2025-2026 KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY

KERN COUNTY LIBRARY

"The advancement and diffusion of knowledge is the only guardian of true liberty."

-- James Madison

Release Date
June 4, 2026

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SUMMARY:

In the past, libraries were known as quiet buildings for reading books. Today's libraries razzle-dazzle us with many extra activities. They are no longer a quiet, staid institution with worn carpeting, books, and librarians constantly shushing patrons to silence. Over the past decade, Kern County Libraries have transitioned to meet the demands of the 21st century. They now offer high-speed internet, multiple computers with sophisticated software, digital literacy programs, and meeting and study rooms. With knowledgeable, ready-to-assist staff, modern libraries have become a primary resource for their surrounding communities.

Libraries are one of the oldest institutions of knowledge and culture, yet they remain indispensable in the modern world. Libraries have been around for over 5,000 thousand years. One of the earliest libraries, assembled by Ashurbanipal, King of the Assyrians, was constructed between 668 and 631 BCE. Located in Nineveh, which is in present-day northern Iraq, it held around 30,000 clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform[1] writing.

Photo of clay tablets with Cuneiform writing

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[1] Cuneiform is one of the earliest known writing systems, developed by the Sumerians of ancient Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) around 3500 BCE, characterized by wedge-shaped marks on clay tablets. It was initially a system of pictographs to record commodities, trade, and administrative information.

Taken from the British Museum website:
www.britishmuseum.org

Modern libraries have transformed to meet the demands of the digital age, providing more than just access to books. Libraries offer state-of-the-art technology, including computer stations, high-speed internet access and digital literacy programs to help users navigate the digital world. The first public library in Kern County was the Beale Memorial Library, which opened June 2, 1900. It was created by Mary Edwards Beale and her son, Truxtun Beale. It was dedicated to her husband and his father, General Edward Fitzgerald Beale.

This library was originally called the Kern County Free Library. In July 1911, the Kern County Library system was organized with the Beale Memorial Library as its headquarters. On July 12, 1952, the original building was destroyed by a 7.3 magnitude earthquake. In 1953, a new Beale library was built at 1315 Truxtun Avenue. Completed in 1957, after 30 years of service this building became too small to meet the public's library demands. A new, larger library was built in 1988 at its current location, 701 Truxtun Avenue, Bakersfield, California.

The Kern County Library Foundation was established in 1986 by the Kern County Board of Supervisors as a 501(c)(3), a non-profit fund-raising organization. The initial purpose was to enhance the newly constructed Beale Memorial Library. The Library Foundation currently serves 22 branch libraries throughout Kern County; six of these are located in Greater Bakersfield.

Libraries play a crucial and ever-evolving role in modern society, serving as pillars of knowledge, education, and community development. Dominated by information and technology, the library provides invaluable access to resources which foster learning, creativity, and personal growth. Libraries have transformed to keep up with the new technology and with the digital age.

Photo of Beale Memorial Library
701 Truxtun Avenue, Bakersfield
www.kerncountylibrary.org

PURPOSE OF INQUIRY:

Authorized by Penal Code §933.5, the Kern County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) investigated the Kern County Library system. This inquiry was to review how Kern County Libraries remain up to date

with current technology. The Grand Jury looked into the numerous additional programs offered to the public.

METHODOLOGY:

The Grand Jury toured and interviewed staff and volunteers at the Beale Memorial and the Northeast branch libraries. Additional online research provided important background information.

DISCUSSION OF FACTS:

The Kern County library card allows the checkout of books and is also used to borrow eBooks, games, movies, and music. There are language learning programs available, GED certification (General Education Development), and free access to computers and career development. As of April 2022, library card holders can obtain a free day-use pass to all 200+ California State Parks.

The libraries offer after-school programs for students, including "Supper and Snacks in the Stacks," a part of the National School Lunch Program. The food is prepared and provided by the Kern County Superintendent of Schools, funded by the US Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. This program is extended through the summer months at most branches.

Many of the library branches offer extra services. The Beale Branch has a well-equipped auditorium and meeting rooms. The Northeast Branch has a 3D printer and a Cricut®[2] available which are free for patrons to use. The Baker Street Branch, recently reopened, has Friday night Bingo. The Rathburn Branch offers guest speakers and a chess club. The Ridgecrest Branch offers grief support, caregiver and résumé workshops. The California City Branch offers teen poetry night, knitting and summer reading challenges. These are a few of the opportunities provided by Kern County Libraries. All activities can be found on their web site: www.kerncountylibrary.org

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[2] A Cricut machine is a smart cutting tool that can cut, draw, score, and engrave a wide variety of materials, including paper, vinyl, fabric, leather, and more. It functions like a computer-controlled craft knife, allowing users to create intricate designs, shapes, and letters with precision. www.cricut.com

The Kern County Library has one Bookmobile to serve outlying communities (formerly there were two). The Bookmobile operates five days a week, offering a variety of materials for all ages, free Wi-Fi, and checkouts and returns.

The "Friends of the Library," a volunteer organization, was formed in 1953 for the purpose of supporting the library system. The members provide funding support for summer reading programs and other events at all library branches. This is done through periodic sales of donated and surplus books. Volunteers also assist library staff with sorting out the donations of books and periodicals.

The Kern County Board of Supervisors serves as the Library Board. Since 1992, primary funding comes from the Kern County General Fund, Federal, State, and local grants, as well as various other grants. State appropriations, donations and non-General Fund revenue are also received. In 1996, a Bakersfield High School English teacher provided an endowment of $690,000.00 to the Kern County Library Foundation. The City of Bakersfield also contributes monetary support to the branches in the City.

Historically, the libraries have suffered numerous budget cuts. When faced with budget cuts, the Board of Supervisors often looks to the library system first, when considering cuts.

FINDINGS:

F1. The library has only one bookmobile to serve all of Kern County, making it difficult for the outlying communities of Kern County to access the services of the library.

F2. There are few bilingual staff or volunteers which impacts the accessibility of library services for those not fluent in English.

F3. Providing different language brochures and books can help our community by increasing accessibility.

F4. Keeping up with technological advancements is costly, but will greatly benefit the citizenry in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Grand Jury recommends:

R1. The Library Board apply for grant funding to secure an additional bookmobile by January 1, 2027. (Finding F1)

R2. The Library Board continue to prioritize the hiring of bilingual staff and the recruitment of bilingual volunteers. (Finding F2)

R3. The Library order brochures in languages other than English by January 1, 2027. (Finding F3)

COMMENTS:

The Grand Jury would like to thank the Kern County Library staff and volunteers for their cooperation and tours of the libraries. They gave us an abundance of information and knowledge, which was greatly appreciated.

NOTES:

- The Board of Supervisors and the Kern County Library should post a copy of this report where it will be available for public review.

- Persons wishing to receive email notification of newly released reports may sign up at www.kerncounty.com/grandjury

- Present and past Kern County Grand Jury Reports and Responses can be accessed on the Kern County Grand Jury website: www.kerncounty.com/grandjury

RESPONSE DEADLINE:

- **REQUIRED WITHIN 90 DAYS:**

  Kern County Board of Supervisors
  All Findings and Recommendations

- **INVITED RESPONSE WITHIN 90 DAYS:**

  Kern County Friends of The Library
  All Findings and Recommendations
  Kern County Library Director
  All Findings and Recommendations

RESPONSES ARE REQUIRED PURSUANT TO PENAL CODE §§933(c) AND 933.05:

- **PRESIDING JUDGE**
  SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA
  COUNTY OF KERN
  1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 212
  BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301

- **FOREMAN**
  KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY
  1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 600
  BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Cal. Penal Code §929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.