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**House Finance Committee  
House Bill 110 Written Testimony  
March 11, 2021**

Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chairman Plummer, Ranking Member Crawley, and Members of the House Finance 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 10 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 quickly pivoted and adjusted our services to meet the needs of local residents. During the brief period when we had to pause in-building use in the spring, 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. While our buildings were closed, 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.

We built on our success in the spring, inviting users back into our buildings over the summer with restoration of in-building service in July. 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 and helping 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; programs to equip parents and caregivers with tools to help their kids through this unique school year; and meal boxes for youth, in addition to our usual summer meals and afterschool snacks programs.

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.

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. 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. The “As Introduced” version of HB 110 would reduce state funding to Ohio’s public libraries through the Public Library Fund (PLF) from 1.7% to 1.66% of the General Revenue Fund (GRF). Under the Governor’s proposal, the Office of Budget Management is estimating the PLF will decrease by 0.5% in FY22 and increase by 3.5% in FY23. However, these estimates are based on assumed growth in Ohio’s economy and the assumption that no additional policy changes will impact the GRF. Most often, libraries do not realize these estimates. Only once in the past seven years has the PLF met the estimates included in budget documents.

Please consider making public libraries a priority in this budget by maintaining the PLF at the current (FY21) rate of 1.7% of the GRF. If you have questions specific to the Cincinnati and Hamilton County Public Library, please feel free to contact me.