

The Next Step for Illinois Library Systems:

An Interview with Leslie Bednar and Michael Piper



Michael Piper, executive director of Reaching Across Illinois Library System (RAILS), and Leslie Bednar, executive director of Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS), responded to the following questions drawn from system membership statewide. Both of the new systems are primarily supported by area and per capita grant funding from the Illinois State Library (ISL) and serve multitype member libraries in two separate geographic regions.

Q: With the formation of RAILS and IHLS, member libraries are curious as to the advantage of the new larger systems over the former, more local, systems?

Piper: The old saying “there’s power in numbers” is definitely true in this case. In the current fiscal environment, finding ways to increase the efficiency of service provision is key to maintaining those services going forward. Without the merger, we would have been unable to continue to provide key services that libraries and their constituents throughout Illinois have come to rely on: delivery, shared electronic catalogs, and the Talking Book Service. In time the merger will help us realize economies of scale in areas such as staffing, building costs and maintenance, and other day-to-day operations.

Bednar: Consistency. We now have the opportunity to ensure members will receive the same information and levels of system services. We operate as two locations within the same grant from the state library, and RAILS and IHLS have pledged to align our services as much as possible.

Q: What role did the previous systems play, what role do the new systems play, and how do the two differ?

Piper: Before the state financial crisis, systems were able to offer a broad array of programs and services. Now we must focus our efforts on providing three key priority services: delivery, shared electronic catalogs, and the Talking Book Service. These are the state library’s designated priorities for systems, and they reflect the top priorities of our members.

Bednar: The former regional library systems served a very important role in library development and consulting, continuing education, materials delivery, and also with supporting local library system automation programs (LLSAPs) at the grassroots level. The new systems will continue to support delivery and LLSAPs, but on a much larger level. My analogy: when systems began several decades ago members needed system support that modeled available technology and communication methods. We have evolved to fewer systems as communication and technology have evolved to serve much larger areas simultaneously.

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Q: Will the systems support continuing education (CE)? What role will LLSAPs play?

Piper: We look forward to the day when systems are once again able to provide all of the services their members want and need, and CE is at the top of that list. LLSAPs will continue to provide CE related to their shared automation systems.

Bednar: Within LLSAPs, continuing education will continue to be a service we provide. We are looking at ways to provide continuing education outside of the LLSAPs that is not dependent upon area and per capita grant funding. WebJunction Illinois is an alternative to traditional CE provided by systems, and is a grant project with continuing support from the state library.

Q: RAILS and IHLS serve populations that are much more diverse than the previous systems did. Will systems be able to address issues unique to small rural libraries as well as large urban libraries? How will you keep everyone informed?

Piper: Library staff members have always been tremendous networkers and we are working on tools that will help foster these networking relationships on a larger scale (such as online forums). We are in the process of forming a RAILS Member Advisory Group and one of the top priorities for this group will be to provide us with advice on how best to communicate with both large and small libraries. We will also take advantage of technology to keep in touch with our widespread, diverse constituency.

Bednar: Communication is the key to service in our much larger service areas. Members need mechanisms for reaching out to each other and to system staff. This can happen through the IHLS advisory councils that will be established soon, continuation of grassroots member meetings, and a variety of communication vehicles.

Q: Will member libraries be able to use the new system structure to negotiate larger consortial purchases (for example, digital books, databases, etc.)?

Piper: Looking further into the future when more financial resources may be available, it will be possible to explore ways to provide this service, if not directly, then through partnering or contracting with an organization already negotiating consortial purchases.

Bednar: We will continue to support consortial purchases through the LLSAPs and are evaluating self-sustaining models for consortial purchases outside of the LLSAPs.

Q: Will the LLSAPs within the new systems continue to function with different Integrated Library Systems (ILS), such as SirsiDynix or Innovative?

Piper: For the immediate future, yes. We are using the current fiscal year as a year of planning and exploring possible service models for the future.

Bednar: Our LLSAP working group is currently evaluating vendor responses to an RFI for a shared ILS platform. Our goal is to have all LLSAPs merged into a single organization, sharing the same platform and bibliographic database. The first step is to determine if there is a vendor that can accommodate our combined size, and what changes might be necessary if we can only share the platform and not the database.

Q: How will the new systems facilitate discovery and access of materials between member libraries using different LLSAPs? Will systems provide delivery service between different LLSAPs? Is statewide service a possibility?

Piper: Systems have long worked together to provide delivery service to the entire state of Illinois, via the LLSAPs and a wide variety of individual library catalogs, and we will continue to do so and actively seek new ways to leverage these services in the future. As you know, a delivery study is currently under way that I hope will help shed light on these issues as well.

Bednar: We are excited about the possibility of a single LLSAP in IHLS utilizing the same platform and database for discovery. That will guide and shape our utilization of delivery methods, with an end goal of an improved patron experience all around. In the interim, we will continue delivery between the LLSAPs, and look at options to make that more seamless. I believe a statewide resource sharing service is a possibility, and our move to a single platform/database in IHLS is an important first step.

Q: Do you see systems as leaders, experts, and models? Will you be introducing libraries to new service models and technologies—or merely responding as necessary?

Piper: Systems have long been in the leadership role in Illinois, especially in the area of technology. Our CE and consulting services have been key tools in fostering this leadership role as well. Introducing member libraries to new service models and technologies to help them meet the demands of the future is a key role I hope we can continue to play, as funds permit.

Bednar: I see systems as leaders in providing services that matter most to patrons. As we spend this first year refining our current services, we will also consider different service models and share with our members as appropriate.

Q: In your own words, characterize the relationship between the library systems and the Illinois State Library (ISL).

Piper: The state library is not only our funder, they are also our partner. We intend to continue building on the strong relationship we have developed. We share the same goal — to elevate library service across the state.

Bednar: I see the relationship as being collaborative and supportive. The merger planning in FY11 would have been quite a challenge without their support and guidance. With that behind us, I look forward to strengthening and refining our services to members, while working in partnership with RAILS and ISL.

Q: With state funding so insecure, do the systems plan to seek other sources of funding besides the area and per capita grant?

Piper: This is an area we would like to explore further in the future.

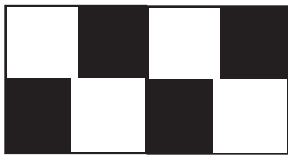
Bednar: We need to explore other models of sustainability to ensure that the services our members depend on can survive.

Q: Finally, why should systems still exist? Could their services be provided more effectively at a statewide level or even by independent consortia? Could Illinois libraries possibly be better served by a repeal of the library systems act and the redistribution of the area and per capita grant monies received by systems directly to the libraries?

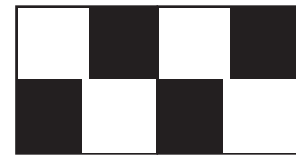
Piper: Throughout their illustrious forty-five-year history, systems have demonstrated a cost-effective and efficient service model that served our state well and stood as a national model. Today's systems are much different than their predecessors, testifying to their ability to stand the test of time. To survive, systems must demonstrate that they are the preferred provider for cooperative services. That means we must continually seek new efficiencies and cost savings. Our proactive decision to consolidate operations is one example of that. We know the merger is only a start. With support from our partners, we have every intention to continually seek new ways to improve, so systems can remain a vital aspect of our state's library services environment.

Bednar: With the creation of RAILS and IHLS, we are truly approaching a statewide model of system services. After all, we operate from the same grant. We are committed to working with our sister system, RAILS, to provide comparable levels of core services. We recognize that member libraries have choices to make regarding service providers, and appreciate the trust they have placed in us. Illinois' library systems have evolved over the decades in part due to the leadership and abilities of our staff and services. With much fewer administrative units today, we are able to hone our core services and deliver an improved experience to our members. The return on investment validates the utilization of tax dollars in library systems. **ILA**

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