

Ohio Senate Finance Committee

Substitute House Bill 110 Testimony

May 19, 2021

Good day, Chairman Dolan and members of the Senate Finance Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to present written testimony today on Substitute House Bill (H.B.) 110 on behalf of Ohio's public libraries.

My name is Mary Ellen Icaza, and I am the CEO & Executive Director of Stark Library, the district library in Stark County. Additionally, I serve on the Board of Directors of the Ohio Library Council (OLC) and am a member of the OLC's Legislative Network. In 2015, I was selected as a participant in the American Library Association Leadership Institute. I am delighted to share with you how Ohio public libraries impact our citizens and communities in Ohio.

Stark Library serves more than 240,000 residents in Stark County through 10 locations, six mobile libraries (bookmobiles and community stops), books by mail, and 24/7 online services. Like other Ohio public libraries, Stark Library has been named one of Library Journal's top-rated Star Libraries for the past six years. Star Libraries represents the best of the best, and it is significant to note that Ohio is the second-highest state in the country for the number of Star Libraries. This is indicative of how high-performing Ohio libraries are among peer libraries nationally.

2020 was a challenging year for everyone, and our Library was no exception. We were unable to serve patrons in the usual manner, but our exceptional and talented library staff quickly rose to the challenge, overcame obstacles, and found new and exciting ways to connect to our community. Our mission is to *spark curiosity and foster knowledge by connecting everyone to resources, services, and opportunities*. Our core values are:

Access
Literacy
Respect
Serving Others

Collaboration
Intellectual Freedom
Forward Thinking
Confidentiality

These core values are at the forefront of everything we do at the Library, and they help drive both our strategic plan and day-to-day operations of the Library. Over the course of the year, we focused our efforts on access to digital technology and materials, collaboration with partner organizations to serve others and, of course, literacy, to meet the quickly-changing needs of our community.

Access – Bridging the Digital Divide

In Stark County, more than 17% of households do not have access to the internet– and that number grows exponentially in rural and urban areas. With this critical need, patrons depend on their Library for internet access. When the library buildings were closed in the spring, WiFi was still

available to patrons – in most cases extending into parking lots – so patrons could continue to access the internet. Patrons logged more than 1.2 million WiFi sessions in 2020!

More than 11% of Stark County households do not have a computer in their home. Patrons use library computers to access email, search for jobs, complete job training programs, apply for government assistance, complete schoolwork, and much more. In order to meet this digital literacy need, one of the first services we began offering in our facilities when we re-opened was access to computers. In 2020, patrons logged almost 53,000 computer sessions.

We received a letter from one patron who used library computers almost exclusively to attain his bachelor's degree in Health and Human Services. Charles said, "Your computers and friendly staff helped me immensely in graduating."

During 2020, usage of digital materials like eBooks, eAudiobooks, eMagazines, and streaming movies and television soared. We re-prioritized our budget to accommodate an 18% growth in these materials. As we re-opened our buildings, we offered Library-to-Go services, allowing patrons to reserve materials for pick up curbside or via drive-through, and Books by Mail as safe alternatives for delivery of materials.

With school closures in March, schools, parents, and children had to adapt quickly to an online learning environment. We partnered with a local school system to help families and teachers by providing 50 WiFi hotspots with unlimited data to access the necessary school services from home – in addition to the 265 WiFi hotspots that circulated more than 1,300 times in the community.

Collaboration and Serving Others

As the pandemic ravaged our schools, many children in Stark County were faced with food insecurity because they could no longer access free meals at school. We served thousands of children and families during 2020 – providing more than 4,000 meals – through our partnerships with community organizations. The Library's bookmobiles provided WiFi access at community stops and during meal distribution. For one of the local school districts, the Library provided deposit collections to all elementary schools so that students and teachers could still access library materials even though the children could not visit the Library.

With the help of acrylic barriers and Personal Protective Equipment, we were able to safely re-open all of our buildings by the end of summer. Patrons were thrilled to be able to browse the collection, talk to their favorite librarians, and access critical services such as document printing, notary, passports, and one-on-one technical help.

Literacy

At Stark Library, everything revolves around literacy. I've already addressed how we meet digital literacy needs in our community; now, let's talk about early literacy. Through our partnership with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library and the Governor's Imagination Library, we have registered almost 6,300 children and mailed more than 33,000 books. Our SPARK parent partners worked with more than 1,400 children and their caregivers to develop skills necessary for kindergarten, transforming their in-home visits into virtual visits. They dropped off care packages with books and crafts to children's homes and then met with them virtually to read stories and do literacy activities.

Hosting in-person programs has traditionally been one of the strongest ways to connect with patrons. Covid-19 brought those to an abrupt stop, but that did not stop our librarians and

programmers. They quickly adapted and developed virtual programs, such as storytimes, book discussions, technology classes, craft sessions, and author talks to fill the gap. These alternate ways of serving will continue long after the pandemic is a thing of the past.

In 2021, we plan to address the learning loss in children that has become apparent during the pandemic. We are already working with the school system to provide virtual programming to augment their school curriculum. In addition, we have re-started Re|imagine – our plan to renovate and improve six of our library buildings over the next two years, and we are working closely with OhioMeansJobs to offer career and job-related programs to our community.

As you can see, our Library has a significant impact on our community. These accomplishments are all possible because of Ohio's commitment to and belief in our Library and the other 250 public libraries in our state through the Public Library Fund. Continuous, consistent funding from the PLF is imperative to continue to meet our community's evolving needs and interests.

These investments in our community come with a price, and I hope you agree that investing in our libraries is a wise use of state funding. Reducing the PLF will mean a decrease in materials and services, meaning that fewer individuals in our community will benefit from library services, often those who have been disproportionately impacted during the pandemic.

On behalf of Stark County and Stark Library, I respectfully ask that you maintain the PLF at 1.7% of the General Revenue Fund and subsequently hold public libraries harmless from any tax reform. If you have any questions about other ways that Stark Library impacts our community, I welcome the opportunity to speak with you personally. Thank you for your consideration.