

What's Keeping Public Library Trustees Up at Night?

by Deborah A. Clark and Jenny Melvin Smith

ABSTRACT

Maine public library boards take on the crucial responsibility of overseeing the functioning and sustainability of our local libraries. These trustee volunteers guide their organizations' services and ensure their financial sustainability. In a recent survey conducted, we found these library trustees are greatly concerned with maintaining adequate funding to address increased community, facility, and staffing challenges. Most community libraries are funded entirely at the local level. As our public libraries strive to meet the expanding social, educational, health, and economic needs of community members, Maine residents must find innovative ways to provide consistent direct state and federal funding to support these service organizations without adding to their already over-burdened operations.

libraries receive no direct state or federal aid. This leaves many small and rural libraries vulnerable to uncertain municipal budgeting and too many library boards over-burdened with fundraising just to maintain minimum operations. Library trustees tell us their organizations need more support in the forms of community advocacy and dependable local funding. Public libraries should also be able to rely on direct state aid and expanded state and federal partnership funding programs to meet the increasing social demands being made of them as essential community support institutions.

PUBLIC LIBRARY TRUSTEES AND THE MAINE LIBRARY LANDSCAPE

In Maine, public library governing and advisory boards take on the crucial responsibility of overseeing the functioning and sustainability of our local libraries. They generously donate their time to ensure public libraries succeed in their mission to provide quality educational resources and services aligned with the goals and needs of their communities. Meeting this mission has become increasingly difficult in the last few years as Maine libraries respond to increased social pressures such as homelessness, food insecurity, population influx, mental illness, substance use, and climate change. Add to that a recent pandemic, book banning attempts, rising costs, budget cuts, staffing shortages, aging trustees, never-ending building maintenance, and constant fundraising, and it is easy to understand why our local library stewards are not sleeping so well. The expanding need of Maine residents for access, education, and connection are falling on public libraries, and trustees and municipal officials are struggling to grow library capacity for the areas they serve.

Public libraries in Maine generally fall into two categories, private nonprofit 501(c)(3) organizations (56 percent) or municipal libraries (44 percent), both of which are funded mainly through local municipal appropriations, donations, endowments, and fundraising. Maine's public

THE SURVEY

To understand the top community and organizational issues for library leadership, we sent online questionnaires to all 257 Maine library governing and advisory boards.¹ Over a third of the boards, representing libraries from all 16 Maine counties with equitable representation of libraries north and south of Augusta, completed the survey. Over half of the respondents have served as library trustees for more than six years. The survey asked trustees about which community needs most influence development of services and programs at their libraries and which organizational needs concern them most. We also asked board members to rank their financial priorities for library development.

The majority of library trustees across the state reported increased community need for social safety nets, lack of sustainable funding, aging facilities and lack of space, and increased director turnover as factors greatly hindering libraries' ability to fulfill their missions. One survey respondent wrote, "keeping our library open to the public is a concern." Board members are worried about the negative impact of these factors on collections, programming, use of library space, and staff quality. They warn that if libraries in Maine do not receive increased funding and support, they will be unable to provide the services and resources their users have come to expect.

TOP CONCERNS FOR PUBLIC LIBRARY TRUSTEES

- increasing community needs
- lack of sustainable funding
- facility needs
- staff turnover and retention

When asked about the top organizational concerns for the board, one Maine trustee commented, “fundamentally, money.”

INCREASED COMMUNITY SOCIAL SERVICES NEEDS AND PUBLIC LIBRARY RESPONSE

Traditionally, public libraries have been learning centers where people can inform themselves on a variety of topics, where they can read and study and bring their children to prepare them for school or receive homework help. Through our years of consulting work with Maine’s public libraries, we have observed these essential local institutions evolve into community centers of social support where people can connect to online resources and assistance services, work remotely, and find a safe place to be during times of personal need or community crisis. Both educational and social support needs were listed in the trustee survey as major influences for development of library services. One board member noted, “the library has shouldered an increasing amount of social service work as the lack of affordable housing has translated into a growing number of unhoused neighbors.”

Libraries are experiencing increased demands on their staff, space, and services as societal pressures and economic challenges drive longtime and new Mainers to seek help with job hunting, access to technology, training in digital literacy, assistance with immigration issues, or help with tax preparation. Libraries are also serving as centers for socialization, sites for addressing food insecurity, and warming or cooling refuges. Libraries are filling service gaps that government and nonprofit agencies cannot fully provide, as stand-in career centers, homeless shelters, census filing and voter registration places, and emergency “second responder” support hubs (Epstein 2017).

When we asked trustees about the nontraditional ways their libraries were responding to changing community needs, more than 80 percent mentioned offering or planning to offer a *library of things*, which can include museum passes, sewing machines, tools, seeds, sports equipment, musical instruments, games, telescopes, internet hotspots, and laptops. Most respondents also plan to offer remote workspaces, videoconferencing, and in-person meetings.

Additional library services mentioned, in order of response rate, included

- social gathering (crafting, gardening, memory cafes, support groups);
- outreach services (bookmobile, home delivery, daycare story times, recovery center delivery);
- health and wellness activities (StoryWalks, adult exercise, cooking classes, nutrition education programs, food pantries);
- arts and culture events (exhibits, local history and genealogy, dances, art classes, music concerts);
- technology and digital literacy support (in the library and at home); and
- environmental sustainability services and programs (EV charging, pollinator garden, e-bike lending, climate change discussions).

One board member reported several ways their library supports the local community:

We are so proud of our Food Cupboard that is in our library. Anyone can help themselves to our library community food cupboard. [And,] any student aged 10 and up can use the “Free Time Club” which is basically a place for students who hang out with friends after school....Finally, we also offer the Wishing Dove tree during the holiday. This is for families and our senior citizens...who let us know if they need a little help...[They] will get...wrapped items during the holidays.

Another trustee described how their library stepped in when the community’s local internet/email company was sold and the new company dropped email service. The library provided technical assistance for the whole community to transition to a new email provider and established “Tech Tuesdays” to provide ongoing support.

Today, people need connection to online resources, to economic opportunities, to social services, and to each other. Libraries are providing support and access, networking, and sanctuary for our vulnerable neighbors such as older adults, veterans, struggling families, rural residents, and new Mainers. Libraries serve as places where everyone can come and build better lives for themselves.

Maine public libraries can offer a wider scope of services to better meet expanding community needs and reach people new to their communities to help them settle in, but libraries can't do it alone. Although libraries often collaborate with other community groups and nonprofit organizations for special projects and events, continually increasing need requires more sustainable solutions. That's when municipal governments and state and federal agencies must work together to subsidize the valuable work being done by libraries at the local level.

LACK OF SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

Maintaining adequate funding is a perennial concern for libraries across Maine. Seventy-two percent of the survey's respondents listed funding as a top concern, and one of them commented,

As board chair, I am concerned about the long-term financial sustainability of the library. We need to strengthen our own annual fund/friend drive, reach a more solid understanding among taxpayers and elected officials about the value of the library and what an appropriate level of annual funding might look like and grow our board directed reserves/endowment...to create a sustainable draw to support operations.

That's a lot to expect of a small group of part-time volunteers who are trying to ensure library services stay relevant to changing communities.

With rising costs and increased demands from their users, libraries are experiencing budget pressures. Many municipalities are flat-funding or cutting funding of their libraries at the same time patrons are asking for more library services and personal assistance. In addition to responding to community socioeconomic needs, libraries are facing increased requests to a wider variety of educational materials such as e-books, e-audiobooks, streaming services, and informational databases. Many libraries are also seeing an increase in library usage with large spikes during the summer months from seasonal visitors, immigrants, independent contractors, and entrepreneurs, with traveling workers stopping in to use coworking and telehealth spaces. One trustee told us, "we are a rural library, but our population swells dramatically in the summer. We struggle with isolation in the winter months—the library is a warm and welcoming place for our citizens." Also, the continually rising cost of books and materials has proved challenging for libraries to meet the reading needs of patrons. Book prices have seen a dramatic increase over the last five years. Children's books have gone from an average

of \$15.00 to \$20.00, an increase of 30 percent. The average price for an adult hardcover best seller now costs the library \$29.00 (Jensen 2023).

A Brief Overview of Current Funding for Public Libraries

Federal funding for libraries is distributed via the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA). States receive annual grants for library development based on population at the rate of \$1 per capita, so states like Maine that are large geographically but with low population are not as well supported. In Maine, LSTA funds are used by the Maine State Library to provide statewide shared services for local libraries such as interlibrary loan requesting, van delivery of materials, outreach services for those with disabilities, and digital resources including cloudLibrary and the Digital Maine Library. However, Maine's federal grant does not cover all of these costs, so the Maine State Library uses some of its state budget monies and funding from academic partners like the University of Maine System and Colby, Bates, and Bowdoin Colleges.

Maine is one of only eleven states that do not provide direct state funding to local libraries. Because of this, the Maine State Library also allocates some of its federal and state funding to support additional statewide services, scholarships, and professional guidance to local libraries. These funds support leadership training for library personnel, continuing education sessions for trustees, consulting services for library directors, and special library development projects. One trustee commented, "Support from the Maine State Library...is very important to the operation of our library. Guidance provided in the form of trustee education, director communication and conferences are invaluable."

Maine public libraries are mostly funded at the local level through property taxes and fundraising and endowments. Regardless of their governance structure, 98 percent of Maine public libraries receive some municipal funds to support library operations. The *Maine Public Library Statistics* data² showed a median municipal appropriation of \$43,400 for FY 2023. This amount covered an average of 63 percent of operating expenses, leaving library boards needing to fundraise an average of \$66,506 per library just to keep the doors open. In fact, in FY 2023, 30 percent of libraries reported flat funding from their municipalities with 9 percent reporting budget cuts ranging from less than 1 percent to 40 percent. And even though Maine public libraries received an average increase

of 3.4 percent in municipal funding, to match the general inflation rate,³ their budgets were unable to cover the even higher cost increases of materials, utilities, and insurance, along with the modest 5.8 percent average increase Maine library directors saw in their wages. This maintain-the-status-quo approach does not support growth and expansion, much less allow boards to save for capital facility upgrades or prepare for emergencies. As one trustee explained, “securing sustainable funding is a top concern because it impacts so many of the other [organizational needs] listed, especially growing the staff.”

Besides annual fundraising appeals and events, many libraries search for grants to augment their operating budgets and finance capital improvements. Maine-based foundations like the Stephen and Tabitha King Foundation and Maine Community Foundation have been generous supporters of local libraries, but they cannot perpetually fill operating budget deficits or substitute as budget reserves. Grants are meant to address a specific problem or need such as piloting services for a new target group, innovating energy-saving solutions, or developing effective emergency response plans, though we have seen some libraries with no programming budgets try to compensate for that gap with repeated small grant applications. Occasionally, library advocates attempt to pass municipal bonds or initiate capital campaigns to pay for major library improvements. These fundraising drives require tremendous time and effort with no guarantee of success. Small library organizations often have difficulty mobilizing and sustaining the operations needed to achieve these long-term fundraising activities.

We asked trustees which areas of their library budgets needed increased funding support. They ranked their organizational funding priorities as needing more sustainable funding for

1. facility and equipment upgrades for building expansions, renovations, ADA access and accommodations;
2. staffing to attract qualified job candidates, retain current staff, and add new workers to cover additional evening and weekend hours requested by patrons;
3. programming to offer a wider variety of programs and services to meet diverse community member needs; and
4. technology, digital resources to support changing job skills requirements, entrepreneurship, and specialized informational needs

While analyzing survey responses, we found that some libraries were “very fortunate to have strong donor and community support,” though many shared a sentiment similar to one trustee who said, “Funding is always an issue. [We are] currently dealing with a very old building and a lack of concern from our town council. Budget constraints in other town areas take precedence over [the] library.” Because small groups of volunteers can become overwhelmed and small and rural Maine towns have a limited tax base, we should work toward developing a wider funding base for Maine libraries so they can remain open and expand needed services. State aid to local public libraries could help alleviate some of these financial burdens on municipalities while state agencies could help small and rural libraries with grant writing support. As one trustee said, “Our Board feels that rural libraries in Maine are very important to our communities. Funding is our number one issue. We don’t always have the tax dollars for what we need.”

FACILITY MAINTENANCE AND UPGRADES

When we inquired about specific organizational challenges, trustees reported that facility maintenance (61 percent) and space needs (57 percent) were their greatest concerns. Almost half of Maine’s public libraries were established before 1916 (Norman 2013). Many of these buildings are still being used as libraries today, sometimes with various additions tacked on over the years. Older buildings are usually more costly to operate and maintain, stressing library budgets and reserves. Plus, building additions often make heating, cooling, and maintenance of the facility even more challenging. On top of that, approximately half of Maine’s pre-1916 libraries are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, meaning that any materials, repairs, or renovations must conform to the original building design. The elevated costs for historic building preservation along with increases in the cost of construction materials since the COVID-19 pandemic overburden libraries undertaking needed capital improvements.

In addition to yearly upkeep, a third of Maine libraries reported in their 2023 annual report their facilities were either currently undergoing renovations or building an addition (24 libraries) or planning some type of building construction or renovations for the near future (61 libraries). While these construction projects can include basic facility upkeep and minor projects such as replacing

roofs and repointing brick facades, many facility upgrades involve adding new spaces because the community's needs have outgrown the library's physical capacity. Maine libraries are trying to add large programming spaces, private community meeting rooms, updated youth services spaces, ADA accommodations, and remote workspace mostly through fundraising, capital campaigns, municipal bonds, and grants.

Finally, our public libraries are incorporating more green design elements such as LED lighting, heat pumps, solar panels, and other energy-efficient and environmentally friendly features to reduce their carbon footprints. Library directors and trustees often ask us if we know of any grant sources for this type of facility upgrade. Additionally, grant writing is especially burdensome for Maine's many rural libraries. These smaller organizations often lack the staff, time, or experienced volunteers to undertake grant applications, much less to manage major construction projects. Until government and nonprofit grant processes are streamlined and simplified so more low-capacity libraries can take advantage of them, subsidies for dedicated library grant writers, grant process navigators, and building project managers could provide vital support for smaller libraries to be able to access this important funding.

Communities outgrow their public libraries just as they outgrow their schools. Both of these local educational institutions deserve state-supported supplemental financial backing for planning, materials, and construction of expanded facilities. With a shared mission of supporting democracy through public education and ensuring safe, equitable spaces for children and adults to learn and create, we see an expanded role for state government to partner with local municipalities to more adequately fund public library construction as they now do for public schools.

LIBRARY STAFFING AND BOARD BURNOUT

In the last five years, Maine libraries have experienced a dramatic turnover in library directors. The ability of library boards to hire and retain experienced library directors has become a major obstacle for our 257 public libraries. To date, the Maine State Library tracked 215 director changes since 2019. Twenty-three percent of those directors resigned within one year of being hired and 58 percent left within five years of taking the job. The top reasons noted for director departures were retirements, leaving for jobs outside library work, and

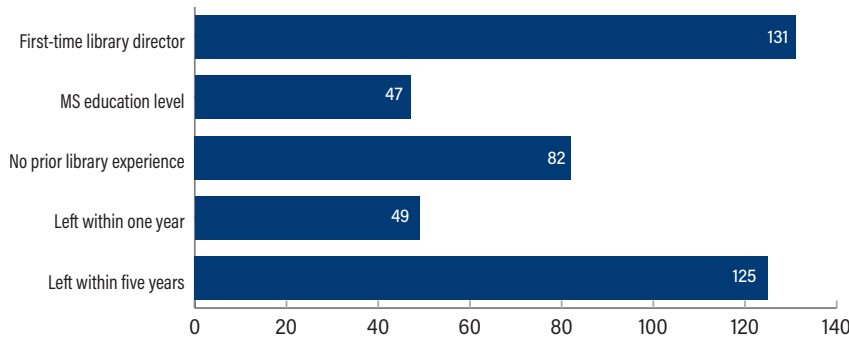
accepting positions at other libraries. Factors reported as important in directors' decisions to leave their positions were low pay, part-time hours, lack of benefits, no support staff, unrealistic job expectations, compassion fatigue and burnout, age, and dealing with community controversies such as censorship attempts.

Of directors hired since 2019, 61 percent were first-time public library directors and only 22 percent have a master's degree in library and information science. A surprising 39 percent had no prior library experience. Many directors reported that when they were hired, they were not fully aware of the demands of the job and the level of knowledge and skill that was required. One trustee remarked, "We are most concerned about retaining the wonderful staff we have in place and making sure they feel safe, supported, recognized and compensated." Retaining staff will continue to be a major challenge for boards if aspiring library managers cannot access affordable higher education degree programs in librarianship and then do not earn a wage that is commensurate with the skills, knowledge, and responsibilities a public library director position requires.

According to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Living Wage Calculator,⁴ a full-time employed person with no children must earn \$22.04 per hour to support themselves in Maine. Fifty-three percent of library directors in Maine make less than this amount while working an average of 18.4 hours a week, with 19 percent making less than \$20 per hour. Sixty-two percent of libraries do not offer any form of medical insurance or retirement plan. The inability of Maine libraries to pay a livable wage and offer benefits means that many library directors are retired from other jobs, inexperienced, or work other jobs to make ends meet. In addition, the lack of support staff leads to more director stress and burnout (Newman 2024). Fifty-one percent of libraries have two or fewer paid staff (34 percent of libraries have a staff consisting of a sole director), which compounds the problem. It is difficult for a one- or two-person library to meet the ever-changing needs of the community while dealing with the demands of managing a building and collections and providing staff coverage and services. One former library worker remarked "There is pure exhaustion...from the sheer amount of diverse emotional labor that staff are being asked to perform day after day, without training or education in the areas that were new to them" (Dixon 2022).

Some of these same factors leading to increased library director turnover are also making it difficult for library organizations to recruit and retain board members.

FIGURE 1: **Education, Experience, and Tenure of the 215 Director Changes in Maine Public Libraries since 2019**



Of the trustee survey respondents, 28 percent have been serving on their boards for more than 10 years. We have observed that most of library trustees currently serving are of retirement age. As trustees age out of board service, whether due to fundraising fatigue, health issues, board dysfunction, or increasing demands on their time, it has also become more difficult to recruit younger members to succeed them. One trustee mentioned, “I believe our biggest concerns are recruiting board members, recruiting members for the Friends organization, and recruiting volunteers. I think we are suffering from what many organizations dependent upon volunteers are: people don’t have time.”

Funding for formal library worker education and trustee certification could help alleviate library staff turnover. Increased scholarships for library information science programs (such as the University of Maine at Augusta offers) could lead to more qualified library workers and higher-paying job opportunities, with an attitude toward library work as a respected profession rather than a low-wage, part-time job. The Maine State Library could work with the Maine Community College System or the Maine Association of Nonprofits to create a certification program on library trustee management to better prepare library board members. Local libraries need budgets that can attract and retain degreed and experienced library directors and staff. They need to be able to compete for and develop skilled employees and volunteers to professionally manage their community libraries. Increased local and state funding to develop and hire more knowledgeable staff and attract skilled volunteers would ensure Maine libraries are able to operate efficiently and effectively into the future.

STRATEGIES FOR PUBLIC LIBRARY SUSTAINABILITY AND GROWTH

Northeastern University scholar Daniel P. Aldrich recognized, “To face the challenges that are coming, we must come together and work collectively. It may be our libraries—and our social infrastructure—that can help save us” (Aldrich 2023: 9). And indeed, Maine’s public library boards and directors are doing the hard work of restructuring library services to adapt and support their diverse and growing communities. This work, however, has led to excessive strain on our library organizations. Through surveying Maine’s public library trustees, we learned the following:

1. Local libraries are seeing increased need for educational, social, and economic support for community members.
2. Library facilities are outdated, undersized, and becoming more expensive to maintain and expand.
3. Boards are having difficulty attracting and retaining qualified staff and volunteers to keep their libraries functioning.
4. Many local library budgets are inadequate to sustain and expand library services.

The current approach to funding public libraries at the local level is inadequate and unsustainable for many rural communities. It is past time we develop new supplemental library funding streams before Maine loses these valuable public institutions to neglect.

We need a more collaborative and sustainable approach to fund public libraries to ensure they are able to support Maine residents and help communities become desirable places to live and do business. Possible solutions such as restructuring federal funding formulas, state-subsidized construction grants, dedicated tax proceeds from sales tax funding streams, and increased local taxes for seasonal residents and tourists can help strengthen our libraries financially and alleviate many of the challenges that strain operations.

Libraries Deserve to Be Fairly and Financially Supported

There are many ways we can work together to sustainably fund and support Maine's public libraries.

- State and local officials should advocate for change in how we fund public libraries to ensure equitable services statewide. Possible solutions could include
 - using a percentage of a municipality's revenue sharing for library services to support workforce development and social services connection;
 - tapping new revenue streams such as legal cannabis sales to subsidize early literacy programming, afterschool programs, and programs that decrease social isolation in older adults;
 - relying on revenue sharing from tourism and property tax surcharges for nonresident homes and short-term rentals to fund expanding library meeting and workspaces to serve the increasing numbers of seasonal visitors using our libraries to work remotely.
- State officials should restructure the Essential Programs and Services (EPS) program to include funding of public library construction projects. Preschoolers, homeschooled children, and public-school students rely on libraries for early literacy learning, summer reading programs, and after-school homework help, all of which support the Department of Education's Maine Learning Results. Indeed, education needs do not disappear after formal schooling ends and local libraries must be safe, accessible places where adults can take advantage of continuing education opportunities such as digital literacy training needed for gainful employment.
- Lawmakers should establish more funding partnerships between state and federal agencies. One successful example of these efforts is the Maine Telecommunications Education Access Fund (MTEAF) and federal e-rate program that installed high-speed internet connections in most schools and libraries via the Maine School and Library Network. Recently, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) grant program worked with the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development and offered grants through the Maine State Library to 39 Maine libraries to offer accessible coworking spaces, resources, and entrepreneurship mentoring to remote workers.
- The Maine State Library and Maine's congressional leaders should advocate for a federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) LSTA Grants to States formula that takes more than total state population into account. The formula should also consider geography-related aspects such as land area, rural nature, broadband access, as well as transportation costs. Immigration numbers should also factor into the grant determination process as new Mainers may have increased need for literacy education and general information and assistance. An increase in IMLS funding would allow the Maine State Library to provide more services, scholarships, and resources for local libraries struggling to meet increased community needs.
- Employers, library and education professional associations, and other organizations that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion should offer more scholarships to students for library and information science coursework or workforce skills development offerings at Maine's community colleges. Increased educational opportunities would ensure a greater local pool of qualified library professionals to effectively manage library operations and engage in community problem-solving. Scholarships could also be a part of new program development for library board member certification through partnerships of the Maine State Library, the Maine Association of Nonprofits, state academic institutions, and Maine Municipal Association to increase knowledge, competencies, and decision-making skills required of both governing and advisory library boards.
- Local library leaders and citizen advocates should regularly communicate with state and local officials, attend municipal meetings, and speak up for adequate annual library budgets, including emergency reserve funds. They can also organize and lead library bond and capital campaigns. Bond and capital campaigns would enable library boards to build capacity through facility renovations and expansions that would enhance accessibility, services, and disaster preparedness for their communities.
- Library grant applicants should provide feedback to charitable foundations to simplify their

grant application and reporting processes. Library support organizations and state agencies could hire grant-writing professionals to help local library trustees and directors navigate national and federal grant applications, data collection, and reporting. Building project management experts could be engaged to provide guidance in facility planning and construction at the local level.

- Skilled retirees and other community residents should volunteer to serve on a library board or run for local government office to support the public library's role in building community resilience. Strong libraries have a positive impact on a community's social infrastructure, especially during times of sudden change and crisis (Klinenberg 2018).
- All Mainers who use libraries should ask our local library directors what they need and what we can do to help them support our communities. We can sponsor a children's program or lead a book discussion group. We can volunteer as substitute staff, so employees can attend conferences. We can help with annual appeals and capital campaigns by identifying donors and stuffing envelopes. Some of us can also set up legacy donations in our wills for the libraries that have helped us and our families succeed.

With adequate staffing, space, and funding, imagine how many more Maine children would have access to enriching out-of-school educational experiences and school-readiness programs, how many more isolated older adults would have socialization opportunities, how many more remote workers would have a place to access online resources, and how many more new Mainers would smoothly transition into the workforce. Finally, imagine how much better our library trustees would sleep at night knowing they could count on broad sustainable support for their libraries. Then, they could fully focus their energies on fulfilling their library's mission to empower people and strengthen communities.

NOTES

- 1 Survey summary data tables may be found in the 2024 Public Library Trustee Survey: https://maine-msl.libguides.com/ld.php?content_id=78759486.
- 2 https://me.countingopinions.com/index.php?page_id=23
- 3 <https://www.bls.gov/charts/consumer-price-index/consumer-price-index-by-category-line-chart.htm>
- 4 <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/23>

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