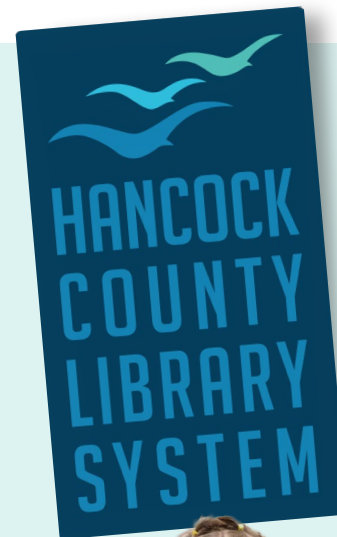


# Strategic Plan

2023



# Letter from the Director

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On behalf of our Hancock County Library System, I am pleased to introduce our FY 2023-2027 Strategic Plan.

I have spent much of the past year getting to know our county. The planning process likewise began with in-depth research and community engagement. It uncovered needs and aspirations, and it helped clarify how HCLS can best serve all of us who call Hancock County home. The resulting plan owes its success to you, the residents and stakeholders who contributed to its collaborative process. I am confident it will inspire excellence for years to come.

Before you read on, I want to highlight three big ideas which arose from the planning process. As part of continuing to improve HCLS, we will:

- Start a mobile library. Mobile library services will let us meet residents where they are, putting our services and resources within reach of more people.
- Go fine free. Eliminating fines will reduce stress and increase Library use, particularly among those who need our resources most.
- Expand HCLS's annual library card campaign to include students entering high school. This will foster a connection with families throughout our service area, and it will reach children at a key time for inspiring lifelong learning.

The following document will guide us in the coming years. In fulfilling the plan's goals, we will strengthen our organization and offerings, serve a broader spectrum of our population, and better fulfill our mission to enrich our communities' quality of life.



**John Brdecka**  
*Director*

HANCOCK COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY



# Executive Summary

Under the leadership of a new Executive Director, the Hancock County Library system set out to create a new strategic plan that identified local needs and promising innovations in library service. To make this forward-thinking process collaborative, the Library engaged the community, from individual residents and staff members, to movers and shakers and decision makers. The resulting plan not only meets the community's needs, but inspires excellence.

In order to create common ground, diverse participants were asked their views on related topics. Community leaders, stakeholders, and staff identified the effects of growth (rising housing and transportation costs), low wages, and related brain drain as stressors on residents. They praised the support offered by the Hancock County Library System (HCLS) but noted many residents seemed unaware of the breadth of its services. Mobile library service, such as a bookmobile, was frequently mentioned as a tool to lower the barriers to library access.

Residents were “very satisfied” with customer service at HCLS. They indicated a desire for increased offerings for children and adults, a delivery service for homebound residents, and expanded hours. Open-ended responses requesting existing Library offerings further corroborate a lack of awareness of the breadth of HCLS offerings.

The Ivy Group synthesized the research and reported their findings at a planning summit attended by staff, HCLS board members, and Library Foundation members. What emerged is a portrait of a library with wide-ranging support that serves a community with high access needs and a desire to improve the lives of younger residents by investing in their futures. Internal stakeholder workgroups reviewed the consultant's findings to identify major themes that would create the scaffolding of HCLS's new Strategic Plan. Four major areas of focus emerged from their discussions:

1. **Responsive Offerings**
2. **Access & Outreach**
3. **Communication/One HCLS**
4. **Organizational Health**

Library leadership and staff then prioritized specific strategies and tactics under each of these areas. This framework allows HCLS to reduce barriers to service, work in partnership to address community needs, support economic development and growth in the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and strengthen Hancock County by inspiring lifelong learning.



# Project Methodology

To prioritize the issues facing the Hancock County Library System and to understand the area at the sidewalk level, the strategic planning team engaged with internal stakeholders, community leaders, and members of the public. The strategic planning team used interviews, conversations, comment forms, and a survey to collect personal accounts from individuals who reflect Hancock County's demographics and leadership. Data analysis connected disparate threads, revealing the highest needs and informing the Library's priority setting.

## Data Analysis

Methodologies that rely on quantitative data offer a reliable snapshot of the issue under consideration. They allow measurements to be precisely compared, and thus they transform numbers into insights.

## Environmental Snapshot

The consulting team reviewed and analyzed Census demographic data, previous HCLS surveys, budgets, and annual reports, along with economic development reports and other regional

information to create an environmental scan of forces shaping Hancock County.

## Market Segmentation Study

Claritas' MyBestSegments lifestyle systems define every household in the U.S. by distinct types, called "segments," to provide a comprehensive picture of who lives where and what they are like. The study identified key demographics, lifestyle characteristics, consumer behavior, and media preferences of library patrons and non-users. These insights can guide decision-making for services, collections, and programs and inform more effective marketing strategies.



## Stakeholder Engagement

Those closest to an organization offer unique insight in their assessment of its strengths and opportunities. Consultants interviewed board members and solicited feedback from staff via a forum during the planning session.

## Planning Session

On April 4-5, 2022, Library management, staff, and stakeholders met with Ivy Group consultants to review consumer trends, discuss and prioritize areas of need, and conduct a SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results) exercise.

## Board Member Interviews

In March 2022, consultants conducted telephone and Zoom interviews with the five Hancock County Library System Board of Trustees about local strengths and challenges and how HCLS's strategic plan can address community needs.



## Community Engagement

Engagement with community members ensures that the assessment process is transparent and inclusive. The qualitative information gathered gives context to the hard data, explaining the “why” behind relationships and uncovering hidden needs.

### Community Leader Interviews

The Library Director interviewed eight influential government, business, school, and social services leaders in Hancock County to determine community challenges and priorities and to gauge feedback about HCLS, its perception in the wider community, and opportunities for enhancing its services.

### Telephone Community Survey

From May 20 to July 14, 2022, the consulting team solicited community input via telephone interviews.

A telephone survey is the best method of soliciting statistically reliable data from a representative sample of the service area, especially from non-users. The survey identified the needs and preferences of the community with respect to public library use, probed reasons why households do not currently use library services, and solicited ideas to develop future priorities for Library offerings.

264 interviews were completed, yielding a margin of error of +/- 6% at the 95% confidence level for the 38,582 residents of Hancock County over the age of 18. 79 (30%) took the opportunity to expand on how the Library might better meet their needs. An additional 126 people responded to an online prompt on the Library’s website asking how HCLS might become a better resource for them.



# Mission/Vision

## MISSION

To inspire lifelong learning and enrich the quality of life of our communities by providing cultural, technological, and informational resources and indispensable services that are accessible to all.

## VISION

A thriving, diverse community connected by an innovative library system as the accessible hub with responsive resources and caring service.

# Areas of Focus

Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, stakeholders, staff, and residents were asked about the challenges facing Hancock County. During a collaborative two-day retreat with staff, HCLS trustees, and the Library Foundation, strategic initiatives were prioritized into four core themes:

## **Responsive Offerings**

will provide collections, programs, and services based on demonstrated need and community requests.

## **Access & Outreach**

will reduce barriers to Library use and engage the populations who will most benefit from outreach efforts conducted with local and regional partners.

## **Communication/One HCLS**

will develop a cohesive system brand identity while targeting messages and improving interdepartmental communication.

## **Organizational Health**

will enable HCLS to recruit and retain excellent, diverse staff, secure support from municipalities, and attract long-term funding.

These priorities are the foundation of the strategic plan. As “areas of focus,” they guide the Library’s investment in collections, services, and spaces over the next five years. “Research highlights” connect the area of focus with the study’s investigations and data from the 2020 Census and the 2019 American Community Survey. Strategies and tactics provide step-by-step guidance for library service over the next five years.

The Library will need to dedicate resources to achieve the goals outlined in the strategic plan. This will include:

- Streamlined, predictable funding
- Investment in mobile services
- Reconfiguration of staff to accommodate expanded services
- Expanded or enhanced staff training
- Expanded or enhanced productivity and communication tools

As the benefits of expenditures are shared across areas of focus, changes to funds and staff time can achieve a high return on investment.

# Big Ideas

Over the next five years, HCLS will launch **three major initiatives.**

1

In response to requests from the community, the Library will restore mobile library service. The new mobile library will make regular stops throughout Hancock County, bringing books, computers, and services closer to home.

2

HCLS will be permanently fine free. Removing fines for late items removes barriers for low-income users and reduces stress for all. The new policy will increase circulation and bring all of the Library's indispensable services back within reach of everyone.

3

By expanding the yearly library card sign up campaign to include all students entering high school, HCLS will inspire lifelong learning in our young scholars and support academic achievement at a critical time.



# AREA OF FOCUS **Responsive Offerings**

Building on the research that went into the strategic plan, HCLS will use ongoing survey instruments, demographic data, and input from partner agencies to meet residents' evolving needs. These offerings will benefit current patrons and attract non-users. Success will be determined by output measurements, such as increased circulation and program attendance, and outcome measurements, such as a reduction in isolation among senior citizens.



## **Research Highlights**

- According to the telephone survey, users primarily patronize HCLS to check out books and/or magazines (49%) and to use the Library's computers (13%).
- 91% of surveyed users wish to expand or enhance offerings to children.
- The majority of users think it is "very important" to expand or enhance the digital collection, according to the telephone survey.
- According to market segmentation research, the top segments in Hancock County are cost-conscious households over the age of 55 who are unlikely to have children in the household.

- 21% of Hancock County residents are over age 65, 28% of whom live alone.
- 29% of children in Hancock County live in poverty and 21% are food insecure.
- 10% of Hancock County residents are veterans.

- Support the veteran population with programs such as support groups, social hours, guidance on benefits, and information on discounts.
- Support the growing senior citizen population with programs that enrich their healthspan and lifespan.

## **Improve quality of life in Hancock County by expanding services that respond to residents' needs and recommendations.**

- Support local economic and workforce development by hosting job and small business fairs and offering workshops on HCLS's online resources, resume and interview preparation, LinkedIn profiles, and entrepreneurship.



- Support financial literacy with programs such as credit and budgeting workshops and information sessions on rental and utility assistance.
- Support food security with programs such as gardening, hunting, and fishing workshops and by evaluating feasibility of community gardens on HCLS property.
- Support early childhood literacy by continuing storytimes.
- Support adolescent development with programs on life skills and academic support.
- Support disabled residents with programs such as a Next Chapter book club, sensory-friendly events, and informational sessions that promote inclusivity.
- Support the preservation of Hancock County’s unique culture with programs that highlight local artists and folkways.
- Expand hybrid, asynchronous programs, including recorded options.



## **Align HCLS offerings with community partners to leverage resources throughout the County.**

- Evaluate feasibility of adding in-library social worker services.
- Create partnerships to collect Hancock County history, such as the Library of Congress’ Veterans History Project and living history initiatives with universities and high schools.
- Increase knowledge of regional support by hosting community events at each branch with partners such as Hancock Resource Center and Excel by 5.
- Expand volunteer base to include Library of People and other vetted program speakers.
- Establish teen advisory boards at each branch to guide collection and program development and promotion, and offer service hours for school requirements.
- Identify the number of homeschool families in Hancock County and survey them on program needs.
- Expand and enhance tools for the programming committees to assess the success of programs and partnerships.

**“More community programming for kids, teens and adults.”**

Online comment form



**Expand patron-driven collection development with an emphasis on the depth and diversity of the physical and digital collections.**

- Support senior citizens by expanding collections to include more accessible formats.
- Support the interests of the largest market segments by expanding the Library of Things to include items such as CD players for audiobook use, puzzles and games for families, and health kits such as blood pressure monitors and exercise equipment.
- Support teens by expanding the graphic novel, anime, and manga collections, as well as driver education resources.
- Support students by collecting titles on school district reading lists.
- Empower residents to make positive changes in their lives by expanding how-to materials.
- Expand and enhance tools for the collection development committee to evaluate collection usage data and patron suggestions.

“Have more books available—up to date books. Sometimes the books are so outdated.”

Community telephone survey

“More digital offerings: magazines (like the old RB digital), classes, movies, etc.”

Online comment form



# AREA OF FOCUS **Access & Outreach**

Community leaders, HCLS stakeholders, and staff identified transportation issues, lack of reliable at-home internet access, and income as barriers to Library access. Increasing open hours, reinstating mobile library services, and expanding the digital collection will reduce barriers to Library use.



## **Research Highlights**

- 28.8% of Hancock County children live in poverty, and 20.5% of children face food insecurity, indicating that households have to make tough choices about their budgets.
- 19% of households in Hancock County lack reliable broadband internet access.
- In the telephone survey, 20% of non-users identified a lack of time as the primary reason that they do not use the Library, making it the second most common reason.
- 80% of telephone survey respondents were “very interested” or “interested” in delivery to homebound residents.

- The Library’s role as a place to access computers, Internet, Wi-Fi, and copy/print services is “very important” to 71% of telephone survey respondents.
- Most telephone survey respondents were interested in expanded operating hours.
- According to market segmentation, only 40.4% of Hancock County households are active library cardholders, suggesting barriers to accessing HCLS services.
- Nearly half of community leaders interviewed suggested mobile library services to address transportation barriers.
- According to market segmentation research, the top segments in Hancock County have below average technology use and live in rural areas.

- Community leaders identified technology access and infrastructure needs such as affordable transportation services as priorities.

## **Improve HCLS’s community impact by reducing barriers to materials and services.**

- Establish a mobile library and homebound delivery services to address transportation barriers.
- Increase cardholders and circulation by eliminating fines, which disproportionately affect low-income residents and cause stress for all borrowers.

- Explore the feasibility of automatic renewals.
- Evaluate circulation policies in order to restore borrowing privileges to the residents with fines, fees, and lost items by establishing payment plans or waiving charges.
- Explore public service hours for more effective distribution across the system to increase evening and weekend operating hours so that residents with transportation, childcare, or employment conflicts can access in-library materials and services.
- Create institutional partnerships to allow borrowing from organizations such as retirement homes and homeschooling co-ops.
- Conduct user experience studies to identify ways to improve accessibility to digital collections and resources.
- Offer and promote adaptive technologies, such as magnifiers and document readers, in all HCLS branches.
- Circulate more technology, such as Chromebooks and hotspots, to enable more residents to access HCLS's digital collections.

- Offer deposit collections for partners such as preschools, senior centers, and other populations with limited transportation.
- Investigate the feasibility of an off-site, volunteer-run used book store to expand access to reading material.
- Enable adults to attend skills-building programs with a pilot childcare service.
- Expand spaces for learning, collaboration, and exploration in each branch.
- Create small group spaces for studying and collaboration.
- Investigate how to create secure telehealth spaces.
- Establish dedicated Makerspaces with room to expand.
- Create appealing teen areas.
- Align policies to create a welcoming, café atmosphere.
- Expand use of outdoor areas for patron and library program use.



“Slightly later hours after school/work would help us visit more often.”

[Online comment form](#)

## Connect more residents to HCLS offerings by making them easier to use.

- Create and promote online tutorials on using HCLS collections and other resources.
- Expand and enhance tools for staff to identify new offerings to meet patron needs and requests.
- Reduce wait times for items by purchasing more high-demand physical and digital titles, automating hold notifications, and training staff on connecting users to digital platforms and interlibrary loans.
- Offer notary services at all branches.
- Refer patrons to local resources by curating up-to-date in-branch and online information, establishing HCLS as a hub of community knowledge.



**“Helping people who have issues getting in and out of the library. Have bookmobile setup on such and such a day and extended hours would be excellent.”**

Community telephone survey



# AREA OF FOCUS **Communication/One HCLS**

HCLS will improve communication with internal and external audiences. Scheduled, transparent communication from administration will better inform HCLS of priorities and changes. Targeted messages will inform underserved communities about HCLS's ongoing offerings. Library administration and trustees will promote the Library's offerings to government leaders and Foundation board members to demonstrate HCLS's return on investment of public and private funding.



## **Research Highlights**

- Stakeholders prefer to receive communications from the Library by email, newsletter, and social media.
- According to the telephone survey, the community prefers to receive communications from the Library by email, newsletter, and text message.
- Community leaders identified lack of awareness of HCLS services as the main challenge facing the Library.
- The non-library user market segments are more likely to be over age 55 with below average or lowest technology use. The two largest segments in the County do not spend any time on the internet.

## **Establish a system-wide brand identity to promote HCLS and foster engagement.**

- Evaluate brand standards and create a style guide.
- Disseminate templates to design promotional handouts.
- Perform a signage audit to create consistency of messaging across five branches.
- Install consistent outdoor signs that are visible from the road.
- Install digital billboards at branches, where feasible to promote HCLS offerings.

- Brand popular and new program series to increase awareness and participation.
- Create a tool to collect user testimonials about positive experiences with HCLS, for use in promotions.

**“They need to do a better job on marketing and advertising their services and programs.”**

Online comment form

## Improve circulation and program attendance through timely, targeted communication and partnerships.

- Identify “power user” groups such as homeschool clusters for targeted marketing and distribution lists.
- Target print materials like newsletters and direct mail to seniors and large market segments with low technology use such as Golden Ponds and Back Country Folks.
- Promote offerings to audiences of partner agencies, such as veterans groups, churches, schools, and health care providers.
- Create a welcome email for new cardholders, offering opt-in choices for newsletters and other communications.
- Enhance relationships with print, radio, and TV outlets to promote HCLS offerings.
- Expand the yearly campaign in partnership with school districts to register all students entering high school as well as all 1st graders for a HCLS card.



- Promote HCLS programs and services on businesses’ digital signs throughout the County.
- Distribute HCLS newsletters and calendars in high-traffic areas such as health care offices, churches, and stores.
- Leverage available tools to create opt-in targeted emails and telephone calls to promote upcoming programs and remind users of programs they have signed up for.
- Train volunteers to be Library Ambassadors who promote HCLS within their networks and at outreach events.
- Identify and train staff to serve as an outreach team at festivals and events.

# “HCLS has been in the shadows.”

Board member interview





## Improve internal communications to leverage HCLS resources across the system.

- Publish a quarterly staff newsletter with submissions from all branches and departments and summaries of Board, Foundation, and committee meetings.
- Establish and enhance existing programming, circulation, and collection development committees that meet on regular schedules both in-person and virtually.
- Maintain an easy-to-use staff portal with updated information on policies, procedures, forms, benefits, contact information, and meeting minutes.
- Identify and communicate key offerings for staff to promote when speaking to patrons, and encourage staff to informally promote services and programs based on patron interactions.



“More information about upcoming activities, for example by email.”

Community telephone survey

# AREA OF FOCUS **Organizational Health**

Repeated turnover at the director level has left staff unsure of priorities and best practices, and it has reduced the confidence of municipalities and funding agencies in Library leadership. Low wages make retention and recruitment difficult at all staffing levels. HCLS can regain its award-winning status through the new director's fresh leadership, the establishment of living wages, and the consistent application of policies and procedures.



## **Research Highlights**

- Trustees expressed concern that past leadership turnover has negatively impacted morale and institutional trust.
- According to an in-house benchmarking study based on FY2019 IMLS data, HCLS ranks last in average compensation per full-time equivalent (FTE) staff.
- To address recruitment and retention needs, the staff forum recommended scheduling regular staff evaluations with 360 degree feedback, offering training opportunities to all staff members, and increasing salaries to meet living wage requirements.

- The most pressing community need identified in the planning session was for economic support: a “living wage, safe and healthy job opportunities for all, and a thriving economy.”

## **Support organizational, professional, and individual excellence.**

- Continue annual in-service training day and create an annual branch-level training day.
- Establish a committee to organize annual in-service training days, set a minimum number of hours of staff professional development, identify staff training and development needs, and provide information on available training options.

- Maintain high customer satisfaction levels by improving staffing levels through reassigning staff and increasing the number of substitute hours.
- Offer scholarships or a process for tuition reimbursement for staff who are continuing their education.
- Establish a performance review process that aligns with the Strategic Plan to maintain accountability.

## Diversify staff and maintain institutional knowledge through recruitment and retainment initiatives.

- Raise minimum staff salary to ALA recommendations and/or a living wage standard for Hancock County and offer overtime.
- Develop an onboarding checklist and orientation program for new hires.
- Improve benefits such as offering on-site health screenings, introducing yearly incentives, exploring alternative health insurance options, and tying earned vacation time to years of service.
- Examine current state standards for providing benefits to FT and PT employees including vacation and sick time accrual.

## Establish resources needed to protect staff and public safety.

- Evaluate lighting, cameras, door chimes, alarms, and emergency communications at all branches, and check them monthly.
- Require two HCLS personnel on the floor during open hours.
- Evaluate first aid policies and offer staff training in mental and physical first aid, empathy and homeless services, and personal safety.
- Develop an emergency response handbook with contact list, preparation and reopening checklists, and first responder and service provider contact information.
- Partner with local and regional agencies to make available tools to connect people during emergencies.
- Train all staff on emergency policies and procedures and review them yearly.
- Ensure all HVAC systems are performing effectively, routinely inspect all buildings for mold and investigate the installation of clean air technology.

“Allow part-time employees to receive 1 < hour of sick/vacation time each pay period to help in their aid if they get sick and have to be out of work for some time.”

[Online comment form](#)



# Acknowledgements

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## Library Board of Trustees

Cathy Pitalo  
Casey Marquar  
Golden Fairconnetue  
Linda McKay  
Paige Lundgren

## Library Foundation of Hancock County

Sherry Ponder  
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Deana Sheffield

## Library Staff, including

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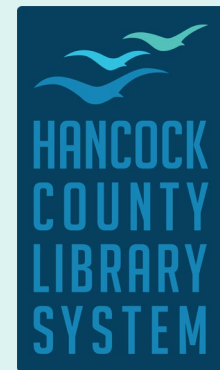
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Web form respondents





# Strategic Plan



[www.hcls.info](http://www.hcls.info)

2023

prepared by The Ivy Group