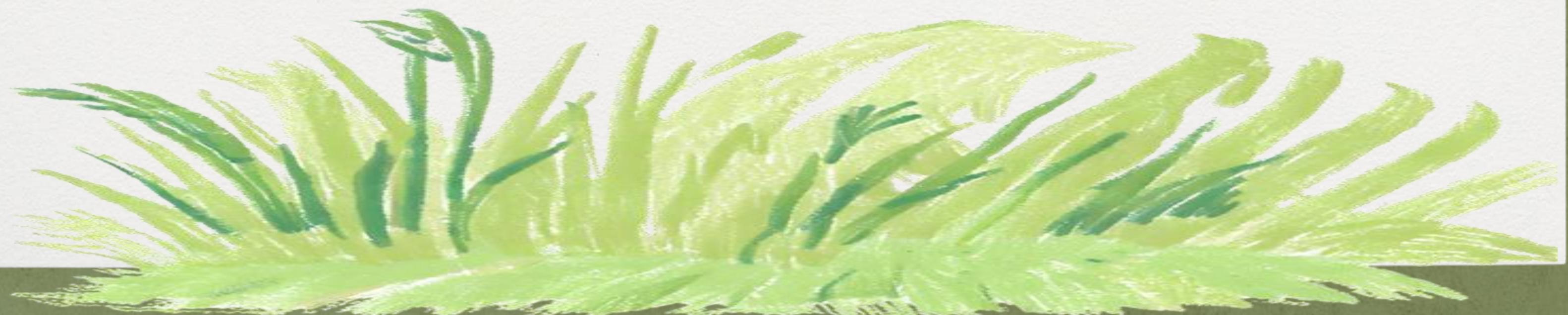


Rooted & Rising:

Rural Libraries, Equity, and the Power of Community

Sam Helmick, President, American Library Association
Community & Access Services Coordinator, Iowa City Public Library

G&G
5 December 2025





RURAL LIBRARIES ARE WITHIN REACH OF THEIR PATRONS



Almost four out of ten of America's public libraries are located in rural communities

Just over

30 million

Americans are served by the nation's approximately 4,000 rural library systems

4.9

The average American lives about 2.2 miles from a library. In rural America, the average person is 4.9 miles from a library



Rural Americans visited libraries more than 117 million times in FY 2017

In addition to leveraging their library buildings and bookmobiles, rural libraries partner with other community organizations to serve patrons "where they are"

State libraries provide support with bookmobiles, books-by-mail, and remote lockers to better reach residents in rural areas



The rapid expansion of electronic resources, with cooperation facilitated by state libraries, has increased rural patrons' access to eBooks and other library materials

More than 14,000 rural library staff members answered almost 18 million questions for their patrons in 2017



RURAL LIBRARIES ANCHOR THEIR COMMUNITIES

Rural libraries provided their patrons with access to more than:

- 100 million books,
- 154 million eBooks,
- 65 million downloadable audio materials,
- 11 million DVDs, VHS, and streaming videos



Rural libraries often house local history collections

State libraries facilitate cooperation across libraries within their states, developing best practices for delivering community-focused programming

Almost 4 in 10 rural libraries have one staff member who wears many hats – but staff are not alone because state libraries help by:

- Providing professional development activities
- Helping rural library staff network with others both inside and outside their state
- Supporting summer reading programs at rural libraries, helping to fight the "summer slide".



Programming to connect people to information resources is increasing to meet local needs

- Rural libraries offered 34% more programs in 2017 than in 2008
- In 2017, rural libraries ran nearly 750,000 programs with 12.5 million attendees.
- About one of every ten visits to a rural library included attending a program
- Of these programs:
 - Over 400,000 were focused on children
 - More than 61,000 targeted young adults
 - They covered topics of local interest such as children's storytimes, makerspaces, health literacy, and workforce development

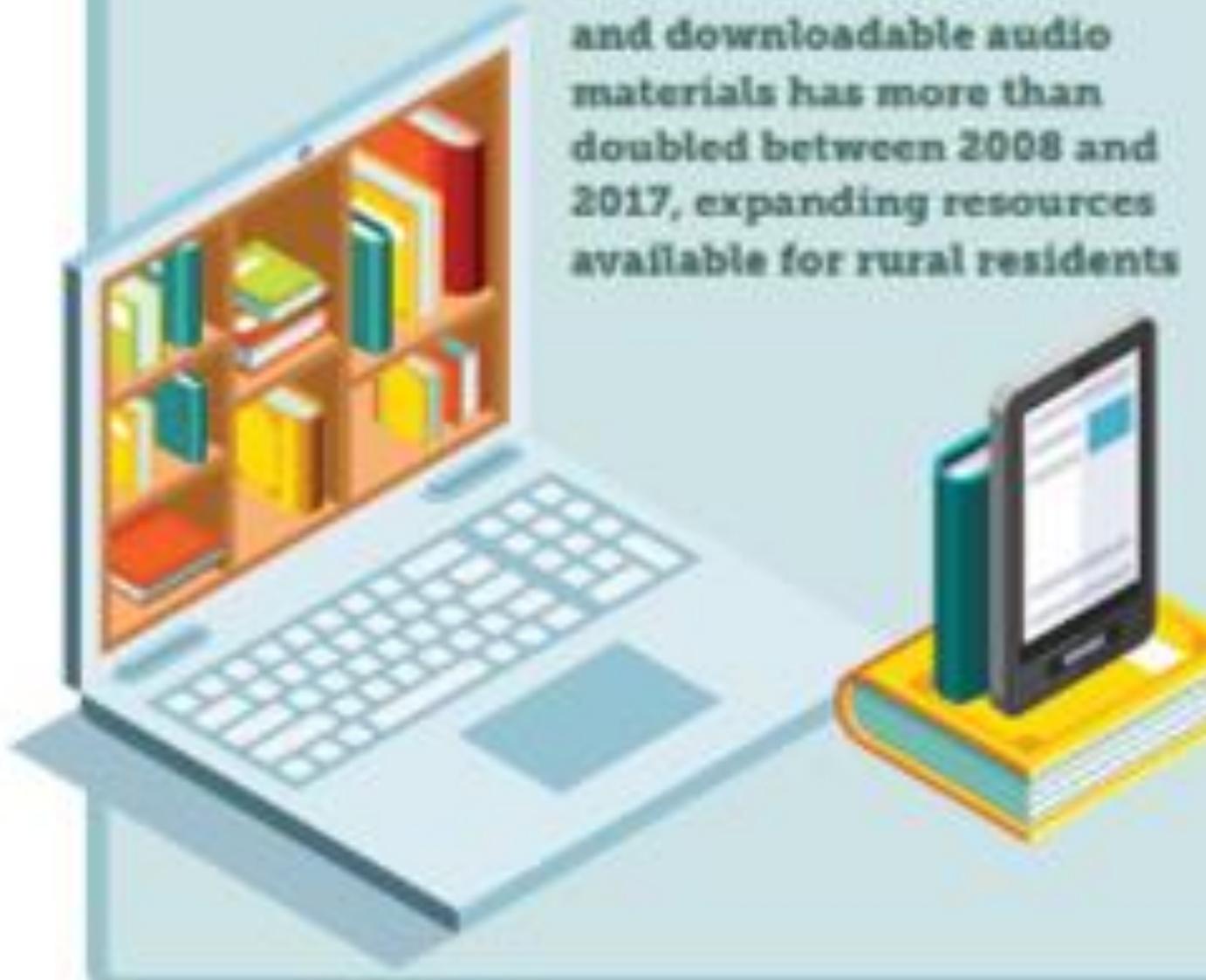


RURAL LIBRARIES LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD IN A CHANGING DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

Rural libraries provide access to a wealth of resources

Rural libraries support lifelong learning to users of all ages and levels

The number of eBooks and downloadable audio materials has more than doubled between 2008 and 2017, expanding resources available for rural residents



State libraries support digital literacy programs. Some states use their IMLS Grants to States funding to enable libraries to provide mobile hotspots for patron check-out to bridge the digital divide in communities that lack broadband coverage

Rural libraries provide Internet access:

- More than 46,000 Internet computers (14% increase since 2006) were used more than 23 million times by rural library patrons.
- One-in-five library visitors used an Internet computer at a rural library
- WiFi – patrons bring their own devices or borrow ones from the library; more than 33 million sessions were logged at rural libraries
- Rural library staff help patrons navigate the increasingly complicated web of online information
- Internet resources provided by rural libraries support economic development, entrepreneurship, students during after-school hours, formal on-line education, telehealth, access to government and community information, and lifelong learning for their communities



How Rural Libraries Meet the Moment

Equity

Access

Free Expression



External practices:
outreach, fine-free,
platforming, and partnerships.

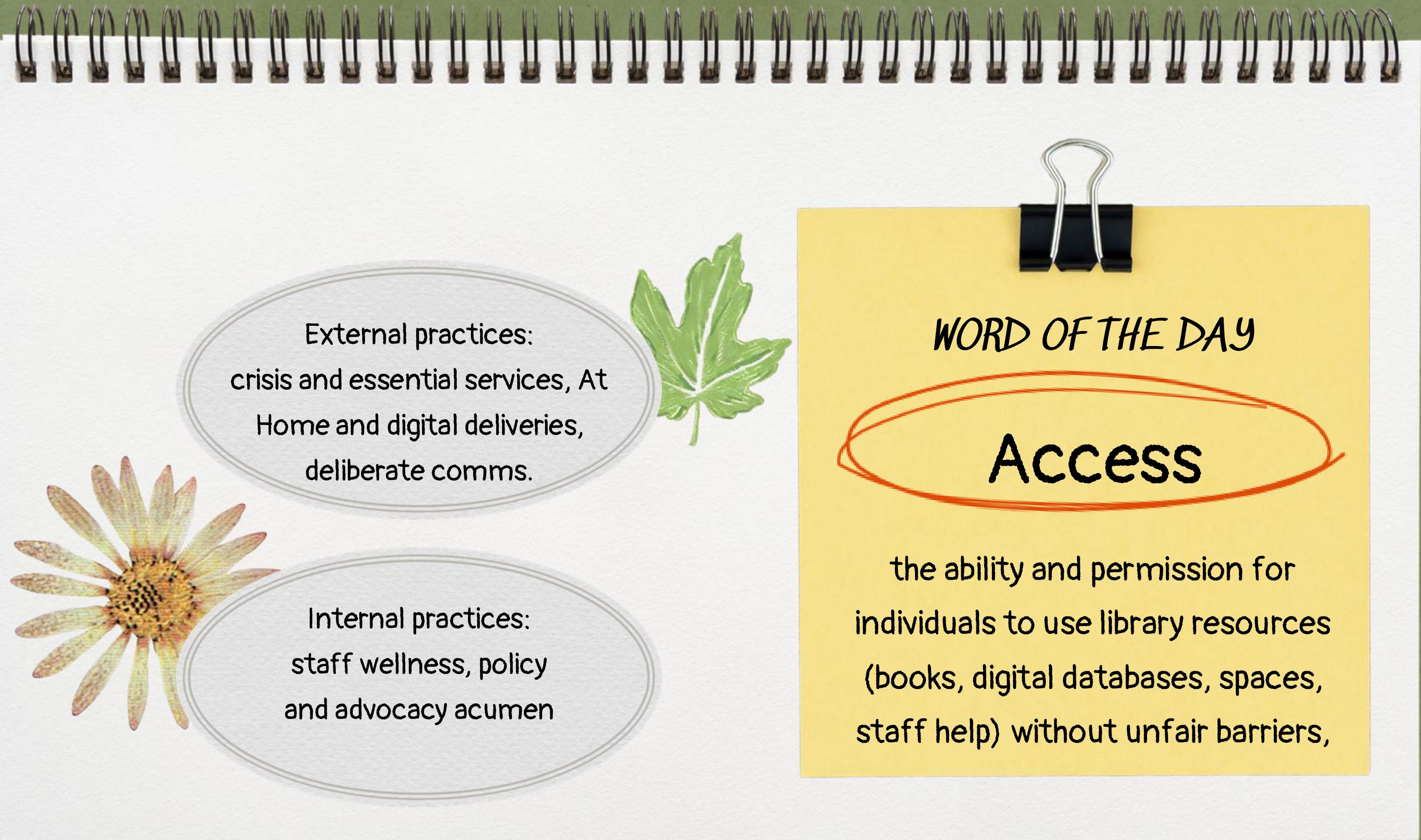
Internal practices:
inclusive hiring,
sustainable training,
and staff resourcing

WORD OF THE DAY

Equity

the quality of being fair and just,
especially in a way that takes
account of and seeks to address
existing inequalities.





External practices:
crisis and essential services, At
Home and digital deliveries,
deliberate comms.

Internal practices:
staff wellness, policy
and advocacy acumen

WORD OF THE DAY

Access

the ability and permission for
individuals to use library resources
(books, digital databases, spaces,
staff help) without unfair barriers,

ALA Advocacy Academy



for local, state, and national library advocacy



LIBRARY OF THINGS
KITCHENWARE, TOOLS, GAMES, AND MORE

DES MOINES
PUBLIC LIBRARY



free
COVID test kits
@ICPL

STOP!
Please activate your test kit.
Results can only be provided for activated test kits.
Testiowa.com
ACTIVATE KIT

IOWA CITY
PUBLIC LIBRARY

For more information, other places to pick up a Testiowa COVID-19 kit, to have a kit sent to you, or to learn more, visit www.testiowa.com

Keep Iowa safe with free statewide COVID-19 testing.

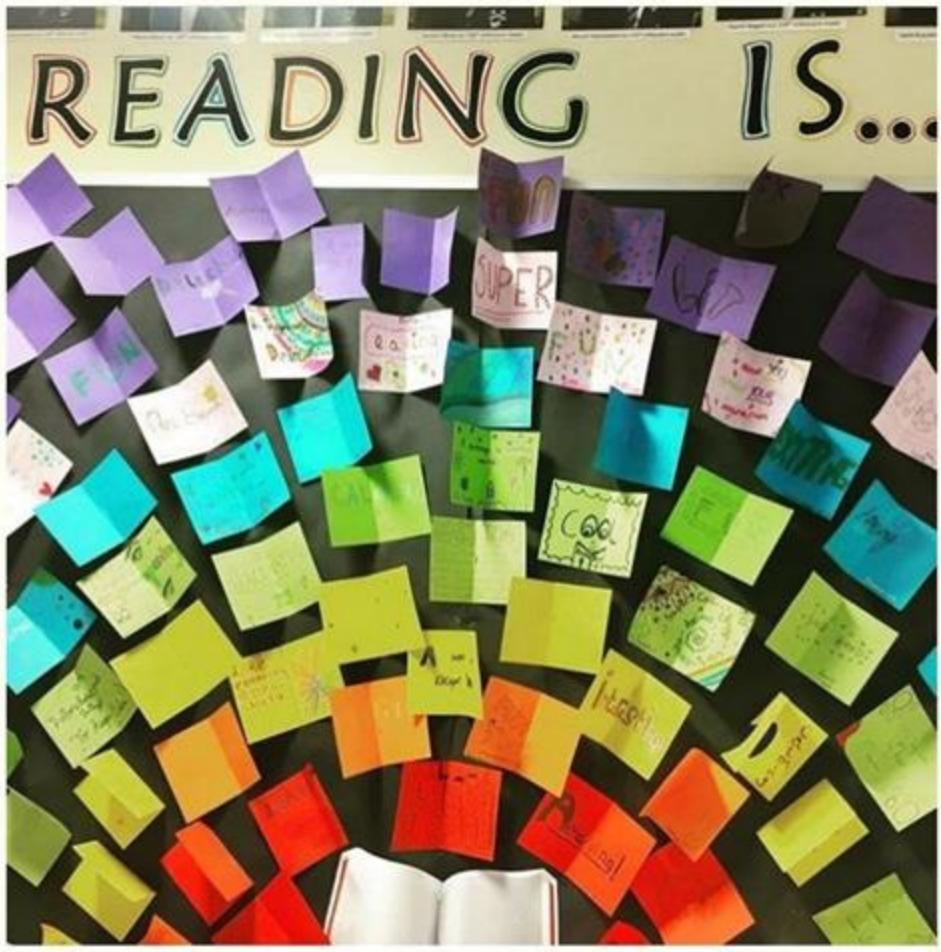
External practices:
protecting privacy, providing
thought partnership and
collaborative space,

Internal practices:
upholding professional ethics,
training, clear policies and
respectful work culture

WORD OF THE DAY

Free Expression

the ability and permission for
individuals to use library resources
(books, digital databases, spaces,
staff help) without unfair barriers,



LIBRARIES TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES **ALA** American Library Association

Learn to lead conversations with ALA's **FREE E-COURSE**

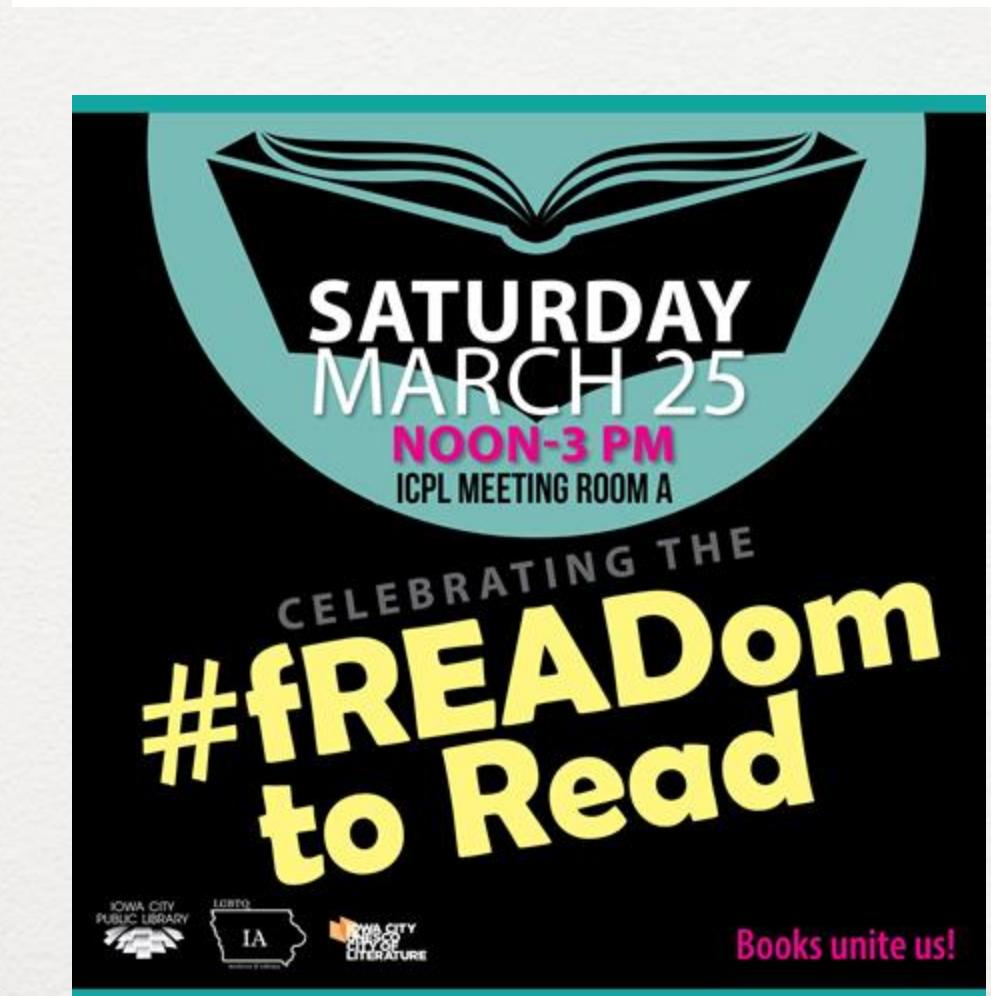
Confidentiality and Privacy @ ICPL



We are committed to protecting your privacy.

We believe it is essential to protect intellectual freedom and free speech, free thought, and free association. State law protects Library Accounts.

(Iowa Code Chapter 22)



What does courage look like today?

Library Users

1. Choosing to Seek Information, Even When It's Sensitive
2. Asking Hard Questions
3. Letting Their Children Explore
4. Using the Library as a Public Square
5. Reading Widely in a Climate of Narrowing
6. Asking for Help
7. Claiming Space in the Library
8. Building Community Across Difference
9. Using the Library During Crisis

What does courage look like today?

Library
Workers

1. Defending Intellectual Freedom
2. Serving All Patrons Equitably
3. Adapting to Community Needs
4. Supporting Staff and Colleagues
5. Navigating Risk and Uncertainty
6. Advocating for the Profession
7. Demonstrating Everyday Bravery to Learn, Keep Going, Face Uncertainty

The Rural Library Reality

- Staff capacity & burnout
- Limited budgets and infrastructure
- Political pressures & censorship
- Geographic isolation vs. community closeness
- Digital divide and access gaps



The Rural Library Superpower

- Community relationships built on trust
- Adaptive problem-solving ("we'll figure it out")
- Deep roots and generational knowledge
- Libraries as gathering places, not just service centers



Moments for Resilience

Book Bans

Is a “culture war” although relevant distracting communities from a class war in America?

70% of challenges come from special interest groups.



Book Burning Iowa

Moments for Resilience

Funding

Despite providing a \$5-\$9 return on investment, libraries continue to see funding, distribution, and digital rights management crunches.



#SaveIMLS #KeepLibrariesLocal



Framework for Courageous Service

Courage:
standing
firm on
mission and
values

Compassion:
meeting fear
with
connection

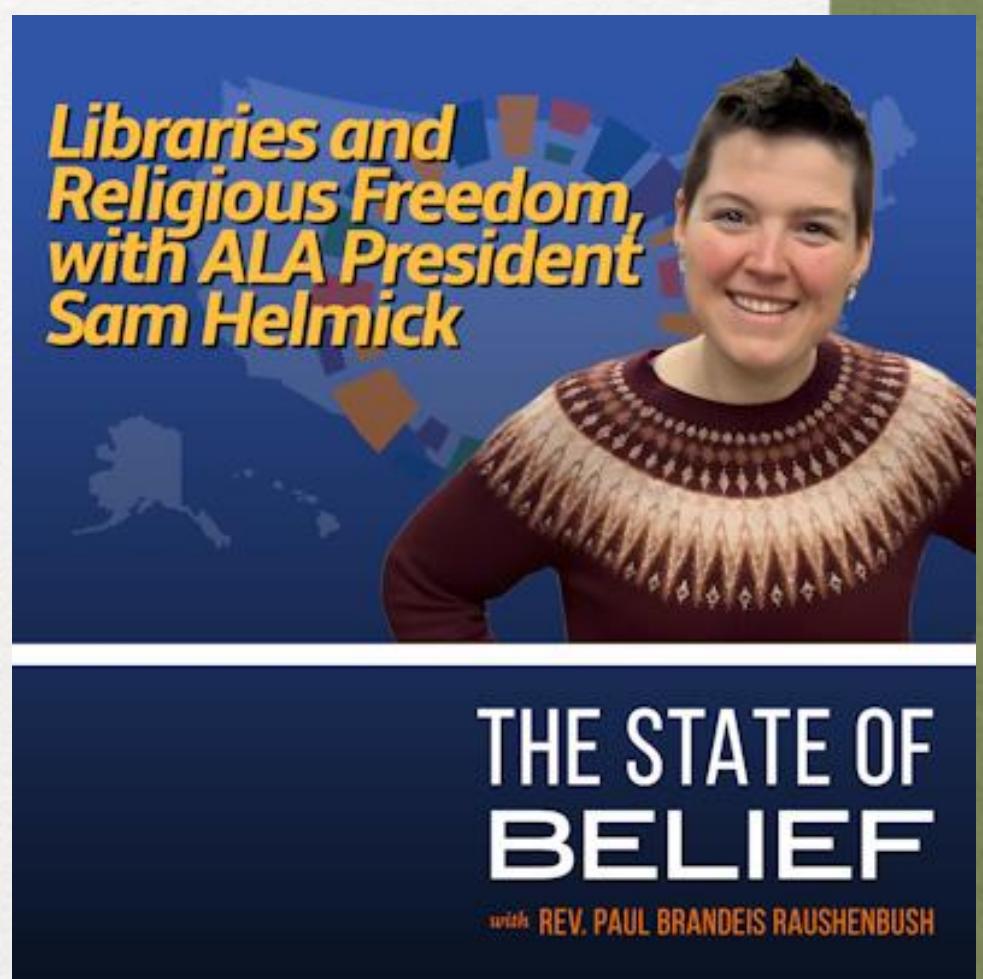
Consistency:
applying policy,
ethics, and trust-
building every day



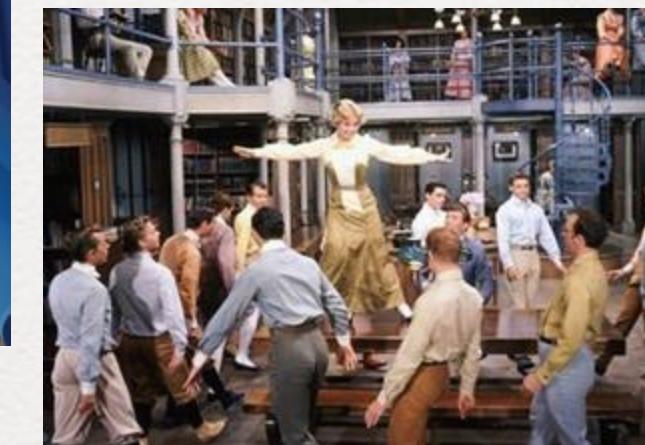
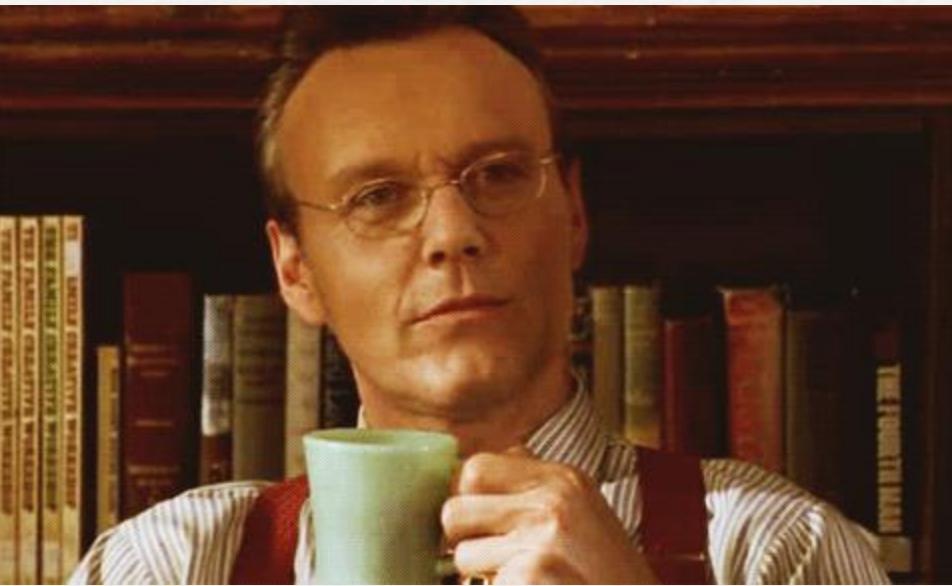
Framework for Courageous Service



Framework for Courageous Service



Framework for Courageous Service



Wellness

You are the sky. Everything else – it's just the weather. Pema Chödrön.



Wellness

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow. I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go. We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear. I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
- Theodore Roethke



Thanks!

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Slides **Carnival**

for the presentation template

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