

Report on the Public Libraries of America (PLA)

2024 Conference

Columbus, Ohio – April 3-5, 2025

From Trustee Jessica Bradley

Background

The Public Library Association (PLA) welcomed more than 7,500 public library workers, supporters, and vendors from across the country and around the world to celebrate all things public libraries at the PLA 2024 Conference, April 3–5, in the city of Columbus, Ohio

This three-day event offered more than 100 thoughtfully curated education sessions, inspiring speakers and authors, engaging networking opportunities, career services, micro-learning moments, and an exhibits hall featuring the latest in products, services, and innovations.

Report

The PLA Conference in Columbus Ohio was robust and brought together library professionals from across North America. I had the privilege to attend in my capacity as a Trustee for the Ottawa Public Library. While there was no shortage of informative sessions and programs, I started off the Conference by participating in a tour of three local libraries in the city. The tour included visits to the Columbus Metropolitan Library’s Martin Luther King Branch, Shepard Branch, and finally the brand-new Gahanna Branch.

Each library on the tour was unique in both history, built form, clientele, neighbourhood demographics, size, collections and services. The Martin Luther King Branch, in particular, was a showstopper in Columbus’ historic King-Lincoln Bronzeville neighborhood. The funding for this branch was rooted in community and the services offered at this location were tailored to meet the needs of the neighbourhood and in the spirit of Martin Luther King. The architecture was also special and reflective of the surrounding community. My favourite part was an elevated area in the branch that was dubbed ‘the porch’. Porches in this community are common and have been seen over the years to be a space to hangout, socialize with neighbours, and build community. Incorporating a porch element in the library was a fantastic way to make the surrounding clientele feel the library incorporated their history and experience into the space. This reminded me of the work that OPL is doing with Ādisōke and our indigenous partners.

Beyond the tours, I spent several days attending various sessions at the conference. Given my keen interest in how Libraries have become a much needed ‘third space’ in communities, I focused my time on sessions related to expanded services, partnerships, and creating welcoming spaces within libraries.

A valuable session I attended was titled 'Community Librari-Aid: Providing Wraparound Social Service Support through Partnerships'. This session profiled the Akron-Summit Country Public Library and their journey to expanding services offered at the library to help increase the uptake and awareness of social services and assistance in the area. The speakers detailed the various partnerships that were explored and implemented at the library including onsite social workers and housing court clinics for free legal advice. As the session progressed, the conversation became more about the evolution of libraries and their role in today's complex society. Beyond being a place to increase literacy and knowledge, they are also safe and neutral spaces for residents. I would be interested in exploring what partnerships currently exist with OPL and external agencies and how we can leverage existing and new partnerships to better serve our clientele, particularly in vulnerable neighbourhoods.

Another session I found of interest explored the biggest issues faced by Library administrators in a modern-day Library system. The topic that caught my attention was focused on security or the need for security inside libraries. Given that OPL, just had similar conversations and increased the number of branches with security services, I was interested to hear how other libraries are handling these same concerns. It was noted that most libraries do not have onsite security personnel, only the more metropolitan cities had a need for these services. Most libraries that experienced issues around safety and security addressed these concerns through building design and orientation of furniture/collections. For example, one branch was noting drug use in washrooms, in response they removed the main doors to the facilities to deter that behavior. Other examples included opening up spaces and lowering the height of shelves. I would be interested to learn more about how OPL has applied these Crime Prevention through Environmental Design in our branches.

Other interesting topics in this session included what services each library provided, hours of operations, and what services libraries charged a fee to use i.e. phones, printing, copying etc.

The PLA Conference was incredibly informative, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to learn more about library systems across North America and how we can enhance the already amazing services OPL provides. The knowledge and relationships that were made will certainly serve me well in my role as a Board of Trustees member for the Ottawa Public Library.