

Assembly Standing Committee On Libraries And Education Technology

Public Hearing On Funding Public Libraries in New York State
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Thank you for this opportunity to report on how state funding has contributed to the growth of library service in all its many facets in Westchester County. As a library layman who has served as a trustee since 2003, I have seen firsthand how important state funding has been to accomplishing our mission of empowering libraries and empowering communities. On behalf of the trustees and other volunteers with whom I serve, I thank you for your support.

New York State funding represents about 38% of the Westchester Library System annual revenue. It is a powerful driver of a growing number of library-based activities that serve many populations in our diverse communities and supports our economic, educational, and quality of life initiatives. In Westchester County, the Westchester Library System (WLS) and the member public libraries have worked collaboratively with many local partners to bring a wide range of services to all county residents. In this testimony we will highlight just a few of the ways that WLS has used State Library Aid to support our local communities.

Learning Ambassadors provides summer training and employment opportunities for youth aged 14-19, with most participants residing in economically disadvantaged communities. The participants are trained in communication, library science, and technical skills, then fill a variety of roles that support children and teen summer reading activities as well as computer workshops for adults. The twenty seven (27) ambassadors this past summer reported an increase in self-confidence, a better competency in technology and early childhood literacy skills, and a stronger desire to excel in school. Numerous local agencies teamed with WLS to make this program possible, including the member libraries, the Mount Vernon Youth Bureau, the Great Potential Program at SUNY Purchase and Upward Bound at Mercy College.

GED Connect! is a technology-based, volunteer driven project that helps adult learners obtain their General Equivalency Degree. WLS created and supports an online portal for low-literacy users, www.firstfind.org, that allows for 24/7 access to this learning tool at no cost to users. Trained volunteers provide one-on-one learning support for students at eight (8) public libraries throughout Westchester County: Greenburgh, Mount Kisco, Mount Vernon, New Rochelle, Ossining, Peekskill, White Plains, and Yonkers. Since this program began in 2011, demand has grown steadily. Local partners working with WLS on this initiative include Westchester Community College in Peekskill, Westhab in Mount Vernon, and Neighbors Link in Mount Kisco.

Senior Benefits Information Centers (SBICs) help residents aged 60 and older to understand and apply for Medicare and other benefits and services that help them lead healthier and happier lives. The Medicare Rights Center (MRC) and the Westchester County Department of Senior

Programs and Services (WDSPP) partner with WLS to make this program available at eight (8) public libraries in the county: Greenburgh, Mount Kisco, New Rochelle, Peekskill (Field) , Port Chester-Rye Brook, Shrub Oak (John C. Hart Memorial), Tarrytown (Warner) and Yonkers (Grinton I. Will). In 2011 the SBIC program received a National Association of Counties Achievement Award for its contribution to enhancing effective county government.

Economic Development has long been supported by WLS and our member libraries. Among the initiatives made possible in some part by state funding are:

- Career counseling. WLS has partnered with the public libraries to offer career and educational counseling seminars, workshops and one-on-one session to the public for 31 years. These programs are available to the public at no cost, and as one could imagine the demand for them is very high. In 2011 over 2,400 individuals participated in these programs. Historically, more than 90% of them rate the experience as “good to excellent” and 42% of those surveyed reported a positive change in employment status such as finding more challenging work, receiving higher pay and/or an increase in promotional opportunities since attending a program.
- The Westchester Putnam One-Stop. WLS and the public libraries in Greenburgh, Katonah, North Castle, and Tarrytown (Warner) have shared resources to create satellite locations that provide easier access to resources and services to job seekers and the under-employed.
- Technology infrastructure. WLS supports the technology infrastructure for the public computer workstations and wireless access at 44 public library sites in Westchester. This technology infrastructure allows library staff to lead computer training and social media workshops for the public, allows individuals to create and update resumes and cover letters, and enables job seekers to fill out online application forms or search job related databases such as JobNow and Career and Job Accelerator.

Training and Professional Development through WLS is also made possible by State Library Aid. Library staff and trustees at the member libraries benefit from a range of training and professional development activities. Recent workshops covered a multitude of topics including autism, compliance and governance issues, customer service, fundraising, grant writing, immigrant services, supporting special needs students and their families, social media, volunteer recruitment, and working with at-risk youth. The goal of these workshops is to help libraries operate more effectively and engage with all members of their communities.

State Library Construction Grants have been put to good use in Westchester County. This year WLS supported fourteen (14) library construction projects through the State’s Public Library Construction Grant Program. These projects will allow libraries to create facilities that better meet the growing need for community and meeting room spaces, update and replace aging infrastructure, create ADA compliant facilities, and help address the growing role of libraries as relief centers during times of catastrophe. From an economic perspective, library construction projects provide additional local jobs and enhance retail sales at nearby businesses. One of those fourteen projects is particularly close to my heart since the state construction grant was leveraged by the Harrison Public Library to attract additional private funding to construct the library’s first

Teen Center, which will include a feature-rich high-tech environment dedicated to a population currently under-served by that library.

Public libraries and public library systems have been, and continue to be, a good investment for the State of New York. By encouraging collaboration and using leverage, state funding improves library service and helps our public libraries operate more efficiently. The Westchester Library System saves \$36 million annually for our 38 member libraries by providing cooperative programs, technology, and other services made possible in large part by New York State funding. We thank you for your past support and strongly encourage the Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology to support an increase in library aid for the 2013-2014 State budget.