

# Facts From NYLA



## 10 FAQ's About New York's Libraries

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**1** Why are libraries so important? Information stored in our libraries is a link to a past we can no longer see and a bridge to a future we have yet to address. We use our libraries to study our culture's past and gather information to make intelligent, personal choices.

Although it takes a great deal of money to maintain and operate a library, the information within it is free. Libraries represent the most democratic of our institutions, giving the greatest and the least of us alike access to the information we need--- when we need it. In our hurried, information-loaded lives, libraries are needed also to help us make *sense* of that information.

**2** Why is the New York Library Association reaching out to New York's citizens and lawmakers? And why now?

We are in an information revolution and libraries are on the front line. As the amount of information increases, so does the demand for library services to help analyze, evaluate, and manage that information. In all, there are 5,756 school libraries, 1,089 public library buildings, 271 college and university libraries, and 1800 special libraries in New York State. Each of these libraries is a storehouse of information and knowledge available to anyone who wants it. Yet, libraries do not sell knowledge, nor do they offer shares on Wall Street. Other than receiving support from patrons and from governments, libraries have no way of raising money needed to operate as "information stores." Furthermore, though the amount of information available has increased at a staggering pace, and though demand for that information has increased at a similar rate, government support has maintained only a strolling gait by comparison.

**3** In this era of high technology, are libraries becoming obsolete?

No. You often hear of the "information superhighway." We use that phrase to describe the "electronic stream" of information available from the Internet and from computers. However, long before the advent of computers, libraries were an "information superhighway," offering traditional, print-based resources such as books, newspapers, encyclopedias and periodical literature. Today, all these "superhighway" resources, both traditional and electronic, are available free at the library. In fact, to extend the analogy, you can even get on the superhighway at the library if you are just a pedestrian. Consider this: last year New Yorkers borrowed 126.8 million items and asked 31.7 million reference questions. So, not only is library information available to all who seek it, there is much more of it available than you would find "online." In fact, it is a misconception that all printed material is digitized and accessible by a computer. Bytes cannot replace books.

**4** Who benefits from libraries? Everyone! According to the most recent figures, there are 9,767,315 registered borrowers in New York State (51% of our population) whose annual attendance at libraries was 105,079,540.

**5** What is Chapter 917? Chapter 917 is the Omnibus Library Bill passed in 1990 but only fully funded for the first time in 1998. "917" provides basic aid to libraries: money for acquisitions and general operations, e.g. New York's libraries are entitled by law to receive \$91.3 million for 2003-2004. The New York Library Association has formulated principles for excellent library service in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which address goals for all libraries to try to reach.

**6** What specifically will "New Century Libraries" buy? The *New Century Libraries* initiative being advanced this year will enable New Yorkers to gain access to a number of beneficial resources including: NOVEL a statewide online virtual electronic library of vast electronic information age materials; high quality libraries in all communities and schools regardless of the ability of local municipalities to fund them; construction and renovation projects to ensure that NYS libraries are safe, accessible and connected; special programs including job counseling, literacy and English as a Second Language, especially in urban libraries where the need is the greatest; the creation of public library districts to ensure that all New Yorkers have access to and borrowing privileges at a local library; the placement of qualified librarians in all public school libraries to teach and guide our children; strengthened library programs for disabled populations; and the support of conservation programs to preserve historical documents and New York's past.

**7** What is a "library system?" New York State has 74 library systems. There are **public** library systems; **school** library systems; and systems known as the **3R's**-- Reference and Research Library Resources systems. These systems correspond roughly to geographical regions. Library systems are cost effective delivery systems for library materials and services. They are large enough to permit economies of scale in purchasing materials and services that individual libraries and communities could never afford. They are also regional, so that they are small enough to be effective and responsive on a local level.

**8** Where do funds for public libraries come from? And, if local communities run libraries, why is this a State issue? 81% of public library funding comes from local municipalities, 9% from New York State, 1% from Washington, and the remaining 9% from other sources, including fund-raisers and donations. In recent years, local funding has often been reduced. Even when full local funding is available, it only pays for local use. The State is responsible whenever books or information "travel" across local boundaries. So, for Statewide library services, we need State funding. With demand increasing for information that is available from dozens of sources all around the State, we need increased State funding.

**9** Why are librarians involved with the Internet? Why can't libraries leave the telecommunications revolution to private operations? For librarians, using the Internet to access and organize information is similar to using other, more traditional means of accessing and organizing information. Even the earliest "librarians," those in the famed library of Alexandria, Egypt, for example, were involved in finding and organizing information. Managing information is at the core of a librarian's training. Furthermore, while librarians are available to help us find information to improve our mind, our health, and our livelihood, the commercial information providers are generally interested in profit. Leaving the telecommunications revolution solely to private companies would risk depriving millions of people, who might not have the money to pay for it, of access to critical, perhaps even life-saving, information.

**10** If the cost of doing library business is rising, why don't libraries charge a fee for service? Free public libraries are a unique American benefit of democracy. In fact, libraries and the exchange of information in them help preserve that democracy. While libraries don't charge directly for their operations, they do receive support from taxes. We tax ourselves to provide every resident equal access to information that will improve our lives, protect our freedoms, entertain us and enrich us, and help keep us employed, safe, and healthy. Library services are too valuable to provide only to people who may be able to afford user fees. Library services must be free and available to everyone.



If you would like to find out more call The New York Library Association at 518-432-6952, write us at 6021 State Farm Road, Guilderland, New York 12084, or visit our Web site: <http://www.nyla.org>

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