



## New York Library Association

*The Voice of the Library Community*

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### **Testimony of the New York Library Association Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Education January 27, 2016**

Good afternoon, and 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 our partners and advocates in the Legislature for addressing the inequity of Governor Cuomo's Executive Budget proposal last year by fighting for \$5M in additional funding. This allocation recognized what New Yorkers have long known – libraries are a core component of our state's education infrastructure. State Library Aid should be fully-funded under the law; but, at a minimum, library funding must increase each year in proportion to any increase in education funding.

Unfortunately, this year, Governor Cuomo once again proposed flat funding for local libraries and library systems. State Education Law mandates State Library Aid be \$102.6M for FY2016-17. The Governor's proposal includes funding equivalent to year-2000 levels at a time when library use is surging statewide. A January 2015 Siena Research Poll found library use is up 10% statewide since 2012; 15% among women and communities of color; and 20% for households making less than \$50,000 annually. During this year's budget process, we implore you to consider the implications and effects that chronically underfunded libraries have on all New Yorkers, but especially on those who need them most.

This is what we know: library use is growing statewide; economically disadvantaged New Yorkers and communities of color heavily rely on library services, and library infrastructure is rapidly falling into disrepair. Failure to fund the State Library Aid and Library Construction Aid programs disproportionately impacts our most vulnerable citizens. I urge you to address these issues head-on in this year's budget.

#### **Libraries are Education**

Libraries are chartered by the same Board of Regents which oversees schools, colleges, BOCES and other educational institutions, and State Library Aid is administered through the NYS Education Department. Libraries are the original universal pre-K, and stand as the lone public institutions dedicated to lifelong education. 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 are rooted in fact. The above-referenced Siena poll found that 94% of respondents said their local public library is important to our state's educational infrastructure, while more than 80% of women, African-Americans, Latinos, and those from households making less than \$50,000 annually said they are "very important." 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 State Library Aid as an expenditure outside of our state's educational infrastructure, and 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 indispensable world of digital information. While we applaud Governor Cuomo's proposal to expand broadband access, increased internet speed is irrelevant if you do not have access to a computer. Startlingly, the Siena poll found that, 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 insurance coverage through 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. Failure to fairly fund State Library Aid willfully disregards this proven digital divide, and functions as tepid acceptance that economically vulnerable and disadvantaged New Yorkers are resigned to a permanent "information underclass."

### **Libraries are Economic Development**

Libraries also serve in the critical role of workforce development, career training and job placement centers. Public libraries have no shortage of success stories about patrons who participated in English as a second language classes, gained basic computer skills, returned to school to earn their GED, found employment, or even started a small business—all thanks to the services provided at the library. These services are particularly important in economically disadvantaged communities; of those who used their local public library for job seeking or career building programs, 53% were African-American, and 40% were households making less than \$50,000 annually. In fact, according to circulation statistics provided by the New York Public Library, a TASC study guide was the #1 most circulated book in the entirety of The Bronx for all of 2015.

### **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 2014 report from the State Education Department's Division of Library Development (DLD) that a \$2.2B capital 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. The lack of capital funding to address aging, inefficient buildings means operating revenues are increasingly consumed for energy costs at the expense of patron services. New York City's enacted 2016 budget recognized their local capital needs by including a long-overdue 10-year, \$300M commitment to library infrastructure improvements. It is long past time for the state to make a similar investment in the State Library Aid Construction Program. As you contemplate a needed, multi-billion dollar investment in our state's transportation infrastructure, New York's library community urges 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 Models for Shared Services**

For over fifty years, New York's Library Systems have served as models of governmental cooperation and efficiency. State Library Aid, in large part, supports local library systems, which enables their constituent community libraries to provide access to materials and services they could never afford on their own. State Library Aid ensures that every community, regardless of economic circumstances, has access to quality library services. According to the State Education Department, state investment in libraries has yielded a return in excess of 7:1 for every dollar allocated.

Libraries are education.

Libraries are access.

Libraries are equality.

Libraries are public infrastructure.

Fully fund Library Aid to \$102.6M.

Respectfully Submitted,  
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NYLA Executive Director