



# Guidelines For Rural/Urban Public Library Systems

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## 3rd edition

**Administrators of Rural and Urban  
Public Libraries of Ontario**

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## Introduction

The Guidelines for Rural/Urban Public Library Systems are a developmental tool for rural/urban and county libraries. The Guidelines are expressed as targets for a library to provide an appropriate level of service for its community; they have been developed by the Library Administrators of ARUPLO public libraries based on:

- their considerable collective expertise;
- comparative data and research regarding other jurisdictions;
- trends and changes in rural/urban Ontario.

Guidelines are generally regarded as quantifiable and can be benchmarked. They are recommendations as to how things should be done. Best practices represent what is well done by peers.

Libraries must conform to provisions of the Municipal Act, the Public Libraries Act, Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, and other relevant legislation and are accountable to the communities they serve.

Reports on general efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery are annual requirements for all libraries. However, there is also a need for more specific guidelines and best practices relevant to rural/urban public libraries in Ontario.

These guidelines build on and are supplementary to the Ontario Public Library Guidelines.

### The Intended Use of the Guidelines

ARUPLO Libraries have made the following commitments with respect to the guidelines:

- The guidelines and best practices describe an appropriate level of service for ARUPLO Libraries;
- The guidelines and best practices will be used on a regular basis by ARUPLO Libraries to evaluate current and plan future library services;
- While the guidelines and best practices will be used in conjunction with other similar products, including the Ontario Public Library Guidelines, they are considered most applicable to the multi-branch rural/urban nature of the ARUPLO library systems.

**“ Libraries must conform to provisions of the Municipal Act, the Public Libraries Act, Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, and other relevant legislation and are accountable to the communities they serve. ”**

## 2. Trends and Changes in Rural/Urban Ontario

The Guidelines for Rural/Urban Public Library Systems identify appropriate service levels that reflect the changing nature of municipalities and public libraries serving rural and rural/urban Ontario. Rural/Urban Ontario refers to those communities that are close to large urban centres and that have integral service, schooling and shopping relationships with urban areas.



### Rural Sustainability

Changing demographics are placing increasing pressures on the sustainability of rural communities including the ability to provide an array of services, such as public libraries. The face of rural communities is changing rapidly as a result of increased urbanization across Ontario, an aging population, and the impact of technology on rural lifestyles. Rural communities need to find creative ways to sustain themselves and attract new residents.

#### Factors affecting rural sustainability include:

- Rural life is based on much more than agriculture; only a small percentage of rural residents work in agriculture. Much of modern agriculture is industrialized, intensified and automated.
- Dominant rural employment is small- to medium-sized manufacturing and services.
- New technologies support the growth of rural employment in knowledge-based, cultural, and creative occupations. Technology now supports more telecommuting and working from home. Therefore high-speed connectivity and information and communications infrastructure is very important.
- Out-migration as young people leave rural areas in search of education and tend not to return for employment.
- Aging population.
- Many rural residents commute to a city for work or are self-employed.
- Steadily increasing populations through attraction of more diverse, urban, educated and retired people to rural areas for a different quality of life.
- Cottages and seasonal residences are being renovated to become permanent and retirement homes.
- Part-time and seasonal residents.
- Growing rural populations of ex-urbanites looking for low density settlements.
- Lack of public transit options creates car dependency and mobility problems for lower income, retired and student populations.
- Increase in outdoor and tourism-based economic and social activities (eco-tourism, agritourism, skiing, ATVs, snowmobiling, fishing, hunting and trail development).
- New rural residents specifically choose a rural residence because it is a good place to raise children.
- New rural residents tend to be affluent and more cosmopolitan and want urban-type services.
- New rural residents bring with them broader service level expectations.
- Shortage of recreational opportunities for children and teens.
- Rural society is based on social gatherings, community involvement and relationships.

## Libraries and Rural Sustainability

**The key to rural development and rural sustainability is a more informed and innovative community.**

- Public libraries must have a high level of Internet connectivity in order to provide access to web-based information, electronic databases and connectivity for those who may not have access at work or home.
- Public libraries already act as community hubs and can play a key role in provincial strategies to further develop these hubs.
- Public libraries must have an advanced Internet presence and active social networking that provides access to a wide range of virtual library services.
- Public libraries must provide access to information resources from beyond the community.
- Public libraries are taking on a greater municipal, provincial and federal services delivery role, whether through their physical presence in the community or as an access point for electronic information.
- Some rural/urban residents, especially those who commute to urban areas for their jobs or services, will use city library services; therefore public libraries should arrange for borrowing privileges in neighbouring cities and towns.
- Public libraries should be built in existing village and town clusters or rural service centres.
- Public libraries are vital to the sustainability of rural schools, in many cases serving to augment library service in these schools. Rural libraries also serve as the school library for those learning through home schooling, distance education and on-line learning.
- Access to post-secondary education is important to rural sustainability. Public libraries should form partnerships with post-secondary institutions to support student success and facilitate the delivery of e-learning and post-secondary services, including library services to the rural community.
- Illiteracy is a barrier to a community's success. Public libraries should work with community agencies in the delivery of programs and resources that encourage literacy.
- Public libraries should assist in the collection, organization and dissemination of information and should form part of the communities' innovation capacity.
- Rural governance is sometimes 'traditional' in its thinking and not always accepting of the new rural realities brought about by demographic and technological change. Rural leaders should be made aware of efforts being made to sustain rural communities.

Based on the strategic importance of public libraries in sustaining rural communities, the following guidelines and best practices are required.





### 3. Guidelines

Guidelines define a level of service or a preferred manner of delivering a service that can be measured and is adopted as a minimum target appropriate for all ARUPLO libraries. Guidelines are expressed as targets for a library to provide an appropriate level of service for its community. Examples of guidelines include size of library space, open hours per week, or collection items. While guidelines might be further defined as mandatory (implying failure to meet the guidelines carries some penalty), this was considered but rejected by ARUPLO librarians.

Application of these guidelines is important for internal planning purposes and also to serve as a benchmarking tool relative to other systems.



#### 3.1 Branch Definitions

Many multi-branch systems serving rural areas seek creative ways to provide service to a variety of different communities. Service delivery options may be known locally as deposit stations, outposts, bookmobiles, book/media lockers, dispensers or depositories, or may still be called “public libraries” or “library branches” as there had historically been one there. However, it is neither feasible nor desirable to try to create guidelines for solutions that attempt to address unique and local circumstances. Every library system will have to address its own rationale for the existence, creation, or “grandfathering” of such local solutions. As a best practice, it is highly recommended that any such options be dealt with in the context of the system’s strategic planning process and addressed by a service delivery plan.

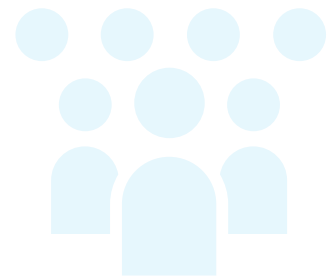
**For purposes of this document, four types of branches have been identified:**

- Small branches;
- Medium branches;
- Large branches;
- Urban branches.

Each type can be determined by attributes including population size, local economic activity, and seasonal demand. It is up to each system to determine which branches it wishes to classify as small, medium, large or urban based on the strategic role that each plays in the system as a whole. Inability to meet one or more of the guidelines does not preclude it from being considered in a certain category if it meets most other guidelines.

## 3.2 Catchment Area/Population Served

The catchment area is the area from which users are drawn to a particular library service point. Catchment areas and the population contained therein can be determined by branch library surveys, census data, information from county or municipal offices, Canada Post postal code areas, and the information collected by school boards.



Determining catchment area/population served can be problematic given available data and factors such as municipal boundaries. As a result, this is not the only consideration as to whether a branch is considered small, medium, large or urban. For instance, a branch may serve an immediate population of less than 10,000 people, thereby putting it in the medium category, but be considered a large branch by the system because it serves a strategic role such as having a larger collection, providing enhanced reference services, hosting system-wide functions such as inter-library loan or providing space for enhanced programming opportunities.

<p><b>Small branches</b> Generally serve catchment areas of up to 5,000 population as determined by each system.</p>	<p><b>Medium branches</b> Generally serve catchment areas of 5,000 to 10,000 population as determined by each system.</p>	<p><b>Large branches</b> Generally serve catchment areas of 10,000 to 35,000 population as determined by each system.</p>	<p><b>Urban branches</b> Generally serve catchment area of 35,000 or more population as determined by each system.</p>
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## 3.3 Guidelines

### 3.3.1 Facilities

Library facilities should be developed to meet local community needs, library service strategies, projected populations and compliance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, building standards, other regulations and municipal policies. The following is a general guideline for the range of size for each library type.



	Small	Medium	Large	Urban
<b>Net library space (in square feet)</b>	2,500–5,000	5,000–10,000	10,000–35,000	35,000+

Branch size is also affected by components such as programs, special collections, and other add-on functions attributed to the branch by the library system.

See Appendices A and B for a process and worksheets to determine the size of a particular library.

### 3.3.2 Hours of Operation

Public libraries operate in an increasingly 24/7 environment. The single greatest barrier to library use as reported in community needs assessments is time. The hours of operation for a system, including virtual hours, have to begin to approximate a 24/7 model to meet public expectations. Full 24/7 service can be accomplished through virtual library services, online resources, and wifi at library locations.

Library hours of operation must be available in order for a library to provide an enhanced mandate

of government services outlet, public access to the Internet, and community gathering place. Library hours should be allocated to meet community needs. Minimum hours of operation by library type, for a “bricks and mortar” library with staff, are as follows:

	Small	Medium	Large	Urban
Hours of operation per week	20–25	25–45	45–65	65+

### 3.3.3 Staff

With increasing public expectations, technology-based services and operations, and the fundamental change in library services, all library employees require formal library education and training. The guidelines indicate both the minimum number of staff and their professional qualifications. These guidelines are based on the organizational, communication and operational challenges of staffing a multi-branch system and ensuring a professional team is in place to deliver and manage all functional requirements of a full library system. In addition to meeting public service needs, consideration must be given to staff safety concerns such as working alone.

#### Definitions:

- Professional librarians are defined as having a Master’s degree in library or information science from an accredited university.
- Library technicians are defined as having a diploma in library techniques from a community college.
- The EXCEL Certificate Program in Small Library Management is a distance education program for library workers without formal library training and is administered by the Southern Ontario Library Service.
- FTE = Full-time equivalent. (35 hours per week)



Each library system has professional librarians that are used on a system-wide basis. The Library Administrator for each system is a professional librarian. One third of all system-wide staff are professional librarians; For every 10,000 people or part thereof, one of the full-time equivalent staff is a qualified librarian.

	Small	Medium	Large	Urban
Staff complement (FTE)	1–2.5	2.5–5	5–17.5	17.5+
Qualifications of Branch Supervisor	Library competency, e.g. post-secondary plus Excel or Library Tech.	Professional Librarian or Library competency, e.g. post-secondary plus Excel or Library Tech.	Professional librarian	Professional librarian
Qualifications of other staff		Library competency, e.g. post-secondary plus Excel or Library Tech.	2 additional professional librarians	2 additional professional librarians

### 3.3.4 Collections

The following guidelines were adopted for collections; an appropriate collection is a variety of materials responsive to specific community needs. These guidelines have been developed at a time when the publishing industry for physical/print publications is in considerable flux and transition. Within this context there is a recognition that:



- Collection materials include a variety of physical, print and digital formats, and system-wide electronic resources;
- Physical or print publications will continue to be an important component for ARUPLO communities;
- Resources are shared among branches;
- Collections are responsive to each community's needs.

The guidelines refer to the number of physical items of any format located at each branch.

	Small	Medium	Large	Urban
Number of items in physical collection	6,000–12,000	12,000–24,000	24,000–50,000	50,000+

### 3.3.5 User Seating

User seating should be flexible and interchangeable to meet community needs. This includes seating for independent work as well as collaboration with other people, and computers provided by the library for use by the public.

	Small	Medium	Large	Urban
Number of seats, including computer seating	15–30	30–60	60–200	200+





### 3.3.6 Technology

Every library system should have:

- Access to an Integrated Library System which includes a public access catalogue of library holdings;
- An Internet presence that provides access to Web-based information sources (e.g., information about the library, library catalogue, virtual reference services, government and municipal information, community information, links to other library collections, on-line databases, etc.), and provide trained staff to assist the public in the effective use of these information sources;
- An active social media presence.

Each library branch should have:

- High-speed, effective, reliable, Internet access and public access workstations with high-speed access to the Internet and the online catalogue;
- The ability for the user to duplicate (copy, print, etc.) from the Internet or online catalogue content or images;
- A minimum of three public access workstations. Branches that serve populations over 2,500 should have one additional workstation per 1,300 population;
- A variety of ways of accessing the internet, such as laptops and workstations for public use;
- Wifi for public use;
- Access to reliable telephone service (e.g. cellular or landline).



### 3.4 Summary of Guidelines by Branch Type

The following are the minimums for each category. Depending on the roles assigned to each branch, other criteria may also apply.

	Small	Medium	Large	Urban
<b>Net library space (s.f.)</b>	2,500–5,000	5,000–10,000	10,000–35,000	35,000+
<b>Hours of operation per week</b>	20–25	25–45	45–65	65+
<b>Staff complement (FTE)</b>	1–2.5	2.5–5	5– 17.5	17.5+
<b>Qualifications of Branch Supervisor</b>	Library competency, (e.g. post-secondary plus Excel or Library Tech.)	Professional Librarian or Library competency (e.g. post-secondary plus Excel or Library Tech.)	Professional librarian	Professional librarian
<b>Qualifications of other staff</b>	Library competency, (e.g. post-secondary plus Excel or Library Tech.)	2 additional professional librarians	2 additional professional librarians	
<b>Number of items in physical collection</b>	6,000–12,000	12,000–24,000	24,000 – 50,000	50,000+
<b>Number of user seats, including computer seating</b>	15–30	30–60	60–200	200+
<b>Number of Public Access Computers</b>	3–5	5–6	6–25	25+

## 4. Best Practices

Best practices describe an optimal level of service or manner of providing services that may or may not be measurable. In addition, it is acknowledged that unique local circumstances may affect the validity or importance of a best practice and they may not apply to all library systems in every circumstance. Examples of best practices include space and staff allocations for services to special groups.

### 4.1 Facilities

#### 4.1.1 Space Allocations by Use and Function

- Seating (users): 5 user spaces per 1,000 capita @ 35 sq. ft. per user space
- Children's area: A children's self-contained area of 20 to 40% of a library's total assignable area
- Teen area: 5% of total sq. ft. allocation
- Staff work room: 15% of total library space



#### 4.1.2 Branch Location

Members of the public travel no more than 30 minutes in a motorized vehicle under normal driving conditions to access basic library services offered by their municipal library system or by another municipal library system.

### 4.2 Staff Continuing Education and Training

The library encourages and provides opportunities for continuing education and training for its staff and makes provision for this in its policy, its long-range plan, and in its budget to an amount not less than 1% of the total staff budget (e.g. by providing in-house training programs, financial support for staff to enroll in the EXCEL Certificate in Small Library Management program, or to attend library conferences and other training programs and events). Cross functional, system wide training is recommended for all staff.

### 4.3 Collections

#### Adult/Children Mix of Volumes

In general, two-thirds of a branch library collection consists of adult material with one-third consisting of children's and young adult material.

#### New or Emerging Formats

Twenty-five per cent of the acquisitions budget is spent on non-print formats including online databases and multi-media.

#### Acquisitions

Each branch has an up-to-date collection, with a minimum of 50% of the materials purchased or published within the last five years.



## 4.4 User Training in Library Resources

Each library offers training on a regular basis to ensure that the public can use the information resources offered by the library, including electronic resources. All library staff are knowledgeable in resources offered by the library.

## 4.5 Resource Sharing

### 4.5.1 Inter-Branch Loans

- Every library system has a delivery system in place to move items from one location to another.
- Library users receive requested items identified as available within another branch in the library system within 3–5 working days.

### 4.5.2 Branch Exchanges

The library system has a procedure to refresh branch collections for browsing. This may consist of regular exchanges, or floating or rotating collections.



## 4.6 Links with other Organizations and Individuals

The Ontario Public Library Guidelines state “The library has established partnerships with other organizations in the community, in order to coordinate the resources and efforts of each partner and thereby jointly improve service to the community (e.g. with schools, literacy programs, chambers of commerce, heritage groups, government offices, public Internet access organizations and advocate groups.)”

For rural/urban library systems this also includes:

- Partnerships with appropriate post-secondary institutions in order to ensure support for postsecondary education opportunities within the rural/urban community;
- Co-operative activities or events with community agencies;
- Encouraging staff to participate in community organizations;
- Reciprocal borrowing agreements with neighbouring public library systems and with local post-secondary institutions.

## 4.7 Rural Development

**The library system contributes to municipal strategic initiatives through a strategic plan which:**

- Reflects the vision in the municipalities’ planning documents;
- Contains strategies that are complementary to those contained in the municipalities’ strategic plans.
- Has library performance and service indicators which are integrated into municipal planning and quality of life indicators.



# Appendix A – Component Worksheet for Branch Space

Branch space guidelines (in square feet)

Component	Small		Medium		Large		Urban
	Minimum	Maximum	Minimum	Maximum	Minimum	Maximum	Minimum
<b>Collections</b>							
Collections @ 8 vol/s.f.	600	1,200	1,200	2,400	2,400	5,000	5,000
Collections @ 6.5 vol/s.f.	150	300	300	600	600	1,250	1,250
Local history		100	100	200	200	400	400
<b>Public Service Areas</b>							
User seating @ 35 s.f. ea	525	1,050	1,050	2,100	2,100	7,000	7,000
Public computers @ 35 s.f.	105	175	175	210	210	875	875
Program room(s)		450	450	750	750	1,500	2,000
Study room(s)		165	165	330	330	660	660
Maker space(s)					150	300	300
<b>Staff Service Areas</b>							
Service/circulation desk	175	250	250	350	350	500	500
Work room	200	300	300	500	500	800	800
Staff lunchroom and lockers	100	100	100	200	200	350	350
Staff washroom		25	25	25	25	50	50
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>1,855</b>	<b>4,115</b>	<b>4,115</b>	<b>7,665</b>	<b>7,815</b>	<b>18,685</b>	<b>19,185</b>
Non-assignable space 25%	464	1,029	1,029	1,916	1,954	4,671	4,796
Components total	2,319	5,144	5,144	9,581	9,769	23,356	23,981
Per capita approach for comparison (net)	2,500	5,000	5,000	10,000	10,000	35,000	35,000



## Appendix B – Sample Worksheet

This example is for a medium-sized branch library for approximately 5,000 to 10,000 population served. Some add-on components are shown for comparison.

Component	Range (square feet)	
	Minimum	Maximum
80% of collections @ 8 vol/s.f. 9,600 – 19,200	1,200	2,400
20% of collections @ 6.5 vol.s.f. 2,400 – 4,800	370	740
Local history	100	200
User seating 30-60 @ 35 s.f. each, including computers	1,050	2,100
Program room 30 @ 15 s.f. per user	450	750
Study room	165	330
Maker space		300
Service/circulation desk	250	350
Work room	300	600
Staff lunchroom and lockers	100	200
Staff washroom	25	25
Subtotal	4,010	7,995
Non-assignable space @ 25%	1,003	1,999
<b>Total Space required (s.f.)</b>	<b>5,013</b>	<b>9,994</b>

The space requirements (unit sizes) used were taken from the book, "Making the Case for Your Library Building Project", published by the Southern Ontario Library Service in 2010, specifically the unit sizes of the components approach. These were then blended into general categories.

### Non-assignable space includes:

- Corridors, foyer, waiting areas, public washrooms, including universal;
- Loading areas, garbage, recycling, custodian, storage, closets;
- Wall thicknesses, building services, chases, mechanical.

Assumes single storey building, FADS standards.



## Appendix C – Additional Resources

**Planning documents are available to assist with ensuring public libraries meet their local needs. Some examples of these documents are:**

Dahlgren, Anders C. Public Library Space Needs: A Planning Outline. 2009.  
<https://dpi.wi.gov/pld/boards-directors/space-needs>

Southern Ontario Library Service. Making the Case for Your Library Building Project. 2010.  
<https://www.sols.org/index.php/develop-your-library-staff/sols-publications/167-develop-your-library-staff/sols-publications/library-development-guides/455-making-the-case-for-your-building-project>

City of London, 2007 Facility Accessibility Design Standards.  
[https://www.london.ca/city-hall/accessibility/Documents/FADS\\_2007\\_final.pdf](https://www.london.ca/city-hall/accessibility/Documents/FADS_2007_final.pdf)

Australian Public Library Alliance. Guidelines, Standards and Outcome Measures for Australian Public Libraries, July 2016.  
[https://www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/20160714%20Guidelines%20Standards%20and%20Outcome%20Measures%20for%20Australian%20Public%20Libraries%20-%20MANUSCRIPT%20VERSION\\_0.pdf](https://www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/20160714%20Guidelines%20Standards%20and%20Outcome%20Measures%20for%20Australian%20Public%20Libraries%20-%20MANUSCRIPT%20VERSION_0.pdf)

Province of Manitoba. Municipal and Regional Public Library Standards and Guidelines.  
[https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/pls/pdf/librarystandardsguidelines\\_e\\_web.pdf](https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/pls/pdf/librarystandardsguidelines_e_web.pdf)

Government of Alberta. Municipal Affairs. Standards and Best Practices for Public Libraries in Alberta, 2010.  
<http://www.municipalaffairs.alberta.ca/documents/libraries/standardsbestpractic97652.pdf>

