



**Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries & Museums  
The State of Tribal Libraries in the United States (2025–Early 2026)**

**ATALM Field Assessment + Early TLC Survey Findings**

This report reflects ATALM’s long-standing field-based knowledge, **supplemented by early findings from the Tribal Library Council’s “State of Tribal Libraries” survey collected December 12, 2025–January 8, 2026.** Responses include tribal library staff, tribal academic library staff, tribal archive/museum library services, tribal government/education staff, and supporters/allies. Findings are presented as themes based on respondent selections and open-ended comments. This is not a statistically representative sample; it is an early snapshot intended to inform TLC priorities and the ATALM2026 Summit and Masterplan process.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The central contradiction remains: **tribal libraries are indispensable yet structurally underfunded.** Early TLC survey responses reinforce ATALM’s long-held understanding that **insufficient or unstable funding, staffing shortages/burnout, and infrastructure gaps** are the major constraints. Respondents also emphasize that tribal libraries are not “just libraries.” They are cultural learning sites, language hubs, and community anchors—and many are trying to meet modern needs (technology, digital literacy, AI, e-books) with minimal capacity.

**1. FUNDING: THE CENTRAL CHALLENGE (STRENGTHENED WITH SURVEY EVIDENCE)**

Across the TLC survey snapshot, respondents repeatedly rated **insufficient or unstable funding** as urgent and described funding as the root cause behind staffing instability, program contraction, and limited visibility.

**What respondents said (anonymous excerpts):**

- A tribal library staff respondent described pulling back despite strong community commitment: “[We are] *doing the best to provide services... often doing [it] with less funding.*”
- A respondent from a community without a library emphasized the basic gap: “*We currently do not have a tribal library...*”
- A tribal academic library respondent flagged institutional de-prioritization: “*College administration putting less and less funding in library budgets...*”
- A tribal library staff respondent tied sustainability to federal support: “[We need] *securing the Basic Library Grant funds...*” and voiced concern about future cuts.

### Implication for the report:

A truthful “state of the field” must treat funding as the keystone issue - not a footnote. The survey supports ATALM’s position that many tribal libraries are operating on **minimal annual support** that cannot sustain staffing, facilities, technology, or long-term planning.

## 2. STAFFING & WORKFORCE (STRENGTHENED WITH SURVEY EVIDENCE)

Survey comments underline what ATALM hears consistently: staffing is fragile, often solo, and difficult to retain, especially in rural and remote communities.

### What respondents said:

- A rural Alaska respondent noted training exists but capacity does not: *“There is a vast mountain of training opportunities... There is not always the staff or funding to take advantage...”*
- Another respondent described visibility challenges linked to remoteness and limited support: *“We are very remote... I need some support and tools to help promote our library in our own community.”*
- Multiple respondents listed **workforce development, training, and certification** among TLC’s top priorities and end-of-2026 goals.

### Implication for the report:

Workforce development must include **retention reported by the field**: wages, benefits, job descriptions, staffing models for small libraries, and realistic PD pathways for one-person operations.

## 3. DIGITAL INEQUITIES, TECHNOLOGY, AND “AI ANXIETY”

TLC survey respondents frequently selected **digital access and technology support** as both a challenge and a priority—alongside a notable split: some want support for emerging tech, while at least one respondent expressed strong concern about AI’s harms.

### What respondents said:

- Several selected “AI, digital futures, and emerging technology” as a desired ATALM2026 programming topic.
- One respondent warned: *“AI needs to be eliminated somehow... it is a downfall for our youth and community...”*
- Another framed the need as integration and values: *“How can small, rural, tribal libraries ‘get with’ the ever-changing digital scene... while blending traditional beliefs with modern technology...”*
- A “quick win” recommendation called for a **Tribal Library Technology Services Toolkit** and regularized online gatherings.

### Implication for the report:

A realistic “state of the field” in 2025–26 must address:

- broadband/device gaps

- tech replacement cycles
- e-book platforms and subscription cost barriers
- digital literacy and safety
- AI literacy and community guidelines (including culturally grounded cautions)

#### 4. COMMUNITY RELEVANCE, YOUTH ENGAGEMENT, AND VISIBILITY (STRENGTHENED)

Even respondents who view tribal libraries as “strong and growing” warned about visibility, youth engagement, and staying relevant in a social-media-dominant environment.

##### What respondents said:

- *“Keeping websites updated is key to awareness.”*
- *“Good with departments but losing young adults and youth in reading.”*
- *“There is no interest in going to the library, it is all on social media for our younger generation.”*
- Public library allies emphasized gaps for Native patrons and called for stronger **tribal–public library relationships** and directories.

##### Implication for the report:

The state of tribal libraries is also a story about **public awareness, youth connection, and communications capacity**, which often requires staffing, training, and tools.

#### 5. WHAT GIVES THE FIELD HOPE

The survey reinforces that morale and possibility come from culture-forward work and collaboration—especially when supported by workforce investment.

Respondents most often pointed to hope in:

- Cultural revitalization efforts
- Community-driven programming
- Strengthening the workforce
- Collaboration across institutions
- (for some) new funding sources/partnerships and digital innovation

##### Implication for the report:

When funding and staffing stabilize, tribal libraries don’t merely “maintain service”—they expand cultural and community leadership.

#### 6. TLC PRIORITIES (2026) — GROUNDED DIRECTLY IN THE SURVEY

Across the survey responses, TLC’s priorities consistently cluster into a few shared, field-validated workstreams:

## **A. Funding strategy + sustainability (top-tier priority)**

What respondents are asking for:

- funding resource training (including IMLS and state grants)
- national funding strategy for investment needs
- advocacy to protect and strengthen federal support

### **Quick wins suggested by respondents:**

- funding/grant training for library staff who have never applied
- streamlined guidance for e-books/OverDrive and subscriptions

## **B. Workforce development, training, and certification**

Respondents want TLC to:

- build training pathways that fit small/solo libraries
- create mentorship and peer support structures
- strengthen leadership and career pathways

## **C. Advocacy and recognition (federal + tribal leadership)**

Respondents repeatedly emphasized:

- engagement with tribal leadership
- raising visibility of tribal libraries as essential services
- federal recognition and stable policy support

## **D. Toolkits, templates, and practical resources**

Respondents asked for:

- best practices developed collectively
- cataloging and Indigenous description approaches (beyond Dewey/LC)
- technology toolkits and practical guides

## **E. Peer networking and community support**

Respondents specifically requested:

- directories/listservs
- regular monthly online gatherings
- stronger cross-institution collaboration, including tribal–public library relationships

## 8. ATALM2026 Summit outcomes (integrated from survey)

Respondents prioritized outcomes that align strongly with the Masterplan build:

### Most desired Summit Protectable Outcomes (as framed by the survey options):

- a clear national vision for tribal libraries
- actionable policy and advocacy recommendations
- a prioritized 5-year implementation roadmap (2026–2031)
- a national funding strategy
- a workforce development/professional standards framework
- a shared model for community-led programming and cultural stewardship

### Preparation needs respondents called out for 2026:

- strong communication and involvement
- values grounding and inclusive input
- a working group structure with real capacity (“commitment” and staffing/time)

## Communications preferences

Respondents overwhelmingly selected **email updates**, with many also selecting **quarterly newsletters** and **Facebook groups**; at least one respondent requested **Instagram instead of Facebook**. This supports a multi-channel TLC communications plan anchored in email.