



**SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
AM. SUB. H.B. 96 TESTIMONY
MAY 12, 2025**

Chairman Brenner, Vice-Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram and Members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Amended Substitute House Bill 96 on behalf of the Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library (CHPL).

My name is Paula Brehm-Heeger and I am the Eva Jane Romaine Coombe Director of the Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library. Our Library is the only public library system in Hamilton County. We have 41 branches throughout the County, as well as a centralized distribution center and over 900 staff, 580 of which are full-time. We have a collection of over 9.6 million volumes, making us the 2nd largest public library in the U.S. by volumes held.

In 2024, we had over 4.1 million customer visits (a 17% increase over 2023) and circulated more than 19 million items, which is no surprise given that Ohio is one of the top 3 states in the U.S. for library visits. Our collection of digital materials is one of the largest in the country and the demand for these expensive items has increased exponentially since 2009, the year eBooks were first broadly available. Demand rose 2.5 times in the last decade alone. I say all of this to illustrate how much Ohioans love and use their public libraries and that stable and consistent state funding is necessary for CHPL and all of Ohio's public libraries to continue to provide the many important books and services our communities want and need.

Today I would like to discuss a few of those services that highlight the crucial role CHPL plays in supporting and promoting the education of young people. We do this by providing free access to a large and varied collection of books, resources, and knowledgeable staff and through programming like Storytimes, Summer Reading, STEM events, Homework Help, and partnering with schools and educators, including Homeschool instructors, throughout the County to enhance their lesson plans and provide books directly to schools and classrooms.

We know that reading to children for at least 20 minutes a day is one of the most important ways to increase success in school later in life. In 2024, CHPL offered 320 reading-focused events for 11,756 kids and teens.

Storytime at the Library:

- CHPL offers entertaining and interactive Storytimes at all of its 41 branches broken down into 5 age groups from infant to age 6 and even offers a Family Storytime to encourage and engage parents and caregivers to become involved in building literacy skills.
- Families unable to make it to one of our Storytime events can explore more than 300 'Storytime at Home Videos' on Youtube.
- Our staff provides resources and support for parents and caregivers to learn about early literacy practices and how to help their children prepare for and learn to love reading.
- In 2024, 88 CHPL youth service-staff received training in the Science of Reading. By incorporating concepts from the Science of Reading, Storytimes expose kids to social skills,

literacy tools, and concepts used in Ohio's public-school curricula, giving younger kids a head-start in the classroom.

- Storytimes are our most popular events. In 2024, over 179,000 children and caregivers participated in 5,791 Storytimes. That's 483 Storytimes/month; 16/day

Summer Reading:

- CHPL kicks off its annual Summer Reading Program at the end of the month on May 31st with fun-filled events at all 41 Branch locations. Summer Reading programs help maintain literacy skills, prevent the "summer slide", and encourage a continuous reading habit, all while having fun.
- In 2024, 29,000 kids (8% increase over 2023) participated in CHPL's Summer Reading Challenge, which includes events, prizes, resources, and activities all summer long.

Teacher Collections and Outreach:

- Any school or daycare in Hamilton County is eligible to be a part of CHPL's free Delivered Teacher Collection Service. This monthly service offered during the school year helps schools introduce great books to students and enhance lesson plans by preparing collections of materials relevant to the curriculum. Our staff is able to prepare collections at the proper reading level from a large variety of materials, including non-fiction books for classroom research, seasonal topics, specific authors, specific or popular titles, and even accelerated readers.
- Outreach staff also coordinate with teachers who have students with disabilities to provide books in alternative formats, adaptive technology to aid with communication and reading, and a varied collection of books by and about people with disabilities.
- This school year, Outreach services served 492 educators each month at 69 different schools throughout Hamilton County. Over 10,000 books have been lent out to supplement classroom curriculum.

STEM:

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Educational programs do much more than foster an understanding of these areas. STEM education emphasizes a hands-on, real-world, problem-solving approach to learning in order to develop critical thinking, drive innovation, and prepare students for the demands of a technology-driven economy and future careers.

- In 2024 24,513 children and teens attended STEM Events at CHPL branches. There are 41 events this month alone at 21 of our branches. STEM events are also incorporated into our Summer Reading Program.
- We have events for kids of all ages from pre-K through High School. These events range from Discovery Days for kids to explore different hands-on activities on a number of topics designed to spark interest to building challenges focusing on basic mechanics or robotics to introduction to coding.
- Through the Library's community partnerships, kids have the opportunity to meet astronomers, zoologists, naturalists, engineers, and many other types of scientists to learn about new careers.
- CHPL has partnered with astronomer, Dean Regas, to circulate 15 Orion StarBlast 4.5" astronomical telescopes for use by Library cardholders.
- In addition to the Library providing kids with access to computers and Wi-Fi, The Library's MakerSpaces introduce kids to technology helpful in creating and growing small businesses and

technology used in 21st century careers, such as high-powered computers with specialized software for creative digital design. Software can be used for video editing, music mixing, graphic design, architecture, web design, and more.

Homeschooling:

In addition to access to free books, technology, educational resources, and all the Library's programming for young people, CHPL offers resources and programs expressly designed to support Homeschoolers and their families.

- Homeschool instructors are eligible for the Library's Educator Card with special borrowing privileges, which include
 - The ability to have 200 items (except DVD's) checked out on the card
 - The ability to request a customized Teacher Collection that can be either picked up or delivered monthly.
 - The ability to apply for a card feature that allows access to classroom sets of downloadable materials.
 - Homeschoolers and their families can participate in a STEM Lab program, STEM Discovery Days, a Hands-On program, and a CAC Art Lab Program (in partnership with the Contemporary Art Center) specifically geared to them.

Homework Helpers:

CHPL provides free homework help to students in kindergarten through eighth grade at 23 of our branch libraries in the afternoons during the school year. Homework Helpers at these locations assist students with homework assignments and provide skill-building assistance on any subject.

- Students (K-Adult) can also receive live, online homework help, skills building (including SAT prep), writing assistance, test prep help, FAFSA form assistance, expert chess coaching, and more from expert tutors.
- Homework Help is one of the most important services CHPL can offer school-aged children. Tutors can be very expensive making them out of reach for many students, but CHPL's Homework Help is free. We want to give every child who comes into the Library the opportunity to succeed in school.
- In 2024, 25,293 students received homework assistance. Almost 60% of the kids were tweens (8-12). Subject-specific help was provided in all areas with the most requested subjects being Math (53.3%) and Language Arts (43.4%). The average amount of time a Homework Helper spends with each student is 47 minutes. Sixty-one schools were served by Homework Help locations.

Additionally, we know that kids who come after-school to the Library are oftentimes hungry. Last year, CHPL, thanks to federal funds and our Library Foundation, was able to provide 97,242 meals and snacks to youth, making it easier for them to concentrate on their work.

ACCESSING MATERIALS

I would like to use my remaining time to speak briefly about access to materials. First, let me say that nobody cares more about children than the Library, as is apparent from the services and resources I just described. We know that parents are the best judges of what is best for their families. To support families in providing oversight and guidance to their children about Library materials, CHPL offers several library card types, each with varying levels of access and privileges. The variety of options are as follows:

- **Unlimited Card:** Access to all circulating materials. For those under 18, a parental signature is required to obtain this type of card.
- **Limited Juvenile Card:** Access limited to Juvenile material (does not include Teen items) for customers under the age of 18, at the request of a parent or legal guardian.
- **Limited No Video Card:** Access limited to any Juvenile, Teen, and Adult material, excluding DVDs and other video formats, for customers under the age of 18 at the request of a parent or legal guardian.
- **Juvenile-Only Card:** Access to seven Juvenile print or audiobook items at a time to children ages 12 and under.
- **Teen-Only Card:** Access to seven Juvenile or Teen print or audiobook items at a time to teens between ages 13-17.

Should an individual have a concern about material in our collection, we also offer a “Request for Reconsideration” form. This form prompts a formal process of review by multiple library staff members, including consideration of the cataloging classification.

For many decades CHPL enforced a policy that involved staff members in our Main Library Fiction Department reading and reviewing every new adult and teen fiction book that was added to our collection to determine, per their judgement, what materials were appropriate only for adults. The department employed multiple staff members and reviewing books was a primary duty. By the time this policy ended in the early 2000’s staffing costs for this department exceeded \$350,000 annually.

Today we purchase a lot of books for young people. Last year we purchased 8,431 unique juvenile titles, (107,827 copies of those titles) and 3,077 unique teen titles last (9,022 copies). If we were to return to a process by which staff read, reviewed, sorted, and sequestered each of these books, the cost likely would be upwards of \$1M per year, adjusting for inflation and current library procedures.

It is important to note that many multi-branch library systems in Ohio, like CHPL, offer our library card holders the convenience of returning checked-out materials to any of our 41 branches. Meaning they do not need to return items to the location from which they were checked out. By allowing materials to “float” or stay at the location where they were returned, we encourage community interests to shape collections at each branch, increase efficiency, and lower material transportation costs.

Under this model, books are returned every day by patrons at each of our 41 locations, totaling more than 87,700 items each week. Returning to a system requiring even a simple sorting of which materials could be placed where, would involve staff at each of the 41 locations working this process daily. It is difficult to calculate the exact staffing costs, but they would be substantial. In addition to increasing costs, the required assessment and sorting of books for compliance would delay materials reaching our shelves, frustrating tax-paying patrons.

Finally, designing a floor layout to keep materials designated for an adult audience completely out of sight of certain visitors would be very difficult, particularly in our smaller locations that may only be 2,500 sf.

We are currently working to update our 41 facilities to modern standards and needs, as many are well over 100 years old. This is the priority for our taxpayer dollars. A system that is redundant to the options already available to support parents and caregivers in determining what is best for their own

families and turns those important decisions over to a staff member, seems not to be the best use of tax dollars. At CHPL we know this better than most.

Most importantly I hope that I have been able to convey today the many ways CHPL serves as a critical resource for children, students, families, and schools in our community. We check out millions of books to children and families each year. In fact, in 2024, we checked out 4,892,950 children's books. We also checked out 4,287,895 books for adults and 460,370 books for teens. The nearly 5 million children's books checked out in one year alone shows that we are doing our part to provide reading materials to children who are learning to read, improving their reading skills, or are already great readers. None of this would be possible without stable and consistent funding through the PLF.

I am happy to answer any questions that you may have. Thank you!