

## **Testimony for the Assembly Committee on Libraries and Education Technology**

Many thanks to Assemblyman Bob Reilly, Chair of the Committee on Libraries and Education Technology, and to all the members of that committee, for giving individuals in the library community an opportunity to testify on behalf of public libraries and library systems at last week's public hearing. Thanks, too, for inviting written testimony from those of us who were unable to attend the hearing. Mine follows below.

For the past four years, I have served as a trustee representing Putnam County on the Mid-Hudson Library System (MHLS) Board. Our library system serves residents of five counties and includes sixty-six member libraries. During the time I've been a trustee—which roughly parallels the time our economy has been on a downhill slide—member libraries system-wide have seen a marked increase in circulation. Tight budgets have meant that more and more people are borrowing books, eBooks, and audio books from libraries rather than buying or renting them. When individuals or families want to see a movie, they check out a DVD instead of renting one or paying high prices at the multiplex.

Internet use is also way up as those without home access are using library computers to look for employment, investigate new careers, seek networking opportunities, write resumes, apply for jobs, practice employment tests, access government assistance programs, and research job-training and educational opportunities. Students are using library computers to complete their homework, do independent research, apply to colleges, and fill out student loan forms. Increasingly, even people who do have computers at home are giving up their accounts and accessing the Internet for free at their local libraries. People are canceling magazine and newspaper subscriptions and reading their favorites at the library or via library databases instead.

Attendance at programs for children, teens and adults continues to rise as people seek free educational opportunities and entertainment. Foot traffic at all libraries is up as people relax and socialize together in what they think of as their community's living room. For people of all ages, from all walks of life, and from all demographics, our member libraries have increasingly become the trusted, reliable go-to spots for information, education and entertainment. For all these people, especially now, the library is a necessity, not an amenity.

Incredibly, during this interval when more and more people have been turning to libraries, funding for libraries at the state, county and local level has been drastically decreasing. For MHLS and its member libraries, this decreased support has forced library directors to make dire and profound cuts to staff and services. At MHLS, the cumulative effects of diminished state library aid for the past four years—amounting to a 23% cut—forced the painful decision to eliminate five full-time positions, reducing the staff by almost thirty percent. One of the consequences is that MHLS can no longer offer the same level of support for various services, including services to children and teens.

Albany's deep and disproportionate cuts to library aid over the past four years are hard to understand. No other state entity has been asked to endure such extreme cuts. What can possibly explain cutting library funding back to 1994 levels? That wasn't only two decades ago in another century, it was also in a previous millennium. Although the world has moved on, library funding seems to be stuck in the 90s.

The irony is that library systems have been achieving for years the goals that Governor Cuomo and lawmakers set this year for state entities: right-sizing government and creating efficiencies. Last January, the Governor established the Spending and Government Efficiency Commission (SAGE). Its broad mission is to make recommendations that will save taxpayer money and improve the delivery of

government services. SAGE is charged to identify and recommend operational improvements that increase cost effectiveness and improve service quality, such as shared services and changes in service delivery mechanisms. Because library systems have been successfully operating this way for years (fifty years, in the case of MHLS), they could serve as the model for SAGE to recommend. By applying economies of scale, New York's twenty-three public library systems enable local libraries in their area to provide essential library services. Through resource sharing, collaboration, and shared services, they create efficient, cost-effective models for delivery of these services. This model enables them to get the most from each state tax dollar. For every dollar systems receive from Albany, local libraries receive \$13 dollars in services. That's a remarkable return on investment. Without help from library systems, though, local communities would find it cost prohibitive to provide the library services that systems help them afford. So when Albany cuts funding to systems, local libraries suffer.

In Putnam County, three out of every four residents have library cards, and statistics from all eight of our libraries show they use them. With the downturn in the economy, our libraries are busier than ever. Because Putnam has no institutions of higher learning, our eight libraries are the go-to destinations for educational resources. Our libraries are one of the tax-funded services that people here value most and are most willing to pay for. This year, the Putnam County Legislature acknowledged the contribution that libraries make to Putnam's quality of life. Recognizing that libraries had not received an increase in funding since 2003, legislators voted for a one-time additional appropriation equal to 3% of the county's contribution. Paul Eldridge, interim County Executive, explained, "We want to make a significant gesture to acknowledge the important work they [libraries] do that makes Putnam County such a great place to live." Although funding challenges in 2013 will probably mean county funding will remain flat or decline—especially if Albany offers no relief from unfunded mandates—our eight libraries are very grateful for the one-time additional funding boost they received this year.

For the libraries in Putnam County that receive their funding from municipalities, the new tax cap legislation is taking its toll. In the case of one library, the town's contribution for 2012 has been reduced by half. For another library, the cut is not so steep, but the town has told the library it cannot continue its support in the future. The funding problems these libraries are facing now, or will face soon, make them a good example of how decisions made in Albany can directly hurt constituents at the local level.

I grew up using libraries, took my children to libraries, and taught middle school and high school students to value libraries. Very soon, I get to introduce my first grandchild to libraries. I'm familiar with the research documenting that access to ample collections, professionally staffed libraries, and current technology positively impacts student academic success. I've also seen firsthand how having access to good libraries makes a profound and lasting difference in children's lives. For these reasons, and because of the responsibilities adults have to children, I am especially concerned about the current state of library funding in New York. The elders of the Iroquois Nation believed that adults should cast away their own self interest, and in every deliberation, consider how their decisions would effect children seven generations into the future. Maybe there's a lesson there for our times.

I hope that the testimony you heard on November 29 and the additional written testimony you've received since then will be useful to you in convincing your fellow lawmakers that ample and fair funding for libraries and library systems is critical. Many thanks to all members of this committee for "fighting the good fight" on behalf of New York libraries. Because my impression is that all of you are as committed to libraries as I am, I'd like to wind up my remarks by sharing with you a cartoon I think you'll like. Drawn by Rob Rogers, the cartoon appeared in the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* on November 7. It features a little boy sitting on Santa's lap. He says to Santa, "I want books, computers...and the ability to travel through time and space!" Santa replies, "OK...Here's a library card." Doesn't that say it all?

Sincerely,

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