

# **Beyond Younger Volunteers: White Paper on What Rural Friends Groups Need to Thrive**

Based on a presentation for the  
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## **Abstract:**

How can a state library association help Friends of the Library groups grow and develop? That's the question the Friends of Libraries Section (FLS), a division of the New York Library Association (NYLA), asked when it considered how to best identify the needs of and provide support for Friends groups that assist small and rural libraries. FLS used a data-driven approach by developing a survey to capture input from community volunteers and library staff about their organizations' unique challenges, abilities, and administrative structure.

The survey results shape FLS's future activities, informing and guiding the state library association in its work to help small and rural libraries and their network of volunteers. This paper explores what FLS learned and how it uses that knowledge to encourage and inspire these Friends of the Library groups.

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## **Background on Rural and Small Libraries in New York State**

New York State is wide and diverse – Long Island to the Thousand Islands, Jamestown on the border of Pennsylvania and Ohio, to the vast expanses of the Adirondack Park and the Canadian border of Quebec. It takes seven hours to drive from metropolitan New York City to Rochester.

Many people equate one of the largest metropolitan regions, New York City and Long Island, with the state itself. Once you head up the Hudson River from New York City, 44% of the public libraries in the state are rural, meaning they are five to 25 miles from an urbanized area. The typical rural library employs 1.9 full-time staff members.<sup>1</sup> While you may see multiple people working in a small, rural library, they may be volunteers or part-time employees – including the library director. All their accumulated hours may not add up to one full-time position. These libraries rely on volunteers, especially the Friends of the Library.

Of the 756 public libraries in NYS, approximately 46% have a Friends group. Some have a rich history of 50 years or more and are still thriving but, overwhelmingly, the demographics of Friends groups are reflective of the library's service population: they are greying. The digital divide – both access to and facility with technology – also plays a role in keeping some groups isolated. It is challenging to get an accurate count on how many groups exist in the state and how many members each group has. The Friends of Libraries Section (FLS) continues to work to identify all Friends groups in the state's 23 public library systems.

When people think of New York's libraries, the first image that springs to mind are Patience and Fortitude, the iconic lions that keep watch over The New York Public Library's 42<sup>nd</sup> Street building in Manhattan. But 36% of the state's public libraries are considered small and are chartered to serve less than 10,000 people. When libraries serve less than 7,500 people, the State Education Department's Division of Library Development requires a library manager to have a four-year degree but not a graduate degree from an ALA-accredited library information studies program. More than one-third of New York's libraries may be led by an administrator who does not have an MSLIS.

## **What is the Friends of Libraries Section of the New York Library Association?**

The Friends of Libraries Section first came into being in 1992 as the Empire Friends Roundtable (EFR), the smallest division of the New York Library Association (NYLA).

In 2014, EFR gained Section status and FLS was born. We became a unit equivalent to the Sections that serve public libraries and youth services staff. As a Section, FLS was

granted a voting seat on NYLA's Board of Directors, giving community volunteers and library advocates an equal footing to their professional colleagues.

Within state library associations across the United States, roughly half have state-level Friends of the Library groups like ours.<sup>2</sup> FLS is directed by a 13-member volunteer board representing the geographic diversity of New York State. The Executive Board includes librarians who support the efforts of Friends organizations as part of their job responsibilities as well as community volunteers who are active in their home library's Friends group.

Of NYLA's nearly 7,000 members, FLS has a roster of approximately 165 members, both individuals and groups. One-third of these members are Friends organizations. The leaders of a Friends group are registered with NYLA as non-voting members, bringing the FLS network to around 300 individuals.

The FLS mission states: FLS creates a network to connect and inspire Friends groups in all types of libraries to support the New York library community. To fulfill that mission of connection and inspiration, FLS offers a full complement of program sessions of interest to library administrators and community volunteer leaders at each of NYLA's annual conferences. From 2013 to 2019, 33 FLS programs reached more than 1,400 participants. Fridays during the annual conference are known as "Friends Day" and FLS members receive a vastly reduced registration rate to attend conference sessions.

Other membership perks include a quarterly print and e-newsletter, "Friends News and Notes," sent by mail for members to share with their groups. The newsletters keep members informed about issues concerning Friends groups across the state and build a robust network. Each newsletter features current, relevant content with many replicable ideas for libraries of all sizes.

## **Problem Statement: Out of touch! What are we going to do about it?**

Despite our best efforts, people repeatedly told us our quarterly newsletter and conference programming did not speak to the experiences of small-town libraries.

We had deliberately featured projects and activities from groups across the state that seemed replicable, but others did not share our assumptions about scalability. Examples from larger libraries with more resources occasionally fell flat, when people were left feeling that they could not accomplish anything similar. The programs and experiences of better-funded and larger Friends groups sometimes left people feeling alienated, reporting, "This topic doesn't work for me; I don't see how it can be adapted to my small group."

Once we learned we were not meeting their needs, we dug deeper. Approaching the challenge systematically, we began with a landscape review to determine how many libraries were small and rural--or saw themselves that way. We asked, "What concerns do rural libraries and their Friends groups have that are different and unique from those in larger communities?"

## **The Dream of Younger Volunteers (Where's Our White Knight?)**

Sometimes people are so close to a problem that they do not know what they "need" for help. FLS decided to form a Task Force on Friends and Rural Libraries to collect data to help groups from small and rural libraries identify their needs. The Task Force, which was initially chaired by Erica Freudenberger, began by developing and distributing a survey to small and rural Friends groups and library staff. Once we identified the most significant challenges, the Task Force proposed a course of action to support and assist these volunteers.

We did not assume the needs of Friends groups serving small and rural libraries were the same as those of robust groups with broad memberships. However, based on this survey and a previous FLS membership survey from 2020, there is one belief nearly all Friends groups—76% of respondents—share in common: an influx of younger volunteers will save their Friends organizations! Many see younger volunteers as the white knight who will swoop in and rescue aging Friends groups.

We heard this refrain so often that we incorporated it into our workshops. The trainer's chant, complete with pom-poms flailing about, included, "Give me a Y! Give me an O! Give me a U,".... etc. "What do we want?" "YOUNGER VOLUNTEERS!" And when do we want them, "NOW!"

To respond to this demand, FLS sponsored two webinars on how to engage today's volunteers and reach out to millennials.<sup>3</sup> Although these were excellent professional development opportunities, younger volunteers are not the panacea or cure-all that everyone thinks they are. We hate to be the bearer of bad news, but the white knight isn't coming to your town.

## **FLS Long-Range Plan 2021-2023 and Establishment of FLS Task Force on Friends and Rural Libraries**

The FLS Board meets virtually five times a year. Given the geography of New York State and the constraints of the Section's limited budget, we began using digital video platforms well before the pandemic.

This comfort with technology served us well during New York's stay-at-home orders. It allowed us to continue our work uninterrupted and push forward with multiple new initiatives. With a dedicated leadership team in place, plans to update and refresh the organization's long-range plan moved forward. FLS created an ad hoc committee to establish goals for the next three years. In July 2020, the FLS Board adopted a new plan to take the group into 2023. The full plan is posted on the FLS webpage: [www.nyla.org/friends](http://www.nyla.org/friends).

The plan identified four Guiding Principles for our organization:

1. FLS educates and supports its members
2. FLS strengthens the library community through membership and advocacy
3. FLS recognizes and encourages member excellence
4. FLS fosters growth through engagement, collaboration, and leadership.

The plan addresses each Guiding Principle, providing further clarification for each principle and listing specific goals and action steps.

The fourth Guiding Principle provided the impetus to begin thinking about how to best serve small and rural Friends groups. We collaborated with our members to identify their needs and aspirations. Each Guiding Principle had specific goals attached. For the fourth principle, the goal was: "The library community regards FLS and NYLA as approachable for resources and sources of guidance on issues concerning Friends organizations in libraries of all types."

The result was the creation of the Task Force on Friends and Rural Libraries in May 2020. It initially included seven FLS members from across the state. Our charge was to:

- (1) study and discuss issues that are unique to small, rural Friends groups
- (2) identify some successful groups associated with small, rural libraries in New York State and learn about their best practices
- (3) develop a list of best practices, replicable ideas, and tips, along with adaptations, for Friends of rural libraries
- (4) if warranted, establish an ongoing Rural Friends Interest Group for FLS beginning in 2022.

While we have completed the initial needs assessment survey and developed some best practices to support our rural colleagues, the Task Force continues to work steadily to accomplish this charge.

## **Informal Surveys to Formal Survey Instrument**

We did not initially decide to use a formal survey. We preferred to take an organic approach, with Task Force members reaching out directly to seven different Friends

groups to ask a series of questions. We offered to interview them at a group meeting or via email.

We had some modest success with the following questions and reassured participants that they could provide estimates for any answer – like how many members were in their group. Nearly all the questions were open-ended.

- How many Friends elected officers and Board members are there?
- How many people do you consider are active members on the core team of the Friends (meaning officers, committee chairs, coordinators for special events, team leaders)?
- How often does the group meet, and when?
- What are your significant activities in a typical year?
- Please give some examples of recent support to the library (e.g., program underwriting, a piece of furniture, magazine subscriptions, a donation toward a renovation).
- How much financial support do the Friends provide the library annually?
- Do you help the library staff/trustees lobby elected officials, assist with "get out the vote" for the library's budget, or do other advocacy?
- How do you recruit members?
- Where can I find you online? What social media accounts do you maintain for the group?
- What works to keep your volunteers involved? What efforts have been successful?
- The founding date of Friends; How did your group get started? (Just a few words about your history)

In October 2020, the Task Force members realized we were taking a scattershot approach, gaining information only from our small network of rural Friends associates. A significant issue was that the Task Force members were not uniform in the ways they were interviewing and documenting the responses from the various Friends officers they approached. Some members carried out the background research by email or telephone. In a few Friends groups, several active members and officers collaborated on their responses to the questions, while in other Friends groups, just one individual



shared information on their own. How could we tally the information we received and draw any accurate conclusions?

Not all of the above questions made it into the final survey. Our experience with direct outreach revealed that the question, "Do you consider yourselves a successful group, and why?" was more confounding than elucidating, and failed to generate any helpful information, so we eliminated it.

Another question that we were initially excited about, "What do you wish you had known when you were starting?" stymied most folks. Some answers were, "I don't know; I wasn't there." Not so helpful, so it was thrown out.

## **Solutions: Potential Products and Pilot Programs**

The responses from these early trial groups shaped how we developed survey questions for a virtual survey. The replies we received when we asked, "What kind of help do you currently need for your group?" was valuable in developing the section of the survey on challenges the Friends leadership were feeling. But identifying the practices that made these groups successful and cohesive in their work was difficult.

We began to discuss our potential products – what would we do with this information? Ideas included:

- Publishing a guide for starting a Friends group for a small or rural library
- Developing a list of best practices with ideas and tips that make sense for small libraries
- Offering virtual consultations, guiding specific initiatives (e.g., membership drives)
- Having a series of virtual leadership training sessions for Friends board members
- Establishing pilot projects, such as assisting a group to secure their nonprofit status or increasing their membership or volunteer engagement with the community

## **Transition to Formal Survey**

Enter SurveyMonkey. If you've not had exposure to SurveyMonkey, it is a web-based survey application. Users can develop a bare-bones survey for free, but a detailed survey such as ours requires a subscription. The Southern Adirondack Library System was willing to develop and host our survey using their subscription.

The simple questions we had posed earlier to our random groups through conversation and email led to the development of a formal survey. The responses from those Friends fell into several categories. The focus of our work became the myriad difficulties these

groups mentioned. What were the most significant challenges Friends groups faced in supporting rural and small libraries?

In mid-November 2020, we began developing potential questions for a survey we would offer to Friends groups and libraries across New York State. The final survey, after many revisions, was released in the third week of January 2021. We asked as many questions as possible in a multiple-choice format so that SurveyMonkey could do the tallying for us. For other, more complex queries, we allowed for open-ended responses with blank text boxes so that people could provide insight into the workings of their group.

Using the challenges we had learned about in our initial interviews, we generated a list of possible obstacles. We asked respondents to rank the challenges and identify their most significant concerns. Were there any challenges they did not face? We wanted to ensure that we were not imagining or projecting our concerns on others. We also assessed where challenges intersected and created pressing problems.

## **Survey as a Learning Tool**

This survey of Friends groups was not our first large-scale research project. In March and April 2020, we circulated a survey to FLS members to inform our second long-range plan. We wanted to know what member benefits and services we offered through NYLA were most important. Because all New Yorkers were under stay-at-home orders during those months, we received 119 responses representing 56% of our members.

Encouraged by this effort, we were confident we could get some robust data from both members and non-members alike. We reviewed the 2020 member survey questions and brought a few of those into this research, although the emphasis was different.

We determined the survey would be limited to Friends groups within New York State who self-identified as "rural" and/or "small." We explained to survey takers that rather than "small" referring to Friends organizations with a small number of members, it referred to the library's service area population.

We designed the questions to raise awareness and serve as a learning tool for survey respondents. Because it was multiple choice, we developed extensive lists of sample ways Friends groups might recruit members, or examples of the kind of support Friends groups might provide to a library. We hoped that some of these illustrations would get the respondents to think outside the box.

And, by golly, this tactic worked! We received an enthusiastic response from the Treasurer and Membership Chair of one of our members, who requested a copy of the

survey. He wrote, *"While doing your survey, I saw many ideas which I would like to share with [my] Friends, so we may use it to inspire new ideas."* Yahoo!

The Task Force sent the second draft of the survey to the FLS Executive Board members in late December 2020. We asked for proofreading and input. Nearly every comment referenced the length of the survey and wanted questions cut to make it more approachable.

In the end, the length was not a deterrent. With primarily multiple-choice questions and other items to rank, the 40-question survey only took about 15 minutes to complete. To encourage people to go the distance, we put completed surveys into a drawing for a free organizational membership in FLS/NYLA, a \$50 value.

Our goals were to locate Friends groups supporting rural and small libraries and to educate them about what FLS has to offer. In the member survey in 2020, we found several people did not know about NYLA's annual conference, something we work overtime on promoting! While the survey we had sent out to our membership the prior year was anonymous, this time we collected participant information to build an email contact list for Friends groups supporting small, rural libraries. We asked respondents to provide a name, address, and email so we could follow up with them. We have been trying to develop lists of Friends of the Library groups statewide for nearly ten years. We could incorporate these responses into that census work.

A few preliminary questions, such as "what day of the week do you meet?" were meant to engage the respondent. And we were hoping those quick hitters would give us some guidance for best practices to share with new Friends of the Library groups.

Yes, many of the challenges we asked about are ones nearly all Friends groups face, regardless of the size of the library they support. We could extrapolate the responses to larger groups. But by crossmatching answers by population served, we hoped to see what was most difficult for these volunteer support organizations. What needs are unique to these groups? Although our 2020 survey asked an open-ended question about challenges, the 2021 survey allowed us to specifically focus on which membership or leadership issues are the most difficult, giving us more quantifiable data.

Some board members suggested that this survey would only serve to reinforce what we know about Friends groups supporting rural and small libraries. But truthfully, we knew very little. We wanted to learn how these groups prioritize their challenges and needs, not relying on presumptions about distance or transportation which might dictate when the Friends meet or how many people participate. We were eager to learn about the organizational challenges of leadership, membership, and legal concerns and find out which is the hardest to handle.

As with all good surveys of constituent groups, the goal is to learn about the population you serve—not develop services and programs that we assume will benefit them. We wanted to hear what they needed. This effort will guide our work over the next few years. Despite the length of the survey, with multiple choice answers, we achieved a good data set. What we do with the data is the most crucial aspect of this project.

## **Survey Results – Basics**

To find our way in the realm of rural and small libraries, we needed to get input from both library staff members and community volunteers. We encouraged libraries to have both the staff and their Friends take the survey. We thought we would receive different responses from differing perspectives.

It has proven to be challenging to compare and contrast these multiple responses. In some instances, the responses canceled each other out. Others were wildly different, such as asking for an estimate on the number of members in a group.

In the end, only 30% of the responses came from multiple participants representing the same library. This meant that 70% of the respondents we heard from were individuals solely representing one library. Our total number of usable responses was 105 surveys from 72 different libraries. We were thrilled to have responses from every corner of the Empire State! We had participation from 19 of New York's 23 public library systems, except for New York City (Brooklyn Public Library, The New York Public Library, and Queens Borough Public Library). When all the results were in, 65% of the respondents were from libraries serving less than 10,000 people.

We managed to connect with our desired audience—just 21% of the responses came from the library's director or other staff members; 79% came from Friends officers and steering committee members.

## **Survey Marketing and Distribution**

So, how'd we get all those folks to participate? Beginning in late January 2021, we utilized our webpage, posting information and the SurveyMonkey link to the survey. NYLA has several electronic newsletters where information about the survey was included, with an article appearing in the weekly digital newsletter for eight consecutive weeks, from early February through March.

We used our quarterly newsletter – which is both mailed and emailed to nearly 400 members – in early March 2021 to spread the word and also had it featured in NYLA's bimonthly magazine. An email reminder was sent to our members in mid-March, following up on the first member blast distributed in February.

FLS has a volunteer Marketing Coordinator who furnished a press release for listservs in public library systems and regional library councils that reached all corners of the state. FLS Board members promoted the survey throughout their regions. We used social media posts to contact NYLA's Rural Libraries Roundtable members. Individual email invitations were sent to participants from past FLS-sponsored professional development events.

We made the last push ten days before the survey closed, with individual messages to ask specific libraries to participate. We reached quite a few Western and Central NY libraries through this effort. This was about a 40% return on our time and effort when all was said and done. Of the personal invitations sent out, about 40% of the folks did take the survey, so it was time well spent.

## **Digging Into the Data – Cross-Comparison of Some Answers**

What did we learn?

First, membership in Friends groups that support small libraries does not necessarily mean small membership numbers. 17% of the respondents had between 40 and 65 members or donors on their rosters. But 30% of the libraries that participated in the survey had more than 100 Friends members.

Groups recruit their members in a wide variety of ways, including word of mouth (95%), both online and printed membership forms (70%), and annual membership mailings (61%), including renewal notices for existing memberships.

53% ask for volunteer assistance on their membership forms. Fewer than half of the respondents use social media to encourage people to join Friends.

A Friends group can survive for a long time using the basics to attract members, such as distributing printed membership brochures in the library, posting fliers on the library bulletin board, enrolling members at a members-only night at the book sale, and recruiting family and neighbors. Often these efforts just sustain the group but do not increase the size of the organization.

There were 14 methods mentioned in the survey for membership recruitment. The more methods a group employs, the stronger it will become. Groups that thrive have a structured membership plan, growing their organization with regularly scheduled opportunities, like membership drives and attending community events. Having many people to draw upon gets the work done, and active volunteers often step into leadership positions.

According to responses, many initiatives and events revolve around fundraising. We also asked about the type of programs or services the organization underwrites, such as the library's summer learning program.

**Survey Question 21. What are your Friends group’s significant activities in a typical year? (Select any that apply.)**

91%	Book Sales
66%	Support for summer reading/summer learning program
56%	Underwriting library programs
43%	Programs for various ages organized by the Friends (e.g., book reviews; book discussion group)
35%	Manage an ongoing book sale area or bookstore within the library
35%	Sales event other than book sales (e.g., craft show, flowers/plants sale, costume jewelry, rummage sale)
34%	Annual fund drive
29%	Holiday event
26%	Product sales (e.g., calendars, coupon books, tote bags)
25%	Volunteer appreciation event
21%	Bake Sale
11%	Chicken BBQ or other commercial food vendor fundraiser
10%	Sell materials online (e.g., eBay, Amazon)
10%	Provide delivery service to homebound patrons
4%	Operate a bookstore outside of the library

Diversification became a necessity during the pandemic. Those Friends groups whose sole purpose in life was to run a book sale, take in donations, and have large in-person gatherings in a meeting room were dead in the water. Groups that had a variety of projects, e.g., home delivery, saw they had something else to offer the library. Many of them pivoted and underwrote the costs of additional e-books, Wi-Fi hotspots, virtual programming, and take-and-make craft kits. Having a diverse “program” of activities for the Friends keep volunteers and the community engaged over the long haul.

**Challenges Identified from Most Challenging to Least**

Going back to the title of our session, yes, the number one challenge to these groups is how to catch the attention of younger volunteers! And not just attracting them but locating and interacting with them to let the next generation know about the Friends important work in the community.

This issue sparked a conversation about how we can ensure Friends groups have a welcoming atmosphere. Friends steering committees need to discuss how their

organizations can be more welcoming, especially across generations. Long-time Friends organizations can seem like a tight-knit group. A newcomer may find it intimidating to break into what appears to be a clique.

### **Survey Question 28 (Challenge #3) - Diversity and Younger Volunteers**

76%	Attracting younger members
55%	Locating younger volunteers in our community
39%	Recruiting a more diverse membership
26%	Having an inclusive membership base in the Friends group that resembles the community which the library serves (e.g., multi-generational, ethnically diverse)
11%	Creating a welcoming atmosphere for volunteers of all ages
5%	We do not face this challenge

Nearly 40% admitted having trouble attracting more diverse volunteers that reflect their community. A few groups stated that they did not perceive diversity as a challenge. We need to seek out these respondents and ask what they are doing to attract a multi-generational, ethnically diverse membership base.

When we crossmatched this question about locating younger volunteers with the challenge of volunteer engagement, 23% of the respondents told us that even if they could identify some younger potential volunteers, they were not making strides to engage them. It is one thing to wring your hands and say there aren't any young volunteers out there and another to be dedicated to the effort to locate and engage them in the organization's work.

### **Survey Question 27 (Challenge #2) - Leadership**

72%	Finding people to serve as officers
49%	An aging board
33%	Poor attendance at meetings
26%	A succession plan for Board positions
15%	Keeping up with changes in technology
8%	We do not face this challenge
5%	No term limits for officers

Like their large Friends counterparts, these groups have difficulty finding people to step up to lead the organization. Groups founded in the 1970s or 1980s have volunteers now in their 70s or 80s. Not quite ready to sling cartons of books around at a book sale!

And yet these groups are seemingly not taking steps to develop a succession plan for the officers and committee members who might want to step down. We need to

encourage groups to shift to proactive planning before they are in a stage of crisis management. Similarly, the age group these officers are part of has sometimes been slow to embrace technological changes that might keep them in touch with their constituents. Few groups have active social media accounts and often are hard to locate on the library's webpage, if the Friends are included at all.

### **Survey Question 26 (Challenge #1) - Membership**

59%	Increasing membership
51%	Lack of active members to do the work
45%	Enlisting the help of willing volunteers
35%	Enlarging the membership and donor base
21%	Offering activities in which members can become involved
15%	Offering unique benefits for joining
9%	Retention of members
8%	We do not face this challenge

Membership was identified as the third most challenging issue for Friends groups supporting rural and small libraries. A quick analysis is that once the members join, retaining them is not that difficult. So, the emphasis should be to put in the effort to increase the number of members and then encourage those supporters to become active in the organization. Consideration may need to be given to social events or other activities for members to meet one another. The more the members feel part of a team dedicated to a single purpose, meaning the library, the more committed they will become to Friends projects.

In comparing the questions asking about the size of the membership and the estimated total number of active members on the core team of Friends volunteers, the smaller the group, the higher percentage of active involvement. If a group is less than ten members, 48% of the group is "active." (Truth be known, there is nowhere to hide! Members are expected to step up.)

As the size of the membership base increases, the percentage of active members trends downward. But this question probably does not account for micro-volunteering, where many members may give 1-2 hours to assist at the book sale one time a year, but the survey respondent may not have classified these members as active.

### **Survey Question 30 (Challenge #5) - Fundraising**

58%	Identifying unique ways to earn money other than book sales
49%	Fundraising that allows for social distancing
35%	Storage of donations and disposal of books not sold



21%	Fundraising at a level that can offset cuts in the library's operating budget
16%	Lack of volunteers to efficiently run bookstore or ongoing library book sale
11%	Lack of space at the library to have a book sale
9%	We do not face this challenge

As a surprising result, fundraising was the fourth most challenging issue.

But what can FLS do here? The individual libraries control space limitations for sales or storage. FLS can encourage Friends to diversify its revenue streams. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, groups could not accept donations from the public or gather large groups indoors. We learned that Friends groups could not rely solely on book sales to generate income.

Creativity in fundraising reflects the group and its community. We devoted four pages in two FLS newsletters in 2020 and 2021 on how to raise money with methods that would be safe during a pandemic.<sup>4</sup> We were heartened to learn of one small library that raffled off a John Deere lawn tractor, which we thought was a terrific idea! The tractor would be a coveted prize in their community, where residents have multi-acre homesteads.

We can offer suggestions on where to look for storage locations in the community. But what if they have already explored those possibilities? We can put our best efforts toward educating Friends on how to increase their number of members, which will give them a larger pool of volunteers to draw upon to run a sale or bookstore.

Related to fundraising, Survey Question 22 asked, "Approximately how much financial support do the Friends provide the library annually? (Please give a round dollar figure)." Of the 101 responses to this question, seven participants said they were "unsure" or "not sure," while one said that a "reasonable amount" was contributed to the library. Nine respondents said that the amount varied or was driven by the library's requests and gave no dollar figure.

Some groups are doing very well, averaging \$7,500 in support to their libraries annually. Other amounts were tallied as follows:

- 25% of the respondents indicated the Friends gave between \$1,000 and \$2,000 annually to the library
- 17% of these groups provide between \$5,000 and \$6,999 annually to their libraries
- 11% provide \$7,000 - \$11,999 to their library
- 20% provide \$12,000 or more in financial support

The total amount that all these groups had contributed was estimated at more than \$652,000. Whether underwriting programs for all ages, purchasing furniture, expanding

technology resources, or contributing to a renovation or construction project, these Friends groups pack a punch for their small libraries!

These figures should be used in advocacy messages to elected officials, itemizing how much Friends who support rural and small libraries give back to their communities. Library civic leaders expend considerable amounts of their time as volunteers to help their library, but their work also enables the public to make a significant financial investment in this community resource.

Groups need to inform their communities of this ongoing support. The library’s program fliers and online calendars need to acknowledge that the Friends underwrite events and services. Staff members who introduce the programs should recognize the Friends sponsorship and distribute Friends membership literature to encourage audience members to become members or donate to the Friends. In Survey Question #24, we learned that only 20% of the respondents give a membership pitch to audiences at the library.

**Survey Question 23. Please indicate some examples of recent support to the library. (Select any that apply.)**

72%	Underwriting programs and performers
51%	Purchases of furniture and/or fixtures (i.e., shelving, display units)
50%	Refreshments for programs
46%	Volunteer support
30%	General monetary support to the library's operating budget
29%	Donations toward a renovation, expansion, or new building
27%	Technology (e.g., Wi-Fi hotspots, in-library computers)
20%	Printer, photocopier, or other equipment purchases
10%	Digital subscriptions and/or e-books
8%	Health and safety equipment and/or supplies (e.g., AED, security cameras)
7%	Magazine subscriptions

Other: 28 respondents indicated other items supported.

**Survey Question 31 (Challenge #6) - Purpose, Mission, and Community Engagement**

65%	Raising the public’s awareness of what the Friends do
48%	Outreach in the community, highlighting library services
31%	Involvement in advocacy for library
26%	Getting volunteers to understand the role of the group beyond book sales

13%	We do not face this challenge
5%	Supporting the library’s strategic plan
4%	Writing policies and procedures to give structure to a growing organization

Some groups reported they did not face the challenges we posed. But fully 65% of our respondents indicated that it is difficult to educate the public about what the Friends do for the library. Do your members know what you do? Why is there a Friends group? Can your members explain the Friends succinctly to their family and neighbors, focusing on the group’s purpose and mission statement?

Closely related to this, 48% shared it was a challenge to participate in outreach activities where they could highlight library services to their community.

NYLA could leverage these community civic leaders to engage with our elected officials. Both library staff and volunteers alike, when answering this question indicated it was difficult to involve their members in advocacy for the library and its needs.

**Survey Question 29 (Challenge #4) - Active Participation and Volunteer Engagement**

57%	Encouraging active participation of current members
40%	Persuading members to participate in a variety of roles
39%	Being committed to recruiting new volunteers
14%	We do not face this challenge
13%	Engaging members in decision making
13%	Maintaining positive relationships between Friends, Board of Trustees, and Director
10%	Recognizing volunteers, showing appreciation for their efforts
5%	Lack of consistent practices and procedures

Active participation and volunteer engagement came in second to last as an issue for these groups, but was still far ahead of legal challenges, which came in dead last. Many folks did not see encouraging active participation of their members as difficult. Only 40% of them felt it was tough to persuade members to participate in several roles in the organization. Being committed to recruiting new volunteers was nearly equal at 39%.

Despite these results, some of the ways to ensure engagement, including involvement in decision making, consistent practices and procedures, volunteer recognition, solid understanding of the roles with staff and trustees, and keeping these relationships

cordial were rated even lower. Another way to interpret these low rankings could be: because we do these things that improve engagement, we don't face this challenge.

Ultimately, this was a surprising result because so many Friends groups (outside of small, rural groups, that is) had told us that getting people to do the work and participate in projects was exceedingly difficult. In some instances, limited membership numbers can keep a Friends group from doing something that would be beneficial to the organization or the library, such as applying for nonprofit status.

### **Survey Question 32 (Challenge #7) - Legal Issues**

75%	We do not face this challenge
13%	Outdated by-laws
9%	Obtaining nonprofit 501(c)(3) status with the IRS
5%	Maintaining nonprofit status for organization (i.e., compliance with all rules and regulations of NYS, IRS, etc.)
3%	Starting a new group
3%	Conflict of interest policy
3%	Merging a Friends group with the library's Foundation

Here was a disturbing data point: 75% felt their group did not face any challenge in the area of nonprofit law. By that, we meant complying with IRS regulations to maintain nonprofit status or needing to review outdated by-laws.

Although we asked groups if they were "formally organized," we did not gather data on which of these groups actually have 501(c)(3) status with the IRS. We therefore cannot crossmatch responses on this challenge question.

We can only imagine that they believe their current set of by-laws are in place and acceptable, meaning that the by-laws are working for them. But suppose the by-laws have not been updated since 2013. In that case, they are probably in need of a severe overhaul, primarily due to the New York State Nonprofit Revitalization Act, legislation which was passed in 2013.

### **What Types of Support Did Respondents Say They Needed?**

After the survey respondents weighed in on the challenges their organizations face, we asked them to select up to five types of assistance or support they felt would be helpful to their group at this time.

Here are the first three items they identified as most helpful:

1. Ideas on attracting younger and more diverse volunteers (77%)
2. Fundraising ideas beyond book sales (65%)
3. Techniques to recruit more volunteers (58%)

FLS wants to be responsive to the 105 survey participants. One of our first actions was to notify them of a free webinar offered by a regional library council, "Fundraising Beyond the Book Sale." Many survey respondents participated in this professional development offering in April 2021.<sup>5</sup>

The last two requests for assistance involved networking with other Friends groups:

- 4<sup>th</sup> was Networking opportunities with other Friends groups close to my home (33%)
- 5<sup>th</sup> was Virtual discussion meetings on best practices on particular topics (29%)

FLS was already providing networking opportunities for Friends groups, but the survey responses encouraged us to redouble our efforts.

## **Types of Support FLS is Offering**

The survey data pointed to the needs and deficits inherent in being a volunteer support organization for a rural and/or small library. We deliberately steered away from using library jargon when formulating the questions to better connect with the community volunteers who do this work. We gathered a mix of quantitative and qualitative data by having people rank their needs in order.

The survey results informed several multi-part initiatives undertaken by the FLS Board of Directors and the Task Force on Friends and Rural Libraries since late spring 2021. We started working to establish regional Friends Councils, offer virtual gatherings to discuss common concerns, encourage remote learning on best practices for Friends groups, and provide a subscription service via email of tips to build and maintain memberships. Ultimately, these projects will serve the survey respondents in small and rural libraries as well as all members of our Section.

## **FLS Task Force on Friends Councils**

In several of New York's public library systems, Friends representatives from member libraries gather to support one another in their work and share best practices once or twice a year. FLS established a task force that worked throughout 2021 with the goal of starting Friends Councils in systems where these Councils do not currently exist.

When people attend a Friends Council gathering, either in-person or virtually, they are like sponges: they soak up a good idea or two that will help to recharge their group. Friends volunteers are eager to meet their volunteer counterparts and look for fresh ideas. They are tired of talking to their own group's officers! These gatherings are energizing! They give people renewed enthusiasm for their vital work to support community libraries.

Agendas include topics of interest and, when in-person, a tour of the hosting library. Each group shares their experiences, asks questions, and highlights their current projects. Some Councils have a secretary record the highlights of the meeting and share minutes with attendees through a listserv set up by the library system's IT department.

This peer-to-peer support and networking has sometimes led to partnerships between two or more Friends groups in neighboring communities. Notably, volunteers from the Friends organizations of the Gates Public Library and the Chili Public Library have collaborated to run a golf tournament for the Chamber of Commerce, which straddles their two adjacent towns in the western suburbs of Rochester. The event is a significant fundraiser for the two groups, with each organization receiving \$6,150 in proceeds in 2021. This partnership provides two pools of volunteer talent to take on the many roles needed in such an endeavor.

The Southern Adirondack Library System and the Buffalo Erie County Library System were both successful in establishing a Friends Council in 2021. The six members of the FLS Task Force on Friends Councils accomplished an inventory of Friends organizations in seven of the 23 public library systems. FLS continues to use these lists to reach out to groups, informing them about our services and learning opportunities. The system directors received an information packet with their region's Friends list, a cover letter encouraging system staff to establish and support a Council, plus a step-by-step resource sheet outlining what a Council might discuss at an in-person or virtual gathering.

## **FLS Meet-Ups and FLS Annual Membership Meeting**

Based on this type of Friends Council experience and because the FLS Executive Board's annual in-person meeting has traditionally been held in various regions around the state, the Board members agreed to try a new approach in 2014. We held a "meet-up" in combination with the Board meeting. The first FLS Meet-Up was so successful, it quickly became an annual tradition.

We approached a Friends group and library director in the location where the Board wanted to meet and asked them to host the FLS Executive Board. Then an informal afternoon gathering of Friends followed the Board's morning business meeting. The

focus was on having an opportunity for local Friends to meet the Board members and learn about FLS, building in additional time for sharing their activities and questions.

For six years, the Board found this event was an excellent way to create an awareness of our organization and develop a support system, stressing our tagline, "Friends helping Friends." If we were in a location near NYLA's annual conference site, we could promote our conference sessions. These gatherings presented strong potential to grow our membership base.

The Board members were energized as they encouraged dialogue among the assembled Friends. We found in most cases that the Friends volunteers had never met one another, even if they were from neighboring libraries. The conversation was casual, as participants offered their experiences with fundraising, strategies for volunteer engagement, and other topics of interest to volunteers and staff.

In 2020, we reluctantly canceled our in-person meet-up scheduled for July in Utica. Ditto in 2021. And during the pandemic, for the first time, the NYLA Annual Conference went virtual, with all sessions online. By November 2020, everyone was familiar with Zoom.

We decided to try our Annual Membership meeting via Zoom after the conference was over. We had always tied the meeting to the conference with mixed success. The downside was that everyone, including the officers, wanted to zip through the meeting in 20 minutes or less to get to the conference program session that was immediately following the business meeting.

Our first attempt at a virtual membership meeting was so successful, we determined to have the 2021 annual meeting by Zoom as well. In November 2020, we had a leisurely gathering that ran 70 minutes illustrated by a PowerPoint of our activities with a virtual annual report. Attendance was nearly double what we have seen at our in-person meetings, with about 50 Zoomers. We were gratified to also have several members of NYLA's Board of Directors in attendance.

We had our award recipients Zoom in and say a few words. They were grateful for the opportunity to address everyone and made some memorable remarks. One of the groups that received an award would never have been able to travel across the state to be recognized at the conference.

## **Interest in E-learning and Digital Access**

This brings us to the question of internet access for our survey respondents. We considered a series of remote learning opportunities for those who were interested. And boy, were they interested! 87% indicated they wanted to know more about an e-

learning opportunity, but only 16% felt more webinars was going to be helpful to their groups.

We asked the survey respondents to give us information on their internet access if FLS were to offer some remote learning options (Survey Question #36). Given digital inequities and the uneven state of broadband internet, how could we best reach people? Would they be able to participate in online classes?

We asked about their access and their devices. What hardware did they have? What was the digital infrastructure in their region? (Survey Questions #34 through #38) 38% deemed their area as having fast, reliable internet; 28% felt their area lacked sufficient broadband and had relatively slow internet; 15% indicated they were in an unserved area.

The vast majority had internet at their home to participate in online classes. Others had access to equipment at their office. 39% said they would head to the public library to use the internet.

Earlier in the survey, we tried to ascertain how the groups had tried to keep their leaders and members engaged during the pandemic. In Survey Question #19, we asked if the groups had met by Zoom or other videoconferencing software. We were heartened to learn that 55% had tried meeting by Zoom, and of those that had, 40% met virtually six or more times (Survey Question #20). Only 3% of the respondents said the group had tried to meet virtually but were unsuccessful.

## **FLS Connections! Virtual Meet-Ups**

Rather than offering the remote learning opportunities the task force had discussed, we decided to go a more informal route. Given the success of our virtual Annual Membership Meeting and some meetings of local library systems' Friends Councils via Zoom, we decided to re-imagine our in-person meet-ups as virtual gatherings. It was evident that many groups were already gathering virtually with their Friends officers and members. We called these online discussions "FLS Connections!" to distinguish them from our usual in-person meet-ups.

In 2021, we held a series of three "Connections" in May, July, and September. Participants pre-registered, and we set a cap of 30 seats to keep conversation manageable. We were pleased to have participation from all across the state, including the Long Island and metropolitan New York area. Our first gathering had 16 people from nine different Friends groups. They discussed using virtual offerings to engage their members in 2020. The second meeting focused on fundraising ideas. Twenty-five attendees representing 16 Friends groups shared great ideas. The third gathering highlighted the importance of ongoing membership recruitment, community



engagement, retention of members, and volunteer recognition. Nineteen people attended, representing 12 Friends groups.

Connections gatherings could focus on mutual concerns of members that support rural and small libraries. One potential end product we are considering is an ongoing Rural Friends Interest Group. This interest group could be another avenue for membership engagement with FLS. The goal would be to develop an informal network of peers (e.g., library managers, community volunteers) with the aim of exchanging ideas and shared problem-solving. Although gathering remotely twice a year seems the most sensible way for this group to convene and discuss mutual concerns, the interest group might consider small in-person meet-ups centered in particular geographic areas (i.e., within an hour's drive of the volunteer's home). We may establish this interest group in 2022 under the FLS Connections umbrella.

## **"Membership in a Minute" Subscription Service**

And yet, there are still Friends volunteers that are not ready to embrace Zoom technology. So we came up with another remote learning opportunity, a way to help them through their inboxes.

With the idea of assisting groups with membership promotion, retention of members, and best practices for donor relations, we started a new service called "Membership in a Minute." Individuals who participated in the survey could subscribe to a once-weekly message about Friends membership delivered by email.

The first subscription period started in September 2021 and ended on December 1 with 51 subscribers. Subscribers were contacted on December 8 and requested to participate in a brief survey to assess the service. We provided a SurveyMonkey link to all participants. We sent a reminder in mid-December.

The response rate was 41% (21 responses from 51 individuals) when the survey was closed out on December 20. On a scale of 100 points, the overall rating of the service was 91. The quality of the content was rated at 90, and practical application to the Friends organization was 85. One person from a huge group (450 members) commented that "most of the content so far has been practices we already follow."

Here are several comments from subscribers:

- I like having something that is quick to read and can be saved for reference or easily shared with others.
- I found much useful information that our Friends group could benefit from.
- An excellent tool!
- I would love for it to continue!
- I look forward to receiving them as I need all the help I can get.

- Having them just show up in my email is great.
- The content has been wonderful...my [members] are enthusiastic about the ideas.

Quite a few subscribers referenced sending the messages on to other officers and members of their group. 82% of the respondents stated they were FLS/NYLA members, but we cannot verify this figure since the evaluation survey was anonymous. When non-members were asked about joining FLS, one person said their group would probably not become an organizational member, and three were unsure. It is safe to say that as a membership perk, this subscription service is not a "driver" to add additional members to the Section. But when FLS could not offer webinars, in-person meet-ups, or regional workshops, this service at least kept FLS engaged with some of our members.

Groups evaluating the service ranged from six members to 450 members; the average group was 105 Friends members. The bulk of the subscribers were Friends officers (11) or members of a Friends group (5). We had expected membership coordinators and other Friends officers to embrace some of these best practices to increase their memberships and retain more of their volunteers.

When asked which tips they might implement, most respondents indicated that they would use the suggestions in the future. Comments referenced volunteer recognition, encouraging folks to become more active with finite, limited tasks (micro-volunteering), improved donor relations, and offering more incentives for joining. One subscriber in a small library in the Southern Tier region of New York posted the entire memo on micro-volunteering to their Friends group's Facebook page, planting the seed that the Friends welcome volunteer help in many small ways.

Beginning in January 2022, this subscription service was made available to FLS members only. The number of subscribers dropped by 14% to 44 people for the winter/spring 2022 series. We promoted the service in the December "Friends News and Notes" newsletter. We sent a member blast on December 30 to encourage members to enroll for the second subscription series, which began on January 11 and will conclude on May 11, 2022, for a total of 18 messages.

Providing this service has not been difficult. We culled tips and best practices from successful Friends groups that impressed us with their practical experience in this sphere. The FLS Second Vice President for Membership sifted through all the subscribers' emails who requested to "Sign me up again" and created a group contact list. Sending the messages takes less than five minutes, a small investment of time with a positive impact. In addition, the tips from the fall series have been compiled into a handout on membership-raising which will be posted on the new resources webpage for Friends supporting small and rural libraries.

## **Membership Has Its Privileges**

Our second question on the 2021 survey, "Is this Friends group a member of the Friends of Libraries Section of the New York Library Association?" was straightforward, but 25% of the respondents were unsure. When we checked the list of libraries that responded "yes" against a current membership list, we found that 22% of the respondents got this answer wrong. Fully 79% of the libraries responding were not FLS members (57 out of 72).

While we want to be responsive to non-members, as an all-volunteer unit of a statewide nonprofit, we do have limits of what we can offer. The FLS leadership must figure out what will work best. We have the skills and enthusiasm to help these potential members, their groups and libraries, but FLS/NYLA is first and foremost a membership organization. We focus on providing services and benefits to our members.

A group membership in FLS costs \$50 annually. Friends officers in those organizations want to see a return on that investment. Smaller Friends groups work hard to earn \$50. Are they willing to become part of NYLA? What can we offer them as incentives to join? One membership perk is that FLS members may attend FLS-sponsored webinars at no additional cost. But we cannot offer free webinars open to everyone because they compete with sessions that generate revenue for NYLA.

The FLS Executive Board approved a membership promotion for FLS during National Friends of Libraries Week in October 2021. To provide additional services to the more than 100 participants who took the survey, we encouraged them to enter a drawing to receive a free organizational membership in FLS/NYLA for their Friends group. FLS will be celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary throughout 2022, and this promotion is part of a larger celebration. Despite an announcement via email directly to the survey respondents in September and a reminder in October, we only enticed 11 groups to participate in this membership giveaway (out of an eligible field of 72 libraries). It was disappointing that Friends groups associated with small and rural libraries could not see the value of gaining access to networking and continuing education for their community volunteers.

## **Participation Rate**

We are quite used to thinking in a quantitative way when evaluating Friends activities:

- How many members do we have?
- How much money did we make at the last book sale?
- How many children came to the last program we helped to underwrite?

But it should be obvious that it is not accurate or fair to compare the total number of members in a Friends group to another group, especially when one library serves a small town, and the other is in a large suburb.

Looking at the participation rate in the community, that is, the number of Friends members as a percentage of the population who choose to join the organization, is a more accurate measure that could be compared.

To calculate the participation rate of a Friends group in the community, take the number of members and divide by the library's service area population. A rate of 1% or greater is something to strive for, indicating a healthy organization serving that community.

A Friends group could thrive by using this formula to see their success in growing their membership over time. The group could have a goal to achieve several members or donors that would be ideal to do the work as well as supporting the organization financially.

If the population of your town is

- 1,000 to 1,800 residents, that would be 10 to 18 members

If your service population area is

- between 3,000 and 7,500 people, that is 35 - 75 members.

For a suburb or small city of 20,000, that would equate to 200 members.

It is a goal.

## **How Can FLS Help These Groups, Not Just Survive, But Thrive? What Lessons are the Volunteers Telling Their Peers?**

These groups are surviving. How could they be thriving?

Following are the potential challenge areas identified in the survey. A list of activities is given, which itemizes actions healthy groups should carry out as maintenance of effort to keep the group moving forward. The approaches in the survival mode might be deemed passive, with minimal effort to keep the organization functioning.

The second list of proactive activities is designed to help organizations thrive by taking on additional initiatives to strengthen and sustain the group.

### **Membership**

Activities to Survive and Maintain the Group

- Membership forms are readily available and up-to-date
- Include membership information on the library's website
- Monitor participation rate in the community

### Activities for Group to Thrive

- A structured membership plan exists, working to increase the participation rate
- Regularly scheduled membership drives
- Outreach activities in the community, including the use of social media
- Systematic recognition of volunteers, showing appreciation for work and involvement

Survey Question #12 asked for information on the Friends dues or monetary donations that defined membership in the organization. 61% of respondents indicated their dues are established at \$5 and above. 9% have dues at \$10 or above. 12% have dues at \$25 or above.

While \$5 for membership dues is a manageable price point for most small towns and villages, the number of members must be greater to have a sizable and reliable revenue stream. If there are 100 members in these groups, times \$5 per head, the organization will receive \$500 in dues. The total income from dues might only cover the cost of doing business in a year, for things like postage, office supplies, or photocopying.

To thrive, a group may want to increase its dues. A second strategy is to offer donors a range of donation suggestions for various membership categories, including more substantial gifts, like a Lifetime membership. Making it easy for people to join through an online membership form or accepting PayPal for payments of dues or additional contributions are other ways to entice supporters to join the organization.

### **Diversity and Younger Volunteers**

#### Activities to Survive and Maintain the Group

- Create a welcoming atmosphere for new members
- Extend personal invitations to attract new faces

#### Activities for Group to Thrive

- Involve multi-generational volunteers
- Strive for an inclusive and diverse membership base representative of the community
- Offer opportunities for members to interact at social gatherings as well as work together as a team
- Friends leadership (i.e., members of the Steering Committee or Board of Directors) actively engages with the community (e.g., involved as volunteers in business or community service organizations)

### **Leadership**

#### Activities to Survive and Maintain the Group

- Identify experienced community leaders to serve
- Involve members in decision-making

- Create job descriptions for all key positions

#### Activities for Group to Thrive

- Develop succession plan for organization
- Highlight leadership opportunities, implementing coaching and mentoring for active members, providing encouragement to progress to leadership positions
- Maintain positive working relationships with library staff and library's Board of Trustees
- Establish written documentation of consistent procedures and practices for the organization

### **Active Participation and Volunteer Engagement**

#### Activities to Survive and Maintain the Group

- Membership forms include a checklist of opportunities for volunteerism
- Commit to regularly recruit new volunteers

#### Activities for Group to Thrive

- Increased size of membership and donor base to have larger pool of volunteers to draw upon
- Have new volunteers shadow and assist key volunteers to learn the ropes
- Offer a wide variety of projects to involve members with diverse skill sets

### **Legal Issues**

#### Activities to Survive and Maintain the Group

- Obtain 501(c)(3) status from the IRS if fundraising is the purpose of the organization
- Compliance with rules and regulations of the IRS, NYS Department of Taxation and Finance, and State Attorney General's Charities Bureau

#### Activities for Group to Thrive

- Update organization's by-laws, incorporating requirements for nonprofits (e.g., conflict of interest policy)
- Establish a collaborative operating agreement (Memorandum of Understanding) among the library staff, the library's Board of Trustees, and the Friends
- Interact and maintain relationship with library's Foundation to recognize the distinct roles of each organization

### **Purpose, Mission, and Community Engagement**

#### Activities to Survive and Maintain the Group

- Have a clearly defined mission statement
- Advocate and network regularly with elected officials on behalf of the library

#### Activities for Group to Thrive

- Work to raise the public's awareness about the Friends and library services

- Participate in community events to promote both the Friends and the library they support
- Become involved in planning sessions with library staff and the library's Board of Trustees to support the library's strategic plan

## **Fundraising**

### Activities to Survive and Maintain the Group

- Establish consistent and reliable fundraising efforts to provide "extras" for the library
- Offer a range of options for donors in the organization's dues schedule

### Activities for Group to Thrive

- Rather than an established tier of dues, provide a range of suggested giving to encourage higher levels of donations
- Maintain diverse and unique revenue streams beyond book sale efforts with creative fundraisers
- Practice "eco-stewardship" with book sale donations and sale remainders to maximize fundraising efforts (e.g., online sales; ThriftBooks Library Discards & Donation Program, <https://www.thriftbooks.com/library/>)
- Broaden fundraising teams to ensure "buy-in" by more members
- Offer members the ability to pay dues online (e.g., PayPal) and accept donations electronically

## **Webpage on Resources for Friends Groups Supporting Small and Rural Libraries**

In April and May 2021, the Task Force members were asked to analyze the survey responses and then develop a list of potential suggestions and best practices to share. The challenge areas were Membership (including Active Participation and Volunteer Engagement), Leadership, Diversity, Fundraising, Legal Issues, and Purpose and Mission. Work continues to make the content freely available to all Friends organizations on the FLS webpage. A new section of the website, "Resources for Friends Groups Supporting Small and Rural Libraries," will be comprised of resource sheets on each challenge area and pertinent handouts from other FLS-sponsored webinars, conference presentations, and regional workshops that relate to the topic. Templates for volunteer job descriptions and transition statements used to inform new volunteers of their responsibilities will be offered. Articles on how to start a Friends group, content in the FLS newsletter archives, and samples of Friends webpages and social media accounts will be included.

## **Summary/Conclusion**

When we began this project, we knew one thing: Small rural libraries that are under-resourced can benefit from having the support of Friends of the Library groups. But how could the leadership of NYLA's Friends of Libraries Section ensure that these organizations not just survive but thrive?

We did not want to assume that we knew the challenges faced by these Friends groups (although we had our suspicions). We began by collecting data relating to who these community volunteers were, how their organizations operated, what challenges they faced, and what services and training might help them succeed.

In our informal surveys, respondents reported that they needed help, mostly in recruiting volunteers and improving volunteer engagement practices that lead to retention. Many of our rural areas are greying—the majority of the population is older—hence the desire for younger volunteers. Other challenges include the ability to fundraise effectively (with less dependence on large-scale book sales) and growing a membership base of supporters of any age.

We moved to a formal survey and were delighted with the response rate, with 105 surveys returned from 72 libraries. Extensive marketing helped us reach 83% of the public library systems in New York. Challenges identified, from most pressing to least, were diversity and attracting younger members, leadership and succession planning, membership growth and involvement, fundraising, raising public awareness of the Friends mission and purpose, encouraging current members to actively participate in a variety of roles, and legal issues, such as outdated by-laws.

Once we had identified the challenges, we could chart a course forward. FLS has been working on a robust series of professional development opportunities to support Friends groups, including webinars, the "Membership in a Minute" email subscription service, a quarterly newsletter, virtual gatherings to discuss topics of interest, consulting with individual Friends groups, and developing a page on the FLS website aggregating resources specifically for Friends supporting rural and small libraries.

Working with New York's public library systems, FLS is creating a network of Friends Councils, where Friends groups can meet up with their counterparts in their region of the state to exchange ideas, share their expertise, and build relationships with library staff and library civic leaders. Social isolation, an ongoing challenge in rural areas, can affect Friends groups as well. Friends leaders would like to link up with their volunteer colleagues to network and learn from one another.

Using the survey allowed us to connect with Friends groups across the state. It provided insight into what our colleagues are grappling with. The results and our responses have expanded our network, allowing us to dream together of ways to



organize, strategize, and maximize the impact Friends groups can have on their libraries, wherever they are located and whatever their size.

## Appendices, Endnotes, and Other Resources

We were pleased to share our perspectives at the 2021 Annual Conference of the Association for Rural & Small Libraries. We encourage you to do your research, using ours as a springboard. These are the steps we took as a division of a statewide professional association, but other agencies in other states could replicate our efforts. A state library, a public library system, or a network of regional libraries could all administer similar surveys of small and rural libraries in their state. With a small amount of help from library administrators, volunteers such as members of a Friends Council could undertake a study to learn about the challenges their colleagues face in their groups.

You will find all our survey results in several documents posted with this white paper. We provide the text of the original survey questions, the bar graphs, and the data summaries from SurveyMonkey. Because the survey was not anonymous, we cannot provide the data from the open-ended questions. We welcome you to contact us with any questions at [FLS.NYLA@yahoo.com](mailto:FLS.NYLA@yahoo.com).

## Appendices

Friends of Libraries Section, New York Library Association (2021). *By the Numbers: Survey of Friends Groups Associated with Rural and Small Libraries* [Data summary].

Friends of Libraries Section/New York Library Association. **2021 Survey of Friends Groups Associated with Rural and Small Libraries**. Original 40 question survey. January 2021.

Wemett, Lisa C. & Freudenberger, Erica. *Beyond Younger Volunteers: What Rural Friends Groups Need to Thrive*. Handout from *Beyond Younger Volunteers: What Rural Friends Groups Need to Thrive*. Virtual session presented at the 2021 ARSL Conference (Association for Rural & Small Libraries), October 20-23. ([www.arsl.org](http://www.arsl.org))

## Endnotes

(1) The typical rural library employs 1.9 full-time staff members. *American Libraries*, September/October 2020, p. 15.

(2) State-level Friends of the Library groups:  
<https://www.ala.org/united/friends/statefriends>. Retrieved 1/13/22. State Friends Groups.

(3) FLS-sponsored webinars concerning younger volunteers: **Engaging Millennials as Friends Volunteers** (2020) and **Connecting With Today's Volunteers to Transform the Friends of the Library** (2019). Details on these presentations and supporting materials available at [www.nyla.org/friends](http://www.nyla.org/friends) > Events > FLS Webinars.

(4) See back issues of "Friends News and Notes" newsletters. Each issue's table of contents highlights the feature articles. Available at [www.nyla.org/friends](http://www.nyla.org/friends) > Publications.

- June 2020 (vol.6, #3), pgs. 6-8: "When Book Sales Just Aren't Enough" featured ideas to implement during the pandemic, socially distant, and low risk!
- March 2021 (vol. 7, #2), pgs. 5-7: When Books Sales Just Aren't Enough, Part 2

(5) **Fundraising Beyond the Book Sale**. Webinar, April 22, 2021. Sponsored by the Central New York Library Resources Council (CRLC). To watch this webinar in full, find the link on the CRLC webinar archive page: <https://clrc.org/events-education/webinars/> You can also view the presenters' slides separately.

## Other Resources

"By the Numbers: Rural and Small Libraries." *American Libraries*, September/October 2020, p.15.

"Rural Libraries in America: An Infographic Overview" updated a 2013 report from the Institute of Museum and Library Services using the Public Libraries Survey data, with analyses based on FY 2017. See also the State Detail Tables: Rural Libraries in America. <https://www.ims.gov/news/rural-libraries-across-america-continue-expand-programs-and-resources>. (October 1, 2020)

Tanzi, Nick. "Using Email to Address COVID-19 Marketing Challenges." *Public Libraries*, January/February 2021 (vol. 60, #1): 17-19.

"Toward an Equitable Digital Future." Special Report. *American Libraries*, March/April 2022 (vol. 53, #3/4): 26-41.

Wemett, Lisa C. "Friends of Libraries Section of the New York Library Association (FLS/NYLA)," State Friends Spotlight. *The Voice for America's Libraries* (February 2019): 14-16.

## Authors' Biographies

**Lisa C. Wemett**, MSLIS, is First Vice President of the Friends of Libraries Section, the FLS Coordinator for Professional Development, and previously served three terms as President of the Section. A public librarian for more than 30 years, she retired in 2009 from the Webster Public Library, where she was the assistant director and teen services librarian. For 9½ years, Lisa was staff advisor to the Friends of the Webster Public Library, helping the organization grow their membership numbers substantially and securing their tax-exempt status from the IRS. In 2014, Lisa was the first recipient of NYLA's "Above and Beyond Award," recognizing her continuous contributions to NYLA in many leadership capacities.

**Erica Freudenberger** is a creative community-builder who works with libraries to create community-led change. Currently the Outreach & Engagement Consultant at the Southern Adirondack Library System, she formerly led the Red Hook Public Library, a finalist for Library Journal's "Best Small Library Award," garnering five-star library ratings from 2013-2016. Erica is a Member At Large for the Executive Board of the Friends of Libraries Section (FLS) of the New York Library Association. She is a 2016 *Library Journal* Mover & Shaker, a Councilor-at-Large for the American Library Association through 2022, and a Public Library Association Board member through 2023. In her free time, she runs Thriving Libraries, LLC (<https://thrivinglibraries.com>).