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New York Library Association

The Voice of the Library Community

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Good afternoon, and thank you for providing me the opportunity to testify today on behalf of our state's local libraries and library systems that make the efficient delivery of services possible to more than 10 million New Yorkers who hold library cards.

I would like to begin by thanking the Legislature for reversing Governor Cuomo's proposed cut in library funding in last year's Executive Budget. I would also like to thank all those members of the Legislature who supported our legislative priorities last year.

The New York Library Association has been deluged by library and library system directors in your districts that were disappointed to learn that Governor Cuomo, despite having an extra \$5.5B in revenue this year, and proposing up to a 4.8% increase in state education funding, proposed flat funding for our community libraries. This comes a year after the Governor proposed a 4.7% cut in local library aid, while proposing a 3.8% increase in education funding. Last year's enacted state budget included a 5.7% increase in education funding, but a mere 1.2% increase in local library aid. New York State Education Law requires library aid for FY 2015-2016 to be \$102.6M. This figure is based on the most recent census data. The Governor's flat funding proposal puts library aid at \$86.6M, equivalent to 1997 funding levels.

Most confounding is that these funding choices are occurring when library usage is surging. A January 2015 Siena Research Poll found that over the last three years, library usage is up 10% statewide, 15% among women, nearly 15% among African-American respondents, 15% among Latino respondents, and among all income demographics, with usage up 20% for those households making less than \$50,000 annually. This poll also found that 70% of respondents have used their local library in the last six months.

Libraries are Education

Our state's libraries are chartered by the same Board of Regents that oversees schools, colleges, BOCES and other educational institutions, and library aid is administered through the NYS Department of Education. Libraries are the original pre-K, and are the lone public institutions dedicated to lifelong education. Libraries are the leading digital literacy educators in New York State. 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're rooted in fact. According to the above-referenced Siena poll, 94% of respondents said public libraries are important to our state's educational infrastructure, while more than 80% of women, African-Americans, Latinos, and households making less than \$50,000 say public libraries are "very important" to our educational system. 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 library aid as an expenditure outside of our state's educational infrastructure, and to 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 increasingly important world of digital information. While we applaud Governor Cuomo's proposal to expand broadband access across New York State, increased internet speed is irrelevant if you do not have access to a computer. Startlingly, 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 the state's health exchange, complete college applications and loan documents, research the positions of political candidates, or review proposed budgetary decisions that directly affect their daily lives. Public libraries bridge this "digital divide" by providing access to this technology. In 72.5% of New York's communities, public libraries are the only free source of Internet access. Librarians and staff are trained, tech-smart professionals who help library users navigate the Internet and use digital devices to find the information they need.

Libraries are Economic Development

In recent years libraries have responded to community needs by expanding their roles in serving as workforce development, career training and job placement centers. Public libraries have no shortage of success stories about various patrons who participated in English as a second language classes, gained basic computer skills, returned to school to earned their GED, found employment, or even started a small business—all thanks to the services provided at the library. The recent Siena Poll found that these are particularly critical services in 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.

Libraries are Models for Shared Services

Governor Cuomo has spoken of the need for local governments to cooperate, collaborate, and share resources to achieve greater efficiency and economies of scale. For over fifty years, New York's Library Systems have served as a model of governmental cooperation and efficiency. Library Aid, in large part, supports our local library systems; library systems enable individual libraries to provide access to materials and services that they could never afford on their own. This is accomplished through sharing services, sharing resources and collections, and conducting cooperative purchasing. 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 Woefully Underfunded

Although positive steps were taken last year, library funding is still down nearly 20% from what is stipulated in Education Law. The current Library Aid structure was devised nearly 30 years ago in 1986, and at that time was funded at \$72.9M. In 1986, few libraries had a computer. Today, New York's libraries provide over 17,000 publicly-accessible machines. No other state-funded service serves so many people for so few dollars.

Libraries are education.

Libraries are access.

Libraries are equality.

Libraries are technology.

Libraries are efficient.

Fully fund Library Aid to \$102M.

Respectfully Submitted,
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