Good morning. I am Linda Johnson, President & CEO of Brooklyn Public Library. Thank you, Speaker Adams, Finance Chair Brannan, Chair Rivera, members of the committees, our Brooklyn delegation, and the entire City Council for the opportunity to testify. We are grateful for your leadership and unwavering support of libraries and our mission.

New York City's Libraries are facing the most significant cuts we have seen in years. It pains me to repeat these numbers to you, but together, our systems stand to lose $58.3 million in Fiscal Year 2025. And, for the first time in 16 years, the libraries’ capital plans have been slashed by a staggering $125 million. Tragically, these cuts come at a time when Library usage is high and the costs of running the system are even higher.

For Brooklyn this amounts to a drastic $16.2 million cut – equivalent to 13% of our operating budget. This will force us to severely limit library service, a devastating and avoidable consequence. We must protect library service for the millions of patrons who rely on us.

**Impacts**
Libraries have not faced cuts of this severity since the years following the 2008 financial crisis. If the Executive Budget passes as proposed, the city will be turning back a decade of diligent progress. In six weeks, Brooklyn Public Library will be forced to:

- Drop down to five-day-a-week service in more than half of our locations
- Further reduce our operating hours
- Drastically diminish collections and programming
- Severely curtail hiring and cut part time staff hours in half

It is unjustifiable to put libraries in this position. As we continue to rebound from the pandemic, demand for services is soaring. Visits, program sessions, program attendance and new card applications are all up by more than 40%. Instead of rising to meet this increased demand, we are forced to reduce programming.

If these cuts are enacted:

- Teen programming will diminish by a third.
- We will offer half as many Young Adult Literacy classes
- Citizenship classes will be cut by more than half
- 50% fewer visits to Senior Centers and Nursing homes
- 30% fewer visits to children and families in hospitals, rehabilitation facilities
- 14% fewer creative aging classes for older adults.
It is heartbreaking to think of the people who will be deprived of our services. Just last week, a patron wrote to tell us the Sunset Park Library was a refuge for him while living at a local shelter. He said, “I found both housing and work by coming to this library every day that it has been open -- because there’s no Wi-Fi at the shelter. It’s also a place for peace, quiet, free books and activities.” Our staff form genuine connections with patrons, helping answer questions from early childhood literacy to career development and everything in between.

But our library workers are struggling to provide excellent service to their communities, as they contend with staff shortages in the branches. A cut of this magnitude will only increase the burdens on our staff, requiring us to severely curtail hiring, operate with half of our part-time staff and permanently eliminate 146 public-facing vacant positions – coveted city jobs.

Our patrons are experiencing the impact of a smaller collection after the $6.5 million cut we absorbed in November. There are 40,000 fewer books on the shelves — 10% of these titles are in languages other than English. We have had to suspend purchasing more expensive materials such as test prep and passport study guides, large print books and reference resources. 15% of our database subscriptions have been cancelled and we have had to restrict the number of books patrons can check out and place on hold.

Fewer books mean longer wait times: the average wait for eBooks and audiobooks has increased 30% since the November cut. Instead of encouraging young readers to explore their passions, we are holding them back. It is harder for patrons to check out novels in their native language, harder to take home a GED test prep book, harder to find your child’s favorite story on the shelves.

To make matters worse, if these cuts are not reversed, libraries will lose 25% of our state funding. The Maintenance of Effort (MOE) clause in the State’s Library Aid statute requires local aid to remain at or above 95% of the prior 2-year average. If the MOE is triggered in this year's city budget, Brooklyn Public Library stands to lose an additional $2 million in state funding next year.

These cuts are being proposed while Brooklyn Public Library is confronting more than $5 million in increased costs. In FY25, we must cover the cost of union salary and minimum wage increases, the library's share of staff health care premiums, as well as the operating costs of two new locations, the Center for Brooklyn History and the Library for Arts and Culture. And this does not include the increased cost of doing business. We are running a library system today on a pre-pandemic funding level that has not kept pace with inflation. Restoration alone will not solve our operating budget needs.

**Capital**

While preventing the further loss of library service is my highest priority, addressing the library’s capital crisis keeps me up at night. Brooklyn Public Library’s unfunded capital needs have grown to over $380 million dollars, including emergency infrastructure such as roofs, heating and cooling systems and accessibility upgrades.
This year, the city cut $47 million from our capital plan, forcing us to eliminate four long-awaited renovations, remove funding for several construction projects and cancel critical infrastructure upgrades. In 2023, BPL branches lost more than 2,200 hours to unplanned closures stemming from outdated building systems and failing infrastructure. Just last month Macon and DeKalb libraries closed unexpectedly when their heating systems failed during a cold spell. In fact, every year, we end up spending nearly $1 million in expense funding addressing emergencies that cannot wait for a full capital project. Without a restoration of the $47 million in capital funding and dedicated funding in the City’s Capital Plan, these unplanned closures will undoubtedly increase.

We depend on city support for the maintenance of our physical plant. And of course, without the backing of our councilmembers who have generously funded local projects in their districts and supported us with delegation-level funding, we would not have come this far in revitalizing our local libraries. Our progress is at risk.

**Conclusion**

We are not dismissing the city’s financial difficulties. But the life-changing opportunities libraries provide to all New Yorkers, even our newest neighbors, are an essential part of the city’s safety net. We offer much more than books and reference materials; we provide support and security. And if libraries are not adequately funded the city’s safety net starts to fray. We must protect our city and our neighbors by protecting our libraries.

I am not alone in making this urgent plea. I am proud to work alongside you at the Council, my colleagues in DC37 and all our staff as well as a strong coalition of library patrons and supporters, many of whom are in this room today. Over 22,000 letters from Brooklynnites have already made their way to elected leaders imploring the city to protect library funding. Today, I’ll also be submitting over 400 statements from New Yorkers who asked that their words of support for libraries be on the record.

Chair Brannan, Chair Rivera, members of the committee, the future of our libraries depends on your continued leadership and support. We are confident that working together, all our City Leaders will rise to this occasion. Thank you.
NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL
FISCAL YEAR 2025 EXECUTIVE BUDGET HEARING

COMMITTEES ON FINANCE AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES & INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS
May 21, 2024

Good morning, my name is Tony Marx and I am the president of The New York Public Library (NYPL). I want to thank City Council Speaker Adams, Chairs Rivera and Brannan, and the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today on the Mayor’s Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) Executive Budget.

Unfortunately, New York City’s libraries are in the same position we were in two months ago when I testified on the Mayor’s Preliminary Budget. The executive budget still reduces expense funding for libraries by a staggering $58.3M; this includes $25.5M for the NYPL. If the budget passes with this reduction, the impact on our services will be devastating to the communities we serve. While the mid-year PEG ended Sunday-service at seven locations (all that offered it), the impact of this cut will be more severe. The majority of our branches will go down to five day service. The FY24 midyear cut already had a significant impact on our collections. With that reduction alone, we will purchase 20,000 fewer eBook copies, 6,000 fewer downloadable audiobooks, 40,000 fewer books in English, and 6,000 fewer world languages (non-English language) books, for a total of 72,000 fewer items. This number is projected to jump to 180,000 in FY25. This will affect the acquisitions of items in all subject areas, books for all age levels, and popular titles that have been banned at public libraries and schools across the country.
Hiring and recruitment will be even more tightly controlled. We have already experienced staff shortages which will continue to limit programs and services across the system. From November 2023 to March, the Library had 69 unplanned closures affecting 34 branches due to staffing shortages, with an average of two hours lost per closure. If the proposed cuts go through, we will not have the staff available to operate branches projected to reopen in FY25 after large-scale renovations. Among these renovations are five, 100-plus year-old Carnegie branches in high-needs areas: Melrose and Hunts Point in the Bronx, Fort Washington and 125th Street in Manhattan, and Port Richmond in Staten Island. These libraries were in dire need of capital upgrades for decades; their top-to-bottom renovation—made possible with funding committed by the City under the 10-year capital plan—allowed us to meet community needs such as ADA accessibility, dedicated spaces for children, facade restoration, and new teen centers. Opening them, while funding is cut, would require service losses at other locations. Other hiring impacts include the reduction of the budget for pages, the Library’s important workforce development pipeline.

As you undoubtedly know by now, the Library has become a social safety net in underserved communities throughout the City. The FY25 reduction roughly translates to 850 fewer hours of service per week, a 20 percent reduction system-wide. When you put that in terms of our 50 After School locations, 20 Teen Centers, 24 ESOL, 11 Tax Preparation locations, 40 College and Career hubs, you can get a truer sense of just what these communities stand to lose.

A budget reduction of this size will further diminish our ability to address emergency maintenance and repairs. Reducing our budget in response to the midyear PEG already resulted in a delayed response to building emergencies. This past winter, funding reductions hampered our efforts to address malfunctioning heating systems, which led to unplanned closures of libraries. Since November 2023, the Library has had 29 unplanned closures affecting 14 branches due to emergency maintenance issues, with an average of six days lost per
closure. This will continue to be a problem in the summer, and it will make it harder to maintain our vital role as cooling centers for New Yorkers across the city.

On the research side, we’ve already seen the impact of the midyear PEG on staffing, which has led to increased wait times for key research library services, fewer service points staffed, and reduced capacity to process, preserve, and conserve collections. These gaps in our service will only grow with the FY25 reductions.

The current $25.5M in anticipated reductions in City funding may also trigger a loss in state funding, as City support may not meet the Maintenance of Effort requirement outlined in State Education Law. If this happens, libraries will lose 25 percent of their State funding.

The unprecedented nature of the expense cuts Libraries face is matched only by the Mayor’s capital cut to libraries, which has not happened since 2011. Libraries received a significant funding cut from our ten-year capital plan. We were also instructed not to submit any new needs. For NYPL, this translated to the removal of $45.5M from our capital budget at a time when we have myriad, imminent needs across our system. Most of our buildings are aging, small structures, many of them over 100 years old. Capital funding is what makes our branches safe, welcoming, and reliable. If our spaces are in a constant state of disrepair and facing critical issues that leave patrons feeling uncomfortable and/or unsafe, then we have failed in our mission to make libraries a place that welcomes all New Yorkers. We simply can not effectively provide our services without adequate resources, capacities, and functionalities. The cut to our capital plan will undo much of the progress we have made over the last ten years to improve our infrastructure and the city capital process. The NYPL currently has over $501 million in new priority capital needs system-wide. The city should be increasing funding to our capital plan, not reducing it.
As noted previously, one of the prime examples of the types of projects we undertake includes the renovation of the Carnegie branches that are at risk of not reopening on time. Again, these projects address the most essential, simple patron needs like ADA accessibility, the renovations of restrooms, or, in the case of Melrose Library, an entire new floor added to the branch. We have seen the impact of these projects on New Yorkers. We know that when we renovate our spaces or build new ones to better accommodate the needs of New Yorkers, they are used more. In its first full year following a recent renovation, Washington Heights Library in Manhattan saw a 47% increase in visits, a 45% increase in circulation, and a 105% increase in program attendance. In March 2022, we opened a brand new Charleston branch on Staten Island. Since its grand opening, Charleston has signed 5,282 patrons up for new library cards. The branch hosted 18,174 program attendees in FY23, and circulated 71,328 items, the second highest on Staten Island. This month, we will cut the ribbon on our brand new, state of the art, Inwood Library, as part of a development including 100% affordable housing and other amenities such as Universal Pre-K.

All of this comes at a time when New Yorkers are returning to their libraries. The City’s recent Preliminary Mayor’s Management Report shows key indicators such as circulation, program attendance, and library card registration steadily rising since FY21. Circulation is up over 50 percent during this timeframe while program attendance and library card registration has more than doubled. A $58.3M cut to our budget stands to reverse this upward trend, which we expect to otherwise continue.

I want to bring the City Council’s attention to the fact that we have reached a point where prospective and actual cuts to our budget have come to dominate a significant aspect of our resources and internal planning. Last fiscal year, we spent months and months of resources on the budget dance and battle for restoration. The time that went to this campaign could have instead been spent serving our communities, after all, we are here to provide library services, not
advocate for resources. What’s more concerning is that even after these efforts were successful, even after the restoration of $36.2M in expense funding, the FY24 November PEG reversed nearly two-thirds of these gains, setting the three library systems back by $23.6M, with $10.33M coming out of NYPL’s budget. As I shared today, the Library’s work to provide unfettered access and opportunity to New Yorkers of all backgrounds materializes in the form of our vast and diverse collections, our free career services, after school locations, teen centers, story times, tax preparation offerings, and ESOL classes for new New Yorkers. How can we build any consistency and dependability, or growth, if we are in a constant state of instability? Regularly having to stop and turn our attention to the latest budget dance? The question regarding branches slated to reopen after massive, community-driven renovations is “what should our programming be in our first week?” not “do we have the staff needed to even open?” This dance distracts us from providing New Yorkers with what they are entitled to. The truth is that even if we are fully restored in this year’s budget, we will spend the following months planning for the possibility of current year PEG’s and proposed cuts, unsure if these funds are to be reversed and our budget reduced. We must work together to end the library budget dance.

Exacerbating this diversion of resources and constant instability, is the fact that the cost of operations has increased. Uncovered rising costs include general inflation in wages and other spending, such as library materials, health insurance, contractual security, collections, maintenance, storage, and technology-related spending. We estimate that unreimbursed cost growth next year may be more than $9M. With these historic cuts to both our capital and expense budgets, and with the rising cost of operations, I simply ask you to help us end this annual exercise in uncertainty and instability that only deprives New Yorkers of what this city long ago determined was their right. Let’s restore and baseline funding to Libraries.

The existence and function of public libraries in today’s world is an actual miracle. By our mere presence, libraries have normalized the once-radical idea that everyone is entitled to the same
access to information and opportunity as everyone else. And for less than half of one percent of
the total New York City budget, we have delivered on that idea. The return on investment for this
City and its citizens is truly unparalleled. Let’s preserve the miracle that is the Library; let’s end
this year-round uncertainty and give New Yorkers the reliable, dependable service that they
deserve.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, I am happy to answer any questions.
Statement by Dennis M. Walcott, President and CEO, Queens Public Library  
New York City Council’s Committee on Finance jointly with the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations  
Fiscal Year 2025 Executive Budget Hearing  
May 21, 2024

Good morning. I am Dennis M. Walcott, President and CEO of Queens Public Library (QPL, Library). It is a pleasure to be here today. Chairs Brannan and Rivera, Speaker Adams, and the members of these esteemed committees, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Fiscal Year 2025 Executive Budget.

The City Council is the greatest advocate for the city’s public libraries. You understand the promise of our trusted spaces and the life-changing impact we have on New Yorkers of all ages, backgrounds, and circumstances. Libraries provide opportunities for discovery, learning, and even joy. In the words of third grader Brooke Huggan, who described the day she received her very own library card, “They gave me a library card and told me I could bring books home with me. That was one of the happiest days of my life.”

In March, the three public library systems testified about the devastating consequences of the budget cuts for the upcoming fiscal year. Today, we underscore the need for full restoration and baselining, at minimum, of $58.3 million, including $16.6 million for Queens Public Library. The cuts to QPL consist of both Administration funding and $4.38 million from the Council’s Library Initiative. We are facing these losses while confronting $5 million of uncovered increased costs stemming from minimum wage and contractual salary increases, rising health insurance costs, and more. At the same time, the repetitive cycle of budget cuts and proposed cuts makes it impossible for the library systems to plan long term. In order to run our operations effectively, we need not only full funding but also a dependable stream of funding.

Queens Public Library would not be the institution it is without our outstanding staff who provide the services New Yorkers count on each day – storytimes, afterschool enrichment, language classes, job search assistance, technology trainings, Creative Aging workshops, film screenings, researching and answering questions, finding the perfect book, and more. They are devoted to our communities, working to meet their ever-growing needs. However, providing the resources and programs the public deserves has become increasingly challenging. In addition to ending Sunday service at our two busiest libraries (Central and Flushing), slashing budgets for collections, programs, services, and building maintenance and repairs, this year’s PEG also curtailed QPL’s ability to hire the proper number of staff for us to perform optimally across the system. Our staff are strained. Personnel is our largest expenditure, and we are down approximately 200 positions. We are currently keeping libraries open by regularly shifting staff from different locations to fill gaps. This is unsustainable, and the people of our great city deserve better.

If adopted, the Executive Budget reductions mean that Queens Public Library will be forced to postpone three long-awaited branch reopenings – at Bay Terrace, Broadway and Hillcrest libraries – once the capital work is completed, due to the shortage of staff. In addition, we will need to close on Saturdays at nearly every location in the borough, bringing our operations to only five-days a week. In 2015, the Council fought hard for universal six-day service, and it is unfathomable that we will lose it nearly a decade later. Last fiscal year, we had more than 883,000 visits on the weekends, and we estimate a loss of 120,000 visits at Central and Flushing on Sundays since their elimination in late 2023 through the remainder of this fiscal year.
On a recent Saturday at Peninsula Library, our mobile food pantry, which QPL hosts in partnership with the Food Bank for NYC, benefited 436 people with the distribution of proteins, vegetables, and shelf-stable foods. The same day, the Cambria Heights Teen Center held Prom x QPL, a prom attire giveaway that offered teens, their friends and family the opportunity to choose a memorable outfit from more than 1,100 new and gently used dresses, suits, shoes, handbags, and jewelry pieces that were generously donated by the Queens community. Closing on Saturdays means we will be unable to offer events like these and many other indispensable programs on Saturdays – ESOL classes for our newest New Yorkers, including the influx of asylum seekers in the city, family storytimes, skills trainings for job seekers, and other crucial resources.

Our collections represent the rich diversity of the borough and our commitment to broad access to knowledge, ideas, and the human experience. Since the November PEG forced us to reduce our collections by an estimated 25,000 print books and 5,000 e-books system-wide, wait times for library materials are escalating. These cuts will only deepen with next year’s budget.

Since the November Plan PEG, QPL has been forced to close our doors or delay our opening on 27 occasions due to staff shortages and building and infrastructure failures. This situation will only continue to worsen if the cuts remain in place, hindering our ability to repair our facilities and hire for the level of staffing needed at our branches.

Libraries also sustained cuts on the capital side. This year, the three library systems were instructed to implement a capital PEG totaling $125 million. In the upcoming budget, Queens Public Library is seeking the reversal of the $32.2 million PEG to our capital portfolio. QPL has 42 active projects with the NYC Department of Design & Construction (DDC), and the reduction in capital funding puts our entire portfolio at risk. Each project is susceptible to being paused or delayed if a shortfall appears, and we will be unable to cover potential shortfalls when notified of them by DDC. These infrastructure, resiliency, and new building and renovation projects are crucial to ensuring safe and modern spaces for customers and staff. QPL has a system-wide capital need of $165.2 million, and we are respectfully asking the City Council to allocate $10 million of unrestricted capital funding in our Capital Plan.

When people are in need, they turn to their local library for help. For Douglaston Library user Debra, the library is her “second home.” After entering a shelter, she sought assistance from QPL for computer, printer and Internet access, job search assistance, and social activities, such as the branch’s karaoke program. With the staff’s guidance, she was able to explore various career paths and submit job applications. Earlier this year, Debra announced that she had two job offers from the U.S. Postal Service and credited the Douglaston Library for “uplifting” her. Her story is just one example of the countless ways QPL has been there for our customers.

Libraries are vital to our neighborhoods and quality of life. We cannot afford to deprive NYC residents of robust collections, wide-ranging and diverse programs, access to resources, weekend service, and reliable buildings that are equipped to withstand whatever the future holds.

Public libraries are the last truly democratic institution. They have the power to change lives. With your steadfast and continued advocacy, we are hopeful that there will be full restoration, baselining and meaningful investment in the Queens, Brooklyn and New York Public Libraries in the City's Fiscal Year 2025 adopted budget.

Thank you, Chair Brannan, Chair Rivera, and Committee members, for the opportunity to testify.