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## Amy Franco Selected as the 2026 Recipient of the Illinois Library Association Librarian of the Year Award

The Illinois Library Association (ILA) has named Amy Franco, Executive Director of the Hillside Public Library, its 2026 Illinois Librarian of the Year, recognizing her leadership in organizing nearly 100 public libraries into an unprecedented grassroots coalition that brought statewide attention to Cook County's ongoing property tax distribution failures. This recognition comes as Cook County officials continue working to resolve problems stemming from the county's troubled property tax system modernization project, which disrupted tax distributions, delayed financial reporting, and prompted months of advocacy by libraries, schools, and other taxing agencies.

Over the past year, Franco founded and helped organize the Cook County Library Coalition, which brought together nearly 100 public libraries from across Cook County to document delayed property tax distributions, gather operational data, coordinate public advocacy efforts, and work directly with county officials to improve transparency and strengthen the property tax distribution process. The Coalition's work has helped elevate libraries' and other taxing agencies' concerns before county leaders and contributed to extensive media coverage of the issue.

When delayed tax bills and distribution problems disrupted Cook County's property tax system, libraries found themselves operating with little certainty about when, or whether, critical revenue would arrive. Libraries postponed vendor payments, froze hiring, delayed facility repairs, reduced book purchases, drew down reserves, and in some cases began preparing contingency plans to meet payroll and maintain essential public services. Instead of serving patrons, library leaders spent months managing a financial crisis they did not create.

Recognizing that many libraries were experiencing the same problems in isolation, Franco began connecting with library leaders to share and compare information and organize a coordinated response. What began as conversations among a handful of library directors quickly evolved into one of the largest coordinated advocacy efforts undertaken by Illinois public libraries in recent history. Coalition members shared financial data, compared tax receipts, developed common messaging, organized board action, testified before the Cook County Board, worked with journalists, and met regularly with county leadership to press for transparency and long-term solutions.

Although the Coalition began as an effort to understand delayed tax payments to libraries, its work soon expanded into broader questions of public accountability. Because property taxes fund libraries, schools, municipalities, park districts, and other local services, Coalition members argued that timely tax distributions and transparency are essential to taxpayers' confidence in local government.

"I am deeply honored to receive this recognition," Franco said. "But this award really belongs to the many library leaders who chose collaboration over frustration. Together, we demonstrated what librarians do best: gather facts, solve problems, and advocate for the communities we serve."

Jennifer Hovanec, Executive Director of the La Grange Public Library and a member of the ILA Executive Board, described Franco as a "decisive and principled leader who identifies challenges and responds with thoughtful, sustained action." In her nomination, Hovanec credited Franco with providing "a level of clarity and organization" that had previously been lacking.

In a separate nomination, Lindsey Dorfman, Executive Library Director of the Glenview Public Library, described Franco as a respected colleague and "hero" whose leadership turned "uncertainty and frustration into a coordinated effort focused on communication, transparency, and action."

A third nomination submitted by Lizzy Boden, Assistant Director of the Hinsdale Public Library, referenced Franco's work as "a model for advocacy, collaboration, and public stewardship in Illinois" and praised her ability to lead under extraordinary circumstances.

Franco announced that she will donate the monetary portion of the award to the Cook County Library Coalition as it works to formalize the organization and continue advocating for improvements to Cook County's property tax system.

Although many of the immediate financial concerns have eased, Coalition members continue to work with county officials to improve accountability and transparency in Cook County's troubled property tax system. "Libraries exist to serve their

communities," Franco said. "When the systems that support those communities fail, librarians don't have the luxury of looking the other way. I'm incredibly proud of everything this coalition has accomplished, and I hope this award encourages more people to pay attention to an issue that affects every taxpayer in Cook County." Franco continued, "Reliable property tax distributions are essential to the public institutions our communities depend on."

The Illinois Library Association Librarian of the Year Award will be presented at an awards ceremony during the 2026 Illinois Library Association Annual Conference. The conference will take place October 6-8, 2026, in Peoria, Illinois.

For more information, contact the Illinois Library Association.

**About the Illinois Library Association**

The Illinois Library Association (ILA) is a professional membership organization that represents Illinois libraries and the millions who depend on them. Founded in 1896, it is the third-largest state library association and serves as a chapter within the American Library Association. ILA is comprised of 2,000 personal and more than 500 institutional members, made up of public, academic, school, and special libraries, as well as librarians, library staff, trustees, students, and library vendors.

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