# Western New York Rural Library Grant Program

Grant Guidelines & Request for Proposals

February 2026

## Introduction

Our public libraries are essential to the vitality of rural communities. Beyond the place to borrow books, these rural hubs serve as vital "third places" – spaces beyond home and work where people gather, learn and connect. In Western New York, where geographic and economic barriers often hinder access to resources, libraries play a critical role in bridging gaps in education, digital connectivity, and cultural inclusion. They are indispensable community hubs where people can access an abundance of resources, for free.

## Program Description

The Rural Library Grant Program, powered by the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation (RCWJRF), will provide support for rural public libraries and library systems, recognizing them as key Community Hubs. RCWJRF is a Detroit-based grantmaking organization focused on improving quality of life in Western NY. The Foundation is providing support for a three-year period (2026-2028). The Rochester Regional Library Council (RRLC) and the Western NY Library Resources Council (WNYLRC) are the intermediaries administering this program in Western NY.

The rural library intermediaries will help to design, launch, and manage a grant program for rural public libraries and library systems, tied to the interests of the Foundation. They will gather input from key local library leaders into the strategy as it launches and assist applicants through the process of submitting a proposal. Further, rural library intermediaries will assist grantees through the process of reporting on their grant.

## Defining Rural

For the purposes of this library grant program, the RCWJRF provides the following definition that has been adopted by the intermediaries in Western NY (both bullets must be true to be eligible for grants):

- Any library facility physically located in a city, town, or village with a population base of 25,000 or less
- Libraries must be 5 miles from an urbanized area

All [eligible libraries](#) in [Western NY](#) have been vetted and approved by the RCWJRF, RRLC, and WNYRLC.

## What do we mean when we say "Hub"

Our libraries are physical hubs located in a central, shared space designed for connection, collaboration, and resource sharing, acting as a focal point for community activity. One of their best features is to provide amenities to foster interaction, idea exchange, and a sense of belonging.

- Rural leaders consistently identify Community Hubs as essential infrastructure—defined as place-rooted organizations that build local capacity and improve livelihoods, health, and well-being.
- Libraries serve as the primary hub in most rural communities, often the largest physical space where diverse residents gather for multiple activities.
- Hubs are critical in rural settings because they consolidate multiple services under one roof, serving as gathering places, collaboration spaces, and service delivery points.
- They provide connection points for national/regional partners to engage with local leaders and bring needed resources to communities.

## About the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation

The RCWJRF is a grantmaking organization dedicated primarily to sustained investment in the quality of life of the people of Southeast Michigan and Western New York. The two areas reflect the devotion of Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. to his hometown of Detroit and greater Buffalo, home of his beloved Buffalo Bills NFL team. Prior to his passing in 2014, Mr. Wilson provided that a significant share of his estate be used to continue a lifelong generosity of spirit by funding the Foundation that bears his name. Based in Detroit, the Foundation began with a grantmaking capacity of $1.2 billion over a 20-year period, which expires January 8, 2035. This structure is consistent with Mr. Wilson's desire for the Foundation's impact to be immediate, substantial, measurable, and overseen by those who knew him best. For more information about the Foundation or other grants, visit [www.rcwjrf.org](http://www.rcwjrf.org).

## About the Library Councils

The RRLC and WNYLRC are multi-type library networks serving libraries, library systems, and cultural organizations in Western New York. The councils were chartered by the New York State Board of Regents in 1966. The State created the regional councils to expand the availability of the resources and strengthen programs and services for all types of libraries. RRLC and WNYLRC have decades of experience awarding grants to member organizations, and are working together to administer the WNY Rural Library Grant Program powered by the RCWJRF.

# Grant Guidelines & Request for Proposals

## Eligibility

Eligible libraries or library systems, on behalf of the eligible libraries, may apply for Rural Library Grant Program funds during the application window. The grant runs on a calendar year fiscal year, with funds becoming available in January of each grant year**\***.

**Application window: 2/18/2026 - 3/31/2026**
*Applications received after 3/31/2026 will not be considered*

Eligible libraries are noted in the [Rural Libraries spreadsheet](#). Not every library within a system is eligible. Qualifying rural libraries in the following counties are eligible: Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie, Genesee, Monroe, Niagara, Orleans, and Wyoming.

Collaborative proposals between multiple libraries with similar interests and needs are welcomed and encouraged.

*Multi-year grant applications will be considered. For example, a three-year project spanning 2026-2028 would be eligible.

## Project Focus

The grant projects must focus on and align with one or more of the RCWJRF priority areas. Priority areas are as follows:

## ACTIVE LIFESTYLES

### Youth Sports & Recreation Expand

Access to safe library spaces and programs that support physical activity and active play for children in rural areas
> Sample Ideas:
>> ● Active Sports Equipment to lend - footballs, baseballs, soccer, etc.
>> ● Outdoor Equipment to lend - bikes, Snowshoes, binoculars for birding
>> ● Programs to support biking, hiking, birding, etc.

### Parks, Trails & Green Design

Position rural libraries as community connectors that link residents to nature, recreation opportunities, and environmental stewardship through partnerships, education, and access to regional parks and trails
> Sample Ideas:

- Story Trails
- Bike Racks and Benches
- Water Fountains/Filling Stations
- Fix-it Stations
- Connector trails to libraries from established parks
- Outdoor gardens/patios

## PREPARING FOR SUCCESS

### Early Childhood

Leveraging rural libraries as collaborative hubs that support social and emotional development for young children, helping them enter kindergarten ready to learn and thrive

Sample Ideas:
- Story Times with caregivers
- Puppet collection/stage
- Reading 1000 books before Kindergarten
- Toddler Area in Library
- Early literacy programs & partnerships
- Sensory/auditory spaces
- Play yards/cradles

### After School

Empower children in rural communities to engage in out-of-school opportunities at our libraries that spark curiosity, develop transferable skills, and broaden awareness of future careers

Sample Ideas:
- Lending Library of Teen-Focused Games and Activities
- Teen Center/Area
- Supplies for Afterschool or Summer Programming
- MakerSpaces and Design Equipment
- STEM programming and infrastructure
- Mentoring/tutoring support

### Young Adults & Working Families

Through the services of our rural libraries, enable rural community members to access and succeed in careers by building the knowledge, soft skills, and technical expertise required for current and emerging workforce needs

Sample Ideas:
- Tool Lending library
- Programs for Trades/Skill Training
- Computer Station for Online Job Searches/Job Training Activities
- Study/Learning pods and meeting rooms

- Access to Career Planning Resources
- Test Prep for higher learning

## CAREGIVERS

Position rural libraries as supportive hubs for family and direct caregivers for older adults by affirming the value of their work, fostering strong local networks, and connecting caregivers to providers, resources, and expertise
    Sample Ideas
- Build out of a respite room for caregivers
- Resources for Caregivers to check out
- Programming (support groups) for Caregivers
- Build out care giver collections/tools for older adults
- Family workstation/desks

## ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

To foster vibrant and thriving rural communities, we will invest in infrastructure improvements and outdoor place-making opportunities at our rural libraries as they revitalize key commercial corridors, as well as create entrepreneurial opportunities
    Sample Ideas:
- Private spaces/rooms/co-working spaces for entrepreneurial workers
- Collection development and resources for entrepreneurs
- Digitization of Library's Local History Collection as part of place-making effort
- Physical upgrades that tie to community wide economic development projects
- Library presence in community using tools to engage the community
- Wall Murals/Sidewalk Murals
- Amphitheatre for outdoor concerts on site

## NONPROFIT SUPPORT AND INNOVATION

How can our rural libraries support and strengthen the nonprofit sector to have the resources and tools needed to realize their missions – including increased access to data, technology and more
    Sample Ideas:
- Wi-Fi or Technology Support for Nonprofit Partners
- Build out a Community-Wide Nonprofit Support Center
- Establish programs to help local nonprofits research and find credible community data
- Facilitation and hosting strategic community-wide planning
- Hosting Nonprofit Resource Workshops

# Funding Requests

The total grant funds available across Western NY each year will be $500,000. These funds will be distributed among the grant projects based on the project's alignment with the focus areas, project need and impact, and potential for success.

Minimum grant amount: $1,500
Maximum grant amount: $150,000

The WNY Rural Library Grant Program is a competitive grant program.  The grant reading team will evaluate project applications and make funding determinations. We encourage you to put forward a meaningful, realistic budget that will accomplish the project goals within the grant range allowable for this program. We will work with applicants on modifying projects or budgets if needed to ensure that each project has the best chance of success with a realistic amount of funds.  Grants on the higher end of the range will primarily be given to collaborative projects that serve multiple libraries.

**NOTE: If you have questions about your project, the budget, or any other questions about the grant prior to submitting your application, please contact Sheryl Knab (sknab@wnylrc.org) or Laura Schiefer (lschiefer@rrlc.org) for a consultation.**

# Grant Proposal Instructions

Grant applications must be submitted through this form:
https://wnylrc.wufoo.com/forms/zffkj3c1mzwnef/

| QUESTION | INSTRUCTIONS |
|---|---|
| **About Your Library** ||
| **Public Library(ies) Name** | Name of library or libraries applying for funding. In the case of the system applying on behalf of libraries, include the names of all libraries included in the project. If this is a system wide grant, all libraries should be included in this box. Collaborative projects among libraries from different systems will be considered; please consult with grant administrators noted above prior to applying. |
| **Manager or Main Contact Person** | Name of the main contact for this grant project |
| **Main Contact Email Address** | Email address of main contact for this grant project |
| **Member Library System** | Choose one system. Must choose from following list:<br>● CCLS<br>● B&ECPL<br>● MCLS<br>● Nioga |

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|---|---|
| | ● OWWL<br>● STLS |
| **EIN or Tax ID #** | EIN or Tax ID # of entity who will receive the grant funds |
| **Mailing Address** | Mailing address of the entity who will receive the grant funds |
| **Library Phone Number** | Phone number for main contact for the grant project |
| **Website** | URL of library and/or library system website where project information will be shared |
| **Population Served** | Population served by the library or libraries included in the project |
| **Total Number of Staff** | Include the number of full time and part time staff at the library or libraries included in the project. If the library system staff will be working on behalf of the libraries, note the number of system staff as well |
| **Grant Amount Requested** | Dollar amount requested for this grant project |
| **Other Funding or In Kind** | Dollar amount of other funding that will be put toward this project, and/or in kind funding. In kind funding could include staff time, supplies, materials,etc., that have a dollar value and will be provided by the system or libraries involved in the grant |
| **Grant Project Title** | Title of the grant project. This title will be used in marketing, promotions, and communications about the project |
| **What RCWJRF Area will your project align with? Please pick all that apply.** | This field can support multiple choices. You must select at least one.<br>Choose from following list:<br>● Youth Sports and Recreation<br>● After School<br>● Parks and Trails<br>● Non-Profit Innovation<br>● Entrepreneurship and Economic Development<br>● Caregivers<br>● Young Adults and Working Families<br>● Early Childhood |
| **Brief Project Description** | Describe the project in one or two sentences. This will be used in marketing, promotions, and communications about the project. |
| **Project Partners** | List all project partners, including community groups, other agencies or nonprofits, municipalities, etc. |
| **Project Need/Impact Statement** | Describe the need for the project and the expected impact. Include any research that you have done to assess the need. Include what you hope to achieve from this project and the expected outcomes in this section. |
| **Project Goals** | List project goals. Connect each goal directly to one or more of the RCWJRF focus areas. As a one-time grant to enhance and expand your work, please list your Project Goals, including strategy to continue activity when funding is expended. |
| **Project Timeline and Activities** | Include a timeline of project activities that address the goals and outcomes above. Provide as much detail as possible, including responsible parties for each activity, and noting where and when project partners will be included. |
| **How do you plan on marketing the project to the intended audience?** | Include your plan for marketing the project to the intended audience. If marketing funding is part of the Project Budget, provide a detailed description of how the funding will be used in this section. Include any relevant links (e.g. system's marketing/communication plan) |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Include any communication plans you have developed.** | RCWJRF wants to speak with project leads periodically and are interested in project milestones/events that would present good media and/or storytelling opportunities. Please describe these opportunities as related to the project timeline & activities. |
| **How do you plan on evaluating the success of the project? Include any metrics/data you will be tracking.** | How will you determine if the goals and outcomes were met? How will you measure the success of the project overall? Include any metrics and/or data that you will be tracking throughout the project for each goal. |
| **Detailed Project Budget** | List dollar amounts for each budget category and include a detailed description of how funding will be used for each category. You should determine the budget categories that apply to your project; example categories could be personnel, hardware/software, consultants, supplies/materials, marketing*, etc.<br><br>**Will you accept partial funding?** In the case that the project isn't awarded full funding, think about and describe how you might change or reduce various budget categories if needed. How will this impact the project overall?<br><br>***Each grant must include some funding for marketing & promotion.*** |
| **Assurances – Name of Person completing this form:** | Name of person submitting the grant application. By submitting the application, you agree to these assurances:<br>● I agree that I have read the instructions and understand my obligations to complete the project and provide a final project report that meets the requirements of the foundation grant.<br>● I also agree to provide periodic reports about project progress. Reports may take the form of written reports, emails, phone or virtual conversations, or using other reporting tools as requested by the granting agencies. |