



## **Testimony to Senate Ed Committee, May 12th, 2025**

Chairman Brenner, and distinguished members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is Aimee Fifarek, I am the Director & Chief Executive Officer of the Public Library of Youngstown and Mahoning County.

Our Library has been serving Mahoning County since we were chartered in 1880. I am the latest in a long and distinguished line of directors, and I am immensely proud to carry on the tradition of exceptional library service.

We currently operate 14 branch libraries and a Bookmobile, offer Books by Mail to residents with mobility issues, and our Community Engagement Team brings books and programming to residential care facilities countywide.

In 2024 alone, we had 670,000 visits to our branches. That could fill YSU's Stambaugh Stadium over 30 times.

For 145 years, our staff have delivered in-demand programming and services to everyone in our region; to parents and children, veterans and seniors, small business owners and those looking for a fresh start.

Throughout the history of our organization, we have strived to meet our patrons, your constituents, where they are. Our first bookmobile delivered books to hospital patients, and our first book trailer in 1947, the largest in the country at the time, helped deliver books to a growing post-war population.

Public funds have given our library the ability to be innovative, creative, and enduring.

All these services and programs were all made possible because our elected leaders INVESTED in our community.

This tradition of innovation continues today.

We are working to better equip our younger patrons for a future where STEM skills and teamwork are the building blocks for a sustainable and growing workforce in the Mahoning Valley. Several of our branches host First Lego League sessions, where 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade students are introduced to the building blocks of robotics and coding in a fun, collaborative and educational setting.

In 2023, we opened a Sensory Room at our Boardman Branch, giving those in our community with sensory processing challenges a safe space with state of the art tools to use and enjoy library services. It is the only such service in our county that is free and open to everyone.

We are immensely proud of these innovative programs but they do not prevent us from fulfilling our core mission: supporting literacy.

We have always provided exceptional early literacy programming, and with the recent designation of our Michael Kusalaba Branch as a Family Place Library, the resources our staff have to support the needs of parents and families of young children continue to grow.





Mahoning County currently has 183 schools and daycare facilities, and our library is here to serve them all. Our staff not only host classroom visits in our branches, they also bring programming and educator resources into schools and daycares.

Our Summer Discovery program is set to kick off on May 27th. This annual celebration of the love of literacy was established to prevent the summer decline in students' academic skills, but it has become the bedrock of our literacy education services in the county. Last year we saw an 18% overall increase in participation, with a 31% increase in total registrations for children ages 6-11. I'm excited to see those participation numbers grow this summer.

All of these programs and services continue because of the Public Library Fund. This state has historically invested in our libraries because we know that investing in libraries is investing in the community, and our future.

The PLF IS the breath that gives life to Ohio's public libraries and makes us exceptional.

Drastically changing the funding model for our public libraries threatens that exceptionalism.

By continuing to protect the Public Library Fund as it stands in current law and providing a modest increase from 1.7% to 1.75% of the General Revenue Fund, you will safeguard our ability to evolve with our community and ensure that libraries will have the resources necessary to meet the needs of our families.

I urge this committee to uphold the long tradition of public support for libraries in Ohio, so that our patrons, your constituents, can continue to pursue a lifetime of literacy.

Thank you, I am happy to answer any questions.

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