



TESTIMONY BEFORE THE NEW YORK STATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON
LIBRARIES AND EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY -
FUNDING PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN NEW YORK STATE

November 29, 2012

Good afternoon. I am Maureen O'Connor and it is my pleasure to deliver testimony today on behalf of Tom Galante, President & CEO of Queens Library. I want to begin by thanking this committee and its Chairman, Assemblyman Bob Reilly, for inviting us here today. I also want to recognize and thank the Queens members of this Committee, as well as the entire Queens delegation to the New York State Assembly, for your ongoing support.

I am pleased to join my colleagues today in sharing with you the value of public libraries. I am especially glad to be able to personally thank this committee for your role in delivering a State budget last year, which, for the first time in years, included an increase in funding to libraries. We know that libraries are more important to New Yorkers than ever before, and this increase demonstrates that New York State supports their continued growth and success. We hope it is the beginning of a sustained investment.

I would like to take a few minute to share with you some of the work that Queens Library has done in the past year, since my last visit to this committee. First, a little background: Queens Library operates 62 community libraries, seven Adult Learning

Centers, Queens Library for Teens in Far Rockaway and the Children's Library Discovery Center in Jamaica. We serve a population of 2.3 million residents in Queens, many of whom are new New Yorkers, having arrived in Queens recently and often speak a language other than English at home. In Fiscal Year 2012, Queens Library loaned over 18 million items and welcomed 12.5 million visitors. More importantly, we provided free educational opportunities for every visitor of every age - from toddlers to senior citizens. We expanded our job information and job search services and expanded our computer training classes. We added more computers and more public computer sessions. We offered more programs and had more program attendance than ever before. Last year, over 37,000 formal programs welcomed over 700,000 participants. All of this, it bears mentioning, was accomplished in an environment where overall government funding continues to slide.

Despite huge restorations of proposed cuts by the New York City Council and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg in July of last year, the library sustained a loss of over \$2 million, bringing our total City Funding reduction since the economic downturn began in 2008 to nearly \$15 million. On a State level, funding had also been on a steady decline, with over \$1.5 million lost through the 2011/2012 budget. Last year, we began to make up that ground with the 3% increase, which added just over \$122,000 to our State Operating funds.

Reversing the downward trend of funding to libraries was an incredible achievement for the State of New York. Unfortunately, the needs remain great and the years of funding reductions have begun to take their toll on public service. In the last year, the hours open and library staff numbers have trended slightly downward, while

wait lists for popular books and other materials have grown. Library staff is stretched to the limit to deliver quality library service.

Nevertheless, New York State has historically played a critical role in the successes of Queens Library. Thanks to your support, we have seen many successes delivering quality resources, programs and state-of-the-art facilities to our customers.

We lean heavily on New York State funding to maintain current collections and materials. Books and materials are the oxygen that supplies the library system. Despite last year's increase, our library materials budget remains a shadow of its former self, with 30% fewer books purchased than in 2008. Many libraries are increasingly facing the impossible choice between keeping the doors open and keeping the shelves full. It is a choice no library wants to make and one no library patron wants to face. This is particularly challenging in an age when the Materials budget needs to cover not just print material, but also the growing world of available digital content. Libraries today stand at the crossroads where demand for e-books is on the rise, yet print materials remain the preferred method for many. For a library, the mission is to provide free and fair access to information, no matter the delivery method. We are, you could say, technology agnostic. Whether it is a print novel, an audio tape, an ESOL class, a newspaper or an e-book, the library is committed to providing that information to its patrons, free of charge. Last year, Queens was the first library in the city to begin lending e-readers. Each device was pre-loaded with digital content organized by genre. The pilot, which launched at our Central library, was widely popular and quickly expanded into other locations. We can only continue to meet our growing demand with your continued support.

State support has also helped Queens Library continue to build state-of-the-art libraries that serve as community hubs for families, children, teens and seniors. The State

Construction Grant funding is critical to planned renovations in four libraries in Queens. The Bellerose, Bayside, Fresh Meadows and Woodhaven libraries will get interior makeovers in the coming year. These projects, which are being funded through a combination of City and State allocated funds, will bring new efficient technology for automated self-service check-in and check-out machines. They will bring new bright finishes, handicapped accessibility, smart and comfortably designed library spaces and much needed infrastructure improvements to those four communities.

Almost exactly a month ago today, New York had an unwelcome visitor - Hurricane Sandy. Lives and neighborhoods were forever altered. It will take time for our states to recover. With strong leadership at the City, State and Federal level, we surely will. There are so many heroes of the storm and so many agencies that will participate in the recovery. Libraries will absolutely play a critical role. In Queens, we have been on the ground from the earliest days. In Southern Queens, four of our libraries took on floodwaters and were all but destroyed. Several others were without power for weeks. None of these challenges hindered our efforts to deliver critical assistance in the days immediately after the storm to the neighborhoods we serve.

- We immediately established an emergency assistance location at our Far Rockaway Library, where—without light or heat—staff and volunteers handed out donated relief supplies and hundreds of meals daily. Soon, with a donated generator, lights and computers came back up to give people their first chance to charge phones or go online to reach out to friends and family.
- We dispatched a Mobile Library to the destroyed Peninsula Library where we have been providing social service assistance, online reference and information in a rapidly changing environment. Questions were plentiful: “Where is my child going to school tomorrow?” “Where should I vote today?” Some people just stopped in for a shoulder to cry on. The Mobile Library was positioned in a hub of emergency service providers and was both a haven and a resource to guide families in need. Volunteer librarians even provided outdoor story hours for kids waiting for their parents seeking services.

- At Arverne Library, another location where the library itself was destroyed, a temporary library complete with computers and staff was opened in the lot next door last week, while many in the community remained without power weeks after the storm.

What became clear in the aftermath of the storm, when phone networks remained down, when computers were flooded out and people displaced, is that a library can step in and provide the most critical of resources - information. Directing people to relief sites for food and water, to FEMA sites to apply for assistance, to their new school or new polling place when the original one had been destroyed, all proved critical to the early days of the recovery. Despite our own losses, which are still being calculated but are estimated in the \$10M range, Queens Library is committed to the communities we serve for the long haul.

As the needs change and the recovery continues, libraries will remain the first place families turn.

- We will continue to connect youngsters to enriching afterschool programs that support their studies in school.
- We will connect tens of thousands of teenagers and at-risk youth each day to a world of literature, of adult supervision and afterschool programs in a safe environment where they can spend their time.
- We will remain the largest employer of teenagers in our borough, hiring young people to reshelv books and assist patrons with computer learning.
- We will continue to serve the nearly 50% of foreign born residents in queens with cultural programs, English language classes, basic adult education, and the free resources that aid them in acclimating and becoming productive members of our society.
- We will help our customers get back to work by connecting thousands of job seekers with resume writing workshops, computer literacy and career counseling.
- We will connect seniors and the homebound with programs and materials by mail.
- We will refer residents to affordable health care and life saving screening services, improving the overall health of the community.

- We will continue to be the primary provider for computer access across the borough to bridge the digital divide to help New Yorkers most in need.

With so much hanging in the balance, we ask you to again prioritize libraries and increase the statewide commitment from Albany. With your increased support, we can put tools for success directly into more of our nearly 900,000 cardholders many more times a year. This great tradition of our service will help all New Yorkers better their lives.

Again, on behalf of Tom Galante and the Queens Library, I want to express my deep appreciation for your support and for welcoming our testimony here today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.