

Director's Report for September 25, 2025

Main Reopening: City officials issued the Temporary Certificate of Occupancy (TCO) last Thursday afternoon, a few hours before we had our donor appreciation reception on the 5th floor of the renovated library. We had 150+ people turn out to see the exciting transformation of the old library. They had a chance to take a tour and heard brief remarks from the capital campaign co-chairs, Lisa Ferrell and Rush Harding. Eliza and the Development Office planned and hosted the event with financial support from the CALS Foundation, and assistance from Communications, Programming, and Public Service staff. [Here's a link to some photos.](#)



We commissioned an original illustration of the new facade of Main from local artist Layet Johnson to print and give away as party favors at the reception. We'll bring prints to the meeting for you and hope you will all take one home as a souvenir!

Judging from the positive reactions of people who saw the space for the first time, I anticipate the entire community will conclude our architects, contractors, and staff have done something that Little Rock can be proud to call its Main Library. As you will see this week if you are able to join us in person for the meeting on the 5th floor of Main, there is still work to be done to finish the project and get completely settled. Leslie Blanchard declared Monday that "every box of Main Library materials has been unpacked, scanned, and shelved!" I wish I could say the same about all my things that were boxed up at the port and returned to Main in August. With the issuance of the TCO last week, we were able to start working from our offices last Friday. The initial task for most of us is to find all of our boxes that have been delivered to a hall somewhere reasonably close to our offices. We don't mind this scavenger hunt because we are happy to be back downtown.

Advancing Reserve Funds to Finish Renovation: Jo has indicated that we are going to need to pay out funds in the near term that have been pledged from private donors. She will request at the meeting that the Board authorize the administration to use up to \$1.1M from CALS reserves to cover these outlays while the pledges are still outstanding. We will still have adequate reserves to comply with the board policy that requires retaining reserves for an unanticipated financial crisis. The funds drawn from reserves will be reimbursed as the money comes in on pledges. To date, the capital campaign has raised \$1,642,905 in total pledges/gifts. We have received \$997,808.80 of that amount so we have \$645,097 in pledged-but-not-yet-collected funding. We expect to receive the balance of the pledges over the next 2-3 years. We have approximately \$200,000 left to raise to "unlock" the \$250K tendered by Windgate Foundation provided we can raise the \$250K in matching funds. If we raise that other \$200,000 the total for the campaign would be \$2,092,905. The deadline from Windgate for raising the match is December 31, 2026.

Brainfuse Online Help Resources: One of the impressive things to know about our staff is that they have been able to multi-task for two months or more. While moving/unpacking they have continued to make sure that all of the great programs and resources CALS offers don't slow down. Trying to be more like our staff who kept the books and programs on schedule through the disruption of moving, I took an hour to check in on a webinar last week about one of the lower profile resources at CALS with a lot of depth. Back in 2020, we received a generous grant from Walton Personal Philanthropy Group to start Count Up, our math tutoring program. As a part of that we purchased a subscription to Brainfuse which is a tutoring program that employs 3,000 tutors to offer free online homework help and virtual learning services for our patrons. The Walton grant ran out but we have continued to subscribe to Brainfuse. This is a wonderful asset that CALS makes available to students needing help with a specific homework assignment. Brainfuse is a solution for those who may not be able to afford to hire a personal tutor for their child. The primary resource is called Help Now which provides access to tutors online to help K-12 students on a range of subjects that broadens as the grade level rises. All tutors are teachers, retired teachers, or graduate students who must have a 4-year degree. About 70% of them have an M.A. They are available from 2pm to midnight Central Time and provide help with concepts and ideas for papers and projects but of course they never complete the assignment for the students. Brainfuse tutors will offer help to students with assignments due the next day (and not scold them for procrastinating the way I did as a parent). Two other components of Brainfuse provide assistance to adults. JobNow offers a variety of resources to assist in a job search. This includes interview practice, a resume lab, and general career resources. VetNow offers tailored support for veterans and their families to Navigate VA benefits, check eligibility for local, state, and federal programs, and smooth the transition into civilian employment. Brainfuse has recently introduced a new resource called CollegeNow which makes advisors available to help students navigate college and trade school applications. Brainfuse is yet another CALS trove of benefits.

Update on CALS Park: As I mentioned last month, we have been meeting with a group of volunteers and neighbors who are eager to see some relatively affordable improvements made to the unused public property (owned by the state highway department) across from the Main Library. With a modest effort this public space could be enjoyed by library staff and patrons, as well as many others living, working, or visiting downtown. Last weekend, Sasaki Consulting released its design for the entire 18 acres they call the 30 Crossing Park. This encompasses the area of most significance to CALS that lies south of 2nd Street between River Market and Cumberland. CALS's short term objectives in this space are compatible with Sasaki's grander vision for the entire area around the freeway improvement project that was completed earlier this year. Sasaki has created a survey to invite people to make recommendations on the entire 18 acres. Here's a [link](#) to the Sasaki survey. I encourage you to help the city, Sasaki, and CALS by taking the survey and highlighting the plausible, affordable opportunities that can become a reality in the short run across from the newly remodeled library with city and ARDOT support.

Pigeons Have Left The Library: Avian Flyaway finished installing their pest bird relocation system on September 10. Start to finish, installation took 5 ½ weeks. The company was easy to work with and worked only at night so as not to disrupt patrons, staff, or construction workers at Main. The project was more complex and difficult than Avian anticipated, but the system is

working as advertised at this point. Company representatives assured us that they will return and further wire the space if even one pigeon finds a way to roost on any part of the treated areas.

Community Resources Success Story: Last week Rebecca invited me to a brief meeting with a woman from AR who now lives in Ft. Worth, TX. The woman had come to Little Rock to check on her 45-year-old son who had been struggling to find health care he desperately needed. She also insisted on thanking Rebecca and her staff in person for their assistance in getting her son to UAMS. In this instance, Rebecca contacted the city's chief homeless officer who put our staff in touch with Dr. John Martindale at UAMS. Dr. Martindale arranged to have the son admitted to UAMS for testing and to begin the process with UAMS social workers to get the son connected to Medicaid assistance. I pass this long by way of illustrating what our community resources staff does regularly. Rebecca has worked to get the medical provider community more involved with addressing the needs of the homeless.

Program Updates: The Six Bridges Book Festival will start on Sunday, September 28 and run through October 5. Last month, Ellen gave a brief preview of this year's slate. Festival Coordinator Drew Herget will join us at the board meeting to highlight some key events and authors on the roster. Venues for this year's festival include four of our branches, the Ron Robinson Theater, and a session at Whole Hog, but we are most excited about welcoming Festival goers back to Main Library first at the Kick-off Party on Friday evening October 3 and at sessions all day on Saturday, October 4. The Festival will conclude on Sunday with the family event Little Readers Rock at the Children's Library, the Pie Contest at the Root Cafe, and the fundraising event, An Evening with Shelby Van Pelt at Ron Robinson Theater. [Tickets are still available for this event at this time.](#)

With our opening delay, some of the events and activities originally planned have been rescheduled with many of the activities now set for Saturday, October 4. The Senior Prom event reported on last month has been moved to Tuesday, October 7. Courtney Jones, our outreach coordinator, has been visiting retirement communities and other groups for senior adults to extend a special invitation to attend this event and experience the newly renovated space.

Outside of Main and the Book Festival, many of our locations are focused on seasonal programs. The list of programs in celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15-October 15) can be found here: <https://cals.org/hispanic-heritage-month>. Our slate of Halloween-related programs throughout October range from pumpkin and fall storytimes, themed crafts and art programs for a variety of ages, to horror movies at Ron Robinson Theater.

Capital Campaign: As reported above, we continue to make progress toward our \$2M capital campaign goal for Main. We are very proud and grateful to have received commitments from more than 250 donors, with new gifts coming in every day. When you arrive at Main for the board meeting, take a look at the "Next Chapter" donor wall under the new front stairwell. This wall, which has a striking "flying book" design created by PSW architect Ernest Banks, acknowledges both the taxpayers and donors who made the re-imagined Main Library possible. We are grateful to CDI and PSW for working hard to ensure the wall was installed prior to our preview reception last week. We have more room on the wall for adding flying books recognizing future donors as we push to secure the Windgate Foundation matching funds.

Development: With the donor preview reception at Main behind us, we are now focused on our October 5 Six Bridges fundraising event. To date we have sold 290 tickets priced at \$100 each to “An Evening with Shelby Van Pelt.” Capacity in the theater is 315. We are hoping for (and expecting) a sellout. As a reminder, this is the only ticketed event during the Six Bridges Book Festival. The proceeds help us keep all the other festival events free.

In the midst of all the excitement surrounding Main re-opening and Six Bridges, we have tried to maintain our efforts fundraising for other programs. We are thrilled that CALS has been the recipient of a \$20,000 NEA Big Read grant for the 2025-2026 cycle. Programming this cycle centers on the theme “OUR NATURE: How Our Physical Environment Can Lead Us to Seek Hope, Courage, and Connection.” Our featured title is the poetry collection *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* by Ross Gay, and our programming will occur during April 2026, coinciding with Earth Month and Poetry Month. We will use grant funds to purchase books for giveaways and plan a number of companion programs, many presented in partnership with other community organizations. This is CALS’s third Big Read grant, following our successful programs in 2024 (connected to *There, There* by Tommy Orange) and 2020 (connected to *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien).

Communications: There have been a lot of moving parts as the Communications team shifted reopening activities from September 20 to October 4. They are now finalizing promotions for the Grand Reopening alongside the Six Bridges Book Festival and Library Card Sign-up Month. Media Day will be held on Friday, September 26, at 2pm. The Grand Reopening will take place on Saturday, October 4, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Mayor Scott will join us to “turn the page” on the reimagined Main Library during the opening ceremony at 9 a.m., followed by reopening activities and Book Festival sessions beginning at 10 a.m. We kept as many of the planned activities as possible, but the schedules of some performers and activities didn’t fit with the new date. Jane O’Connor and Robin Preiss Glasser, the author and illustrator of the Fancy Nancy books, kept their original date and were greeted by a packed house at the Children’s Library on September 20. On October 4, we will have performances by Philander Smith University’s Panther Dolls and Papa Rap, stilt walkers from Arkansas Circus Arts, balloon crafts with Vicente Yanez, a bounce house, face painting, a carousel, games, teen karaoke, sessions on the library’s digital resources, and printmaking at Roberts Library. A full list of activities is available on the event page: <https://events.cals.org/event/14629479>.

Communications staff and Festival Coordinator Drew Herget have also made a several recent media appearances, including radio (Power 92, KOKY, KARN, Alice 107.7, KASU, and The Buzz), television (KARK, KATV, THV 11, and Fox 16), and print (*Arkansas Money & Politics* and *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*) to highlight both the reopening and the Book Festival.

You can read the articles here:

- [ADG, Main Reopening: Kate and Tameka](#)
- [ADG, Six Bridges Book Festival: Drew and Book Festival authors](#)
- [AMP, Main Reopening: Nate, Christina \(Boulevard Bread\), Reese and Amanda \(Polk Stanley Wilcox\)](#)

To wrap up Library Card Sign-up Month, the CALS Cruiser will join our partner libraries (North Little Rock and Garland, Saline, Faulkner, and Jefferson counties) to [“Power up and Play” at Main Event](#) on Saturday, September 27, from 10 a.m. to noon. The [Children’s Business Fair](#) at the Williams’s Library is also happening that day from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Circulation and Traffic: Library traffic and business tends to be cyclical, which is why the monthly statistical report usually focuses on the numbers and percentage changes from the same month in the previous year. For example, it is not as useful to compare June to February as it is to compare June to June. Those year-over-year numbers are available in the report included in the board packet. But here are some of the changes we’ve seen since the beginning of 2025. In August, door count across the system was 115,876, a 38% increase over the January total of 86,340. Total circulation was up 4% in August, from 202,642 to 210,897. Surprisingly, physical circulation (every physical item except laptops) was up 8% in since January, while digital circulation remained flat. We’ll see if the reopening of Main drives continued growth in physical circulation. The number of staff assistance interactions (reference questions, instructional assistance, notary transactions, and account questions) rose 16% from January to August. While staff assistance numbers are still considerably lower than they were before the pandemic, the fact that the numbers are slowly rising is a positive sign.

Update on Joyce Elliott: When I inquired this week with one of Joyce’s close friends about her recovery from her June 2024 stroke I got this encouraging response: “A few friends got together and had a small lunch with her last week. She is continuing speech and physical therapy, and the progress is remarkable.” I was very happy to hear that and wanted to share it with you. We send our love and best wishes, Joyce!

Next Board Meeting: The fourth Thursday next month will fall on October 23rd. We will meet at noon in the new 5th floor boardroom of the Main Library. Pam, Kate, and I will be in Cincinnati that day for the annual Urban Libraries Forum. We will join the meeting virtually.