



Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on 2010-2011 Executive Budget

Good afternoon and thank you for letting me speak to you today about the latest round of budget cuts proposed for libraries. I am here today speaking on behalf of the 4,000 plus members of the New York Library Association and the millions of library users they serve throughout the state.

Sadly, this is the fifth time that I have had to speak to you about cuts in library funding. The Governor is proposing a 2.76% or \$2.4 million cut in funding for libraries that would drop Library Aid to \$84.45 million, which is below 1998 levels. The cumulative total of these five cuts would be 18% or \$18 million less in funding for library services since April 2008.

I am hard pressed to name another part of the Education budget that has been cut as many times in such a short period or is asked to function at 1998 levels or even less if you factor in inflation.

In addition, these state cuts will result in a corresponding loss of almost \$2.8 million in federal aid that is used to fund innovative and cost-sharing programs at libraries and to fund the NOVEL databases that are used by all types of libraries and which saves them approximately \$87 million a year through statewide licensing of these valuable online information resources, that are used by students, researchers, and businesses.

I also want to make the case, that libraries are essential.... To Life-Long Learning, Jobs and Opportunity, to our Quality of Life and to Community Empowerment.

Libraries are the quintessential "universities of the streets", a place where people of all ages can go for life-long learning, to further educate themselves and improve their prospects in life. Librarians are educators -- our students range from 4 year olds in early literacy classes, to 18 year old high school or college students researching their term papers, to twenty-something year old Jamaican or Bosnian immigrants learning English, and to senior citizens wanting to know how to use the computer and internet.

Libraries are the place for the unemployed or underemployed to go and use the free resources available, whether it's the computers, or internet access to look for or apply for a job, or help with printing or writing their resumes.

According to a study funded by the Gates Foundation, 73% of libraries serve as a community's only option for free internet access, and that number rises to 82% in rural areas. So if you don't have a computer or internet access at home -- and according to the U.S. Census Bureau 38% of Americans still do not have internet access at home, you rely on the library for free internet access.

So put yourself in the shoes of an unemployed or underemployed New Yorker, who doesn't have a computer or internet access at home, and ask yourself, where would you go to look for or apply for a job, especially on the weekends and evenings?

I called around last week to several NYS Dept. of Labor One Stop Centers across the state, and found that all the ones I called are not open in the evenings or weekends, unlike libraries, although that may change if these cuts continue. The Albany and Rensselaer One Stops close at 4:30 or 5 pm, the Harlem One Stop is open from 8:30 – 5 p.m. M-F, Syracuse and White Plains and Buffalo, the same.

So again, ask yourself, if you got laid off from your manufacturing job or customer service position, and are now working part-time at Wal-Mart to pay the bills, or staying home to watch the kids, because you can no longer afford after-school child care, and you can't make it to one of these 71 One Stop Centers during the week to look for a job, where would you go? Libraries are open convenient hours *and they are in every community in the state*, a total of 1,100 separate locations.

Libraries are supported and appreciated by your constituents. More importantly, voters have put their money where their mouths and hearts are by overwhelmingly approving their local library budgets. Attached to my testimony is a chart provided by the NYS Library that shows that over the past three years, on average 97% of library budgets have been approved by the voters.

So why does New York State continue to cut funding for library services at a time when libraries, now more than ever, are needed by so many in our communities to survive and recover from this economic downturn? In a January 2009 survey NYLA conducted, 80% of libraries had helped a patron look or apply for a job, and that number has probably increased by now. Cutting library funding now makes as much sense as cutting financial assistance to the unemployed or funding for food banks.

The last time our country faced this type of economic downturn, FDR created the WPA, which built or expanded 1,000 libraries across the country. New York provides \$14 million in public library construction grants for 755 public libraries, when there is a \$1.4 billion plus list of shovel ready construction projects waiting to be funded. Providing additional construction funding, which is bonded through the Dormitory Authority, would provide a boost to our economy and your local libraries.

In addition, there are plenty of existing state funding streams that libraries should be allowed to tap into, like Employment Preparation Education (EPE) funds. There is \$96 million for schools to provide GED and other jobs skills, services that libraries are also providing. There is \$375 million for Universal Pre-K, which many libraries are providing similar services. And why not allow school district public libraries, whose buildings are owned by the school district, and whose budgets and trustees are elected on the same ballot as the school districts, to tap into the \$2 billion plus fund set aside for school construction.

In conclusion, during tough economic times, when the neediest among us are looking for help, now is not the time to be cutting the very services and assistance they need the most. Whether it's food banks, job training programs, unemployment assistance or libraries, it would be penny wise and pound foolish to cut the very services that are in the greatest demand and can do the most good to those in need.

