



The Voice of the Library Community

New York Library Association

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New York State Department of Health
Corning Tower
Empire State Plaza,
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January 25, 2022

Dear Commissioner Basset,

Library workers across New York State have stepped up to provide vital services to our communities over the last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. As community connectors, libraries not only provide standard services like early literacy programs, materials lending, and a warm safe space for vulnerable people to be, they have expanded to fulfill new needs like COVID-19 test distribution and remote workspace for students and office workers. Community members often stay inside our buildings for several hours in a way that they do not in retail spaces. The provision and duration of these essential services put library workers at an increased risk of contracting and potentially spreading COVID-19 on a daily basis.

Related factors that increase risk include:

- Libraries are required to stay fully open to the public to meet state minimum standards
- Close contact while constantly enforcing the current mask mandate puts library staff at risk of contracting COVID-19
- Unlike other cultural institutions, libraries are not included in local vaccine mandates for indoor spaces
- Many public library staff are contracting breakthrough cases of COVID-19, despite widespread vaccination across the workforce
- Remote work and school have brought new populations into the library space who stay in the space the entirety of open hours
- Unlike retail, libraries are a place where people linger and converse
- Communities are impacted when branches unexpectedly close due to staff shortages

The best tool we have for protecting library workers and patrons from COVID-19 is a robust state-funded testing program. Unfortunately, rapid test shortages and long lines at PCR test sites make obtaining tests difficult or nearly impossible for library staff. This is particularly problematic in historically underserved areas where the community is experiencing higher rates

of COVID transmission. Our libraries cannot provide necessary services for our communities when we do not have enough staff to run them.

On behalf of the New York Library Association and its member, I request that you help library workers protect our communities and our workforce from COVID-19 by prioritizing libraries in future test distribution.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Beth Merkle', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Beth Merkle
President, NYLA Council