



Public Hearing on Funding Public Libraries in New York State

Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries & Education Technology

Thursday, November 29, 2012
Hamilton Hearing Room B
Legislative Office Building
Albany, New York

Testimony by Claudia Depkin
Library Director
Haverstraw King's Daughters Public Library

To the Honorable Members of the Committee:

American author Isaac Asimov once said, "I received the fundamentals of my education in school, but that was not enough. My real education, the superstructure, the details, the true architecture, I got out of the public library. For an impoverished child whose family could not afford to buy books, the library was the open door to wonder and achievement, and I can never be sufficiently grateful that I had the wit to charge through that door and make the most of it." In New York State, the backbone of all our public libraries is the library systems that are funded by the State. You don't need me to tell you the history of public library systems in New York State or how they get funded. Others can take care of that more eloquently. What I'm here to do today is to tell you why public library systems are important to your constituents, even if they don't know anything about how or why library systems exist.

Who Am I?

I'm the director of the Haverstraw King's Daughters Public Library, in Rockland County. I'm also the president of the Leadership & Management Section of the New York Library Association and the chairperson of the Directors Association at the Ramapo Catskill Library System (RCLS). The Haverstraw Library serves a population of approximately 30,000 and we have stable funding through our Special Legislative District status. Our customers, the general voting public, decide whether we receive a budget increase from year to year. When we do a good job, we get a "yes" vote. I'm happy to report that our budget proposals have passed.

Why Am I Here?

If you look behind the scenes of that good job we're doing, you'll see that RCLS plays a large role in our success.

- The library system helps us stretch our public's dollars by providing opportunities for group purchasing of things we use every day like paper, computers, computer software, and research databases so that people can come into our buildings or even stay at home, and get what they and their families need to succeed.
- The library system helps our management teams by providing real assistance with things like Construction Grant proposals and e-Rate discounts, projects that result in direct dollars coming to us to complete vital projects such as the installation of solar panels, Summer Reading Program funding, and refunds on our telecommunications fees.
- The library system provides expertise and guidance on things like the Annual Report to the State, legal concerns, and questions about our own funding structures, which in turn helps us to make the case for stable library funding in our home communities.
- The library system provides technical know-how to troubleshoot our computers, build our networks, manage our internet traffic, and catalog and circulate our thousands upon thousands of library titles, so that when our

patrons come in our doors, our librarians are able to find what patrons want on our shelves, get it in their hands and make their day.

- The library system provides delivery of library materials so that patrons in the Haverstraw Library, for instance, can borrow items from the public library in Liberty, 2 counties away but part of the same system, saving us tax dollars while still providing access to the information or entertainment library users want.

What Can You Do?

For each year the State doesn't fully fund the public library systems, we see a bit of those benefits I just mentioned getting chipped away. Even with a 20% reduction in staff in recent years, and the elimination of programs such as the newspaper reading service for the visually impaired, and desktop publishing services for member libraries, RCLS has had to implement a service fee to members, to help offset their shortfall. That means your constituents are paying twice for services that aren't quite up to par. They're paying their taxes at the state level, a tiny amount of which gets apportioned to public library systems, and they're paying their taxes at the local level, a portion of which comes to us.

Please, fund public library systems fully, based on the State Education Law formulas approved in 1990. Use current census figures in those calculations so that our library systems, our public libraries and our patrons enjoy the full benefit of stepping through Asimov's door of wonder and achievement, into the public library and into an unimagined future of success and well-being.

Thank you.