

Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology

Public Hearing on Improving and Supporting New York State's Libraries

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Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee.

Public libraries are on the **frontline of helping** New Yorkers thrive despite some of the most concerning issues of our time:

- **Social isolationⁱ**

- U.S. Surgeon General has called loneliness an epidemic in our country;
- 50% of adults report feeling lonely which is leading to mental and physical health problems;
- Social isolation among older adults alone accounts for an estimated \$6.7 billion in excess Medicare spending annually, largely due to increased hospital and nursing facility spending;
- The impact of social connection not only affects individuals, but also the communities they live in. Social connection is an important social determinant of health, and more broadly, of community well-being, including (but not limited to) population health, community resilience when natural hazards strike, community safety, economic prosperity, and representative government.

- **Climate change**

- The incidents of severe weather including heat waves, flooding events, and hurricanes super charged by climate change are predicted to worsen over the next three decades
- Climate change is a threat multiplier, exacerbating other social threats or stresses such as poverty, delicate food supply chains, and immigration.ⁱⁱ

- **Mis- and disinformation online**

- A World Economic Forum survey named misinformation and disinformation from artificial intelligence the top global risk over the next two years, ahead of climate change and war.ⁱⁱⁱ

Libraries are the social and physical infrastructure that the world is crying out for right now.

Libraries are **trusted**, with 87% of Millennials and 74% of Baby Boomers agreeing that their library helps them find information that is trustworthy and reliable.^{iv} Some 40 percent of Americans say they trust libraries and librarians a lot — more than twice the rate registered for local and national media and the highest figure across eight information sources.^v Libraries are **strongly valued**, both for providing access to materials and resources and for promoting literacy and improving the overall quality of life; 94% of Americans say that having a public library improves the quality of life in a community.^{vi} They **cultivate social capital** in their communities, serving as community anchors that contribute to social cohesion and civic participation both through on site services and programs and through digital equity, inclusion, and justice.

The educational role of public libraries sees local libraries leveraging **physical and outdoor spaces, technology, trained information professionals, a variety of collections, and creative partnerships** to meet the needs of their community. While traditional services such as book lending (physical and digital), homework help, and

research are still prevalent, the modern public library has expanded the definition of collections and programming to more adequately meet **different learning styles** and **communities' priorities**.

It is not uncommon to see libraries **lending objects far beyond books**: gardening tools, kitchenware, craft instruments, sports equipment, home improvement items, and items to increase health and wellness.^{vii} The design of programming for community members of all ages has exploded, between 2010 and 2016 there was a **72% increase^{viii} in the amount of public programming** happening in public libraries and this number is only growing, evolving beyond the traditional story hour for children and book club for adults. The range of topics in library programming is almost unlimited, but all speak to the **aspirations and learning goals of their community**. A significant investment has been made in the evolution of libraries as venues for informal science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education.

Leveraging Physical Infrastructure

Public library facilities serve as **demonstration sites** for climate change mitigation technology and applications such as renewable energy, energy conservation, water management, stormwater mitigation, and waste management.

- The Hendrick Hudson Free Library, the first library in the country to complete the Sustainable Library Certification Program, boasts a solar array and battery storage, rain garden, composting, and more. They use a flat panel monitor in the children's area to educate the community about solar – how it works, how much the library is saving, and the environmental impact of switching to renewable energy.
- The Phoenicia Library, the first library in the country to have a Passive House certified library facility, has reduced their operating costs by adopting stringent

sustainable design standards which has both reduced their greenhouse gas emissions and lowered their operating costs.

There is also a growing trend of **library facilities providing resources during and after natural disasters**, including those supercharged by climate change. Public library facilities, always a refuge for intellectual pursuits, now serve as refuge for an expanding list of basic human needs: air quality, cooling, warming, and food security. Libraries also play a role in acute disaster recovery efforts, serving as rallying points for volunteers, information distribution centers, and hosts to disaster recovery agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). So much so that FEMA formally designated libraries as essential community organizations through the Stafford Act of 2011.^{ix}

For example, the Lindenhurst Memorial Library (NY) - one of the first libraries to complete the Sustainable Library Certification Program - served as a FEMA Disaster Recovery Center in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy for close to a year. Stationed at the library during this time were not only FEMA but the New York State Department of Health, New York State Department of Children and Family Services, New York State Homes and Community Renewal Department, New York State Office of Mental Health, New York State Department of Financial Services, the local Department of Public Works, Social Security, Department of Labor, Department of Social Services, Department of Economic Development and Planning, Department of Motor Vehicles, Suffolk County Executive's Office, Small Business Development Center, and the Red Cross. In one day alone, the American Red Cross food truck served hot meals for 500 residents in the library's parking lot.^x

Outdoor spaces at libraries are increasingly leveraged to meet community goals for not only public gathering spaces but for food security with libraries providing community gardens to grow fruits and vegetables. From "library farms,"^{xi} to edible landscaping^{xii}, to

community composting^{xiii}, public libraries are expanding people’s minds about how they can contribute to community goals.

The egalitarian nature of library facilities – in that **they are open to all in a community** – results in residents of all walks of life experiencing a public facility designed with their health and the health of our environments at its core. Quietly leading by example, a growing number of libraries in New York are engaged in a methodic overhauling of their facilities to address concerns surrounding both climate change mitigation and climate change adaptation while concurrently embracing the power of public spaces to combat social isolation.

Leveraging Collections, Programs, and Services

Libraries have a proven track record of contributing to the social well-being of communities. Research indicates that public libraries are deeply embedded in their communities in ways that **enrich the well-being of local residents**.^{xiv} Libraries have been shown to meet a diverse range of needs for individuals, organizations, and their broader community tackling such issues as community health, school effectiveness, institutional connections, and cultural opportunities.

In addition to the traditional roles of public libraries - curation of knowledge, collective history, and cultural heritage; the provision of access to public knowledge and learning; and the creation of spaces for children to learn and play – “libraries are facilitating access to resources and services to **get things done**.”^{xv}

Examples include:

- Hosting Repair Cafes and Fix-it Clinics to connect residents with local experts who will teach them how to fix their stuff;
- Hosting bicycle repair programs and even installing bike repair stations on library property;

- Investing in makerspaces and providing access to expensive or unique equipment (e.g. 3D printers and scanners, laser engraving and cutting machines, computer numerical control (CNC) machines, soldering irons, sewing machines) that enable residents to imagine, create, and innovate; and
- Expansion of The Library of Things concept to include access to hand tools, kitchenware, repair tools, science equipment (e.g. air quality monitors, multimeter, electricity usage monitor, participatory science kits, etc.).

This “**library as laboratory**” **concept** encourages and empowers residents to not only understand the world around them but to engage in actively repairing it and innovating for our future. The programs that are offered alongside the tangible resources encourage collaborative problem-solving, on a small scale, but sets the model for the larger work necessary in communities to ensure we work together to solve the problems we are faced with due to climate change.

Conclusion

This snapshot of the strengths of our libraries throughout New York serve to help you understand the critical nature of ensuring continued access to quality libraries for the people of New York. **A key to the success of libraries in this state will be the legislature’s investment in the public library system network as well as the State Aid for Library Construction Program.**

The current state of funding to public library systems in the state is one of the largest threats to the viability of public library service in this state. It is not enough. Period. The pressures of rising costs impact our organizations just as they do personal finances. The rapidly changing world of technology requires us to move faster, to advocate more strongly for people’s rights to access quality information, literature, and art. The world has changed and **the investment in this powerful network must evolve** to address this changing world and leverage the library infrastructure to the best possible advantage of New Yorkers

who are contenting with a mounting number of challenges we are well-positioned to help with.

There is **a point of no return rapidly approaching** from which I do not think we can recover. Since the pandemic, our budget has been balanced only by coasting on unfilled positions and stretching out the federal aid received during COVID-19. A day of reckoning is on the horizon unless the Legislature and Governor work with urgency and focus to properly fund this powerful infrastructure that is the library ecosystem in New York State.

I guarantee it will be some of the **smartest money spent** at the state level, benefitting a generation of New Yorkers who will have a better quality of life from the access to quality information, information professionals, and community gathering spaces in disaster-resistant public facilities.

We respectfully ask that you support and advocate for the recommended funding levels of \$176.8 million for library operating aid and \$175 million for library construction aid. New Yorkers are worth this investment.

ⁱ Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Health Effects of Social Connection and Community, 2023, <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Climate Change Effects and Impacts, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation <https://dec.ny.gov/environmental-protection/climate-change/effects-impacts>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Global Risks Report 2024, World Economic Forum
https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_The_Global_Risks_Report_2024.pdf

^{iv} Most Americans – especially Millennials – say libraries can help them find reliable, trustworthy information,” by A.W. Geiger, Pew Research Center, 2017 <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/08/30/most-americans-especially-millennials-say-libraries-can-help-them-find-reliable-trustworthy-information/>

^v “Libraries, Trust and Social Capital,” by John B. Horrigan, Ph.D., Urban Libraries Council,
https://www.urbanlibraries.org/files/ULC_White-Papers_LIBRARIES-TRUST-AND-SOCIAL-CAPITAL.pdf

^{vi} “How Americans Value Public Libraries in Their Communities,” Pew Research Center, 2013,
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2013/12/11/libraries-in-communities/>

^{vii} The Library of Things, Curtis Memorial Library (ME), <https://curtislibrary.com/library-of-things/>

^{viii} National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment (Phase 1), American Library Association, 2019, https://nilppa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/NILPPA_Phase-1-white-paper.pdf

^{ix} “What is essential? Understanding community resilience and public libraries in the United States during disasters,” by Dr. Beth Patin, Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology, 57(1): e269, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7645857/>

^x “Lindy Library is Official FEMA Disaster Recovery Center,” by Barbara Capella Loehr, Patch, 2012, <https://patch.com/new-york/lindenhurst/lindy-library-is-official-fema-disaster-recovery-center>

^{xi} “What is the Library Farm?,” Northern Onondaga Public Library, <https://www.nopl.org/library-farm/>

^{xii} “We have an edible campus in our back yard,” Emmaus Public Library, <https://www.emmauspl.org/edible-campus>

^{xiii} Food & Compost, Greenwich Free Library, <https://greenwichfreelibrary.org/food-compost/>

^{xiv} “Understanding the Social Wellbeing Impacts of the Nation’s Libraries and Museums,” Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2021, <https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/swi-report.pdf>

^{xv} Understanding the Social Wellbeing Impacts of the Nation’s Libraries and Museums,” Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2021, <https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/swi-report.pdf>