



*The Voice of the Library Community*

**New York Library Association**

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**Testimony of the New York Library Association  
Hearing of the New York State Assembly Committee on Libraries and Education Technology  
January 10, 2018**

Good morning. Thank you for providing me the opportunity to testify today on behalf of our state's local libraries, library systems, and the more than 10 million New Yorkers who hold library cards.

I would like to begin by thanking the Chair of the Committee for calling this hearing, and for her ongoing commitment to our most valuable community and civic assets, our local libraries. The library community is grateful for your leadership, and we look forward to the Committee's continued work under your guidance.

Today, the Committee will have an opportunity to hear how the state's continued, chronic underfunding of library services divests our citizens from their full potential, institutionalizes inequity, and creates a culture of cold complacency rather than a culture of curiosity and cooperation.

The past decade of underfunding has withheld more than \$117M from the State Library Aid program. The State Library Aid program is the primary source of funding for New York's library systems, which provide shared services and resources to each library in New York. These system services ensure that every community and every New Yorker, regardless of relative wealth, has access to a quality local library.

Library system services are efficient, effective, and empower community libraries. According to the State Education Department (SED), each dollar invested in the State Library Aid program returns seven dollars in local library services; the past decade of funding cuts exceeding \$117M have deprived our communities of more than \$800M in local library services. This has led to depleted services, degraded technology assets, and diminished educational programming. To be clear: state funding cuts do not simply present local decisions between foregoing the library services individuals need and on which they have come to rely, or paying more in local taxes -- when New York fails to fund the State Library Aid program, New Yorkers are forced to pay more in local taxes for diminished services.

This is not only inefficient; it is improvident, imperious, and unconscionable.

We are cognizant of the present fiscal challenges. This year, New York State will grapple with a \$4B budget deficit; projected, growing out-year deficits; and the looming, uncertain impacts of federal policy decisions seemingly designed to target New York and similarly-situated states. The Governor and members of the Legislature will be confronted with increasingly difficult decisions about how best to allocate stagnant and shrinking revenues in a way that ensures every New Yorker is a full participant in their own story, the development of their community, and the direction of our state.

Full and robust funding for libraries and library services is the best place to start.

### **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 library aid is administered through the NYS Education Department. Libraries are the original pre-K, and are the lone public 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 are objective facts. According to a recent poll conducted by Siena Research Institute, 92% of respondents said public libraries are important to their local educational infrastructure, while more than 80% of women, African-Americans, Latinos, and those households making less than \$50,000 say public libraries are "very important" to our educational system. A clear majority of respondents favor increased library funding, with nearly half saying library funding should increase proportionately with education funding. It is time to bring funding priorities in line with how an overwhelming majority of New Yorkers view their local library – as an indispensable educational resource.

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

Libraries serve as essential portals to the modern 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 local public library is their **primary source of internet access**. Without the digital and information services provided by their local library, New Yorkers would have been unable to sign up for health care coverage, complete college applications and student loan documents, find job opportunities, research the positions of elected officials and candidates, and review proposed state and local budget decisions that directly impact their daily lives. Further, the recent Siena Poll found that library services are particularly crucial in historically 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 Infrastructure is Rapidly Aging and Requires State Capital Investment**

After a decade of stagnant funding, appropriations for the State Library Construction Aid Program have increased slightly, but a staggering need persists. A recent report issued by the State Education Department's Division of Library Development (DLD) details a \$1.7B capital need for public libraries statewide. Nearly half of New York's local public libraries are now over 60 years old, and an additional one-third are more than 30 years old. According to DLD, the State Library Construction Aid Program leverages a nearly 5:1 return for every dollar invested.

### **Libraries are Economic Development**

Libraries serve workforce development needs, and function as career training and job placement centers. Public libraries have no shortage of success stories about patrons who participated in English as a second language classes, gained basic computer skills, returned to school to earn their GED, found employment, or even started a small business—all thanks to the services provided at the library. In fact, according to circulation statistics provided by the New York Public Library, the TASC study guide used to prepare for high school equivalency exams was the most circulated book in the entirety of The Bronx in 2015.

Libraries are education.

Libraries are access.

Libraries are equality.

Respectfully Submitted,

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New York Library Association