

BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY

TESTIMONY ON THE EXECUTIVE BUDGET

Jointly to the Finance Committee and the Committee on Cultural Affairs,

Libraries & International Intergroup Relations

May 18, 2023

Good morning. I am Linda Johnson, President & CEO of Brooklyn Public Library. Thank you, Speaker Adams, Chairs Brannan and Ossé, committee members, our Brooklyn delegation, and the entire City Council for prioritizing library service in this challenging year and for the opportunity to testify today.

This morning I come to you with as simple and as dire a budget request as I have ever made – save the library service we have all come to rely upon. At stake is a staggering \$36.2 million reduction in operational funding, \$10 million for Brooklyn Public Library alone.

We recognize that the city faces economic hardships ahead, but that's precisely why we must protect the services people turn to in times of adversity.

The Fiscal Year 2024 Executive Budget proposal will cause harm—it threatens to turn back the clock on a decade of diligent progress. While I am extremely grateful that Mayor Adams restored the additional 4% cut proposed in early April, we must work together to reject the current plan to cut \$20.5 million in expense funds. It is equally important to restore the Council's Libraries Initiative, funded last year at \$15.7 million. As we have been communicating to everyone since we first received news of the PEG, a cut of this magnitude will undoubtedly have service impacts.

And, while my top priority is to preserve library operating funding, Brooklyn Public Library's infrastructure needs and shortfalls are extensive. In the fiscal year 2024 Executive Budget, I also urge the city to allocate \$80 million in capital funding for each library system, \$240M in total.

Brooklyn Public Library has been providing a safe, dignified, and free public space to everyone in every neighborhood for more than 125 years. I am grateful for our dedicated library workforce, who despite the enormous challenges of the last few years, continue to provide quality resources and programming that make us the most trusted, democratic, and far-reaching institution in our city.

Now, all the progress we have made together is at risk. Without a restoration of funding, we will be forced to make permanent reductions in staffing that lead to reduced hours and days of service, less programming, and decreased spending on collections. This cut may be the breaking point.

We are facing permanent elimination of positions.

Libraries have already been asked to absorb several mid-year reductions. To meet the City's PEG targets and do the least harm, we allowed vacancies to go unfilled. But this strategy is not sustainable. It has already taken a toll at the branch level where staffing shortages result in frequent disruptions to service and programming.

The devastating loss of \$10 million in operating funds for Brooklyn Public Library will mean a permanent elimination of 78 positions just when our staffing needs have grown larger. There are 5 libraries coming back online in the coming months, requiring an additional 40 positions.

We are facing the loss of six- and seven-day service.

With our staff already spread too thinly across the system, a reduction of this magnitude means we will ***no longer be able to guarantee universal 6-day service***, reversing years of progress toward opening to the public on the weekends. If enacted, the cuts would force us to eliminate Sunday service now available at ten locations, as well as eliminating Saturday service in 20% of our branches.

Weekend hours are a cornerstone of our commitment to meeting the myriad needs of our patrons. Closing the doors on Sundays and Saturdays, a schedule people have come to rely on, is not an action I take lightly. But it will be necessary if we must accommodate these deep cuts to our current staff levels. Sundays are the most expensive and most difficult days to operate—we rely entirely on staff from all over the system to volunteer for Sunday shifts with overtime pay. And we are already struggling to keep the doors open on Saturdays, with skeleton crews and delayed openings because of short staffing.

We are facing reduced collections and programming.

Our collection budget, funded in part with the \$1 million we receive from the Council's Library Initiative, will be reduced, while demand for books and e-books is soaring. We have had more than 183,000 new card applications in the last year. Checkouts overall, including the more expensive digital items, are the highest they have been in the last six years, at 5.38 million. And we are on track to hit 7.2 million checkouts by the end of the fiscal year, significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels.

If we sustain a cut, our progress will be upended, with impacts to both our physical and digital services. More than 1.5 million connections to our Wi-Fi and well over half a million public computer sessions occurred last year. But our computer programs in the branches may have to scale back. Tech help for older adults, Creative Aging programs, community movies, knitting clubs, conversation groups, outreach to senior centers and many other important programs could see reductions.

We provide assistance to all people without a home and people seeking refuge. Our bookmobile and outreach staff have been visiting shelters, hotels and humanitarian relief

centers in Brooklyn where migrants and asylum seekers are temporarily housed. We sign people up for library and IDNYC cards and connect people to services with our partner organizations. These resources would diminish.

Just last year, the Administration invested \$15 Million to enhance teen services at all three library systems, funding for which we are grateful. Brooklyn Public Library opened a new Teen Tech Center in Crown Heights and is scheduled to open three more centers before the end of the fiscal year. With the allocation we added new young adult librarians throughout the system and enhanced our teen programming. Our monthly Teen Takeovers have been incredibly popular, attracting over 50 teens at a time. This week alone, Brooklyn teens are hosting takeovers at five branches. Tonight, in fact, there will be a retro game night takeover at Macon Library in your district, Chair Osse.

It is heartbreaking to think about stalling this progress, particularly during a growing youth mental health crisis. We are building a comprehensive program to better serve teens that is now just beginning to build momentum. How can we sustain these efforts with fewer librarians, fewer programs and reduced hours?

We are facing dire capital needs.

The proposed cuts to our expense budget are not the only threat to our branches remaining open. In the last fiscal year, we lost over 2,000 hours to unplanned closures or infrastructure issues at three quarters of our branches. Brooklyn Public Library is carrying \$340 million in unfunded capital needs, 30% of which are considered emergency needs, such as roofs, heating cooling and fire safety systems, and accessibility. We desperately need an infusion of capital funding.

We are requesting \$80 million in capital funds for FY24 to help us cover shortfalls and move forward with our critical infrastructure projects. Since there were no additional capital funds allocated to Brooklyn Public Library in the Executive Budget, we are left to prioritize our emergencies, picking and choosing which projects make limited progress and which stall until the next budget cycle.

If there was ever a year not to dip into precious operating dollars for emergency fixes, it is this one. And with \$36 million worth of shortfalls on projects scheduled for this year, upgrades that are waiting to begin construction or are delayed in the planning stages, will lose another year of progress.

The Council has been instrumental in helping us keep our infrastructure upgrades moving—allowing us to repair and renovate branches that otherwise might have continued to deteriorate. We are grateful to the Speaker and Councilmembers for district level capital support and strong delegation support and are hopeful that we can rely on your assistance again this year.

There are two exciting renovation projects that are nearly finished. In a few weeks, we will re-open East Flatbush Library, which underwent a comprehensive interior and exterior upgrade. The community and our staff are eagerly awaiting its debut. Soon after,

we plan to open the newly constructed Brower Park Library at the Brooklyn Children's Museum. Other branches will launch this Fall, with more to follow in the years ahead. But as we open beautiful new libraries, it is disheartening that a reduced operating budget could limit access to these magnificent "palaces of the people"—as we are known.

Conclusion

Chair Brannan, Chair Ossé, members of the committees, millions of library patrons across the city depend on your continued leadership in defense of their community libraries. It is not an overstatement to say our future depends on you.

The public should always be able to count on libraries; from toddler Storytime to career counseling; from tech help to research guidance; from English conversation groups to support for new asylees. It is difficult to imagine our libraries offering less. But it is impossible to imagine sustaining a \$10 million cut that does not starve these efforts.

Without a restoration of the proposed cuts, there will be fewer open hours for our growing number of patrons, and longer wait times for fewer books. Fewer legal services staff will be available to answer our hot line. Working families will have fewer Storytimes if their local branch is closed on the weekends. A cut of this size means all our focus will be on keeping our doors open, and we will not be able to deliver the support our communities need so badly amidst a convergence of an asylee crisis, an economic crisis and a mental health crisis that impact so many of our patrons.

Libraries are meant to provide the community free and open access whether in prosperous or challenging times. I know you understand the value of libraries, a vital shared public resource, and I urge you to protect our funding, especially in these challenging times, when our communities need us the most.

Thank you.