Jennifer Ogrodowski  
Saratoga Springs Public Library  
President 2012-2013 YSS (Youth Services Section of NYLA)

2012-2013 budget = $82.927 million in state aid. This was the funding amount for 1997/98 ($82.8). This budget is the same amount given 15 years ago.

Introductory Remarks

In the notice of this hearing, it was stated that “libraries continue to represent a community investment.” I want to thank the committee for the recognition of public libraries and library systems as an investment in communities. It is vitally important that this view continue, for when we educate individuals, communities become stronger. The value of this public good extends beyond the walls of the library and ripples on beyond those who immediately benefit from its resources to those who are impacted by an individual’s motivation to acquire further knowledge and understanding.

I have long believed in the power of the public library to serve and educate all. A society is only as strong and wise as those individuals which build it. The beauty and strength of a public library is its accessibility. The goods and services provided by these institutions can change lives and encourage communities to stay vital and strong.

Libraries are not merely warehouses of books (though some may have this antiquated view). They are living institutions where community members and visitors come to learn, to grow, and to connect. In our role, we not only assist people in finding materials, guide them in the use of new technologies, help children find answers to homework questions, offer early literacy activities for the very young, and provide parent education programs. We also serve as community facilitators, bringing together groups of individuals with different ideas and resources in a meaningful way that helps our patrons to find new connections.

Programs and services libraries and library systems are providing in their local communities

As I am here representing youth services, I will speak in general terms regarding a sample of types of programs that public libraries across the State are providing to their communities.

A sample list of programs provided are: library babies, afterschool workshops, preschool story programs, story and music programs, story and art programs, therapy dogs, parenting workshops, technology classes for children and teens, and more.

The impact and value of such programs can be seen in statistics on early literacy development as well as their connection to current initiatives in education. Many of the programs that we provide to young people are geared at supporting their growth and development and supplementing the education that they receive at school and through the home. We continue to learn just how important it is to support early literacy education and experiences from the very beginning. Children who cannot yet read are still
developing the foundational skills necessary to be able to read when they are ready. We know that the interaction between a child and a trusted adult, whether it be a parent, a grandparent, a teacher or a caregiver is essential to helping children make gains in language development. The ability to make sense of and use language is the start to a lifetime of learning. For many children, the library is a place where this learning is reinforced. As children hear more language and participate in its creation, they grow stronger in their ability to understand concepts. Adults who participate in family literacy activities with their children learn how to continue to encourage their children in this reinforced learning.

In addition to literacy programs for the very young, libraries also provide opportunities for school age children to explore literature, science, art, dance, and more. Through these afterschool programs, children learn to be inquisitive, learn new skills and have a chance to further engage in activities that support such initiatives as STEM and the Common Core. As much as possible, public libraries strive to work with local schools and homeschool families and groups to offer opportunities for such growth and reinforcement.

A sample list of additional services public libraries provide to children, teens and families include: user education (technology, research), readers’ advisory, reference, class/school visits, community organization (cub scouts, girl scouts, etc.) tours, programs, and instruction.

Libraries provide not only programs and access to materials, but also knowledgeable staff to assist patrons in finding learning new skills and finding information. Part of the service that libraries offer is the assistance needed to connect the user with the information or experience that the user is seeking. While technology has made it possible to access the world at our fingertips, that amount of access also comes with the sometimes daunting task of actually finding what one is looking for amidst it all. The user education services that public libraries provide through one on one consultations, through workshops, and through group visits helps library users to navigate through physical and online environments to reach the information they seek.

Since our library is chartered to serve a certain geographic area and we have limited staff, we are not able to accommodate requests from community groups that are based outside of our service area. Recently, a cub scout troop parent called asking if he could schedule a library tour and workshop on how to use the library and find information so that the troop could earn their library badge. As much as I would have liked to say yes to him, I could not because the troop was based out of a neighboring service area. I explained to him why we were not able to do the program and suggested that he contact his local library as I was sure the librarian there would be happy to help. Upon this suggestion he said that he had called them, but that they were not open on the day they could bring the troop. This is where funding becomes critical so that libraries can operate during hours to meet their community’s needs.

How libraries and library systems are using collaboration and technology to better leverage their resources

Library systems continue to provide consistent delivery services to member libraries, helping to fill patron requests when individual library budgets do not allow them to do so. Because our systems do this, we are able to get children enough copies of a book that they are required to read when the
some libraries cannot. Because our systems do this, libraries with limited funding for materials and/or space are able to offer their community members the chance to also have access to materials that would otherwise be denied to them.

Library systems, if funding allows for it, have youth services consultants who know that continuing education and collaboration is an important part of keeping up with user expectations and needs. These consultants work to bring youth services staff together for training and collaborative meetings that allow youth services staff to continue to provide quality service to their communities. They also work to promote and support the libraries in their systems through collaborative programs and grant-seeking activities. At this point, many library systems do not have a full time youth consultant to provide this type of support.

Some libraries in the State have used technology in the form of video webcasts to provide their community members with author visits. For libraries who cannot afford to pay the costs of transportation and lodging for an author visit, this has been one way that libraries have been able to offer such opportunities to their communities using technology to better leverage the resources that they do have. In addition, many libraries are taking advantage of free or inexpensive social media outlets as a way to keep their public informed on library happenings and developments. Online learning environments are another way that libraries can provide opportunities and stretch their resources for their communities. However, this does require the technology and staff training to be able to do so.

**Testimony to ascertain the future funding needs of our public libraries and library systems**

**Technology needs:** With new devices and platforms come more ways of accessing information. While libraries still work with books, they must also keep up with an ever-increasing demand for information on how to use new technologies. This is part of the job that has been added to what library staff is expected to know and offer assistance with. While library staff members continue to order and weed and plan programs and answer reference and readers’ advisory questions, community members also look to library professionals to tell them how to use their e-book or what apps are good for their children. I do not believe that the prevalence of hand-held personal technology is a trend that will soon be gone. Current technology means that people can access information anytime, anywhere, and yet, with an overwhelming amount of information at their fingertips, patrons still look for guidance in sifting through this data. If anything, libraries need the tools and training to be able to help their community members navigate through it all. Technology is ever-changing and yet, patrons ask that we keep up with it so that we can help them. To do so, libraries need the continued financial resources to help stay one step ahead of the technology curve so that they can meet patron needs and expectations.

**Staff training:** Intertwined with the technology needs is the ongoing need for staff training. Staff need the time and the resources to keep up with new technologies. Funding is necessary to making this happen. For small libraries that are lucky if they have one librarian who is scheduled to work 25 hours a week (but puts in many more voluntary hours on top of that to keep the library going), it is often almost impossible for the library staff to attend training that would allow them to keep up with the demand for knowledge of devices and web-based learning tools. Beyond staff training in technology, it is also
important that staff who work with children keep up with current trends in early childhood development and educational philosophies and mandates. In order for public librarians to support the students, teachers, and parents in their communities, they must have time to further develop their skills and understanding of working with children of all ages. Youth services librarians must have knowledge and understanding of infant, toddler, preschool, elementary school, tween, teen, young adult, adult and older adult populations. As youth service librarians we often move between serving these individual groups at one moment to serving several groups at once in family program settings. We must give validity to the work and knowledge that it takes to effectively meet the educational and experiential needs of all of these groups by continuing to provide funding that will allow staff to remain up-to-date on how to best design programs and services geared towards these populations.

Staffing to meet community needs: Most of the time libraries are not able to meet the demands of the communities they serve for better access to the libraries, more programs to support the growth and development of their children, or computer literacy needs because they simply do not have the funding necessary to provide the staff necessary to meet these needs. Many libraries rely on volunteers to help them supplement some of the work the professional staff does, but this is often not enough. Volunteers are not staff, and they cannot be expected to be held to the same level of dedication and continuing education that staff members can. To create programs and services and sustain these programs for as long as they are needed and useful, staff is required. Without staff, libraries are merely warehouses and not cultural centers of community education.

Closing Remarks

If we truly value libraries as a community investment, we must be willing to fund that investment. We must see it as a priority that is worth funding. When libraries are denied funding or given less funding than they were given over a decade ago, it sends a strong message to community members in towns and villages and across the State. It sends the message that they are not vital, they are not important, they are not worth investing in; that community education for all is not worth investing in. I ask that our beautiful State continue to tell the people who reside in it that it cares about their future and their children’s future. I ask that it send a strong message that says public libraries as centers of community education and exploration are important. I ask that it do so by continuing to fund public libraries and library systems so that they can be centers of community education that people can depend on.

1 see “History of Library Aid 1990-2011/12”+

2 see “Zero to Three: Early Language and Literacy”
http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/early-language-literacy/

11/27/12 jo