Onondaga County Public Libraries Free Direct Access Plan 2027-2031

In fulfillment of Commissioner's Regulation 90.3(a) through (d)(4)

The Onondaga County Public Library (OCPL) is a federated public library system chartered to serve all residents of Onondaga County, New York. The system includes 19 independent member libraries, 8 Syracuse City branch libraries, 2 community center libraries, and the Central Library located in the City of Syracuse. The Central Library is chartered to serve all residents of Onondaga County.

This plan supports the principles of free direct access established under New York State Commissioner's Regulations §90.3 and the guidance provided by the New York State Library Division of Library Development.

DEFINITIONS

Direct Access is defined as the ability of an individual, who resides within the boundaries of a public library system and who has a valid borrower's card issued by the system or any member library in the system, to borrow materials for home use directly from the premises of any library that is a member of the public library system on the same basis as that specified for cardholders in each individual library.

Chartered service area is defined as the geographic area served by a library as stated in charter documents approved by the Board of Regents and on file with the department. Please note that the phrase "and its environs" or equivalent as contained in any charter document will not be recognized by the commissioner as a valid part of the library's chartered service area. For purposes of this section, the commissioner will not recognize areas served by the library under contract or agreement as a valid part of a library's chartered service area.

Resident borrower is defined as an individual who resides within the boundaries of the chartered service area of a public library as defined in section 253 of the Education Law and who is a library cardholder at that library.

Non-resident borrower is defined as an individual who resides outside the boundaries of the chartered service area of a public library as defined in section 253 of the Education Law and who is a library cardholder at that library or at another member library of the public library system or who is a system cardholder. This definition and plan does not include or address individuals residing outside of the boundaries of the Onondaga County Public Library system.

Library resources are defined as the print and non-print materials owned by the library and any other services provided by the library to the resident borrowers of the library's chartered service area

On-site use is defined as the ability of an individual to use library resources on the premises of a library.

Serious inequities and hardships are defined as those conditions which adversely affect resident borrowers of member libraries, such as when circulation of library materials to non-resident users is excessive and significantly deprives local residents of the opportunity to borrow library materials.

Unserved is defined as those individuals residing in geographic areas that are within the boundaries of a public library system but outside the boundaries of a chartered service area of a library which is a member of that system. Note that since the OCPL Central Library is chartered to serve all of Onondaga County there are no unserved individuals in Onondaga County

Underserved is defined as those individuals residing in geographic areas that are within the chartered service area of a member library and which the public library system had identified as having an inadequate level of local income to support the delivery of acceptable library services.

Member Libraries means the public libraries in the library system's service area chartered by the Board of Regents of the State of New York to provide public library service to the residents of their chartered service areas within the Onondaga County (and associated school districts for a school district library). This includes the Syracuse City Branches and the Central library.

System Meeting is a meeting organized by the OCPL system that includes representation from member library directors and/or trustees.

1. **Describe how all individuals residing within the boundaries of the system but outside a member public library's chartered service area will receive library services.**

Individuals residing within the boundaries of OCPL but outside a member library's-chartered service area will continue to receive library services through:

1. Free direct access at all OCPL member libraries
2. Intra-system borrowing through the integrated library system (ILS) shared by all OCPL member libraries
3. Access to downloadable and streaming digital collections
4. Library services provided by the OCPL Central Library, chartered to serve all of Onondaga County

5. Access to electronic resources through the OCPL website and online catalog
6. Participation in library programs and outreach services, subject to local capacity limitations permitted under Commissioner's Regulations
7. Mobile, pop-up, outreach, and community-based library services where available

OCPL libraries participate in a shared library card environment in which cards issued by any member library are honored system-wide. No fees are charged to Onondaga County residents for library cards.

2. **Describe how the system will assure that those persons living within the system boundaries in an area where a member library chooses to withdraw from the system, or where a chartered and registered library was never a member of the system, will be served by the system.**

Individuals residing within the boundaries of Onondaga County in an area where a member library chooses to withdraw from OCPL will continue to receive the same suite of library services available to all residents of the OCPL service area (see #1 above):

1. Free direct access at any member library
2. Shared borrowing and delivery services from any member library
3. Access to digital collections and electronic resources
4. Access to the OCPL Central Library and their services
5. Remote access to the online catalog and library services
6. Outreach and community-based library services as feasible

3. **Describe what the system considers "serious inequities and hardships" and the criteria used by the system to make the determination.**

OCPL recognizes that resource sharing is a core value of the federated system and that equitable access benefits all county residents. Serious inequities and hardships may exist when:

- Non-resident borrowing significantly limits county residents' access to high-demand materials or services
- Excessive lending patterns create substantial financial or operational burdens on a member library
- Demand for programs, technology, or equipment exceeds a library's capacity to serve local residents
- Digital licensing or vendor restrictions create inequitable access pressures
- Persistent circulation imbalances materially affect collection development or service delivery

Criteria used in determining serious inequities and hardships may include:

- Borrowing-to-lending ratios
- Hold fulfillment delays
- Financial impact on member libraries
- Usage data for electronic resources
- Program attendance and facility capacity
- Loss or replacement rates for shared materials
- Collection turnover rates

4. Describe what constitutes excessive out of chartered service area borrowing in the system.

OCPL recognizes that resource sharing is a core strength of the federated system. However, borrowing activity may warrant review when sustained patterns of non-resident use create service pressures or inequities that significantly affect a member library's ability to respond to the needs of its resident community.

More specifically, a review of out-of-chartered-service-area borrowing may be initiated when circulation and resource-sharing patterns demonstrate sustained imbalances or usage trends that materially affect collection availability, delivery operations, digital resource access, or service capacity for resident borrowers.

Circulation involving the Central Library will continue to be treated separately because the Central Library is chartered to serve all residents of Onondaga County.

5. Analyze the library resources available to unserved and underserved populations residing within the system boundaries.

a) Describe the unserved and the underserved populations within the system.

Because the OCPL Central Library is chartered to serve all residents of Onondaga County, there are no unserved populations within the system boundaries.

OCPL recognizes, however, that some residents may experience barriers to library access due to geography, transportation limitations, economic conditions, disabilities, language barriers, broadband availability, or limited local funding.

Underserved populations may include:

- Residents in economically disadvantaged communities
- Individuals without reliable internet access
- Older adults and homebound residents
- Individuals with disabilities
- New Americans and multilingual populations
- Residents with limited transportation access
- Communities with limited local funding capacity

b) Describe the criteria used by the system to identify libraries as having an inadequate level of local income to support the delivery of acceptable library service (underserved). List those libraries so identified.

OCPL uses compliance with New York State minimum standards for public libraries, as described in New York State education law and New York State Commissioner's Regulations, as a primary measure of adequate support.

Each member library reports on their compliance with the NYS minimum standards in the state annual report. If the library is in compliance with the minimum standards, or if the Commissioner of Education has granted a waiver from one or more of the standards, the library is deemed to have an adequate level of support.

All libraries in the Onondaga County Public Library system report compliance with NYS minimum standards or have a waiver granted by the Commissioner of Education.

c) Describe the actions the system will take to expand the availability of library services to unserved and underserved individuals residing within the boundaries of the system.

Onondaga County is a compact geographic area, with most residents living within a short distance of a library building where they are welcome, regardless of their physical location within the County. OCPL will continue to support equitable library access through:

- Countywide reciprocal borrowing and resource sharing
- Shared digital collections and databases
- Delivery services among member libraries
- Technology access initiatives
- Outreach and mobile services
- Community partnerships

OCPL will expand the availability of library services by:

- Improving our digital platforms and web presence
- Increasing the visibility of library services
- Building on our accessibility and inclusion efforts

d) Provide a timetable for such actions.

These actions will occur on an ongoing basis throughout the 2027–2031 Plan of Service period and will be reviewed annually as part of OCPL:System planning and evaluation activities.

e) Identify who will be responsible for carrying out these actions.

Responsibility for these actions will be shared among:

- OCPL's Executive Director
- OCPL's Director of Library Information Systems
- Member Services staff
- Member library directors and trustees
- The OCPL Board of Trustees
- Relevant system committees and working groups

6. Describe the conditions under which modifications to the free direct access plan can be made:

a) Without the prior approval of the Commissioner of Education

Subject to approval by a majority of member libraries and consistent with Commissioner's Regulations, member libraries may implement limited restrictions including:

- Restricting holds on newly acquired locally funded materials for a limited period
- Restricting circulation of specialized equipment, non-print materials, or fragile items purchased with local funds
- Limiting attendance at programs funded entirely with local funds when space or capacity requires priority for local residents
- Applying vendor-imposed limitations on licensed electronic resources

Materials restricted from holds may still be available for on-site use or direct borrowing by visitors at the owning library. OCPL also supports cooperative purchasing of electronic resources and shared digital platforms intended to maximize equitable access across the system.

b) With prior approval of the Commissioner of Education

Although the system does not anticipate the need for any modifications requiring the prior approval of the Commissioner of Education, the following path may be followed by a member library:

A library may request a waiver from the Commissioner of Education to impose restrictions beyond those mentioned in this plan if a majority of the other member libraries agree to support such a waiver. The request for this waiver will be made in writing to OCPL and must include the following:

1. Documentation of the serious inequities and hardships affecting the resident borrowers of the member library making the request.
2. The proposed restrictions that will be implemented and a description of the anticipated impact on resident and non-resident borrowers.
3. Recommendations for remedying the underlying inequity with a proposed timetable for action.

7. **Describe how the system will assure that member libraries are complying with the system free direct access plan approved by a majority of member libraries.**

   Upon approval by the OCPL Board of Trustees and the Commissioner of Education, the Free Direct Access Plan will be:

   - Distributed to all member libraries
   - Posted on the OCPL website
   - Reviewed periodically at system meetings
   - Incorporated into member library orientation and training activities as appropriate

   OCPL will provide guidance and consultation regarding compliance with the plan and applicable Commissioner's Regulations and will work collaboratively with member libraries to resolve concerns related to implementation.

8. **Describe how the system obtained member library input to the plan for free direct access.**

   This plan was developed through a collaborative process involving OCPL system staff, member library directors, and system stakeholders.

   The development process includes:

   - Review of the previous 2022–2026 Free Direct Access Plan
   - Review of updated guidance from the New York State Library Division of Library Development
   - Distribution of draft versions for member review and feedback
   - Review and discussion at a scheduled OCPL System Meeting
   - Approval by a majority vote of member library boards
   - Approval by the OCPL Board of Trustees

   A copy of the member library vote results will be attached to the final submitted plan in accordance with New York State Library requirements.

Approved 6/2/2026: OCSLD Meeting
Approved by 20/20 Member Boards
Approved 9/16/2026 OCPL System Board of Trustees