

With Demand Growing, Libraries Face Fiscal Pressure

BY CELESTE BRUNO

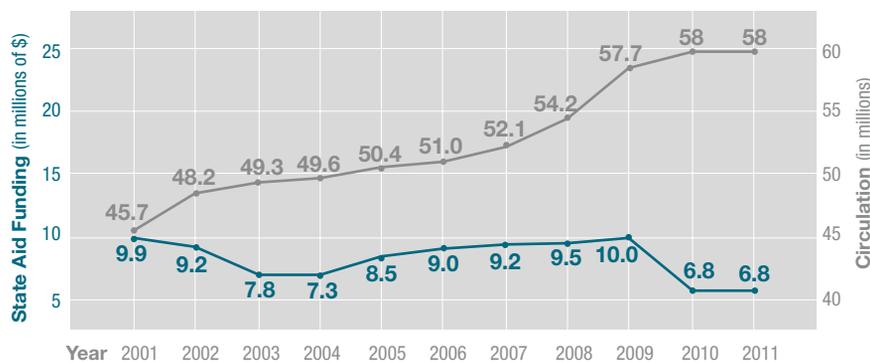
It's an understatement to say that this has been a unique fiscal period in Massachusetts and the rest of the world. For many, the financial crisis began in 2007, but for Massachusetts public libraries, funding reductions started in 2002, when both state and municipal funding that supports library services began to stagnate. With the most recent economic downturn, library funding still has not returned to pre-2002 funding levels.

"Libraries, like other agencies and most residents, were affected by the economic downturn," says Frank Murphy, chair of the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners. "But what has compounded the situation for libraries is that they are busier than ever before." Library use is at an eleven-year high, but current state funding to support libraries is the lowest it has been since the mid-1990s.

The effect of budget cuts on the services that libraries are able to offer to residents is significant. Libraries across the state are open 85,000 fewer hours than they were ten years ago. State aid to public libraries has been reduced by one-third since 2009 and is now at its lowest point since 1993. Once used to enhance programming and other local library services, state aid is now used by many libraries to cover basic operating costs. "We've had to make tough choices," says Mary Rose Quinn, director of

Library Usage Outpaces Library Funding

State Aid funding to libraries amounts to \$1.05 per resident.



Source: Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners

the Stevens Memorial Library in North Andover and a commissioner on the MBLC. "State aid now helps libraries keep the lights on."

Funding challenges at a time of increasing usage have created a scenario that not only affects current services but impedes the library community's efforts to develop new cooperative projects that benefit all residents. Access to ebooks is one such example. In a single year, ebook borrowing at Massachusetts public libraries has more than tripled. Yet some major publishers refuse to do business with libraries, set strict lending limitations, or sell ebooks to libraries for two to six times the price typically paid by consumers. In response, the MBLC is heading up a collaborative effort to broaden ebook access, making it affordable for libraries and easy to use for residents.

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WITH DEMAND GROWING, LIBRARIES FACE FISCAL PRESSURE

“Technology has the potential to eliminate so many barriers to information, but we must work together to ensure access so that we don’t end up in a society where content is actually less accessible than it was in the era of print,” says Murphy. “Adequate funding is critical to keeping access open and free.”

Funding from the federal Library Services and Technology Act has helped to fill the gap to a small degree. In July 2012, the MBLC approved thirty-seven Library Services and Technology grants totaling more than \$1.4 million to public, academic, school and special libraries as well as library networks across Massachusetts. The grants help libraries meet the diverse needs of the patrons they serve. For example, the Vital Aging for Older Active Adults program helps libraries become centers for productive aging, lifelong learning and civic engagement. Science Is Everywhere helps public libraries develop innovative programs and strategies that promote interest in science, technology, engineering and math. Libraries for Job Seekers helps libraries meet the needs of the unemployed, who need Internet access and career-related programming and workshops. Conversation Circles helps the state’s newest residents learn English. Funding, however, for the federal Library Services and Technology program for Massachusetts has been cut 11 percent, and the MBLC anticipates additional cuts for the upcoming fiscal year.

STATE AID

One way that the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners gauges the fiscal health of libraries is through the information the libraries supply on their applications for the State Aid to Public Libraries program. Public libraries apply for state aid, available to all municipalities, and are certified annually by the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners. Statutory and regulatory requirements must be met to receive State Aid to Public Libraries (per M.G.L. Ch. 78, Sec. 19A-19B and 605 CMR 4.00). These statutes and regulations include meeting a Municipal Appropriation Requirement and providing minimum standards of free public library services in regards to hours of operation, library materials acquired, and education levels and certification attained for library directors.

State Aid to Public Libraries has always been listed as an offset item on the annual Cherry Sheet distributed by the Department of Revenue. Because of this classification, and annual budget language stating that “any payment made under this appropriation ... shall be expended by the public library ... without appropriation,” state aid received by a municipality under the authority of this program can be spent without appropriation by the library for any library expenditure.

Some use the award to keep the library open, buy new computers, or enhance literacy programming. “The bulk of our state aid is used to buy and replace computer hardware and software,” says Deb Kern, director of the Dickinson Memorial Library in Northfield. “Although this is now a ‘cost of doing business,’ our library does not have a budget line item for these expenses. We would be in technological shambles without state aid.”

While the amount of state aid received by libraries represents a small piece of their operating budget—about 3 percent—there are other features of the certification that are important to libraries and patrons.

For residents, the most important benefit of the State Aid to Public Libraries program is access to library materials from across the state. Certification means that a municipality and its library meet the statutory and regulatory requirements of the program. Doing so guarantees that residents of the certified community are able to visit any other public library in Massachusetts that is also certified to borrow books, videos and CDs as well as get help with their questions. Certification guarantees that the library may make requests for books for its residents from any other certified library through Interlibrary Loan. Last year, residents borrowed more than 11.4 million items from libraries outside their own community. “If our library lost certification,” says former Lunenburg Public Library Director Amy Sadkin, “our patrons would go from having access to 37 million items at the click of a mouse to just 55,000.”

Certified libraries can also apply for Library Services and Technology Act grants and for state construction program grants to help fund a planning and design project, a new building or renovations to their current facility. (See related story, page 18.)

COOPERATION, CONSOLIDATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Faced with fiscal challenges, how are libraries able to survive? Through cooperation, consolidation and the use of the latest technology, libraries are working to meet the growing demand for library services. Under the direction of the MBLC, library services have been automated and streamlined, cooperative purchasing agreements have been established, and many needs of local libraries and residents are addressed through statewide contracts, services, and grants, saving time and money. In short, libraries have had to become hyper-focused on efficiency. Patrons of the Jones Library in Amherst, for example, received close to 50,000 items through Interlibrary Loan in fiscal 2011. If the library had to purchase these items, it would have cost more than \$600,000. Interlibrary Loan is made possible through a collaboration of the nine automated library networks, the Massachusetts Library System, and the State Aid to Public Libraries program.

How Are Libraries Funded?

- **88%** of library funding comes from municipalities.
- **3%** comes from State Aid to Public Libraries.
- **9%** comes from other sources, such as endowment incomes, friends of the library groups, etc.
- **1.24%** of total municipal operating expenditures statewide are spent on public libraries.

Sources: Data Reported by Libraries to the MBLC’s State Aid to Public Libraries Program; Mass. Department of Revenue

Fortunately, state and municipal funding for libraries appears to be turning a corner. “Even though we’ve been through the greatest economic downturn since the Great Depression, in Massachusetts we are not shuttering libraries,” says Representative Kate Hogan of Stow, chair of the Legislative Library Caucus. “The Legislature has worked hard to sustain state funding for libraries.” After a 31 percent reduction in State Aid to Public Libraries from fiscal 2009 to fiscal 2010, the program was level-funded after that, and overall state funding to support libraries increased 1.7 percent from fiscal 2012 to fiscal 2013. “In this economic environment,” says Murphy, “that’s a win for libraries and for residents.”

The MBLC gauges municipal support for libraries through the Municipal Appropriations Requirement, which is part of the State Aid to Public Libraries program. Throughout the economic downturn, cities and towns statewide worked hard to keep their libraries certified in the program. Most libraries maintained certification without any accommodation. In fact, the 312 libraries that met all state aid requirements in fiscal 2009 saw a budget increase of 3.8 percent from the previous year. In fiscal 2012, these certified libraries saw their budgets grow by 2.7 percent.

Libraries that are not able to meet the MAR are able to apply for MAR waivers and, with MBLC approval, can maintain certification in the program. From fiscal 2009 to fiscal 2011, the number of libraries granted MAR waivers jumped from 24 to 123. In fiscal 2012, the number dropped slightly to 121. In fiscal 2013, the number of MAR waiver applicants stands at 91, with the review process still under way.

Drastic, disproportionate budget cuts to libraries have been on the decline. In fiscal 2009, nearly one-quarter of the libraries that applied for MAR waivers suffered disproportionate budget cuts of more than 10 percent when compared to other municipal departments. In fiscal 2012, only two communities had budget cuts that were significantly disproportionate. In fiscal 2009, budgets for the twenty-four libraries that received MAR waivers were cut by 6.7 percent. By fiscal 2012, MAR-waiver libraries saw a budget reduction of just about one-tenth of 1 percent. (Libraries that were not state-aid certified, either because they were not granted a MAR waiver or because they did not apply, are not figured into this data because they are not required to report their financial information to the Board of Library Commissioners.)

ONE LOCAL TURNAROUND

The Bridgewater Public Library became a reference center library in the state’s regional library system in the 1980s, and subsequently the town expanded the library building with assistance from the Massachusetts Public Library Construction Program in 1995. By 2004, however, library funding began to slip. After receiving a 38.8 percent disproportionate budget cut in 2008, Bridgewater could no longer be certified in the State Aid to Public Libraries program. Because of the collaborative way libraries work together, it was a blow felt not only by Bridgewater residents but by the entire library community.

According to Sean Daley, who was brought on as the library director in May 2010 to turn things around, the circumstances

State Aid to Public Libraries

- Of the 351 municipalities in Massachusetts, **349** have public libraries or share public libraries.
- Of the 349 municipalities, **342** applied for fiscal 2012 State Aid to Public Libraries.
- Of those that applied, **219** met the requirements.
- In fiscal 2012, **122** communities applied for waivers of the Municipal Appropriations Requirement, and **121** received them.
- In fiscal 2012, **341** were certified to receive State Aid to Public Libraries.

were dire. With the library budget at about 25 percent of what it had been, and hours reduced to just fifteen per week, there was a lot of rebuilding to do. “Patrons felt rejected by other libraries,” Daley says. “They were confused, bitter, and saw this as a punishment.” Daley’s job was to educate the public and town officials about the benefits of the state aid program.

Just one month after Daley became director, the town faced a big decision: see the police and fire departments cut in half and the library closed and other services eliminated, or pass the town’s first Proposition 2½ override. The town supported the override, and the library gained \$200,000 in its budget. The recovery was under way.

Troy Clarkson, currently the town manager in Hanover, was Bridgewater’s town manager in 2010, when the override passed. “The library is the heart of the community,” says Clarkson. “I couldn’t see a real revival in Bridgewater without the public library.”

When Daley came to Bridgewater, he sat down with the library trustees to talk with them about regaining certification in the state aid program. “Our highest priorities were access to resource sharing and the recognition conferred by certification that the town values its library,” he says. At the library, he adds, “I made sure that we did things as effectively as possible by following best practices, reassigning limited staff, and getting the highest level of service from a very limited budget.” With these changes in place, the library has continued to gain town support.

Now with funding improved and service maximized within that budget, the library is poised to regain certification in the state aid program. This will assure residents access to borrowing and interlibrary loans from neighboring libraries. “The biggest response from library users,” Daley says, “is to the improved hours, which now stand at forty-eight per week, and to improved adult and children’s programming.”

While the Bridgewater Public Library is not yet what it once was, it is on its way back.

For more information, visit mass.gov/mblc or contact the MBLC at (617) 725-1860.