



Statement by Dennis M. Walcott, President & 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 2024 Executive Budget Hearing**

May 18, 2023

Good morning. I am Dennis Walcott, President & CEO of Queens Public Library (QPL, Library). It is a pleasure to be here today. Chairs Brannan and Ossé, Speaker Adams, and members of the esteemed committees, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Fiscal Year 2024 Executive Budget.

The New York City Council has long been a fierce advocate for public libraries, speaking out and working behind the scenes to ensure we receive the funding we need to continue providing free, high-quality, and trustworthy resources, programming, services, and information to the public. At a time when libraries are under attack across the nation, you have reinforced the enduring importance of our role. On behalf of our staff and customers, please accept our sincerest thanks.

A month ago, Queens Public Library was in a devastating position. After learning of an additional four percent budget reduction, we were planning for deeply painful scenarios in the new fiscal year. **We are very grateful that the Mayor recognized the value of the city's three library systems (Tri-Li) by ultimately reversing the additional PEG (Program to Eliminate the Gap).**

However, \$36.2 million in cuts remain for the three systems and will result in significant service impacts. **Queens Public Library is facing a reduction of \$5.9 million from the Administration as well as the loss of \$4.38 million if the Council's Library Initiative is not reauthorized – a total loss for QPL of \$10.3 million.** As my colleagues and I testified at the March Preliminary Budget hearing, cuts of this magnitude would translate into fewer programs, hours and collections. **For Queens Public Library, the cuts mean we must eliminate Sunday service (Central, Flushing and Kew Gardens Hills libraries); close Saturdays at up to half our locations across the borough – effectively ending universal six-day service; cut spending on books and materials; reduce programs and services; and defer facilities maintenance and repairs.** We would lose up to 73 staff positions. These cuts represent a major step backwards for our city.

New Yorkers are counting on libraries, especially during these challenging times. The local Queens Public Library branch continues to be the lifeline of every neighborhood across the borough. People of all ages, circumstances, and backgrounds know that their libraries, and our dedicated staff, will provide them with the resources and opportunities they need and deserve – all for free – including computer access and technology support, Wi-Fi, bilingual storytimes, job search assistance, afterschool homework help, college readiness workshops, spaces to connect with their neighbors, and so much more.

And for many customers, free access to an extensive collection of books is paramount. Lifelong customer Conciere Taylor visits the Rochdale Village Library to “do research for fiction writing and personal health information.” “I can’t afford to buy the necessary books,” he says. “I have used the public library since growing up in Queensbridge NYCHA. They always had a great selection of books for me to take and read. I think everyone deserves the same opportunity.”

Each day, thousands of our youngest New Yorkers begin to discover the library and the world of possibilities that await them. Due to a lack of social interaction during the pandemic, Xiao Hong Chen’s two-year-old son was experiencing speech delays. They found Toddler Storytime and Kid Play Time at their local branch, and gradually, her son made his first friends, his speech and motor skills vastly improved, and he began learning English, which is not his first language. He also began singing songs from storytimes while at home. Xiao Hong credits the Library’s early literacy programs for reducing her parenting anxieties and for an anticipated smooth transition to 3K.

Our incredible staff are always developing creative ways to ensure as many people as possible can access the Library’s resources, engaging existing customers and drawing new people to us. In partnership with the New York Mets, QPL launched an exclusive, special edition library card in March and is bringing library service to Mets games with our Outreach team and the mobile library. To introduce the card at Central Library, I, along with Mets legends Mookie Wilson and Tim Lincecum, and of course Mr. and Mrs. Met, greeted customers and baseball fans who were eager to receive their brand new Mets library cards. Many picked up not only the new card, but also books, DVDs and information on programming and services.

More than 2,700 individuals signed up for the card on the launch date, and we have nearly 17,000 people who have taken advantage of this initiative so far. At Central Library, on the same Saturday we introduced the Mets card, we also welcomed – as we do throughout each week – a long line of asylum seekers and others looking to apply for IDNYC cards, with QPL staff volunteers providing interpretation services and other supports.

Just on the weekends through April of this fiscal year, QPL has welcomed over 737,000 visits, hosted more than 90,400 computer sessions, held over 4,600 programs with an attendance of more than 91,200, and circulated nearly 873,000 physical materials. Weekend programs range from English conversation groups, dance classes, citizenship courses, and cultural performances to college readiness seminars, arts and crafts, computer lessons, and family storytimes. In addition, thousands of people have come to rely on the food pantry distributions QPL’s Food Justice Initiative has been hosting with Food Bank of NYC, like the one this past Saturday afternoon at Peninsula Library. So far this fiscal year, we have hosted 17 mobile food pantries at Rochdale Village, St. Albans, Ozone Park, and Peninsula libraries benefitting 10,795 people from more than 2,800 households—almost all hosted on Saturdays.

Soon, with funding received from the Mayor this fiscal year, QPL will be opening our expanded teen centers at Central, Cambria Heights and Flushing libraries, and a brand new center at the Long Island City Library – safe and welcoming spaces with robust programming and technology where teens can connect with peers and trusted adults and find the supports they need. At Central Library, our Teen Center Site Coordinator Ashley Allen, who was recently named a 2023 Library Journal “Mover & Shaker,” works to develop opportunities for young adults to broaden their horizons in

multimedia. The “Voices of Queens” podcast she oversees, created by and for teens, has produced 100 episodes, and the 165 participants have completed over 900 hours of career training.

In partnership with Touro University, the Library offers “World of Work for Teens,” a program that won an Urban Libraries Council “Top Innovator” award this year. This six-week course prepares high school students for careers and college and teaches financial literacy and civic leadership skills. Thus far, 40 students have graduated from the program and completed more than 900 class hours and nearly 100 hours of community service.

Next month, we are looking forward to unveiling our StoryWalk initiative. In collaboration with NYC Parks, our Arverne, Corona and Auburndale libraries have created an interactive reading experience at nearby parks – Arverne Playground, Park of the Americas, and Bowne Park. The public will be able to enjoy the outdoors while engaging with literary works.

At 23 locations beginning this month through June, QPL will host voting for citywide participatory budgeting, known as The People’s Money. As summer approaches, our libraries will be serving as cooling centers to provide relief when the heat index is too high, as well as hosting summer meals for youth 18 and under in partnership with the NYC Department of Education. And families across the borough will be counting on QPL to help prevent the “summer slide” through our annual Summer Reading program, which features STEM activities, reading challenges, arts and crafts, and other engaging programming.

All of these offerings serve as examples of the breadth and depth of services that help make our communities strong, and that are at risk with the proposed cuts to our operating budget.

Nine-year-old Peyton Mitchell, a student in the STACKS afterschool program at our South Hollis branch, visits the library almost every day. “I’m in a safe place,” she says. “I know people love me there.” Customer Lisbeth Correa reinforces this sentiment, describing Queens Public Library as “the heart of our community” and “one of the few places in our city where everyone is welcome to learn and grow together.” However, we know this promise of public libraries is dependent on having safe and modern spaces that can meet each community’s needs. **Tri-Li is collectively requesting \$240 million – \$80 million per system – in unrestricted capital funding from the Administration**, which was not included in the Executive Budget. Our long-term capital plan represents a number of vital projects, ranging from new buildings, expansions, and renovations to replacements of critical infrastructure and fortifying our buildings to ensure they are resilient against the increasing threat of severe weather events.

We know the City Council understands the importance of investing in our capital portfolio, and your investments over the past several years have resulted in reliable and updated buildings. **We appreciate the Council’s consideration of QPL’s \$10 million unrestricted capital funding request for the upcoming year.** This funding is crucial in allowing us to cover shortfalls seamlessly as soon as we are notified, thereby avoiding funding-related delays.

Queens Public Library remains committed to being there for everyone, regardless of their identity, race, gender, background, beliefs, or socio-economic status. Less funding translates into fewer opportunities for people to access the resources that are essential to advancing their growth and

success. In a city where half of households are struggling to afford to live, eliminating days open to the public, reducing programs and collections, and limiting our ability to provide indispensable resources and service will make it increasingly challenging for vulnerable, working and middle class New Yorkers to thrive.

On behalf of the millions of people who depend on public libraries – our children, families, teenagers, adult learners, seniors, asylum seekers, unhoused individuals, aspiring entrepreneurs, and others – **I implore you to continue to prioritize full funding for Queens Public Library and our counterparts in the Fiscal Year 2024 Adopted Budget.**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.