

Regional Networks and LSCA

by Sara Laughlin, The Stone Hills Library Network

By 1973 increasing publishing rates and demand for information from businesses, schools, and citizens were straining every library in Indiana. Decades of informal cooperation had set the stage for a higher level of resource sharing.

Indiana libraries of all types and sizes responded by forming regional planning commissions. Around the state, 14 planning commissions were authorized and funded with LSCA grants. The commissions were formed using the regional planning commission boundaries already established

by the Indiana Department of Commerce, which corresponded with commuting and shopping patterns. Not coincidentally, each region included a metropolitan area with a large public or academic library or both. Their task: to identify priorities for improving library service through sharing resources within each region.

It was a massive grassroots planning effort unparalleled in the library community. After months of meetings that involved participants from school media centers, public libraries, college and university libraries, and special libraries ranging from corporate to prison, the regions developed plans for sharing their resources. State Library guidelines required that interlibrary loan, reference referral, and continuing education be included in each plan, but each region was free to design services and programs that made sense for their situation. With the input of nearly every library in each area, the plans included time-tested as well as new solutions.

Indiana was the first state to form networks that included all types of libraries, called "multitype library networks." Divided into geographic regions, Area Library Service Authorities (ALSAs) were formed under existing state legislation, the Library Services Authority Act, which had been on the books since 1967. By 1994, 782 libraries belonged to one of these regional networks—239 public libraries, 320 school corporations, 71 colleges/universities, and 152 special libraries.

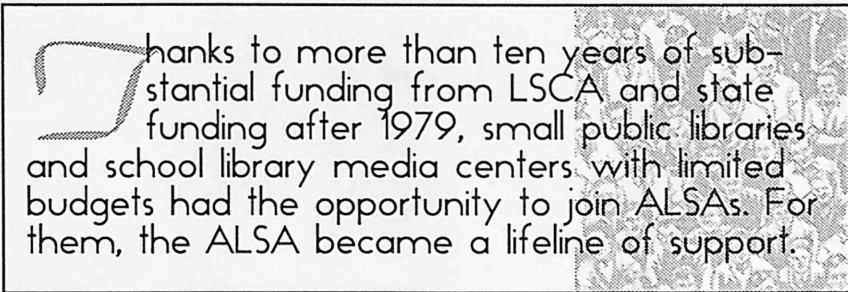
Thanks to more than ten years of substantial funding from LSCA and state funding after 1979, small public libraries and school library media centers with limited budgets had the opportunity to join ALSAs. They became the heaviest borrowers of interlibrary loan materials, the heaviest users of reference referral and the biggest proportion of participants in continuing education programs. For them, the ALSA became a lifeline of support. They no longer had to turn away patrons who needed sophisticated research sources. They could keep

up with current trends in the library field through routed professional journals, regular newsletters, and consultation on the phone or in person in their libraries. They could count on the ALSA to sponsor continuing education programs

on practical topics of interest to their staffs. They could participate in discount purchasing on everything from office supplies to computers to public programs. They were full participants in cooperative decision-making.

Interlibrary loan became the "bread and butter" service of the ALSAs. Annual request loads increased from a few thousand in the mid-seventies to more than 100,000 per year by the 90s. As new technology became available to transmit requests, the ALSAs switched from teletype machines to computer terminals. They added fax machines and modems to support database searching, which helped users locate and receive materials much faster. With a toll-free call, libraries in each region could place a request, and with an average turnaround time of less than two weeks, they could receive materials quickly and conveniently.

However, of the 2,500 library locations in the state, only the largest were able to contribute their holdings to on-line databases. It simply wasn't worth it for ALSA interlibrary loan staff to call smaller libraries in the hopes they would be able to loan an item, when the item was available through OCLC from a nearby university or large public library. As the volume of interlibrary



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loans increased, so did requests to large libraries, and their staffs were stretched to the limit.

In the early 1990s, two ALSAs sought to reduce their dependency on large libraries and to increase the participation of smaller libraries. With generous funding from LSCA Title III, they developed regional databases on CD-ROM. In the first two years of operation, both areas reported huge increases in lending by the small libraries that participated, decreases in loans from large libraries, and substantial jumps in direct lending and borrowing between libraries. In

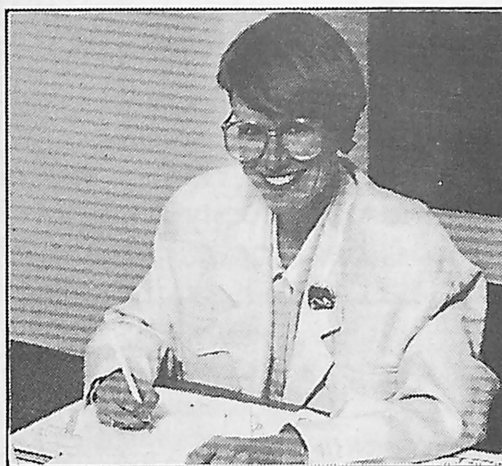
addition, the libraries have contributed their records to OCLC and are beginning to lend to other libraries in the state. Through the CD-ROM projects, the participants have entered the computer age and demonstrated their ability to participate as full partners in the resource sharing network.

Between 1975 and 1995, 70,000 library staff members participated in hundreds of continuing education programs. The ALSAs, initially supported by LSCA funds, made these programs possible. In addition, LSCA funded two major statewide continuing education studies in 1981 and 1992 which resulted in statewide plans. These

plans identified continuing education priorities. The basics were management issues, children's services, improving reference service, and automation, but many, many other areas were also included. Continuing education was delivered through low-cost workshops and regional roundtables, printed information, video training, field trips, and one-to-one consultation. LSCA funding helped underwrite ALSA roundtables for public library trustees, workshops for public library directors, and reference training for staff.

Through mergers and creative combinations, the number of ALSAs was reduced from the original 14 to nine by 1992, but a strong sense of local ownership still prevailed within each area. By the early 1990s, the loosely coordinated autonomous ALSAs found it increas-

ingly difficult with their limited resources to meet the pressing needs of their members. Large lending libraries grumbled about the increasing burdens imposed by their participation in ALSA interlibrary loan. Small libraries desperately needed more assistance with technology. The state legislature demanded accountability for statewide automation planning. Information technology threatened to bypass libraries and library networks entirely. The time had come for rethinking networking in Indiana.



Sara Laughlin, administrator of Stone Hills Library Network, presents an overview of the benefits of LSCA's contributions to Indiana's library network

Once again, libraries of all types and sizes responded to the call for a new vision of resource sharing. In a grassroots participatory process unequaled since the formation of the ALSAs twenty years earlier, library representatives met to review drafts of new principles and new services and governance plans that would radically restructure Indiana's library networks. The plan proposed to create a single, statewide network, organized under the LSA structure and using INCOLSA as the transition agency. It would retain the strengths of democratic governance, while positioning the network to respond to new needs.

Like the original formation of networks in Indiana, the reorganization of Indiana's resource sharing programs is getting a big assist from LSCA funding, which will help cover the one-time legal, consulting and administrative costs of restructuring. In order to remove any financial barriers to participation by small libraries, LSCA funds will also pay the 1995 membership dues of libraries joining the New Network.

With the help of LSCA funds, library networks have delivered valuable services to Indiana citizens for twenty years. As the networks restructure, they again are depending on help from LSCA to make the transition. It's a good partnership, bringing together the best in federal, state and local resources to build a modern information infrastructure.