

What's Needed: St. Louis County Library Wins 2024–25 Jerry Kline Community Impact Prize

by [Lisa Peet](#)

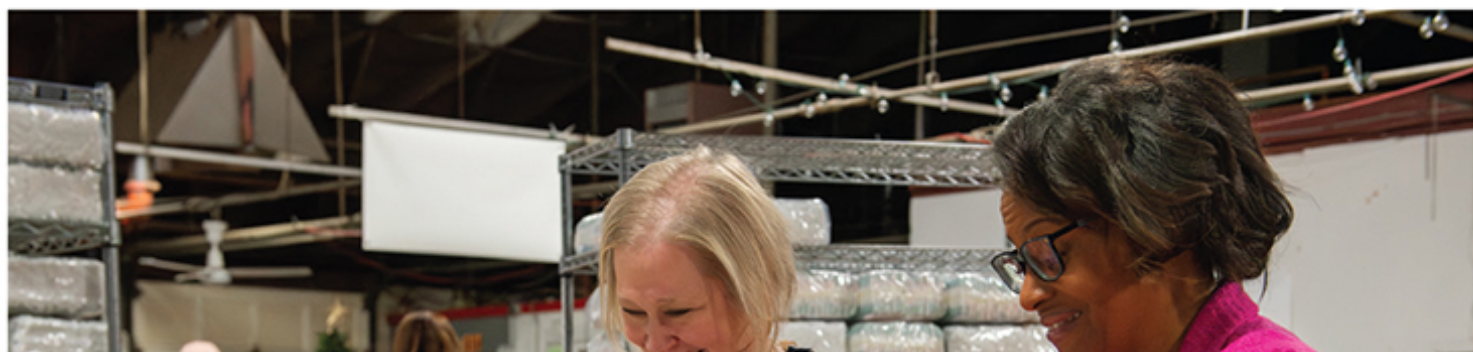
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A strong library looks to its community for direction. Sometimes, those answers can catalyze and shift the trajectory of the library's core work—if its administration, board, staff, and local partners listen closely to what is being asked.

Covering 467 square miles, St. Louis County, in eastern Missouri, is the state's most populous county, with more than 860,000 residents. It also contains some of the most economically disparate areas in Missouri, with a long history of residential segregation. According to 2020 U.S. Census data, the percentage of St. Louis County's population that falls below the poverty line varies from 0.3 percent to 25 percent, and the lowest-income neighborhoods often lack resources such as healthy foods, safe places to walk and play, and nearby medical centers. The

consequences for marginalized residents affect everything from information access to basic needs, economic opportunities, educational outcomes, health outcomes, school dropout rates, and incarceration rates.



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BEING THERE Key SLCL staff help make it all happen (top photo, l.-r.): Gib Van Cleve, Assistant Director of IT Services; Kristen Sorth, Director & CEO; Kelli Reeves, Facilities Manager; Jennifer McBride, Assistant Director of Communications; Barbara Turkington, Assistant Director of Advancement; Ashley Sexton, Development Manager; Laura Taylor, Chief Financial Officer; Jennifer Gibson, Assistant Director of Strategic Initiatives; and Eric Button, Deputy Director; bottom: Sorth with St. Louis Area Diaper Bank Executive Director Muriel Smith (r.), packaging diapers for distribution through the library. *Photos by Kate Munsch Photography*

St. Louis County Library (SLCL), established in 1946, is the busiest public library in Missouri, circulating more than 11 million items in 2023. In addition to strong literacy and service outreach, SLCL has actively sought community partners whose missions are aligned with its work—nonprofits; businesses; school districts; and municipal, county, and state government at all levels—and expand the library’s impact within the community. This means that SLCL is positioned to help local organizations amplify their work to address some of the county’s biggest issues: food insecurity, diaper and period supply insecurity, digital equity, services for justice-involved individuals, and mobile health services. These alliances extend beyond boots-on-the-ground services to helping local organizations effectively tell their stories. “We’re in a position to help the region talk about how we’re all moving forward, and the things that we’re doing to make our community amazing,” says SLCL Director and CEO Kristen Sorth. “The library is really in the center of that conversation.”

That mutual support, and the library’s conscious shift over the past decade to investigate what each of its neighborhoods needs most, and then step up to those needs—among many other honors, SLCL was awarded a 2022 Institute of Museum and Library Services National Medal for Museum and Library Service—has earned it the 2024–25 Jerry Kline Community Impact Prize, developed in partnership with the Gerald M. Kline Family Foundation.

CATALYZING CHANGE

Sorth came to SLCL in 1998 with a master's degree in public administration, starting out as the manager of human resources. When director Charles Pace left in 2013, the board asked her to serve as interim director and, several months later, director. She earned her MLS from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee as she settled into the role.

At that time, SLCL was still a fairly traditional system, according to Sorth, but it was beginning to break ground for “Your Library Renewed”—a major capital improvement undertaking, funded by a 2012 ballot initiative, to improve all 20 branches and construct a new administration building. “We started that process and thought, ‘Well, the community is just going to embrace whatever we do,’” she says. But several events in 2014 brought home the realization that SLCL would need to rethink how it looked at its spaces and services in order to create the neighborhood hubs its community wanted and needed.

In August, 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot and killed by a police officer in the St. Louis County city of Ferguson, sparking protests and civil unrest in the region and across the country. Around the same time, the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis published *For the Sake of All*, a report on the health and well-being of African Americans in St. Louis. The 10-year study looked at social determinants of health—factors such as education, income, the quality and makeup of neighborhoods, and access to healthy food and safe public spaces. Among the most important findings was that the zip code people lived in within St. Louis County mattered; residents only a few miles apart had an 18-year life expectancy difference. The report also stressed that education was the strongest predictor of physical health, mental health, and chronic disease.

Several recommendations were offered: Invest in quality early childhood development for all children; help low- to moderate-income families create economic opportunities; invest in mental health awareness, screening, treatment, and surveillance; and invest in quality neighborhoods for all in St. Louis.





SERVICE ACROSS THE COUNTY St. Louis County Library provides what its community wants and needs. Top: Housed on a repurposed city bus, Metro Market, run by Operation Food Search, brings fresh produce to select SLCL branches throughout the year, sponsored by Area Resources for Community and Human Services and BJC Health; bottom: Nikole Brown, Manager, Lewis & Clark Branch, helps load fresh produce boxes; in 2024, 28,800 were distributed in parking lots at three branches. *Photos by Lucas Peterson*

The protests and report hit home for SLCL and Sorth. There was a clear opportunity for the library to make an impact through a series of thoughtful, well-considered changes in how it provided and allocated resources throughout the county. “We made a very conscious decision to steer our priorities at the same time we were doing the buildings, so we could have our buildings reflect who we were, and also have our programs and services reflect who we were,” says Sorth. SLCL began expanding existing collaborations and reaching out to new community partners, as well as strengthening bonds with county executives.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic became a second catalyst. SLCL administration saw how local shutdowns threw inequities of all kinds into sharp relief, recognizing that not only could the library help community members in the short run, but that its support infrastructure could—and would need to—change for the long run.

SEEDS OF SERVICE DURING COVID

“We really stood up during COVID, and stayed standing up,” says Sorth. On the first day the library offered curbside pickup service of food, diapers, and period products, among other items, the phone lines crashed because so many community members called in.

These partnerships originated out of immediate needs during countywide shutdowns and have continued to serve the community in the nearly five years since. A partnership with the County Department of Public Health began during the pandemic, with SLCL distributing 920,000 masks, offering COVID testing in library parking lots, and hosting weekly clinics that provided 6,200 vaccines at multiple branches. Since then, the county has provided SLCL with COVID test kits, Narcan rescue kits, and comfort kits containing a water bottle and toiletry items to give out at all branches.

In the early days of the pandemic, the St. Louis County government recognized SLCL as a critical hub, and asked Sorth to serve on the COVID-19 Regional Response Team. It quickly became apparent that the closing of schools and libraries exacerbated an existing digital divide, most notably for students and seniors—a March 2020 survey by the library found more than 10,000 households in St. Louis County lacked internet access. Together, SLCL and county government formed the Digital Equity Initiative to help level the field.

With a county grant of \$4 million announced that July, the library was able to provide remote learning resources for 39 under-equipped school districts. A committee of library staff helped identify solutions and distribute devices: 10,000 hotspots, 2,500 Chromebooks, and subscriptions to Tutor.com. Thanks to a concerted effort, cataloging staff processed the items in four business days, and students were able to begin the 2020/21 school year smoothly. The initiative was recognized by the Urban Libraries Council, National Digital Inclusion Alliance, and local news outlets.

Those resources were augmented by an additional \$1 million from the county and \$2 million from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) for the library to distribute 3,000 GrandPad tablets to help combat social isolation among seniors. GrandPads, easy-to-use tablets with simplified displays, voice-to-text capabilities, safe browsing, and Zoom, helped older residents keep in touch with their loved ones.





COMMUNITY VISION Top: the Sweet Reads bookmobile, which brings books and other library materials directly to neighborhoods not served by a physical location—no library card required! Bottom: the Eye Thrive mobile vision clinic visits SLCL branches throughout the summer months, offering free eye exams and glasses to kids ages 4–18.

Photos by Lucas Peterson

BUILDING ON FOUNDATIONS

SLCL was able to roll out many of those needed pandemic services by repurposing existing partnerships that connected patrons with food, diapers, and hygiene assistance, as well as ongoing mental health awareness efforts. And, as these collaborations proved beneficial for both the people served and the organizations helping them, the library has continued and expanded them.

Operation Food Search (OFS), a Missouri- and Illinois-based hunger relief organization that provides free food, nutrition education, and programs to reduce food insecurity, has been a library partner since 1999. “The [first] day of lockdown I called their executive director, and said, ‘We need to figure this out,’” says Sorth, “and we had drive-through meals up within a week.”

From March 2020 through August 2021, SLCL employees served 2.4 million OFS meals at 10 branches in a contactless drive-through arrangement. Since then, OFS and its mobile partner MetroMarket have provided free meals throughout the year at library branches, including summer lunches and after-school meals, in the neighborhoods with the most children receiving free or reduced school lunch. In December 2023, OFS and SLCL created a food pantry at the Rock Road Branch, providing shelf-stable healthy snacks for employees to distribute.

SLCL originally joined forces with the St. Louis Area Diaper Bank (SLADB) to connect residents with emergency diapers and period products in 2019—the first relationship between a national diaper bank agency and a public library. Families could pick up a monthly supply of diapers at six branch locations and receive referrals for long-term diaper supplies and family support. During the pandemic, these products were also available for drive-through pickup.

Other organizations that were unable to distribute their resources reached out to the library. “And we did the same thing with everything else: Pop your trunk, we’ll put the box in,” recalls Sorth. “It was just one partner after another.”

And the partnerships have continued to grow. Because Missouri allows for in-person, no-excuse absentee voting before an election, SLCL, in partnership with the county Board of Elections, served as an early voting location at more than half of its branches during the November 2024 election—some 40 percent of all in-person ballots in the county were cast at SLCL libraries by more than 200,000 voters. “We were inundated,” says Sorth; fortunately, relationship-building with county executives paid off, and the county transportation department helped with traffic and parking at early voting sites.

Recognizing that members of the library community on both sides of the desk need additional resources, in 2023 the library partnered with St. Louis County Children’s Service Fund and Epworth Children & Family Services to launch the Community Resource Initiative, placing social workers in five branches; a sixth floating social worker was added in 2024 because of high demand. The program provides referrals to trusted community partners, case management, and individualized assistance for all ages. The social workers also train library employees in crisis management, trauma-informed practice, and de-escalation techniques.

TAPPING IN

One of the most persistent community challenges has been the racial and economic disparities of the St. Louis justice system, particularly the large number of people incarcerated because of open warrants—most commonly, warrants issued for a defendant’s failure to appear in court because they lack a cell phone, time off from work to appear in court or transportation to get there, or a stable address.

The Tap In Center (TIC) is a collaborative project that provides free legal assistance and connects justice-involved individuals with local support services. Through the TIC, clients can recall bench warrants and set new court dates in a non-threatening setting without fear of further legal reprisals. It is open every Tuesday evening at the Florissant Valley Branch, in a part of the county that is both most impacted by arrests and accessible by public transit.







BUSY BRANCH Library life at the Clark Family Branch, SLCL's newest building. Top–bottom: Library Associates Matt Ketterer (l.) and Kathryn Altman monitor materials; Ja'Mel McCaine, Creative Lab Manager (l.), talks with Kylee McCaine in the Teen Creative Lab's recording studio; young patrons find multiple spots to do homework and research. *Photos by Kate Munsch Photography*

When clients check into the TIC, a court liaison looks up their case and passes the information to defense attorneys from The Bail Project and the Public Defender's

Office. Once attorneys review the case, they confer with the County Prosecutor's Office. The prosecutors can decide to recall a warrant that same night, and any necessary paperwork is sent to the court to be signed by a judge in the morning. Judges view the TIC favorably, taking it as a sign that defendants are making a good-faith effort to resolve their legal issues. While attorneys address the warrants, a court support specialist from The Bail Project connects clients with a cell phone, transportation to court, and other social services as needed.

The program was created during the pandemic through the MacArthur Foundation Safety & Justice Challenge, and was looking for a home base outside of a courthouse, prison building, or police station. SCLC seemed like the perfect solution, but the original partners—including The Bail Project, Missouri State Public Defender's Office, University of Missouri–St. Louis, St. Louis County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, and St. Louis County Department of Justice Services—were hesitant to approach Sorth with the idea of bringing people with felony charges into the library. When the project's representatives came to her, "They had this plan about how they were going to tell us why they love the library, like they had practiced," she says. "And we were like, 'It's a yes! You don't have to sell this to us.'" Sorth specified that she didn't want metal detectors or extra security for those Tuesday evenings, and called the local police chief to request that officers not park by the library during that time so as not to deter people with outstanding warrants from coming in. Law enforcement was understanding, reports TIC Director Miranda Gibson. "Sometimes we'll even have people tell us that they were referred by the police department, because they don't want to arrest."

The TIC was brought into the library in September 2020, and Gibson became SLCL's Justice Services Specialist in January 2024. "We wanted to be an alternative way for a person to deal with that warrant issue that didn't involve turning yourself in, paying the bond to get out, disrupting your life," says Gibson.

Since then, it has helped more than 1,650 individuals recall warrants, and has been effective in reducing recidivism—85 percent of those who have had a warrant recalled with TIC assistance did not return to jail within one year. The program has expanded to providing pretrial support and helping people with municipal cases, such as traffic ordinance violations. TIC also hopes to expand to cover St. Louis City, which has a separate court system from the county—which, among other benefits, will mean new community partners for the library.

Justice-involved individuals face barriers on release as well, and often encounter stigma and difficulty when looking for work. SLCL developed the Small Business Launchpad, an eight-week program for potential entrepreneurs with previous state or federal convictions. The program, which makes use of the library's existing relationships with small businesses and nonprofits, is offered for 12 participants a year, and provides a full business education through classes, online coursework, and mentoring. All participants receive a Chromebook and hotspot during the program as they create a business plan, learn finances and marketing strategies, and connect with local organizations, culminating in an elevator pitch competition.

Anthony Taylor participated in the Small Business Launchpad program in 2024 and was the audience choice winner for the pitch event. His business, Amp_Connections, supports recent amputees—Taylor lost his left leg to gun violence several years ago—and he is the author of a book, *Five Ways of Healing from an Amputation*. In addition to the technical side of launching a business, Taylor says, he learned how to network and build relationships, while

discovering SLCL's resources to support entrepreneurs. "I'm impressed," he says. "If they don't have the answer, they're trying to figure out how they can help you or understand what you're asking—building a business plan, how to get financing through the bank, what does that look like?"



St. Louis County **Library**







TALKING IT UP The library hosts a wide range of lively programs and events. Top: Bestselling children's book author Max Greenfield in conversation with Stephanie Skees, Director of Events and Curated Collections for The Novel Neighbor, a local independent bookstore, at the Clark Family Branch's Post Event Space; middle: SLCL Library Associate Michelle Lahiri (r.) assisting at a Welcome to Watercolor program at the Samuel C. Sachs Branch; and bottom r.: Missouri Department of Conservation volunteer Beth Deichmann engaging with patrons at a Backyard Birds program at the Grand Glaize Branch. *Top photo by Lucas Peterson; middle and bottom photos by Kate Munsch Photography*

Taylor took part in last December's Holiday Market at the Clark Family Branch with more than 50 other entrepreneurs. Again, he says, the atmosphere was supportive and geared toward participants' success, making sure he had marketing materials—he gave away branded water bottles, snacks, stress balls, and copies of his book—as well as the knowledge necessary to build a small business. “Having those things in place keeps me hopeful for how my business will scale over the next five years,” Taylor says.

SLCL “takes the position that this is actually public safety work, because 95 percent of people will be out of jail or prison eventually, so let's set them up for success,” says Gibson. “The research is very clear: If someone is able to meet their needs and have the tools to be successful, they will be less likely to reoffend. So if we can help meet social determinants of health, support their kids, give them a safe place to be, get them on the right track with their case or employment, whatever it is—that's an incredible mission at the library.”

SLCL, RENEWED

The “Your Library Renewed” campaign offered an opportunity for SLCL to consider each neighborhood's unique requirements. “The thing that we've learned the most is: Don't assume that you know what people need,” says Sorth. “You have to ask them.”

There were many answers, but the call for comfortable, family-friendly gathering spaces came through loud and clear. Over the past 10 years, SLCL has replaced or renovated every branch with an eye toward community well-being, transforming them into bright and welcoming community hubs with interactive children's areas, private study rooms, designated teen spaces, computer labs, comfortable seating, quiet reading areas, and outdoor spaces. The work has been done with an emphasis on green practices such as increasing water and energy efficiency, reducing waste and emissions, using eco-friendly materials, and improving indoor environmental quality, resulting in over \$69,000 in energy efficiency rebates.

Native landscaping was given priority in all children's gardens, outdoor play areas, community gardens, and walking trails. The recently built Beckwith Administration Building planted 290 trees, and the new Clark Family Branch brought in 354 trees, 1,000 shrubs, and 2.3 acres of native grasses. Six branches and the administration building installed bioretention ponds that remove pollutants from rainwater runoff before releasing it. Community gardens were created at four branches through a partnership with the nonprofit Seed St. Louis, starting in 2012, and the library now has 119 beds, including accessible gardens for patrons with disabilities. Garden starter kits, seed packets, and pots are distributed at branches where community needs are greatest to help support households experiencing food insecurity and promote awareness of sustainable practices.

A new bookmobile—the first of four—hit the road in January, visiting elementary schools throughout the county. At the bookmobile's launch in December 2024, SLCL unveiled a limited-edition St. Louis Cardinals library card issued to celebrate it.

That emphasis on the importance of listening also helped shape the library's 2023–26 strategic plan. Thanks to insights from nearly 4,500 survey responses and face-to-face conversations with more than 220 individuals, the library developed a strategic plan that encompasses community needs and aspirations alike, comprising three main pillars: 1. Promote literacy and lifelong learning; 2. Foster a sense of community, inclusion, and belonging; and 3. Increase access, impact, and awareness.

"We also changed our philosophy to start with Yes, and to work back from there," says Sorth. "When you change that thinking at the top, that goes through the whole organization. We became way less of an organization focused on rules and more on community."

That philosophy extends to SLCL's five-member board. They may start from Yes, notes Sorth, but that level of support and enthusiasm is bolstered by a steady exchange of information. "I want them never to be surprised," she says. Employees regularly attend board meetings to give reports on department or branch activities, strengthening the connection between the board and staff as well.

Dr. Lynn Beckwith Jr., a longtime St. Louis educator, has served on the library board since 2007, and as its president from 2010 to 2024. "When I first came on the board, there was a lot of talk about mission creep, that the library shouldn't be providing these additional services," he says. "That has changed—we see it as part of our mission to help uplift the community in various ways, not just with library materials, but active programs that enrich their lives, especially those who are underserved."

Beckwith considers his relationship with Sorth to be strongly collaborative, positioning him as an advisor and mentor (Sorth calls him "my ride or die partner"). "We work for what is best for the community, not what's best for her, not what's best for me," he notes. In recognition of his

consistent stand for library values, the new two-story Lynn Beckwith, Jr. Administrative Building bears his name.

“That was such a great honor,” he says. His mother, who worked as part of a cleaning crew at a library in nearby University City, demanded that all her children get library cards. “So I’ve always had a special place in my heart for libraries, for what they’ve done for me.”

STAFF OPPORTUNITIES

A library that prioritizes workplace community needs a dynamic, positive internal culture to thrive. SLCL offers a range of opportunities for employees to grow and develop leadership skills, such as the Employee Engagement Committee, which brings staff from various branches and departments together to exchange ideas, share information, and make connections. Employees without an MLIS degree are provided with opportunities to move up, reducing barriers and increasing equitable access to leadership roles. All employees attend diversity and inclusion training, and many are trained in mental health crisis intervention.

Those who want to gain a deeper understanding of SLCL can apply to be part of a Staff Development Cohort. The Cohort, initiated in 2019, is designed to help employees increase their knowledge about the inner workings of the library and develop leadership skills by bringing together workers from across the system for hands-on learning experiences—branch and department visits, meetings with managers and administrators, group discussions, independent online courses, webinars, and simply getting a look at what’s going on elsewhere in the system.

“It can be kind of isolating being at a branch, because the days are so busy—you’re just focused on the person standing in front of you and what you’re going to accomplish for that day,” says Marianne Atkinson, library associate at the Weber Road Branch, an employee since 2017, and a member of the most recent Cohort. “You forget that there are 18 other branches out there.”

Cohort members often need to step away from their posts to take part in events, but, says Atkinson, managers are encouraging. “They supported me to apply, they supported me to attend, and they’ve also supported me coming back from the meetings and saying, ‘Hey, guess what I learned today—can I share this with our staff?’” By the end of 2024, eight percent of employees had completed the program.

“It’s an opportunity for people to come to the table who don’t have a degree and see that there’s more than one path to progress with the library,” she adds.

ACTION PLUS EXPLANATION

An important lesson learned during the library's information gathering over the past dozen years, says Sorth, is that no matter how much she felt the library was championing its mission, "there were people that saw the work we did but weren't sure why we were doing it. So we had to start calling out, we're doing *this* because of *this*—we're distributing diapers because diaper insecurity is a barrier for so many families," she says. "We couldn't just do the work. We had to say why we were doing it. And that came through loud and clear."

SLCL's relationships have remained strong, after solidifying during a time of great need, and that community-building will pay off well into the future. Now, "if there's a regional conversation going on, the library is in that mix," says Sorth. "We gently, and through good work, elbowed our way to the table."



The Jerry Kline Community Impact Prize recognizes the public library as a vital community asset. The prize seeks to honor a library that has achieved this recognition to the highest degree through a strong reciprocal relationship with its civic stakeholders and community.

To honor its exemplary record, St. Louis County Library will be presented with \$250,000 from the Gerald M. Kline Family Foundation.

We thank the following external judges who helped inform the final decision:

Tracie D. Hall | Distinguished Professor of Practice, University of Washington Information School; Former Executive Director, American Library Association

Marc A. Ott | Executive Director, International City/County Management Association

Lance Werner | Executive Director, Kent District Library, MI; 2023 Jerry Kline Community Impact Prize winner

Also serving as judges were: Leslie Straus, Library Awards Director, Gerald M. Kline Family Foundation; Hallie Rich, Editor-in-Chief, *LJ*; and Lisa Peet, Executive Editor, *LJ*.

For more information, see libraryjournal.com/communityimpact



2024–25 Jerry Kline Community Impact Prize

St. Louis County Library

Gerald M. Kline Family Foundation
