



**Testimony of the New York Library Association  
Public Hearing of the New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology  
December 13, 2016**

Good morning. Thank you for providing me the opportunity to submit testimony today on behalf of our state's local libraries, library systems, and the millions of New Yorkers who rely each day on the services libraries provide.

First, we thank the Chair of the Committee for calling this hearing, and for his unwavering commitment to our most valuable community assets, our local libraries. The library community is grateful for your leadership of this Committee, and the great work of the Committee under your guidance.

We are also grateful that, thanks in part to this Committee and our partners in the legislature, this year's enacted state budget attempted to address the chronic, inequitable underfunding of the State Library Aid Program and State Library Construction Aid Program. Despite these recent efforts, the last decade of piecemeal and patchwork funding has rendered lasting reductions in services, staffing, and programs, and deprived a generation of New Yorkers of the quality libraries they deserve. Persistent recession-era state funding for library programs is not only in opposition to public sentiment, but continues to have a disparate impact on those New Yorkers who rely most on library services.

Particularly confounding is that these funding choices have occurred while documented library usage is surging statewide. A January 2015 Siena Research Poll found that over the preceding three years, library usage increased 10% statewide, 15% among women, nearly 15% among African-American respondents, 15% among Latino respondents, and among all income demographics, with usage up 20% for those households making less than \$50,000 annually. This poll also found that 70% of respondents have used their local library in the preceding six months.

**Libraries are Education**

Our state's libraries are chartered by the same Board of Regents that oversees schools, colleges, BOCES and other educational institutions, and State Library Aid is administered through the NYS Department of Education. Libraries are the original pre-K, and are the lone institutions dedicated to lifelong education. Libraries are the leading digital literacy educators in New York State. When schools close at the end of each day, each week and each school year, libraries remain open to New York's children and families.

These points are not conjecture or platitudes, they're rooted in fact. According to the above-referenced Siena poll, 94% of respondents said public libraries are important to our state's educational infrastructure, while more than 80% of women, African-Americans, Latinos, and households making less than \$50,000 say public libraries are "very important" to our educational system. A clear majority of respondents desire increased library funding, with nearly half saying library funding should increase proportionately with education funding. State lawmakers must move away from arbitrarily considering library aid as an expenditure outside of our state's educational infrastructure, and bring funding priorities in line with how an overwhelming majority of New Yorkers view these critical educational resources.

### **Library Funding is About Access and Equality**

Libraries serve as essential portals to the indispensable world of digital information. Startlingly, for nearly 33% of African-American and Latino respondents, and 25% of households making less than \$50,000 annually, the public library is their **primary source of internet access**. Without the robust digital and information services provided by their local library, millions of New Yorkers would not have been able to sign up for the state's health exchange, complete college applications and student loan documents, research the positions of political candidates, or review proposed state and local budgetary decisions that directly affect their daily lives. Further, the recent Siena Poll found that libraries are particularly critical in economically disadvantaged communities: of the respondents who have used their local public library for job seeking or career building programs in the last six months, 53% were African-American, and 40% were households making less than \$50,000 annually.

### **Library Systems are Models for Shared Services**

For more than fifty years, New York's Library Systems have served as models of governmental cooperation and efficiency. State Library Aid, in large part, supports local library systems; library systems enable individual libraries to provide access to materials and services they are unable to provide their own. This is accomplished through sharing technology services, resources and collections, and conducting cooperative purchasing. According to the State Education Department, state investment in libraries has yielded a return in excess of 7:1 for every dollar allocated.

### **Library Infrastructure is Rapidly Aging and Requires State Capital Investment**

The FY2016-17 state budget reversed a decade of stagnant funding for the state Library Construction Aid Program. More than half of the local libraries in New York State are now over 60 years old, with an additional one-third over 30 years old. A recent report from the State Education Department documents a capital need of more than \$1.7B for libraries statewide. An annual \$19M investment simply cannot address this issue. According to SED, the State Library Construction Aid Program leverages a nearly 5:1 return for every dollar invested. The State Library Aid Construction Program is one of the few state capital aid programs that directly, positively impacts every resident of our state, and provides an immediate, demonstrated return on investment every year.

### **New York State Must Retire Recession-Era Funding Cuts**

Funding for State Library Aid still lags pre-recession funding levels. This past year, state policymakers repealed one of the last vestiges of recession-era School Aid funding cuts, the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) – it is now time to fully address the austerity measures that continue to plague State Library Aid. Dating to FY2008-09, nearly \$111 million has been withheld from statutory State Library Funding formulas -- the cumulative impact of fully de-funding library aid for more than a year. This persistent underfunding has devastated system services to the continued detriment of individual, local libraries and the patrons they serve. Education funding has largely rebounded since FY2008-09, with total spending up nearly 16%; Foundation Aid up nearly 11%; BOCES aid up 29%; State Library Aid is down 4.3%. The effects are felt not only by students who rely on after-school, weekend, and summer programming that supplements their classroom learning, but by their families and adult learners in every community.

Libraries are education.

Libraries are access.

Libraries are equality.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Jeremy Johannesen  
NYLA Executive Director