



The Voice of the Library Community

New York Library Association

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**Hearing on Funding Public Libraries in New York State
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Good morning and thank you for providing me the opportunity to present today regarding state funding for libraries and library systems.

I would like to begin by thanking Governor Cuomo for maintaining the previous year's funding levels in the 2012 Executive Budget. I would also like to thank all those members of the Legislature who supported our legislative priorities last year.

Libraries are an essential part of every community; they provide access to free, unbiased information, they provide a bridge to cross the 'digital divide', and they serve as a focal point in the community, hosting countless community groups and events. The value of New York public libraries has become ever more poignant in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. As highlighted in a recent *New York Times* article, libraries across the disaster area are providing needed resources to storm victims. An example includes a mobile library bus, situated outside a former location of a Rockaway branch library, offering warmth, power outlets, emergency information, and books.

Libraries are educational institutions, delivering learning opportunities at every stage of life.

Parents introduce their children to books and foster a love of reading beginning with story time programs that serve to develop early literacy skills.

Throughout elementary and high school, school and public librarians provide guidance and resources that augment general classroom learning and foster critical thinking and information analysis.

Following formal education, libraries continue to serve the needs of the public, addressing human curiosity and hunger for information.

Additionally libraries provide access to what has become a necessity in today's world, access to a computer and the Internet. Can you imagine applying for a job and not having access to send or upload an online application? Or not being able to look up information on a diagnosis that the doctor just gave to your mother? That is the reality for one third of minority households in New York State, and 67% of homes with annual income below \$20,000. Public libraries bridge this digital divide, by providing access to this technology for free. Walk into any public library, at any time, on any day, and you will see computer labs with nearly ever terminal in use.

In recent years libraries have also expanded their role, serving as career training and job placement centers. The Career Development Center at the Brentwood Public Library recently circulated success stories of various patrons who gained basic computer skills, returned to school, found employment, or even started a small business, all thanks to the services provided at the library.

New York's public libraries need your support.

Despite last year's modest funding increases, libraries aide remains below 1997 levels. As a frame of reference, in 1997 President Bill Clinton was just beginning his second term in office, no one was yet worrying about the Y2K issue and *Titanic* was a hit in the theatres.

Although positive steps have been taken in the last couple of years, library funding is still down nearly 20% from its peak in 2007 – at a time when library use is up 12% and circulation is up over 21%.

In a 2012 survey of 284 public libraries (that's about 37% of the libraries in New York State), in just one day:

- There were over 170,000 patron visits, (of them, nearly 40K of them used a public computer)
- Over 24,000 reference questions were answered,
- Over 13,000 children took part in a program, and
- Over 340,000 items circulated

These numbers illustrate that contrary to those who claim that the internet is making libraries irrelevant; library usage and circulation continue to rise.

The library community has always been modest in our funding requests; never asking for more than the state can realistically provide. And our needs are small, so small that the amount of Library Aid in the budget is less than one tenth of one percent of the state budget as a whole.

In order to continue to provide all the services that the public has come to rely on, we request that library aid be restored to its pre-recession level of \$102 million.

Keep in mind that libraries are nearly entirely supported by the communities they serve. On average less than nine percent of a public library's budget comes from state aid, and yet that funding is critical to their operation, as they have already reduced expenses and operations as much as possible.

Additionally, according to the State Library there is approximately \$2.5 billion in library construction and renovation needs throughout the state and yet the state provides only \$14 million annually for public library construction funds. A modest increase to \$20 million would be welcome.

Your constituents overwhelmingly support their libraries; over the past three years, on average 97% of library budgets have been approved by the voters. I hope that you will support libraries as well by voting in favor of full funding restoration.

Beyond all the numbers and statistics, and the end of the day this is a matter of what type of society we all want to live in. Libraries make for better communities, a better informed public, bridge the digital divide and support the functioning of democracy. I for one want to live in a world where libraries are viewed to be just as essential as police and fire departments in the community. Every one of you has come here to Albany to serve the interests of your community and the state. Supporting library funding is an investment in a better future for New York State.

There is no better place for the citizens of New York State to gather knowledge than at their local library.

On a personal note, I would most likely not be here today if it were not for public libraries. As a young mother, I moved to a small rural hamlet in eastern Rensselaer County. I wanted to be involved in the community and started working with others on the development of a park. Since I did not own a computer (or a typewriter) I used the local library to access needed information (including books via interlibrary loan facilitated through the public library system) and a word processor to type letters for funding. I spent a lot of time in the library. The library director knew this and asked if I would become a trustee. My response was that, as a waitress, I could not serve in this position. She reassured me that the responsibilities would be limited and consisted of a meeting each month and voting. It turned out that the library's reference collection lacked important resources. The library director handed me the *Foundation Directory* (again a loan through the library system). I quickly got to work and selected foundations interested in education and another topic, found a matching reference book, and then requested the source. I sent out hundreds of letters and in total received over \$20,000.

This experience prompted me to go to college. Within 5 years, I had an associate's degree, a bachelor's degree, and a master's degree. This spring, 22 years after that public library director asked me to serve as a trustee, I received a Ph.D. in Informatics.

Yes, public libraries and systems do make a difference. With your support they can make an even stronger impact for the citizens of New York State.

Thank you for your time and attention, and please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of service in gathering information on any library related issue.

Respectfully Submitted,
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