



**SENATE HEALTH COMMITTEE
AM. SUB. H.B. 96 TESTIMONY
MAY 13, 2025**

Chairman Huffman, Vice-Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Liston and Members of the Senate Health 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 lent out over 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 the largest in the country and the demand for these expensive items has increased 2.5 times in the last decade.

I say all of this to illustrate how much Ohioans love and really 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 in-demand services our communities want and need.

A few of those services that I would like to discuss today highlight the crucial role the Library plays in supporting and promoting the health of our community, specifically through our senior services, services for people with disabilities, and our partnerships with local health-focused agencies.

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.

I hope that I have been able to convey to you the many ways CHPL and all of Ohio's public libraries serve as a critical resource for seniors, people with disabilities, and our local health organizations. We relish our role as a welcoming, accessible space that connects people to community resources and as a trusted provider of high-quality information and services for people to stay healthy and thrive. 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!