

Thank you, Chairman Reilly and committee members, for inviting oral and written testimony regarding how state funding affects the services public libraries are able to provide their communities. In my remarks, I'll primarily focus on what I've recently experienced and observed in public libraries in the region I've called home for the last ten years—Putnam County. Although I've served as a trustee on a local library board, and most recently on the Mid-Hudson Library System Board, I'm representing only myself today: an avid and unabashed library user and supporter.

As you probably know, Putnam County—approximately sixty miles north of New York City—is a mostly-rural area blessed with open space and a multitude of reservoirs that are part of the watershed for the metropolis. Putnam's area of 240 square miles makes it the third-smallest county in the state outside of the five boroughs. Of the state's sixty-two counties, Putnam ranks just about in the middle in regard to population—almost 100,000 residents. In spite of that sizable population, Putnam has no institutions of higher learning and not one book store. For residents who seek information, culture or entertainment, our eight public libraries truly serve as the “universities of the streets.”

In Putnam, three out of every four residents have library cards, and statistics from all eight libraries show they use them. If people were not already library users, the challenging economic situation of the past several years has increasingly brought them in. Tight budgets have meant that more and more people are borrowing books, eBooks, and audio books instead of 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. People are canceling magazine and newspaper subscriptions and reading their favorites at the library or via library databases instead. And attendance at programs for children, teens and adults continues to rise as people seek learning opportunities and free entertainment.

I've observed that computer stations and labs at our libraries are constantly busy. Those who have given up home access to the Internet to save a few dollars—or who never had home access in the first place—are using library computers for a variety of purposes. Many are looking for employment, investigating new careers, seeking networking opportunities, writing resumes, applying for jobs, practicing employment tests, accessing government-assistance programs, and researching job-training and educational opportunities. Lacking a county employment center, residents head to our libraries. There they find staff members who have been trained to help them find and use the resources—online and in print—that will improve their chances for re-entering the workforce. For these people—particularly now—the library is a necessity, not an amenity.

There's something intangible, too, that libraries offer those who have lost their jobs or are down on their luck. I'd characterize it as a sense of belonging. When a person has been cut from the payroll and is no longer expected to clock in or show up at the office, that individual has not only lost a job, but has also lost a community. Where does that person fit in any longer? Libraries create communities where everyone is welcome. While there is no pressure to converse with others or participate in any way, the opportunity to interact is always there. It has been said that during the Great Depression, libraries became such resources and refuges for the out-of-work that they were called “the bread lines of the spirit.” From what I've experienced, the same is true today. Libraries are truly the cozy living rooms and comfy front porches that draw in and shelter the residents of our little communities in Putnam.

Incredibly, at a time when more and more people have been turning to libraries, funding for libraries at the state level has been poor at best. Given that libraries are asked to provide the ever-increasing services New Yorkers need and deserve, Albany's record of deep and disproportionate cuts to library aid over the past several years is basically unacceptable. What other state entity has been asked to endure such extreme cuts? I'm aware that last year libraries received a 4% increase to match the

increase given to schools, but that brought up funding only to 1994 levels. Is there any other state agency operating at last-century funding levels? Although the world has moved on, state funding for libraries seems to be stuck in the '90s.

I find it ironic that public libraries and public library systems—models for creating efficiencies through resource sharing, collaboration, and shared services—are not acknowledged for their successful cost-effective solutions by fair and ample funding from Albany. Instead, they're underfunded. Are you aware that for every dollar public library systems receive from Albany, local libraries receive roughly \$13 dollars in services? Talk about more books for the buck! That's a remarkable return on investment. Without help from public library systems, local communities would find it cost prohibitive to provide the library services that systems help them afford. So when the state cuts funding to systems, local libraries suffer. If funding for systems is not substantially restored in the next budget, the eight libraries in Putnam will face difficult decisions regarding cutting essential services or increasing local taxes.

My hope is that the members of this committee won't allow this to happen. It's been said that where you stand depends on where you sit. If you haven't visited your own local library lately, do. Pull up a chair and just watch all that's going on for a half hour or so. If you have any doubts about how much your neighbors use and value their local library, I think your perspective will change with that experience.

While I am grateful for the little bump upward in library aid last year, it's simply not enough. I realize that lawmakers have many requests for increased funding from various constituencies across the state. Still, to ensure the continuance of the critical services public libraries provide to so many New Yorkers—particularly to the laid-off, the lost, and the least—I hope you will seriously consider funding public libraries and library systems at the level they actually deserve. Many thanks for your time.

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