

KDLA July 2012 Trustee Tip of the Month Special Message from State Librarian Wayne Onkst

There are many components required for a successful public library. One of the key factors frequently overlooked in the success of a public library is a strong board of trustees. In looking at the very best public libraries, an outstanding library board will always be evident.

Few people understand the complexity and the amount of work required for providing library service. This is certainly true of the work of trustees. Overseeing the work of the library in today's world is ever more demanding. Trustees must deal with all the operations of a business while realizing that the library is a government agency attempting to meet the needs of the community.

It is not unusual to hear from a trustee about how they never expected their service to demand so much; nor did they expect their service to provide such a return. Serving as a trustee definitely changes perspectives about the library and usually converts trustees into life-long advocates and supporters who really understand what the library means to the community.

It has been my pleasure to work with trustees – usually under the most difficult circumstances. Whether the trustees are facing a crisis in the library, difficult decisions, or serious challenges, I am always impressed and inspired by the selfless manner in which they guide the library – solely by their sense of dedication to the community.

The transformation of Kentucky's public libraries in recent years has been absolutely remarkable. In an age that has been dominated by change in so many areas, libraries are providing more service than ever before. Much of the progress made in libraries over the last century is due to the wonderful, dedicated trustees who have overseen our libraries. In the face of criticism – mostly from those with limited knowledge about the board's work – our trustees have remained strong and focused on serving the needs of the community. I often think that higher levels of government would be well served by observing our trustees in action rather than criticizing or making factually incorrect statements about the board's efforts.

As a result of the system set in place more than 50 years ago, Kentucky's library trustees are free to deliberate in the best interest of the library without any possibility of personal benefit or any concern about the next election cycle. Communities across the Commonwealth have been the beneficiaries of this dedicated service.

I realize that the last two years have been especially challenging for trustees. As they have struggled to meet the increasing demands for service with the limited resources provided to libraries, a few opponents have undertaken legal action, political attacks, or threats against libraries and trustees. The manner in which trustees have met these challenges while continuing to provide strong leadership for libraries is inspiring to all who value the library and understand its value to the community.

The definition of what it means to be a public servant has been expanded in recent years to include many people and various groups. But there are no better examples of true public servants than the 600 trustees serving libraries and communities across Kentucky. Those who agree to undertake the role of library trustee do so with no expectation of personal gain or glory. Perks are minimal. Trustees are expected, on the other hand, to give of their time and talent on a regular basis.

Our libraries and our communities owe library trustees a great deal of gratitude for this service. Kentucky's libraries are not only thriving but excelling as a result of their dedication. As we move ahead, we look forward to working with you and seeing the great things that communities will enjoy at their libraries as a result of the continued resolve, support and dedication that has been a hallmark of Kentucky's library trustees for many years.