
Senate Local Government and Elections Committee
House Bill 110 Written Testimony
May 4, 2021

Chairman Gaverone, Vice Chairman O'Brien, Ranking Member Maharath, and Members of the Senate Local Government and Elections Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on House Bill (HB) 110.

My name is Paula Brehm-Heeger and I am the Eva Jane Romaine Coombe Director of the Cincinnati and Hamilton County Public Library. Our Library is one of the busiest in the United States, providing service to over 800,000 Cincinnati and Hamilton County residents through a network of 40 branch libraries, a major downtown Main Library, and a Distribution Center. Our Library is one of the 5 biggest public library systems in Ohio, offering more than 1 million square feet of space for use by our community.

The year 2020 was a time of adapting for everyone, and as the needs of our community shifted, the Cincinnati and Hamilton County Public Library, as always, remained committed to responding to the needs of our community. We quickly pivoted and adjusted our services to support our local residents. We did not stop providing important services to the community. Here are some examples.

- Our Virtual Information Center remained open to take questions and provide reference help to community members by call, email, and chat. Between the months of March and July, residents took advantage of this service 59,211 times.
 - We kept our Wi-Fi turned on at all Library locations 24/7 to give residents free Wi-Fi access from our parking lots and outside of our buildings. Between the months of March and July, our Library locations provided 747,617 free Wi-fi sessions.
 - Staff created PPE for healthcare workers with donated materials using equipment from our MakerSpaces. Our Library provided TriHealth with over 700 masks.
 - We added over 10,000 titles to our eBranch collection due to the significant increase in eContent use during the pandemic.
 - We offered virtual events like Storytime at Home for kids with Children's Librarians, and some of your fellow General Assembly members shared their Storytime videos with us to be featured on our website. In addition, Lunch & Learns were hosted by our Adult Learning Center staff.
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- We offered grants classes virtually, presented by our Grants Resource Librarian. Our cardholders were able to access the Foundation Directory Online from anywhere for free. Prior to the pandemic, this resource could only be used while inside of our buildings. This became a lifeline for local small-businesses and non-profits looking for new funding opportunities to offset losses they experienced during the pandemic.
- While other community resources had in-person services severely disrupted, we offered meal pick-up service to area youth, in addition to our usual summer meals and afterschool snacks service, distributing 229,827 meals and snacks in 2020.
- We expanded our free tax preparation service since some other in-person options, such as churches and community rooms did not have the space to accommodate this important service as they have in past years.

It is clear that our community needs us now more than ever. Even in the pandemic year of 2020, we had over 1.9 million in-person visits. Throughout the pandemic we have provided special COVID-19 related assistance, and continue to do so today. We have offered free COVID-19 testing; resources to help community members navigate related challenges during this crisis, including job and workforce development help, eviction and tax return assistance for individuals and support for businesses and non-profits impacted by COVID-19. We also offer many online and virtual resources, including a page on our public website with fact-based COVID-19 vaccine information for residents; helping community members set up their vaccine appointments; free health-related educational sessions and screenings at several Library locations; and programs to equip parents and caregivers with tools to help their kids through this unique school year.

The Cincinnati and Hamilton County Public Library provides technology and internet access for school, work, and personal use. This resource is critical for residents who lack internet and technology access. We have been assisting local schools with bridging learning gaps caused by COVID-19 and summer break. This year, our summer program focused on engaging take-home opportunities for youth like STEM activity booklets, Take & Make activity kits, and we offered both virtual and live in-person programs that were held outside of our buildings. Our Library also provides Census outreach, serve as polling locations, and provide residents with accurate, non-partisan voting information.

I was disappointed that the Ohio House did not include a provision in Amended Substitute House Bill 110 to maintain the Public Library Fund (PLF) for Ohio's libraries at 1.7% of the General Revenue Fund (GRF). Based on what is included in the House Budget, libraries are being negatively impacted in several different ways:

- The PLF percentage is being cut from 1.7% to 1.66%
- The base of the GRF will be negatively impacted by the 2% income tax cut
- Libraries will automatically see a \$5 million deduction each fiscal year for the Ohio Public Library Information Network and the Library for the Blind

In addition, libraries are not receiving any of the American Rescue Plan Act stimulus money for local governments directly from the federal government. Unlike in other states where public libraries are part of city or county government, in Ohio, public libraries are separate political subdivisions, eliminating our eligibility for many federal funding dollars.

An investment in public libraries yields significant returns. For every dollar spent by the Cincinnati and Hamilton County Public Library, our community receives \$5.12 in direct benefits. As we come out of the pandemic, demand for our critical services continues to increase and adequate funding is crucial for us to keep up with this growing demand. Prior to voting the bill out of the Senate, we urge you to consider amending the House version of the budget and preserve the PLF at the current rate of 1.7% in addition to holding libraries harmless from any unintended consequences from tax reform.

If you have questions specific to the Cincinnati and Hamilton County Public Library, please feel free to contact me.