 2026.

Digital Literacy

ALA’s “[T.E.C.H. for Reentry: Digital Literacy and Public Library Programming for Formerly Incarcerated Community Members](#)” acts as a guide for librarians who are interested in addressing the vast digital divide that is created by incarceration.

“T.E.C.H. for Reentry” reflects a two-year project to pilot digital literacy programming for people in reentry at four public libraries in varied geographic areas in the U.S. It covers best practices for similar endeavors.

“T.E.C.H. for Reentry” illustrates that “[a]mid a network of resources and organizations that support formerly incarcerated people locally and nationally, libraries can serve as valuable hubs of information, services, and resources that support people in defining their own successful reentry.” This resource is especially prescient as higher education in prison programs increase in number and academic libraries consider how to provide students with information and digital literacy programming that accounts for and responds to a lack of access to technologies inside.

Shifting Landscape

The ability of jails, detention centers, and prison systems to censor materials continues to profoundly shape the experiences of people who are incarcerated. Censorship practices can be irrational, but they often also fall along lines of [race, gender, and sexuality](#). Notable practices have included dictionaries in languages other than English at facilities [in Michigan](#) and censorship of [materials created by incarcerated people](#).

Libraries that provide [Reference by Mail](#) services are grappling with how to navigate the professional ethic of patron privacy given the rise of jails and prisons partnering with private technology companies to digitize and retain mailed communications. Interruptions in federal funding have, at times, [threatened prison library services](#).

The [increasing detention](#) of people who read in languages other than English is exacerbating a distinct need for information and materials in the languages in which people read. The rise in anti-transgender legislation informs and shapes prison policies, escalating incarcerated transgender people’s inability to access accurate information. Librarians and advocates are trying to provide resources and recreational materials like those described above within jails, juvenile detentions, and prisons across the country. Where available, these are cherished lifelines.

Trends that limit incarcerated people’s access to libraries can be held against recent successes. Groups like [Initiate Justice](#) demonstrate the possibility of creating collaborative information-based projects that are built around the needs of people directly impacted by incarceration. Initiate Justice is changing California state practices through legislative

education and advocacy, including by introducing greater transparency around censorship practices in California prisons.

The [Prison Libraries Act](#) was introduced early in 2026. If passed, it will result in grants that can be used for “creating libraries in prisons without libraries and in prisons that otherwise would not have the means to scale library services.” ALA President Sam Helmick expressed the importance of the Act in a [press release from Representative Emanuel Cleaver, II’s office](#), writing: “Prison libraries open doors of opportunity and provide essential literacy support to address the urgent information needs of millions of incarcerated people in the United States.” Passage of this Act will result in a remarkable increase in library services for incarcerated people.

The stark need for additional funding is a reminder that many institutional libraries are maintained by incarcerated

library workers, often for very little pay. Incarcerated library workers desire opportunities for professional development and want to use the skills they’ve built in their future employment.

Librarians looking for guidance and ideas will find these in ALA’s [Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated or Detained](#). The Standards offer general guidelines and present real-world examples of successful programs alongside aspirational visions for moving ahead. Librarians across the country are drawing from the Standards to create new services, models, and resources that will broaden the field of academic, legal, prison, and public librarianship. ●

Jeanie Austin is a jail and reentry services librarian with San Francisco Public Library.

Libraries Take on a Tumultuous Washington

BY LISA VARGA



America’s libraries entered 2025 primed for inevitable challenges posed by the second term of a president who, in his first term, proposed to eliminate the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the only federal agency that provides dedicated funds for America’s libraries, in all four of his annual budget proposals. During his first week in office, President Trump signed dozens of executive orders assaulting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and protections for millions of Americans in historically marginalized communities. The same week, the American Library Association (ALA) launched a proactive advocacy campaign to harness the collective power of library advocates in every pocket of the U.S. to influence elected leaders and policymakers in the 119th Congress.

The [Show Up For Our Libraries](#) campaign proved prescient when, on March 14, President Trump issued an executive order to effectively dismantle IMLS. The announcement also ordered the Office of Management and Budget to reject any budget requests from IMLS other than funds needed to shut down the agency. Showing up as a united front and engaging strategically with Congress would prove to be necessary to protect libraries and library workers. The following months saw a groundswell of opposition to the president’s order, fighting on two fronts: preserving the existence of IMLS and maintaining congressional support for funding its programs.

ALA immediately [responded](#) to the order by mobilizing advocates to voice their support for IMLS. Within two weeks of ALA’s call for advocates to urge their Congressmembers to reject the president’s executive order and support continued funding for IMLS in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2026

budget, more than 50,000 messages were recorded and sent to Congressmembers through ALA's action center. As the annual appropriations process wound through House and Senate committees and weathered a 43-day government shutdown, advocates continued to show up for libraries by engaging legislators.

On February 3, 2026, Congress patently rejected the administration's call to shutter IMLS, instead passing a \$1.4 million increase for library programs run by IMLS through the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) in FY2026. Congress also provided level funding of \$30 million for the school library-focused Innovative Approaches to Literacy program. The final FY2026 budget is not perfect for libraries. While LSTA funding increased, IMLS overall saw a slight decrease, largely reflecting the reduction in staffing at the agency.

Battling in Federal Court

While securing IMLS funding called for congressional support, preserving the agency itself required legal action. On April 4, three weeks after the executive order was announced, 21 state attorneys general filed suit (*State of Rhode Island v. Trump*) to restore IMLS. Days later, ALA and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the largest union representing museum and library workers, asked a federal judge to halt the Trump Administration's gutting of IMLS, [filing](#) a motion for a preliminary injunction in a lawsuit and being granted a temporary restraining order preventing the mass termination of IMLS staff. Meanwhile, a preliminary injunction was granted in the Rhode Island case on May 6, and in November, the court ruled to overturn the actions of the Administration to carry out the Executive Order. Shortly thereafter, IMLS reinstated all terminated grants to libraries.

In April 2026, the U.S. Department of Justice withdrew its appeal of the Rhode Island order and reached a settlement in ALA's case. Under the settlement, the agency will continue awarding grants, conducting research, and operating IMLS programs nationwide. The agreement also confirms that previously terminated grants have been reinstated, agency staff reductions have been reversed, and the administration will not take further steps to implement the executive order targeting IMLS.

"Restoration of these grants is a massive win for libraries of all kinds in all states," ALA President Sam Helmick said, but noted that "the fight is not finished. The administration can appeal court decisions. Congress can choose to not fund

IMLS in future years. ALA calls on everyone who values libraries to remind their Congressmembers and elected officials at every level why America's libraries deserve more, not fewer resources."

Core Values Under Threat

In addition to the direct attack on IMLS, the Administration dealt blow after blow to libraries' core values of DEI: diversity in collections, equitable access to information, and inclusive spaces.

Days after Trump's inauguration, in what ALA called a "cruel and headlong effort to terminate protections from discrimination for LGBTQIA+ students and students of color," the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights dismissed 11 complaints related to book bans, eliminated the Biden-instituted position of book ban coordinator, and declared book banning "a hoax." ALA began receiving confidential reports that library workers on military installations were being forced to remove books from shelves, take down displays about Black History Month, and cancel cultural events. On February 7, the U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) announced that it would remove and review "books potentially related to gender ideology or discriminatory equity ideology topics" in DoD schools, and suppress programs, activities, and holidays related to those topics. In a joint statement, ALA and the American Association of School Librarians accused the DoDEA of "engaging in censorship of legitimate views and opinions that violates the First Amendment rights of those who serve our nation and their families, thereby denying them the very freedoms they have pledged to protect with their lives."

Among the many causes for alarm at the Administration's ongoing efforts to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education was transfer of the Office for Elementary and Secondary Education, which administers the Innovative Approaches to Literacy (IAL) program, to the Department of Labor. ALA



Fourteenth Librarian of Congress, Dr. Carla Hayden was fired by President Trump in May 2025.

opposed this effort as it thwarts the intent of Congress. As a competitive grant promoting innovative literacy programs that support the development of literacy skills—especially through school libraries—in low-income communities, IAL is one of ALA’s top priorities in its annual advocacy campaigns. Moving day-to-day operations of IAL does not bode well for literacy, which is better served by agencies devoted to education rather than labor.

Firing the Librarian of Congress

The Administration’s attacks on libraries struck a particular nerve for many library workers when, in May, President Trump fired the fourteenth Librarian of Congress, Dr. Carla Hayden.

Nominated by President Obama and confirmed by the Senate in 2016, Dr. Hayden, a past ALA president, was the first woman and the first African American to serve as Librarian of Congress. 2024–2025 ALA President Cindy Hohl decried “the abrupt and unjust dismissal” of Dr. Hayden as “an insult to the scope and breadth of work Dr. Hayden has undertaken in her role.” Days later, Hohl again expressed dismay when Register

of Copyrights Shira Perlmutter, who reports to the Librarian of Congress, was suddenly fired.

“The Trump Administration’s unlawful removal of the Register of Copyrights follows a pattern of targeting library and information leaders in nonpartisan positions,” Hohl said. “Congress must stand up for its Library and intervene to counter this dangerous campaign to weaken institutional knowledge and professionalism.”

ALA Defends E-Rate

Because libraries faced assaults on many fronts, ALA strategically prioritized the most significant threats where library advocates might have influence and impact. With deep expertise, coalition partners and a history of engagement in telecommunications policy, ALA focused on protecting the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) E-Rate Program, which provides discounts on internet access, telecommunications services, and related costs to public libraries and K-12 schools, with the deepest discounts going to rural communities. More than half of all public libraries apply



Library advocates from ALA and allied groups rallied on Capitol Hill in March 2025 to support E-Rate, a federal program that provides discounts on internet access and telecommunication services to K-12 schools and public libraries.

for millions of dollars in E-Rate funding each year to help pay for internet connectivity. Critics of the Universal Services Fund (USF), the funding mechanism for E-Rate, had long accused the program of wasteful spending, when the conservative advocacy group Consumers Research filed lawsuits against the FCC in three federal courts in 2023, challenging the constitutionality of the USF. All three lower courts had rejected the complaint made by Consumers Research when the Supreme Court agreed to review the Fifth Circuit appeal.

In January 2025, ALA filed an [amicus brief](#) in the case affirming the constitutionality of the USF and the vital importance of E-Rate in bringing broadband connectivity to libraries and communities. Dozens of advocates rallied on Capitol Hill in support of E-Rate on March 26, the day the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in the case. Library advocates [celebrated](#) the court's 6-3 decision to uphold the USF when the ruling was announced on June 27.

Months after the Supreme Court rejected their arguments, on October 1, Consumers Research filed another petition in the Fifth Circuit, alleging that specific parts of the USF are unconstitutional, including the Universal Service Administrative Company, the nonprofit that administers the program. While the court's decision is not expected until late 2026, ALA and other advocates continue to push for E-Rate's long-term sustainability through policy discussions with decision makers and raising awareness of E-Rate's impact everywhere.

For an Administration bold enough to challenge established programs, pulling the plug on newer initiatives was almost a given. On May 8, President Trump announced via social media his decision to [end the Digital Equity Act](#), which he called “woke handouts based on race.” Passed by Congress in 2021 as part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the \$2.75 billion program established grants to support broadband access and digital skills training for underserved communities. States and community anchor institutions around the country had already developed promising models, begun establishing resources and partners, and carefully navigated contracts. On May 9, the U.S. Department of Commerce sent letters to states, informing them that funding for the grants was terminated and any project activity costs incurred after that will not be reimbursed.

The Digital Equity Act, which ALA described as “a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create a digitally equitable future for all,” was not the only loss in federal support for broadband, as the administration also reversed a new rule that would have permitted libraries and schools to use E-Rate

funding for hotspot lending programs. On September 30, 2025, the FCC voted 2-1 to pull the plug on the “Learn Without Limits” initiative adopted in 2024. Hotspot lending in libraries—sometimes targeted to specific populations such as students, jobseekers, or the homeless—had expanded during the pandemic. While not a permanent fix, E-Rate funding for hotspot lending in libraries could have ensured that students, jobseekers, veterans, and seniors had the opportunity to keep up in the digital economy.

Bright Spots Amid Challenges

While they met mixed outcomes for the unprecedented challenges to established federal programs, libraries continued to have favor of champions in Congress who recognize the value of libraries in every context. In some cases, Congressmembers introduced legislation to fund new opportunities for libraries to serve their communities. The bicameral Right to Read Act was reintroduced by Senator Jack Reed (D-RI) and Representative Adelita Grijalva (D-AZ-07).

Originally introduced in 2022 by the late Representative Raúl Grijalva, the Congresswoman's father and predecessor in AZ-07, the Right to Read Act was designed to ensure all students, including low-income and minority students, children with disabilities, and English language learners, have access to an effective school library staffed by a certified school librarian. The bill would authorize \$500 million in Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grants and double the authorization for the [Innovative Approaches to Literacy](#) program to \$100 million to provide critical literacy resources in communities with significant need.

In June, ALA released “[Investing in Prison Libraries: A Cost-Effective Path to Safer Communities and Second Chances](#),” a report exploring the essential role of prison libraries in lowering recidivism by better preparing incarcerated people for their release. Having made a strong case for further investments in prison libraries, ALA welcomed the Prison Libraries Act, introduced by Representative Emanuel Cleaver II (D-MO-5). The bill would provide grants to prisons to update materials, hire qualified librarians, and support digital literacy and career readiness training.

In October 2025, the U.S. State Department began notifying public libraries organized as 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations that they would no longer be allowed to accept passport applications. According to the State Department, the 1920 Passport Act does not authorize non-governmental

agencies to serve as passport facilities. While only approximately 15% of all public libraries are non-governmental, according to IMLS, they helped tens of thousands of Americans apply for passports in 2024. Despite some nonprofit libraries having offered passport services for decades, dozens were forced to stop in February 2026.

Federal legislators in both parties rallied to introduce bicameral and bipartisan legislation that would allow nonprofit public libraries to continue providing passport services. The Community Passport Services Act, introduced in January 2026 by Representative John Joyce (R-PA 13) and with companion legislation introduced by Senators John Fetterman and David McCormick of Pennsylvania, would amend the Passport Act of 1920 to authorize certain public libraries to collect and retain a fee for the execution of a passport application.

Libraries, like many public services and cultural institutions, may have lost ground in the Executive branch in 2025, but libraries fared better in Congress and the courts. Further challenges, known and unknown, lay ahead, but federal support for libraries would not be possible were it not for the perseverance of library advocates. Just as they prevailed during all four budget cycles in the first Trump Administration, libraries garnered increases in the first budget cycle of the president's second term. While libraries can't expect support from the White House, Congress has signaled that library funding is a national priority. It's up to library supporters to keep that signal strong. ●

Lisa Varga is associate executive director of ALA's Public Policy and Advocacy Office.

About This Report

Production Team

Production team authors: **Dan Montgomery**, Executive Director, ALA; **Sam Helmick**, 2025-2026 ALA President, Community and Access Services Coordinator at Iowa City Public Library; **Sarah Lamdan**, Director, Office for Intellectual Freedom, ALA; **Rachel Riggs**, Technical Adviser, World Education; **Jeanie Austin**, Jail and Reentry Services Librarian, San Francisco Public Library; **Lisa Varga**, Associate Executive Director, Public Policy and Advocacy Office, ALA

Content editor: **Phil Morehart**, Communications Manager, Communications and Media Relations Office, ALA

Project coordinator: **Chase Ollis**, Senior Communications Manager, Communications and Media Relations Office, ALA

Design: **Lauren Ehle**, Senior Production Editor, Production Services, ALA

About ALA

The American Library Association is the largest non-partisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to America's libraries. The ALA mission is to empower and advocate for all libraries and library workers to ensure equitable access to information for all. For 150 years, ALA has provided resources for information professionals to transform their communities through essential programs and services.

Press Contact

Reporters should contact:
Communications and Media Relations Office,
American Library Association; cmomedia@ala.org

How to Cite This Report

American Library Association. The State of America's Libraries 2026: A Report from the American Library Association. 2026.



BUILD STRONG COMMUNITIES

as a member of the American Library Association

JOIN TODAY

ALA150
American Library Association

ala.org/membership