



**New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries
and Education Technology**

December 13, 2016

Good morning. My name is Nick Buron, Chief Librarian and Senior Vice President at Queens Library. Before I begin my testimony, I would like to thank you Mr. Chair, all your colleagues in the State Legislature, and Governor Cuomo for the \$4 million increase in State Library Operating Aid this past fiscal year, as well as for the \$5 million increase in State Construction Aid. Thank you for holding today's important hearing to allow us to talk about the many programs and services Queens Library provides for over 2.3 million people in Queens County, to discuss the impact of state operating and construction aid on the Library, as well as some of the challenges we still are facing.

Every day, Queens Library provides the broadest range of services to New Yorkers from all walks of life. Whether it is a family trying to give their pre-school aged child an educational head start, or a senior citizen keeping their mind sharp by engaging in social activities, and every age group in between, you can find a free program at our libraries.

Queens Library is a national leader in the delivery of varied and innovative services to our youngest library patrons. We are the first public library in the country to collaborate with a municipal education department to provide a library-based, accredited, universal pre-kindergarten program. We have pre-K instruction at our Woodhaven community library, where we graduated our first class in June 2015. We also provide classes at a second site at our Ravenswood learning center, which began in September 2015. Queens Library also offers a unique Kick- Off to Kindergarten (K2K) program, an eight-week school readiness program for children ages 3-5 and their caregivers. K2K was originally developed and piloted by Queens Library professionals at eight community libraries. An independent evaluator assessed the program and the results showed that 65% of the children spoke a language other than English at home. After eight (8) sessions, 85% of those students showed measurable educational attainment which is quite a testament to how effective this program has been. Due to its success and popularity, we are expanding the program, with plans to have it in every community library in Queens.

In Fiscal Year 2016, over 317,000 young people attended Queens Library programming for children and teens. Recognizing our potential and the importance of reaching this age group, Queens Library developed a free, evidence-based afterschool program called Stacks, which is designed to enhance students' learning experiences through structured and unstructured age-appropriate activities that build emotional, social, and academic skills. We are currently offering this program at twenty (20) of our community libraries, and the response has been tremendous. Due to the program's popularity, we have waiting lists at nearly every location as many parents are struggling to find quality afterschool programs in a safe environment for their children. We have plans to expand the program to every library in our system, but need additional funding.

Queens Library operates one of the largest library-run literacy programs in the United States. Our Young Adult Literacy Program (YALP) provides resources to young adults in various capacities. We provide our young adult literacy participants with a wide array of instructional, vocational, recreational, family support, and social services. Instructional services include:

- Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Pre-HSE (High School Equivalency)
- Job Readiness/Resume Preparation Workshops
- Small Literacy / English Learning Groups
- Computer-Assisted Instruction
- Monthly Cultural Workshops & Center Outings
- Independent Learning Materials
- An Extensive Book and Multimedia Collections

In Fiscal Year 2016, we provided over 160 sixteen-to-twenty-four year olds with academic preparation toward a high school diploma, intensive case management, internships, and job shadowing.

Our Adult Learner Program (ALP) provides services, resources, and life-long learning opportunities to the changing communities of Queens. In addition to our core initiatives, ALP offers Adult Learning Resources for students and educators, including ESOL; Learn to Read programs and activities for beginning to mid-level adult readers; and Pre-HSE classes for adults who speak English and want to improve their reading and math skills in preparation for HSE classes. We operate seven Adult Learning Centers, with full-time professional staff and volunteers who tutor literacy groups and facilitate English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) conversation groups. Centers also offer Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes, video groups, writing groups, technology-assisted instruction, and ongoing tutor training provided by

professional staff. In Fiscal Year 2016, we served 5,500 adult learners, and 1,700 students participated in our structured 12-week ESOL program. Our Adult Learner Program is widely popular and in high demand. We provide ALP services at 38 community libraries, but we are still struggling to meet demand. For example, we were forced to turn away over 1,000 individuals from our ESOL program because we did not have a seat for them. We need additional funding to accommodate everyone seeking these services.

For our Older Adults, Queens Library offers a wealth of free programs and resources that include:

- Book-discussion groups
- Live performances and readings
- Talks and panel discussions
- Film screenings
- Drama clubs, chess clubs and arts and crafts workshops
- Our Stay Well Exercise Program, which introduces adults age 60 and older to special exercises, relaxation techniques and principles of good nutrition
- Computer Training Courses, where we offer a range of classes appropriate for older learners, including beginning classes on using computers, the Internet, email, Microsoft programs, Google, Facebook and other technologies and social media
- Our Mail-A-Book Program, which offers homebound individuals free delivery of library materials right to their door.

Materials include books in large print, audio books, e-books, e-readers, movies and games. Mail-A-Book also offers lectures, classes, book discussions, music and theater, debates and chats by teleconference, video and live stream.

In addition to these wonderful age-specific programs, the Queens Library offers many other programs that serve our many diverse communities.

Queens Library's Jobs and Business Academy (JBA) provides specialized training and learning opportunities, with an emphasis on technology training, to job seekers, aspiring entrepreneurs, and business owners. By combining the Job & Business Academy's individual counseling, in-person workshops, and online learning opportunities with complementary services provided by the library's Adult Learner Program and New Americans Program, Queens residents participating in training will become better prepared for the modern workforce. Individuals seeking to access JBA services get started by using Job Map, an innovative online job skills assessment tool developed by Queens Library. Based on assessments and one-on-one interviews

with JBA staff, customers are enrolled in structured job search classes, workshops and technology training classes. Last year, JBA provided over 53,000 hours of job search and technology training to more than 43,000 customers. Eight Hundred and Sixty Five (865) customers completed job skills training, of which 59% reported new employment, a promotion or pay raise.

These are just some of the many empowering programs and services the Queens Library offers. As an organization, we pride ourselves on recognizing and adapting to the ever-evolving needs of our local communities.

The Queens Library's New Americans Program (NAP) was established to provide special services to the area's many new immigrants. NAP organizes workshops in the languages spoken by Queens' immigrant communities that assist new immigrants in adapting to life in the United States and offers programs that celebrate the culture of the diverse ethnic groups in Queens. The program works closely with the Adult Learner Program, the Job and Business Academy, and community libraries to assess local needs and link residents with existing system-wide library and social services to enhance civic engagement. Approximately 48% of the residents of Queens County are foreign born, making this program a vital resource to many. Initiatives such as our New Americans Corner, in partnership with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services and the NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, dedicates a space in every single one of our facilities where immigrants can go and find information and resources to become a U.S. citizen.

Queens Library is also at the forefront of bridging the digital divide in our communities. We are the borough's technology hub. For too many Queens residents, the digital divide presents barriers to education, job opportunities and tasks of daily living. Approximately 30% of the borough does not have broadband access or a computer at home. In certain communities, that number is much higher. You can well imagine how a child's education will suffer without learning critical technology skills, or how an adult can become disconnected from our new technology-driven reality without access to information and services available only online. You can enter any library of ours and you will see our computers in constant use. In fact, Queens Library hosts more than three (3) million public access computer sessions a year. Additionally, over 477,000 individuals took advantage of our free wireless sessions.

The Queens Library is constantly exploring new opportunities and partnerships to reach our customers, such as our partnership with Google to host coding programs, and our new DigitalQ initiative, which will allow our customers to use their smartphones and tablets to access free digital copies of popular magazines. Our libraries serve as community centers where people, regardless of where you were born or your socioeconomic background, have equal access to information and the latest technology. Our free services and programs literally serve to enrich the lives of those who access them.

While everything we provide to our customers is free, staffing, materials and maintenance for these programs and services require significant investment. With demand for our programs and services at an all-time high, it is critical for library systems across the state to receive the funding necessary to keep up with the needs of our customers.

In Fiscal Year 2016, we received \$7.1 million in state aid for which we are very grateful. However, we are still underfunded. If funding had been provided in accordance with the State Education Law formula utilizing the 2010 census, Queens Library should have received approximately \$650,000 more. This shortfall is significant. If we were fully funded under the law, this money could have expanded Stacks afterschool programming to every library in our system. It could have saved us from having to turn away folks eager to participate in our Adult Learner Program, or the young adults looking to sign-up for free pre-HSE classes. It could have provided more materials for our teens and older adults. It could have allowed us to help thousands of more people find a job or become more marketable in the workplace. Every dollar really makes a difference, and it impacts the lives of the people we serve.

Maintaining our 65 locations and aging infrastructure is also a short and long-term challenge for the Library. The average community library is 61 years old. More than a third of them are over 50 years old. They are heavily used, and most were not constructed to accommodate the traffic that we see due to the growth in demand for our services. Additionally, the vast majority of libraries are poorly configured to meet the demands of the digital age – with too few electrical outlets, too little space for classes, group work, or space for individuals working on laptop computers. Our challenge is to modernize our facilities, maintain our critical infrastructure and to expand our public spaces in order to thrive in the 21st century.

Queens Library has more than 900,000 square feet of library space, and all of it is heavily used. You can imagine the scope of maintaining our physical spaces. We have identified a capital need of nearly \$400 million over the next 10 years to modernize all of our facilities and bring them

into a state of good repair. Therefore, state construction aid is very important to us. We thank the Governor and the State Legislature for increasing State Construction Aid last year to \$19 million, of which we received \$1.6 million. This funding allows the Library to leverage other municipal funding sources, giving us the ability to complete projects on time and on budget. It is used for critical projects that are of high priority to Queens Library. This year, we've allocated these funds to begin sorely needed renovation work at the Baisley Park and Richmond Hill community libraries that will include the addition of new public space. We are excited to begin work there; however, there are more needs we can address with your increased support. An increase in this capital funding allocation would allow the Library to complete critical, high-priority capital projects and keep the Libraries in good repair.

Our mission is to provide quality services, resources, and lifelong learning opportunities through books and other formats to meet the informational, educational, cultural, and recreational needs and interests of anyone who comes to us in safe and comfortable facilities. I am proud to say that Queens Library does a fantastic job in meeting the needs of our diverse constituency. Our accomplishments have been many, but so too are our needs. With your help and increased generosity, we will be able to meet those operational and capital needs.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before your committee, Chairman Abinanti.