

I want to offer my thanks to the New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology, Assembly Member Bob Reilly, its Chair, and the other members, and staff, of the Committee, for this opportunity to provide testimony on the continued importance of public libraries and public library systems and the threat that state cuts pose to the continued effectiveness of this library cooperative.

I have had the privilege to serve as the Executive Director of the Mid-Hudson Library System for the past year and have worked in libraries for thirty years, largely in New York State, which included leadership positions at academic, public and school libraries, as well as at a BOCES.

Today, I represent a creative and vibrant community of sixty-six public libraries--the members of the Mid-Hudson Library System--in the five counties of Columbia, Dutchess, Greene, Putnam and Ulster, which is an area of 2,900 square miles. With its sixty-six members, Mid-Hudson helps support more libraries than any other library system outside of New York City, Queens or Brooklyn.

I would like to share today

- How public libraries are now being used by state residents more than ever and not less;
- How public libraries have become increasingly interdependent with one another and with library systems to achieve ever greater efficiencies and cost-savings in their services;
- How public libraries will continue to be relevant in an increasingly digital world and not less so; and
- How state cuts, which directly impact library systems, threaten the public library cooperative.

First, how are public libraries being used more by state residents than ever, not less?

Given everything one hears about the emerging and impending changes in the digital marketplace, and the immediacy of on-demand services, this may seem counter intuitive.

But our member libraries are like public libraries elsewhere in New York State. They are witnesses to the truth that public libraries serve as oases in economically troubled times. They can confirm the findings of a recent Harris Interactive survey that those who have been negatively impacted since 2008 by the economic crash and continuing slump are fifty percent (50%) more likely to visit a public library on a weekly basis than those not impacted; that thirty-seven percent (37%) of those impacted use the library more frequently than they did before the recession; and that eighty-one percent of those impacted are likely to have a library card compared to sixty-eight percent (68%) of those not impacted.

Mid-Hudson's member libraries have seen average increases of 10% in visits and 12% in circulation since 2008. Total visits increased to over 4 million in 2010 from 3.67 million in 2008, and circulation jumped to 4.7 million items from 4.2 million. 2011 promises to push these numbers even higher.

Our members have also seen an average increase of 10% in the use of their computers, Internet and WiFi since 2008. Indeed, people who have been negatively impacted by the economy are twice as likely to access the Internet at a public library than those who have not been impacted. In 2010, our members supported 800,000 computer sessions, which is a striking

number when you consider that the population served by our members is 650,000 according to the 2010 census.

Mid-Hudson's sixty-six member public libraries are busier than ever.

So how are public libraries interdependent with one another and library systems to achieve ever greater efficiencies and cost-savings in their services?

The Mid-Hudson Library System would be more aptly named the Mid-Hudson Public Library Cooperative because all our services are in response to planning conducted in concert with our members; and we leverage the economies of scale that are possible across five counties and sixty-six libraries to create efficiencies and cost savings in the services provided by our members.

For example, Mid-Hudson develops and administers a computer system that all sixty-six of its member libraries use to manage their collections and loans, and that their residents use to find, reserve and borrow library materials. We combine state funding and member library cost-sharing to make this system affordable to all our members, who serve populations from several hundred to 70,000. Many of our smaller members serving rural communities could not afford this system on their own and would not enjoy the efficiencies in staffing or the effective service to residents that this system provides.

Mid-Hudson also encourages, and its computer system supports, resource sharing among its members. This helps reduce costs for new materials, especially high demand items. More than a million items were shared between our members in 2010. Moving these items from library to library costs about 50 cents per item, round-trip. Again it's both state and member library funding that makes this possible. If every library were to purchase these items, the cost would be astronomical. But libraries, of course, wouldn't--couldn't--purchase items equal to what they share. Resource sharing and delivery is another example of the interdependence of libraries and library systems that achieve superior public service at substantially reduced cost.

State funding and funding by our members also help underwrite a number of other important services. The coordination and support we provide for the State's \$14 million Public Library Construction Grant program assist our members to efficiently use existing space or develop new space in response to changing community needs.

We coordinate the development of regional collections, such as Mid-Hudson's new eBook collection. We assist member libraries in information technology, governance, long-range planning and funding. We provide training and professional development for member library trustees, directors and staff.

But everything we do is the result of ongoing collaboration and planning with our members. Our new five-year plan of service for 2012-2016 was the result of a six-month process in which 244 member library trustees, directors, friends and staff from sixty-three libraries and five correctional facilities participated.

So how will public libraries continue to be relevant in an increasingly digital world and not less so?

The perception that public libraries will no longer be relevant in a digital world might be accurate if all digital content were free, or if everyone could afford this content. It is highly unlikely, however, that either of these will be true. Digital publications may be cheaper than print publications, but this will be relative: what costs \$65 in print may cost \$35 in digital format, what costs \$35 may cost \$15 and what costs \$20 may cost \$10. Authors and publishers can be expected to fight to the very last period in their publications for a fair return on their efforts. And so they should.

And if Committee Members have heard how some publishers refuse to make their digital publications available to public libraries, they also need to be aware that some of the same publishers, including the six largest U.S. publishers, refuse to support Amazon's new Kindle Owners Lending Library as well.

I believe it is important for the members of the Committee to understand that the role of public libraries in providing state residents access to information and the wealth of U.S. publications, no matter the ability of state residents to individually pay for this access, will continue to be an essential public good and justify continued state and local public funding.

The majority of our member libraries are also the only institution in their communities providing state residents access to computers, WiFi and the Internet. They are providers of last resort for these essential resources, which contribute to both a community's economic development and quality of life.

The regional economic development councils established by Governor Cuomo are presenting their strategic reports this week to the Empire State Development Strategic Plan Review Committee in Albany. The Mid-Hudson Regional Economic Development Council's presentation is today. Its five-year strategic plan recognizes that public libraries and library systems are partners in the state's workforce development. The computers, access to broadband, and digital literacy programs provided by public libraries are important economic resources.

But clearly, it will take substantial advocacy by libraries and library systems, as well as by the Regents and the State Library, to counter the quick judgment that many make that public libraries will somehow no longer be relevant in a digital world.

So how will state cuts, which directly impact library systems, threaten this remarkably effective public library cooperative.

Because of the significant reductions in State aid since 2008, Mid-Hudson has been forced to eliminate five full-time positions and reduce its staff by nearly thirty percent (30%). Mid-Hudson Library System now has the lowest staff per member library ratio in the state. As a result, our new five-year plan of service has shed all but the most essential services. We and our member libraries agreed to reduce support for youth services, literacy, and outreach to groups with special needs. We agreed that we would provide only those services that provide our members the greatest gain in resource sharing and cost savings.

One bright spot is that our member libraries will increase their direct support for these remaining services by a third beginning in 2012, from \$400,000 to \$600,000. But it's very unlikely that we would see any additional increases in support by our members if there were further state cuts.

Our members have seen the use of their services increase at a time when their very relevance is being questioned and public funding for these services are increasingly challenged. The tax cap law in the State has especially created a new downward pressure on the funding of public libraries, a public good that has rarely received its equal measure of public support in the past.

And our members face significant challenges in folding new digital formats into their existing collections. Expectations are that eBooks will increase to 9% of public library materials' budgets in five years. The combined budget for eBooks of Mid-Hudson's member libraries is presently just over \$40,000. This would need to increase to nearly \$230,000 by 2016 to meet expectations.

If there are further state cuts, it is difficult to see how the Mid-Hudson Library System could preserve the current system of cost and resource sharing that benefit its member libraries, irrespective of the size of the community they serve, and the state residents our member libraries serve.

I believe the testimony before the Committee today will make the risks that additional state cuts pose to public library service in the state very, very clear.