

Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology 11.15

10:30 a.m. Friday, November 6 @ NYLP Schwarzman Building

Thank you having me here. I'm Erica Freudenberger, the director of Red Hook Public Library in Red Hook, Dutchess County, New York.

I represent a small rural library, similar to hundreds in New York. We are chartered to serve the Village of Red Hook, a population of 1,961, but in fact serve the entire town (close to 11,000 people) and part of the Town of Milan, an unserved area. Red Hook Public Library is located in the center of the Village, in a mid-nineteenth century octagonal building.

I've been at Red Hook Public Library for five years. In 2014, we were one of ten libraries nationwide chosen to be a part of the American Library Association initiative, Libraries Transforming Communities, and in 2015, one of eight libraries in New York State chosen to be a part of the ILEAD USA program organized by the New York State Library. This August, we were approached by the Aspen Institute to be a part of the pilot Action Guide to Re-envisioning Your Public Library.

I believe that libraries are community anchor institutions, a vital part of the socio-ecosystem we serve. It is our job to help our communities attain their aspirations – to do that, we must be deeply embedded in our community, at every table, and a part of every conversation. We must value our patrons not as consumers and customers, but as engaged citizens in a democracy. It has been my experience that by embracing community, actively engaging and collaborating allows us to do much more than we could on our own.

I am a promiscuous collaborator. In the past five years, we have collaborated with our school district, Bard College, Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, Historic Red Hook, Red Hook Community Arts Network, local banks, the court system, police, the town and village of Red Hook – basically anyone who doesn't turn tail and flee upon seeing me.

The result has been the creation of an active, vibrant community hub. In 2014, more than 11,500 people came to attend our 634 programs. We learned Italian and Latin, how to raise chickens and bees, groom dogs, make our own wine, tap maple trees, create intricate

mehndi tattoos and dance, Bollywood-style. We've relied on local teen volunteers to provide tech help for the community, and had seniors rip up carpeting. We've helped people write resumes, find jobs, and get insured through the New York Health Exchange. Seniors and low-income residents have had their taxes filed, homeschoolers learned about history, biology and geology, and toddlers and pre-schoolers danced and played their way to literacy. Middle schoolers attended Science Camp, Maker Camp and even Zombie Camp, thus ensuring the safety of our small village should the zombie apocalypse befall us.

All of these programs have been possible due to the talent and generosity of our community. We've asked people to get involved with the library in meaningful ways, because we are a public library. Our library is their library. They want us to succeed, and we want our community to thrive.

This fall we are launching, in partnership with Red Hook Central School District and Bard College's Stevenson Library, an afterschool Makerspace program, the direct result of the work we've done as part of ILEAD USA. It's part of a larger initiative, sparked by the community engagement work we've been doing, to take our programs to where people are, rather than waiting for them to come to the library. In June, we piloted the first teen programs at the high school library, where they were wildly popular. During the summer, we partnered with Red Hook Recreation Park, Bard College, Red Hook School District and the Town of Red Hook to offer a Maker Camp at the Rec Park – a program that was so successful, the director provided us with funding to continue several weeks in addition to what we had originally proposed.

Recently, at a Red Hook Together meeting – a monthly meeting of local stakeholders and organizations -- we went around the room to report on what we were doing. Some were struggling to find volunteers, or looking to rethink who they were and how they worked in the community. Most of the organizations said they wanted to be more like the library, and engage more deeply with the community.

While we've been able to leverage our relationships with our community to do more than our budget of \$325,000 would allow, we struggle to make ends meet. The library is open 51 hours each week, with staff needed on three floors of our 150-year old building. In 2014, we added our second full-time employee to the staff in addition to our ten part-time employees, who work between 10-20 hours per week. We have 4.6 full-time equivalent thinly-stretched employees to meet the growing demands for services and programs at the library.

We have been fortunate to have local budget referendums pass to allow us to grow our budget, but the cut in state funding to library systems has resulted in a considerable portion of our budget – nearly \$12,000 each year, going to pay fees to the Mid-Hudson Library System to provide services that are outlined in their Plan of Service to the state. The fees we pay to the System are sorely needed locally, to increase our staffing and to be able to provide updates to our building.

Why? Most of our electrical outlets are two-pronged, and unable to support the needs of a modern library. When the summer heat comes, we rely on small window units to keep sections of the library cool, and close the largest meeting space on the top floor due to extreme heat. In the winter, we struggle to keep the building warm for our staff and patrons. We need to install an HVAC system, run CAT6 throughout the building to make it more accessible for technology, and update our electricity, and maintaining our building. Additional money should be allocated to the Public Library Construction Grant program, so that the hundreds of New York libraries that choose to remain in historically significant buildings can do so while moving gracefully into the future.

We made some difficult decisions this year to reduce our already modest spending to reallocate several thousand dollars in funds to upgrading our broadband to 35 mbps/5 mbps, so that our patrons can have regular, reliable access to the Internet. Our only option to do so is through Time Warner Cable, and the price – more than \$200 a month, is a significant hit to our small budget – and the best speed that we can acquire is 35/5, because of a lack fiber-optic and enhanced broadband capability in rural areas. Any help that the State Assembly could offer in

working with internet service providers to create a price structure that reflects the needs of small libraries and the important role that libraries play in bridging the digital divide would make a huge difference in to our communities and organizations.

It's an exciting time to be a librarian, and I believe our future is bright. Our Mayor calls what's been happening in our Village the Red Hook Renaissance, and says the library has been an integral part of it, which makes me proud. But we are only one small cog in the wheel. We are part of a community that is willing, and even eager, to embrace change, to try new things, and to work together for the benefit of all.

Libraries are ideally positioned to do amazing work in the communities we serve – but we can't continue without adequate funding. Every New Yorker deserves a great library. Please help us make that happen.

Thanks for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.