

OVERVIEW

The Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners (MBLC) is the agency of state government with the statutory authority and responsibility to organize, develop, coordinate and improve library services throughout the Commonwealth. The Board advises library trustees and municipal officials on the operation and maintenance of public libraries, including construction and renovation. It administers state and federal grant programs for libraries; promotes cooperation among all types of libraries through the Massachusetts Library System (MLS), the Library for the Commonwealth and automated library resource sharing networks; supports cultural programming through the Massachusetts Center for the Book; and arranges for talking book and related services for blind and disabled residents. It also works to ensure that all residents of the Commonwealth, regardless of their geographic location, have access to essential new electronic information technologies and significant electronic databases.

Founded by statute in 1890, the Board of Library Commissioners oversaw the start of 100 public libraries in its first decade of work. Today, 350 of the state's 351 cities and towns have public library services. The Board has nine volunteer members appointed by the Governor who set policy for the agency and hire the director. The agency has a staff of 23.

MBLC Vision, Mission, and Core Principles

Our vision for libraries in the Commonwealth:

Every library in Massachusetts is a thriving community hub, transforming lives through knowledge and lifelong learning.

Our mission:

As a state agency, the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners promotes equal access, advances innovation, and fosters resilience in libraries across the Commonwealth through funding, guidance, partnerships, and the coordination of statewide services.

Core Principles:

The principles below affirm who we are and who we aspire to be.

- **Equity and diversity:** We prioritize our work and resources in service to a more equitable world where diversity, in all its forms, is valued and leveraged for the good of all.
- **Inclusivity and belonging:** We support the work of libraries that create environments where people feel included, respected, and that they belong.
- **Partnership:** We are trusted partners, collaborators, and conveners, connecting people to ideas and to each other.
- **Courageous leadership:** We lead with courage, integrity, accountability, and compassion. We nurture these qualities in those we serve.

- Stewardship: We are good stewards of the public funds entrusted to us, and the well-being of the Massachusetts library community.

Alignment with Organizational Goals

In keeping with the MBLC's mission, the Board conducts campaigns designed to increase residents' awareness of and access to the services and programs that public libraries offer. The Board also serves as an advocate for libraries and improved library services. To that end, it produces publications intended to increase awareness on the part of government officials, library trustees, the general public, Friends of Libraries, and library staff. The Board also provides media with information about library-related topics and issues.

The 2021-2024 Statewide Strategic Communications and Public Awareness Plan will continue to further the MBLC's mission as well as meet the needs and goals outlined in the [Library Services and Technology Act \(LSTA\)/ Massachusetts Long Range Plan](#) and the recently completed MBLC Strategic Plan 2021-2025.

Compliance with Funding Requirements

The MBLC uses federal funds from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) for promotional outreach and awareness. Therefore, all campaigns must center around LSTA-funded websites or products and meet specific IMLS guidelines.

MBLC Websites are as follows:

Agency site <https://mblc.state.ma.us/index.php> (audience: librarians, library staff, library trustees, Friends groups, legislators, local officials, press)

MBLC Warehouse <https://awarehouse.mblc.state.ma.us/> (audience: librarians, library staff)

Consumer portal <https://libraries.state.ma.us/> (audience: general public)

Main Goals for the 2021-2024 Statewide Strategic Communications and Public Awareness Plan

First and foremost, market research is needed to better understand non-library users, determine target audiences, strategy, and messaging. The MBLC recently conducted a [survey](#) to gather input from the library community and further focus the plan.

The MBLC will be working with the Public Relations (PR) Advisory Committee (comprised of representatives from school, academic, and public libraries) and a hired agency to carry out plan. The MBLC and the PR Committee have developed this plan but are receptive to ideas and suggestions from the hired agency. Both the PR Committee and the MBLC understand the need to be flexible in the undertaking of this plan as new needs may arise that necessitate a refocusing of efforts

- 1) **Increase public awareness of statewide products and services**
- 2) **Increase librarian and library staff awareness of statewide campaigns and ready-made promotional materials**
- 3) **Increase awareness about the MBLC**
- 4) **Build a sense of value of Massachusetts libraries**

Increase public access to and awareness of statewide products and services

IMLS funded-statewide products and services include [LEA \(Library eBooks and AudioBooks\)](#), [statewide databases](#), the [calendar of virtual library events](#) (created in response to the pandemic), the [Video Library](#) (created in response to the pandemic), [Commonwealth Catalog \(ComCat\)](#), and the statewide summer library program. In a recent survey, librarians indicated that they wanted promotional campaigns for 1) everything you can do with a library card 2) eBooks and Audiobooks 3) statewide databases.

- Conduct market research to better understand non-library users
- Create promotional materials that reflect the state’s diversity
- Explore creating a permanent diverse patron group to review promotional materials and online assets
- Redesign the consumer portal so that it appeals to people who are new to library services
- Redesign the portal so that it is available in languages other than English
- Add library accessibility information to the portal
- Ensure that the statewide Public Relations Advisory Committee represents the state’s diverse population, different regions of the state, and different areas of library expertise

Measurement: Consumer portal usage statistics, Gale and Proquest statistics, and usage statistics from LEA (Library eBooks and Audiobooks), member-makeup of the Statewide Public Relations Advisory Committee, summer library program statistics. The MBLC welcomes additional metric suggestions from the agency.

Increase librarian and library staff awareness of statewide campaigns and ready-made promotional materials

In a recent survey, 76% of respondents said that they used some form of MBLC promotional materials in the past year. Of those who didn’t use MBLC promotional materials, 23% said they didn’t know they existed. Sorting through the overwhelming amount of emails and resources was cited as a reason for not using MBLC promotions or participating in MBLC promotional campaigns.

- Hold zoom sessions that introduce the library community to a new campaigns and provide opportunity for people to ask questions
- Promote the Awarehouse
- Periodically attend network meetings
- Create a publication and promotional calendar specifically for librarians, posted on the agency website
- Develop curated toolkits that make it easier for librarians to find the resource
- Explore potential trainings and helpful information for the library community

Measurement: materials ordered/downloaded, Awarehouse usage statistics; the MBLC welcomes additional metric suggestions from the agency

Increase awareness about the MBLC

MBLC's publications increase awareness of the role of the MBLC and the services MBLC offers. In a recent survey of librarians, 75% said that they used an MBLC publication in the last year. The most used were the online weekly MBLC Service Update and the online monthly Libraries in the News. Of those who didn't use an MBLC publication, 19% said it was because they didn't know it existed. Target audiences: librarians and library staff and local and state officials.

- Explore ways to expand the reach and accessibility of MBLC publications
- Highlight and promote staff expertise: work with staff to coordinate efforts to publicize their workshops, events, and achievements
- Ensure Brand Guide is used by affiliates and grant recipients
- Identify and participate in appropriate events
- Continue press releases and press outreach

Measurement: number of publications that are moved to a more accessible online format; the MBLC welcomes additional metric suggestions from the agency

Build a sense of value of Massachusetts libraries

Although library usage has steadily increased over the past ten years, libraries continue to struggle with the perception that they are a "nice" but not essential public service. As a result,

libraries often do not receive the funding needed to keep pace with increased demand for library services. Awareness campaigns typically target state and local officials

In a recent survey, librarians identified the topics they would like featured in an awareness campaign. In order of popularity, they are:

How libraries positively impact people's lives

How much money people save by using the library

Libraries as places that bring diverse people together

Measurement: state aid usage statistics, waiver applicants, overall funding to libraries; the MBLC welcomes additional metric suggestions from the agency

TARGET AUDIENCE, MESSAGE, and STRATEGY

The MBLC's target audiences include librarians, legislators, library trustees and friends, and people who live and work in Massachusetts.

- In many cases, librarians are frontline marketers and without their buy-in and awareness, campaigns can be only marginally successful.
- State and federal legislators and local officials provide library funding. It is important that legislators and municipal officials view libraries as a vital community resource. Legislators and municipal officials should receive ongoing information and contact, not just when it's time to ask for funding.
- Trustees and friends are uniquely positioned to advocate for library funding. Trustees run libraries and need to be aware of MBLC services and programs.
- The MBLC also provides direct services to residents through mass.gov/libraries.

Narrowing such a broad target audience is a challenge. Market research is needed to better understand non-library users, determine target audiences, strategy, and messaging. The MBLC will work with the statewide Public Relations Advisory Committee and a marketing firm to further define target audiences and determine market messages.

An integrated approach guided by consumer needs and preferences that includes a mix of paid, shared, owned and earned media is ideal. However, strategy development should consider the following:

1. Ways to reach underserved populations including people who may speak a language other than English
2. Integrating videos as a promotional/awareness element
3. An online/web-based format for MBLC publications

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT)

From the Statewide Public Relations Advisory Committee SWOT conducted 11.24.2020

Strengths

- Databases and other statewide/MBLC products/programs save libraries money—libraries (especially schools) would not be able to provide these on their own; Schools are heavily dependent on databases.
- Statewide resource sharing gives people access to millions of items that no library could provide on its own; Everyone has access to BPL's vast resources through Library for the Commonwealth
- Librarians are experts in collaboration—they don't compete, they work together; skillset that librarians bring to the table is valuable
- MBLC has staff dedicated to PR and marketing; the ability for the MBLC to work with a paid advertising agency helps ensure quality and consistency; The Statewide PR Committee and its efforts to be representative of different perspectives; Creative—the PR Committee is always coming up with new ideas
- MBLC has knowledge of the state and political process. Know federal perspective and where Massachusetts fits compared to other states. MBLC offers support to bring together libraries to make things happen in the state; MBLC tracks trends and brings innovation into library services in Massachusetts
- Networks work with and support member libraries. Example: SAILS Library Showcase in which librarians talked about programs that worked for them
- While MBLC staff cannot advocate for libraries, the nine-member volunteer Commission is active, involved and informed and have consistently demonstrated their willingness to serve as advocates. There are an estimated 60,000 members in Friends of Libraries groups
- LEA (Library eBooks and Audiobooks), an eBook program that allows borrowing from across the state. A huge success given vendor limitations and publisher restrictions

Weaknesses

- We're all overextended and there's an overwhelming amount of info coming at us/ Burnout is a threat to the profession, COVID has made it even worse. Vacancies that are not filled right away because of current budget realities are adding to stress/burnout/ People are overwhelmed with emails and resources; Some libraries are understaffed

and underfunded, leaving little time/resources for staff to engage in statewide promotional efforts--some with one or 2 staff members; There's two full-time MBLC communications staff for a large workload

- Lack of diversity in the profession. We're making an effort (on the PR Committee) but we each come with our own perspective that can be a barrier to reaching people who aren't using the library
- Identity confusion – audiences are confused, librarians don't know the difference between MBLC, MLS, MLA, networks, etc.
- Some libraries that don't recognize the need for outreach and marketing/ we can provide every tool possible but it is up to the libraries to pick it up and run with it to inform both users and connect with non-users/ Lack of local buy in from some small libraries in CWMARS Network; Libraries don't know how to do marketing and outreach; better coordination with MLS on marketing, technology and website training
- Legislators and Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) don't understand what libraries do—they think we're still the same old library from 50 years ago and a lot has changed. We don't just pass out books: DESE does not understand what Certified School Library Teachers actually do nor understand the learning limitations placed on those without access to library materials
- More and more is falling on Networks to create equity and engage librarians
- Whether or not a there is a school librarian is hit or miss depending on the school system
- Technology skill level is fantastic for some librarians and nonexistent for others/ Some libraries don't have websites
- Email is the preferred way of communicating, yet some don't read their emails and others are overwhelmed at the amount of emails they receive

Opportunities

- Learn more about what diverse people are looking for in library services and highlight those on the consumer portal; Nonusers are an opportunity and the consumer portal is a way to reach a new audience/Create tools for libraries to use to attract nonusers
- With current social justice movements and BLM, the MBLC and libraries have an opportunity to focus on inclusivity in both the profession and our libraries and send a clear message that libraries are allies and welcome everyone
- Free internet and WIFI—many people using library's WIFI in the parking lot when the library was physically closed due to the pandemic/laptop and WIFI hotspot lending
- Right now we're connecting people through virtual programming, but after the pandemic people will be craving in-person gatherings and programs—libraries should capitalize on this as a way to invite people in—new users and veteran users alike; Once

libraries are able to return to in-person services, marketing efforts to support libraries' outreach specifically related to "our buildings are open again; we welcome everyone here—more than a “welcome back” message that may exclude people who weren't library users in the first place.

- Our events, programs and statewide products (databases, audiobooks, eBooks) are free/ the new statewide calendar of virtual events and new video library; The pandemic is shining a light on all of the digital resources libraries have and virtual programming for all ages, as well as a vehicle to get important information to the public.
- Capitalize on the way librarians share and create a way for libraries that are doing a good job with marketing and outreach to share successes with others so that people don't need to recreate the wheel (SAILS showcase or Awarehouse)
- Library Information is from a reliable and trustworthy source and Librarians are research experts.
- To engage more librarians and library staff: target them in the same way that we set target audiences in other campaigns—a more segmented approach—not one size fits all; identify specific contacts per library that serve as a direct two-way communication source when something new is released; promote the Awarehouse with monthly email reminders
- Perhaps an all-encompassing state brand for all digital material- a way to refer to them. Databases, downloadable movies, magazines, books, etc. could all be captured under one theme, and have it customizable for libraries to plug-in their resources
- The major strength of the databases is that no one else provides free full text online articles, 24/7 from anywhere—no library card is needed for Massachusetts residents.
- Partnerships with the Boston Bruins, Department of Children and Families and the First Lady of the Commonwealth, Lauren Baker/ Legislators attend Bruins events in libraries
- The statewide summer library program reached 430,000 participants during the summer even though the pandemic forced libraries to close their doors
- Explore the synergy between the different library types (public, school, academic, special)/ connect with educators - at all levels - to promote what we have
- Positive social media campaigns

Threats

- Loss of funding potentially at all levels; perhaps not immediately but for FY22 and beyond

- The digital divide—not everyone has access to Broadband It depends on where you are in the state. All of the great ideas for social media campaigns and online resources may never reach some people experiencing life without access to technology in their home.
- There is potential for a slow recovery of in-person library usage and visits following the pandemic. No one knows how to fully reopen a library after a global pandemic. Libraries will need some help and some tools.
- There is no name/branding of databases and though they're online, they can seem too complicated or intimidating for consumers who are accustomed to the one-step Google type search. Unlike our competitors there is no entry url, accessing the databases is a multi-step process.
- Libraries continue to face the misconception that search engines such as Google, provide the same information as searches on the libraries' databases. "Who needs a library when we have the internet?"
- There is no standard way to get a library card online
- Services like LEA (Library eBooks and Audiobooks) that already have a recognized vendor brand name that may be familiar to librarians and current users but not to new users and therefore hampers our efforts to brand the service; vendors can and do change so while a user may identify Overdrive for example, that name could change to a new vendor
- There can be a long wait for popular eBooks/ Power users can take advantage of the system and make it appear that there are more holds than there really are
- Pay-by-use services (libraries pay but, are free to consumers) are a double-edged sword—we want people to know about them and use them, yet too much exposure and it's easy to exceed budget limitations

Timeline and priorities

Year one

Market research to understand non-library users

New accessible web-based format for MBLC Publications

In addition to the activities listed under each goal, the following activities will occur each year of the contract:

The paid agency will be expected to attend the meetings of the Statewide Public Relations Advisory Committee which occur at least quarterly, attend rollout sessions with the library community and attend MBLC communications team meetings as needed.

Publications

Marketing firm must be able to coordinate with printer. MBLC provides written content and some photographs; paid agency designs MBLC official publications (some may be web-based

documents) including but not limited to:

State Aid Guide for local officials
State Aid slider
Construction program fact sheet
Construction map
Construction grant round basics
Construction design elements
Construction slider
Podcast social media graphics
LSTA fact sheets for grant opportunities (10)
LSTA Brochure
LSTA slider
LSTA social media graphics
Legislative Agenda and micro-site
Legislative materials for national library legislative day
Annual Report
MBLC Brochure
Trustee Pocket Guide
Trustee Legislative

Campaigns:

Campaign to promote databases, LEA or other online resources
Campaign to promote summer reading
Awareness campaign-value of Massachusetts Libraries
Campaigns may include but are not limited to: target audience determination, message development, focus group review, paid advertising, microsite, bookmarks, posters, reading lists, social media, sliders for the agency and portal websites, in-person library events and participation in rollout sessions with librarians

Evaluation

Evaluation of the effectiveness of the public awareness campaign will be through the measurements mentioned with each goal. The marketing firm will also be expected to provide data especially as it pertains to paid media, the Awarehouse and any microsite created as part of a campaign.

BUDGET

Pending approval of MBLC's special projects budget

