



THE LIBRARY

utica public library

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Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology
Public Hearing on Funding of Libraries in New York State
Wednesday, January 10, 2018

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My name is Chris Sagaas, and I am Director of Utica Public Library, which is the Central Library of the Mid-York Library System. While I have only been Director of the library for seven months as of this Friday, my history with the area goes back much further.

I got my first library card at the Frank J. Basloe Library in Herkimer, NY. As I grew older and used the library more regularly, I found out that my card gave me access to much more than just what was available inside the brick building on Main Street. As a library card holder in the Mid-York Library system I could check out items from any other library in the area, and even get materials from across the state and beyond. I can remember when the library started checking out VHS movies and what a crazy idea that seemed like at the time.

My professional career in Albany (actually, three blocks up the street from this building) took me away from the Utica area to live and work, but it was never far from my mind or my life, as almost my entire family has lived, worked and raised families there and continue to do so. The opportunity to return to my roots to work was not to be missed, but I was uncertain about how things would be professionally – what kind of library would I be inheriting; would the system be a support?

What I found was especially encouraging. Utica Public Library's landmark status has been preserved, and even improved. Work on a new roof, new boiler, new windows, and a new HVAC have all been accomplished in the last ten years. The building is still awe-inspiring, and I am filled with pride at its majesty when I arrive to work each day and guide newcomers up its marble staircases and through its glass-floored stacks. The library has a robust technology infrastructure that is up-to-date and responsive to upgrades in hardware and software.

The Mid-York Library System has also continued to evolve and expand its array of services. There aren't many VHS tapes anymore, but the idea of downloadable books, music and magazines is as routine as the snowfall in winter. The staff at Utica Public Library has an excellent working relationship with Mid-York staff, and often engages in collaborative programming in the city.

The City of Utica has also evolved – and counter to trends in most upstate cities over the last twenty years - expanded. The population of the city

has grown to include people from 40 different countries and over 40 different languages are spoken in one of the nearby elementary schools. Groups of young children coming to the library for story time are wearing clothing unique to their homelands. Re-settled refugees and their families, who now make up almost a quarter of the city's current population, sign up for library cards and take English language classes in our Genealogy room.

While there are signs of progress for the local economy, we are still in a high-need area. A third of the city lives in poverty. The Utica City School District is required to meet the demands of schooling additional non-native English language speakers. Internet access is not available in many of the city's residences. The library continues to be a gathering space for communities of mutual interest, job seekers who need computer skills, and people who need help with their education.

To continue to reach our public, our library staff are present in the community as well. We table at the Oneida County Public Market at historic Union Station in downtown Utica every Saturday in the summer and fall. We do outreach at the Boilermaker Expo before the annual, world renowned Boilermaker 15K Road race each July. We are partnering with the local Rotary Club to establish a lending library and hold Summer Reading Program events and activities at a housing complex whose young residents don't have access to transportation to come to our building. We work with system staff to do pop-up libraries at a local business that sells reduced price groceries and promotes healthy eating to low-income residents.

None of this would be possible if New York State Aid to libraries and systems and New York State construction grant money hadn't been available to my library and Mid York over the years. What hasn't evolved and expanded, however, is the level of funding. Library funding hasn't kept pace with increases in education funding and while a building like mine that was built in 1904 is magnificent to behold, it continues to age. Libraries are unable to contemplate needed improvements to their physical plants so they are truly accessible to people of different abilities. Staff are often unable to take advantage of professional development opportunities due to their cost or lack of staffing coverage.

In what we are told is going to be a tough year budget-wise for all, we expect library use to increase as a result. Equitable funding - especially at a time when libraries will be even more essential for the citizens of Utica, Mid York communities, and this state - is what we are asking for today.

Thank you for inviting me to testify before this committee, and for your continued support of funding for public libraries in New York State. If you'd like more information, please feel free to contact me at 315-735-2279 x202 or csagaas@uticapubliclibrary.org