PLA President's Report
Sonia Alcántara-Antoine, 2023–2024

Looking back on all that PLA has accomplished in my year as president, I am truly grateful to be representing and serving such a strong, creative, and resilient group of public library workers. It's been amazing to see library content trending this year, with accounts like those from the Milwaukee Public Library and recent "I Love My Librarian Award" winner Mychal Threets bringing joy and hope back to the library field, while raising awareness of the important role we play in our communities.

Unfortunately, we have also continued to see rising book challenges and threats to our intellectual freedom, with public libraries becoming an increasing target. The preliminary data from the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) showed that between January and August of 2023, challenges to books in public libraries accounted for 49% of those documented by OIF, compared to 16% during the same reporting period in 2022.

In my role as PLA President, I've spent the year talking with media about intellectual freedom, digital equity, and the evolution of library services. The Board has continued to focus our conversations and the work of the organization around equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice. We have fought hard to advocate for library funding and participated in events such as the ALA Congressional Fly-in, March 8–9 in Washington, DC, to meet with federal appropriators and their staffs about funding libraries.

We could not have accomplished all that is reflected in this report without the dedicated support of our Board, staff, members, volunteers, donors, and advocates.

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Transformation

Digital Literacy

Powered by a contribution from AT&T, PLA awarded $1.27 million to more than 200 public libraries across 45 states to host digital literacy and Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) workshops. The PLA Digital Literacy Workshop Incentives, supported by AT&T, support public libraries in their work improving digital skills, closing the digital divide, and promoting broadband adoption among families and communities. The workshops leverage online digital literacy courses, created by PLA in collaboration with AT&T, that are freely available to anyone through DigitalLearn.org and AT&T ScreenReady. DigitalLearn.org online courses and training materials were developed with and for library staff and their patrons.

The second cohort was part of an expanded national initiative and collaboration between PLA and AT&T. In 2022, 160 libraries were selected to be part of the PLA Digital Literacy Workshop Incentive, supported by AT&T. The initial group of libraries held more than 1,500 workshops which helped over 8,000 learners build skills and confidence using technology. This new cohort increased the number of learners libraries can reach, while teaching basic technology skills such as internet use, video conferencing, cybersecurity, and ACP basics. PLA is planning to launch the third round of incentives in July.

PLA also partnered with Heartland Forward to create a four-part training module on DigitalLearn.org. The new course, Getting Started with Telehealth, is designed to help community members understand and utilize telehealth resources.

Data-driven Librarianship

In June 2023, PLA released the first Public Library Services for Strong Communities Report. The 2022 national survey explored types of public library programs and services, the nature of partnerships with other organizations, and the state of library facilities. The survey is the third in a rotating series exploring public library roles, services, and resources to provide actionable data for decision-making and advocacy. The report also includes pointers and resources for action to address community needs such as food insecurity, workforce development, and renewable energy. PLA invited all U.S. public library administrative entities to complete the survey in fall 2022 and received a total of 1,167 library responses, a response rate of 12.6%. Key findings included:

- The majority of public libraries (68%) offer elections services, such as voter registration, ballot drop-off, or serving as a polling place.

- Virtually all libraries (99%) have summer reading programs for children, teens, and/or adults to support learning outside of school.

- 78% of libraries offer job and career services currently and 24% have workforce development programs.

- 17.5% of libraries have at least one type of mobile programming facility, including bookmobiles, cybermobiles, and mobile job centers.

- 98% of public libraries have at least one type of partnership with an external organization (e.g., K-12 schools, government entities, and non-profits).

- 40% of library buildings have not undergone major renovations in over two decades (since 2000 or earlier).

- Half of libraries (50%) have special designations for emergencies, serving as cooling/warming centers in extreme temperatures, distribution centers during public health emergencies, and/or centers for community members and first responders during disaster recovery.

In the fall, PLA administered the 2023 national survey, which focused on resources, infrastructure, training, staff, and funding related to technology. The initial technology survey was first administered in 2020 and provided an essential snapshot of public library technology services and capacity. The findings illuminated the critical role that libraries of all sizes play in bridging digital divides in communities across the nation. The 2023 Technology Survey builds upon these insights and provides an updated picture of the state of technology in public libraries. This is particularly important for advocacy efforts, as more than $1.4 billion in federal funding will be distributed to states to support digital equity work starting in 2024. PLA invited all public libraries to participate and received a total of 1,511 library responses, a participation rate of 16.4%. The survey report and findings will be released in July, and respondents get free access to data visualizations and benchmarking analysis in PLA's dynamic Benchmark tool.

Professional Growth

PLA 2024 Conference

In April, PLA held a successful and exhilarating conference that brought together more than 7,500 public library workers, supporters, and exhibitors to Columbus, Ohio, and virtually from around the world. PLA's Conference Program Subcommittee had the difficult task of selecting the robust slate of programming out of more than 550 proposals. Programs ranged from food insecurity to Black librarianship to censorship challenges and beyond. Attendees visited with more than 200 vendors and enjoyed perks like the networking receptions, How-To Stage, Career Center, and the inaugural PLA Dog Park!

PLA also received a record-breaking number (573) of scholarship applications to attend the conference. As part of our commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice in the library profession, PLA tripled the number of conference scholarships offered and increased the

number of qualifying categories for applicants. More than 100 scholarship recipients were awarded complimentary conference registration, one year of ALA/PLA membership, and a travel stipend of $750 for those attending the conference in-person. Recipients also took advantage of special networking opportunities—including meeting with and learning from TikTok sensation and library advocate Mychal Threets.

Online Learning

PLA continued to offer the best online learning for public library staff and supporters, with 33 webinars (12 paid, 21 free) presented to over 8,500 people. Highlights included a focus on accessible programming, inclusive services, and supportive staffing in our most popular paid webinars. PLA's biannual webinar proposal process ensures we showcase the best work happening in public libraries today and offers a great opportunity to get involved.

Library leaders at all levels have been facing unprecedented challenges related to a variety of topics: intellectual freedom; equity, diversity, and inclusion; staffing challenges; community engagement; and maintaining our own motivation in a post-pandemic environment. People need time and space to refresh, energize, practice self-care, and feel seen and supported by their colleagues. To respond to this growing need, the PLA Leadership Development Committee launched a series of 10 online networking conversations, "Stronger Together: Creating Space for Mutual Support," which reached over 1,600 people from September 2023 through January 2024.

PLA and Google know that library staff are trusted facilitators and guides in boosting information literacy skills. With growing challenges rooted in misinformation, this role is only becoming more important. Building on a 2022 Super Searchers pilot with Public Libraries 2030 and Google, PLA extended the brief and effective training to help equip more busy library staff with tools to help patrons search more efficiently and critically engage online information.

The Super Searchers training and toolkit provide resources for Google users to understand the context that surrounds what they find when searching the web. Built on work developed by University of Washington researcher Mike Caulfield, this can be a useful resource for library workers as they perform their own duties and help patrons think critically about the information they consume. PLA offered five free webinars that reached over 3,000 people with tools to help library patrons search more efficiently and critically engage with online information.

Advocacy and Awareness

Advocacy

Timed with International Fact Checking Day in April, PLA and Google convened experts from across government, civil society, libraries, academia and the private sector to discuss effective

strategies for helping people develop information literacy skills. Hosted by DC Public Library, speakers explored topics such as how to make information literacy skills training more compelling for communities, what collaboration is needed across stakeholder groups, as well as the role of libraries and library professionals in this vital work.

PLA expanded our work with AT&T to provide media and marketing templates to support community awareness of public library digital literacy resources. We showed our support at several community events across the country where libraries participating in the PLA Digital Literacy Workshop Incentive program were given additional funds to distribute free laptops to workshop participants.

The PLA Board engaged with reporters and partners to increase awareness of the impacts of book bans on public libraries, their staff, and their communities. Dr. Maria Taesil Hudson McCauley, PLA President 2022–2023, helped raise awareness of the rise in public library censorship incidents by participating in the ALA x NBC Banned Book Club discussion featuring George Orwell's *1984*. In a story from NPR, "The plot thickens: The battle over books comes at a cost," Sonia Alcántara-Antoine, PLA President 2023–2024, spoke about the dangers of these challenges, including losing staff, limiting services, and the ripple effect that has on the community.

PLA also published stories and examples of summer learning programs to remind the world of the joy of reading and the essential role libraries play while school is out. Whether it's visiting with raptors, learning about upcycling, or having a massive foam party to celebrate the end of summer, public libraries offer learning and experiences that kids couldn't get anywhere else.

As PLA President, I have acted as a spokesperson for PLA and public libraries in over 40 unique media pieces. I have interviewed with national news outlets, local news outlets, and library trade publications including NPR, CBS News, the Baltimore Sun, and Library Journal. I have spoken to the media on topics ranging from book bans and intellectual freedom, to library mental health resources, to uplifting the nation's largest celebration of public libraries, the PLA 2024 Conference. In the face of unprecedented challenges on a national scale in the library field, it has been my honor to advocate for and represent the resilient and adaptive nature of public libraries today.

Free People Read Freely

PLA lifted the advocacy messaging and support of libraries facing censorship challenges by producing and selling a limited-edition Free People Read Freely tote bag at the PLA 2024 Conference. Over 850 bags were sold onsite in Columbus, totaling $21,700 in revenue shared with the Freedom to Read Foundation, PLA, and ALA Graphics.

Publications

PLA's bimonthly magazine, *Public Libraries*, continues to serve as a crucial resource to more than 8,000 members and 500 subscribers, covering topics from library leadership to data-driven decision making to powerful partnerships. FYI: The Public Libraries Podcast provided 10 thought-provoking episodes so far this year. Covering diverse subjects such as The Let's Talk Race Program at the Richland Public Library, Read Romance/Fight Patriarchy, and even Beekeeping at the Library, FYI episodes collectively garnered over 13,000 listens, showcasing the podcast's broad appeal. *Public Libraries* Online, the digital companion to the *Public Libraries* magazine, remained an information hub. Throughout the year, the site unveiled nearly 100 articles, each contributing to the robust dialogue within the library community. With approximately 30,000 individual views per month, *PL* Online demonstrated its continuing commitment to providing valuable insights to its readership.

PLA continues to provide valuable resources to enhance family engagement in libraries. Released in spring 2024, PLA and ALSC published the new digital edition of the Every Child Ready to Read® (ECRR) toolkit, which enables public libraries and other early literacy centers to present workshops that help prepare parents/caregivers for their critical role as their child's first teacher. The workshops demonstrate how parents, grandparents, childcare providers, and preschool teachers can use five simple research-based practices—talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing—to develop language and pre-reading skills in children from birth to age five. PLA's annual Early Literacy Calendar continues to be a popular tool for libraries. It is available in both English and Spanish versions and caters to a diverse range of libraries and communities.

PLA has also been working on a new publication titled *Navigating Crises in Public Libraries - Trauma-Informed De-Escalation Tips*. This forthcoming book aims to provide practical guidance for library workers on responding in a trauma-informed manner, de-escalation techniques, and effective responses to verbal altercations and crisis situations, promoting a safe and supportive library environment.

Organizational Excellence

PLA 2024 Election

In April, the PLA membership elected Dr. Brandy McNeil, Deputy Director of Branch Programs and Services, New York Public Library, to the office of 2025–2026 PLA president. Under her stewardship, Dr. Brandy McNeil has worked to transform community access to technology, knowledge, and opportunity across the 89 branches of the New York Public Library. Her contributions to library science include serving on the PLA Board of Directors, as a liaison on the PLA Conference Committee, as the chair and co-chair for the PLA Digital Literacy Committee, as well as serving on the Executive Board of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association and being a contributing writer for the book *Libraryland; It's All About the Story* (2020). Dr. McNeil is also a proud member of the New York Library Association, a

columnist for *Public Libraries* magazine, and the recipient of the 2017 Library Journal Movers and Shakers Award. Also elected to the PLA board as directors-at-large were [Laura McGrath](#), Deputy Director, Skokie (IL) Public Library, and [Padma Polepeddi](#), Assistant Director of Public Services, Community Outreach, Jefferson County Public Library (Lakewood, CO).

On the Road

After a hiatus from traveling due to the pandemic, PLA took advantage of the return to in-person events by exhibiting, sponsoring, or presenting at several library conferences across the country. We were thrilled to reconnect with our members and supporters and share new resources and toolkits, grant opportunities, and raffle off PLA 2024 Conference registrations. Stops on the PLA promotional tour included:

- [IFLA World Library and Information Congress](#) in Rotterdam, Netherlands;

- [Association for Rural & Small Libraries Conference](#) in Wichita, KS;

- [Colorado Association of Libraries Conference](#) in Loveland, CO;

- [New England Library Association Conference](#) in Springfield, MA; and

- [Ohio Library Council Convention](#) in Cincinnati, OH.

Looking Ahead

PLA had an exceptional year due in large part to a successful conference and we look forward to the year ahead. Michael Lambert, city librarian, San Francisco (CA) Public Library, will assume the PLA presidency on July 1, 2024. This summer will kick off the third round of PLA's Digital Literacy Workshop Incentives, supported by AT&T, and continue to drive our work helping libraries close the digital divide. We also look forward to reading the results of the 2023 Technology Survey, as well as launching the second run of the Public Library Staff survey this fall. With PLA 2024 behind us, planning for PLA 2026 in Minneapolis will soon begin and program proposals will open next spring.