



STRATEGIC PLAN FY24-FY28

New Bedford Free Public Library
613 Pleasant Street
New Bedford, MA 02740
www.newbedford-ma.gov/library



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Message from the Library Director



It is my pleasure to present and share with you the FY2024-FY2028 Strategic Plan for the New Bedford Free Public Library, which was developed with resiliency and sustainability in mind. This plan builds off our previous plan, which had a focus on early literacy, reading, education and lifelong learning, being a community center and to provide equal access to print and digital information. We set out to engage users by expanding service programs, especially for those who did not understand or had access to technology. The objectives set out in the last plan were on target for achievement when in Spring of 2020 they were disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our library doors were closed to the public beginning on Tuesday, March 17th, 2020, and would not be reopened to full access for the public until Wednesday, June 15th, 2021. Our library, just as many others around the world did, had to reimagine public library services on the spot. There was no time to plan out a strategy other than to create a work plan that would allow individuals access to the library remotely. Libraries always seek ways to be innovative and flexible to meet the growing demand for more technology, spaces to gather and always with limited funding. Covid-19 contributed to this mission with the need to learn and utilize technology quickly to offer virtual story-hours, book club meetings, crafting sessions and more, all the while working inside the library buildings and available to our patrons during the listed business hours. Our doors may have been closed at all service outlets, but the New Bedford Free Public Library never closed.

I am proud of the way our library staff faced this challenge of service to our community when it had to be done through telephone, contactless pickup, learning and utilizing the new platform Zoom, along with our patrons, who were wanting to connect with someone while they were in isolation, and assisting Emergency Medical Services with distribution of masks and tests. A highlight of service during the pandemic closure was the two weeks of early voting for the 2020 Presidential election held at the Main Library. Over 5,000 community members were welcomed to cast their ballots at the main library.

As our services slowly change back to in-person, our community has steadily re-emerged to participate in programs, both for youth and adults, as noted by our increasing attendance numbers over this past year. We are at pre-pandemic service levels and see the trend continue to grow upwards as we provide in-person and remote services equally.

This plan is the framework for the library, which will serve as our guide over the next five years to ensure the library continues to thrive!

We want you to discover the world through us!

Thanks for reading,

Olivia Melo

Olivia Melo, Library Director



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of our patrons who participated in the numerous community focus groups held at all the (5) library locations and also the staff who trained for and facilitated these sessions. The information from these sessions were compiled and incorporated into this plan and we have woven our experience of the last few years to create a plan that reconnects us to each other and our community.

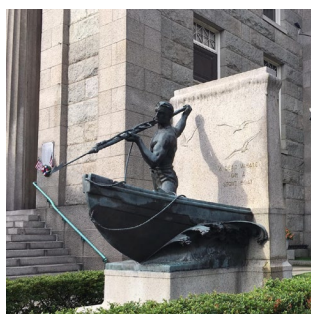
We would like to thank the Library Board of Trustees for their continued support:

- Mayor Jon Mitchell - Trustee Chair
- Diana Henry - Vice-Chair
- Lee Blake
- Carl J. Cruz
- Maria G. de Sa
- Kimberly Ferreira
- Elsie R. Fraga
- Ann R. O'Leary
- Helen Rogers

A special thank you to Mayor Jon Mitchell for sharing his thoughts and vision for the library and for his continued support of the New Bedford Library system as we embark on this second 5-year Strategic Plan under his administration.

We would also like to express our appreciation to Deb Hoadley from Hoadley Consulting, who facilitated our meetings, trained library staff to hold the community focus groups, led us through the planning process and consulted on the writing of this plan.

Library History and Statistical Information



The New Bedford Free Public Library is a municipal department in the city of New Bedford and maintains five locations throughout the city: the main library (located in the heart of downtown) and four branches (two in the south end, one in the west end, and one in the north end of the city). The library employs a total of 43 employees, which along with the Director include 11 professional level librarians, 18 full-time and 14 part-time support staff. Some staff, including the Director are bilingual in English and Portuguese, Spanish and Russian.

The main library is open a total of 64 hours per week. Three of the four branches are open 48 hours per week and include evening and Saturday hours. One branch is open 32 hours per week from Monday through Thursday and does not include evening or Saturday hours.

The Free Public Library was created by a city ordinance in 1852 and beginning in 1857, housed in the building now used as City Hall until 1910. Built as a City Hall in the 1830's, the present building was reconstructed after a fire in 1906. Once restoration was completed, the buildings switched permanently. It is believed the main library is one of the oldest libraries in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It holds a significant historical collection of whaling materials, early 19th century Quaker and Abolition Movement materials and a museum quality collection of art.

The Wilks, Howland-Green and Francis J. Lawler branches were built with funds left in trust to the library by Sylvia Ann Howland-Green Wilks, daughter of famous financier, Hetty Green. The Wilks branch was built first in 1958 and is in the north end of the city and has the second highest circulation after the main library.

The second branch to be built was the Lawler branch in 1960 located in the west end, followed by the Howland-Green branch in 1964 located in the south end of the city. In 1971, the Casa da Saudade branch was established with federal grant funds to meet the needs of the large Portuguese community in the city.

FY23 Statistical Highlights

Total Holdings	325,278
Annual circulation of physical items	164,985
Annual Circulation of downloadable items	63,130
Items loaned to other libraries	60,884
Items borrowed from other libraries	38,895
Total visitors	86,605
Total number of registered library cardholders	39,310
Adult Programs / Attendance	285 / 1,454
Youth Programs / Attendance	320 / 2,937
Internet Usage	12,322
Outreach & Partnership Programs / Attendance	71 / 2,726

Statistical Comparisons	FY17	Q4 FY23
Annual circulation of physical items	60,409	42,492
Annual Circulation of downloadable items	14,084	17,196
Adult Programs / Attendance	47/236	119 / 1,138
Youth Programs / Attendance	22/109	84 / 973

This FY2024-FY2028 plan is a continuance of the FY2018-FY2022 Strategic Plan which served as the foundation for the New Bedford Free Public Library's vision to be the primary place to go for materials, information, and educational support for all ages, to learn and teach each other in a safe and welcoming environment, to preserve local history, art and special collections for increased access, and to build an engaged and connected community. The metrics above indicate the growth in circulation and program attendance from a full fiscal year (2017) to a quarter in 2023.

Goals

- To create opportunities to stimulate imagination and creativity
- Be a lead provider to information and access to technology
- Build strategic partnerships and strengthen community engagement
- Invest library resources to support all ages

Keeping in line with these goals, from 2018 to 2022, the library accomplished the following things:

- Partnered with the Urban Libraries Council, the National Book Foundation and the Department of Housing & Urban Development to create Book Rich environments in Public Housing throughout the city. Over 28,000 books distributed over past 5 years.
- Reinstating Youth Services Librarian position.
- Branch hours restored to 48 per week after several years at 40.
- Establishing of a CreateLab area with LSTA funds to provide an area to create, learn and socialize in a welcoming environment.
- Digitizing of historical photographs, city and historical documents, whaling logbooks, all now accessible worldwide via Digital Commonwealth and internet Archive.



New Bedford Demographics

Total Population	2010	2020
	95,072	101,079

Racial Make-up

- White – 60.6%
- Black or African American - 6.1%
- Hispanic or Latino – 23.1%
- White alone, not Hispanic or Latino – 58%

Foreign born persons, percent 2017-2021-**19.9%**

Language other than English spoken at home, ages 5 years+, 2017-2021 - **37.7%**

New Bedford Free Public Library's Role in the City Government's Mission and Goals

The Library has a significant role in meeting the city government's mission and goals. They are reflected in the Library's Strategic Plan in the following areas:

1. Provide educational and learning opportunities for all ages *(1.2)*
 2. Increase public awareness of library services *(1.3)*
 3. Evaluate the library organizational structure, including the branch services for consolidation/expansion *(1.5)*
 4. Create community connections by offering diverse and inclusive programming focusing on art, creativity, culture, and history *(2.3)*
 5. Support workforce and economic development in partnership with other city organizations *(3.4)*
-

City of New Bedford

City Government's Mission Statement, Organizational Goal, and Strategies

Fiscal Year 2024 provides us with the framework of a city government mission statement, organizational goal and strategies that serve as a policy guide for the physical, cultural, and economic growth of our city. - a means of translating our city's values into actions.

New Bedford City Government's Mission Statement

New Bedford is the economic, cultural and political center of Southeastern Massachusetts; a city that is taken seriously beyond its region; a city where every resident has the opportunity to pursue the American Dream; a city with a highly professional, caring, and efficient city government that commands the confidence of taxpayers; and a city where residents take responsibility for their neighborhoods and their neighbors.

New Bedford City Government's Organizational Goal

The overarching goal of our city government is to enable New Bedford to become a city of choice; that is, we provide municipal services in ways and to a degree that will make it more likely that people will choose to live here.

New Bedford City Government's Strategies to Achieve Its Mission

1. Municipal Services That Enable the City of Thrive
 - 1.1. Provide effective and even-handed public safety and emergency services that maintain safety and order and command the public's trust and confidence.
 - 1.2. Support educational opportunity from Pre-K through workforce development to enable residents to compete in a global economy and empower them as citizens.

- 1.3. Strengthen connection with residents to promote civic engagement, improve services, and promote organizational legitimacy.
- 1.4. Facilitate the provision of quality housing and basic services for those in need to ensure healthy and viable neighborhoods of choice.
- 1.5. Continue to modernize city government and drive operational improvement to ensure residents enjoy the benefit of superior, cost-effective, and timely services.

2. A Cherished City

- 2.1. Ensure a clean, well-designed, properly maintained public realm that projects a sense of order and reflects a citizenry that cherishes its city.
- 2.2. Reinforce resident and business responsibility for the maintenance and design of both private and public realms through fair and effective code enforcement.
- 2.3. Exalt the city's sense of place and collective identity by celebrating its history, culture and art in all their facets.
- 2.4. Reinforce the city's status as the economic and cultural center of the region by bolstering existing anchor institutions and developing new ones.

3. A Successful Economic Competitor

- 3.1. Nurture a healthy relationship with the private sector to build a diversified and inclusive regional economy that offers opportunity for everyone who seeks it.
- 3.2. Advance pro-growth initiatives that create career opportunities and expand the city's tax base by leveraging Greater New Bedford's inherent economic advantages to attract and retain capital.
- 3.3. Sustain the city's commitment to routinely reinvesting in itself.
- 3.4. Promote entrepreneurship by providing small business supports, leveraging networks, and lowering the barriers to capital.
- 3.5. Pursue opportunities that will attract visitors to the city for tourism, hospitality and convening.

4. Resilience to All Hazards

- 4.1. Maintain a stable long-term financial base to sustain quality municipal services by employing best governance practices and promoting sound fiscal policies at every level of government.
- 4.2. Ensure a timely and effective short-term and long-term response to natural disasters, public health crises, and other citywide emergencies to save lives, protect property, and preserve the environment.
- 4.3. Promote the development, adoption, and evaluation of evidence-based strategies and programs to reduce health and socioeconomic inequities for the city's most vulnerable populations.
- 4.4. Protect the city's natural environment as stewards of our land, air, and water, and continue to deploy climate mitigation and adaption tactics to sustain our resources for future generations.

Planning Process and Methodology

The New Bedford Free Public Library embarked on developing their new strategic plan for FY24-FY28 beginning in April 2022. Staff and Trustee meetings were held with Deb Hoadley from Hoadley Consulting. In both meetings, the S.O.A.R. (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results) related to the library was done, as well as a discussion about the city's challenges, issues and vision for the future. An interview with Christina Connelly, Chief Operating Officer, City of New Bedford | Mayors' office was also conducted as well offering insights to the opportunities and future direction of the city.

As part of the information gathering process, key staff managers were asked to participate in an all-day facilitation workshop so they could conduct their own focus groups. This was in an attempt to be more inclusive and have greater diversity in the people the library staff engaged with during their conversations.

During the focus groups, two key questions were asked:

- 1. How does the library play a role in your community?**
- 2. What do you need in a library? (Now and in the future) What does this library look like to you?**

There were eight (8) staff facilitated focus groups. In some cases, small groups of people were asked to participate at a scheduled time. Staff also did more informal one-on-one interviews with patrons. Participants were from each branch and various departments at the Main Library. A summary of the responses can be found in the Appendix.

A Community Forum was also held in August 2022 at the Lawler Branch. This was open to the entire community. While this was a small group, they had a lot of input as to what a "healthy community" looks like and the challenges and issues facing the city of New Bedford now, and what their aspirations would be if they were given the resources to fund them.

After the focus groups were conducted, a survey was created. There were 284 responses. The responses were mainly from library users (95%) and the majority of the responders visit the Main Library downtown (40%). An overview of the results can be found in the Appendix A.

It is important to note some ongoing concerns related to the pandemic during the initial information-gathering period. During the all Staff meeting, it was the first time staff had met in person as a group to discuss the process for the plan and they had a lot of uncertainty for the days ahead due to the pandemic. Discussions included concerns about staff and the public's health safety being in public spaces after re-opening the library. The low turnout at the community forums indicated a continued discomfort from our patrons

regarding public spaces. It was evident that developing a framework of service, given the circumstances beyond our control, and still very much in our minds, would not result in a document that would guide us over the next five years.

Library Director, Olivia Melo, and Consultant, Deb Hoadley, met to discuss the results of all the information gathered to develop a plan for FY23 - FY27 for submission in January 2023 to the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners. In reviewing the responses, it was determined they correlated more to an emergence out of the pandemic than to lead us to grow from our last plan. It was a mutual decision to table the plan until more data and metrics could be compiled as we were in fact, continuing with goals & objectives of the FY18-FY22 plan, having picked up our service priorities on June 15, 2021 where we left off on March 17, 2020.



With data collected from FY23 program statistics, as reported to the Mayor's Office, waiting to resume the strategic plan was the correct decision. For example, data gathered from the Quarterly Reports show the progression of services, and how patrons began feeling more confident in coming back into all the library buildings.

Here we look at specifically the number of programs and attendance:

In-person programs for adults in Q1 (7/1-9/30) - 84 programs with 386 attending

Q4 (4/1-6/30) - 119 programs with 1,138 attending

Program offerings increased, resulting in more than doubled attendance in the library!

In-person programs for youth

Q1 (7/1-9/30) - 49 programs with 479 attending

Q4 (4/1-6/30) - 84 programs with 973 attending

As with programs for adults, the programming schedule increased, and this resulted in more than double the attendance at children's programs across all branches.



The Board of Library Trustees reviewed the draft plan in August and approved the plan at the September 26th meeting in time to be submitted to the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners (MBLC) on October 1, 2023.

Assessment of Community Needs

As mentioned above, community members had a chance to participate in the Community Forum; Library Staff facilitated Focus Groups/Interviews and the Strategic Planning Survey. It is estimated that over 500 people participated in total.

Based on the feedback gathered, here are the highlights of what people said about the library.

What is going well and what area(s) does the library most excel?

- Selection and availability of reading materials both in print and online
- Variety and access of resources available
- Staff is helpful, friendly and knowledgeable
- Diverse programs for adults and youth
- Integration of newcomers to the community
- Unique items to borrow through the Funbrary; also the mobile hotspots
- Digitization of historical collections and the expanded access worldwide
- Partnerships and collaborations with other organizations and institutions
- Seen as a “cultural heritage institution”
- Stronger social media and email communication raising awareness of what the library offers.
- “Continue serving our community with the richness of learning through independent reading and the enrichment of our community and neighbors”

What is the community asking for and what area(s) does the library need to improve?

- Patrons have equitable access to the same resources at all the library locations
- Complete digitization projects and make them available to the public
- Celebrate people in the community and showcase what they do
- Outreach to the schools and neighborhoods
- Look at diversification of the collection; more materials in different languages
- Communication with the schools; teacher engagement
- More diverse staff to match ethnicity shift in demographics
- Increase and provide a wider variety of programs for adults; offer at different times
- Address safety concerns and provide more welcoming and inviting entrance in certain locations
- Increase patron engagement through collection suggestions and providing expertise for presentations to the public

Where should the library be going in the future and what does your dream/ideal library look like?

- Thoughtfully designed spaces for people to do a variety of things (read, study, meet with others).

- Create partnerships to provide services to patrons outside the traditional library services (social work, health, workplace development, tech skills, etc.)
- More outreach to underserved populations
- Recognize importance of art and historical collections and make them an integral part of the library
- Preserve the history of the people in the community; humanity focus
- Utilize and improve outdoor spaces at all library locations for programs and activities for all ages
- Current and emerging technology where staff can train patrons on how to use it
- Market the library services and all it has to offer
- City supports and values the library
- Patrons feel an ownership in the library through engagement and opportunities to showcase them
- Relationship with higher education institutions will be stronger
- "New Bedford Free Public Library is a place where all are welcome and staff are there to help everyone!"
- **"It's a free pass to the world and beyond!"**

What are some issues or challenges living in New Bedford and how can the library help?

- Computers and technology
- Workforce development and skills
- Senior activities and ways to combat isolation and loneliness
- Youth activities to encourage less screen time
- Increase literacy skills for all ages
- Lifelong learning opportunities
- Opportunities to learn about the history of New Bedford
- Coordinating communication efforts across the city
- Welcoming immigrants and keeping cultural integrity

What factors contribute to a "healthy community" and what are the benefits for the community?

- City departments working together; building partnerships with organizations, businesses and schools
- Compassion and helping one another
- Culturally sensitive
- Welcoming
- Promotes city's history and provides opportunities to celebrate pride in city
- People don't want to move out; invested in the community
- Self-accountability and ownership by citizens
- Tourists are central to the city and want to visit

Strategic Plan FY24-FY28

Mission

New Bedford Free Public Library provides free and equitable access to services for all ages and promotes access to knowledge, experience, information and ideas in welcoming, safe spaces.

Vision

New Bedford Free Public Library will provide vibrant and attractive places for all ages in safe, well-maintained and accessible facilities where everyone can access library services and resources through outreach, partnerships, and digital channels all provided by efficient, well-trained library staff.

Strategic Priorities

These priorities reflect the need to reflect the diverse needs of the community and provide equitable access to all library materials, services and programs.

1. Community connections and outreach
2. Public spaces
3. Digital inclusion and literacy
4. Workforce development
5. Excellent public service

Goals

1. Provide diverse, cultural and educational opportunities for all ages.
2. Create vibrant, accessible, inclusive spaces that are flexible and sustainable.
3. Expand digital access and technology skills for everyone.
4. Build pathways for workforce and economic development.
5. Invest and equip staff with knowledge and tools to deliver exceptional customer experiences in an ever-changing environment.

Goal 1: Provide diverse, cultural and educational opportunities for all ages.

- Expand community outreach and engagement through the new mobile library vehicle providing services and programs throughout the city.
- Develop community connections by offering diverse and inclusive opportunities for art, creativity, culture and history.

- Open Main Library 3rd floor exhibit space to artists and community groups to share their stories.
- Create marketing materials and awareness campaigns to promote the library services and programs effectively and efficiently.

Goal 2: Create vibrant, accessible, inclusive spaces that are flexible and sustainable.

- Evaluate the organization's branch services for consolidation/expansion.
- Investigate sustainable options and opportunities for all the buildings.
- Maintain and expand efforts for accessibility throughout each building, including both exterior and interior spaces.

Goal 3: Expand digital access and technology skills for everyone.

- Update technology infrastructure, including expansion of Wi-Fi.
- Digitize collections for online public access.
- Provide technology training for all ages.

Goal 4: Build pathways for workforce and economic development.

- Partner with other city organizations to provide resources and networks to strengthen entrepreneurial enterprise.
- Continue providing service to patrons seeking employment opportunities.
- Partner with the Massachusetts Trial Court System to offer virtual court access through the Access to Justice program.

Goal 5: Invest and equip staff with knowledge and tools to deliver exceptional customer experiences in an ever-changing environment.

- Provide opportunities for staff to gain advocacy and outreach skills needed to increase public awareness of library services.
- Staff will develop and implement new outreach opportunities to engage residents throughout the city utilizing the new mobile library vehicle.
- Create opportunities for staff to use their strengths in a variety of ways to enhance customer experiences for patrons.

Appendix A

Summary of the New Bedford Free Public Library Survey

Total responses = 284

Q1: If you visit the library, which location do you visit?

Main Library (downtown)	39.35%
Lawler Branch	25.27%
Wilks Branch	23.47%
Casa da Saudade Branch	6.86%
Howland-Green Branch	5.05%

Q2: How often do you visit the New Bedford Free Public Library (any of the locations)?

1-2 times per month	51.99%
3-4 times per month	22.02%
5 or more times per month	11.55%
I do not visit the library at all	5.42%
I only use the library's digital resources and online programs	9.03%

Q3: If you answered that you visit the library, what do you usually do? Please check all that apply.

Borrow books, magazines, DVDs, other materials	81.05%
Work, read or relax	24.60%
Visit special collections and exhibits	20.97%
Seek specific information on a topic	19.76%
Attend a children's program or visit the children's area	18.55%
Use a public computer, printer or fax	16.94%
Attend an adult program	13.71%
Use the free Wi-Fi	13.31%
Attend a meeting	11.29%
Use a study room	9.27%
Opportunity to meet other people, share an experience, learn something new	9.27%
Get help with technology	7.26%

Q4: If you didn't visit or use the library resources in the past year, what prevents you from visiting? Please check all that apply.

I use ebooks and digital resources	26.27%
I fell out of the habit of visiting	25.42%
Covid concerns	24.58%
No time	18.64%
I use another library (school, college, other neighboring public library)	13.56%

I buy my own books, magazines, DVDs, etc.	12.71%
Inconvenient hours	9.32%
I can't get there easily	4.24%
I don't feel safe at the library	3.39%
Doesn't have what I need	.85%

Q5: How do you learn about library events and services?

Library email newsletter	67.14%
Library website	33.93%
Flyers or brochures in the library	26.07%
Facebook	20.00%
Word of mouth	17.14%
Newspaper	8.93%

Q6: We want to know more about your needs and wants. Please check off any of the following things you are interested in doing.

Learning to do something new (learning a language, a craft, cooking, art, etc.)	73.98%
Learning something new (taking a class, attending a lecture	73.17%
Meeting other people who share the same interest or to experience something together (book discussion, social, travel, etc.)	40.24%
Opportunity to do something (volunteer, community project, social change)	39.02%

Q7: What three words would you use to describe the library?

Here are the top words:

- Friendly
- Helpful
- Community space
- Welcoming
- Informative
- Resources
- Free
- Educational
- "Quiet, calm and peaceful"

Q8: In what area(s) does the library most excel?

Here are the top categories:

- Collection development – great selection; up-to-date; access; online collection, and interlibrary loan
- Customer service – staff (helpful, friendly, knowledgeable)
- Historic information and resources

- Access and availability of resources
- Programs

Q9: in what area(s) could the library improve?

Here are the top categories:

- Adult programs (variety, different times, citizenship classes)
- Adult literacy
- Patron engagement – collection suggestions; program suggestions; experts to speak; volunteers)
- Promotion of what is going on at the library
- Homeless issue
- Hours

Q10: What is a problem or challenge in your life or in New Bedford that you wish the library could help you with?

Here are the top categories:

- Technology
- Community engagement
- Programs
- Youth
- Historical collection & resources
- Workforce skills
- Senior issues

Q11: What do you wish you could borrow from the library rather than having to buy?

Here are the top items:

- Tools
- Musical instruments
- Technology aids
- Art supplies
- Video games
- Streaming services

Q12: Is there anything else you would like to share?

- Lots of appreciation for what the library does for the community
- Amazing resource
- Great staff
- Look at diversity of the community and host variety of programs to reflect the people living in New Bedford now
- Library on wheels to reach more of the community
- More vibrant spaces