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COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

of the

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2024
Start: 10:16 A.M.
Recess: 11:43 A.M.

HELD AT: 250 BROADWAY - COMMITTEE ROOM, 14TH FLOOR

B E F O R E: HON. CARLINA RIVERA, CHAIR

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

David M. Carr
Shahana K. Hanif
Kamillah M. Hanks
Crystal Hudson
Farah N. Louis
Chi A. Ossé
Sandra Ung
Nantasha M. Williams

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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A P P E A R A N C E S

3 Scott McLeod,
4 Director of Civic Engagement, Queens Public
Library

5 Dr. Brandy McNeil,
6 Deputy Director of Branch Programs and Services,
New York Public Library

7 Edwin Maxwell,
8 Director of Neighborhood Services, Brooklyn
Public Library

9 Thomas Gogan, representing himself and the Move
10 the Money-NYC Coalition

11 Dalvin Bartley,
12 Mid-Atlantic Senior Program Manager at Generation
Citizen

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COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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2 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Chair Rivera, we are ready to
3 begin.

4 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: (GAVEL SOUND) (GAVELING IN)

5 Good morning, I am Counsel Member Carlina Rivera,
6 Chair of the Committee on Cultural Affairs,
7 Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations.
8 Welcome to our Oversight Hearing: *How Libraries*
9 *Empower New Yorkers To Become Informed Voters and*
10 *Engaged Citizens.*

11 As most of you know, library services in New York
12 City are provided through three independent systems,
13 the Brooklyn Public Library, which serves the borough
14 of Brooklyn; The New York Public Library, which
15 serves the boroughs of Manhattan, Staten Island, and
16 the Bronx; and the Queens Public Library, which
17 serves the Great borough of Queens.

18 As a New Yorker, I could not be more proud of
19 everything that these three systems bring to our
20 city. Collectively, these institutions offer free and
21 equitable access to a vast array of resources and
22 programming, serving as essential hubs for learning
23 and community building.

24 Beyond providing books, periodicals, and
25 electronic resources, they offer programs ranging

1
2 from early childhood literacy to workforce
3 development, catering to a diverse population across
4 all five boroughs.

5 However, libraries are not only places for
6 accessing information, but also for learning about
7 actively participating in our democratic society.

8 What we are here to talk about today is the
9 incredible work they do in facilitating civic
10 engagement and in bringing together community
11 residents, particularly those from underserved
12 neighborhoods and marginalized populations to make
13 important changes in their local communities.

14 Each library system has undertaken significant
15 initiatives dedicated to educating and empowering
16 voters.

17 I believe these services are also critical in
18 helping to get out the vote on November 5th.

19 As we delve into today's hearing, I'm eager to
20 explore the myriad of ways these libraries have
21 prepared our communities for the upcoming election
22 and how they continue to support the broader civic
23 engagement of New Yorkers. Furthermore, the Committee
24 aims to understand how the City Council can bolster
25

1
2 these efforts, ensuring that our libraries remain
3 vibrant centers of civic life.

4 Before moving into this important hearing topic,
5 I would like to note that this week is Banned Books
6 Week across the nation.

7 In February, this Committee held a hearing on New
8 York City Library's fight against banning books. It
9 was incredible. I was honored to chair that hearing
10 and to commend the work that our libraries were doing
11 in helping to fight book banning that was occurring
12 every day, including way outside of our city limits
13 and within them. We continue to be proud of our
14 library's ongoing leadership in this national arena.

15 So I encourage everyone, please, go to your local
16 library, see the incredible things that they're
17 doing. And there, you could also register to vote,
18 and the registration deadline is October 26. Do your
19 research, register to vote, be involved, and you can
20 start right in your local library.

21 Now I want to acknowledge my colleagues in the
22 Committee who are present. We are joined by Council
23 Member Hanif, via Zoom, and, of course, council
24 members, Hudson and Carr.

1
2 I want to thank the Committee staff, they work
3 really hard in putting together every hearing, and
4 especially this hearing, Christina Yellamaty, the
5 Committee's counsel, Regina Paul, the Committee's
6 Policy Analyst, and Sandra Gray, the Committee's
7 Finance Analyst.

8 I also want to thank my staff, Katie Loeb, my
9 Chief of Staff, and Edward Amador, my Director of
10 Legislation

11 I would like to remind everyone who wishes to
12 testify in person today to fill out a white
13 appearance card, which is located on the desk of the
14 Sergeant at Arms near the entrance of this room, even
15 if you have already registered in advance, please
16 still fill out a slip, and I want to thank all the
17 sergeants for their work always.

18 I am also going to ask my colleagues to limit
19 their questions and comments in five minutes.

20 And as a reminder to all of our witnesses, please
21 state your name prior to your testimony for the
22 record.

23 We're ready to start with the panel of
24 representatives from Libraries, and please say your
25

1 name for the record when you start your testimony,
2 and you may begin.

3
4 DIRECTOR MCLEOD: Scott McLeod, Good morning.

5 I am the Director of Civic Engagement at Queens
6 Public Library on behalf of our President and CEO,
7 Dennis M. Walcott. Thank you, Chair Rivera, and the
8 members of this committee.

9 Thank you to the Chair and members of this
10 committee for the opportunity to testify about the
11 key roll Libraries play engaging and empowering the
12 residents of New York City.

13 Public libraries are the last truly democratic
14 institution. Regardless of circumstance or
15 background, anyone can visit our buildings and
16 digital platforms to access the information and
17 resources they need to grow, learn, and improve their
18 lives. That is why we are tremendously thankful for
19 the restoration and baselining of our operational
20 funds in this year's budget. Your incredible support
21 allows Queens Public Library to continue offering
22 free, reliable, and open spaces throughout the
23 borough - at minimum, six days a week.

24 As was mentioned earlier, this week is Banned
25 Books Week, an especially poignant moment as attempts

1
2 to limit expression and silence marginalized
3 viewpoints continue at unprecedented levels at
4 libraries across the nation.

5 Queens Public Library is dedicated to protecting
6 the freedom to read, ensuring unrestricted access to
7 diverse perspectives, and learning free from
8 censorship throughout the year.

9 This week, our efforts spotlighting this critical
10 issue include a banned books movie festival, story
11 times, a book giveaway, teen programming, and making
12 a selection of banned books available in our digital
13 collections to our users with no weights.

14 Additionally, the Library has launched a banned
15 books library card design contest where the winning
16 artwork will be featured on a special edition QPL
17 card.

18 Our libraries help ensure that everyone has the
19 opportunity to participate fully in our democracy.
20 Our customers know if they need trustworthy
21 resources, they just need to go to their closest QPL
22 location. As discourse in the country has become
23 increasingly divided and politicized, QPL remains the
24 steady force in ensuring New Yorkers are educated
25 about government and the issues facing society.

1
2 Working closely with the City's campaign finance
3 boards NYC Votes, the Library distributes candidate
4 information guides and educational literature ahead
5 of both primary and general elections.

6 The Library creates special blog posts that
7 provide an overview of what voters should expect,
8 including the offices being sought, ballot measures,
9 and useful links. This information is also amplified
10 via email and social media to reach as many people as
11 possible. Ultimately, we want our customers to be
12 able to make informed decisions when they enter the
13 voting booth.

14 Queens Public Library annually participates in
15 National Voter Registration Day (NVRD) to raise
16 awareness of the November general election and to
17 encourage people to register to vote in time for
18 Election Day. Last week, we continued this tradition
19 by having voter registration forms, one page is on
20 how to complete those forms, and absentee ballot
21 request forms readily available to the public.

22 Ahead of September 17th, our Public Service staff
23 is educated and prepared to answer questions from the
24 public, whether it is about the registration deadline
25 or how they can find their polling sites for the

1
2 upcoming election, critical to NVRD, and leading up
3 to the registration deadlines, our collaborations
4 with community based organizations that are also
5 committed to conducting nonpartisan efforts. Over the
6 years, QPL has worked with NYC Votes, the League of
7 Women Voters, Woodside on the Move, and many other
8 groups on NVRD actions.

9 As centers and community in every neighborhood,
10 libraries are natural voting locations. QPL has
11 longstanding relationships with the Board of
12 Elections to allow our buildings to serve this
13 important purpose. This past primary, 11 libraries
14 welcomed Queens residents to vote and three were
15 early voting sites. We look forward to continuing
16 this partnership with the BOE in November to help
17 individuals seeking to exercise their right to vote
18 in a known and trusted environment.

19 A vibrant democratic society requires a well-
20 informed citizenry with access to unbiased and
21 undistributed information, which is becoming
22 increasingly challenging in a social media dominated
23 world. In 2021, the entire city was preparing for the
24 implementation of ranked choice voting, including for
25 the offices of the Mayor, the Comptroller, Public

1
2 Advocate, as well as council members. With the advent
3 of RCV in Queens and the likelihood of confusion and
4 misconceptions circulating about the new method, it
5 was imperative that we educate the public and
6 reinforce the facts.

7 Similar to our election lead up efforts, QPL
8 developed web content outlining the process, its
9 background, the applicable offices, and resources to
10 learn about RCV.

11 Ahead of the special election, first using RCV,
12 QPL president Dennis Walcott, led a virtual
13 discussion with the Rank the Vote NYC and CBOs with
14 deep ties to communities in the borough. The
15 conversation had more than 1,200 live and post-live
16 views and is still available to anyone who was
17 interested.

18 That same year, QPL along with BPL and NYPL were
19 proud recipients of a GoVoteNYC grant to assist with
20 public education and outreach for the June primary
21 and November general election.

22 Together, we sponsored a series of four RCV
23 virtual sessions in Mandarin, Cantonese, Bengali,
24 Spanish, and Haitian Creole.

1
2 We also jointly hosted programs that prompted
3 attendees to consider how voting has long term
4 consequences in regards to local issues.

5 A session with our Queens memory project entitled
6 NYC FLOOD RESILIENCY: ASK THE EXPERTS involved a
7 dynamic discussion about flood resiliency in the city
8 including history, policy, and neighborhood level
9 actions. This topic was especially poignant since
10 Hurricane Ida had impacted Queens residents in the
11 month prior.

12 Crucial to our voter education outreach is
13 connecting with Queens most vulnerable populations.
14 The Library's integrated English literacy and civic
15 education classes incorporate topics ranging from the
16 history of the United States, citizen rights and
17 responsibilities, election day, holidays and their
18 significance, voter registration, conversations with
19 polling site officials, and more.

20 This program has an enrollment of 280 students a
21 year. However, the overall need for ESOL programming
22 and the borough is overwhelming. In fiscal year 2023,
23 the Library had a total attendance of nearly 59,000
24 to our English learner classes, and we consistently
25

1
2 have a systemwide waiting list of approximately 200
3 with half from our Flushing Library.

4 Through QPL's partnership with the Mayor's Office
5 on Immigrant Affairs, we are able to expand our reach
6 by offering, We Speak NYC an English language
7 learning program that features civic focused
8 instruction. Since beginning to offer this in the
9 spring, QPL has served 868 students.

10 As part of our efforts at Rikers Correctional
11 Facility, we work with a broader coalition to
12 encourage participation in the voting process. QPL
13 supports this initiative by distributing voter
14 resources during our routine library service, as well
15 as by creating content for candidate and voter guides
16 that supplement NYC Votes materials and adheres to
17 the facility's approved guidelines ahead of the
18 election.

19 The Library's teen centers are essential spaces
20 for our young adult users to freely express
21 themselves and develop their interests. Earlier this
22 year, our Central and Long Island City teen centers
23 partnered with NYC Votes to host Civics for All, a
24 student-focused training on the basics of civic
25 engagement and voter registration. Ahead of the

1
2 upcoming election, the teen center at our Cambria
3 Heights library is offering a teen civic education
4 series to help build a foundation of understanding
5 government, the significance of being involved in
6 one's community, and more. This first session called
7 "MythBusters": Political Parties" examines the
8 political party system in the United States and the
9 chance for teens to see where their ideologies most
10 closely align. And following sessions, they will
11 also be provided with the opportunity to register to
12 vote.

13 Our libraries also serve as trusted accessible
14 hubs for community convening and civic engagement. We
15 have instituted service learning initiatives in which
16 individuals not only engage in meaningful service
17 experiences, but also on reflection that leads to
18 greater understanding of their ability to have an
19 impact on their communities. For example, World of
20 Work for Teens, which received an Urban Libraries
21 Council Top Innovation Award, combines college
22 coursework and professional development workshops
23 while engaging teams and service projects. And our
24 Talking Period Initiative prepares young people to be
25 menstrual equity advocates and community champions.

1
2 In addition, Queens Public Library hosts online
3 community education and leadership workshops to equip
4 residents with information and resources to help them
5 prepare to assume roles in city government, civic
6 groups, and community organizations. These sessions
7 have trained more than 500 and reach participants in
8 the United States, Europe, and Australia. Our
9 workshops, forums, and resources focused on building
10 leadership capacity, address topical issues such as
11 the child welfare system in New York City, and
12 provide media training to develop skills such as
13 executive presence and communications.

14 Since 2022, Queens Public Library has partnered
15 with the Food Bank for New York City, the city's
16 largest hunger relief organization, to address food
17 insecurity by conducting mobile food pantry
18 distributions with Library staff and volunteers at
19 branches across the borough. Over the past two years,
20 we have served 5,700 households and reached nearly
21 28,500 people so far.

22 Throughout the year, QPL staff and our government
23 and community partners leverage our spaces to empower
24 customers as well informed citizens through public
25 resource tabling and informational workshops. The

1
2 Library works closely with the New York City Civic
3 Engagement Commission to support The People's Money
4 through community outreach and awareness.

5 Last year at 23 QPL locations across the borough,
6 residents voted on how to spend taxpayer money. And
7 this year, we conducted a digital campaign
8 encouraging library users to submit their votes
9 online.

10 For over a decade, the Library has partnered
11 closely with the NYC Council on Participatory
12 Budgeting by hosting information sessions and
13 providing polling sites during voting week. In
14 addition, local civic organizations hold regular
15 meetings and community activations at our libraries.
16 In the past two years, these public meetings,
17 combined with the Library's civic programming, have
18 garnered attendance of more than 2,000. Our elected
19 officials, including Speaker Adams and members of
20 this committee, regularly host mobile office hours
21 and resource distribution events at our libraries,
22 thereby promoting civil discourse and facilitating
23 opportunities for direct constituent access to and
24 engagement with their representatives.

1
2 In closing, at Queens Public Library, we believe
3 it is one of our highest responsibilities to provide
4 the 2.4 million residents of the borough free,
5 trusted resources and spaces to discover and explore
6 their interests and to better understand diverse
7 ideas and viewpoints. We remain committed to
8 collaborating with our government and community based
9 partners to help individuals be active, informed, and
10 engaged citizens.

11 Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to testify
12 today.

13 DR. MCNEIL: Dr. Brandy McNeal.

14 Good morning, My name is Dr. Brandy McNeal, and I
15 am Deputy Director of Branch Programs and Services at
16 the New York Public Library.

17 I would like to thank City Council Speaker Adams,
18 Chair Rivera, and members of the Committee for the
19 opportunity to testify this morning on: *How Libraries*
20 *Empower New Yorkers To Become Informed Voters and*
21 *Engaged Citizens.*

22 As trusted nonpartisan institutions, public
23 libraries play a vital role in supporting a healthy
24 democracy. Libraries provide access to resources,
25 knowledge, and spaces that empower individuals to

1
2 become active participants in their communities. With
3 the rise of book bans across the country, and the
4 proliferation of misinformation, this work has become
5 more important than ever. The library's efforts to
6 inform voters and engage citizens are guided by three
7 pillars: civic knowledge, civic attitudes, and civic
8 actions. These pillars set the parameters for our
9 efforts to promote equitable access to information
10 for voters across the neighborhoods we serve and
11 innovative civic programming.

12 At the heart of democracy is our responsibility
13 as citizens to participate in the political process
14 at all levels of government. But, according to the
15 New York City Campaign Finance Board, voter turnout
16 in New York City is only 60.8 percent for
17 presidential elections. These numbers are even lower
18 in local elections with only 29.6 percent of eligible
19 voters participating in mayoral elections, and drops
20 further within low income neighborhoods, communities
21 of color, youth, older adults, and voters with
22 disabilities. As an institution with 88 neighborhood
23 locations across the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten
24 Island, the Library is positioned to engage the
25 patrons and local communities in the electoral

1
2 process through public programs and outreach that
3 encourage participation and equip New Yorkers with
4 the tools and knowledge they need to make informed
5 decisions.

6 During the 2021 primaries, which first introduced
7 ranked choice voting, and as part of the GoVoteNYC
8 Initiative, the three New York City library systems
9 introduced a number of voter education and civic
10 engagement programs and outreach efforts that
11 included RCV training sessions and panel discussions
12 that targeted low turnout segments of the electorate.

13 Voting engagement events leading up to and amid
14 the primaries were coordinated with the help of our
15 cosponsors and community partners at Queens Public
16 Library, Brooklyn Public Library, the Campaign
17 Finance Board, The Hispanic Federation, Gothamists,
18 and Citizens Union among others.

19 Since then, NYPL has maintained its partnership
20 with CFP's New York City Votes Initiative to host
21 virtual training events to prepare voters for local
22 elections and to share voting resources like New York
23 City votes, print materials, and digital tool kits.

24 From September 2023 to July 2024, New York City
25 held eight voter focused events with civic partners

1
2 like the League of Women Voters. These events
3 included 101 trainings that covered ballot proposals
4 and panel discussions on voter engagement.

5 NYPL also coordinated the New York City Board of
6 Elections to distribute close to 10,000 voter
7 registration forms in branches for the 2023 November
8 elections.

9 Ahead of this year's general election, CFB's New
10 York City Votes will hold a voter mobilization
11 training for library staff in October that will cover
12 voter registration and best practices to inspire
13 voter engagement.

14 These trainings are a valuable resource for the
15 offerings and conversations that our branch staff
16 have with eligible voters.

17 Branches like the Andrew High School Braille and
18 Talking Book Library are also hosting important
19 conversations with disability activists about the
20 barriers to voting faced by people with disabilities
21 and how New Yorkers can make a difference.

22 This year, both National Voter Registration Day
23 and Constitution Day fell on September 17th creating
24 a fortuitous opportunity to share voting resources
25 and materials from our collections, including a

1
2 handwritten copy of the first draft of the Bill of
3 Rights, and a book list covering subjects from the
4 ratification of the constitution to the
5 enfranchisement of African Americans and women. All
6 open branches across the system distributed voter
7 registration forms and promoted online voter
8 registration using multilingual signs in Spanish,
9 Chinese, Bangla, Arabic, and Russian to help close
10 language barriers and provide access to computers and
11 wireless Internet service.

12 In the digital space, our voter information pages
13 provide information about voting requirements, how to
14 research elections, uh, election issues using the
15 Library's resources, and voting for teens just to
16 name a few.

17 Beyond programs and initiatives targeting voter
18 engagement are a host of services, campaigns, and
19 offerings that focus on citizenship and civic
20 engagement more broadly.

21 In FY24, we helped 481 programs with 6,780
22 participants, and they were held to engage
23 communities with civics through conversation and
24 learning. These programs covered topics such as
25

1
2 everyday civics, activism, New York City Government
3 101, and citizenship study groups.

4 In April 2023, NYPL launched the Innovation Lab
5 Initiative that expands our support for staff
6 innovation, encourages experimentation at the
7 library, and celebrates staff ingenuity and
8 creativity. Our first innovation challenge for FY24
9 focused on civics and civic action, building on our
10 existing strengths to encourage democratic
11 participation. As a result, branches have held
12 programs like free Spanish citizenship classes,
13 application help, and a civic festival where patrons
14 learned about civics and how local government shapes
15 public policy to programs that promote free access to
16 citizenship applications.

17 One of the most indispensable components of our
18 work to engage citizens is the preservation of the
19 freedom to read and access to books for all.

20 While equitable access to information has always
21 been essential to NYPL's mission, it has become
22 increasingly vital to the survival of our democracy
23 which is currently being threatened by book bans
24 across the country. Books educate people about the
25 world around them, they invite discussion and

1
2 dialogue, and challenge readers to consider different
3 world views and perspectives.

4 One of the most alarming aspects of recent book
5 bans is that the overwhelmingly majority of the
6 titles being challenged center the experiences of
7 marginalized communities, in particular, LGBTQ+
8 Americans and people of color. These book bans are
9 often a feature of a larger context of efforts to
10 explicitly ban or even criminalize the teaching of
11 such topics as race, gender, and the identities of
12 LGBTQ+ people. The censorship of these topics keeps
13 marginalized communities from seeing themselves
14 represented in our country's literature and culture.
15 We know from history, for example, how important the
16 voices of those most marginalized were to the
17 advancement of voting and civil rights. Perhaps most
18 importantly, these bans deprive others of the
19 opportunity to learn and empathize with their
20 experience.

21 This time last year, in response to the alarming
22 rise of book bans and challenges throughout the
23 country, we launched Books for All to underscore the
24 importance of reading and access for all, and the
25 vital role that public libraries play in our

1
2 democracy. The campaign made banned titles free for
3 readers nationwide to borrow through our SimplyE, our
4 free-e reader app. It had a major focus on teen youth
5 and engagement in recognition of the fact that the
6 majority of books currently being banned or
7 challenged our young adult books.

8 This week, in coordination with Banned Books
9 Week, and as part of our continued commitment to
10 protect the freedom to read, we kicked off our annual
11 Teen Banned Club. The Teen Band Book Club shines a
12 spotlight on young adult titles that have been the
13 subject of bans or challenges. Free copies of this
14 year's book club pick will be available for teens at
15 their local branches and to NYPL cardholders on
16 Libby, accompanied by a discussion guide and
17 culminating in an online ortho talk led by teens.

18 We also launched an online exhibition that
19 explores censorship in the United States through four
20 themed sections: literature and film, sexual and
21 reproductive freedom, archiving against censorship,
22 and white supremacy, and war, colonialism, and
23 protest. The exhibit will be accompanied by a
24 curriculum guide and temporary displays of material
25 in the Stephen A. Schwartzman Building. On October

1
2 19th, the New York Brooklyn, and Queens Public
3 Libraries in partnership with the American Library
4 Association, they United Against Book Bans campaign,
5 and the Association for Rural and Small Libraries
6 will organize a first of its kind, "Freedom to Read"
7 national day of action to unite against book bans.
8 NYPL will hold a rally at the Stephen A. Schwarzman
9 Building, share information about the freedom to read
10 with patrons at tabling events across the system, and
11 take to social media to share more information about
12 book bans taking place across the country.

13 As noted previously, young New Yorkers are a
14 segment of the population with particularly low voter
15 turnout rates. This is why NYPL launched Teen Civic
16 Ambassadors, a program that offers paid internships
17 for teens to help develop job readiness and
18 leadership skills with a focus on library resources,
19 civics, and peer to peer engagement. As community
20 hubs and "third places" for teens outside school and
21 home, Libraries coordinate teen led programs focused
22 on building civic knowledge for our youngest eligible
23 voters.

24 In spring 2024, NYPL's Teen Civic Ambassadors
25 worked across 16 branches in low income neighborhoods

1 and offered over 50 programs serving over 250 teens.

2 Teens hosted programs on a range of topics from
3 women's history to art programs focused on supporting
4 mental well-being.
5

6 This past summer, in partnership with New York
7 City Votes, the Library's inaugural Teen Civic
8 Ambassador summer cohort held 15 voter registration
9 drives and created programs focused on how to involve
10 their peers in community issues. The Teen Civic
11 Ambassadors also facilitated an immersive and
12 thoughtful panel discussion with local city council
13 members on the importance of civic action and ways to
14 affect change. Our teens were able to learn directly
15 from council members representing the most diverse
16 city council in New York's history.

17 We want to thank you again, Chair Rivera, for
18 participating in that panel. And we want to thank the
19 city council for their support through the years,
20 which has been integral to our ability to innovate
21 these programs that speak directly to the City's
22 youth.

23 The Library's Centers for Educators and Schools
24 brings civics to life for school librarians,
25 educators, and students by teaching them to conduct

1
2 civics research using NYPL databases, resources, and
3 using the Library's primary sources to create civics
4 forward guides on subjects like Black New Yorkers
5 commemorating emancipation, Jewish activism and
6 housing reform, and censorship and the freedom to
7 read in the 20th century.

8 Our Center for Educators in School also offers
9 free field trips to the Stephen A. Schwartzman
10 Building featuring The Polonsky Exhibition of The New
11 York Public Library's Treasures and workshops for
12 educators to build their knowledge and understanding
13 of civic themes and how to bring them into the
14 classroom.

15 This fall, we're hosting civics workshops for
16 educators to help them teach their students how to
17 use Library resources to conduct historical and
18 contemporary research on housing activism and
19 regulation aligned with the New York City Public
20 Schools' new Seal of Civic Readiness.

21 Our recent work to inform voters and engage
22 citizens is supplemented by long time initiatives
23 such as offering our branches as polling sites. Four
24 of our libraries will serve as voting locations in
25 the upcoming November election. We also continue to

1
2 play a role in participatory budgeting processes with
3 the City Council and the Civic Engagement Commission.
4 The library not only submits potential projects of
5 its own for these initiatives, but serves as a safe
6 space for New Yorkers to generate and discuss ideas
7 and ultimately cast votes for their projects of
8 choice.

9 Libraries are increasingly one of the only
10 institutions that remain trusted by a wide range of
11 New Yorkers. Our principle committed commitment to
12 our mission makes our branches safe spaces where
13 everyone is entitled to the same right to
14 information, knowledge, and the opportunity to grow.
15 We have built on this trust to establish our pillars
16 of civic knowledge, civic attitudes, and civic action
17 to ultimately inform voters and engage citizens.

18 We are grateful for your support for these
19 initiatives which have taken on a consequential role
20 within the survival of our democracy.

21 Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I
22 remain available to answer questions, thank you.

23 DIRECTOR MAXWELL: Good morning, Chair Rivera and
24 members of the New York City Council. My name is
25 Edwin Maxwell, and I oversee public service at 59 of

1
2 Brooklyn Public Library's locations. On behalf of my
3 1,200+ colleagues and every Brooklynite, I want to
4 say thank you for your unwavering support of
5 Libraries and you're resolving and fighting against
6 the Library budget cuts this past spring. It is with
7 a joyous sigh of relief that we are back to the hours
8 and services which our communities expect. I, and all
9 Library workers, look forward to the day we can go
10 beyond restoring budget cuts and instead talk about
11 increasing the hours that are available to our
12 neighbors.

13 Voter turnout in New York City is lower than
14 ideal. We believe it is our responsibility as a City
15 funded organization to help with nonpartisan voter
16 education and engagement. And BPL takes this duty
17 seriously. Every branch carries and promotes voter
18 registration forms in the languages of their
19 neighborhood. BPL uses our digital screens, website,
20 and social media to promote upcoming elections and
21 the voter registration deadline. Our branches also
22 hold voter registration drives with organizations
23 like League of Women voters, Brooklyn Voters
24 Alliance, and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.

25

1
2 I am personally proud that 16 BPL branches serve
3 as polling sites during general elections. This is no
4 easy task, our staff arrive at 5:00 a.m. to open
5 libraries, and we're there until 11:00 p.m. way
6 beyond normal hours. Everyone, including our
7 custodial team, public safety officers, branch staff,
8 and administrative staff assist with the all hands on
9 deck effort to make sure voters have been nearby,
10 safe place to vote.

11 With partners like the Campaign Finance Board,
12 BPL branches hold ranked choice voting seminars,
13 "What's on the Ballot?" sessions, and other programs
14 that demystify voting it by explaining what voters
15 can expect at the polls. Staff made booklist service
16 guides for patrons interested in learning more about
17 what is happening in the news, political, and
18 otherwise.

19 BPL's five Adult Learning Centers help adults
20 develop their reading and writing skills, finish
21 their high school equivalency diploma, and learn
22 English. These centers have long integrated voter
23 education and civic participation into their
24 curriculum. This year, we're offering voter and
25 election themed swag to excite program participants

1
2 about this year's election. BPL's Teen Tech Center
3 staff and YA librarians encouraged 16 and 17-year-
4 olds in our teen programs to preregister the vote
5 while our Reentry Navigators help formally
6 incarcerate a patrons to understand their rights and
7 reregister the vote if necessary.

8 For this election season, we're offering a
9 special "Cast Your Vote" Story times to encourage
10 patrons and caregivers to register the vote. In these
11 story times, kids vote on the next books they'll read
12 or which song they'll sing, while adults are shown
13 how to check their voter registration status. We
14 encourage program participants and everyone here to
15 take your kids to vote with you and be a role model.
16 Studies show that parents and caregivers who vote
17 have children who vote. This program communicates
18 that. We are very thankful to the City Council for
19 generously funding this program through the City's
20 First Readers Initiative.

21 What I've described to you is a lot, and it takes
22 a lot of effort to make it happen, but this is just
23 the start of the civic engagement that happens in
24 libraries. Library workers are dedicated to building
25 community, fostering neighborhood connections, and

1
2 increasing civic literacy. We intentionally cultivate
3 a sense of belonging at our branches. From our
4 programs, to our emphasis on intellectual freedom,
5 all with the larger goal of empowering our patrons.
6 BPL offers 20 volunteer-led conversation groups for
7 English language learners each week and monthly
8 community dinners for those reentering society after
9 incarceration. Almost every week, a City Council
10 Member, City Agency or City Commission utilizes a
11 branch for office hours or a program to invite
12 neighbors to participate in our city's government.
13 These programs deliberately center collaborative
14 engagement to instill a sense of belonging and
15 community.

16 As a society, we find it harder to talk about
17 what's meaningful to us without relying on political
18 cliches, especially online. BPL has launched a
19 variety of programs to address this, including
20 "Anthem to Us" a recently concluded program with NYPL
21 QPL, and the Lincoln Center for Performing Arts. It
22 invited all voices to join to create a contemporary
23 national anthem echoing our collective hope. A 100
24 participants embarked on this immersive writing
25 workshop series, and three of these anthems were

1
2 performed live at Lincoln Fitter on July 6th this
3 year.

4 In our 28th Amendment program, BPL invited
5 Brooklynites to the town hall meetings to debate
6 ideas suggest language that they would like to see in
7 a new amendment to the Constitution decades after the
8 last amendment was issued in 1992. During the 2020
9 election cycle, we helped residents find their voice,
10 with, "I Wish to Say", a program before the election
11 which invited patrons to dictate messages, which
12 would be mailed in January to the next US president.

13 Working with the nonprofit news organization *The*
14 *City*, we have begun to establish newsrooms at
15 branches to facilitate information exchange.
16 Residents develop newsletters which focus on what
17 matters to them and their neighborhoods assisted by
18 librarians and journalists. By involving residents in
19 every step of the process from writing articles to
20 newsletter distribution, we strengthen these
21 residents' bonds to their neighborhoods, their
22 government, and to each other. These projects are not
23 just about delivering information or providing
24 creative outlets, they're also about cultivating
25

1
2 empowerment and sense of belonging and one's
3 community amongst our patrons.

4 As your previous hearings have highlighted, this
5 work is under threat nationwide. This October with
6 the American Library Association and our fellow New
7 York City Libraries, BPL is spearheading a National
8 Day of Action to rally for the freedom to read. On
9 Saturday, October 19th, libraries across the country
10 will gather their patrons and supporters to unite
11 against book bans and demonstrate that the freedom to
12 read is an enduring, nonpartisan American value that
13 must be protected. Libraries are facing a dire
14 threat, and this Day of Action will be one of the
15 first times in recent memory that the American
16 libraries have banded together to such a magnitude.

17 Communities with vibrant public libraries are
18 healthier and more resilient. Libraries play a role
19 around every election, but our efforts to empower
20 citizens through this sense of community are bigger
21 than any election season.

22 Thank you, Chair Rivera, and members of the
23 Committee for this opportunity to discuss this topic
24 today.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you, thank you so much
3 for your testimony. You just gave me such a nice
4 memory, too, because, you know, my family, we dress
5 up for special occasions. Right? Special events. And
6 one would be to go to church, and another would be to
7 get on an airplane, which was like a very big deal,
8 especially, you know, when you don't grow up with a
9 lot of money, it's like a privilege to get on an
10 airplane and go somewhere. And then the third one
11 that clearly comes to mind is that my family would
12 dress up to go vote. It was ,like, such an important
13 moment that they wanted to just put their best foot
14 forward, so to speak. So, I can recall, like, going
15 into the booth, and I can't tell you what was on the
16 ballot that didn't even matter at the time, it was
17 just the moment of being next to my grandparents or
18 my mom, and then that's when we had the curtain, and
19 we had to pull the switch, and it was the lever. And
20 I just remember thinking, well, this was something
21 that I get to do soon. You know? So, thank you for
22 that, because I do think it's important as we look to
23 emulate our role models that they typically start at
24 home, those people.

1 So thank you so much again for your testimony.

2 You know, you mentioned that "I Wish to Say" program,
3 which you did in 2020, will you do that program again
4 to send messages to the next?
5

6 DIRECTOR MAXWELL: Yeah, sure.

7 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Yeah, sure? (LAUGHS)

8 ALL: (LAUGHTER)

9 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Well, I will ask you all the
10 question of ,you know, the budget cuts in a second,
11 because I know that every single program and how you
12 support you staff, and the ability to get things
13 done, also requires a reliable partnership with the
14 City. And, so, I know that when the... As November
15 approaches, I can't help but feel a bit anxious. I
16 don't want to feel that way. I want it to be that we
17 are not ,you know, bargaining or negotiating for
18 restoration, but rather we are looking at what's
19 next, the future, and expansion of clearly programs
20 that work.

21 But, I did just want to ask, because I thought...
22 I also remember, like, writing the letter, like,
23 dear, Mr. President, so we'll see. But, you also
24 mentioned you used digital screens, website, and
25 social media used to promote elections.

1
2 What do you think has been the most effective in
3 promoting elections or just voter registration, I
4 know you all give out the actual guides. Do you give
5 out the paper versions? I know some people prefer it,
6 even people on this very dais prefer the paper form
7 over an electronic version.

8 So, what do you think has been the most effective
9 in in reaching individuals in in terms of voter
10 information and participation?

11 DIRECTOR MAXWELL: Yeah, it's difficult to say,
12 well, one particular measure is the one. Right? That
13 that's getting people out to vote. But I think just
14 having a presence and making those materials
15 available, having people available to explain, as you
16 mentioned, coming from certain neighborhoods within
17 the city, I'll say, it's not always pushed to the
18 forefront of everyone's mind, uh, voting season. So,
19 I think having a presence at the library, constantly
20 promoting it through the various methods that we were
21 speaking about, just being there and knowing that you
22 can get the information, so that if you're hesitant,
23 as we know, many of our residents here are having
24 someone to speak to, knowing that there's someone on
25 staff, that's why we're so proud to have so many

1
2 branches participate throughout the city. Just being
3 there, and just being visible, and being someone... a
4 place of comfort that people can ask questions and
5 learn about how to be more specifically engaged. I
6 think it's cumulative, all of those things.

7 DIRECTOR MCLEOD: I will echo my colleague in
8 terms of what we do. I had the opportunity to be out
9 a couple of weeks ago, right before National Voter
10 Registration Day, out in Jackson Heights doing voter
11 registration out on 82nd and 37th Avenue, and I had
12 the opportunity to speak with a lot of residents.
13 What they appreciated was our visibility. What they
14 expected was our participation. And, so, when we
15 asked people, do you know where your polling sites
16 are? They said, "the Library", they could point right
17 there, whether it was an early voting site or an
18 election day site. Making sure that our staff are
19 equipped with not only the information, but also
20 prepped to know how to help individuals -- other
21 languages, people walk into the library, they want to
22 know. I was stunned, in a weird way, when I got to
23 meet people who were in their seventies, had said
24 they had never registered before, had been, you know,
25 citizens have been here, but they felt that it was

1
2 important, and they were happy to see that we were
3 out there. People from upstate who were visiting had
4 walked by and said, "You guys are here on the street,
5 in my, you know, in my town of state, they would
6 never do this." So, making sure that we are visible
7 in every way, shape, or form, whether that's on
8 social media, whether that is in our branches,
9 whether that is at street affairs, talking to
10 everybody, making sure that they know that we're
11 still trusted institutions, that we have the
12 information, that it's accurate that it's reliable.
13 So to echo, making sure that we are everywhere and
14 can deliver that information to everybody regardless
15 of the format.

16 DR. MCNEIL: So, I echo everything that they've
17 already said. What I will add to it is that I also
18 believe that for us, the work that we've done with
19 our teens, the in person programming that we do where
20 people are able to ask questions, you participated in
21 one, that does something for people when they feel
22 like they can connect with the people who are in
23 these positions. I also think that it's really
24 important that, when they come to our programs, and
25 they get to understand what the other opportunities

1
2 are that they have to be engaged in their elections,
3 understanding what other positions that they should
4 be thinking about in terms of voting outside of
5 mayoral, outside of presidential, those are huge
6 opportunities that create long lasting impact.

7 And really for the teens, I mean, you mentioned
8 about budget, we offer these internships to the
9 teens. These are paid internships. We can only do
10 things like that if we constantly have the funding to
11 do that. So, it's really important that we are able
12 to continue to do those types of things.

13 DIRECTOR MAXWELL: Can I say one more thing? I
14 just want to echo what Dr. McNeil said, one of the
15 biggest things that we do at Libraries we all kinda
16 talked about cultivating the next generation of
17 voters. Right? So I want to make sure that we
18 emphasize that. So, with the team program, then like
19 I spoke about, with the children's programs, one of
20 the biggest things that we can do to impact voter
21 turnout is build the next generation of voters, and I
22 think that's something that we all do very well in
23 are conscious of.

24 DR. MCNEIL: I want to add one more thing...

25 ALL: (LAUGHTER)

1
2 DR. MCNEIL: Sorry...

3 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: You all can keep adding
4 whatever you like, okay, this is about hearing from
5 you.

6 DR. MCNEIL: I also want to say that what we
7 noticed during the pandemic, when a lot of people
8 didn't have access to internet and even devices, the
9 fact that we all introduced online programming, that
10 continues to be a huge part of where we are seeing
11 participation. So, being able to offer online
12 information and programming about what's happening
13 with voting, has been another area that I think has
14 been a turnout for us as well.

15 DIRECTOR MCLEOD: Okay, I couldn't let them just
16 keeping going, (LAUGHS) right? I have to throw one
17 in.

18 The other part of this is, and I'll speak to our
19 teens, but I think this is also true for our adults,
20 and that is investing in their awareness of things
21 beyond sort of the voting process, so high community
22 engagement and awareness. And so what we've done, and
23 I think all of us have spoken about this, uhm, with
24 our adults, with our young people, is making them
25 more aware of some of those larger issues, whether

1
2 that is poverty, whether that is child welfare, you
3 know, getting them involved or thinking about what's
4 going on, what they see every day, and how that
5 affects them. And so being able to get them invested
6 in those types of issues, there's a natural
7 correlation between that and now being able to do
8 something at the in the voting booth - And not just
9 the voting booth, but also looking at things like the
10 community boards and the civic associations and the
11 city council. And, so getting people really invested
12 in what's going on around them in a lot of different
13 ways will naturally sort of direct them to well, now
14 that I know about it, what can I do about it?

15 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: You know, you mentioned
16 adults in your testimony, I appreciated the work that
17 you're doing with people who are currently and
18 formally incarcerated. You know, for anyone who has
19 ever stood on the street for any cause, whether
20 political or not, you know, there's this, uh,
21 eventually, you get to the point in the conversation
22 where you're like, well, you know, to make this
23 change, you should register to vote. Right? That
24 that'll come up at some point. And I can't tell you
25 how many people I've spoken to who would say

1 something like, you know, "I actually served, I did
2 time, I was previously incarcerated, I can't vote."

3 And I do think there is this... there are many,
4 many misconceptions about who can and who cannot
5 vote. So I just want to thank you for, you know,
6 doing the work, you know, on the Island and off the
7 Island, and just making sure that we're in connection
8 with those individuals, because they certainly have
9 rights as well.
10

11 Just to go back to your teens, I'd remain
12 impressed by the young people that walked through the
13 doors of your libraries. They are incredible people.
14 I wish I had 5 percent of, like, the capacity and
15 the just sort of the awareness that they exhibited,
16 and I was very proud to participate in in that panel.

17 You have an online author talk you said held by
18 teens? You said that I think in your testimony, I
19 think that's so interesting, because I do feel as I
20 don't know, I guess it's, I don't want to say
21 controversial, but as deep as the discussion is about
22 access to online and digital platforms, I do think
23 that space is so important to have that discussion
24 about books, and literacy, and the topics that are
25 involved that affect our everyday life.

1
2 So we would love to continue promoting that, you
3 know, from our office, and I think in the Council, I
4 think that's very, very cool.

5 Just one question, because I see one of my
6 colleagues who wants to ask.... You know, in terms of
7 contact, in terms of being able to speak to people in
8 their own language, you all mentioned language
9 access, incredibly important. And just for Queens, I
10 mean, I used to be the chair of the Hospitals
11 Committee, and they would say that in Elmhurst
12 Hospital, you could probably hear in a single day
13 over a 100 languages. Right? They call it the world's
14 borough for a reason. But, I know that throughout all
15 of our branches, people are commuting, they're
16 visiting, they're going to appointments, and they're
17 stopping at a branch. And they don't necessarily
18 speak English or Spanish or Mandarin or Cantonese or
19 whatever it is. And so if you can just, I guess,
20 expand on how the Council can be helpful in expanding
21 any sort of language access programs you all have,
22 especially when it comes to voter engagement, I
23 would love to hear just a little bit about that...
24 Especially the... I know you're also doing classes,
25 citizenship, just learning. I've done actually

1
2 Government 101 at the Tomkins Square branch a couple
3 of times, so that's a lot of fun. I mean, that's in
4 English, but, if you all can just explain a little
5 bit on language access programs and what you're doing
6 and how the Council can be helpful. And then we'll go
7 to Council Member Carr.

8 Oh, we've also been joined by Council Member Ung
9 and Council Member Hanks.

10 DIRECTOR MCLEOD: I'll talk a little bit about
11 the... A couple of things that we have going on - the
12 English Language Line that provides translation
13 services for the public. I think, Chair what you
14 mentioned in terms of the classes and the... We
15 talked about We Speak New York, we talked about our
16 ESOL conversation groups, we talked about all of
17 those different sort of, I think, foundational pieces
18 that we rely on funding, we rely on support to
19 continue those services. We've expanded that type of
20 access in terms of languages into other areas. So,
21 looking at our programming and making sure that our
22 programming, at different points, is conducted in
23 other languages, whether that's a story time, whether
24 that's an author talk, those have been some of the
25 things that we've been trying to... And that really,

1
2 I think, put an effort into making sure that it's
3 accessible. Looking at our international collections
4 and making sure that we have books and resources
5 within different libraries that cater to that
6 neighborhood, but also expanding beyond that. And,
7 then, now looking at with our civic literacy
8 components, looking at making sure that we are doing
9 things like these discussion groups or idea sessions
10 where we're talking about the Participatory Budgeting
11 and making sure that that's being done in other
12 languages so that we can connect with people.

13 So, I think all of those things collectively are
14 ways in which we've been able to, I think, live up to
15 the moniker as the most diverse borough in in the
16 world.

17 But I think the support from the City Council has
18 been and continues to be essential to making sure
19 that we can deliver those services to everyone and
20 not have to worry about disruptions or reductions.

21 DR. MCNEIL: I will go next. So, thank you for
22 this question. We do quite a lot. What I would like
23 to say is, you know, we also participate with the
24 Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, and we offer We
25 Speak NYC, so we do a bunch of that. We also have our

1
2 new program that we launched to really help a lot of
3 the asylum seekers. We noticed that the people who
4 were coming in were really at a beginner level that
5 wasn't really at where we did our series based
6 programming. So, through the use of Mango Languages
7 and now through the use of the We Speak NYC, the
8 beginners program, we have expanded that, and that
9 has been a great partnership in order to do that.

10 I would also like to say that, obviously, funding
11 is needed. Translation of the materials that we
12 provide, whether it's our political materials,
13 whether it's our materials just in everything that we
14 do in terms of offering our services, requires quite
15 a bit of funding. So helping with that is a big need.

16 We also have invested in what we call ILA
17 devices. These are new devices that will allow people
18 who are able to come into our branches, and to try to
19 describe it a bit, it's a tablet that is kind of two
20 sided, and basically, you can just touch it, and you
21 would speak in your language and in reverse, it's
22 going to speak English to me. And then In reverse,
23 when I say whatever I say back to you, it will speak
24 it in your language. These devices have been
25 instrumental in a lot of the outreach that we're

1
2 doing in our communities, because we are able to help
3 people with a variety of different languages.

4 Once again, that comes at a cost, so that's
5 really important.

6 And then lastly, I would like to say, one of the
7 things that we've also done at the New York Public
8 Library is to really think about expanding people's
9 knowledge outside of just access to ESOL. And we've
10 done that through our entire Adult Services
11 collaboration. And what I mean by that is, not only
12 do we provide ESOL help, we now provide digital
13 literacy help that goes in partnership with the
14 programming that they come in for. Not only do we do
15 that, but we also now offer workforce development
16 that also comes as programming with that. And those
17 are electives that they can choose to do.

18 This past spring, we offered a podcasting course,
19 and it was really great to see people provide
20 podcasts in their own native languages so that they
21 can offer that to their families and friends.

22 And so that's just some of the work that we've
23 done.

24
25

1
2 DIRECTOR MAXWELL: Agreed. I don't I don't think I
3 can say anything different from my colleagues, we
4 share all of all of the same struggles and successes.

5 I just want to highlight again that the best way
6 to help is through that funding source. Like, both of
7 my colleagues spoke about our language capacity in
8 the branches, but even with all our devices and all
9 our efforts, they don't match the language capacity
10 of our residents. So, funding helps us employ more
11 multilingual staff members, expand these programs
12 that we're speaking of, the We Speak program amongst
13 others. So that would be the greatest use to us. You
14 know, everything is gonna come down to funding. I
15 know you said that we're gonna talk about that in a
16 moment, but that is the greatest way.

17 And I would also, I know that you have done
18 programs and use your multilingual abilities and
19 NYPL and Queens branches, and we always will invite
20 you out to Brooklyn as well.

21 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Well, I can't wait to go
22 because you mentioned voter, like, swag, and you all
23 have, like, a rep for the swag. Like, I just want to
24 say, I have, like, a toad with the pigeon DJing,
25 it's, like, iconic.

1
2 I just want to thank you all. And listen, you
3 know, the budget conversation is gonna be intertwined
4 in everything. So, let's just let's just say what it
5 is. It's gonna be important in the work that you do
6 and how you're promoting the citizenship study groups
7 to help soon to be citizens repair for the US Citizen
8 test, in order to keep going with the Teen Civic
9 Ambassadors, with neighbors, Neighbors Meet and Chat
10 sessions, all of that is contingent upon what you're
11 able to do and how you're able to support your own
12 staff with a living wage.

13 So with that, I'm gonna go to Council Member
14 Carr.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER CARR: Thank you, Chair Rivera.
16 This is an important hearing, so glad to have our
17 colleagues from the three Library systems with us
18 today.

19 You know, you have an important mission here and
20 it's a difficult one, because when public
21 institutions like libraries and schools engage in
22 education and informational efforts about politics
23 and events, particularly contemporary politics and
24 events, there's a high standard of objectivity that
25 the consumers of those efforts are gonna have,

1 particularly parents of youth who are coming to you
2 for that kind of an effort. And, there's you know,
3 everyone's antennas are up, for you to kind of breach
4 objectivity and in their view, you know, start
5 teaching or promoting a position with which they do
6 not agree. And then there are some, that is a smaller
7 group, who actually want you to take a position in
8 some cases.

9
10 So can you talk to me in terms of how you're
11 curating these efforts and managing these efforts in
12 a way that that is objective In your view and how it
13 conforms to that standard.

14 DIRECTOR MCLEOD: Thank you for the question.

15 We take our position as a trusted institution
16 very seriously, and it's something we do not want to
17 threaten, we don't want to breach the community and
18 the public's trust. So, we pride ourselves really on
19 one, training, we sure that our staff understands
20 really the facts from the fiction. We understand our
21 position as a nonpartisan institution. We make sure
22 to either be completely sort of out of the
23 conversation, or if we're going to be, and I think
24 I'll speak for everybody... I'll throw this out and
25 you guys can correct me. But it's the idea of being a

1 safe space that allows discourse in a civil manner
2 and allowing whatever side of the issue you happen to
3 be on for both sides, for all sides, to have an
4 opportunity to speak what their truth is. We are
5 simply the place where they all can convene and know
6 that it's a trusted place. And, so when we are doing,
7 whether it's a program, whether it is a speaker,
8 whether it is classes, whatever we're doing, in
9 within, you know, those walls, whether... and those
10 walls are not just physical walls, but digital walls,
11 interpersonal walls, we're making sure that we are
12 sort of right down the middle, that we are still that
13 safe space, and all of that goes into our trainings,
14 our information, how we prepare our staff, the
15 information that we research to make sure that it is
16 factual. All of that goes into sort of are standing.
17 And like I said, we take that very seriously. So
18 those are the things that we make sure that we have
19 in place.

21 DR. MCNEIL: I mean, I completely I think he
22 really answered that really well. I will also say
23 that you know, one of the things for us is that we
24 really rely solely on information available. And so
25 we ensure that all voices are represented. That's

1
2 part of what we do as a library. And so, you know,
3 our theme is libraries for everyone, if you've seen
4 our swag. And so, right, we simply just want to make
5 sure that people have the information they need to
6 make informed decisions. And that's really the goal,
7 and we do that in (NO MIC) (INAUDIBLE) way.

8 DIRECTOR MAXWELL: I don't think I have to say
9 anything different. I just want to again highlight
10 the beauty of libraries. Right? As we talked about
11 being that one of the last democratic institutions.
12 Just like my colleagues said, being that place to
13 convene, being that place where that all voices are
14 equal, And we heavily - we heavily rely on that. And
15 throughout trainings, everything that we speak about
16 as a library system is to point to that beauty of
17 having that space that everyone can have safe and
18 civil discourse.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER CARR: I appreciate those answers.

20 I guess, as a follow-up, right, there seems to
21 be, right, because I participate in forums in my
22 community all the time, as well as other parts of the
23 city, and there seems to be an increasing amount of
24 people who have the view that some viewpoints however
25 civilly expressed, are themselves so noxious that

1 they don't belong in these forums, in these in the
2 public sphere. And there may be instances where I
3 agree, right? There's a person that advocates a
4 position that I particularly find to be hateful or
5 (TIMER CHIMES) loathsome, but does so quite politely
6 and civilly. So, I mean, what is the standard that
7 you employ? Do you agree with that notion, or do you
8 think that, you know, as long as nobody's cursing and
9 hurling obscenities and interrupting other people
10 that there's a space for views that people find to be
11 odious. Right? I mean, I guess that's really the
12 standard, and that's not so much on your
13 informational and education packages, but if you're
14 curating real discussions, that's going to happen.
15 Right? This is a city with a broad spectrum of
16 opinion and some of it is gonna be controversial and
17 maybe even hateful to some people. And, so I'm just
18 wondering how... how do you handle those, and how do
19 you train your facilitators and educators to handle
20 those situations?

22 DR. MCNEIL: I mean, I think one of the first
23 things I think about is, you know, obviously, we are
24 about freedom of speech, but we're also about
25 respect, and at the beginning of all of our

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2 programs, especially ones in which we're engaging in
3 that dialogue or that conversation, that is something
4 that we make sure that people know that this is a
5 place where we want to ensure that that happens,
6 whether someone flies off the handle or not is the
7 whole other thing. But we go in with that goal in
8 mind.

9 DIRECTOR MAXWELL: I will echo that in terms of
10 leading with respect and, you know, respect and
11 understanding how to deescalate, uh, situations is,
12 again, goes back to training. I cannot stress enough
13 the amount of training that is done with our staff,
14 especially around sensitive topics and sensitive
15 issues. And, you know, it seems like that's every
16 day in all issues, but making sure that our staff are
17 equipped on how to address those issues in a
18 respectful and civil... it's still called civil
19 discourse with the civil being, you know, I think
20 paramount to it. So making sure that we have the
21 disclaimers as well. And letting people know that
22 this is a topic that may rile people up and it's a
23 self of a sensitive nature. So you always have sort
24 of that ground rules piece that sort of sets the
25 stage. And then also knowing when, you know, the

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2 discourse in the conversation has sort of reached its
3 apex. And knowing how to now say, okay, this has gone
4 as far as it can possibly go and still maintain a
5 respectability and a civil nature and knowing how to
6 then kind of move out. So making sure that our staff
7 are aware of that, making sure that any facilitators
8 that were coming in the outside are aware of that.

9 Yeah, I think that's sort of how we look at it as
10 well.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER CARR: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

12 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you, that was an
13 important question, and freedom of speech is
14 important. But, also intolerance, that hate is not
15 accepted. It is sometimes a difficult space to
16 navigate, uhm, and also you want to ensure that
17 people feel protected, including your own staff.

18 I want to add that we have been joined by Council
19 Member Louis. And, Council Member, you had a
20 question?

21 COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: Thank you so much, chair,
22 and good morning. I'm just gonna ask all the
23 questions that you could answer them afterwards
24 because one of them is pretty long.

1
2 So, as some of you may know, Clarendon Library
3 and the Clarendon Branch in my district has been
4 closed for considerable amount of time, maybe over
5 three years now. During its closure, local residents
6 and family seeking library services have been
7 referred to a one day a week mobile library to
8 replace the services typically offered by the full
9 branch.

10 How would you describe the services being
11 provided by the mobile librarian in comparison to
12 what would normally be available at a fully
13 operational branch, particularly in terms of
14 programming such as literacy programs, educational
15 workshops, and what we hear for today, civic
16 engagement efforts?

17 What steps is BPL taking to ensure that the
18 community, especially children and families, continue
19 to receive access to civic information while the
20 Clarendon Library Branch remains closed leading up to
21 the vital election on November 5th?

22 Second question, to echo Chair Rivera's questions
23 on language, access, and diversity. Given the large
24 immigrant population in the Clarendon and Rugby
25 Branch service areas in my district, what specific

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2 efforts are being made to provide multilingual
3 programming and resources such as legal workshops or
4 ESL classes to support immigrants in their path to
5 citizenship to ensure equitable access to library
6 services? Thank you.

7 DIRECTOR MAXWELL: I'll take the first part of
8 that question.

9 So as far as Clarendon, DDC, told us that we can
10 expect to open in 2025. And we're aware, right, we've
11 gone through one of the largest innovations as a
12 public library system over the last few years, and
13 we'll continue over the next couple of years. And
14 we're aware that we want to make sure that every
15 neighborhood has the correct access, the right
16 amount... the access that you spoke about that it
17 would happen if their library was open.

18 So, we have kind of changed philosophies on how
19 to service neighborhoods, and when the branch is
20 closed, traditionally, we did have, like, a mobile
21 bus a couple of times a week, but we've looked to
22 do... had to have services that far expand that.

23 So, one of the things that we're doing now is
24 making sure that that staff from that library that
25 the community have got comfortable with remains in

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2 that area. So, it heavily relies on partnerships in
3 the area so that we can continue to have the same
4 amount of programs there. Then that is in addition to
5 having mobile services. Right? So, I think that
6 combination of those two things, so that we're not
7 just heavily relying on one or two times a week
8 having mobile service, but really having a commitment
9 to work with the community partners within that
10 neighborhood to continue to provide those programs
11 and services while the branch is under renovation.
12 But I hope to get Clarendon back soon.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: I thank you for that
14 response, and I think that while BPL is a great
15 partner with my district, the problem that I have is
16 that we were told that it was going to open back in
17 the fall. So, if you say you're trying to service all
18 districts, all neighborhood, here is a district in an
19 area that is being disproportionately marginalized
20 because contractors are not doing their job - which
21 means now you have a population of folks that are not
22 getting civic engagement opportunities, because
23 you're not doing your due diligence.

24 So, whether if it's EDC, uh, DDC, or BPL we
25 should all be coming together to ensure that they are

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2 civic engagement classes for our youth. The once a
3 week mobile is not going to work. And most parents
4 don't feel comfortable having their children on the
5 mobile site, just so you all are aware. I think it is
6 unfair, it's unethical, and we need to do a better
7 job after this hearing to ensure that we get this
8 site open this fall. We have a very important job to
9 take care of in November. And we have about a month
10 to get it done and to get people engaged. There is no
11 reason why this library shouldn't be open just
12 because of an HVAC system. It's not fair.

13 DIRECTOR MAXWELL: I absolutely agree, and we're
14 willing to do whatever we can, and we would love to
15 work with you even more on. And I know you have been
16 a strong supporter of that community.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: The best way we can work
18 together is to get this library open this fall.

19 DIRECTOR MAXWELL: Yes, absolutely.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: Thank you.

21 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you. So, uhm, you know,
22 Council Member Louis brought up a good point in terms
23 of civic engagement. I know that your sites have been
24 doing tons of information and resource sharing, also
25 ranked choice voting. I think that's going to be

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2 important. It continues to be ,you know, something
3 that we receive a lot inquiries about just truly
4 trying to understand it. It's new. It's new to the
5 system, and I think that's fair for it to take a
6 while for people to truly catch on.

7 So, you all do all of that, but you also serve as
8 polling sites. So, how many of your branches - I know
9 in Queens for example, you mentioned you have 11 poll
10 sites on election day and early voting. But, how many
11 of your branches are serving as polling sites in the
12 upcoming election? And does this produce any
13 logistical or financial strain on these local
14 branches?

15 DIRECTOR MAXWELL: As I testified to, we have 16
16 in Brooklyn. Of course, just like I mentioned in the
17 testimony, does it produce a hardship? Yes. But I
18 think that, again, this is something that we're
19 committed to as our obligation as a public library.
20 So the strain that it puts on it, again all of that
21 falls on our staff members. Like I said, we have
22 to... our typical hours as the branch staff would
23 come in at 9:45 - 10 o'clock. People are volunteering
24 to come in at five o'clock in the morning, right, to
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2 make sure that the library is open. They may to make
3 sure that the polls are set up for people to vote.

4 And then we stay towards the end. Typically, that
5 ends around 11:00, but we all know that backend work
6 usually takes longer, so people... the staff that are
7 volunteering - and, again, volunteering - to do this,
8 to come in because this is that important to them.

9 So it does create some hardship, but it's
10 something that we're happy to do.

11 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And this is also the
12 opportunity for you all to let us know how we can
13 better support your civic engagement efforts, not
14 only in a crucial presidential election year, but
15 also more generally.

16 Do you want to bring that in?

17 DIRECTOR MCLEOD: I will let you know for Queens,
18 we have 10 sites that will be polling sites for the
19 general election. And starting October 26th, we will
20 have two early voting sites.

21 As far as sort of the hardships, it is difficult.
22 Programming is tough during those times, because when
23 we have the voting locations, we're not able to do
24 programming in those rooms. And our programming is
25 popular, you know, we have, you know, 987,000 people

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2 that came to our programs last year in the fiscal
3 year. What can be done, I think, beyond the election
4 cycle, this particular cycle, For us, it's really
5 looking at access and information. People are curious
6 about how local government works. I was thrilled to
7 hear, Chair, that you were participating in, you
8 know, civic literacy related programming. Our
9 constituents want to meet their elected officials.
10 They want to talk with you. They want to hear from
11 you. Having you come and do office hours in our
12 branches has been, you know, really positive, and
13 we've gotten a lot of good feedback from our
14 customers wanting more, when we do things about the
15 community boards and knowing how they operate and how
16 people can get involved.

17 So I think for us, it's having or continuing to
18 have access to you, to hear from you, to know that
19 our patrons can speak with you and being able to
20 continue that two way dialogue within our spaces.

21 DR. MCNEIL: I echo everything he just said.

22 For us, we have four polling sites, uh, largely
23 in part because our process, how it works is that we
24 work the Board of Elections, so they choose and kind

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2 of nominate where they would like to hold the
3 elections within our branches. So, we do have four.

4 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay, excellent, well, thank
5 you, thank you very, very much. I don't have any
6 further questions. I just wanted to thank you. I know
7 you have - in order for you to continue the work that
8 you are doing, whether it's story time, Cast Your
9 Vote, or whether it's teen civic ambassadors, or
10 actually MythBusters: Political Parties which I
11 thought, he keyed that up for you...

12 ALL: (LAUGHTER)

13 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: But, I thought ,you know,
14 your answers on how you keep things absolutely
15 neutral in the most positive and beneficial way in
16 order to fully inform the voter, the person, uh,
17 regardless of whether they can register or not, uh,
18 was great. And I think you said it very well, Dr.,
19 that our libraries play a consequential role in the
20 survival of our democracy.

21 So, I thank you all for your work. I am excited
22 to see you and/or your colleagues out in the field at
23 these branches. And I look forward to working with
24 you, thank you.

25 PANEL: Thank you.

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2 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I now open the hearing for
3 public testimony. I remind members of the public that
4 this is a formal government proceeding, and that
5 decorum shall be observed at all times. As such,
6 members of the public shall remain silent at all
7 times.

8 The witness table is reserved for people who wish
9 to testify. No video recording or photography is
10 allowed from the witness table. Further, members of
11 the public may not present audio or video recordings
12 as testimony, but may submit transcripts of such
13 recordings to the Sergeant at Arms for inclusion in
14 the hearing record.

15 If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please
16 fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant at Arms
17 and wait to be recognized. When recognized, you will
18 have two minutes to speak on today's hearing topic:
19 *How Libraries Empower New Yorkers to Become Informed*
20 *Voters and Engaged Citizens.*

21 If you have a written statement or additional
22 written testimony that you wish to submit for the
23 record, you may provide a copy of that testimony to
24 the Sergeant at Arms.

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2 I will now call on the first panel, I want to
3 call... Is Dalvin Bartley joining us via Zoom?

4 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

5 DALVIN BARTLEY: (NO RESPONSE)

6 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: He may not be there.

7 That's okay, I will do a callback after the next,
8 uh, person. Thomas Gogan?

9 THOMAS GOGAN: Good Morning, Chair Rivera, and any
10 other council members who are currently present.

11 I'm Tom Gogan, I am representing myself as well
12 as the Move the Money in New York City Coalition.

13 First, speaking for myself, I am a regular user
14 of both the Brooklyn Public Library, my own
15 neighborhood, which is over in Park Slope, not a
16 typically underserved neighborhood for sure. But,
17 nonetheless, we've experienced the very same cuts
18 that the rest of the city experienced, and I want to
19 express my pleasure and thanks to the city council
20 and to you, Chair Rivera, for your own efforts, and
21 for all your colleagues who fought hard to restore,
22 you know, as much funding as you were able to claw
23 back this year.

24 Unfortunately, we still have a long way to go in
25 terms of proper funding for both the Library system

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2 and the many other services that our city is lacking,
3 especially in communities that are so hard hit - our
4 immigrant, our working class, our brown and Black
5 communities.

6 I also represent the Move of The Money in New
7 York City Coalition, and I want to talk about
8 something that was touched on today, and it's very
9 important, and that's the subject of banning books
10 and the relationship to civic engagement, as well as
11 the notion of banning ideas. Because book banning and
12 banning ideas are really on the same spectrum
13 somewhere. And we are living in a society, which
14 currently seems to have banned one topic. You could
15 say that I'm part of a marginalized group in a sense.
16 Not in the usual senses of identity, but in the sense
17 of there are a lot there are many of us out there. In
18 fact, our group Move the Money has collected well
19 over 3,000 signatures over the last couple of years
20 from our fellow New Yorkers who want to talk (TIMER
21 CHIMES) about the role of militarism in our society
22 and the fact that it so much of our budget is
23 distorted by the fact that our city contributes
24 literally tens of billions of dollars every year of
25 the federal government and our taxes that don't get

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2 back to us in the form of help for our libraries, to
3 help all the wonderful programs our libraries are
4 doing, and, of course, all the many other programs
5 that we need and want in this city.

6 And, again, Chair Rivera, I do want to thank you
7 for your efforts in in that respect as well.

8 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you.

9 THOMAS GOGAN: I guess my time is up. I could go
10 on and on, thank you.

11 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you. Thank you for your
12 testimony.

13 We are going to go back to Dalvin Bartley on
14 Zoom?

15 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

16 DALVIN BARTLEY: Thank you for this opportunity to
17 submit testimony on behalf of Generation Citizen at
18 the New York City Council Committee on Cultural
19 Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup
20 Relations.

21 My name is Dalvin Bartley, a Mid-Atlantic Senior
22 Program Manager at Generation Citizen. Via our
23 community-based civics curriculum, secondary school
24 students apply social studies learning to the real
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2 world by studying and advocating on an issue of
3 importance in their communities.

4 Today, I am excited to testify about our voter
5 education, engagement, and registration activities in
6 New York City during this important election year to
7 inform this hearing on how libraries empower New
8 Yorkers to become informed voters and engaged
9 citizens.

10 Libraries are vital in fostering engaged voters
11 by providing essential resources and programs. They
12 offer access to unbiased information about elections,
13 voter registration assistance, and educational
14 materials on civic engagement.

15 Libraries also serve as neutral spaces for
16 community discussions and debate, allowing citizens
17 to learn about different perspectives and making
18 informed decisions.

19 Additionally, we often partner with local
20 organizations to host voter registration drives and
21 events, ensuring that all members of the community
22 have the opportunity to participate in the democratic
23 process.

24 Libraries play a crucial role in empowering New
25 Yorkers to become informed voters and engaged

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2 citizens, and Generation Citizen partners with the
3 New York Public Library to build relationships with
4 our school partners and provide them with support
5 researching their focus issues.

6 Our programs and resources provide essential
7 tools for understanding complex issues, evaluating
8 candidates, and participating in the democratic
9 process.

10 Through our RISE (Registering, Informing,
11 Supporting and Empowering) Vote 2024 voter activation
12 campaign, Generation Citizen has created a toolkit
13 and resources for teachers in 11th and 12th grade
14 classrooms to inform, educate and register 17 and 18
15 year-old students who will be eligible to vote in
16 November 2024.

17 Generation Citizen hopes to continue partnering
18 with the (TIMER CHIMES) Council and the New York City
19 Public Library to continue bringing high quality
20 civics education to our City schools.

21 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you, your time has
22 expired.

23 DALVIN BARTLEY: Thank you for considering this
24 testimony.

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2 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you so much. I look
3 forward to reading your full testimony submitted to
4 the Council. And thank you for the RISE program and
5 the work that you do with young people.

6 If there is anyone else who wishes to testify, I
7 just want to remind you to fill out a slip with the
8 Sergeant at Arms. Okay, that includes the in person
9 portion of our public testimony, as well as the
10 portion of the remote testimony.

11 Seeing no one else who wishes to testify, this
12 hearing is adjourned. Thank you, everyone.

13 (GAVEL SOUND) (GAVELING OUT)

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C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date October 10, 2024