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To: Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology

Re: Public Hearing – Funding Public Libraries in New York State

Date: August 29, 2011

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today concerning the funding of public libraries and public library systems in New York State. My name is Terry Kirchner and I am the executive director of the Westchester Library System (WLS), a cooperative public library system comprised of 38 member public libraries. All of these libraries are located within the geographic boundaries of Westchester County.

2011-2012 Public Library Funding

The New York State Library Aid allocated to WLS is used to provide system-wide services to the communities served by our member libraries at no additional cost to the member libraries or their communities. These services include cataloging of materials; interlibrary loan to obtain items not owned within our system; consulting and training services for trustee and staff; the administering and coordinating of system-wide grants and purchases; shared access to over 5 million books, DVDs and CDs; the ability to attend over 24,000 educational and recreational programs and events; and outreach to underserved populations.

Examples of our outreach to underserved populations includes activities such as: the Senior Benefits Information Centers that provide information about Medicare and other government benefits to seniors and their caregivers; the career and educational counseling services at libraries that have been helping individuals transition to new careers, reenter the workforce and start new businesses; the GED Connect! project that pairs learners with trained volunteers so that they can more successfully prepare for and pass the GED test in New York State; Academic Help initiatives in libraries supporting after-school educational support programs staffed by trained teens who serve as role models for younger youth while gaining important job and life skills; and Mixing in Math programs that help school age children learn math concepts through fun, engaging games and activities at the libraries so that the children are better prepared to succeed in their elementary schools.

The New York State 2011-2012 funding appropriation for WLS and its member libraries is just over \$2.2 million. This amount is 6.42% less than the previous year, resulting in a year-to-year funding reduction of approximately \$153,000.

Four (4) full-time positions were cut from the organization for the 2011-2012 budget. These cuts resulted in the discontinuation of the system-wide bookmobile service and a reduction in the levels of support for consulting and educational services provided to children's and teen librarians.

Additional challenges faced by the WLS member libraries during the 2011-2012 State fiscal year include uncertainties about the impact of the tax cap limits and the MTA Tax. Currently, twenty nine (29) member libraries are municipal or association libraries without public budget votes and are subject to their municipalities' tax caps. In terms of the MTA Tax, the WLS member libraries will pay approximately \$124,000 in MTA taxes in 2011. Each of these situations stresses the already fragile financial situations of the public libraries in our system.

For 2011-2012, the Local Library Services Aid portion of system funding payable directly to the member libraries is approximately \$228,000, or ten percent (10%) of the overall Library Aid allocation received by WLS. This amount is also 6.42% less than the previous year, resulting in a year-to-year funding reduction of almost \$16,000. The member libraries use these Local Library Services Aid funds to support their operations and meet their minimum service standards – such as the number of hours that the library is open to serve the public.

Public Library Construction Grant Program

On a brighter note, the Public Library Construction Grant Program has allowed WLS member libraries to move forward on activities that they might not otherwise be able to afford. Approximately \$652,000 was available for WLS member libraries to use toward construction activities during the 2011-2013 time period.

The matching construction grant awards are being used for a range of projects including the replacement of old roofs, remodeling library entrances to make them safer and more ADA compliant, and upgrading and replacing HVAC systems. All of these projects will help the libraries provide their communities with safe, wi-fi compatible, comfortable places to learn, conduct business and engage with others. During recent weather events that left many communities and individuals without electrical power, people turned to the libraries to meet their essential needs for safety, comfort, information, and yes – technology.

Future Needs

The future is here and it is changing rapidly. Public library systems like WLS provide the technology training and support that allow libraries to meet the public's growing demand for downloadable electronic content; access to e-government forms and documents; computers for creating online resumes and submitting electronic job applications; and digital literacy training. Public library systems and public libraries provide an essential safety net for individuals not directly served by other institutions. The programs and services at libraries are geared to help individuals at all age and education levels discover new opportunities and learn new skills.

In these difficult financial times, we can agree that expenditures need to be reviewed and kept in line with revenues. Sometimes, however, a good investment provides many more opportunities than does a severe cut. I encourage you to remember that Library Aid is a good investment. Well-funded public library systems and public libraries will foster the growth of stronger, better educated, and more economically independent communities throughout New York State: A win-win situation for all.