



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

November 29, 2011

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 Assemblywoman Grace Meng and Assemblywoman Barbara Clark, both members of this committee from Queens and both tremendous supporters of the Queens Library. I am pleased to join my colleagues today to share with you the work that we are doing day in and day out, and urge you to support institutions that are always so critical to the public, especially in times of continued economic uncertainty- our State's public libraries.

In New York City last year public libraries welcomed 40 million visitors, more than Times Square, Central Park, the Mall of America or Hong Kong. In New York State, nearly 118 million visits to a library were tallied. Queens Library is a library system that operates 62 public libraries for 2.3 million residents. In 2010, one in every eight library visits in the state happened in Queens and one of every eight items loaned was loaned in Queens. Usage is clearly up, with statewide attendance and circulation numbers both on the rise. New Yorkers use their libraries. The need is clear.

We are grateful for the support of this body that allows us to provide quality resources, programs and services, as well as state-of-the-art library facilities. Your capital, legislative and operating support are each critical pieces to ensure that we can be successful in our efforts to enrich the lives of the 900,000 library cardholders who rely on us.

As you know, last year, funding for public libraries was reduced statewide. Queens Library's share amounted to a loss of \$1.52 million. Cumulatively, since budget reductions began in 2008, Queens Library has lost \$3.8 million in State funding. It bears noting that our local support, on which we rely to support the majority of expenses, including staff and operating hours, has also been steadily reduced as the City has struggled to balance its budget. Despite the herculean efforts of our local legislators to successfully prioritize and restore robust funding each year, we have sustained significant losses. Staff has been reduced by 18% causing a similar reduction in days and hours of library service. For the fiscal year ahead, we anticipate facing a potential loss of over one-third of our current support. Taken cumulatively, City funding losses since 2008 totals \$49 million; we presently face a \$27 million additional reduction next year.

With this level of reductions on the table, we must redouble our efforts on every level to secure full funding for public libraries to support the residents of this State most in need. As the economy takes its toll on other government programs and assistance, libraries are increasingly the first place, indeed the only place, families turn. We connect youngsters to enriching afterschool programs that support their studies in school. We 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 in which they can spend their time. We are also the largest employer of teenagers in our borough, hiring

young people to reshelv books and assist patrons with computer learning. In our county, nearly 50% of residents are foreign born. Queens Library has long served as that critical first point of contact for immigrants to access English language classes, basic adult education, and the free resources that aid them in acclimating and becoming productive members of our society. Queens Library connects thousands of job seekers with resume writing workshops, computer literacy and career counseling. We connect seniors and the homebound with programs and materials by mail. We refer residents to affordable health care and life saving screening services, improving the overall health of the community. In Queens, we are the primary provider for computer access across the borough. We bridge the digital divide to help New Yorkers most in need. Without access to Queens Library, millions of downstate residents are literally unplugged. When you think of all the daily tasks that have migrated online, from applying for a job to paying your utility bills, it is easy to see how the loss of free access to the library, and our network of over 1,500 public computers, would handicap New York residents. We need your support to make sure that does not happen.

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. State funding reductions have had tangible adverse effects on our ability to support materials purchasing, resulting in a 59 percent reduction in the materials budget since 2008. We increasingly face the impossible choice between maintaining public service or filling the shelves with current relevant information, homework help materials and books of all kinds. The materials budget has been repeatedly slashed to meet funding reductions; it has reached historically low levels and is taking a toll on the public's access to free information, a corps mission of any library. State losses sustained have also taken their

toll on programs for the disabled and seniors funded through the Coordinated Outreach Services Program grant. Overall, shrinking government support has resulted in a reduction in force at Queens Library of 18% and a loss of public service hours of 14%, with weekend hours becoming increasingly rare.

There is no doubt that the State is facing continued fiscal challenges. We fully recognize those challenges and embrace the mantra of ‘doing more with less’. By stretching resources, utilizing technology, and leveraging government aid to access public and private grant dollars, we continue to provide top-notch library service each and every hour we are open. With so much of the State’s economic recovery depending on job creation it is up to us to provide an educated and job-ready workforce. That simply cannot happen without adequately equipped public libraries; and our public libraries cannot be adequately equipped without the statewide committed support of our legislators in Albany. Empires cannot be built in a vacuum.

State aid to libraries gives us the tools to deliver quality service and put books and educational materials into the hands of our 900,000 cardholders over 20 million times a year. We need your support to continue this great tradition of our service; so all New Yorkers have the tools they need to better their lives.

Again, I want to express our appreciation for your past support and for taking the time today to consider the importance of providing robust library service in New York State. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.