



SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
AM. SUB. H.B. 96
INTERESTED PARTY TESTIMONY
JUNE 5, 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, which is the only Library system in Hamilton County. Our 41 branch locations saw over 4.1 million customer visits last year (a 17% increase over 2023) and we lent out over 19 million items. We are the 2nd largest public library in the U.S. by volumes held and our collection of digital materials is one of the largest in the country.

We share our large collection with users across the state through a partnership with 48 other public libraries (ShareOhio) and about 100 university libraries (OhioLink). In fact, in 2024 CHPL was the 2nd highest net lender of items in ShareOhio, lending almost 70,000 items to libraries outside of Hamilton County.

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. ***Therefore, I respectfully urge the Ohio Senate to fund the PLF at the level originally proposed in the Executive Budget: \$531.7 million in FY26 and \$549.1 million in FY27. I also ask that the Senate eliminate the \$10.2 million deduction from the PLF for other state agencies (State Library, Library for the Blind, Regional Library Systems, and the Ohioana Library). These entities should be directly funded from the GRF.***

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.

In the testimony I submitted to the Committee last week, I highlighted 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. I also discussed the added burden and redundancy that the vague language regarding the displaying of materials creates for public libraries. Today, I would like to focus on the economic challenges we face in our efforts to deliver the high-quality services that are in great

demand from our customers—and how the proposal released by the Committee on Tuesday falls short of supporting us in this endeavor.

CHPL FUNDING

About half of CHPL's funding comes from the state Public Library Fund (PLF). The other half comes from two 10-year property tax levies generously passed by Hamilton County voters in 2018 and 2023. The 2023 levy augments operating funds and the 2018 levy provides capital dollars for our Facilities Master Plan (FMP). It is important to note that public libraries do not receive funding for facilities in the State Capital Budget.

FMP

Our Facilities Master Plan, which was developed with input and recommendations from more than 3,000 community members, outlines improvements at all of our 41 locations, many of which are over 100 years old and haven't been renovated in the past 40 years. The focus of the improvements are accessibility and maintenance. We are working efficiently and responsibly to upgrade our facilities to meet community priorities now and in the future. Branches that have received improvements (20 so far) have enjoyed a marked increase in visits – from 32% at the Madisonville Branch to 165% at the Corryville Branch. All of the improvements, which range from small strategic investments, moderate capital maintenance repairs/upgrades, to major accessibility projects and replacements, have been done without the Library taking on debt.

DEMAND & COSTS OF eBooks and AudioBooks

I want to clear up some confusion that I have been hearing from some Members in describing the services provided by public libraries. CHPL is very much in the business of lending books. Of the over 19 million items lent out last year, about 16 million were books in print form (almost 10 million) or digital form (eBooks & eAudioBooks – just over 6.3 million) [Attachment 1].

In fact, the financial stress we are under is directly related to the exponential demand over the past decade for expensive digital materials – eBooks and eAudioBooks. The first part of this equation is the demand. CHPL circulation of eBooks increased by 150% over the last decade, growing from just under 1 million in 2014 to 2.5 million in 2024. In the same time period, eAudioBook circulation increased almost 900%, from about 245,000 to just over 2.4 million (Attachment 2). The 6.3 million digital items borrowed in 2024 represent a 14% increase over 2023. Other numbers of note:

- Downloads on the Libby app, an eBook/eAudioBook app we employ that can be used by all Ohioans, reached 5 million in 2024 – the highest number among Ohio's non-consortium Libraries and one of only 7 libraries in the country to do so.
- In January 2025, we exceeded 600,000 downloads for the first time.

The other part of the digital materials equation is cost. Digital materials are significantly more expensive for libraries than physical books. Unlike print materials, public libraries do not own digital content—they lease it from publishers, typically through intermediaries like OverDrive (the platform behind the Libby app).

Publishers place limits on these leases, usually restricting access to a 24-month period. Once a lease expires, we must decide whether to repurchase the title or allow access to lapse. This requires an

ongoing cycle of re-leasing the same materials—at a cost far above the consumer rate. As an example, while the average consumer pays about \$15 to permanently own a popular eBook and \$30 to permanently own the same eAudioBook, CHPL pays approximately \$75 for a 24-month eBook lease and \$70 for an eAudiobook lease (Attachment 3).

It's also important to note that library users cannot simultaneously download digital titles under a single license. Only one person can access a copy at a time, which forces us to lease multiple copies of popular titles to keep hold times reasonable.

This combination of high costs and restricted access of materials that will only continue to increase in demand presents a significant and growing challenge to our bottom line. Last year CHPL spent 56% of our materials budget on digital materials.

YOUTH ACCESS TO MATERIALS

In the testimony I submitted last week I provided a detailed description of the costs and problems associated with an old policy once employed by CHPL, which seems similar to the vague language in the budget bill regarding how and where public libraries must display certain materials to keep them out of the view of minors. The now defunct CHPL policy required some staff to read and review every new adult and teen fiction title added to our collection to determine, *based on their own judgment*, which materials were appropriate only for adults.

I also discussed in detail the process that we currently use to support parents, who we recognize as the best judges of what's appropriate for their families, in guiding and monitoring their children's access to Library materials. I won't repeat my previous testimony on this topic, but I would like to highlight some of its key points.

- CHPL offers several types of library cards—each with different levels of access and privileges. Parents have the ability to determine which of the 5 types offered is most appropriate for their children.
- 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.
- 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.
- Patrons return items daily at all 41 locations, amounting to more than 87,700 items each week, under a model where items are allowed to “float” – meaning they stay at the location where they were returned. Reverting 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 overall quality of service.
- 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.

As mentioned above, we are currently working to update our 41 facilities to meet modern standards and evolving community need. 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—is not only not the best use of public dollars, but amounts to an unfunded mandate.

For all these reasons, I respectfully urge the Ohio Senate to remove the provisions on library materials, as outlined in amendment SC 1542.

COUNTY BUDGET COMMISSION

Local funding represents about half of our total budget. Although our Board of Trustees is bi-partisan, they operate independently of political affiliation. As stewards of a public institution, the Trustees maintain a non-partisan stance to ensure impartiality, equitable service for all, and a focus on the community's needs. Like many public library systems across the state, our levies have consistently received strong support from voters. Allowing County Budget Commissions, who lack meaningful insight into our financial position or day to day operations, to reduce the millage on a voter-approved Library levy would put our services at risk and undermine the will and rights of Hamilton County voters.

I strongly urge you to remove the provision regarding County Budget Commissions

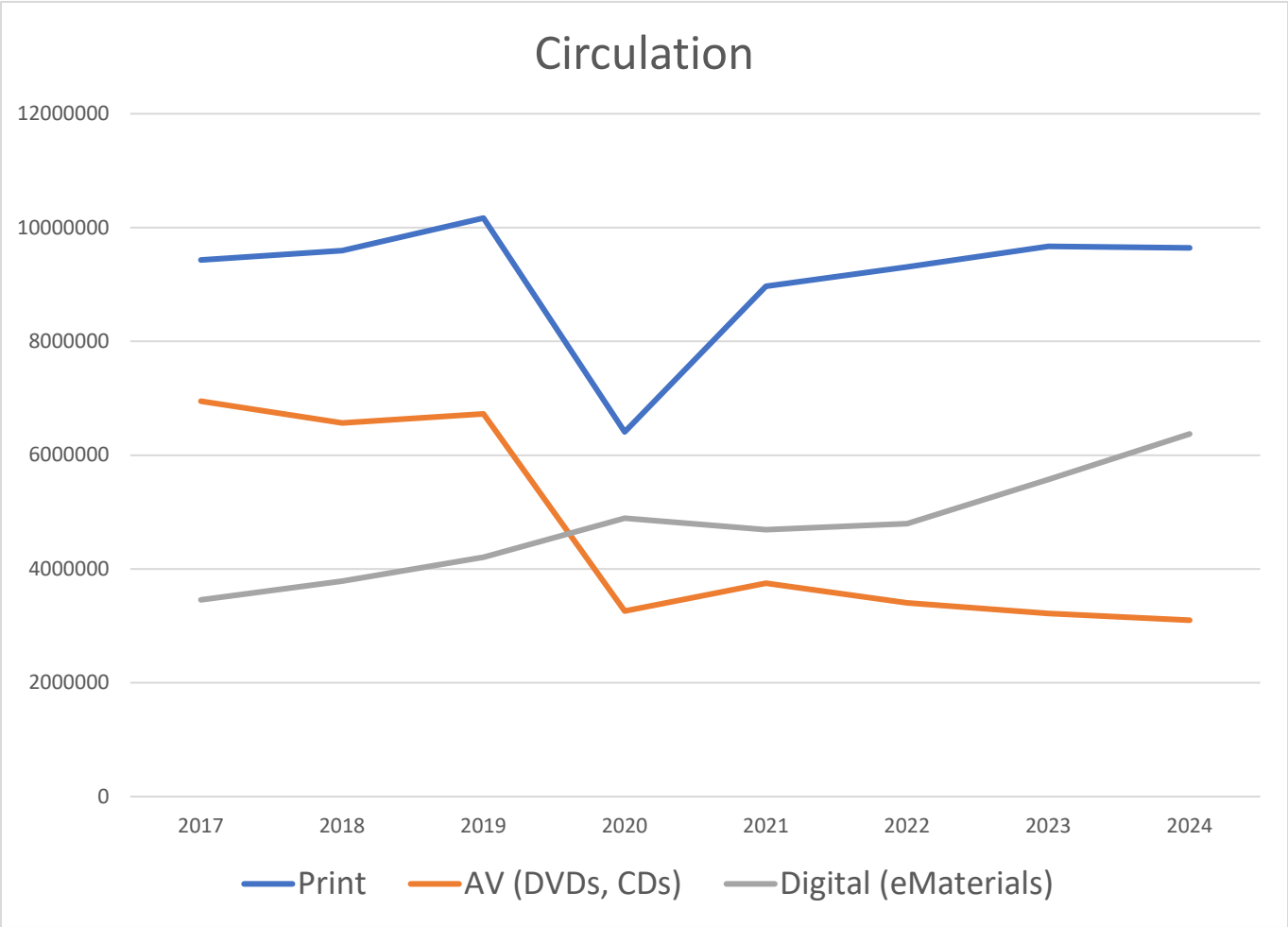
CONCLUSION

Ohio's public libraries experienced a \$27 million loss in state funding in calendar year (CY) 2024 compared to CY 2023. This reduction brings funding levels back to what they were 25 years ago.

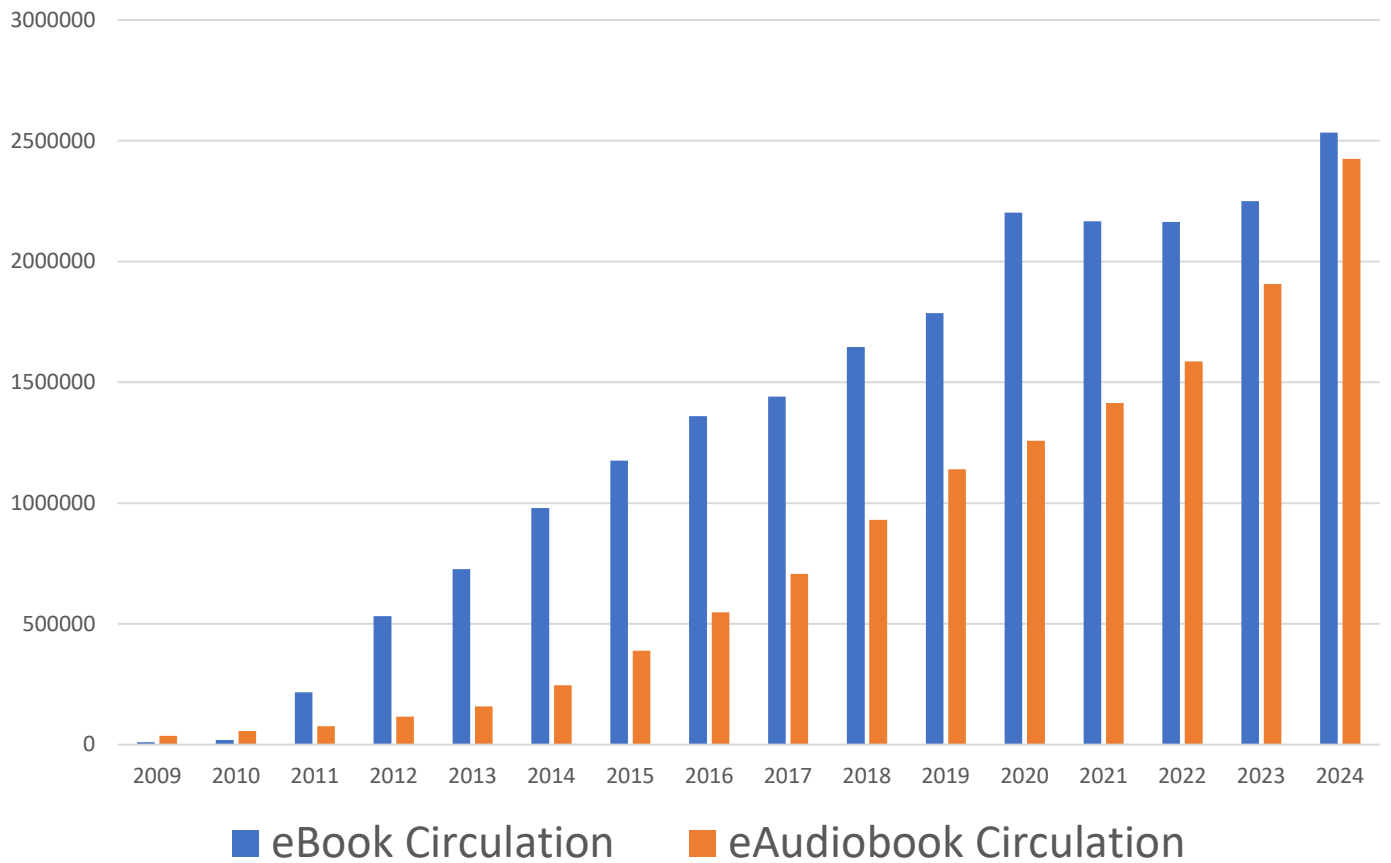
Meanwhile, the demand for our services continues to grow. Digital materials—our fastest-growing area of use—are also the most costly. But our impact extends far beyond books. We proudly serve as a welcoming, accessible space that connects people to community resources and offers trusted, high-quality information and services that help our community stay informed, connected, and thriving.

Further cuts to state funding would seriously undermine our ability to deliver these vital services—particularly to children, students, job seekers, small business owners, and seniors who rely on us every day.

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.



eBook and eAudiobook Circulation





Library eBook

eBook \$75: 24-month lease



Library eAudiobook

\$69.99: 24-month lease



Library Hardcover

\$17.60



Customer Hardcover

\$32



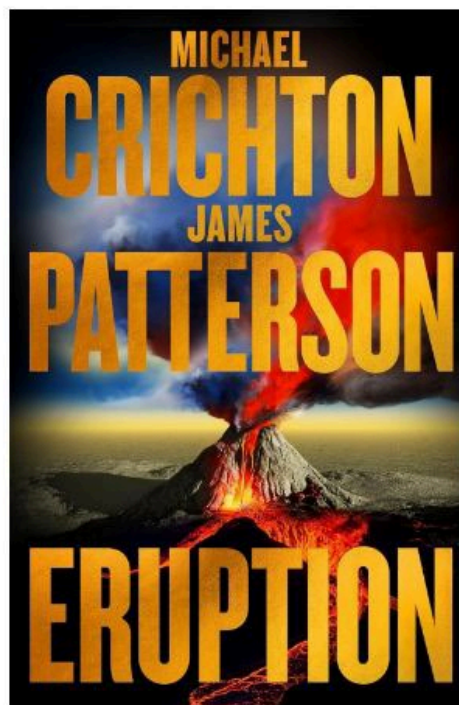
Customer eBook

\$15.99



Customer eAudiobook

\$27.99



Digital copies cost more for libraries than they do for individual customers.

An example of one popular title, *Eruption* by Michael Crichton & James Patterson, is included here. This book was released in June 2024.

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