

Testimony of Brooklyn Public Library
Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology
Impact of the 2016-17 State Budget on the Mission of NYS Libraries in the 21st Century
December 13, 2016

Good morning. My name is Michele Bonan and I am Vice President of Government and Community Relations for Brooklyn Public Library.

I would like to thank Chair Abinanti and the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today. We are grateful to you and to Assembly Speaker Heastie for your support of New York's public libraries. Because of your leadership, Brooklyn Public Library received increased funding in the 2016-2017 state budget.

Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) is an independent library system for the 2.5 million residents of Brooklyn. It is the fifth largest library system in the United States, with 60 branches located throughout the borough and more than 1 million patrons. We maintain a collection of more than 4 million books and 65,000 electronic materials; in fiscal year 2016 we circulated nearly 15 million books, DVDs, e-books and other materials. People are using our libraries more than ever; we hosted nearly 65,000 program sessions with almost a million attendees in the last fiscal year.

I'm proud to share that in a ceremony at the White House earlier this year, Brooklyn Public Library earned the National Medal; the nation's highest honor for museums and libraries. The National Medal is awarded to institutions that respond to societal needs in innovative ways, making a difference for individuals, families and communities. BPL was recognized in part for the work of our Outreach Services Department, which offers citizenship classes for new Americans, creative aging workshops for older adults, an oral history project for veterans and the Books-to-Go program for homebound library patrons.

Much of that programmatic work is made possible thanks to government funding, and we are grateful that you continued to direct additional resources to libraries in last year's budget. Thanks to your leadership total library aid increased by \$4 million to \$95.6 million, but it is still \$7 million shy of the amount required, and relatively equivalent to funding levels of 14 years ago. At BPL, the \$7.5 million we received last year went to library materials, our Business and Career Center, our coordinated outreach services, services for older adults, and services for the incarcerated—much of the programming that won us the National Medal.

In addition to the operating dollars that you provide us, we are very grateful for the \$1.8M we received last year in Library Construction Aid. Thanks again to your leadership, Construction Aid was increased for the first time in 10 years up to \$19 million. We are putting this year's allocation toward construction of the new Greenpoint Library and Environmental Education Center at the site of our existing branch. Brooklyn Public Library was awarded a \$5 million grant from the Greenpoint Community Environmental Fund, a joint program of the NYS Attorney General and the NYS Department of Environmental

Conservation created with funding from a settlement with ExxonMobil over its oil spill in Greenpoint. With matching funds secured by the Library, the new branch will be a model of sustainable development and provide significantly more space, indoor and out, for expanded programs and activities, information and special collections that increase awareness and stewardship of the local environment, as well as hosting space for community and environmental groups to hold meetings and public events. We are grateful for the opportunity to put funding toward this innovative project, something we could never have undertaken without significant funding.

Equally, BPL is very appreciative of the assistance we receive from individual members. We have numerous State and Municipal Capital Grant (SAMs) project applications pending from our members around the borough, and just recently, we celebrated a \$3M technology grant from the members of the Brooklyn Assembly Delegation, led by Joe Lentol. Several years in the making, this grant allowed us to establish a baseline level of technology at each of our branches, so we can offer sophisticated equipment to every neighborhood we serve—including, televisions, gaming consoles, Apple and Microsoft laptops, Lego Robotics and Little Bits kits, portable sound systems and more. Our librarians and technology resource specialists can host more programs and thousands of patrons will have free use of equipment that they might not have at home or in school. Without this funding, we would never have been able to roll out technology upgrades like this, system wide.

While all of these projects have been enormously helpful, and as grateful as we are for the state aid we receive, Brooklyn Public Library has staggering capital needs that we are not close to resolving. Years of underfunding has left us with more than \$300 million in unmet capital needs system-wide, nearly \$80 million of which are emergency infrastructure needs like boilers, roofs, fire/life safety and security upgrades. BPL is facing a deferred maintenance crisis that is impacting every neighborhood in the borough.

Our libraries are aging. The average branch is 65 years old, and many are in poor physical condition. Eighteen of our buildings are historic Carnegie Libraries, over 100 years old, with millions of dollars needed to bring them into good repair. The failing condition of our infrastructure hampers our ability to deliver library service. Last year, 41 of our 60 buildings had an unplanned closure, in total 400 hours of service were lost. Many of our major systems are not functioning at all; we have many branches that are operating with *temporary* chillers in summer and heaters in the winter that are well beyond their useful life.

With an average of \$15 million in capital funding provided each year by the city and another \$1 to \$2 million from the state, the Library is continually forced to 'triage' only a small handful of the most serious projects and leave countless, critical infrastructure needs unaddressed.

Clearly, there is much more to be done if we are to significantly improve the Library's ability to maintain its physical infrastructure, let alone create modern inspirational spaces for learning and enjoyment.

Of course we are not here simply to report on the budget or request greater investment from government, but also to let you know that libraries are working hard at conserving resources, and collaborating to realize greater efficiencies.

There is no stronger example of collaboration to realize efficiency than BookOps, a shared library technical services organization created by Brooklyn Public Library and the New York Public Library in 2013. Our two systems joined forces to pull back-office library work out of the branches and consolidate the work offsite at an NYPL facility in Long Island City. BookOps is tasked with managing the collections of NYPL and BPL systems (separately) including; book selection and purchasing, sorting, cataloging and pick up and delivery of materials to libraries in each system. We have leveraged purchasing for our two large systems to negotiate better pricing on electronic resources and subscriptions. It is estimated that BookOps saves BPL \$2 million annually.

As a result, back-office library clerical work became much less of the focus in our branches. BPL's Information Technology department re-trained those clerical staff and created a new career path for them within the Brooklyn Public Library system. We have been able to keep those jobs, and train staff to become Technology Resource Specialists, or TRSs. They serve our patrons and staff in every branch; helping patrons understand how to use technology and hosting programs from computer and internet basics to coding.

Another citywide collaboration pools together library resources for the benefit of our public schools. MyLibraryNYC is a partnership between New York City's three public library systems and the NYC Department of Education. The program helps students and teachers access materials beyond their school library allowing them to access books—including teacher sets, DVDs, magazines, newspapers, online databases and other digital materials. MyLibraryNYC library cards have no fines on books from Brooklyn Public Library. Over 135 Brooklyn public schools are participating in the program in the current school year.

Additionally, we have partnered this year to expand the Library Hotspot, a program that has already loaned thousands of mobile wireless internet devices to New Yorkers who do not have home internet access. This year, through ConnectED a partnership with the city's public library systems and the Department of Education, Google, and Sprint, we will offer free wi-fi hotspots to public school students and families without home internet access.

These are among some of our strongest collaborations, but we are continually searching for ways to move forward efficiently and offer the best possible opportunities to the public. We thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your support of Brooklyn Public Library. We look forward to our continued partnership.