Beyond ABLE: Foundational Continuing Education for Public Library Staff

Introduction OCLC proposes to partner with Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICfL) on a 3-year LB21 implementation project to develop a **free online continuing education program for non-degreed public library staff** to build the knowledge and skills needed to provide core library services such as collection development and management, acquisitions and cataloging, and delivering community-centered programming that is responsive to contemporary and emergent community needs. OCLC respectfully requests $319,258 in grant funding and will contribute $325,041 in cost share. This project will update and replace ICfL's existing *Alternative Basic Library Education* program (ABLE), which started in 1998. Key project stakeholders and advisors will include state library continuing education coordinators, library system training managers, library staff who have taken ABLE courses, and members of the Association for Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL). As of September 2023, ARSL and 13 state libraries (CA, CO, CT, GA, IA, IN, MI, MT, NE, OR, PA, TN, and UT) have expressed interest in or support for this project. The project aligns with LB21 Goal 3, Objective 3.2. This continuing education program will be freely available and accessible through ICfL's website (https://libraries.idaho.gov) and WebJunction's online course catalog (https://learn.webjunction.org).

Project Justification ICfL created ABLE (https://libraries.idaho.gov/continuing-education/able) to address the continuing education (CE) needs of non-degreed library professionals working in and managing public libraries in Idaho. Today, the program is widely used by library staff across the US and beyond. Since ABLE was created, the number of library workers has increased, while the percentage of these who hold MLIS degrees has declined.[1] Over the past 25 years, the roles and work of public library staff have changed and community needs continue to evolve.[2] These changes require library staff to adapt to new job responsibilities, standards, and best practices, however, there are limited opportunities and resources available to support this, because the existing options in the field for fundamental library skills training— including ALA Allied Professional Association's Library Support Staff Certification or online training from providers such as Library Juice Academy, Infopeople, and PLA—present financial barriers for staff at public libraries with limited or no CE funding, particularly at under-resourced small and rural libraries.

Despite ABLE's vintage, there is still a great need for this kind of CE program, as evidenced by the continued high demand for these courses that are offered through both ICfL's website and WebJunction. In FY23, ICfL recorded over 8,500 course completions; in the same fiscal year, six out of the twenty most-used of WebJunction's 420 courses were ABLE courses. While ICfL has made minor updates to the content of the ABLE courses, it's time to take a fresh and more comprehensive look at what today's library staff need to provide core library services.

Project Work Plan
The first project year will focus on data collection, co-design activities to help define the scope of the new CE program, instructional design, building the first courses for the program, creating a strategic communications plan, developing an evaluation plan, and designing and implementing learner surveys.

Year 1: August 2024-July 2025	
Key activities	*Deliverables*
▪ Facilitate online kickoff meeting with project team and advisors, contract partners, supporters, subject matter experts (SMEs), and evaluator. ▪ Design and distribute a set of national surveys to identify skills and tasks involved in core library work to send to groups that may include: state library CE coordinators and library system training managers; ARSL members; WebJunction users; and ABLE course users from the last 1-3 years. ▪ Conduct a field scan to collect data on current training offerings in the field. ▪ Write a short report on findings to share widely with field and to inform an online co-design workshop. ▪ Design and facilitate a virtual co-design workshop with up to ten state library CE coordinators and library system training managers; synthesize findings as input for course development. ▪ Create strategic communications plan. Note: The team will update the name of the program, ABLE, which may have negative associations with ableism today. ▪ Develop evaluation plan.	▪ Data from national surveys ▪ Information from field scan ▪ Short report on findings from surveys and field scan, which will be published and widely promoted via partner and supporter communications channels ▪ Virtual co-design workshop ▪ Input to inform content development for new CE program ▪ Communications plan ▪ Evaluation plan ▪ Program and course outlines

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[1] See https://www.imls.gov/research-evaluation/data-collection/public-libraries-survey/
[2] See Marien, Stacey (ed). *Library Technical Services: Adapting to a Changing Environment.* Purdue University Press, 2020.

- Define program scope and collaborate with SMEs to create outlines for first 4-6 course hours using input from surveys, field scan, and co-design workshop. - Review of course outlines by advisors; collect and synthesize their feedback for use with instructional design. - Develop first 4-6 hours of course content for review by advisors; collect and synthesize their feedback. - Instructional design, create templates for online courses. - Build course modules, incorporating input from advisors. - Test course functionality and make corrections based on results. - Design and implement course surveys. - Publish courses on ICfL's website and in WebJunction's course catalog. - Promote available courses on OCLC, ICfL, ARSL, and state library media channels. - Begin collecting and analyzing learner surveys for data on course usage.	- 4-6 hours of on-demand online courses available through ICfL's website and WebJunction's course catalog - Promotional outputs (e.g., webinars and articles promoting the completed courses published via project partner communication channels) - Survey data to inform development of next course modules

The second project year will focus on course creation and promoting the available courses.

Year 2: August 2025-July 2026	
Key activities	*Deliverables*
- Develop next 8-12 hours of course content using the process described in year 1: create content, review with advisors, build modules; test, refine, and publish courses on ICfL's website and in WebJunction's course catalog. - Promote courses on OCLC, ICfL, ARSL, and state library media channels. - Continue collecting and analyzing learner surveys for data on course usage.	- 8-12 hours of courses - Promotional outputs (see year 1 for details) - Survey data to inform development of next courses

The third year of the project will focus on producing the final courses, promoting the complete program nationally, and collecting and analyzing data to produce a summative project evaluation.

Year 3: August 2026-July 2027	
Key activities	*Deliverables*
- Develop final course content using the process described in year 1. - Promote complete program directly widely via partners' communications channels, and via webinars, articles in national publications, and presentations at national conferences such as ARSL (dependent upon acceptance). - Collect and analyze data to produce summative project evaluation	- Final 4-6 hours of courses - Promotional outputs (see year 1 for details) - Survey data for evaluation report - Summative evaluation report

Key project team Andrew Harbison (OCLC WebJunction Director) will oversee the project. Dr. J. Elizabeth Mills (Program Manager OCLC WebJunction) will manage the project and collaborate with Dale Musselman (Senior Program Manager OCLC WebJunction), Zoe Fisher (Instructional Designer OCLC WebJunction), Annie Gaines (ICfL Continuing Education Consultant), and contracted SMEs (TBD) to create the courses.

Diversity Plan This project addresses training needs of staff working at rural libraries and lower-resourced library systems, many of whom do not have an MLIS degree and generally have less access to training or CE opportunities, and many of whom are serving communities with limited access to resources or are facing economic challenges.

Project Results The project will result in a free, on-demand, online CE program to build the knowledge and skills public library staff need to provide core library services. The program will benefit US public library staff and help further the mission of state libraries by providing training to develop their workforces, including—but not limited to—non-degreed library staff. As courses are published, they will be widely promoted through ARSL, state libraries, and via partners' media channels, webinars, articles in national publications, and presentations at national conferences such as ARSL's annual conference.

Budget Summary The requested $319,258 will be used toward project team salaries/fringe ($202,030); contracts and honoraria for subject matter experts, advisors, evaluators, and video producers ($49,500); ICfL staff travel to kickoff meeting ($1,600); software ($5,000); conference travel ($3,600); indirect costs ($57,528). OCLC will contribute $325,041 in cost share.