

Testimony

of

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Good afternoon, Chairman Sturla, Co-Chairman Samuelson and members of the committee.

I'm Glenn Miller, executive director of the Pennsylvania Library Association (PaLA). Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the state of library services and funding in Pennsylvania.

First a few words about our association which is the state's oldest and most diverse professional library organization serving libraries, librarians, library employees, library trustees, and Friends of the Library groups. PaLA represents more than 1,700 personal, institutional, and commercial members affiliated with public, academic, special, and some school libraries throughout the Commonwealth. The association represents the profession in Harrisburg and provides opportunities for professional growth, leadership development, and continuing education for librarians.

As I am sure you know, these have been difficult years for libraries. Over the last two years, more than one-third of the state support for library services has been cut, and Pennsylvanians are worse off as a result. I know that you heard from library supporters, and I know that you understand our frustration at fewer dollars for services at a time when the public wants and needs more library service, not less.

We won't really know exactly how much demand for service has increased until library annual reports are filed with the state later this year. But make no mistake about it; during this horrible recession, more and more Pennsylvanians rely on free services at their local public library. Families who cannot afford to buy books or DVDs turn to the library for summer reading and viewing. Unemployed workers who lost Internet access at home—or never had it at all—turn to the library to find and apply for jobs. Seniors who want to learn the basics of computers and emailing their grandkids turn to the library for instruction and access.

Come this fall, libraries once again will become bustling centers for early learning, for homework help, and for academic research. But sadly, many of the resources formerly available through their local public library simply will not be there. If we're serious about education in this state, and serious about leveling the playing field so that everyone has a chance to compete in this economy, then it's time to get serious about library services, too. Which brings me to funding.

Funding of public libraries in Pennsylvania is an age-old problem. We've talked about it a lot. We've had exposes written. Here is a copy of the June, 1997 series in the Philadelphia Inquirer entitled, Libraries in Distress. The headline says it all. This series led to important steps taken by our association—including the development of statewide plan—that in turn led to improved library services. Thanks to the leadership of Governor Ridge as well as strong support from the General Assembly, libraries made some real progress. Hours and collections grew as did customer use. Technology was modernized and expanded. Professional standards strengthened and a greater variety of programming emerged.

Sadly, in recent years, we've headed in the wrong direction—backwards, beginning with the 2003 state budget, recovering in 2006, and retreating again these past two years with the loss of one-third of our state support. This roller coaster of support points out just how difficult it is to achieve truly excellent library services in a state as large and complex as Pennsylvania. It will come as no surprise that funding—especially underfunding at the local level—is considered our biggest problem by far.

First, here's a look at where funding for library services comes from. According to the 2008 state annual report, on average nearly 6 dollars out of 10 for public libraries in Pennsylvania comes from local government sources (counties, municipalities, and school districts.) State dollars represents about 25% of funding for libraries and nearly all of the rest (14%) comes from "Other" sources which includes fundraising, grants, late fines, copier fees, and so on. Federal money amounts to about 1%.

The raw numbers for Pennsylvania (2008) are as follows:

Local governments	\$209.1 million	60%
State government	86.6 million	25%
Other sources	49.8 million	14%
<u>Federal</u>	<u>4.1 million</u>	<u>1%</u>
Total, all sources	349.9 million	

Now if you break this down on a per capita basis, it tells an interesting story: Pennsylvania does well in funding libraries at the state level (4th in the country), and pretty well through private fundraising, too (12th in the country.) Where Pennsylvania falls way behind is funding from local government sources. Nationally, we rank **third from the bottom** in local funding. And since local funding accounts for a 60% share of total library dollars across Pennsylvania, such a low ranking for local funding pulls our national average for overall revenue down to **39th place**.

Now there might be a temptation in Harrisburg to walk away and say, we're fourth in the country in state funding of libraries; that's good enough. Such an attitude would be understandable, but incorrect. Here's why.

Down through the years, state funding for library services has focused on three primary missions:

1. To provide at least a basic, minimum quality of library service across this large state. This is especially critical in areas of our state with limited or declining local tax bases;
2. To leverage the state's buying power and secure lower costs for library services that benefit the entire state; and,
3. To use state dollars as incentives to improve poor local government support.

To date, state dollars have indeed helped to provide a minimal level of local library service across the state. But support for statewide services such as POWER Library, the statewide library catalog, the ACCESS Pennsylvania statewide borrowing card, and even services provided by the State Library have been either slashed or eliminated.

Worse still, incentives at the state level to stimulate greater local support have not been in place since the library budget cuts of 2003. The real tragedy from our standpoint is that the incentives that first came online in 1999 were just beginning to gain traction and be effective when the '03 state budget was slashed 50%. Since that moment, our funding formula has not run and, therefore, incentives built into the formula for greater local support have not been offered.

Absent a state mandate for local library funding, we believe that state incentives properly funded and sustained over time, offer the best hope to address the funding crisis in Pennsylvania's libraries. Moreover, it might be helpful if the General Assembly either expanded local taxing options or allowed for the creation of local library districts to support library services. Currently, the Library Code limits local taxation to property taxes only. Greater local options would be a step in the right direction.

Or, if the property tax remains the only local option, establishing local library districts could help. We know, for example, based on a 2009 Rand Corporation study of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, that library districts offer more predictable and steadier funding than other types of organizations. However these local funding options shake out, a dedicated and predictable source of state funding that includes strong incentives to prime the pump for local support would reverse the trend of recent years and enable libraries to give the public what they want and deserve: improved hours, programs, services, facilities, collections, and staff.

Mr. Chairman, this is just a brief outline of where we've been and where we are in terms of library funding. If I sound frustrated, I am. I know firsthand the great works done by librarians all across this state. Many find ways to create miracles out of nothing more than what amounts to mulch. No one enters the library profession for the money. They do it because they believe in public service. They do it because they believe in sharing information and literacy. They do it because the public library is America's great equalizer where immigrant and intellectual alike share the empowerment of knowledge.

For too long we have marginalized these hard-working library professionals. Despite that, they do mighty works, and could do so much more given better support and resources. In the big picture of the state budget, the library portion is modest indeed. But these modest dollars invested in libraries today pay big, big dividends for Pennsylvania's future. We urge you to work to restore and grow the state's investment in public library services which, in turn, can help us address the age-old problem of local underfunding of public libraries.

Our association is working on a plan for the next generation of library services which will focus on the vital role of libraries in attacking Pennsylvania's illiteracy problems—illiteracy of all sorts. We hope to complete this plan in time for the next administration and next General Assembly, and we look forward to working with you on it.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee for this opportunity to testify, and for your attention. For your further information, I have provided you with some additional background on issues referenced in my testimony along with a copy of our 2010 Best Practices in Early Learning Guide. I would be happy to take any questions.