

## 8. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Public libraries are an important mainstay of American life, with some 15,000 central and branch facilities spread across this nation. They have a long, proud tradition of community and educational service.

Judging by what the participants of this survey say, and by the large number of public libraries now involved in the provision of adult literacy service (some 7,000 not counting branches), public libraries also embrace adult literacy service as a central part of their ongoing mission, although with occasional ambivalence. They are a community anchor for literacy—or as one project advisor put it, they could well be seen as “the irreducible backbone of the literacy movement.”

Throughout the country—in state library agencies, state literacy resource centers, local library literacy programs, and among state librarians themselves—examples of committed and inspired leadership abound. These bright lights are well worth cele-

brating in their own right and should never be lost sight of in the national averaging and analyses that make up most of this report.

However, the study is about problems and possibilities, and, as it turns out, about the fraying lifeline that presently links public libraries to adult literacy. As the title of this report proclaims, this lifeline needs to be reinforced as a matter of grave urgency.

Otherwise, hundreds of thousands of poorly skilled adult Americans being helped to improve those skills every year by public libraries—and by public libraries *alone*—could lose their best hope for achieving their full potential as workers, parents, and citizens. And vast numbers of public library adult literacy programs—including affiliates of Literacy Volunteers of America and Laubach Literacy Action that are housed in public libraries—will be forced to severely curtail their operations or close down altogether.

Ironically, just as public library literacy programs have become an established part of the adult literacy system, they find themselves in terrible jeopardy. They are being squeezed by diminished funding for adult literacy generally, threats that federal library literacy funding will not be available in any form in the near future, and reduced state library budgets.

It is hoped that those now in positions of leadership—and those who *could* be—will read the findings and recommendations presented below with an eye toward what new roles they can assume.

Among those in the best position to accept the challenge are the American Library Association, the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, state libraries and library associations, federal and state departments of education, the National Institute for Literacy, the National Coalition for Literacy, Literacy Volunteers of America, Laubach

Literacy, governors, state literacy resource centers (SLRCs), university-based literacy institutes, the Center for the Book, the philanthropic community—and there are many others, including the President and members of Congress.

*Even Anchors Need Lifelines* is full of more ideas, findings, and suggested remedies than can possibly be explored fully in one short document. But this report has been designed as a resource that can have a life well into the future—in the coming discussions, meetings, and studies of all who care about adult literacy and the role of public libraries.

In the meantime, the report’s main findings are given below, followed by 19 recommendations (on pp. 121-125) for preserving and developing the public library role.

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### ~ ROLE ~

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✓ **1** When it comes to providing adult literacy services, public libraries

play a unique, substantial, and cost-effective role that is vastly beneficial to all parties involved. But their role has not yet been clearly enough defined, which handicaps advocacy, funding, and policy development.

✓ 2. Some 70% of state library personnel surveyed believe that adult literacy services should be a *major* public library mission. (Many of the others are either unsure or think the role should be less than major.) Moreover, the vast majority of *all* respondents think adult literacy should be even more important to public libraries in the future.

✓ 3. Despite their strong, even passionate, belief in adult literacy, only 50% of state libraries currently have a major adult literacy involvement. Lack of funding at the state and federal levels is the basic reason for the discrepancy between what state libraries *say* about the importance of their adult literacy role and what they *do*. Without external funding help, the situation is certain to worsen, especially as the state

agencies struggle to preserve their core operating budgets.

✓ 4. Communication is poor among state library personnel, the SLRCs, and local library literacy programs.

✓ 5. State librarians, and librarians generally, are too little involved in state and national literacy planning.

✓ 6. Librarians, traditional adult educators, state and national legislative entities, and funders have a limited understanding of the important public library role in providing adult literacy services. Yet the policy and funding actions of these very groups most affect libraries *and* literacy.

✓ 7. Tension, mistrust, and occasional hostility between education and library agencies makes cooperative planning difficult. Traditional educators often do not recognize or accept the educational role of public libraries. Tendencies to protect turf need to give way to cooperation and mutual respect.

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~ TECHNOLOGY ~

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✓ 1. In general, public library literacy personnel strongly favor the increased use of computers in their institutions and programs.

✓ 2. Local library literacy programs make heavy use of computer technology now, but they are hesitant to increase that use while struggling to keep their very programs alive.

✓ 3. Interest is high in using distance learning technology for library literacy purposes—understood by most respondents to be computer, Internet, and World Wide Web information technology. There appears to be only moderate understanding of the potential of the instructional broadcast media as traditionally defined, despite the tremendous potential of this vast untapped resource.

✓ 4. Even if local programs had the funds to invest in more technology, the information they need about good models in use

There is no shared agreement about the role of library literacy service from any umbrella organization. Professional organizations such as the IRA...have taken leadership in setting standards for English and language arts throughout the country. Perhaps the ALA could take the lead for literacy. (Diane Rosenthal, NY)

This report shows a tremendous need to debate, and to [better document] the benefits...of libraries as education/literacy service providers. (Barbara Humes, OERI)

by their peers is in very short supply.

✓ 5. If they must choose one or the other, state library agencies are more interested in technology for the purpose of expanding their general

public information services than for its use as an adult literacy tool. In many cases, technology would have to be in place for general purposes before it could be put into adult literacy service.

✓ 6. The greatest obstacle to wider technology use among all groups surveyed is a critical lack of funding to purchase hardware and software, and to develop trained staff to support them.

✓ 7. Technology can help improve instruction and information management, but it can also destroy important human values and sap the core services of underfunded local library literacy programs.

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~ PLANNING ~

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✓ 1. Most states have a statewide literacy planning body of some kind. Most state library agencies are involved in that planning, although, with a few exceptions, they do not have a strong voice.

✓ 2. SLRCs are presently the main source of planning and resource development

help to libraries and other literacy stakeholders at the state level.

✓ 3. With some remarkable exceptions, SLRCs have been badly implemented and financially starved. Many have been forced to close or severely cut back their services because federal funding for them ceased in FY95. Without a restoration of funding, many others will not long survive or remain effective. Their death or crippling would deprive state libraries and other groups of a vital source of information and technical assistance—at a time when it is most needed.

✓ 4. SLRCs (and the state departments of education in which many are lodged) have weak working relations with the American Library Association and other state and national library professional groups that are interested or engaged in adult literacy.

✓ 5. Similarly, state libraries have generally weak working relations with key national organizations that shape overall adult literacy policy and funding.

In Tennessee we have worked very well with state level staff, but still find it a bit difficult to “convince” local providers, both library and adult education, of the advisability of being very collaborative with each other.  
(Nancy Weatherman, TN)

✓ 6. Public libraries need the help of national organizations to develop informational materials...carry out awareness and planning activities...and devise strategies for program coordination and collaboration.

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~ FINANCES-FUNDING ~

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✓ 1. More than 50% of state libraries provided some local library literacy funding in FY95, including many who do not consider adult literacy services a major part of their mission. But, in most cases the funding was minimal, ranging from \$4,000 to \$70,000. Only

Cooperation, collaboration, and partnerships between the local literacy program and other literacy and education programs is the key—not competition and duplication of effort.. Collaboration between the local library literacy programs and the rest of the library is also essential.  
(Judy Stark, OERI)

seven state libraries provided a six-figure amount (between \$100,000-\$385,000). California and Illinois, in a class by themselves, provided \$3,466,000 and \$6,000,000 respectively. Furthermore, federal LSCA funds, rather than allocations from the core library budget, accounted for much of the state library funding.

✓ 2. Permanent loss of federal funds for library literacy or a shift to block grants without earmarks specifically for library literacy would force most

programs to cut deeply into the muscle of their services. Even worse, many would be unable to survive. Few respondents believe replacement funding could be found.

✓ 3. Public libraries need the help of national literacy and library organizations to restore lost funding and develop additional funding and more funding stability.

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~ STATE-LEVEL PROGRAM DATA ~

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✓ 1. With a few exceptions, state libraries do not regularly collect data on local public library literacy activities, and neither do any other groups. This void undercuts the efforts of state libraries and others working to advance library literacy.

✓ 2. There is a crying need for consistent and comparable data collection at the state and national levels. Data kept according to the population service area categories in use by the National Center for Educational Statistics would be especially useful. Fortunately, there are a few truly extraordinary models of effective leadership on this front—the state libraries in Illinois, Massachusetts, Florida, and California, for example—from which others could learn.

✓ 3. Although their role is not fully recognized, public libraries are a vital component of the country's adult literacy delivery system. Without counting individual branch operations, an estimated 2,000+ local public libraries nationwide have a major involvement in providing

adult literacy services today. An additional 5,700 are involved to some degree.

✓ 4. State library funding for literacy is heavily dependent on federal LSCA grants. Much of it will evaporate if federal funding is not restored or if block grants are not earmarked for state libraries and library literacy.

✓ 5. Although state libraries give little direct funding to local library literacy programs, they give many other important services—at a substantial cost.

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~ LOCAL PROGRAMS ~

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✓ 1. **Who and What They Are:** Local library literacy programs are a mix of LVA, Loubach, and eclectic programs. Some are outside entities housed in public libraries, others are directly operated by the library. They rely heavily on volunteers, focus on one-to-one and small group instruction, tend to be based on whole language principles, and follow flexible teaching methods geared to the life

needs of their adult learners. Their fundamental purpose is to provide help to the most poorly skilled adults (who are not served by traditional school or ABE programs), enabling them to acquire the basic reading, writing, math, and ESL proficiency needed to advance to higher-level educational programs and achieve their personally-determined functional goals.

✓ 2. **Their Students:** In FY95, of the 53,000 students served by the sampling of programs in this study, 32% were Hispanic, 23% were Black. Some 36% were unemployed, and 50% were in the workforce either part- or full-time. 93% were between the ages of 17 and 59. The gender balance was 45% male and 55% female. A disproportionately high percentage were on public assistance and were high school noncompleters.

✓ 3. **Their Reliance on Federal Funding.** 75% of the programs (chosen for this study because of their longevity and solid track records) have been in operation 10 years or less,

The most alarming part of the survey findings is the minimal level of state funding for literacy programs throughout the country. (Dan Boyd, SD)

One thing that surprised me (although I knew it intellectually) was just how different the situations are in individual states. It seems like block grants will create very uneven services from state to state. The data from these surveys really emphasized that for me. Overall this is a bad thing. It will make programs very political and could increase program favoritism (a comment made often by the respondents). (Virginia Heinrich, MN)

corresponding to the 10-year period in which LSCA Title VI grants were made. Only 21% pre-date 1983 and the launching of the adult literacy movement as a whole. In the fall of 1995, 65% of all the programs had some federal funding, with federal LSCA grants accounting for 40% of their total funding (and

state funding only 10%.) The permanent withdrawal of federal funds or unearmarked state block grant funding would be disastrous for the local programs.

✓ **4. Their Low Cost.**  
Library literacy programs operate with very small staffs and limited budgets. They are truly one of the country's great educational bargains. In FY95 all programs in this study averaged 1 full-time staff member for every 390 students, 1 paid staff member for every 172 students, 1 volunteer tutor for every 8 students, and a per-student cost of \$107.

✓ **5. Their Service To Working Adults.**  
Some 25% of the programs surveyed regularly serve part- and full-time workers. Crippling the library-based delivery system would thus have an adverse impact on workforce and workplace literacy.

✓ **6. State library agencies are not the dominant source of technical and planning help to local programs but they are a highly important source. If the SLRC role keeps**

There have to be some leadership activities. The Center for the Book would provide ideal auspices for some, but there are others. To get started, the activities required need not cost very much.

Being willing to put up funding for leadership is a test of whether anybody really cares about the programs.  
(Forrest Chisman, SIPA)

shrinking, state libraries may need to pick up the slack.

✓ **7. Adult literacy programs**  
experience three main problems because they operate in a library culture: trouble competing for local education funds... widespread salary inequities... and low status in the eyes of other library personnel.

✓ **8. The library culture is beneficial to adult literacy programs in many ways. For example, an immense variety of free resources... an inviting, stigma-free setting...great flexibility because the programs are not arbitrarily held to**

inappropriate regulations designed for traditional education...a natural path to volunteers in the community...and a highly supportive natural environment for families.

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~ **LIFEBLOOD ISSUES & LEADERSHIP** ~

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✓ **1. For adult literacy services in public libraries to survive and thrive, bold state and national leadership is essential. Funding for that leadership is also essential.**

✓ **2. The field is still handicapped by a "quick fix" mentality. Upgrading adult basic skills takes time.** ■



Throw down the gauntlet and challenge The Center for the Book/Library of Congress, the American Library Association, and others (e.g. foundations like Lilly and MacArthur) to help. (Shelley Quezada, MA)

The Center for the Book, LVA, Laubach, and the National Institute for Literacy could come together as a dynamic advocate for community-based library literacy programs by communicating to our legislators that literacy is accomplished one by one and that learning takes time.

We shouldn't abandon the programs now that the infrastructure is established in many parts of the country. (Virginia Schantz, MI)

## ~ RECOMMENDATIONS ~

The single most urgent issue identified in this report is the dire need for funds and funding stability. In fact, funding may well be the defining issue for the future of public libraries in adult literacy. Recommendations #1 and #2 are addressed to this life-and-death matter.

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### **RECOMMENDATION #1:**

**Earmarked funding in a significant dollar amount needs to be restored for library literacy programming—at the federal level, in state block grants, or both.**

This should be done to prevent a major implosion of the field. It can be achieved most quickly through federal and state legislation. The extreme urgency of this matter needs to be conveyed immediately to Congress and to state legislators and governors. It is vital to keep in mind that voluntary organizations, community-based organizations, and adults across the country have as much at stake as public libraries have.

Individually and in joint actions, the following groups need to speak out: national

adult literacy leaders from across the spectrum of private and public interests...committed state librarians and commissioners...the American Library Association...the National Institute for Literacy...the Office of Educational Research and Improvement...the Office of Vocational and Adult Education...the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies...Literacy Volunteers of America... Laubach Literacy Action...the Association for Community Based Education...the National Coalition for Literacy... and any other group whose voice could make a

difference and who will be affected by the outcome.

Local library literacy personnel need to speak out as well.

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### **RECOMMENDATION #2:**

**The philanthropic community should offer immediate help. It would make a profound difference.**

The new three-year grant initiative of the Lila Wallace-Readers' Digest Fund is a very bright light on a dark horizon. But, in the present situation, respon-

siveness is needed from other foundations as well.

Foundations can often move more quickly than government bureaucracies, and it would be in their best tradition if several responded to this call to action. The Kellogg and MacArthur Foundations, and the Ford, Lilly, and Mott Foundations, are all examples.

Funds placed in the hands of the ALA and/or state library agencies themselves might be used in the first instance to help local library literacy programs keep their balance while time is taken to develop thoughtful long-range plans.

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**RECOMMENDATION #3:**

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**Assuming that federal and/or state library literacy funding will be forthcoming, consideration should be given to officially designating state library agencies the lead state agencies for planning and developing local public library adult literacy programming.**

Even though state library involvement in adult literacy varies from

state to state now, there is substantial experience and a very strong state library interest on which to build.

As part of this official leadership role, the agencies should be given fiscal and administrative responsibility. To be effective they would need to consult regularly with other state agencies, especially education and literacy groups. They would also need to consult with each other, through COSLA and other ongoing forums.

Guidelines would probably need to be written into federal and/or state law to assure an equitable redistribution of the funds to local libraries for their literacy programs.

This recommendation may need considerable refinement given the politics involved and structural differences in the organization of education and library services from state to state. But without funding and real opportunity to “buy-in,” it is hard to see how even the most willing state libraries can take a wider leadership role than they now have.

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**RECOMMENDATION #4:**

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**Form a national planning alliance.**

Membership should include state libraries, local library literacy programs, state and local leaders from the adult education and literacy field, SLRCs, students, national analysts and researchers, representatives of federal and state government, and concerned business representatives.

The alliance would be an excellent forum in which to develop policy and resources and promote the sharing of resources. It might have a small publications component. Its lifespan could be determined by the membership.

The Center for the Book or the ALA might provide a home for the new initiative, with funding to be sought from multiple outside sources.

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**RECOMMENDATION #5:**

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**State librarians should form an action group, perhaps within COSLA, to plan for their wider**

**and more effective involvement in supporting and developing adult literacy services in their local public libraries.**

A major goal should be to become more active participants in all state and national planning forums where policy and funding issues for literacy are the focus, and where they and public library literacy programs have a stake.

Librarians must insist on having a full and equal partnership role, but adult literacy and education professionals must also become more aware of the education and literacy role of public libraries and take steps to include them.

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**RECOMMENDATION #6:**

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**In parallel to the COSLA action group suggested in #5, state librarians should develop regular two-way channels of communication with local libraries offering adult literacy services.**

The communications link would improve the understanding each has of what the other is doing, build an atmosphere of mutual support and trust, and provide a

stronger framework within which to work together.

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**RECOMMENDATION #7:**

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**Create a national library literacy data collection system.**

At the national level, partners to this effort might include such groups as the American Library Association, COSLA (representing state libraries), and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). At the state level, state libraries might be able to assume the responsibility. Some do this superbly now.

The format suggested in this report (pp. 62-65) is built around categories already in use at NCES and is worthy of consideration, but the essential need is for all players to use the same framework so that comparable data can be generated—and so that general reports about public libraries can see at a glance how adult literacy fits into their overall programs of public service.

Funding for the system would probably require a partnership of state and national sources and both

the public and private sectors.

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**RECOMMENDATION #8:**

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**Existing journals and newsletters of literacy and library organizations should give regular coverage to library literacy programs for the purpose of making their role and accomplishments more widely recognized.**

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**RECOMMENDATION #9:**

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**The ALA, the National Commission on Libraries & Information Science, COSLA, the voluntary organizations, and other leading groups should issue official resolutions giving consistent and unequivocal attention to the important role of public libraries in providing adult literacy services.**

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**RECOMMENDATION #10:**

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**A project should be launched to develop and disseminate information to local library literacy programs about good models of library literacy service.**

The new Lila Wallace Fund initiative will do

this very thing with the thirteen library literacy programs they have selected for their demonstration effort. But that effort will unfold slowly over three years and good information is needed now as a practical tool for advocates, program developers, and policy-makers. It could easily be developed. To start, many worthy candidates for inclusion in the project can be found among the 63 programs included in this study.

The ALA, the Center for the Book, the National Institute for Literacy, or the U.S. Department of Education could take the lead here.

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**RECOMMENDATION #11:**

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**As a national goal, the President, the Administration, and the Congress should commit to the wider use of technology in public libraries *for the advancement of library literacy programs.***

The initiative would enable state libraries and local public library literacy programs to acquire hardware and software, and to develop the related technical and support staff

they need to improve their education and information services.

The initiative would be good for America and good for public libraries. Such a commitment would be consistent with action already taken to foster the greater use of technology in the schools. Some foundations have a strong interest in technology and could be a source of funding.

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**RECOMMENDATION #12:**

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**An appropriate national organization, or a collaboration of several, should undertake a project to gather and disseminate the information local library literacy programs need about effective uses of technology for both program management and instruction.**

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**RECOMMENDATION #13:**

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**Although computers, the Internet, and distance learning technology have great appeal and potential, their wider implementation should be adopted only after the most careful consideration of the benefits—in terms of individual learning, program outcomes,**



economies of scale, and access.

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**RECOMMENDATION #14:**

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**State and local public libraries should explore ways to expand space allocations for literacy programs or to find innovative space-sharing arrangements.**

New technology will require additional space and many programs are already overcrowded.

The development of mechanisms for sharing resources across communities and regions might be the answer in some cases.

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**RECOMMENDATION #15:**

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**A campaign of information and discussion should be launched to increase understanding throughout the field and in the political arena about the important role of public libraries in adult literacy. The campaign could be sponsored by established literacy and library groups.**

One strand of these activities might be for the U.S. Department of Education or the National

Institute for Literacy to organize discussions around this report at the regional, state, or local level. State education departments might be asked to join in.

Another strand could consist of panels and workshops incorporated into the regular conferences of such national groups as Literacy Volunteers of America, Laubach Literacy, and the ALA. State and regional meetings convened for and by the literacy and library fields would provide plenty of other opportunities.

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**RECOMMENDATION #16:**

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**At every level of the field, explorations should be made into how the much-needed greater degree of collaboration and cooperation can be achieved.**

Coordination efforts carry heavy staff and financial costs and place a heavy burden on library literacy programs. But they will be increasingly necessary as funding becomes tighter.

Local library literacy programs in particular cannot reasonably be ex-

pected to enter into new partnership arrangements without affordable options for doing it.

The alliances and action groups recommended above (#4, #5, and #6) should make this one of their highest priorities.

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**RECOMMENDATION #17:**

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**The U.S. Department of Education, the National Institute for Literacy, the National Coalition for Literacy, and others should join forces to impress upon Congress the immediacy of the need to restore funding for the valuable but endangered SLRCs—at the federal level, through state block earmarks, or both.**

Although SLRCs are not the central focus of this study, they are a crucial resource for public libraries and for everyone working at the state level to advance adult literacy.

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**RECOMMENDATION #18:**

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**The structure and legislated role of the SLRCs should be reviewed for the purpose of reconstituting them if necessary**

**to guarantee their future viability and effectiveness.**

One new approach to consider is suggested on pages 44-47 of this report.

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**RECOMMENDATION #19:**

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**The groups that would be formed and that are challenged to action by many of the above recommendations should shape a clearly-articulated definition of the purpose and role of public library adult literacy programs, seek agreement for it through wide consultations with local groups, and use the validated definition in a single voice to advance the public library role in adult literacy.**

This report contains the makings for that definition. But whatever definition is agreed on, four fundamental facts should stand at its core:

◆ Outside literacy programs acquire access to the basic reading collections and many other valuable resources of the library because the library provides sponsorship and space. Most of these resources are

generally minor items in a library's overall budget but they would be prohibitively expensive for small external programs on their own.

◆ The library culture is a uniquely user-friendly environment for adult learners and offers a flexible climate in which programs can be customized to meet their real life needs.

◆ Libraries are a fundamental cornerstone of knowledge and information. America and Americans gain in many concrete ways from the efforts of public libraries to help develop literate communities of users.

◆ Most important of all, in providing basic literacy services to adults with the least skills—

whether through their own tutoring or through the tutoring of the voluntary and CBO groups to which they provide a home—public libraries give educational access to the adults most in need of help, to people who either would not be served at all by schools and traditional ABE programs or could not be served by them effectively.