

**Ohio Senate Finance Committee**

**House Bill 166 Testimony**

**Cleveland Public Library**

**Felton Thomas Jr., Executive Director & CEO**

**May 22, 2019**

Chairman Dolan, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on House Bill (HB) 166, the biennial budget bill for FY20-21.

My name is Felton Thomas Jr. and I am the Executive Director and CEO of the Cleveland Public Library. I am also a member of the Ohio Library Council’s Government Relations Committee, past president of the Public Library Association at the national level, board president of the Greater Cleveland Food Bank as well as community impact chair for the United Way of Greater Cleveland.

This year, the Cleveland Public Library (CPL) is celebrating its 150th year anniversary. However, we know that the library would not have thrived this long without the citizens of Cleveland and the state of Ohio. Our patrons not only trust us, but see us as an important component of their communities. Last year CPL had a total attendance of **2.3 million** for the year. We circulated over **5 million** digital and physical items to our library patrons, and hosted more than **19,000 programs** for children, teens and adults. Our computers were utilized more than **700,000 times** and our Wi-Fi, located in each and every branch, was used **1.7 million times**. These figures demonstrate as the years have gone by, our importance to the community has not only sustained but strengthened.

In our most recent strategic plan we focused on addressing community deficits, forming communities of learning, and ensuring residents were prepared for the future digital environment. We gave significant attention to education, workforce development, and digital literacy, all subsets of our strategic priorities. I am pleased to say in the years since we have done an exceptional job at implementing programs and providing resources in all of these vital areas that have had a positive impact on our Cleveland and Ohio community. But the need is ever-growing.

**Impact in Education**

In terms of education, our early childhood literacy & academic support programs focus on building support for young children’s first year of school. Other programs such as story times and Read to the Beat, teach reading readiness and literacy skills to children at a young age. We have also addressed the summer slide through our summer reading initiative and engaged children in STEM-related programs such as our science and robotics clubs.

Our goal is to also provide supports that address the child’s whole-self. This includes social, emotional, and health components. For example, our partnership with the Greater Cleveland Foodbank allowed us to serve more than **150,000 meals** to students last year. Additionally, our partnership with MetroHealth and North East Ohio Medical University (NEOMED) residents provide youth and their parents free health screenings and medical advice, right in our library branches. We seek to expand partnerships such as these.

**Impact in Workforce Development**

Our workforce development efforts include our partnerships with a number of organizations in the city and region aimed at ensuring our patrons have the necessary skills and resources to acquire a sustainable wage. We host Ohio Means Jobs and ASPIRE Greater Cleveland (i.e. adult basic literacy services) at our branches. Additionally, Lynda.com, a statewide partnership with LinkedIn, is accessible at all of our branches allowing our patrons to up-skill and re-tool by taking free online classes. Since launching in July of 2018, more than **60,000 individuals** in the state of Ohio have utilized this service. We know this number will grow as awareness of the service increases.

**Impact in Digital Literacy**

Last, but certainly not least, digital literacy is another area that CPL has invested in significantly. In the 21st Century, knowing how to use and operate a computer and the internet is vital for all. At our branches we host many digital literacy courses that help introduce our patrons to beginner and advanced computer and internet skills. Courses include but are not limited to Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, all of which are needed in today’s workforce.

CPL also currently has mobile hotspots available to our patrons, with plans to expand our inventory. CPL loans out hotspots for walk-ins on a first-come, first-served basis to anyone over eighteen years of age with a CLEVNET library card in good standing. The demand for our hotspots is significant given the fact that 1/3 of the city’s residents do not have access to the internet in any form and as many as ½ of the city’s residents have no fixed wired home internet access.1

**Closing**

Public libraries are doing more and more for communities; however, public funding has not matched this growth. Ohio libraries have lost more than $113 million since 2001. Therefore, I formally ask that you consider increasing the Public Library Fund from **1.68% to 1.7% of the GRF.** While this is still lower than funding prior to the recent recession, it is an increase that would help public libraries significantly.

Libraries are centered on the idea of access for all. By increasing the PLF, we will be better equipped to leverage our infrastructure and resources to provide that access to our Cleveland residents and the residents in the state of Ohio. We believe that increased funding for our efforts will lead to great improvements in our communities as more and more residents rely on the library for resources and services in their neighborhoods. More after-school programming so that our youth spend more time learning and staying engaged, more adult literacy programming aimed at alleviating illiteracy in our region, and more partnerships to help our communities holistically will allow public libraries to remain vital anchor institutions in local neighborhoods.

We hope that you see us as partners in your efforts and support the efforts of libraries in our state. Doing so will ensure that Ohio continues to have premier public library institutions for decades to come.

I am happy to answer any questions and thank you for your time and consideration.

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**Felton Thomas, Jr., Executive Director, CEO**

1 <https://www.digitalc.org/connect-theunconnected>