



The Voice of the Library Community

New York Library Association

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**Testimony of the New York Library Association
Hearing of the New York State Assembly Committee on Libraries and Education Technology
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Good morning. I'm Mike Nepl. I am General Counsel and the Director of Government Relations for the New York Library Association. Thank you for providing me the opportunity to testify today on behalf of our state's local public, school, and academic libraries and 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 her ongoing commitment to our most valuable community and civic assets, our local libraries. The library community is grateful for your leadership.

Today, the Committee will have an opportunity to hear how the state's continued, chronic underfunding of library services divests our citizens from their full potential, institutionalizes inequity, and creates a culture of cold complacency rather than one of cooperation and civic engagement.

The New York State Library Aid program is the primary source of funding for New York's library systems, which provide shared services and resources to each library in New York. These system services ensure that every community and every New Yorker, regardless of relative wealth, has access to a quality local library.

Library system services are efficient, effective, and empower community libraries. According to the State Education Department (SED), each dollar invested in the State Library Aid program returns seven dollars in local library services. Chronic, continued underfunding has led to depleted services, degraded technology assets, and diminished educational programming. To be clear: state funding cuts do not simply present local decisions between individuals foregoing the library services they want and on which they have come to rely or paying more in local taxes -- when New York fails to fully, or fairly, fund the State Library Aid program, New Yorkers are forced to pay more in local taxes for diminished services.

We are cognizant of the present fiscal challenges. The Governor and members of the Legislature will be confronted with increasingly difficult decisions about how best to allocate stagnant and shrinking revenues in a way that ensures every New Yorker is a full participant in their own story, the development of their community, and the direction of our state.

Equitable funding for libraries and library services is the best place to start.

Libraries Build Inclusive Communities

Libraries are safe, welcoming public spaces that foster community cohesion through diverse programming and access to community meeting places and local services, but this mission is threatened by lack of sustainable state funding for inclusive local library programming and curricula. Libraries that rely on local funding streams often face difficult decisions when inclusive, supportive programming is met with political resistance -- resistance that leaves vulnerable populations on the margins of community life and civic engagement. However, inclusive and diverse

programming alone is not enough; for libraries to fully engage all members of the communities they serve in civic life, there must be avenues to connect patrons to the local services they need. Increasingly, local public libraries are seeking to hire social workers to serve vulnerable patron populations; for libraries in less-advantaged communities – the communities which most need these services – local economic conditions prevent patrons from receiving connections to supportive services. Increased state library aid to place a social worker at each public library system will ensure all New Yorkers have access to supportive services in a trusted, inclusive local environment.

Libraries are Education

Our state's libraries and librarians connect disenfranchised individuals and marginalized populations to information resources and educational opportunities they would otherwise be denied, particularly to resources for financial, health, and digital literacies. Core to this mission is creating comprehensive information fluency curricula for New York's elementary and secondary students, delivered by certified School Library Media Specialists. Currently, students lack a universal right to instruction in information sciences by school librarians, which diminishes college-readiness, career opportunities, and meaningful participation in civic life. Further, public libraries serving small neighborhoods and rural communities lack resources to hire the skilled, well-trained staff needed to meet patrons' information needs. State Library Aid must increase to provide every student with access to competent instruction in information sciences by a certified School Library Media Specialist, guarantee public libraries are staffed by professional librarians, with access to quality continuing education resources.

Quality Libraries & Library Services Combat Information Inequity

Libraries serve as essential portals to the modern world of digital information. Startlingly, for nearly 33% of African-American and Latino respondents, and 25% of households making less than \$50,000 annually, the local public library is their **primary source of internet access**. Without the digital and information services provided by their local library, New Yorkers would have been unable to sign up for health care coverage, complete college applications and student loan documents, find job opportunities, research the positions of elected officials and candidates, and review proposed state and local budget decisions that directly impact their daily lives. Further, the recent Siena Poll found that library services are particularly crucial 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.

Library Infrastructure is Rapidly Aging and Requires State Capital Investment

After a decade of stagnant funding, appropriations for the State Library Construction Aid Program have increased slightly, but a staggering need persists. A recent report issued by the State Education Department's Division of Library Development (DLD) details a \$1.7B capital need for public libraries statewide. Nearly half of New York's local public libraries are now over 60 years old, and an additional one-third are more than 30 years old. According to DLD, the State Library Construction Aid Program leverages a nearly 5:1 return for every dollar invested. Recent attempts to address library infrastructure issues with increased state funding are making a difference, and we advocate for an even more aggressive approach – funding for the Public Library Construction Aid Program should be increased to \$75M in FY2020.

Libraries are Education.

Libraries are access.

Libraries are equality.

Respectfully Submitted,

Mike Neppl

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New York Library Association