

**NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON
LIBRARIES AND EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY**

FUNDING PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN NEW YORK STATE

**LEGISLATIVE OFFICE BUILDING, ALBANY, NEW YORK
Tuesday, November 29, 2011**

TESTIMONY OF BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY

Good morning. Committee Chair Reilly, members of the committee and distinguished guests, my name is Richard Reyes-Gavilan, director and chief librarian of Brooklyn Public Library. I am testifying today on behalf of BPL President and CEO Linda Johnson who is unable to join us today. We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the availability and distribution of New York State funds for library operations.

First, I would like to thank Committee Chair Bob Reilly and his colleagues in the Assembly for recognizing the important role New York's libraries play in the lives of their constituents, our patrons. Your work to ensure that BPL and other libraries across the state receive the operating assistance they need to keep their doors open, and provide access to books, computers, and educational and cultural programming is appreciated. We also want to thank Speaker Silver and the Brooklyn delegation to the Assembly for their strong and ongoing support.

We recognize that the state is faced with historic budget deficits, and that services across many different program areas are facing cuts. However, we wanted to make sure you were aware of the many diverse roles that BPL now plays in the lives of Brooklyn residents and how the reduction in the Education Department's budget has impacted "traditional" library services such as book lending in addition to children's services, specialized programs, job search assistance and much more. With programs now ranging from resume writing assistance and pre-k education to cultural events for senior citizens, BPL has moved well beyond simply lending out material and offering research assistance, and is now a relied-upon, day-to-day provider of educational, cultural and community programs and services across the borough.

Brooklyn's libraries are community centers critical to the health and vibrancy of the neighborhoods they serve. In a single branch on any given day we provide a wide array of services to diverse patrons. We regularly host senior citizens in the morning, provide programs and a safe haven for students after school, assist immigrants in their efforts to learn English or become United States citizens, and even aid students preparing to take standardized tests in hopes of enrolling in institutions of higher learning. And perhaps most commonly these days we are *the* place to seek help in drafting resumes, retraining for new workforce skills, searching for employment, and starting small businesses. BPL's work in these areas is important, but in truth is much broader than many understand.

Often, our testimony focuses on the big picture and the impact we have across the borough as we cite circulation and computer usage in multi-million increments and other statistics

in the tens and hundreds of thousands. But it is important to remember that each item that circulates, each computer session, and each program attendee represents a Brooklyn resident who has enriched his or her life by borrowing a book, logging onto a computer session or spending time at a neighborhood library to learn something new.

Impact of the Budget

To this point, my testimony has focused on the work we do to support the communities we serve. But it has become increasingly difficult to meet our mission with steadily declining support from New York State. New York State has reduced Library Aid five times in the last three years. Despite the Assembly's level of support, the State has reduced discretionary funding to BPL in FY 2012 by 22% or \$1.7 million since FY 2008. This year's Executive Budget included a cut to libraries approximately 6% below the already-reduced level included in the final 2010 - 2011 budget; this translated into a cut of \$650,000.

Like the other New York City library systems, we rely more on city funds to provide for our operational needs, however State funding is just as important to supplement many of our ever-popular programs where city dollars are insufficient.

During the 2010-2011 fiscal year we experienced a reduction in program sessions from 49,000 to 43,000, an 11% reduction in a year. Without your support our program sessions will continue to decline. Furthermore, loss in state funding has resulted in the inability to purchase tens of thousands of new titles for our flagship Central Library. We understand our need to align expenses with the funding that is made available to our libraries and

we are working diligently on the strategic issue of how to efficiently deliver the best library services our patrons deserve and have come to expect. We cannot continue to trim around the edges and still keep our budget in balance. Accordingly, we have recently completed a top-to-bottom strategic review of operations to determine how we can significantly reduce our expenses while maintaining the highest level of library service possible. But the challenge we face this year is daunting.

Capital Funds also Play Key Role

Finally, before I conclude, I'd like to say a few words about the incredibly important role state capital funding has played, and hopefully can play in the future, in helping us to better serve our patrons. And while I recognize that today's hearing is focused on the issue of expense funding for programs, I would be remiss if I didn't at least note for the record that even modest capital grants – if they are highly-targeted and program-specific – can have an immeasurably positive impact on our operations. For example, several years ago the Brooklyn Assembly Delegation generously provided BPL with a delegation capital grant that is allowing us to install new self-check systems in dozens of neighborhood branches across the borough. This technology will have direct and positive impacts on tens of thousands of local Brooklyn residents. It is an example of how targeted capital funding can streamline and improve our operations, thereby also helping us to utilize increasingly scarce expense funds more efficiently. Therefore, as you might imagine, we are hopeful that there might be new Assembly capital funding opportunities in the coming year, and we look forward to sharing with our Brooklyn delegation and this Committee how ever-evolving new technologies such

as state-of-the-art attendance counters could make our branches even more effective and efficient with your support.

Conclusion

BPL serves immigrants, teens, indeed every Brooklynite, and provides critical access to books, programs and technology. But if state funding continues to decline, we will not be able to meet the demonstrated demand. We know the Assembly understands and believes the work we do every day is vital to the health of our communities. We are hopeful the 2012 budget includes a level of funding that will allow us to continue to meet our commitment to the people of Brooklyn.

In 1932 in the face of the Great Depression the then President of the Brooklyn Public Library Board of Trustees, Judge Edwin L. Garvin wrote:

“Some persons may hold the view that the public library is a sort of luxury to be indulged in when money is easy, but to be put aside when the economic shoe pinches. The period of depression has proven to the contrary. People have flocked to the libraries in greatly increased numbers, finding there recreation of the highest type at the minimum of cost, and also means of study in preparation for the old job which will surely some day need its faithful servant, or for the new job which will give the individual a better opportunity to earn a living and to enjoy life.”

Clearly BPL finds itself confronting the very issues we faced in the 1930s. And the argument put forth by library supporters to preserve service when the need is great goes largely unchanged; but as technology makes life both richer and more complex, the need to provide the less fortunate with access to the materials and tools they need to compete becomes more critical. Please help us continue to make a material contribution to the productivity and quality of life of all who now call Brooklyn home.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.