TEXAS LIBRARY JOURNAL

Volume 102, Number 4, Fall 2026

Back to School Back to Reading

The Quiet Magic of the Mock Caldecott: A K-5 Literacy Incentive

Midterm Election Resources from League of Women Voters Texas

LAWPods: Expanding Community Access to Legal Information

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For editorial and advertising information, contact Wendy Woodland, TLA Director, Advocacy & Communications at: wendyw@txla.org

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Texas Library Journal (ISSN 0040-4446) is published quarterly in spring, summer, fall, and winter by the Texas Library Association, 3420 Executive Center Drive, Suite 301, Austin, Texas 78731.

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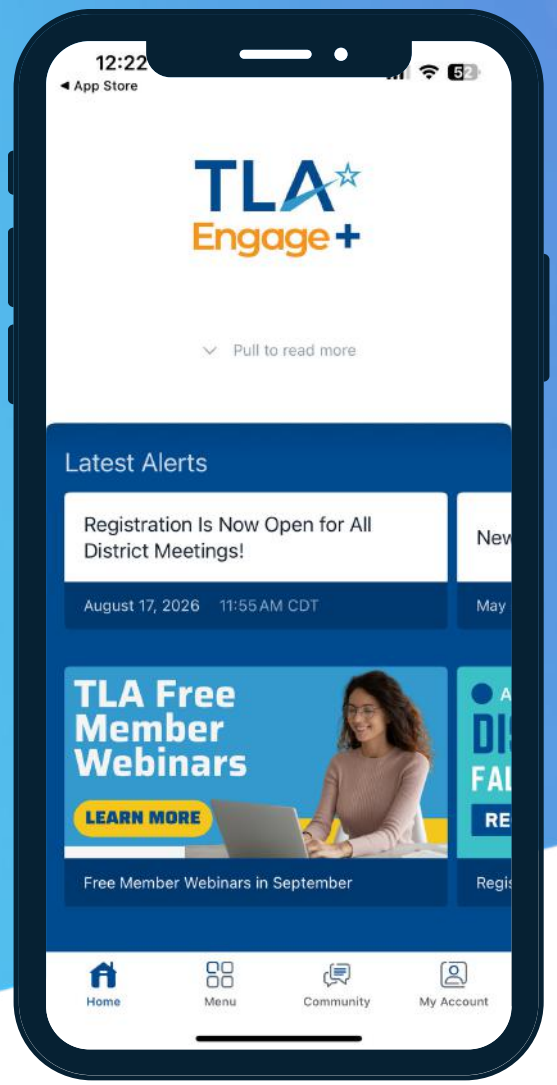

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President's Perspective

By Melissa Rippy

FALL HAS ALWAYS FELT LIKE A SEASON OF RENEWAL TO ME. For many of us, it brings the beginning of a new school year, new opportunities to serve our communities, and a renewed sense of purpose. Even beyond our libraries, fall invites us to pause, refocus, and consider what we hope to accomplish together in the months ahead.

Across Texas, library professionals are beginning this season in different ways. School librarians are welcoming students and educators while continuing to work through requirements resulting from the 2025 Texas legislative session. Public libraries are responding to evolving community needs. Academic and special libraries are supporting student learning, research, workforce development, and access to reliable information. Although our settings may differ, we share a commitment to ensuring that people can find the resources, support, and sense of belonging they need.

That shared commitment is at the heart of our 2027 annual conference theme: **Your Voice. Our Community. For ALL**. The theme reminds us that libraries are strongest when people share their perspectives, support one another, and work together to ensure every member of our community feels welcomed and valued. It is both a celebration of who we are and a call to action for how we move forward together.

This fall, one of the best ways to put that theme into practice is through **TLA District Meetings** held across the state. These gatherings give members the chance to learn from one another, strengthen professional relationships, and connect with colleagues from all library types close to home. They also remind us that, while our communities may look different, we share many of the same goals, challenges, and aspirations.

Whether you are attending for the first time or returning as a longtime member, District Meetings offer a meaningful opportunity to expand your network, exchange ideas, and discover new ways to support your local community. They are also an excellent way to introduce new members to the value of TLA and the power of belonging to a statewide professional network. As you make plans for the fall, I encourage you to attend a **District Meeting** in your area, reconnect with colleagues, welcome someone new, and add your voice to the conversations shaping our profession.

This fall also arrives at an important moment for Texas. The general election on November 3, 2026, will determine leaders whose decisions will help shape the future of our communities and public institutions. The 90th Texas Legislature will convene on January 12, 2027. These dates matter to every type of library because public policy can affect funding, education, access, technology, intellectual freedom, and the services available to Texans.

As library professionals, we understand the importance of reliable information and informed participation. Our responsibility does not begin or end on Election Day. Now is the time to learn about the issues, build relationships, share the impact of our libraries, and help decision-makers understand what is at stake. Advocacy is most effective when it is consistent, informed, and rooted in the experiences and stories of the people we serve. Together, we can strengthen the relationships and collective voice that support libraries across Texas.

This season of renewal offers more than a fresh start. It gives us an opportunity to recommit to the future of Texas libraries and to the people and communities we serve. When we speak with purpose, listen with care, and act in partnership, we strengthen both our association and our collective impact. I continue to be inspired by the generosity, expertise, and commitment of TLA members across the state. No matter where we serve or what type of library we call home, we share a common responsibility to help Texans access the information, resources, and support they need. I look forward to seeing our community continue to grow this fall—in person, online, and through the voices we use to shape the future of libraries.

Melissa Rippy

Melissa Rippy
2026–27 TLA President

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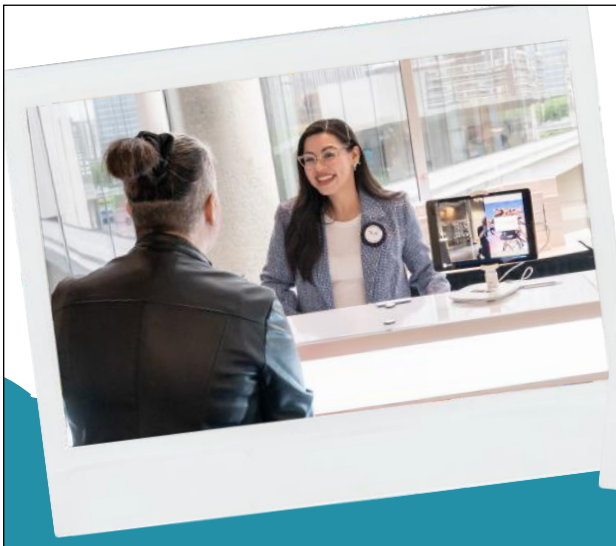

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Beyond the Stacks: Measuring the Economic and Community Value of Public Libraries

By Wendy Woodland

The results of the Return on Investment (ROI) Study commissioned by the Texas Library Association were released this week (September 16), and they prove what we all know, Texas public libraries are essential community resources that deliver value far beyond the books on their shelves.

For every $1 invested in public libraries, communities see a $4.74 return on investment.

Public libraries generate $3.8 billion in economic benefits statewide. $2.5 billion of that comes directly from library services such as computer and internet access, job search support, programming, circulation of print and digital materials, and databases.

More than 11,000 jobs are supported directly or indirectly by public libraries and $950 million is generated in state GDP.

The 2026 " Beyond the Stacks, Economic and Community Value of Texas Public Libraries," conducted by JBK Economics Group and funded by a grant from the Mellon Foundation, examines the economic value of public library spending and the broad range of services libraries provide to Texans.

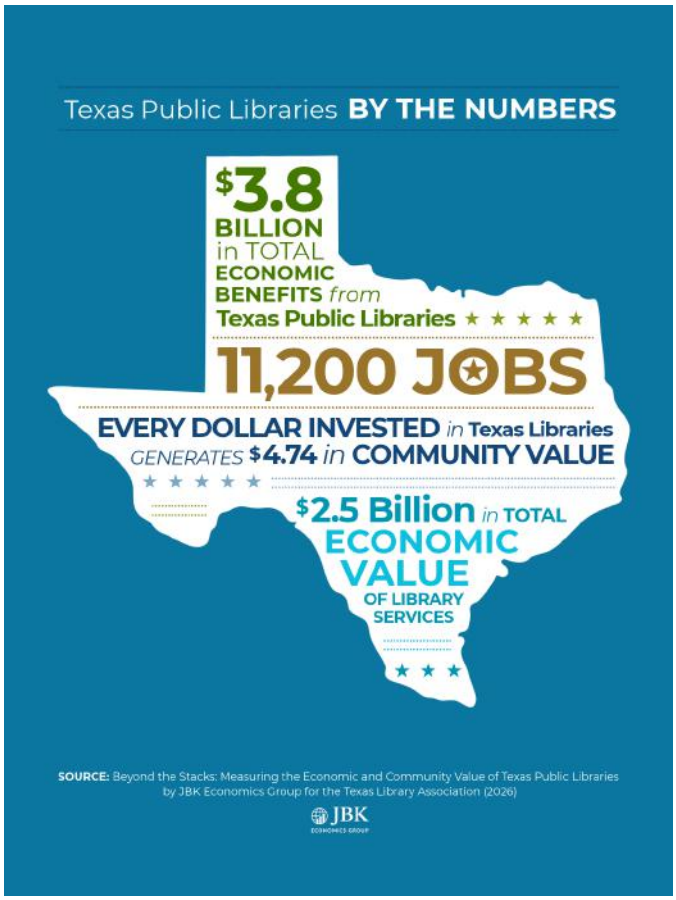
The lead researchers will present the findings at a **webinar** on Tuesday, September 29 from 3:00 – 4:00pm. Registration is free for TLA members.

The ROI study, together with results from the Public Library Public Opinion Poll conducted by KRC Research on behalf of TLA and funded by the Mellon Foundation grant demonstrates that public libraries are smart investments that are highly valued by Texans.

The findings reinforce a broader picture of public libraries as essential community infrastructure. In fact, 90% of Texans surveyed believe public libraries should be treated as an essential public service—placing them alongside other critical community infrastructure like community centers, schools and public transportation.

As TLA Executive Director Shirley Robinson noted when the ROI study was released, "In a state as large and diverse as Texas, finding common ground isn't always easy. Public libraries are places where opportunity is shared, neighbors come together and communities have access to resources that improve their quality of life."

TLA will continue to promote these findings to stakeholders and the public via our **Libraries: Truly Texas** campaign. Visit **TrulyTexas.txla.org** to download the complete reports, and access resources you can use to communicate these results to local stakeholders.

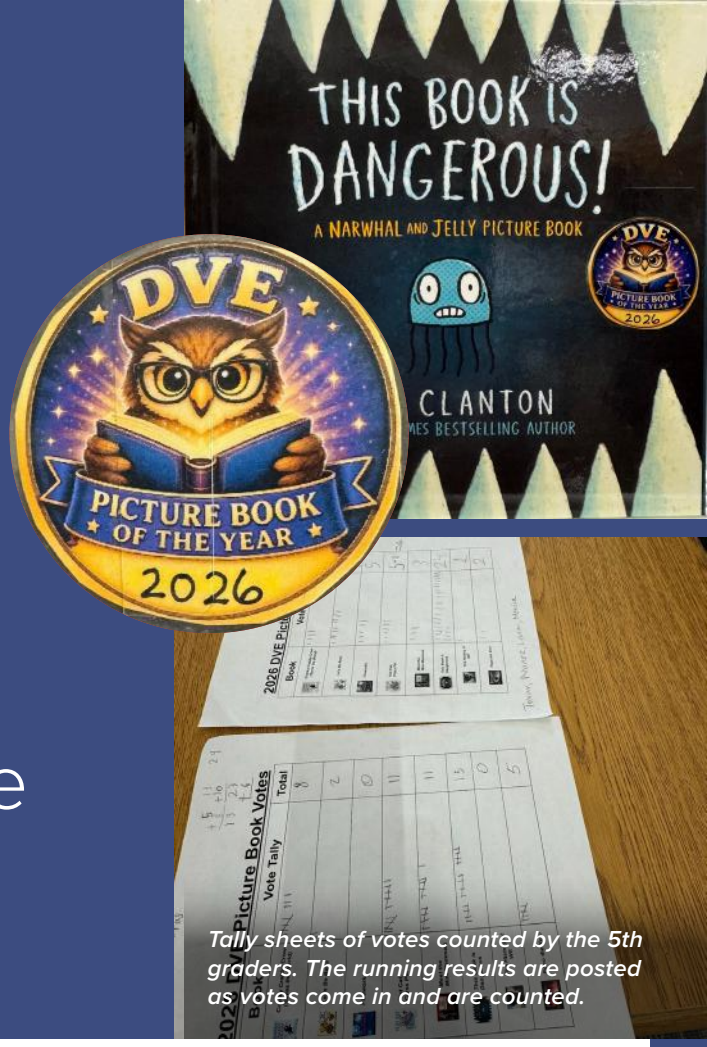


LIBRARIES TRULY★TEXAS

The Quiet Magic of the Mock Caldecott

A K-5 Literacy Incentive

By Nina Personius, MSEd, MSIS
Librarian | Del Valle Elementary School



Tally sheets of votes counted by the 5th graders. The running results are posted as votes come in and are counted.

On a cool October morning in Central Texas, in a brightly lit elementary school library, a visitor might encounter a group of enthusiastic children huddled around a pile of picture books, speaking in hushed voices that mingle with the sweet sounds of pages turning and sporadic, muffled giggling. Fifth graders flip through books, pointing and laughing and delighting in the stories together. This visitor would also find these children using academic language to discuss the style, themes, and artistic renderings as they carefully evaluate each title. Appreciative comments are shared between students as they encourage their peers to open various books and examine them. In this space, endless possibilities lie among pages: time travel, mythical creatures, drama, humor, mystery and every genre that has captured the hearts of children for generations.

These 10-year-olds are analyzing newly published picture books for Del Valle Elementary School's annual Mock Caldecott. They have done this process before and have waited for the privilege of selecting this year's contenders. During this evaluation stage, students compare illustrators' use of color and shape. They read select passages aloud to each other, and consult informational pages to see what media and techniques were used. They go through hundreds of works in a few months, critiquing them through the lens of the criteria employed by the official Caldecott committee. As the oldest students in their elementary school, these fifth graders carry the prestigious honor of selecting stories for the entire school community to enjoy, completing the first stage of our schoolwide picture book contest.

This year marked my seventh Mock Caldecott. Out of the eight picture books selected from hundreds of others by last year's fifth graders, two were illustrated by former Caldecott Honor winners, while five others later received prestigious medals and awards. In addition, two other selections earned spots on the Texas Topaz Reading List and this year's 2 x 2 Reading List.

While students enjoy guessing which books might win medals, our annual Mock Caldecott is an experience that goes beyond discovering our school's favorite picture book. It is a profound literacy incentive that unites our community of readers, carrying ripples of benefits for years to come.

At a time when the printed page feels like a relic from the past, our Mock Caldecott fosters an age-old tradition of selecting stories with intentionality and purpose. While young people live in a digitized world dominated by pervasive screens, our students reverently take part in an activity that connects them to generations of readers before them.

Libraries, bookstores, and overflowing bookshelves were once ordinary parts of domestic life. Now, many of these spaces

and traditions feel increasingly rare. Through this process, students help keep the experience of discovering and sharing physical books alive. As schools struggle with literacy rates across our country, and adults scratch their heads wondering why children are no longer interested in reading the printed word, our Mock Caldecott ensures that readers in our school library are immersed in the beauty and essence of literature.

At the start of this process, students learn about various awards for children's literature and are shown examples of decorated titles from each category. They are reminded that committees of adults are contemporaneously working to uncover the very best in children's literature. These young readers are delighted to discover that they have the important role of selecting books for their fellow schoolmates based upon their own interests, while gaining exposure to artistic styles and techniques in children's literature.

After learning the criteria used by the official Caldecott committee to discern the winner, students weigh in on selections, advocate for stories, and debate which books deserve a place not only in the running for the school award, but to also earn a spot in our library collection.

Intrinsic motivation fuels the desire to participate in schoolwide literacy initiatives. Students, imbued with the importance of the task, and how we are all doing it together in community, become invested in the shared experiences of our learning space. These young readers find themselves active participants in the library's process of resource acquisition.

Exposure to high-quality literature creates an authentic selection process. The process begins with students opening more than 100 physical books. Student choice means that stories I may have overlooked due to personal preferences often make it to the final rounds, and go on to become wildly popular among our greatest stakeholders.

There is no influence more powerful than a peer's recommendation. When students suggest titles to each other, the level of interest and engagement soars. The subsequent fandom is not something trending on an app; this trend is localized, bonding readers together in the spaces where they learn.

Peer influence leads the way, making it "cool" to read.

OUR MOCK CALDECOTT TIMELINE:

As the steward of this annual schoolwide tradition, my preparation takes place June through November.

Summer: I peruse new picture books at bookstores and libraries, consult online mock Caldecotts, and request titles from local libraries. I visit numerous public libraries and fill tote bags after poring through their newly published picture books. Once school begins in August, I bring around 20 new books each week. When the fifth graders come to the library for lessons and book exchange, they spend a few minutes going through the new titles and voting for their favorites.

Autumn: I tally the votes each week, record them on a spreadsheet, and return the ones with the fewest nominations back to the libraries in exchange for more. In mid-November, I purchase titles from the top 20 to add to our collection.

Winter: In January, the fifth graders return from holiday break with the excitement of sitting in the story corner to enjoy the fruits of their labor, as the top eight selections are read over a couple of months to the entire school.

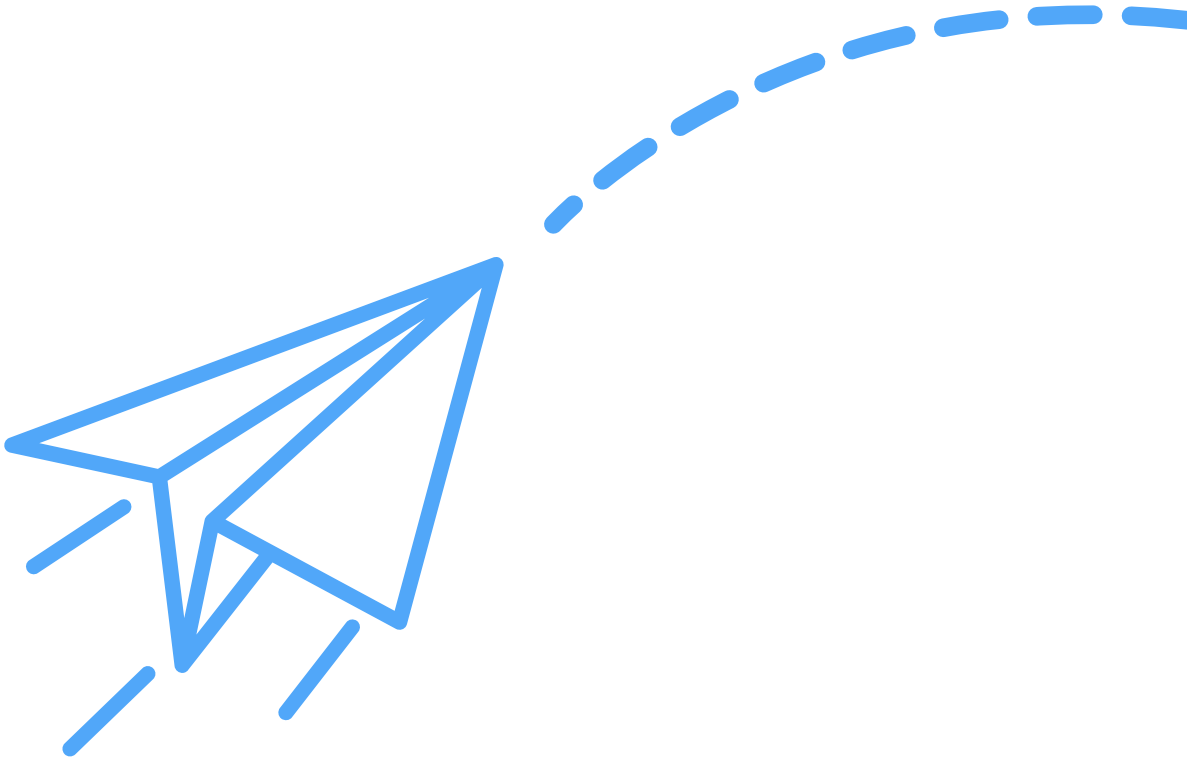
Once a class has read all eight books, they vote for their favorites. Votes are tallied, and ongoing results are displayed in graphs in the hallway for students to see how each award contender is faring. Finally, the winning books are announced, additional copies are ordered, and a rush ensues to check out those titles from the library.

This process keeps alive the quiet magic and awe felt for countless stories lining shelves on all sides, the wonder around access to thoughts and ideas, and the spark of joy young readers feel when they find their "just right" books. Winning titles from years past remain community favorites and do not stay on the shelves long throughout the school year. Younger siblings not part of the original contest also develop a love for the books as they are shared in homes outside of school.

As the beautiful chaos of this process comes to a close, I stand in the quiet reflective space among the books that have been chosen to live in our library, and I am filled with the knowledge that the tiny ripples of this literacy initiative have grown into waves of impact beyond our school walls. That is truly the magic of our school's Mock Caldecott.

5th grade students evaluating the picture books. They used post-it notes to indicate their choices.

The books pictured were the Final Eight Contenders for the School Award. They were read by the entire school, K-5.



BUILDING THE PLANE BEFORE IT'S NEEDED

A Case for Library Advocacy

By Carolyn Foote

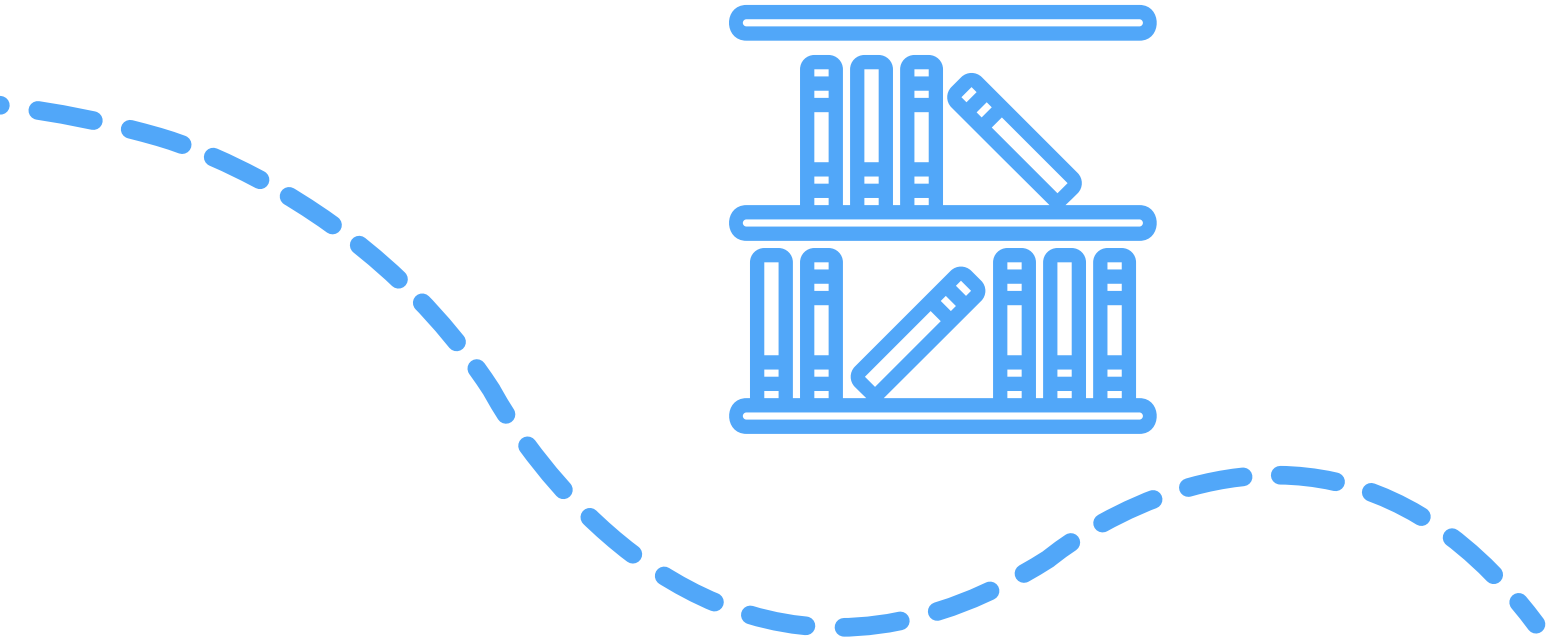
ONE THING I HAVE LEARNED OVER THE YEARS FROM JOHN CHRASTKA AT EVERYLIBRARY, BUT ALSO THROUGH EXPERIENCE, IS THAT TRYING TO BUILD A PLANE WHILE FLYING THROUGH TURBULENCE IS DOUBLY DIFFICULT. Building a library support group ahead of time, whether it's to fight book challenges or speak up for job security, can make a huge difference and means you aren't scrambling to reach out to supporters in a crisis.

In the spring of 2025, many school districts in Texas, including Austin, were facing budget pressure and considering cuts. After speaking with a couple of Austin ISD librarians, local library advocates felt like something might be brewing in the budget and decided to begin organizing a Friends of the Library group that could be activated if needed.

We started by developing our mission, then we set up a Google form and a Facebook page to gather supporters. The next step was to reach out to current library volunteers and publicize the Facebook page to authors and local friends through our personal channels. Volunteers began to trickle in, bit by bit. The fact that Austin is a city of library supporters and authors also helped! The group was not conceived of as an official "friends" group, but more of an informal coalition ready to help the school librarians if needed.

The goal of the Facebook page was to build support throughout the upcoming year by posting stories showing the district's libraries in action, and growing a ready crew of advocates. We wanted to be sure to highlight a variety of stories from different parts of the community, but it was difficult to get stories from busy school librarians. In that respect our page has areas for growth this year.

However, we continued gathering names of advocates through a Google form during the year. There were also opportunities during the year to reach



out to the district about hiring policies, job titles and to affirm that the "friends" wanted to see certified librarians on every campus.

In Spring 2026, rumors that library cuts might be made were again swirling. We activated our email list prior to the April school board meeting, asking library friends to attend the board meeting to show their support. We asked supporters to wear blue for books and to carry a library picture book that they could hold visibly during the meeting. We asked those who could not attend to call into the district's comment system, because those comment recordings are played at the board meeting. Lastly, we requested that supporters reach out to their particular board member. Our message was tailored around showing a love for libraries, and telling the stories of impact for our own families, not any particular request, since no budget cuts had been officially announced. A few community members spoke in person at the meeting, and a librarian from the district read an excerpt from Mychal Threets' book *I'm So Happy You Are Here* and reminded the board it was National Library Week. It was well received by the board and a few board members and the media reached out to some of the attendees, drawing positive attention.

Shortly afterwards, the district issued a memo indicating that they would not be cutting library positions during this budget overview. We were relieved but continued to encourage our email list, which had grown to over 200 people, to thank their board members for the support. However, about a month later, during the last week of school, the district suddenly announced that they would be reducing librarians at smaller campuses to half time positions. We were shocked by this reversal, but because our Facebook group and email list were in place, we were very quickly able to activate members to contact the district administration and the school board. Again, we worked hard to keep the message positive and explain the difference that librarians made to their campuses. We dug into the data and discovered a large number of the smaller campuses facing cuts were also designated as Title I, so we reminded the district of that as well. By the next school board meeting school was out for the summer, families were scattered, and in person advocacy was more difficult, so we kept up the phone calls and emails. We were losing hope that things would change, but suddenly, at the very last budget meeting, one of the board members, and then another, asked the superintendent to restore the librarian positions to full time. Ultimately the board voted to restore the positions after an hour of discussion, much to our shock and amazement.

Thanking people who support you is important. So again, we activated our email list and asked them to thank board members for their support. In retrospect, this experience showed us that organizing ahead of time made the work more efficient and timely. It also demonstrated the importance of being persistent and not giving up no matter how bleak the situation looks. Lastly, taking a positive and proactive approach helped. We didn't wait until the cuts happened to show support. Supporters can show up at any time to tell the great stories of our school libraries, rather than waiting to show up in a crisis.

The board's action and the public support will make it more difficult for library cuts in the future, not just now. But we need to continue to show up and speak up in this school year. Our loose organization and networking with the school librarians helped us understand the needs. This year we plan to grow our leadership and to also find ways to build financial support for the libraries, which will also help the district, overall.

We don't know what the upcoming budget year will bring, but because we have built the plane already we can focus our efforts on advocacy rather than list building. Out of gratitude, we want to give back. In these difficult times around the country with school budgets under stress, preserving library services for students is a critical task for us all.

Carolyn Foote is a founder of FReadom Fighters, a volunteer-led grassroots advocacy group, and a retired school librarian.

LAWPods

EXPANDING COMMUNITY ACCESS TO LEGAL INFORMATION

By Andre Davison

Public libraries are trusted places where people seek information, technology, forms, printing, and help to take the next step when they do not know where else to turn. Increasingly, those everyday needs have a legal dimension.

A HOUSING PROBLEM, FAMILY CONFLICT, JOB LOSS, MEDICAL CRISIS, DEBT, OR IMMIGRATION CONCERN can quickly become a legal issue. Patrons may not say, "I have an access-to-justice problem." They may ask, "What does this notice mean?" "Where can I find a court form?" "My landlord filed something." "I need to respond, but I do not know where to start."

These questions reflect a national justice gap. According to the Legal Services Corporation, low-income Americans receive no or insufficient legal help for 92% of the civil legal problems that substantially affect their lives. Nearly three-quarters of low-income households experience at least one civil legal problem each year. Many face eviction, domestic violence, foreclosure, debt, custody, or other serious matters without a lawyer.

Legal aid organizations cannot meet the demand, and private representation is often unaffordable. As a result, people frequently turn to trusted community institutions, including public libraries, for information and assistance.

Those circumstances inspired LAWPods.

The idea began with a practical question: How could the Harris County Robert W. Hainsworth Law Library extend its services beyond its downtown location and reach people where they live and seek help? Traveling downtown to the law library can be difficult because of traffic, parking, distance, work schedules, childcare responsibilities, and limited public transportation. These barriers can prevent people from accessing legal information they need.

Legal Access Workspace Pods, or LAWPods, were created in response. Through a partnership with Harris County Public Library, the law library brought legal information, technology, privacy, and law librarian support into neighborhood library branches. The goal was not simply to provide another computer. It was to make reliable legal information more accessible, private, and practical.

At its core, the LAWPod model is simple: bring law library expertise into trusted public library spaces.

Each LAWPod provides access to legal databases such as Westlaw, Lexis+, HeinOnline, and other resources selected by law library staff. Patrons can use Microsoft Word, legal forms, self-help guides, government websites, and research tools. Through virtual reference support, they can connect with law librarians who help them locate reliable legal information, navigate resources, and identify referrals to legal aid or other appropriate organizations.

A document camera allows patrons to show paperwork to a law librarian. This feature is especially useful because many legal questions begin with a notice, petition, court form, or letter the patron does not understand. The LAWPod can also support practical tasks such as reviewing documents, completing forms, saving files, printing, scanning, and locating information about courts or government agencies.

Privacy is equally important. Patrons dealing with eviction, family law, debt collection, probate, immigration, or other sensitive matters may not feel comfortable discussing their circumstances at an open computer. The LAWPod provides a private space to focus, review documents, and communicate with a law librarian without feeling exposed.

The project succeeded because of partnership. The Harris County Robert W. Hainsworth Law Library contributed legal information expertise, databases, self-help materials, virtual reference, referrals, and training. Harris County Public Library contributed neighborhood locations, trusted relationships, branch visibility, and community outreach.

This was more than one library system hosting another's project. It represented shared ownership of a solution to a community access problem. Public libraries are often the first place people go when they do not know where else to turn. Law libraries bring specialized knowledge of legal information and support for self-represented litigants. Together, they created a new access point.

THE LAWPOD SQUAD

A successful LAWPod is more than a room or workstation. It depends on the people who make the service welcoming, understandable, and dependable. The LAWPod Squad includes law librarians, public library staff, technology and facilities personnel, communications teams, community partners, and legal service providers.

The squad maintains technology, coordinates programming, trains library staff, promotes the service, monitors usage, troubleshoots problems, and connects patrons with appropriate resources. It also keeps the model patron-centered. Because legal access involves information, technology, privacy, and referrals, no single department can manage every part of the service alone.

The implementation process offered several lessons. First, start with the barrier, not the gadget. The pod is the visible feature, but the access model is the real innovation. The objective is not to purchase furniture or install technology; it is to help patrons overcome obstacles and leave with a clearer next step.

Second, involve the right people early. Successful projects require coordination among information technology, facilities, accessibility experts, vendors, frontline staff, communications teams, legal information professionals, and community partners. Much of this work happens behind the scenes, but it determines whether the service functions effectively.

Staff training is also essential. Public library staff do not need to become attorneys or law librarians. They do need to understand what the LAWPod is, what it is not, and how to make an appropriate referral. The clearest message is that LAWPods provide legal information, not legal advice. This distinction protects staff and patrons while preserving a meaningful pathway to assistance.

Promotion matters as well. A resource cannot help people if they do not know it exists. Flyers, videos, social media, partner referrals, branded materials, and simple language all contribute to awareness. Instead of saying, "We offer legal databases and remote reference services," a more accessible message might be: "Need help finding legal forms or understanding where to start? The LAWPod connects you with free legal information and a law librarian."

BEYOND THE PHYSICAL POD

The next phase of the LAWPod model is to extend its essential services beyond the physical pod. The pod remains an important access point, but not every community has the space, budget, or need for a dedicated enclosure.

The essential elements are reliable legal information, appropriate technology, privacy, document access, virtual connection to law librarians, and clear referrals. These elements can be assembled in many settings, including community centers, workforce offices, shelters, courthouses, colleges, faith-based organizations, and social service agencies.

A partner site might provide a private room, computer or tablet, scanner, document camera, headphones, secure video

connection, and scheduled access to a law librarian. Mobile outreach is another possibility. A portable kit containing a laptop, hotspot, scanner, document camera, privacy screen, headphones, and printed resources could support community events or rotating neighborhood locations.

This approach allows the law library to share its tools and service model with organizations already serving people who face legal and digital access barriers. The physical pod remains an anchor, but the broader vision is a network of trusted places where people can connect to legal information.

The impact of LAWPods is both numerical and human. In 2025, LAWPods recorded 509 bookings and 307 interactions. An interaction represents a real exchange in which a patron used the LAWPod and received assistance from a law librarian or trained service provider with a legal information need. Assistance might include reviewing a notice, locating a court form, navigating a database, identifying a reliable government resource, scanning or printing documents, or finding an appropriate referral.

The numbers demonstrate use, but the human impact is reflected in what each interaction makes possible: a private place to work, dependable information, support in understanding available resources, and a clearer next step during a difficult situation.

(l-r) Edward Melton, Executive Director, Harris County Public Library and Andre Davison, Director, Harris County Robert W. Hainsworth Law Library

LAWPods have also created opportunities for deeper partnerships. Through clinics with Houston Volunteer Lawyers, the model connects pro bono assistance with self-represented litigants. These clinics support patrons who need help initiating or navigating family law matters, including divorce and custody cases. Although the clinics do not provide full representation, they offer limited-scope assistance, triage, and guidance.

For libraries considering similar work, replication does not require duplication. A community may not need a pod. The model could take the form of a dedicated legal information workstation, scheduled virtual law librarian hours, a legal help webpage, a QR-code referral tool, a private appointment room, a scanner and document camera setup, a mobile outreach kit, or a legal aid partnership.

The key question is not, "Can we build the exact same thing?" It is, "What legal access barrier exists in our community, and what is the smallest meaningful access point we can create?"

A practical starting point includes five steps:

1. Identify one high-need legal problem affecting patrons.
2. Find a law library, legal aid organization, court, law school, bar association, or community partner.
3. Choose one realistic access point.
4. Create a patron-centered message and train staff on referrals.
5. Track usage, questions, referrals, and at least one story of impact.

LAWPods are a forward-looking response to present-day problems, but the larger lesson is simple: libraries build bridges. They connect people to knowledge, technology, resources, partners, and possibilities. In the legal information context, that bridge can help someone move from confusion to clarity, isolation to support, and uncertainty to a next step.

For public libraries, law libraries, and community partners across Texas, the invitation is clear: start with the barrier, build the partnership, create the access point, promote it, measure it, and improve it. The result may be a pod, private workstation, mobile kit, or virtual service. The form can vary, but the mission remains the same: bringing reliable legal information closer to the people who need it most.

Andre Davison is the Director of the Harris County Robert W. Hainsworth Law Library.

Midterm Election Resources from League of Women Voters of Texas

By Marilyn Minnaar

THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF TEXAS IS ROLLING OUT ITS *MIDTERM ELECTION VOTER GUIDE*! Over the past several years, the League has shipped free General Election and Primary Election *Voter Guides* in both English and Spanish to more than 300 libraries across the state. In addition, PDFs of the *Guides* in English, Spanish, Simple Chinese, and Vietnamese are shared with the libraries to use on their websites and in their newsletters during the election season. As a further option, some libraries have developed an eBook format.

These nonpartisan *Voter Guides* contain issue-based questions for candidates in all statewide races, with responses directly from the candidates, so voters can be assured of authentic information. Important voter information on various topics is also included to help voters navigate the voting process in Texas.

Another League-created resource is **VOTE411.org**, the League's digital version of the *Voter Guide*, which will be available on October 6, 2026. Here, a voter can find not only statewide races but also local races if they reside in the vicinity of a Texas League. Voters submit their address, see the races on their ballot along with candidates' responses to questions, choose their preferred candidates, and print their selections to take to the polls.

The League of Women Voters of Texas is committed to providing unbiased, nonpartisan educational information to voters across the state. To see if there is a League in your region, go to **www.lwvtexas.org**. If you are interested in Midterm Election PDFs of our Voter Guides for your library website and/or being added to the printed guide library distribution list for future elections, please contact **Marilyn Minnaar** or **the League of Women Voters Texas**.

It is an honor to partner with libraries throughout Texas to bring nonpartisan voting information to Texas voters.

Marilyn Minnaar is the Vice President, Voter Education for the League of Women Voters of Texas.

FREE DIGITAL AUDIO, LARGE PRINT AND BRAILLE BOOKS FOR TEXAS STUDENTS WITH A QUALIFYING VISUAL, PHYSICAL, OR READING DISABILITY.

Talking Book Program

Back to School Back to Reading

The Texas Talking Book Program Helps Texas Students with Dyslexia Start the Year Strong

By Susan Floyd

> “Every student deserves the chance to fall in love with a story, regardless of how they read it.”

AS STUDENTS RETURN TO SCHOOL THIS AUGUST, the Texas Talking Book Program (TBP) is reminding families and educators about a free resource that can help students with dyslexia succeed: access to more than 180,000 audiobooks and audio magazines, all provided at no cost and narrated by real people.

Dyslexia affects an estimated one in five students. Audiobooks can help strengthen literacy skills, increase reading engagement, and build confidence. Research has shown that students who regularly use audiobooks often develop a greater interest in reading and improve academically.

“Every student deserves the chance to fall in love with a story, regardless of how they read it,” said Alicia Topolnycky, TBP Engagement Specialist. “As families prepare for the new school year, we want them to know that a free, nationwide library of audiobooks is available with a simple application.”

Any Texan with a qualifying reading disability, including dyslexia, may be eligible. There is no minimum age to enroll, and membership lasts a lifetime. Applications can be certified by educators, school staff, dyslexia specialists, or medical providers, and no medical records or insurance information are required.

TBP offers books for all ages and reading levels, including classroom classics and popular fiction and nonfiction titles. Students can access materials through the BARD mobile app or a free Digital Talking Book Machine mailed to their homes. There are no waitlists, due dates, late fees, or charges for lost materials.

Texas Senate Bill 2075 requires school districts to inform families of students with dyslexia, or those at risk of dyslexia, about TBP. Teachers may also apply for a free School Classroom Account to support students in the classroom.

Families and educators can find the application, certifying-authority requirements, and program details online, or reach the Texas Talking Book Program directly by phone (toll-free in Texas): 1-800-252-9605 or email.

The Texas Talking Book Program provides free library services for Texans of all ages who are blind or have a visual, physical, or reading disability. To learn more, visit tsl.texas.gov/tbp or call 1-800-252-9605.

Susan Floyd is the Communications Officer at the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

Not A Magic Mirror

A LIBRARY STAFF'S PERSPECTIVE ON AI

By Eun Ah Lee and Emma Hair

"MIRROR, MIRROR, WHO IS THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL?" In *Snow White*, the evil queen asks her magic mirror this question over and over again. She appears to be asking for information, but in fact, she is asking for confirmation. She accepts what the magic mirror says without question and comes to rely on it. Now consider how easy it is to turn to AI as a mental shortcut for more and more tasks. Are we starting to rely on AI as our magic mirror?

We are living in the AI-embedded world and using AI tools almost every day. Library staff are no exception. We use AI tools in this line of work: notetaking at virtual meetings, brainstorming ideas, and summarizing long documents are a few examples. AI is a powerful tool, and it brings automation that enhances efficiency and creates convenience in the work environment. On the other hand, it also brings questions and concerns:

- Will AI affect how we think?
- Will AI affect how we work?
- Will AI replace us?

In this article, we try to think about these questions from the perspective of front-line library staff who see this technological advancement sweeping the workplace.

AI AND HOW WE THINK

Edwin Hutchins's Distributed Cognition Theory[1] gives us a clue

to how AI might affect our thinking. Distributed Cognition explains that the cognitive process is not just happening within an individual's brain. The cognitive process involves interactions between people, tools, and environments. For example, we often use a whiteboard to write and organize what we think. What we are doing is offloading a part of our cognition to empower our brain. We let the whiteboard remember information and free up mental bandwidth for other tasks. This is how cognition is distributed between our brain and the whiteboard. Also, when we use different tools, we think differently. Using an abacus, a calculator, or Excel requires different thinking processes to do calculations. What about AI?

Suppose we are using generative AI to create a family program in the library. We ask AI to summarize and compare similar previous programs and to generate possible topics. Then we use these suggestions to make a program outline, which we ask AI to review and provide feedback on. During this process there are cognitive interactions between our brains and generative AI. It is a different thinking experience from using simpler tools such as word processors or a whiteboard. Generative AI is a sophisticated tool capable of collaborating with us like a human teammate and cognition is distributed between our brain and AI. Distributing cognition affects how we think, however it does not mean letting AI think for us.

AI AND HOW WE WORK

AI changes how we work. People use AI tools for various tasks: scheduling, time management, communication, documentation, data management, office operations, and more. In short, AI enables automation in administrative, clerical, and organizational tasks. It brings efficiency and certainly saves us time and effort. However, being an efficient assistant is only part of AI's role. Experts suggest considering AI as a collaborator[2], and we see this already happening in the library. What do we expect from a collaborator? When we collaborate with others, we expect them to share their unique skills and ideas to achieve mutual goals. We are collaborating with AI when we ask it to generate more ideas in brainstorming, to review, revise, or refine our writings, or to assess our plans and give us feedback.

Suppose that we are leading a team project in the library. Team members gather to brainstorm, and, as leaders, we listen to and discuss all the ideas, but we do not accept everything that members suggest without critical review. We can assign various tasks to team members; however, we need to review, analyze, and verify results before producing the final outcome. Collaborating with AI is not so different. We assign various tasks to AI, and we need to review, analyze, and verify what AI suggests. Human-in-the-loop (HITL)[3], a term that emphasizes human involvement and responsibility in AI systems, is key in this relationship. We collaborate with AI, and in the collaboration, we are the leader who makes the final decision.

AI AND THE LIBRARY STAFF

What does this mean for library workers? As AI advances and becomes more enmeshed in our technologies and lives, library staff are more necessary than ever to help identify misinformation and to educate our patrons on AI literacy. In response to the increasing sophistication of AI tools, Texas State Library and Archives Commission (TSLAC) proposes adapting our approach to AI: "...it's time we shift from asking 'Is this AI' to 'Can I trust this, and how can I verify it?'"[4] By focusing on verification, we can play to libraries' strength as information literacy educators. Just as we have helped patrons navigate technology like the internet and smartphones, we should prepare to help patrons navigate the AI-embedded world. In addition to information literacy basics, we should educate patrons on AI's limitations and potential pitfalls. This will empower patrons to find the information they need without being misled by outdated or biased training data or hallucinations.

Recently, Plano Public Library (PPL) staff discovered Google's AI summary was providing incorrect information about library services. Patrons were relying on these summaries and feeling frustration upon hearing conflicting information from staff. At PPL, staff are providing feedback to retrain AI summaries as incorrect information is discovered while also helping patrons find the correct information. This example illustrates why it is important to always have a Human-in-the-loop to verify the output when working with AI. AI cannot and should not replace library staff. We have an important role to play in educating our patrons on AI literacy and continuing to provide accurate and verified information.

CONCLUSION

AI is not a magic mirror that should be believed unquestioningly. It is always necessary to have a human at the decision-making helm, verifying AI outputs before acting on them. What we need more than anything is AI literacy: understanding how AI works, questioning AI outputs, and using AI responsibly. Library staff especially need AI literacy as there are additional factors for us to consider such as privacy concerns and institutional policies.

As AI literate staff, we will sharpen our information literacy skills, lean on our unique human abilities, and enhance our ability to support our communities.

Eun Ah Lee is a Public Services Librarian and Emma Hair is a Library Technician at Plano Public Library.

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[4] Texas State Library and Archives Commission (TSLAC). (2026, February 27). Information literacy in the age of AI slop. https://www.tsl.texas.gov/ld/librarydevelopments/2026/02/27/lets-talk-about-ai-3-2/

Update on TLA's Governance Transformation Project

By Valerie Prilop

TLA HAS LAUNCHED A MULTI-YEAR GOVERNANCE TRANSFORMATION PROJECT designed to strengthen the organization's ability to serve members, support volunteer leadership, and remain responsive to the evolving needs of the library profession. The initiative supports TLA's Strategic Priority #4, Transforming Governance and Operational Agility.

The needs and priorities of our members and the association have changed, and TLA's structure and complexity have created challenges for member engagement and participation in leadership roles. The Governance Transformation Project will evaluate our current governance structure and governing documents, examine best practices from similar organizations, and develop recommendations that promote clarity, sustainability, and long-term success.

The project is being led by the Governance Task Force, which includes myself as chair, current and former Executive Board members, TLA members, and the TLA Executive Director as staff liaison. TLA has engaged a consulting firm for support and guidance. Strategic Association Management (SAM) was selected through a competitive request for proposals and interview process to provide guidance and support, and their staff brings years of association and governance experience to the project.

Over the past few months, SAM's team has been reviewing TLA's governing documents, organizational structure, and related materials as it assesses opportunities to strengthen and modernize the association's governance framework. In collaboration with the task force, early this summer a survey was sent to hundreds of our volunteer leaders, and with a nearly 50% return rate, it provided invaluable information and feedback.

In July at the Officer Governance Training and Workshop, nearly 50 TLA members participated in focus groups that provided valuable insight into both the member and volunteer leader experience and ideas for positive transformation. The SAM team and task force members are currently reviewing what we learned from the focus groups and working on our next steps.

Member engagement will continue to play an important role throughout the process. A **project webpage** and **online feedback form** provide all members with opportunities to share their ideas and experiences. This site will be periodically updated with project news and feedback opportunities. Findings and recommendations will be reviewed over the coming months, with the task force and SAM expected to continue their work through the end of 2027.

I encourage all members to participate in upcoming feedback opportunities and help shape the future of the association. By working together, TLA aims to build a governance structure that supports meaningful engagement, effective leadership, and a strong foundation for years to come.

Thank you all for your engagement and dedication to TLA and our amazing library profession!

Valerie Prilop is a TLA past president and chair of the Governance Task Force.

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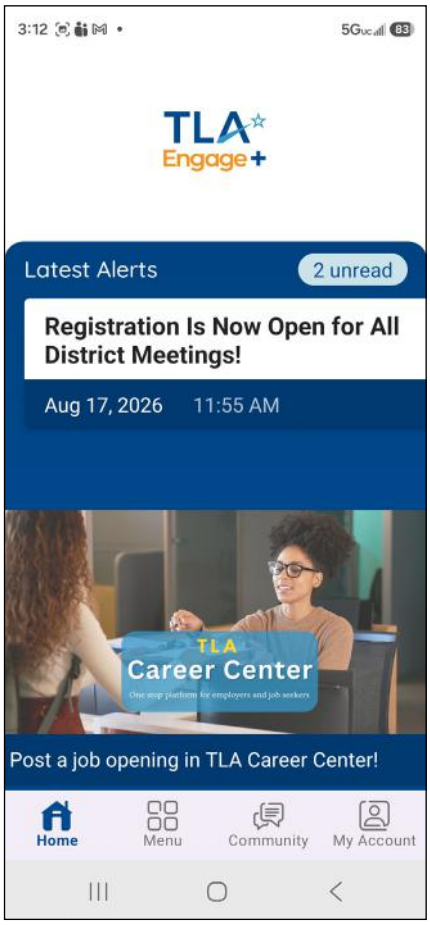

Texas Library Association members can take their membership wherever they go with the new TLA Engage+ mobile app. Available for download on the Apple App Store and Google Play, the app provides quick access to the tools, resources, and communities members use every day.

The launch of TLA Engage+ is part of TLA's ongoing commitment to making membership more accessible, convenient, and valuable. Whether you're at your library, attending a conference, traveling, or working from home, the app keeps your TLA membership within easy reach.

Check the latest discussion in TLA Engage, register for an upcoming event, or update your member profile with TLA Engage+. Members can also access the TLA Learning Hub, Volunteer Portal, Career Center, Member Directory, TLA Calendar, Reading Lists, merchandise, and additional unit purchases—all from one convenient app.

To access personalized features, simply download the app and sign in using your existing TLA member login. Logging in unlocks member-only resources and provides a seamless experience across TLA's online platforms. Questions? Email the TLA membership team.

REGISTRATION FOR TLA 2027 ANNUAL CONFERENCE OPENS OCTOBER 1

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Get ready for TLA 2027! Join library professionals from across Texas April 19-22 in San Antonio for four days of learning, connection, and inspiration. Explore educational sessions, discover new resources and ideas, connect with colleagues, and experience all that the TLA Annual Conference has to offer.

Visit conference.txla.org to learn more and start planning your TLA 2027 experience.

Texas Bluebonnet Award®

TEXAS BLUEBONNET AWARD VOTING NOW OPEN

It's time to "Read 5, Then Decide." Voting for the annual Texas Bluebonnet Award is open now through late January 2027. Every year, students in grades 3-6 from across the state choose the winner from a list of 20 selected books curated from suggestions from librarians, teachers, parents, students, and others. The TBA selection committee works hard all year to craft a list that reflects children's interests, relevant content, has reputable reviews, and demonstrates literary quality to promote free voluntary reading.

The winner will be announced in early February and celebrated at the Texas Bluebonnet Author Session at the TLA 2027 Annual Conference. Don't forget to register your library and be part of one of the most prestigious children's choice literary awards in the United States since 1979. Information on the current list, reading resources, and links to registration and voting can be found on the TBA website.

TEXAS STATE LAW LIBRARY RECEIVES GRANT TO DEVELOP TEXAS LEGAL OASIS PROJECT

The Texas State Law Library has been awarded a generous grant from the Texas Bar Foundation to develop the **Texas Legal Oasis Project**. The project will create a free online training course for public librarians, giving them the tools and confidence to help community members find reliable legal information.

Librarians will learn how to:

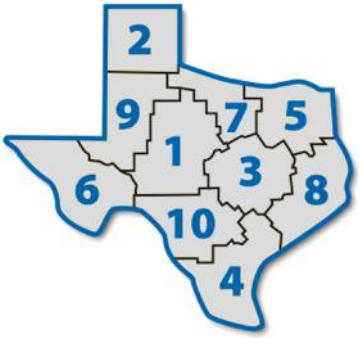
- Point people toward trustworthy legal resources.
- Make referrals to the right organizations and professionals.
- Answer basic questions about common legal topics like divorce, landlord/tenant issues, and estate planning.
- Stay within the boundaries of their role (provide information, not legal advice).

Finding legal help in Texas can be tough, especially outside of major cities. The rural parts of the state are especially underserved. According to the American Bar Association's 2020 Profile of the Legal Profession, nearly half of Texas's 254 counties (122 of them) are considered a "legal desert." It means there is less than one lawyer for every 1,000 residents. Only 30 counties have a law library open to the public.

But here's the good news: 232 counties do have a public library. That makes local libraries one of the most promising ways to connect Texans with legal information. We hope to develop them into a reliable source of support in communities that have little to no legal access.

In the words of Amy Small, Executive Director of the State Law Library: "Public libraries are a trusted, familiar institution, and often the first place people go with their questions. By training public librarians across the state in basic legal information skills, the Texas Legal Oasis Project will increase the ability and willingness of librarians to help with legal questions, and in doing so, increase availability of legal information statewide. We are very grateful to the Texas Bar Foundation for their support of this work."

The State Law Library serves the legal research needs of the Texas Supreme Court, the Court of Criminal Appeals, the Office of the Attorney General, other state agencies and commissions, and the citizens of the state. It is a public law library.



Connect with Librarians at a District Meeting Near You

The annual fall district meetings allow local librarians, paraprofessionals, and trustees from all types of libraries to meet, network, and set a foundation for collaborative efforts. Members and nonmembers are welcome to attend, and you can attend meetings outside of your district.

District 1, November 4, Abilene

District 2, October 6, Amarillo

District 3, November 16, Round Rock

District 4, October 9, McAllen

District 5, October 17, Greenville

District 6, November 14, El Paso

District 7, October 2, White Settlement

District 8, November 7, Richmond

District 9, October 10, Odessa

District 10, October 15, San Antonio

Visit **txla.org/district-meetings** for more information and to register.

Rio Grande City Public Library Selected to Participate in Smithsonian Institution Program

The Rio Grande City Public Library was one of only 16 public libraries nationwide – and the only library in Texas – selected to participate in the inaugural Smithsonian Associates Rural Library Program.

The Smithsonian Institution selected this inaugural cohort to expand educational opportunities, strengthen community engagement, and promote lifelong learning in rural communities. From September 2026 through August 2027, the Rio Grande City Public Library will collaborate with Smithsonian staff and fellow cohort libraries to bring world-class educational resources, virtual presentations, professional development, and community-centered programs to the residents of Rio Grande City and Starr County.

"We are deeply honored to represent Rio Grande City, Starr County, and the state of Texas in this prestigious national initiative. This recognition is a testament to the hard work of our staff and community partners, as well as the consistent support from our city leadership," stated Norma Fultz, Director of the Rio Grande City Public Library.

TLA RECEIVES GENEROUS DONATION

Recently, TLA received a generous $25,000 donation from the Bennett Raccah Charitable Fund. We appreciate their support of the association and of Texas libraries. Donations, no matter how small or large, help TLA achieve our mission to embrace, unite, and amplify voices of the library community through advocacy and education to ensure library excellence for all Texans. **Donations** are accepted at any time.

TLA 2027 MEMBERSHIP OPENS OCTOBER 1

Whether you're a seasoned librarian or just starting your journey, TLA membership connects you to a community of fellow professionals who share your passion and face similar challenges. Renew your membership or join TLA for the first time!
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Congratulations to the TALL Texans Class of 2026!

The TALL Texans Leadership Development Institute (TALL Texans) program is designed for library leaders to study and embrace leadership principles and practices. The program aims to help participants realize their potential to initiate positive changes within their institutions, professions, and for their stakeholders.

Rachel Alvarez, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD
Alexander Ames, University of North Texas
Innocent Awasom, Texas Tech University Libraries
Lareka Bailey, Fort Worth Public Library, East Regional Branch
Kara Baker, Socorro ISD
Viviana Caballero, Dustin Michael Sekula Memorial Library
Katherine Carter, University of Houston Libraries
Lareyna Cook, Hondo Public Library
Lori Eddy, Mansfield Public Library
William Flores, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
Tracey Griffin, New Braunfels ISD
Ariana Guel, Lamar Academy
Michael Gutierrez, South Texas College
Jenniffer Hentzen, Temple Public Library
Shannon Houston, Round Rock ISD
Jessica Jackson, Aldine ISD
Sara Kelley, Dallas Public Library, Vickery Park Branch
Margarita Longoria, Mission CISD
Robin Low, Carrollton Public Library
Audrey Manchester, Montgomery County Memorial Library System
Amanda McClure, Plano Public Library
Crystal Mendoza, Harlingen CISD
Natalie Newell, Brazoria & West Columbia Libraries
Melissa Quirl, Royse City ISD
Regina Reed, Leon Valley Public Library
Veronica Rodriguez, Harlingen CISD
Misty Schattle, Newton Gresham Library | Sam Houston State University
Bailey Sterling, NNLM Region 3, UNT Health
Rachel Stewart, Garland ISD
Jonathan Thorn, Tarrant County College District
Gabriella Trinchetta, Texas State Library and Archives Commission
Amanda Watson, Frisco Public Library
Anna Waugh, Mesquite ISD
Christopher Woodward, Grapevine Public Library
Ronna Wyse, Little Elm ISD

TLA AWARDS NOW ACCEPTING NOMINATIONS

Help us recognize the outstanding individuals, organizations, and projects making a difference in the Texas library community. Nominations are now open for TLA Awards honoring excellence, leadership, service, advocacy, and achievement in the library profession.

Nominate a deserving colleague, organization, or project today and join us in celebrating the incredible work happening in Texas libraries.

Learn more and submit a nomination

TLA SCHOLARSHIPS NOW ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS

Invest in your professional growth with support from TLA. Scholarship opportunities are available to help current and future library professionals pursue library education, professional development, and other learning opportunities. Explore available scholarships, eligibility requirements, and application information to find the opportunity that's right for you.

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- Access resources and resume tools

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