



**Pioneer
Library
System**

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leading libraries forward

Thank you, Chairperson Barrett and the members of the Assembly Committee on Libraries and Technology for convening this hearing on the important topic of library funding in New York. My name is Lauren Moore and I am the Executive Director of the Pioneer Library System, a cooperative library system providing shared services to the 42 small and rural public libraries in Ontario, Wayne, Wyoming, and Livingston counties. I am also the Chairperson of the Public Library System Directors Organization.

Last year I provided testimony about the Pioneer Library System's successful project aimed at quadrupling bandwidth at our member libraries without any cost increases to local libraries. In 2016, Pioneer Library System used its collective purchasing power to renegotiate a favorable contract with Time Warner, which resulted in higher bandwidth availability at more competitive pricing levels. We were able to make contract pricing even more favorable because of a strategic effort by the System to bring tech support for our member libraries' networks in-house. Most importantly, the Pioneer Library System committed to using system funds to subsidize more than 80% of member libraries' bandwidth costs.

The impact of these changes is significant. Not only has every member library in the System at least quadrupled its bandwidth, seven of our libraries upgraded to 100x100 mbps fiber connections. Now, every resident of our four counties, even those living in the region's most rural communities, will have access to the technology they need to find employment, learn new skills, succeed in school, and become fully engaged digital citizens.

At the Pioneer Library System, we are proud of what we have been able to accomplish with our limited state aid. Finding a way for our rural member libraries to achieve adequate bandwidth levels was our number one priority at the time, and we made a series of bold changes at the System that helped us achieve this goal. However, I have to admit that the only thing that made these decisions feel "bold" is the instability of state funding to library systems in New York.

The governor himself has stated that adequate bandwidth is a basic right. On the homepage of New York's Broadband for All website it says, "In today's world, internet connectivity is no longer a luxury—it is a necessity. Broadband is as vital a resource as

running water and electricity to New York's communities and is absolutely critical to the future of our economy, education, and safety.”

I agree completely, but I also know that for people living in rural communities or people without the means to afford bandwidth in their homes, ensuring high-speed internet access through the public library is the only way to meet the Governor's goal for every New Yorker to have access to high-speed internet.

I also know that for small, rural, and low-income communities, leveraging the resources of the region's library system is the only way to make sure that every library can afford and manage high-speed internet. It is ironic that despite the fact that library systems across the state are on the forefront of universal broadband efforts, a vision shared by Governor Cuomo, that state aid to library systems has stagnated.

As you know, current state library aid is roughly equivalent to the library funding level of 2002. However, we are operating in a completely different technology landscape than in 2002, one that requires high levels of expertise, new investment in evolving technologies, and ever-increasing bandwidth levels. At the Pioneer Library System, nearly half of the full-time employees we are able to hire at our funding level are exclusively devoted to the technology needs of our member libraries. They are operating a complicated automated library catalog system, coordinating the digitization of precious local history resources, managing the internet networks of 42 libraries across four counties, and providing onsite support to maintain and secure every library's technology. More than just limiting the local tax dollars required to provide the technology our communities deserve, these system services guarantee equitable access to technology across the region. Because of the System's efforts, a resident of Pike (population 1,100) and a resident of Cananadaigua (population 25,000) both have access to up-to-date computers, adequate bandwidth, and a modern collection of digital books and resources.

Even under the perpetual threat of state funding cuts, the Pioneer Library System remains an innovative and nimble organization. We are exploring an opportunity with the Chattaqua-Catteraugus Library System to develop a shared automated library catalog using open source software. This plan has the potential to guarantee a sustainable path forward for two rural library systems and create a blueprint for other systems in the state, and I think it is important to note that we are doing this as a grass roots effort between two underfunded systems serving small and rural libraries in western New York. Imagine what we could accomplish with adequate funding.

After more than a decade of underfunding, the Pioneer Library System is at capacity. Although library systems in New York are the models of shared service, the increased costs of delivering the twenty-first century services our communities deserve are outstripping found efficiencies. If the state is unable to provide additional funding to

support library systems, our services will stagnate, and the technology gap will widen, which means that access to technology will lag in the communities that need access the most.

I don't wring my hands over the future of libraries. The mission of libraries always has been, and always will be, education. The tools we use to educate our communities change, but the mission remains to provide communities with equitable access to lifelong education, a fundamental aspect of democracy. In a nurturing environment, libraries thrive and then their communities thrive. When libraries have the ability to afford the tools, they innovate and adapt. For libraries across New York, systems create that nurturing environment and provide libraries with the tools communities need, including bandwidth, expertise, and economies of scale to tackle big issues.

Although I wholeheartedly believe in the enduring future of libraries, I must admit that I am worried about the future for libraries in New York. As a state, we built an innovative library system structure designed to take on the important goal of ensuring that every resident has access to lifelong education opportunities. It was an experiment that worked amazingly well, as evidenced by the high quality libraries that can be found everywhere in the state. Yet by continuing to underfund systems, we put that infrastructure at risk. We threaten to take away the tools our libraries need to deliver equitable access to education.

Last year I shared a modest goal, that every library in the Pioneer Library System has 100 x 100 mbps internet connections by 2019, which is the NYS Broadband Office's definition of high-speed internet. We will continue to leverage all of the System resources we can to reach that goal, but it certainly cannot happen with 2002-level funding, and, frankly, I find that incredibly frustrating.

Which is why this year, I am thinking about bigger goals. We are at a critical juncture for the future of our communities. As a state, if we truly value equity, democracy, and opportunity, then we need to place libraries at the top of our agenda because libraries are the only institutions by which we can guarantee that every New Yorker has access to the lifelong education they need to be full participants in this information economy. We need to acknowledge that in order for libraries to maintain their critical role in our communities, we will need to support the massive shift they are undertaking to a technological model of service. This shift will require an influx of capital, just as the major shift in the delivery of library services at the turn of the last century was fueled by the massive investments of philanthropists like Andrew Carnegie.¹ If we continue to believe that every New Yorker has the basic right to lifelong education, as our communities believed in 1890, then we need to make a public investment to the same scale in our public library systems today. We

¹ Palfrey, John. *Bibliotech: Why Libraries Matter More Than Ever in the Age of Google*. Basic Books, 2015

need to think even beyond the current funding formula and begin to envision a library funding model that prepares our communities for the future.

In 2018, I hope that you will help libraries secure full funding. By 2019, I hope that you can help us place the conversation about the future of libraries where it should be, at the center of every conversation about the future of this state.

Thank you for your time.