



SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
AM. SUB. H.B. 96
INTERESTED PARTY TESTIMONY
MAY 27, 2025

Chairman Cirino, Vice-Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and Members of the Senate Finance 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 CHPL. 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 share all of this to emphasize just how deeply Ohioans value—and actively use—their public libraries. Stable and consistent state funding is essential for CHPL and all of Ohio's public libraries to continue delivering the books, resources, and high-demand services our communities rely on. ***I respectfully urge the Ohio Senate to restore Governor DeWine's proposal to set the Public Library Fund (PLF) at 1.75% of the General Revenue Fund (GRF), as outlined in amendment SC 1236.***

In our community, the Library serves as a vital resource for children, students, families, adults, entrepreneurs, small businesses, schools, and seniors. We educate, connect, and offer lifelong learning opportunities that empower people to grow and thrive. I would like to highlight a few of the many services that demonstrate the Library's essential role in supporting youth education and promoting community well-being—through our senior services, programs for individuals with disabilities, and partnerships with local health-focused organizations.

YOUTH EDUCATION SERVICES

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 fun and engaging Storytimes at all 41 branches, tailored to different age groups ranging from infants to age 6. A special Family Storytime is also available to encourage parents and caregivers to actively participate in fostering 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.

YOUTH ACCESS TO MATERIALS

No one cares more about children than the Library, as reflected in the services and resources discussed. We recognize that parents are the best judges of what's right for their families. To support them in guiding and monitoring their children's access to Library materials, CHPL offers several types of library cards—each with different 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 materials in our collection, we 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 maintained a policy in which staff in the Main Library's Fiction Department read and reviewed every new adult and teen fiction title added to our collection to determine, based on their judgment, which materials were appropriate only for adults. At that time, the department employed multiple staff members, and reviewing books was one of their primary responsibilities. By the time this policy was discontinued in the early 2000s, annual staffing costs for the department exceeded \$350,000.

Today, we purchase a substantial number of books for young readers. In the past year alone, we purchased 8,431 unique juvenile titles—totaling 107,827 copies—and 3,077 unique teen titles, with 9,022 copies. If we were to reinstate a process in which staff read, reviewed, categorized, and sequestered each of these titles, the cost—accounting for inflation and current library operations—would likely exceed \$1 million per year.

It is important to note that many multi-branch library systems in Ohio, including CHPL, offer library card holders the convenience of returning checked-out materials to any of our 41 branches – eliminating the need to return items to their original checkout location. This system, known as "floating", allows materials to remain at the Branch where they were returned. Floating supports the development of collections that reflect the unique interests of each community, improves operational efficiency, and reduces material transportation costs.

Under this model, patrons return items daily at all 41 locations, amounting to more than 87,700 items each week. Returning to a system requiring even basic sorting of which materials could be placed where, would necessitate daily processing by staff at each branch. While it is difficult to quantify the exact staffing costs, they would be substantial. Beyond the financial impact, the additional sorting and compliance processes would delay materials from reaching our shelves – ultimately frustrating our tax-paying patrons and reducing service overall quality of service.

Additionally, designing branch layouts to ensure that all materials designated for adult audiences are entirely out of view of certain visitors would be especially challenging - particularly in our smaller locations, some of which are only 2,500 square feet.

We are currently working to update our 41 facilities to meet modern standards and evolving community need, as many of these buildings are over a century old. This important work is the top priority for our taxpayer dollars. Creating a redundant system that duplicates resources already available to help parents and caregivers make informed decisions for their families—and shifts that responsibility to library staff—does not seem to be the most effective use of public funds. At CHPL, we understand this better than most. ***For all these reasons, I respectfully urge the Ohio Senate to remove the proposed language on library materials, as outlined in amendment SC 1542.***

SENIOR SERVICES

CHPL provides impressive evidence about the role Ohio's Public Libraries play in combating social isolation and improving the quality of life for seniors and older adults. We provide access to information, social connection, and community resources through our Senior Programs and Outreach Services.

Last year over 5,300 attendees participated in programming for seniors -- a 36% increase over the previous year! Accessibility improvements made to several of our Library Branches are a major reason for the increase in senior attendance at our events. Services include the Memory Café, designed for those experiencing dementia and their caregivers, Digital Literacy, meal programs, and Outreach Services.

Memory Café:

Memory Café's, developed by the Alzheimer's Association of Greater Cincinnati (AAGC) and Episcopal Retirement Services (ERS), are supportive gathering spaces for people with dementia or mild cognitive impairments and their caregivers to socialize, play games, learn about community resources, listen to speakers or music, and engage in arts & crafts.

- CHPL Staff at several branch locations participated in trainings developed by AAGC and ERS to gain background information on dementia and communication strategies for potential interactions to ensure that our spaces remain a safe and comfortable destination for people with memory loss.
- CHPL, which was the first organization to participate in the program, currently hosts Memory Café's each month at 3 of our branch locations.
- Neighboring cities and library systems, inspired by the success of CHPL's program, have reached out to replicate the Memory Café model for their communities.

Digital Literacy

The ability to use technology can combat social isolation and better connect people to their doctors, medical records, and community and government health resources. Seniors at our Tech Assistance and

Digital Literacy programs receive individual device how-to training to help with emailing, texting, internet searches, and even apps to improve accessibility. Several branches also offer Tech Help Drop-In hours to problem-solve and answer questions.

Meal Program

In 2024, the Meal Program hosted at our newly accessible Deer Park Branch served 1,120 meals, provided by Episcopal Retirement Services' Deupree Meals on Wheels, to 156 seniors. Participants came from 22 different zip codes. Just over 40% of attendees live alone and the average age is 74.

Outreach Services

Seniors and people with disabilities living in retirement or nursing facilities can take advantage of everything the Library has to offer through door-to-door deliveries from CHPL Outreach Services.

- Last year Outreach Services made 117 visits to nursing home facilities each month, delivering materials tailored to customer requests.
- Our In the Mail service sent materials to 160 customers per month.

SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

CHPL is committed to providing equal access to facilities, collections, and services for all Library users, including those with disabilities. CHPL's Building the Next Generation Library Plan features important design aspects that go beyond simply meeting the code requirements of the ADA. For CHPL accessibility and inclusion also includes:

- **Assistive Technology:** Providing access to tools and devices, such as e-readers and special apps, that can help individuals with disabilities access information and participate in library activities.
- **Alternative Formats:** Offering materials in Braille, audio, or large print formats.
- **Sensory-friendly environments:** Creating spaces that are calm and predictable, with minimal distractions, for individuals who may be sensitive to sensory input.
- **Personalized Support & Outreach Services:** Providing one-on-one assistance to help individuals with developmental disabilities navigate the library and find resources. CHPL Outreach Services provides materials for disability programming in schools and offers door-to-door delivery and In the Mail services, for those who are unable to visit the Library.
- **Inclusive Collections:** Featuring Library materials by and for people with disabilities, which is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and ensuring equal access to information.
- **Specialized Programming:** Offering events specifically geared to children and adults on the autism spectrum, or anyone who feels they need extra support, including Sensory Storytime and Neurodivergent Book Club.

CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY HEALTH RESOURCES

CHPL takes its role of providing the community with accurate and up-to-date information seriously. For several years CHPL has found innovative ways to partner with community health and well-being organizations to meet people where they are and connect them to reliable information and resources. Some examples include:

- **Resource Connect:** Customers are able to connect with local community health organizations at branches throughout the County each month.
- **Hosting Hamilton County's 513Relief Bus:** The 513Relief Bus provides community-based health screenings and other social services.

- **Hosting Get Covered Ohio:** Get Covered Ohio provides free information and assistance to people about their health insurance options, enrolling in health coverage, and understanding and using their coverage.

In addition, because we operate our own County-wide transportation system for books and materials, we are able to enhance the County's emergency response capabilities by partnering with them to aid in the delivery of essential resources, such as health supplies. The ability to disseminate reliable information and essential resources not only helps to mitigate the consequences of emergencies, but also helps to keep our community safe, informed, and healthy.

CONCLUSION

I hope I have effectively conveyed the many ways CHPL serves as a vital resource for children, students, families, schools, individuals with disabilities, seniors, and local health organizations throughout our community.

Each year, we check out millions of books to children and families. In 2024 alone, we circulated 4,892,950 children's books, along with 4,287,895 books for adults and 460,370 for teens. The nearly 5 million children's books (print only) checked out in a single year underscores our commitment to supporting young readers—whether they're just beginning to read, building their skills, or already reading at advanced levels.

Beyond books, we proudly serve as a welcoming, accessible space that connects people to community resources and provides trusted, high-quality information and services that help individuals stay healthy and thrive. None of this would be possible without stable and consistent funding through the PLF.

Should any member have questions or wish to discuss this further, I would be happy to provide additional information upon request. Thank you for your consideration.