







Essex Library Association

ANNUAL REPORT

Free and Open to All.

July 1, 2025 to June 30, 2026

WWW.YOURESSEXLIBRARY.ORG

WELCOME

to the FY26 Annual Report of the Essex Library Association



This has been a year of exciting progress and accomplishment for our Library. Through thoughtful planning, hard work, and the generosity of our community, we are making significant improvements both inside the library and throughout our outdoor spaces. These renovations have enhanced our facilities while helping to ensure that the Library remains a welcoming, vibrant place for generations to come.

None of this would've been possible without the dedication and commitment of so many people. I want to extend my sincere appreciation to Ann Thompson, Executive Director, our hard-working staff, and my fellow Board members for their leadership, energy, and countless hours of service. Their efforts have been instrumental in moving our Library forward.

Most importantly, I want to thank the people who make our Library so special – our Patrons. Whether you come to borrow a book, attend a program, bring your children to Storytime or simply enjoy a quiet place to read, **you** are the heart of our Library.

I am also deeply grateful to the many generous donors who support our Annual Fund. Your contributions make an enormous difference, allowing us to maintain and improve our facilities, expand our programs, and respond to the evolving needs of our community.

As we look to the future, we do so within enthusiasm and gratitude. Three years ago, our Building and Grounds Committee began identifying much-needed maintenance projects and prioritizing them according to urgency. A new roof became our most important issue and that is where we began our renovations. To that end, we are currently initiating **The Story Continues Campaign** to raise funds for the renovation and modernization of Essex Library. We are hoping to complete our list of projects over the next two years.

As we look to the future, we do so with enthusiasm and gratitude. Our library is much more than a building. It is a gathering place, a center for learning and an essential part of the life of our community. Together, we are ensuring that it continues to thrive.

Thank you for being part of another wonderful year! We couldn't do it without you!

With warm regards,

JoAnne Carter

President, Essex Library Board of Trustees



After a story time for all ages at Essex Island, led by Children's Librarian Nicole Ballestas, parents and children gathered to show their appreciation for Essex Library.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Fiscal year 2026 (FY26) proved to be another impressive year in usage, attendance, and circulation for the Essex Library. Our highly trained and dedicated staff worked collaboratively to cultivate a welcoming and enriching environment, ensuring that every patron, from newborns to lifelong learners, received exceptional service.



Executive Director Ann Thompson, with State Senator Norm Needleman and U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal, announced a $576,000 Congressionally Directed Spending grant for the Essex Library Association.

We issued new library cards to 306 Essex residents this year, an increase of nearly 12% over FY25, reflecting the community's continued demand for professional library services and its perception of the Essex Library as a vital community resource. Our meeting rooms remained in high demand among local nonprofit organizations, remote workers, and students. We were once again pleased to welcome Valley Regional High School IBS students for their final exams, and in May, the VRHS Warriors in the Community returned to assist with facility preparations ahead of upcoming renovations.

The Library hosted 873 programs in FY26, attended by almost 13,000 patrons. Parents and caregivers continue to recognize the value of early literacy and STEM education through our Wiggle Worms, Little Learners, and STEAM Saturdays programs. The 2nd Annual Non-Profit Volunteer Expo was hosted by popular demand from local groups. We continued to partner with Southeastern Connecticut World Affairs Council to offer Great Decisions Discussions and introduced a new world politics book discussion group, joining six existing book groups. Our Library Speaker Series continued to present talks by best-selling authors, available both live and on-demand. The Library also launched the inaugural Essex Film Festival, screening four independent films with facilitated Q&A sessions and a complimentary producing workshop. More than 150 children registered for our 2025 summer reading program, and in 2026 we introduced a vibrant and engaging companion program for adults.

Following a two-year review, the Board of Trustees voted in October, 2025 to amend the Certificate of Incorporation, formally designating the Board as the Library's governing body; a change intended to promote organizational efficiency and align with current nonprofit best practices.

The Library was awarded a $576,000 Congressionally Directed Spending Grant in 2025 to fund essential facility repairs and upgrades. Work to replace the roof, HVAC system, and window glass, and to upgrade lighting, carpeting, and furniture began in September 2026. To meet growing demand for private workspace, we constructed two new study rooms and furnished a new local history area—generously sponsored in part by the Clark family in memory of Sherry Clark.

As always, we are extremely grateful for the financial support we receive from the Town of Essex and our patrons, as well as the countless hours of volunteer help that so many people provide. With that generous support, the Library continues to be a cornerstone of inspiration and civic vitality; fostering connection, curiosity, and lifelong learning throughout the community.

Ann Thompson,
Executive Director, Essex Library Association

TREASURER'S REPORT

The fiscal year ending June 30, 2026 was another strong year for the Essex Library Association. The Annual Fund collected nearly $164,000 representing a 32% increase over the prior year and reflecting strong support for ELA's programs. The Friends of the Essex Library were again able to provide $20,000 in support. Additional gifts and events including $351,500 from the Town of Essex combined to $620,000 of pre-investment income. Expenses were well controlled and below budget. Current assets of $6.15M are 10.9% higher than last year reflecting strong investment returns, dividends, interest income, and distributions. The Association is well positioned to be able to meet future financial obligations and be able to continue to provide strong programming and resources for the community. Respectfully submitted,

Stephen Brinkmann,
Treasurer, Essex Library Board of Trustees

QUICK STATS


NEW LIBRARY CARDS
306


BORROWING, ALL FORMATS
63,201


TOTAL NUMBER OF LIBRARY VISITS
41,425


TOTAL PROGRAMS
873


WI-FI SESSIONS
10,456


TOTAL PROGRAM ATTENDANCE
nearly 13,000

IMAGINE

Adults



Imagine

Lifelong Learning

Olena Lennon, national security professor for University of New Haven, provided a talk on the Russia-Ukraine War and Global Geopolitics.

The Library's adult offerings in FY26 reflected a commitment to **lifelong learning**, **cultural enrichment**, and **community connection**.

By bringing people together around shared interests and new experiences, the Library strengthened its role as both an **educational resource** and a vital **community gathering space.**

Programs such as the Local Author Book Fair, Author talks, book groups, and a three-part literature studies seminar encouraged participants to engage in **thoughtful discussion** around literary works and the writing process.

To help encourage a **free exchange of ideas** on international affairs, the library facilitated a series of Great Decisions discussions and hosted a lecture by Olena Lennon, a national security professor and expert on Russia's war with Ukraine. Patrons also enjoyed **practical learning opportunities**, including a five-week Italian language class led by a native speaker.

The library also addressed timely issues affecting libraries and the communities they serve through a screening of The Librarians, an Emmy Award-winning documentary examining the freedom to read and book banning. Remarks by a nationally renowned librarian provided additional insight on **intellectual freedom**, **access to information**, and the essential role libraries play in protecting the **right to read**.

Cultural programming included a Turkish Coffee Tasting as well as musical performances of Celtic songs by Pierce Campbell of The Kerry Boys, Spanish and Latin songs of life and romance by Entwyned Early Music Group, and jazz from Brian Torff, showcasing diverse musical styles and traditions.

Twelve months of art exhibits provided a year-round presence of **visual art** in the library, enriching the visitor experience. Complementary programs, including a lecture on collage quilting and a demonstration of the reduction silk screen technique as well as two lectures on art history, offered opportunities to **engage with artistic expression**.

The Library's drop-in groups provided welcoming spaces for adults to practice languages, research family histories, exchange writing ideas, and pursue needlework alongside others. These informal gatherings fostered creativity, **shared learning**, and meaningful **social connections**. Similarly, low-impact mind-body wellness programs such as tai-chi, yoga and meditation allowed for **shared community experiences**.

Collaboration with local nonprofit organizations was a defining feature of adult programming in FY26. A volunteer expo featuring ten **community nonprofits** introduced residents to **vital local resources**.

Additional collaborations included:

- Essex Resident State Trooper Mark Roberts led a **crime prevention** seminar
- A representative from the Essex Land Trust was a co-presenter for an educational lecture on **invasive plant species**
- The director of the Essex Historical Society provided an illustrated talk that explored **Revolutionary-era events in Essex** and the community's role in the American Revolution
- Suzy Kolber, acclaimed sports journalist, television anchor, and reporter, was the library's inaugural speaker for its **"In Your Backyard" speaker series**, which highlights prominent individuals from the community.



Imagine

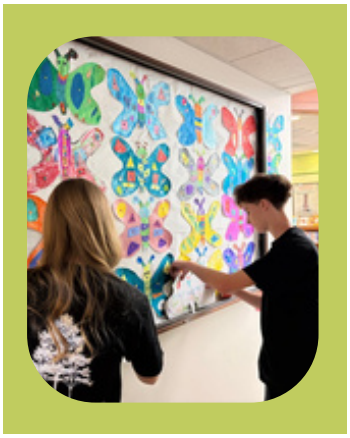
Cultural Enrichment

Representatives from the Peace Islands Institute CT (an organization dedicated to promoting cross-cultural dialogue, friendship, and understanding) provided a Turkish Coffee Tasting at the library.

IMAGINE

Teens

Imagine
Your Teens



Valley Regional High School's annual "Warriors in the Community" service day brought several students to the Essex Library where they worked on special projects.

In FY26, despite being under construction, our teens borrowed more books, attended more programs and volunteered in record numbers this year. Our teen volunteers took ownership of their library use through: display creation, book recommendations, digital citizenship, and programming. While in the Library, they connected with friends, resources, and staff members, helping to set the stage for **lifelong library use**.

Our innovative Teen Book Box initiative gave us a new link to young adult readers using **individualized reader's advisory strategies**. Once teens received these boxes, they began requesting to help share and develop the project.

Notably, a group of teens joined our Teen Volunteer Program after attending our Volunteer Expo last spring, an event that showcased local non-profit groups searching for support. Through these **connections**, students went on to establish community relationships and define the course of their own career-focused education.

We strengthened our **collaborations** with the upper elementary, middle and high schools to promote a supportive library "third space" where teens can relax, develop skills and take part in a larger community. We worked with local educators to emphasize the library as **a place to connect** in person in an increasingly digitized world. We doubled our classroom visits, hosted book talks, and increased support for local educators. We were thrilled to remain the Region 4 International Baccalaureate Program's most requested testing site. More and more, the Essex Library is recognized among local teens as an institution that **supports local students** and what matters most to them.





Imagine
Your Community

Individuals representing ten different non-profit organizations of Essex gathered for the library's bi-annual volunteer expo, connecting residents with local resources and volunteer opportunities.

Imagine
Volunteering

The Friends of the Essex Library was established to help provide services and equipment that are outside the library's budget. Here, Midge Kayfez discusses the annual book sale with Michelle Dewey.



IMAGINE



Imagine

Your Kids

Kids and Teens participated in a beginner's sewing machine workshop where participants learned beginning sewing skills while making a mug rug, a tiny quilt just big enough for a beverage and a cookie.

Many exciting things have been happening in the Children's Department at the Essex Library! This past year has been filled with new programs, expanded resources and partnerships, and opportunities for children and families to learn and grow. We have continued to find creative ways to engage our youngest patrons and meet the evolving needs of our community. We are excited to share some of the highlights and accomplishments that have made this past year so special!

In FY26, we were honored to be awarded a grant from the Community Foundation of Middlesex County. This grant funded the start of our Sensory Playtime program for babies up to 4 years old as well as a collection of sensory materials available for checkout, and an update to our parenting collection.



Sample Dragon Cards from the Library's Children's Summer Reading program.

We saw an increase in participation in both our Summer and Winter Reading Challenges by offering a game-like experience with the Reading Dragons trading card game. In this program, kids read to earn dragon cards they can then challenge their friends to "battles" with! This new approach to our reading challenges was met enthusiastically by patrons, with one mom saying, "Thank you so much for doing the Reading Dragons program, my sons got up early in the first week of summer vacation to read!"

A new, regular series of monthly cooking classes provided a fun, hands-on way for kids to gain experience measuring ingredients, following recipes, practicing safe food handling, and learning basic food preparation techniques. We also collaborated with local organizations and community helpers, welcoming police officers, EMTs, firefighters, dentists, nurses, and doctors into the Library to lead story time. These collaborations have not only strengthened the library's connections within the community but have also provided children and families with opportunities to build positive relationships with the people who serve and care for them.



Overall, this has been a wonderful year of growth, learning, and community connection in the Children's Department! From encouraging a love of reading and introducing new life skills, to providing opportunities for sensory exploration and strengthening community relationships, we are proud of the positive impact our programs and resources have had on our community.

We look forward to continuing to build on these successes, finding new and creative ways to engage young learners, support families, and make the library a welcoming and exciting place for everyone!

2025 - 2026 BOARD OF TRUSTEES

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Vice President
Gail Briggs

Treasurer
Stephen Brinkmann

Secretary
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Board Members
Sandra Cahill, Sarah Fryxell, Susan Guernsey, Rebecca O'Neal, Robert Parkerson, Bridget Quinn, Pamela Reeser, Kevin Rogers, Jill Schwartzman

Friends President
Lisa Burkarth



A hands-on adult craft class where participants discovered the timeless beauty of Sashiko, a traditional Japanese technique of mending and embroidery that transforms simple stitches into bold, geometric patterns.

LIBRARY STAFF

Ann Thompson, MLS, *Executive Director* Ann leads and is responsible for day-to-day management of all library operations. She supervises staff, manages the budget, and advocates for the Library. She also hosts programs and facilitates the Third Wednesday, Classics, and American History Book Groups.

Nicole Ballestas, MLIS, *Children's and Teen Librarian* Nicole delivers services for children and teens, including acquiring materials, hosting programs and conducting outreach to area schools. Her STEAM Saturdays and Wiggle Worms Storyhours provide valuable opportunities for young families to connect beyond the sessions themselves.

Evelyn Benvie, *Webmaster & Circulation Assistant* Evie helps manage our website and social media platforms and mends books on a regular basis to care for and extend the use of the library's materials. She provides friendly and accurate service to library users at our circulation desk.

Jessica Branciforte, MLIS, *Teen Librarian* Jess delivers services for teens, including materials, programs, and outreach to area schools. She helps to guide this age group's volunteer efforts with a Teen Advisory Board and helps to provide a welcoming space where teens can explore interests, improve research skills, and connect with resources for their needs. Jess also delivers circulation services as a member of our desk staff.

Shea Campion, *Circulation Assistant* Shea delivers circulation services as a member of our desk staff. Shea also assists in creating marketing materials and updating the library's website and social media platforms.

Amy Gallagher, *Circulation Assistant* Amy provides excellent and friendly service at the circulation desk. She also helps to manage the library's inter-library loan service for patrons.

Katherine Hilliar, *Circulation Assistant* Katherine delivers circulation services as a member of our desk staff.

Elizabeth Reinhart, MA & MLIS, *Adult Services Librarian* Elizabeth delivers services for adults, hosts most of the adult programs, acquires materials, composes Ex Libris and in addition to the HiFi Book Group, facilitates the popular First Thursday/Saturday Book Group. She also provides friendly and accurate service to library users at our circulation desk.

Diane Simoneau, *Manager – Donor & Technical Services* Diane catalogs materials for all the collections and purchases DVDs for adult patrons. She also maintains the Library's donor engagement database. In addition, Diane works at the circulation desk with customer service expertise.

THANK YOU TO OUR FISCAL YEAR 2026 COLLABORATORS

A Place Called Hope
Amphibian Reptile Center
Andrea Buka
Andrea Steele
Atlantic White Shark Conservancy
Blissful Beauty Day Spa
Brad Fowler
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Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station
Connecticut River Museum
Connecticut Valley Camera Club
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CT DEEP's Fish with CARE Program
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Essex Board of Trade
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Essex Fire Engine Company No. 1
Essex Garden Club
Essex Historical Society
Essex Land Trust
Essex Nails Spa
Essex Parks and Recreation
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Hannah Clark
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Isabelle Laufer
Ivoryton Library Association
Jan Wilson
Jillian Simms
Jim Benn
Jim Brown
Jim Sirch
John Winthrop Middle School
John Winthrop Language Arts Team
John Winthrop Media Center
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Karen Israel
Kessel Temple Lightsaber Academy
Laura Bevis
Library Speakers Consortium
Lisa Hall Brownell
Little Leaps Dance Adventures
Liz Egan
Lyman Allyn Art Museum
Lyme Art Association
Mallory Mortillaro
Mary Devins
Mary Saraceno
Maura Casey
Michael Langlois
MY Productions CT
Mystic Seaport Museum
Nancy Moran
Nick Bellantoni
Noah Charney
Nutmeg Pharmacy
Olena Lennon
Opera Theater of Connecticut
Partoons Caricature Artist
Pat Procko
Paul Colburn
Paul Costello
Pencil & Wool
Peter Berkrot
Pierce Campbell
Pizza Pub
Privateer's Pizza
Rebecca Russell and Louie the Therapy Dog (Certified through Pet Partners)
Riggio's Garden Center
RI Pirate Guy - Luca Rebussini
Robbie Storms
Robyn Rivers
Rolie Polie Guacamole
Safe Harbor Dauntless
Sam Tannenhaus
Sarah Minor (Gaming/JW Club Representative, Nutmeg Presentations)
Savour Café & Bakery
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Science Outside the Box
Scotch Plains Tavern
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Steward Outdoor Day School
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Suzy Kolber
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Valley Regional High School (VRHS)
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VRHS Career Path Counseling
VRHS Creative Writing Department
VRHS Honor Society
VRHS Interact Club
VRHS Media Center
VRHS Special Education Department
VRHS Summer Reading Committee
VRHS Warriors
Warren Leach
Yale Science in the News



ESSEX LIBRARY ASSOCIATION THANKS YOU, OUR DONORS

The following donors made gifts to the library between July 1, 2025, and June 30, 2026.

$10,000 Or More

Danielle Danese
Friends of the Essex Library
Kitchings Family Foundation
Jim Childress and Ann Thompson
Town of Essex

$1,000 - $9,999

Bauman Family Foundation
Stephen and Alison Brinkmann Family Fund at the Community Foundation of Middlesex County
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Bob and Jean Walker
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$500 - $999

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Tom and Sally Crawford
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Elizabeth Normen and Paul Eddy
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Essex Garden Club
Essex Lions Charities, Inc.
Marilyn C. Fall Fund at the Community Foundation of Middlesex County
Gordon and Patti Giffin
Dee Grover

Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this list. Omissions or discrepancies should be brought to the attention of Ann Thompson 860-767-1560.

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$500 - $999 (continued)

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$250 - $499

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$250 - $499 (continued)

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Adam and Regina Von Gootkin
Phillip and Deborah Walters
Susan B. Weiner
Karen Katen and Robert Williams. Jr.
Victoria Winterer
Peter and Andrea Woolston

$100 - $249

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