

To: Westchester Delegation of the New York State Assembly
Re: 2021-2022 State Budget Public Forum
Date: February 6, 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to share my views regarding funding of libraries in New York State for Fiscal Year 2021-2022. My name is Terry Kirchner and I am the Executive Director of the Westchester Library System (WLS), comprised of 38 member public libraries that are located within the geographic boundaries of Westchester County. WLS is one of the 23 cooperative public library systems in New York State.

Governor Andrew Cuomo's Executive Budget for FY 2021-2022 includes \$87 Million for Library Aid and \$14 Million for Public Library Construction Aid. These amounts represent an 8% [\$7.6 Million] cut in Library Aid and no increase in the Public Library Construction Aid Program from the final approved budget for the State's FY 2020-2021 [\$94.6 Million-Library Aid; \$14 Million-Construction Aid]. This proposed cut is in addition to the 5% [\$4.73 Million] reduction that was applied to the FY 2020-2021 Library Aid allocation.

The COVID-19 pandemic may have slowed down the economy, but it has only increased the activities within libraries. WLS and the member public libraries quickly transitioned to a hybrid environment with virtual and physical resources, services and programs taking place during the current COVID-19 pandemic. More than ever, the role of public libraries as a trusted resource for information about the Census, COVID-19, voter registration, job skills training and job placement has helped us keep our communities informed and engaged.

WLS *outreach activities* support library programs that focus on promoting literacy, increasing community awareness of the services and resources available through the member libraries and building strategic partnerships with other community agencies to create library programs and services that address community needs. WLS and the member libraries are not direct social service providers; but by working together with community partners, we help to address the growing list of social needs in our communities as shown by the examples below:

As a provider in the FEMA funded **NYS Project Hope COVID-19 program**, WLS is hiring trained crisis counselors to help individuals throughout Westchester County to connect with a broad ranges of support services that can help them respond to their COVID-19 related challenges. In cooperation with the public libraries as well as other strategic partners, WLS will help individuals move forward on issues such as financial and housing insecurity, joblessness, mental and physical health support and digital access.

WLS has begun a year-long series of **community dialogs** across Westchester County to better understand shared aspirations. We are doing this following a model set by the Harwood Institute. The Harwood Institute is the go-to place for people and organizations looking for ways to fight against the negative conditions stifling progress in society. They teach and coach people from all walks of life how to move society forward by building stronger communities, bridging divides and creating a culture of shared responsibility. Unlike other groups that support communities, they get to the core of what it takes to create real progress and change. People who feel stuck get a renewed sense of hope and a real path forward. Libraries are a trusted

community leader and can play an important role in making sure that the aspirations of all members of a community are valued, heard and included as part of the dialogue of building a shared future.

WLS's curated online resource **FirstFind.org** continues to be a launch point for information on core adult learning tasks such as obtaining a high school equivalency diploma, building core reading and math skills, learning English and finding employment. An effective multi-media learning tool for adult learners is ***Learning Upgrade***, and can be found in FirstFind. This easy, fun learning app helps improve reading and math skills using songs, videos, games and rewards. Along with *Learning Upgrade*, **Read Better** - our core literacy tutoring service offered in collaboration with Hadassah Westchester – has also grown over the past year. Read Better tutors meet adult developing readers at library locations convenient to the student when possible or via Zoom. Read Better is a companion service to **HSE Connect!** that offers information on pathways and resources for obtaining a HSE diploma.

WLS provides instruction on simple, effective breathing techniques that have been demonstrated to relieve stress and improve mood, mental focus, and performance. These techniques are taught as **BREATH-BODY-MIND™ (BBM)** – a program of gentle movement, breathing and relaxation exercises that reduce the experience of stress and anxiety and increase a sense of calm and wellbeing. These exercises are simple and evidence-based in their impact on an array of populations – including children, adults, and individuals with depression or PTSD. During COVID-19, these programs have helped individuals feel more grounded and better able to cope with the challenges of social isolation.

Westchester Seniors Out Speaking (WSOS), which includes community presentations and one-to-one counseling, was an “onsite and in person” program that has found renewed success in the virtual world. More than ever, individuals in the County are seeking assistance in using the Medicare Plan Finder tool and in understanding the available Medicare plans. The WSOS program now offers many video programs about the Medicare program that individuals can watch at their leisure and provides a hotline for individuals would like to speak directly with a counselor. WLS staff also co-chair the **Senior Law Day collaborative** and WLS hosts and updates SeniorLawDay.info, which continues to evolve as a resource for information on essential topics for elder law and related concerns.

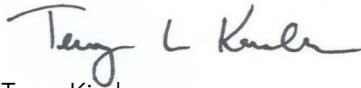
WLS helps achieve cost efficiencies that maximize the value of every tax dollar received. Examples of cost-saving services provided through WLS's Library Aid allocation include:

- **Centralized cataloging services** for all titles purchased by the member libraries and shared access to over 5 Million books, DVDs and CDs.
- **Administration of the Integrated Library System**, 3rd largest telecommunications network in Westchester County.
- **Over 15 digital resources** that allow individuals to engage in online learning, reading, listening and viewing 24/7. These resources are supported through library aid, including central library funding, as well as direct financial support from the member libraries.
- **Professional development and training opportunities** for library staff, trustees and volunteers provided at no or low cost to the member libraries to help everyone keep up to date on the newest technologies, best practices, and to remain in compliance with local and state regulations.
- **Administration and coordination of system-wide grants, construction aid and purchases.**

Westchester’s Public Libraries were allocated just under \$655,000 in Public Library Construction Aid. These construction-related funds are often the only means that allow WLS member libraries to move forward on vital projects that they might not otherwise be able to afford – especially with the lower match (from 50% to 25%) for economically disadvantaged communities. The last submitted round of construction grant applications (FY2020-21) supported important infrastructure upgrades for roof, elevator, windows, electrical and HVAC systems, improved accessibility, as well as creative renovations for increased community services.

These proposed cuts will severely limit the ability of WLS and its 38 member public libraries, as well as public libraries and library systems throughout the state, to effectively meet community needs. Public library systems and public libraries provide lifelong learning and often serve as an essential safety net for those not accommodated by other institutions. Well-funded public library systems and public libraries can expand opportunities and *make progress happen* for the almost 1 Million people in Westchester – and all of New York.

Respectfully submitted,



Terry Kirchner

Executive Director