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The (Perilous) State of State Libraries

A Message from ASCLA President Ethel Himmel

When I was a doctoral student searching for a dissertation topic that would both engage me in a new area of the field (my experience had been in public libraries and systems) and allow me to apply all those newly developed research skills, I somewhat serendipitously discovered state library agencies. I'd known they existed before, but I hadn't known very much about them. WOW—here was a state level library agency with responsibility for improving public library services statewide! Every state and the District of Columbia had one; they got federal dollars (LSCA at the time) to help local libraries do things that improved and extended library services; and, in my state (Wisconsin) at least, the state library agency funded library systems and set public library standards.

Here (I thought) was *the* place where library folks had the opportunity and responsibility to do good things beyond the parochialism of local library boards and the skewed priorities of local officials who were more often interested in building highways than in providing library services. So, I found SLAS and joined ASCLA so I could meet these influential people and learn how they went about the professional business of raising the level of library services. The rest, as they say, is history.

I've learned a great deal more about the diversity among state library agencies—the wide variety of programs and services they provide and about the environment that state librarians and their staffs have to navigate. These days it's not just public libraries and their services; often it's leading the charge to get libraries of all types working in the same direction and overseeing services to special populations as well. Like library systems, state library agencies are generally invisible to the end users of library services and, for that reason, often vulnerable when funding bodies look for ways to cut budgets.

A big issue that has ebbed and flowed in relation to state library agencies since the 1950s is their location in state government. The question here has been whether the agency is better equipped to deal with its environment if it is insulated within a larger department or if it is independent and thus unlikely to get caught in the politics of the larger department. As you read the articles in this issue devoted to the current perilous state of state libraries, you'll find that isn't the only question today. In Oklahoma, the State Library is an independent agency; in Minnesota the state library is within the Department of Children, Families and Learning, which is similar to a Department of Education; in Colorado and Iowa the state library agencies are within the Department of Education; and in Tennessee and Washington the state libraries are in the Office of the Secretary of State; Rhode Island's Office of Library and Information Services is part of the Department of Administration. While some state libraries clearly still get caught in the middle of

departmental politics, no location is secure in today's economic environment. The big issue today is gaining the recognition of elected officials, funding bodies and the users of information services that libraries, regardless of what they're called, are key resources for all people and must be adequately funded.

The continued existence and health of state library agencies matter to all of us in ASCLA. SLAS is one of our smaller sections, but the perspectives that SLAS members bring to the discussions at all levels, from the Board to committees to task forces, greatly enrich our understanding of the challenges we face and the possible solutions that will improve the services our members and their organizations provide.

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