

NCW Libraries

North Bookmobile Service Change Frequently Asked Questions

Will people be left without library service?

No, every NCW Libraries cardholder has access to our Mail Order Library service, making library resources available at your doorstep. Individuals can place holds on library materials over the phone, via email, or at www.ncwlibraries.org. Materials are then mailed to the individual's home and the package includes a bag and a pre-paid shipping label for easy and free returns.

A careful audit of the number of people using the North Bookmobile showed that the majority of people who used the North Bookmobile also make use of other library resources. In addition to visiting the North Bookmobile, they also either visited one of our 30 library locations or used the Mail Order Library. Very few individuals accessed the library only through the North Bookmobile. We are encouraging everyone who wasn't already using the Mail Order Library to visit www.ncwlibraries.org/mailorderlibrary/.

NCW Libraries new Rural Services Department is working to creatively identify any barriers to accessing the Mail Order Library service for patrons living off the grid. Individuals do not need Internet access to use the Mail Order Library service.

Who made this decision?

Under the leadership of our Deputy Director, several members of our Public Services staff conducted a thorough audit of our Bookmobile services, with a focus on evaluating the impact of the service. This audit revealed significant redundancies and major operational challenges that limit opportunities for the North Bookmobile to make a meaningful impact. As a result, these staff developed a proposal last Spring to discontinue the service. After a careful and thoughtful review, their proposal was approved by our Executive Director with support from the entire Executive Leadership Team.

Discontinuing a public service is very difficult, and this decision was not made lightly. All involved staff spent significant time and care to ensure this was the right decision for the organization and for the communities we serve. Once the decision was made, we prioritized appropriately notifying the impacted staff before notifying the public.

Was there any public feedback or comment period?

No. NCW Libraries is committed to gathering public feedback on our services when appropriate. In this instance, there was not a path for us to responsibly continue providing a service with such significant redundancies and operational challenges.

We know many people loved the service. However, usage data showed that attendance at the North Bookmobile service stops was quite low, with average patron counts in 2023 ranging from 5-19 people per stop with an average circulation of 23 items per stop. With extensive driving time (between 3.25-6 hours per stop) added to the length of each stop, the North Bookmobile team has spent over 50% of their time driving and has only been able to conduct one or two stops per day.

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What is the data behind this decision?

Rural Schools

The North Bookmobile started operating in 2018. At that time, one of the original priorities was to serve rural schools. In fact, it was originally called the “Rural School Bookmobile.” A recent audit revealed that all schools currently being served by the North Bookmobile already have a physical library within the school, except for one school that has access to an online library. Additionally, most school visits made by the North Bookmobile are near existing NCW Libraries branches where local branch staff already have relationships with the school and are positioned to meet requests from schools for programs or services.

Community Stops

Discontinuing service to rural schools significantly reduces the operating schedule for the North Bookmobile. In addition to the rural school visits, the Bookmobile was serving three rural communities each month, Loomis, the Aeneas Valley, and Orient.

The Aeneas Valley has been our “busiest” North Bookmobile stop, with an average of 19 patrons per visit and an average circulation of 56 items per visit. Of the library patrons with an Aeneas Valley address, there are 8 households who exclusively use the North Bookmobile. All other households in the Aeneas Valley that have used the North Bookmobile already also use our Mail Order Library service or regularly visit one of our 30 public library locations (in Tonasket, Oroville, Okanogan, and Omak).

The North Bookmobile was housed in Omak resulting in significant travel time to each of these three community stops: Loomis is a two hour roundtrip drive, Orient is five hours, and Aeneas Valley is 3.25 hours. These travel times do not account for weather delays or road closures. The average number of patrons served in Loomis was five, in Orient it was 13, and in the Aeneas Valley it was 19.

Our circulation data shows that many people who visit the North bookmobile are also visiting library locations and using the Mail Order Library service.

Partner Organizations

The North Bookmobile also visited several partner organizations including Boys and Girls Clubs and the Okanogan County Juvenile Detention Center. Local branch staff have already reached out to each location to ensure continuation of their outreach services.

Accessibility Challenges

In addition, the required travel and geographic challenges of Bookmobile service in our northern region have become prohibitive. Unreliable cellular coverage makes service difficult and presents a safety hazard for our staff when they are on the road. Our staff spend over 50% of their time on the road with very limited time at scheduled stops. Severe winter weather and regular pass closures only increase that driving time. Many of our community stops only receive service during warmer months.

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Operating Costs

The annual base budget for our North Bookmobile service is \$178,969.70. This only includes personnel costs (wages and benefits), fuel, vehicle repairs and maintenance, and the lease of a garage to house the vehicle. Other substantial costs to operate the North Bookmobile that are not included in this figure are vehicle and liability insurance, collections, supplies, technology, wireless internet, savings to replace the vehicle, and substitute pay (if a regular employee is absent). In addition, the vehicle can only receive required maintenance and repairs in Spokane or Yakima – the related travel and staff time costs are also not included in this base budget.

In 2022, the North Bookmobile provided service on 175 days, making the daily operational cost over \$1,000 (again, using only the base budget expenses – \$178,969.70/175). In 2023, we have continued making a similar number of weekly stops.

Since this is a budgeted item, where is the money going?

The primary costs associated with the North Bookmobile service will not immediately be realized as savings. Personnel changes will follow the Collective Bargaining Agreement we have with our union and may not be finalized for some time. We will continue to lease a garage to house the vehicle safely until we can responsibly sell or surplus it, likely in the spring. We will also incur some new temporary expenses to redistribute the North Bookmobile's collection, supplies, and technology resources.

While we did not base our decision on a budget cut, we are responsible for stewarding taxpayer dollars in impactful ways. The redundancies of the service, operational challenges, and overall costs of providing the service were closely evaluated in making the decision to discontinue the service. Our 2024 budget prioritizes sustainably approaching the public services we provide.

It is important to keep in mind that operating costs for library services rise 8-9% annually while our revenue only increases by roughly 1-2.5% annually. Budget information is available on our website at www.ncwlibraries.org/budgets/.

The combined tax dollars from our large five county service area make our investment in service to rural populations possible. We are continually striving to leverage the tax dollars we receive to provide the same level of service to each county and community, regardless of their contribution level to our overall budget. In 2024, we will continue prioritizing rural communities through outreach, programming, and Mail Order Library services. If we were not such a large district, our service to rural populations would not be possible.

Is this decision related to the NCW Libraries budget?

This decision is based primarily on the discovery of significant service redundancies along with operational challenges. We carefully consider the long term fiscal impact of every decision we make. In this case, we have decided that we cannot adequately or responsibly steward taxpayer funds while continuing to provide this redundant service.

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Are other NCW Libraries Departments or Service areas at risk of being “discontinued”?

The North Bookmobile is the only service that we have considered for discontinuation, for the reasons outlined above.

When did you notify staff and the public about this change?

NCW Libraries leadership very thoughtfully considered the most appropriate plan to share this difficult and sensitive news with our staff and then with the public.

We notified all staff on Tuesday, October 17. Throughout the day on Wednesday, October 18, our Rural Services Manager called partners at each of the community stops on the North Bookmobile route to notify them of this change as well as connect them with local branch staff.

In order for NCW Libraries staff, along with impacted community members and partners, to be given appropriate advanced notice, NCW Libraries planned a broad public announcement about this change for Friday, October 20. This announcement included a blog post, a Press Release sent to all area media outlets, and an email to all County Commissioners.

Did you notify County Commissioners?

Yes, our Communications Department emailed each of our County Commissioners on Friday, October 20, the day that we planned to announce this change externally. Our Executive Director has been meeting with County Commissioners from all five counties and has an open door policy with community leaders, including County Commissioners. She is always ready to answer questions, engage in dialogue, and provide information.

What impact does this have on the South Bookmobile?

South Bookmobile services will not change at this time. The South Bookmobile began as the “community bookmobile” and over the last five years has developed a robust schedule of outreach to communities that do not have proximity to a local library location or are otherwise identified as underserved. The South Bookmobile service does not experience the same challenges and redundancies as the North Bookmobile. The public use of and engagement in the South Bookmobile is significantly higher. This team, with guidance from their supervisor, will continue to regularly evaluate and adjust the services they provide.

I have more questions! Who should I talk to?

NCW Libraries is committed to transparency and open communication. You deserve to know how your tax dollars are being spent! Please email info@ncwlibraries.org or call 509-663-1117 with questions.

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Additional Information

[October 2023 Press Release](#)

[Rural Services Blog Announcement](#)

[Mail Order Library Information](#)

[Bookmobile Information](#)

[NCW Libraries Budget Information](#)