



New York Library Association

The Voice of the Library Community

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Testimony of the New York Library Association Hearing of the New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology November 6, 2015

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 his unwavering commitment to our most valuable community assets, our local libraries. The library community is grateful for your leadership of this Committee, and the great work of the Committee under your guidance.

We are also grateful that, with thanks to this Committee and our partners in the legislature, this year's enacted state budget began to address the chronic, inequitable underfunding of the State Library Aid Program. After nearly a decade of piecemeal and patchwork funding proposals, state policymakers finally acknowledged what their constituents have long known: that our state's local libraries are at the core of our state's educational infrastructure, and state library must at least increase each year proportionately with increase in education aid.

Despite having an extra \$5.5B in revenue this year, and proposing up to a 4.8% increase in state education funding, Governor Cuomo proposed flat funding for our community libraries. This comes a year after the Governor proposed a 4.7% cut in library aid, while proposing a 3.8% increase in education funding. Last year's enacted state budget included a 5.7% increase in education funding, but a mere 1.2% increase in local library aid. New York State Education Law requires library aid for FY 2015-2016 to be \$102.6M. This figure is based on the most recent census data. This year's enacted state budget pegs library aid at \$91.6M, or below year 2000 levels.

Most confounding is that these funding choices are occurring when library usage is surging. A January 2015 Siena Research Poll found that over the last three years, library usage is up 10% statewide, 15% among women, nearly 15% among African-American respondents, 15% among Latino respondents, and among all income demographics, with usage up 20% for those households making less than \$50,000 annually. This poll also found that 70% of respondents have used their local library in the last six months.

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 Department of Education. 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 aren't conjecture or platitudes, they're rooted in fact. According to the above-referenced Siena poll, 94% of respondents said public libraries are important to our state's educational infrastructure, while more than 80% of women, African-Americans, Latinos, and households making less than \$50,000 say public libraries are "very important" to our educational system. A clear majority of respondents want increased library funding, with nearly half saying library funding should increase proportionately with education funding. It is time to stop arbitrarily considering library aid as an expenditure outside of our state's educational infrastructure, and to bring

funding priorities in line with how an overwhelming majority of New Yorkers view these critical educational resources.

Library Funding is About Access and Equality

Libraries serve as essential portals to the important world of digital information. We applaud Governor Cuomo's proposal to expand broadband access across New York State, but increased internet speed is irrelevant if you do not have access to a computer. Startlingly, for nearly 33% of African-American and Latino respondents, and 25% of households making less than \$50,000 annually, the public library is their **primary source of internet access**. Without the robust digital and information services provided by their local library, tens of thousands of New Yorkers would not have been able to sign up for the state's health exchange, complete college applications and student loan documents, research the positions of political candidates, or review proposed state and local budgetary decisions that directly affect their daily lives. Further, the recent Siena Poll found that library are particularly critical 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.

Libraries are Models for Shared Services

For over fifty years, New York's Library Systems have served as a model of governmental cooperation and efficiency. Library Aid, in large part, supports our local library systems; library systems enable individual libraries to provide access to materials and services that they could never afford on their own. This is accomplished through sharing services, sharing resources and collections, and conducting cooperative purchasing. According to the State Education Department, state investment in libraries has yielded a return in excess of 7:1 for every dollar allocated.

Library Infrastructure is Rapidly Aging and Requires State Capital Investment

Funding for the state Library Construction Aid Program has remained stagnant at \$14M annually since 2006, despite a report from the State Education Department's Division of Library Development (DLD) that a \$2.2B construction need exists for libraries statewide. Nearly half of the local libraries in New York State are now over 60 years old, with an additional one-third over 30 years old. An annual \$14M investment cannot address this need. According to the DLD, the state Library Construction Aid Program leverages a nearly 5:1 return for every dollar invested. This makes the state Library Aid Construction Program one of the few state aid programs that directly, positively impacts every resident of our state, and provides an immediate, demonstrated return on investment every year.

Now is the time for the state to invest in public libraries. New York City's enacted 2016 budget includes a long-overdue 10-year, \$300M capital commitment to infrastructure improvements. Recently, New York State made a 5-year, \$900M commitment to fully address an estimated \$1B in deferred maintenance in our state parks. It is long past time for the state to make a similar investment in the state Library Aid Construction Program. A comparatively modest 10 year, \$40M annual investment in our state's library infrastructure would nearly fully address deferred capital needs statewide, and directly improve every community across our state. As the state contemplates allocating \$8.3B to address the public transportation infrastructure of New York City, and possibly billions more for transportation projects in the rest of the state, New York's library community and its millions of users urge you to consider a comparatively small investment in our state's public education infrastructure that will directly benefit every community, and every New Yorker.

Libraries are education.

Libraries are access.

Libraries are equality.

Respectfully Submitted,
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