



**Testimony of New York Library Association  
Mike Nepl, General Counsel & Director of Government Relations  
Joint Legislative Hearing on Elementary and Secondary Education  
February 6, 2019**

Good afternoon. 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 recognizing our partners and advocates in the Legislature for fighting back against Governor Cuomo's attack on library funding last year, and especially for your efforts to secure \$34M for the Public Library Construction Aid Program - a high-water mark in the program's thirty-plus-year history. As you know, more than half our state's local public libraries are now more than 60 years old, with another third now more than 30 years old. Your support for this program is changing communities and neighborhoods where needs are greater than available economic resources. We are incredibly appreciative of your efforts.

New York's libraries are founded on the principle of open, equitable access to information for ALL New Yorkers. When access to information is anything less than full, open, and equitable – when access to information has preconditions -- New Yorkers cannot be full participants in their own lives, their own story, or their own communities. This consistent underfunding has forced libraries into competition for limited resources, rather than cultivating the collaborative environment necessary to build integrated information environments that serve all New Yorkers.

Unfortunately, and once again, Governor Cuomo's "Democracy Agenda" aggressively attacks local libraries and library services. This year's Executive Budget slashes funding for library services to year-2000 levels, and cuts funding for the Public Library Construction Aid Program by 60%. This approach to library development is not just inequitable in relation to overall Education funding - it is improvident, incongruous, and incompatible with how New Yorkers view libraries -- as indispensable educational institutions in their communities.

I want to be clear about the implications here – this chronic failure to fully or fairly invest in library services and infrastructure means millions of New Yorkers are being "digitally disenfranchised." Without immediate, aggressive investment, New York risks presiding over the creation of a permanent digital and information underclass. We must reverse this approach that divests our citizens from their full potential, institutionalizes inequity, and creates a culture of cold complacency rather than one of cooperation and civic engagement.

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 a 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. The State Library Aid Program protects those communities and populations. The 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 and welcoming library environments. 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.

However, inclusive and diverse programming alone is not enough - for libraries to fully engage every individual 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**

New York’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. As you know, historically marginalized and underserved communities live in diminished information environments – they have been, and continue to be, “digitally disenfranchised.” 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.

For example, how effective would legislators be without access to information resources? Or if the information you received was from a source of unknown or questionable veracity? Or the degree of access to the information you needed was based on the wealth of the community from which you were elected? Those members without access, or without the resources to assess the quality of the information they receive, would not be full participants in the legislative process. This is the situation facing millions of New Yorkers, and it is creating a permanent “digital underclass.” This is not just inequitable - it is immoral.

### **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.

### **New Yorkers Want You to Fight for Libraries!**

New Yorkers consistently express the desire for quality libraries and library services – when communities vote on local library budgets, those budgets pass at a 98% rate. I will leave you with a few quick statistics from a January 2018 Siena Poll:

- 92% of New Yorkers say their public library is important to their local education system, including 97% with household incomes less than \$50,000 annually;
- 74% of New Yorkers have used their local public library at least once a month;
- 73% of New Yorkers say local libraries are key to helping people decide what information they can trust;
- New Yorkers are just as likely to use their local library as they are to use formal schooling when it comes to learning: 46% have done so at their library, 52% through classroom learning;
- 40% of households earning less than \$50,000 have sought career-building and job-training programs;
- 25% of households earning less than \$50,000 annually indicate the local public library is their primary point of internet access.

Libraries are Education.

Libraries are access.

Libraries are equality.

Respectfully Submitted,

Mike Neppl, Esq.

General Counsel & Director of Government Relations

New York Library Association