

Analyzing Cardholder Signup Policies to Increase Access

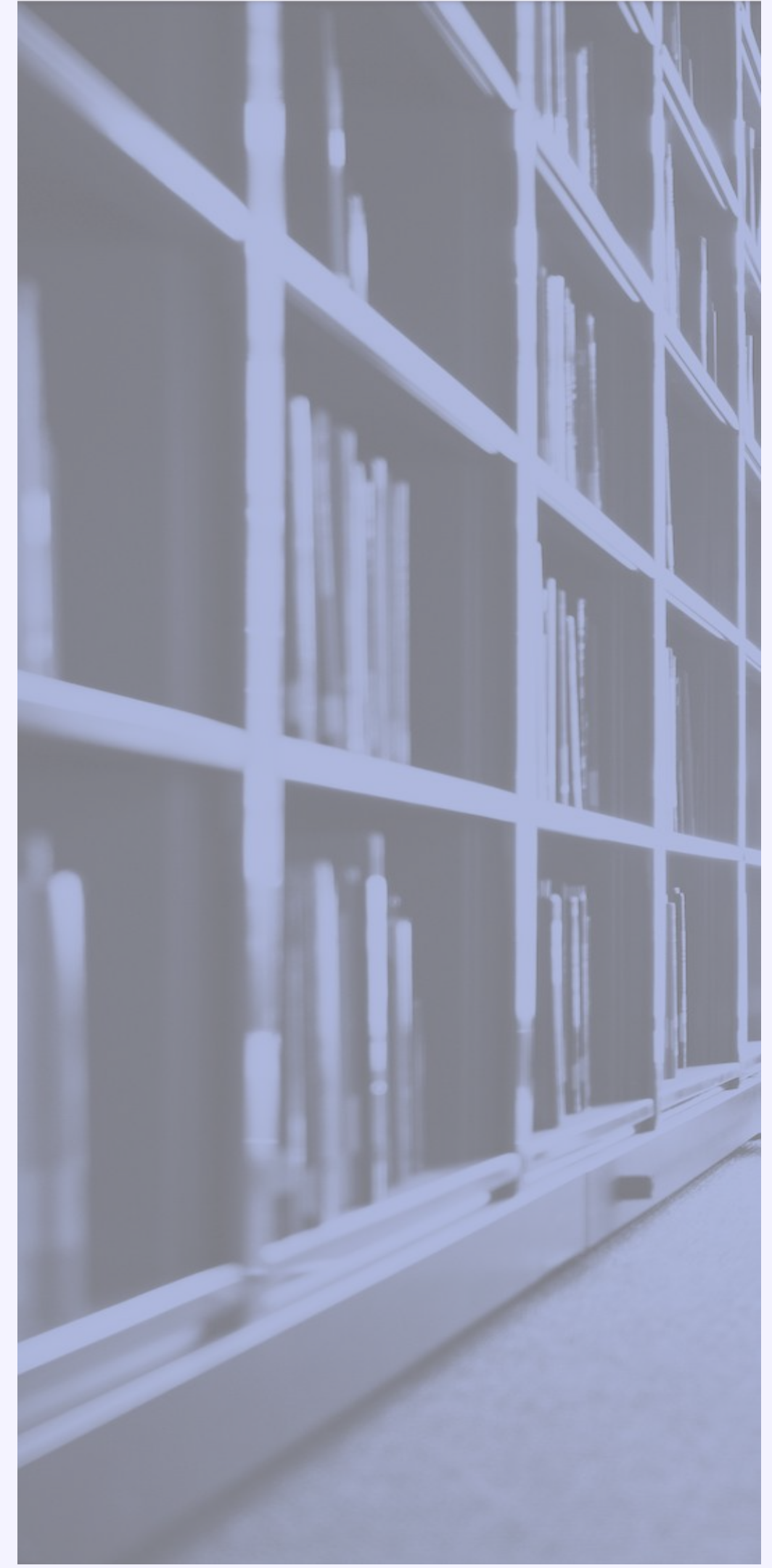


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Empirical Studies In Libraries Summit

April 24, 2026



Policy Research

Brooklyn Public Library is researching public library card sign-up policies.

Join our nationwide study!

Bklyn
Public Library

Help us advance the right to read.

Brooklyn Public Library is leading a research project to study cardholder sign-up policies in public libraries across the United States. We are seeking to understand:

- The range of policies and procedures that govern cardholder access
- The rationale used when establishing policies
- Notable trends and patterns nationwide
- Where the field could benefit from clarity, guidance and standardization

Starting fall 2023, public library administrators and staff will be invited to respond via surveys and focus groups. Make sure YOUR library is represented! Your participation and responses will remain confidential.

Project timeline

Fall 2023 Data collection	April 2024 Final report and dissemination to the field	Spring/ Summer 2024 Review findings	August 2024 Publish framework of best practices
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Sign up and learn more at bklynlib.org/library-study

Bklyn Public Library **AVENUE M** GROUP

This project is generously supported by the Mellon Foundation.

In 2023, Brooklyn Public Library launched an effort to research how public libraries in the U.S. structure their cardholder signup policies.

The project resulted in the first known national dataset of this area of practice.

- What is the established practice across the field?
- How often are policies revisited, updated, and/or interrogated?
- Where could we benefit from better clarity, standardization, and guidance?

Research Need

BPL Cardholder Policies

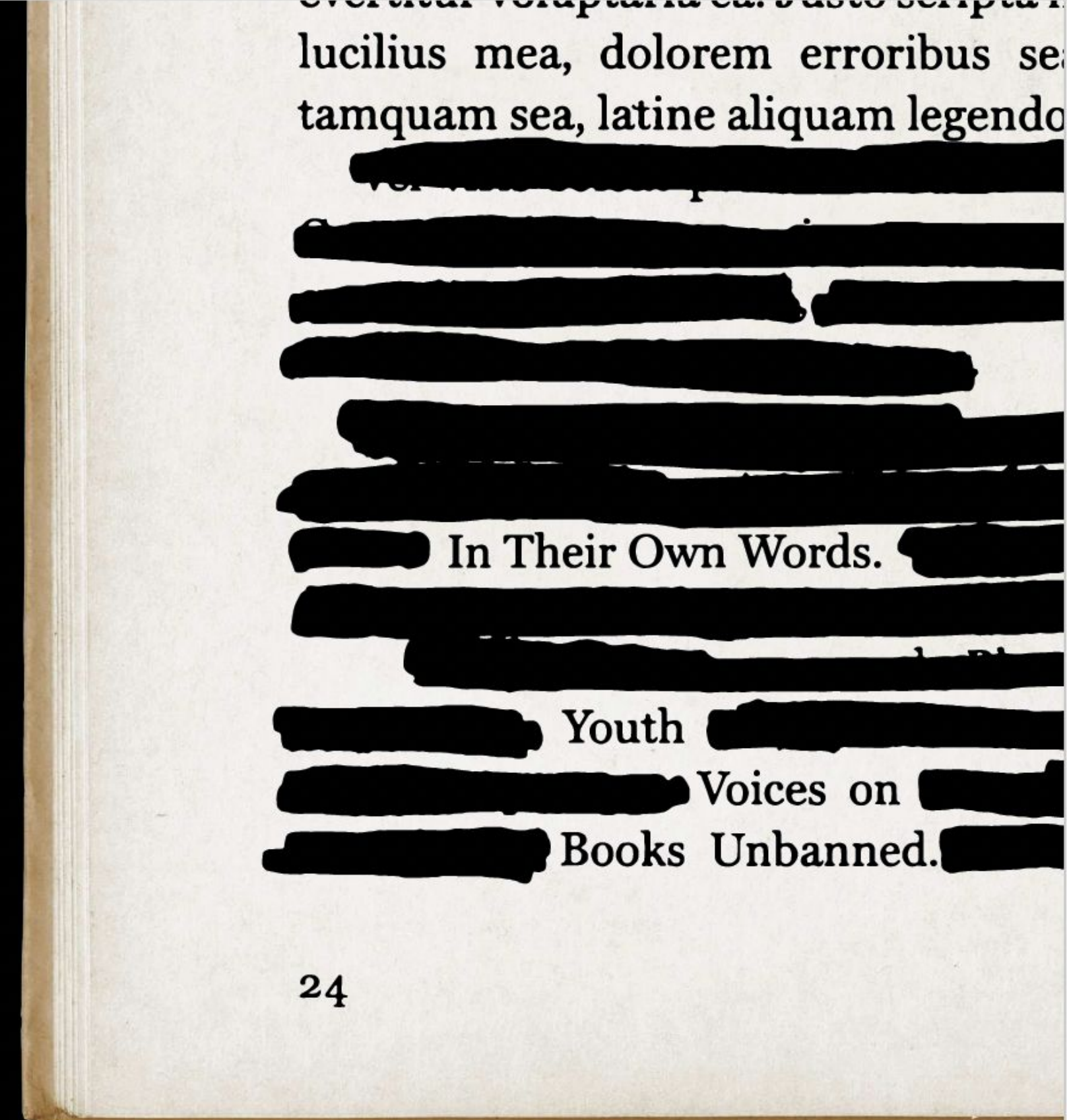
Balancing access and stewardship

Books Unbanned

Youth Voices: limited library access

Library Leaders

Best practices and guidance



Methodology

1,895 libraries completed the surveys, and approximately 115 libraries total participated in the focus groups.

A few libraries participated in multiple research methods.

Interviews

75 in-person
interviews at ALA
Conference
June 2023

Survey

Online survey
fielded
between
**Sept 18 -
Dec 7, 2023**

In-Person Focus Groups

1. ARSL
Conference in
September 2023
2. ULC Forum in
October 2023

Online Focus Group

Online,
asynchronous
focus group in
November 2023

Sample Survey Question

[Show to all respondents]

14. Does the library require adults to show government-issued photo identification (ID) in order to receive a full-access library card? (Select one)

- ☐ No
- ☐ Not currently, but this is in development – feel free to explain: *[text box]*
- ☐ Yes, but there are exceptions – feel free to explain: *[text box]*
- ☐ Yes, always
- ☐ Unsure
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

[Show if respondent selected either “Yes” response, “Unsure,” or “Prefer not to answer” in Q14]

15. Does the library give any considerations to patrons whose name does not match their legal ID? (Select one)

- ☐ No
- ☐ Not currently, but this is in development – feel free to explain: *[text box]*
- ☐ Yes – feel free to explain: *[text box]*
- ☐ Unsure
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

- Collaborative process to develop
- Close ended answer options
- Opportunity for write-in responses

Complete survey and focus group questions available at
www.bklynlib.org/library-study

Results and Analysis

The research findings were published in April 2024 and are freely available at www.bklynlib.org/library-study

- Report with data analysis
- Interactive data dashboard
- Raw dataset (available by request)



Key Takeaways & Uses

POLICY CHANGES

Most libraries have made some type of change to their cardholder signup policies and/or procedures in the past five years; 30% of libraries have not.

BARRIERS TO ACCESS

Barriers can present themselves in the cardholder signup method (ie requiring in-person), proof of eligibility, the types of data collected, youth signup, and language access.

SOURCE PROMPTING CHANGE

Changes to library card policy, for the majority of libraries, are prompted by staff, but a large percentage made changes prompted by external factors like national trends, or state or local regulations.

DATA FOR DECISION-MAKING

Libraries expressed the value of having data available to support change (patrons not able to provide ID or address not shown to have a higher materials loss rate).



Key Takeaways & Uses

Survey Snapshot: Library Cards for Children and Teenagers

- About half (53%) of the libraries in the survey do not have an official **minimum age requirement for getting a library card**. An additional one in ten (10%) libraries have a minimum age younger than 1 year old, and 14% of libraries have a minimum age requirement of 5 years old to get a library card. Almost one in ten (9%) libraries have a minimum age requirement between 10 and 18 years old to get a library card. (Q38)
- For about two-thirds (68%) of libraries, children/teenagers receive a library card **without limitations on access based on age**. Less than one in five (16%) libraries issue library cards to children/teenagers with limitations on access. Less than one in five (15%) issue library cards with limitations on access in some cases. (The survey defined library cards with limitations on access as cards that are “more restrictive than the regular library cards for adults.”) (Q42)
- Among the libraries that have limitations on library cards for children and teenagers based on age, the most common limitation is on the **types of items** (60%). Nearly one-third (32%) of the libraries with limitations on access based on age put limitations on the **number of items** for children and teenagers. (Q43)



Card Signup Process

Method or process for collecting cardholder information and creating a library card, ranging from the length of time for completion, method (online application, paper application or both), requirements for in-person signup, and whether the application was available in other languages.

98%

General library card signup takes 15 minutes or less.

17%

Reported not having an alternative signup method for those who are homebound or otherwise unable to visit in person.

43%

Require patrons to apply in person for a full-access library card.

62%

Offer applications materials only in English.

Library Card Eligibility

Eligibility determination for a library card extending both to *who* is eligible for a library's typical full-access card and *how* that eligibility is determined at time of signup.

75%

Require proof of eligibility in order to receive a standard full-access library card.

39%

Require adults to show government-issued photo identification (ID), with no exceptions or workarounds, in order to receive a full-access library card.

55%

Of that subset that require proof of eligibility, some **always** require a patron to prove eligibility to receive a library card, with no exceptions or workarounds.

45%

Do not offer temporary cards or guest passes to anyone who cannot obtain a library card.

Data Collection

The kinds of information that libraries do/do not collect that might get stored in the patron's record.

24%

Do not give any consideration to those whose legal name does not match ID (excluding those who don't require legal ID).

93%

Require a primary mailing address in all cases.

19%

Do not offer an option to collect preferred name (different name than what is on legal ID).

66%

Require a phone number in all cases.

11%

Require gender in the patron library account.

27%

Require an email address in all cases.

Youth Access

The cardholder signup process for children and teens, or minors (under the age of 18).

14%

Have a minimum age requirement of 5 years or older to get a library card.

9%

Have a minimum age requirement of between 10 and 18 years old to get a library card.

85%

Require youth up to a certain age to have stated permission from an adult in order to receive a library card. Among these libraries, **more than half** require some form of permission until the minor is 18 years old.

16%

Issue youth cards with some form of **limitation on access**, either by limiting the types of items that youth card is able to check out, or limiting the number of items that can be checked out as compared to adult cards.

Policy Guidance

Brooklyn Public Library recently convened a national working group across a range of public library types and localities. Together we developed a framework of best practices and recommendations for libraries when developing policy & process in the area of cardholder signup.

The draft framework is freely available at www.bklynlib.org/library-study

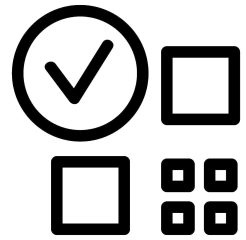
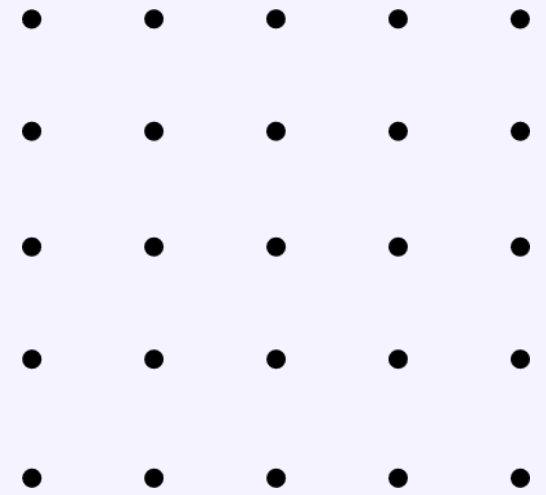
Alameda County Library
Austin Public Library
Boone County Public Library
Brigham Memorial Library
C/W MARS (Central-Western Mass
Automated Resource Sharing)
Carlsbad City Library
Casey County Public Library
Charlotte Mecklenburg Library
Chicago Public Library
City of Wolfforth Library
Davidson County Public Library

DC Public Library
Deschutes Public Library
Englewood Public Library
Fort Vancouver Regional Library District
Jefferson County Public Library (JCPL)
Lake Park Public Library
Lambertville Free Public Library
Libraries of Eastern Oregon
Mandel Public Library
Metropolitan Library System
North Liberty Library

New York Public Library
Public Library of Youngstown &
Mahoning County
Round Rock Public Library
Rusk County Community Library
Sacramento Public Library
Salt Lake County Library
Springfield City Library
St. Louis Public Library
Suffolk Public Library
The Seattle Public Library
Toronto Public Library

Policy Framework

Key areas of policy and process



The Public Good

Eligibility Requirements

Data Collection and Retention

Digital Access

Youth Access

Language Access

Patron Information & Communication

Staff Training & Guidance



Informed by state and local laws and regulations!

Questions?

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