

NICE (Northern Wisconsin ILS Consortium Exploration)

Project Report for WVLS Board of Trustees

September 21, 2024

The Northern Wisconsin ILS Consortium Exploration (NICE) Project is an effort of Northern Waters Library Service (NWLS), Wisconsin Valley Library Service (WVLS), and their respective consortia to determine the value and feasibility of a merger to a shared Integrated Library System (ILS). The ILS database software and related services are necessary to maintain the core library mission of resource sharing.

Member libraries in NWLS and WVLS already benefit from the services, support, and economies of scale offered through the LEANWI collaboration. A merged ILS has the potential to build on this success. The state-wide [Public Library System Redesign Report](#), completed in 2019 following a two year study, “envisions larger regions of service for Integrated Library Systems throughout the state.” Five of 15 library systems in Wisconsin currently participate in ILS sharing including some recent ILS mergers. The WI Department of Public Instruction supports this collaborative effort and currently offers grant funding for this purpose.

The NICE project prioritized existing processes at the local level to ease the transition toward a shared ILS. Many workgroups found a consensus around recommendations that, as much as possible, allowed the two systems to maintain existing practices.

- Keep the current enhanced public library catalog in place to maintain a consistent experience for library users.
- Continue to fill requests for materials in a way similar to current practices within each consortia
- Continue use of the familiar Sierra ILS software interface by member library staff.
- Retain V-Cat and NWLN funding models with shared NICE costs split at the consortium level.

Northern Waters Library Network and NWLN Board Votes

On July 18, 2024, the Northern Waters Library Network (NWLN) discussed the NICE Project Recommendations and Report and voted against merging its ILS with V-Cat. 15 member libraries voted to not merge, 5 voted to merge, 3 abstained, 6 did not attend nor send a proxy.

The NWLS Board of Trustees voted to uphold the NWLN recommendation against merging the ILS at their July 20, 2024, meeting.

Following conversations with NWLS staff, WVLS identified factors that may have contributed to NWLN's vote against a merged ILS with V-Cat.

Holds Fulfillment Recommendation

The NICE Holds Fulfillment Recommendation allows patron requests and access to materials to be handled in very different ways. NWLN member libraries expressed concerns that it may be challenging to explain to patrons the way holds are filled, and how/when items would become available.

Both NWLN and V-Cat libraries grant preferential access to local patrons with a focus on providing access for all library patrons to most materials. However, each consortium practices preferential access for local patrons differently.

NWLN Budget and Financial Savings

Northern Waters Libraries did not see sufficient financial savings within the proposed NWLN budget with NICE shared costs. In addition, NWLN would like to prioritize development of reserve funds to fund future ILS migration efforts.

Complexity of Collaboration

Compromise led to complex NICE recommendations. NICE Recommendations were more complex than NWLN member libraries expected, and substantial effort was needed to clarify information. Misunderstanding and misinformation may have had an impact on the vote. NWLN member libraries were concerned about how much would change with an ILS merger.

Other Aspects Worth Noting

NWLN Timeline - The NWLN ILS contract ends in December 2024. It is financially advantageous for NWLN to move forward with a new ILS contract as soon as possible.

Satisfaction with NWLN and WISCAT - NWLN libraries expressed satisfaction with current resource sharing among NWLN and WISCAT, as well as services provided by NWLS staff and cataloging partners. A level of comfort exists among NWLN members with current practices, policies, and decision making.

V-Cat Vote

All V-Cat libraries had a representative in attendance at the August 1 V-Cat Council meeting, with 1 proxy. Each V-Cat member library representative was able to share their thoughts on benefits, sticking points, and offer other comments. A handful of libraries requested additional time to discuss the NICE project with their boards.

At the September 5 V-Cat Council meeting, the Council voted by non-anonymous ballot, and the results were

- **79.19% yes** to pursue a merger by representative vote (16 yea/5 nay)
- **50.5% yes** to pursue a merger by weighted vote (51 yea / 50 nay)
- **The motion did not pass**
(V-Cat Bylaws require a 2/3 majority in both representative and weighted votes to pass a motion.)

A total of 20 of 25 library representatives were present. One library was absent and designated a proxy, 4 were absent without designating a proxy (Antigo, Laona, Thorp, Withee). Additional votes from absent representatives would not have impacted the final vote, even if all had voted in favor of a merger.

Factors that contributed to V-Cat member library votes in support of a merged ILS with NWLN:

- **Expanded collection with increased access** to a wider variety of materials and additional titles by popular authors
- **Financial savings** to serve patrons with materials, services and programs with shrinking library budgets
- **Minimal training** would be required for staff or library users
- **Opportunity for proactive leadership** to choose a change rather than being forced to change
- **Generous grant funding** available to assist with an ILS merger
- **Access to more libraries with one library card**, especially in Oneida and Vilas Counties
- **Potential reduction in staff time** spent on WISCAT interlibrary loan requests
- **Increased support to libraries** with a larger ILS administration and support team
- **Increased professional collaboration** with a larger group of libraries

Factors that contributed to V-Cat member library votes against a merged ILS with NWLN:

- **Uncertainty about wait times** for patron holds
- **Unknown value** of an expanded collection
- **Potential for increased staff workload** due to an estimated 10-20% increase in materials movement
- **Challenging workgroup conversations** caused concern about the effort required for future collaboration
- **Differences in existing practices and processes** at NWLN, and V-Cat, especially holds and cataloging
- **Uncertainty about net lending**, and concern that V-Cat member libraries would lend significantly more materials to patrons of NWLN libraries than their patrons would borrow from NWLN libraries
- **Uncertainty about the sustainability of savings presented**, and concerns about rising costs in the future
- **NWLN's vote against merging**, and anticipated negotiations needed to get NWLN on board

WVLS staff will reflect on the outcome and have follow-up conversations with stakeholders. A report of lessons learned and next steps for V-Cat will be developed, including opportunities for improving V-Cat services for library users and future collaborations.