

**Testimony of Elizabeth Muether
Director and Chief Fiscal Officer
Mercer County District Library
Before the Ohio Senate Finance Committee
Regarding Broadband Access, Community Support,
and Public Library Services**



May 27, 2025

Chair Manchester, Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Weinstein, and members of the Government Oversight and Reform Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony today. My name is Elizabeth Muether, and I serve as Director and Chief Fiscal Officer of the Mercer County District Library, which serves residents throughout Mercer County via our main library in Celina and branch locations in the villages of Mendon, St. Henry, and Chickasaw. Mercer County is a largely rural area in west-central Ohio, with a population of just over 42,000 spread across 473 square miles. In this context, the Mercer County District Library plays a vital role in ensuring access to information, technology, and resources.

Public libraries like ours play a vital role in strengthening communities, especially in rural areas where access to digital services, one-on-one assistance, and reliable broadband remains limited. Our mission extends beyond books and circulation. We serve as a central hub for information, technology access, and personalized help for residents of all ages and backgrounds.

Broadband Access: Bridging the Digital Divide

The Mercer County District Library is a vital resource for residents with limited internet access. In addition to free in-building Wi-Fi and public computers, we circulate mobile hotspots and help eligible households enroll in the Home Hotspot Program, a partnership between *Bridging the Gap* by PCs for People and Mobile Beacon.

This program provides low-cost internet service to qualifying residents. The Library facilitates enrollment but does not manage hardware, service, or billing, these are handled directly by the nonprofit, PCs for People. All sensitive documents are securely submitted and destroyed, and no payment information is collected by the Library.

Through this partnership, our Library helps bridge the digital divide, ensuring more families in Mercer County can access the internet for school, work, healthcare, and daily life.

We continue to meet essential digital needs in our rural community. Our Wi-Fi usage reached nearly 28,000 sessions in 2024, up over 1,000 the year prior, a clear indicator of our role in bridging the digital divide. Public computers were used close to 7,000 times last year, and our mobile Hotspot devices circulated nearly 1,300 times, offering reliable internet access to patrons without connectivity at home.

Extended Hours and Personalized Assistance

Recognizing the needs of our working families, students, seniors and veterans, the Mercer County District Library offers extended hours to ensure our resources are accessible to as many people as possible. We provide one-on-one computer help for patrons who may lack digital skills, whether they are navigating online forms, accessing email, or using government websites for services like unemployment, social security, Veteran Services or Medicare.

Library staff take the time to work individually with residents, often on tasks that can be overwhelming or confusing, particularly for those who are not tech-savvy or who may not have family members nearby to assist. Our role is quiet but essential: we help people accomplish things that are necessary for daily life.

Tax Resources and Public Information

Each year, our library distributes hundreds of federal, state, and local tax forms and instruction booklets, resources that are increasingly difficult to find in print elsewhere. While we do not prepare taxes, we assist residents in locating and printing online forms, accessing filing websites, and navigating the digital side of tax season.

We serve many older adults and individuals with limited access to computers who would otherwise struggle to meet filing deadlines or understand changing tax requirements. By providing this assistance, we help save people time, stress, and oftentimes money.

Conclusion

As I close, I'd like to leave you with a few numbers that reflect our continued relevance in our rural community: in the past year, the Mercer County District Library served over 70,000 visitors, circulated more than 300,000 books and materials, and supported 1,500 community events and meetings with over 42,000 people in attendance in our public spaces and in our community. These statistics illustrate just how deeply the library is woven into the fabric of our community.

Ohio's public libraries are an essential part of the state's infrastructure for public service delivery. At the Mercer County District Library, we are proud to offer our community a welcoming, inclusive, and dependable place to access the internet, government services, and trusted information. We do this efficiently and professionally, with a focus on fiscal responsibility and community service.

We urge the General Assembly to continue supporting the Public Library Fund and to view public libraries as a key part of Ohio's strategy for digital equity, civic engagement, and community resilience. Please restore the Governor's proposal to HB 96.

Thank you for your time and continued support of Ohio's libraries.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Muether
Director & CFO
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Celina, Ohio