



The Association for
Rural & Small Libraries



2025 Annual Report

Table of Contents

3	Letter from our Executive Director
4	Strategic Plan
5	Increase Membership Growth & Retention
6	Membership in Review
7	Professional Development
8-9	Annual Conference Highlights
10	Increase Operational & Environmental Sustainability
11	ARSL Leadership Institute
12	Grants & Partnerships
13	Expand Advocacy Efforts
14	Advocacy Impact
15-16	Our Thanks



Our Shared Purpose

As ARSL looks back on 2025, we honor a year in which dedication, collaboration, and out-of-the-box thinking delivered us through challenges, laying the foundation for a better future for libraries. ARSL remained resilient in the face of significant pressures on rural and small libraries and the dedicated workers who sustain them. We refused to be confined by conventional approaches; instead, we built alliances and strengthened partnerships in unexpected ways, pursuing creative opportunities that aligned with our mission and advancing both our short- and long-term strategic goals. This bold, imaginative focus allowed us to support libraries and library professionals even as circumstances continually shifted around us.

Recognized for its nimbleness, ARSL leveraged available resources to help us accomplish our goals in an ever-changing climate. We saw new partnerships take shape between rural libraries and urban systems, small-town library boards standing shoulder to shoulder with national organizations, and booksellers, publishers, and community members forming powerful networks of support.

When federal funding through the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) was threatened we met directly with congressional offices, both virtually and in Washington DC. We held more than 40 meetings, inviting library directors from the legislators' own district to join us. We shared your stories and data and made the case for why rural libraries and library workers matter. When legislation threatened access to information, we showed up, represented, and communicated diligently with our membership. I want to be clear: the work you do every day is the fuel that sustains me and keeps ARSL moving forward.

Throughout 2025, we invested strategically and meaningfully in short and long-term collaborations, deepening significant relationships that will help build the future we want to see for rural and small libraries and the communities they serve.

We brought library leaders together to learn from one another and solve problems side by side, making sure rural voices were included in national conversations. The philanthropic and federal support we received affirmed the importance of this shared work and gave us the resources to lay a foundation that will carry forward for years to come.

We also embraced our role as a connector and advocate for the right to read. Through consistent coalition work, we helped facilitate meaningful conversations among publishers, booksellers, libraries, and other allies within and adjacent to our profession, reminding us all that we are stronger together.

We know challenges lie ahead. There is still a great deal to overcome. But with the support of our members and dedicated staff, we are confident that the commitment is there to pursue the bright future small and rural libraries deserve, one filled with promise and limitless opportunity. We are deeply grateful for your hard work and are honored to support you every step of the way, year after year, representing ARSL with dignity, care, and a deep-rooted passion.

This annual report reflects a year that challenged us to think differently, act boldly, and reimagine what's possible. The "out-of-the-box" approach we took in 2025 proved that our greatest strength lies not just in our commitment, but in our willingness to innovate. It reminds us that, as long as we remain aligned with our mission, our shared purpose carries us forward.



Kate Laughlin
Executive Director



Strategic Plan

Guided by values. Driven by purpose. Built for rural & small libraries.

Adopted in 2024, ARSL's strategic plan serves as a living roadmap guiding our staff, board, and membership through 2027 and beyond. It keeps our work focused on what matters most: building strong communities through advocacy, professional development, and elevating the impact of rural and small libraries. We revisit our goals regularly to ensure they reflect the evolving needs of ARSL and the communities we serve.

Six core values shape everything ARSL does, from how we serve our members to how we show up for rural communities across North America.

Accessibility

Providing equitable services, events, and information that are inclusive of all and reflect the diversity of our community.

Responsive Service

Acting with initiative, creativity, and flexibility to deliver timely, high-quality service that meets member needs.

Intellectual Freedom

Defending free and unhindered access to information and supporting every library users right to privacy.

Professionalism

Supporting skilled practitioners at every level and fostering an environment where all feel welcomed and respected.

Collaboration

Partnering with agencies and organizations across the broader library landscape to advance our shared goals.

Accountability

Stewarding member resources with transparency, ethical leadership, and a commitment to meaningful results.

Organizational Goals

Increase Membership Growth & Retention

Expanding professional development, peer mentorship, and inclusive networking opportunities for library workers.

Increase Operational & Environmental Sustainability

Diversifying revenue, reducing our environmental footprint, and building a resilient organization for the future.

Expand Advocacy Efforts

Empowering our community to advocate for libraries and establishing priorities that reflect the real needs of rural communities.

Organizational Goals

Increase Membership Growth & Retention



Increase Member Value

ARSL eliminated TRAIN workshop fees for members in 2025, increasing engagement by 47% and removing financial barriers to professional development. The Development team launched a monthly Grants Digest newsletter that quickly became an essential member resource, with an average open rate of 46.5% reflecting strong member interest in discovering new funding opportunities.

ARSL expanded its preferred partner vendor program, adding new vendors offering exclusive discounts and tailored services for members. These partnerships provide tangible value to members while supporting their operational needs and professional growth.

Increase Community Engagement

Through collaborations with generous private funding partners, ARSL distributed over **\$3.0 million in cash grants** over the past five years to small and rural libraries nationwide. ARSL's seven professional networking groups, facilitated by member volunteers, continued to provide space for connection and conversation that forms the heart of the association. Monthly Regional Forums led by Regional Representatives also offered opportunities for peer connection and knowledge sharing.

Heading into 2026, ARSL will launch two new professional networking groups in response to member needs for specialized peer support.

Membership in Review

A growing community of rural and small library workers across North America.

2,762 Total Members | 327 Active Library Members | ~1,400-1,500 Unique Libraries Represented
61% Average Renewal Rate | 50 States + D.C. & Canada

Membership Joins

Membership joins are cyclical, with annual peaks in the summer driven by those excited to attend our September Conference.

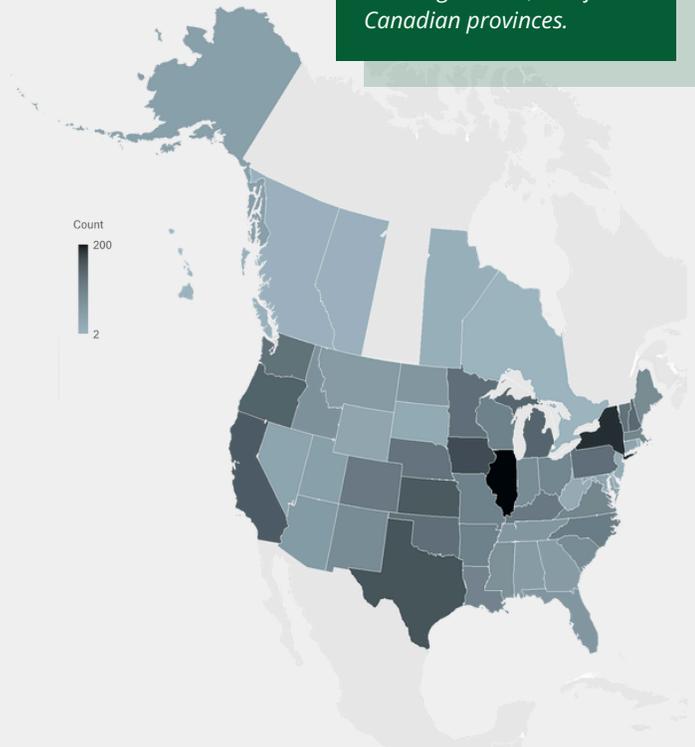


Where Our Members Are

Membership Highlights:

- Illinois** — 7.2%
- New York** — 5.5%
- Iowa** — 4.3%
- Texas** — 4.0%
- Kansas** — 3.7%

Illinois, New York, Iowa, Texas, and Kansas lead in membership, together representing over 680 members. However, ARSL's reach extends to all 50 states, Washington D.C., and four Canadian provinces.

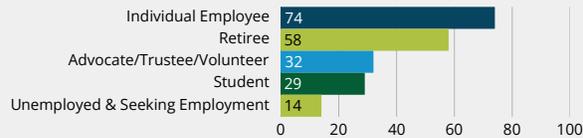


Our community extends beyond North America, with members also joining from Bangladesh and Palau.

Membership Renewal Percentage

Renewal rates remained strong across all member types, with Individual Employee members leading at 74%.

INDIVIDUAL



ORGANIZATIONAL



Service Population

- Over 90 Million**
Estimated Community Members Served by ARSL Members
- 6,482**
Median ARSL Resident Community Population
- 69**
Smallest ARSL Resident Community Population

Based on data reported by 1,267 members (46% of membership), ARSL's community directly serves nearly 30 million people at local library branches, and indirectly serves many millions more through the participation of State Libraries in our professional network.

Professional Development

ARSL empowers library workers through accessible, relevant continuing education and peer networking opportunities.

ARSL TRAIN

With guidance from our Con Ed Cmte, ARSL hosted 14 TRAINS (*Training, Roundtables, and Informational Networking*) in 2025, including 6 workshops, 3 partner webinars, and 5 roundtables. Topics ranged from Disaster Planning & Preparedness to Empowering Library Advocates to Leading from Every Level. A total of 428 library professionals attended these TRAIN sessions, a 47% increase in attendance from 2024.

428

TRAIN
Attendees

Professional Networking Groups

Our 7 Professional Networking Groups, facilitated by ARSL members, met regularly to provide space for important conversations and connections within the rural and small library community. Meetings were open to all ARSL members, with a couple also including non-members to provide important spaces for all rural and small library workers to connect and share knowledge. In 2025, these groups held 44 sessions with a total of 313 participants.

313

Professional
Networking Group
Participants

Regional Forums

Aligning with the four census regions: West, South, Northeast, and Midwest, these forums provided regional networking and discussion opportunities on topics closer to home. 170 library professionals participated across all Regional Forums in 2025.

170

Regional Forum
Participants

Member E-list

ARSL's member e-list remained one of the most valued member resources in 2025, with 228 conversations shared throughout the year. Members turned to the e-list for everything from employment inquiries and librarianship troubleshooting to professional development opportunities and helpful resources, consistently ranking it as one of ARSL's most impactful membership benefits.

228

Member E-list
Conversations

Annual Conference Highlights

Bringing together library workers for inspiring keynotes, meaningful connections, and community-driven learning.

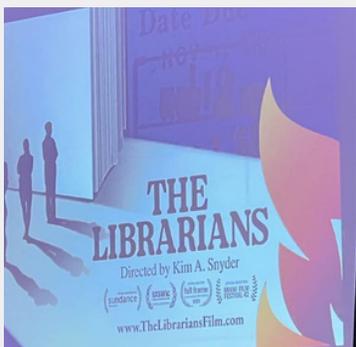
ARSL's annual conference, held September 17-20, 2025 at the Albuquerque Convention Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, brought together rural and small library workers under the theme **Libraries Rise!**, celebrating the resilience, innovation, and collaboration that empower libraries to thrive and uplift the communities they serve. This year's program featured keynote speakers Ramona Emerson and Mychal Threets, as well as a special screening of the film *The Librarians*.



*"I can't thank ARSL enough for having **Ramona Emerson** as a keynote speaker. Absolutely captivating. Hearing her process, background, and journey was only topped by the inclusion, again, of an indigenous voice."*



*"**Mychal Threets** was such a joy! To hear him speak in person really made a huge impact on me."*



*"**The Librarians Film** was wonderful, scary, and empowering....years ago I would have never thought things like this would be happening. I have wanted to see this film but had no idea how/where. Thank you!"*

Annual Conference Highlights

From all 50 U.S. states and across Canada, library workers come together to learn, connect, and grow.



957

Total Attendees



514

Libraries Represented



120

Sessions, Clinics, & Pop-Up Programs



222

Discussion Topics



40+

Volunteers



\$42K

Scholarship Funds Awarded



Organizational Goals

Increase Operational & Environmental Sustainability

Financial Sustainability

ARSL maintained diversified organizational revenue, balancing growth in investment portfolio income with increased funding from grant partnerships, conference vendor fees, and the ARSL Supporters Alliance annual sponsorships. New revenue streams in 2025 included the ARSL Supporters Alliance, with Hoopla/Midwest Tape, OCLC, and Penguin Random House joining as year-round organizational sponsors to provide sustained support for ARSL operations and programs. Conference sponsorships from Vircon and First Book helped offset operational costs while maintaining accessible registration rates. Targeted scholarships expanded access to specialized professional development, with Network of the National Library of Medicine (NNLM) funding travel for 10 attendees for the Community Health Hub Pre-Conference and Internet Archive supporting 15 attendees for the Community Webs' Post-Conference.

The Grants Digest, launched in April 2025, provides curated grant opportunities for rural library professionals, supporting their efforts to secure and diversify funding for local projects.

Operational Sustainability

More than 250 volunteers gave 1,000+ hours of their time and talents in roles spanning our Board, Committees, and Conference opportunities in 2025. This volunteer capacity sustained critical operations, including direct peer-to-peer advocacy outreach, planning and executing our annual conference, and supporting organizational grantmaking activities.

The addition of dedicated Communications and Development roles in 2025 will enhance operational sustainability by growing and diversifying revenue, strengthening funder and partner relationships, and ensuring consistent, strategic outreach. The addition of staff Development and Communications roles in 2024 and 2025 has enhanced operational sustainability by launch major new grant programs, manage an expanded conference schedule including specialized pre- and post-conference events, and provide timely communications and member support year-round.

Environmental Sustainability

Key environmental initiatives in 2025 included prioritizing conference facilities that demonstrate commitment to sustainable operations and incorporating environmental criteria into site selection processes. Conference materials and communications transitioned to digital formats, minimizing paper use and waste while improving accessibility for all attendees.

The ARSL Board established the new Sustainability Committee to guide actionable sustainability frameworks for ARSL operations in alignment with our organizational environmental priorities. Through a new partnership with the Sustainable Libraries Initiative, ARSL is able to share resources and best practices through member education and professional development so members can lead their local sustainability activities.

Leadership Institute

Building the Future of Rural & Small Libraries: One Leader at a Time

About the Institute

The ARSL Leadership Institute, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), was created to address a critical gap: over 75% of libraries nationwide are small or rural, nearly half have no MLS-credentialed staff, and the average salary of just over \$42,000 puts graduate-level training out of reach for many. The Institute bridges that gap with a tailored, accessible leadership program built for the realities of rural librarianship. It combines immersive cohort experiences, expert-led workshops, mentorship from established leaders, and real-world leadership projects that create lasting impact in their communities.

“

We're incredibly proud of the 30 graduates who will carry forward the leadership skills and networks they've built. The impact of this cohort will ripple through rural communities for years to come.

Kate Laughlin, Executive Director

”



Celebrating the Graduates

ARSL's second Leadership Institute cohort ran from May 2024 through November 2025, culminating in an online recognition ceremony. **The 30 graduates**, proudly calling themselves The Happy Salmon Squad: The School of Cool, represented communities across North America, from Butte Falls, Oregon to Virden, Manitoba. At the conference, participants showcased their leadership work through capstone poster presentations covering topics such as educational librarianship resources, legal literacy for library staff, and community-driven programming. Their work demonstrated not only what they learned, but the real impact they are already making in the communities they serve.

Grants & Partnerships

104 grants awarded. \$935k in funding. Countless communities served.

Sustainable & Resilient New England Libraries Grant

In 2025, ARSL distributed grant funding for rural & small libraries in the New England region, made possible by the Manton Foundation. This ongoing grant program was showcased through our multi-year Sustainable & Resilient New England Libraries Grant Impact Report, highlighting the transformative impact of these grants on rural libraries.

\$640,000

Total Awarded (2025)

54

Grants Awarded

\$12,000

Average Grant

Infinite Sums Rural & Small Libraries Cohort Grant Program

Made possible by Simons Foundation, ARSL distributed \$200,000 to 20 rural and small libraries nationwide to support innovative community math programming that makes mathematics accessible, engaging, and relevant to library patrons of all ages.

\$200,000

Total Awarded

20

Libraries Funded

17 States

Geographic Reach

Grants in 2026 and Beyond

Building on the momentum of 2025, ARSL secured funding for expanded new grant programs in 2026. Funded through the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the *Overcoming Obstacles: Enhancing Access to Professional Development for Solo Librarians* grant program will identify and address the barriers that prevent solo librarians, especially those in small and rural communities, from effectively accessing professional development.

The *Literacy Bridges: Empowering 21st Century Communities* grant program is a two-year initiative that will train library staff working in Carnegie-built libraries in small and rural areas of the U.S. to deliver programs integrating adult basic and digital literacy skills. Support for this program was provided by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York.

These programs reflect ARSL's continued commitment to expanding opportunities for rural and small libraries, ensuring they have the resources and professional development needed to serve their communities effectively.

Organizational Goals

Expand Advocacy Efforts



Empowering Our Community

ARSL expanded advocacy education through targeted continuing education and just-in-time support. The Advocacy Committee facilitated TRAIN sessions on empowering library stakeholders and storytelling for advocacy, and led "Advocate Smarter and Harder: Advocacy Tools for Rural and Small Libraries" at the ALA Annual Conference. The ARSL Annual Conference featured programming on state-level legislative advocacy, abundance mindset strategies, and bridgebuilding practices with the Urban Libraries Council, and screened *The Librarians* documentary to facilitate dialogue on intellectual freedom.

The Advocacy Committee provided direct support for libraries facing local challenges, responding swiftly to communities like St. Genevieve County Library in Missouri and connecting libraries with resources, guidance, and peer support.

National Advocacy & Strategic Partnerships

ARSL deepened strategic partnerships with national allies to ensure rural library needs remained centered in policy conversations. Throughout 2025, ARSL participated in IMLS Alliance and Right to Read coalition meetings, Schools Health & Libraries Broadband Coalition policy calls, and other advocacy-focused meetings.

In coordination with the Urban Libraries Council and through collaboration on events like COSLA's *Voices for Libraries*, ARSL attended more than 40 congressional meetings with U.S. Senators' and Representatives' offices, focusing on IMLS funding and rural library impact. ARSL also met with Senate HELP Committee staff regarding rural library needs and participated in an amicus brief strategy on an IMLS-related lawsuit.



Advocacy Impact

By the Numbers

Defending Intellectual Freedom

ARSL took a strong stance in defense of intellectual freedom through multiple coordinated efforts. During Banned Books Week, ARSL issued a statement in support of IMLS in partnership with the Right to Read Coalition. ARSL co-signed an amicus brief with 13 other organizations in support of intellectual freedom and contributed to efforts at the state level through letters of support for pro-reading legislation.

Amplifying Rural Library Stories

ARSL connected national media outlets—including PBS, NPR, Reuters, Library Journal, LA Times, and NY Times—with rural librarians to amplify their stories and elevate the critical work happening in small and rural communities. These partnerships ensured that rural perspectives were included in national conversations about libraries, literacy, and community impact.

Building Collective Power

ARSL's Executive Director participated in Common Ground, a two-day convening of more than 50 library leaders and policy advocates focused on peer learning, skill-sharing, and building collective power across the library community. ARSL also partnered with EveryLibrary to educate ARSL's leadership team on best practices in library advocacy.

Long-Term Strategic Work

Beyond immediate advocacy efforts, ARSL remained committed to building long-term support for small and rural libraries. Through strategic planning sessions, ARSL aligned advocacy priorities with evolving community needs while deepening partnerships with national allies, ensuring that small and rural libraries maintain a seat at the policy table and continue to shape the future of library services.

Thank you

ARSL 2025 BOARD:

Executive Leadership:

John Clexton	<i>President</i>
Sherry Scheline	<i>Vice President/President-Elect</i>
Patrick Bodily	<i>Past President</i>
Erin Busbea	<i>Treasurer</i>
Amanda Doherty	<i>Secretary</i>

Regional Representatives:

Jeanne Williams	<i>West (Jan-Aug)</i>
Kip Roberson	<i>West (Aug-Dec)</i>
Tyler Hahn	<i>Midwest</i>
Amy Stone	<i>Northeast</i>
Janine Miller	<i>South</i>

Ex-Officio Members:

Michelle Underhill	<i>COSLA Representative</i>
Kate Laughlin	<i>Executive Director</i>



2025 Board of Directors

ARSL OFFICE STAFF:

Kate Laughlin	<i>Executive Director</i>
Megan Fontaine	<i>Assistant Director</i>
Brooke Van Eyk	<i>Development Director</i>
Ainsley Nobara	<i>Communications Director</i>
Lucy Pekovich	<i>Programs & Events Coordinator</i>
Shamim Rupani	<i>Development Coordinator</i>
Emma Beckley	<i>Communications Coordinator</i>
Rhys Day	<i>Administrative Coordinator</i>

“

*The more I interact
with other ARSL
members, the more I
have found a library
family like no other.*

*John Clexton,
2025 ARSL President*

”

Thank you

*Committee Chair
†Board Liaison

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

2025 Conference:

Kristi Chadwick*
Debbie Winlock*
Kip Roberson†
Merideth Johnson
Tanner Ames
Andrea Eckerson
Angela Watkins
Jason Macoviak
Margo Gustina
Sarah Jones
Shellie Zeigler
Wendy Johnston
Wil'Lani Turner

Advocacy:

Sara Koehn*
Drew Wichterman*
Sherry Scheline†
Amy Stone
Jana Slisher
Jenny White
Lea Chisum
Natasja Williams
Jane Gagne
Keaton Toney

Continuing Education:

Melissa Little*
Margaret Woodruff*
Tyler Hahn†
Allison Hollek
Christinna Swearingen
Beverly Pietlicki
Carrie Kasperick
Kenneth Roman
Rachel Lunden

Finance:

Erin Busbea*†
John Clexton
Megan Dazey
Nick Shimmin
Sarah Crisler-Ruskey
Kimberly Benjamin
Sherry Scheline

Governance:

Kristy Smith*
Mandy Walters*
John Clexton†
Shannon Schultz
April Hernandez
Kellee Forkenbrock

Grants, Awards, & Scholarships:

Kip Roberson*
Drea Douglas*
Erin Busbeat
Carrie Bushman
Aimee Adams
Jaden Scassiferro
Kimberly Brantley-Sallee
Laura McWilliams

Marketing & Communications:

Phillip Carter*
Erica Testani*
Janine Millert
Alyson Hayes Blankenship
Claire Williams
David Scott
Nancy Ramirez
Sarah Vantrease
Taylor Revilla

Membership:

Anne Osborne*
Meghan Sullivan*
Amanda Doherty†
Cynthia Hughes
Lisa Thompson
Bree Drapa
Brenda Stanley
Lucretia Calonder
Margaret Perkins

Partnership:

Shannon Terry*
Meredith Janet Fletcher*
Amy Stone†
Deborah Dutcher
Joy Worland
Beth Anderson
Joan Grothoff
Marsha Richmond
Melissa Duncan
Patti Lehman
Ruth Shattuck Bernstein
Tina Bell

Thank you

TO ALL OF OUR GENEROUS SUPPORTERS

ARSL's advocacy efforts, conference, and professional development all rely on the generous support of sponsors and donations from members. We'd like to thank our Supporters Alliance Members, 2025 Conference Sponsors, and individuals who made large donations to ARSL in 2025. All your donations go directly to support ARSL and rural & small libraries across North America!

ARSL Supporters Alliance



Penguin
Random
House

Conference Sponsors

Diamond Tier

First Book and Virco

Event Sponsors

Bibliotheca and EveryLibrary

Silver Tier

American Library Association, EBSCO, and Mission Telecom

Bronze

Hachette Book Group, Libro.fm, Partners for Rural Impact, San Jose State University School of Information, and The University of Southern Mississippi



Large Donors

\$1,000+

John Carmack

\$650+

Six donors in loving
memory of Dr. Barbara
"Barbie" Renee Buckner



Here's to 2026!

2025 was a year of growth, connection, and impact, and none of it would have been possible without you. Thank you to our members, volunteers, partners, and supporters who show up every day for rural and small libraries. Here's to everything 2026 has in store!

 (206) 453-3579

 PO Box 33731, Seattle, WA 98133

 www.arsl.org

