Please accept my testimony on behalf of the Connecticut Library Association, Connecticut’s professional organization of over 1,000 librarians, library staff, friends, and trustees working together to improve library service in our state.

We are pleased that the Governor’s budget maintains funding for important statewide library services such as ConnectiCARD, ConnectiCAR, and the Connecticut Library Consortium. Each of these state-funded programs provides vital services to our member libraries and residents across the state and we thank you for recognizing their importance.

This year, as you consider and emphasize educational reform, we urge you to remember the key role played by Connecticut’s public libraries in ensuring that every Connecticut child starts kindergarten ready to learn to read. Our libraries make books freely and widely available to every Connecticut parent and child and we offer a wide array of early learning programs and services. We begin with early literacy story programs for infants, toddlers and their caregivers, provide preschool story hours and offer programs for child care providers and children in community programs such as Head Start. Our summer reading programs are the link to maintaining literacy skills throughout the summer break. Connecticut’s public libraries could play an even more important role with access to additional funding. Please remember us as you investigate and fund successful, cost-effective educational programs.

Libraries across the state are concerned about the reduction in funding for iCONN which provides all students, faculty and residents with online access to essential library and information resources. This reduction is coming at a time when library budgets are being stretched. Connecticut’s public libraries are among the most visited public libraries in the country. However, Connecticut ranks 36th in state support - ($.58/per capita vs. $2.94/per capita nationally) meaning that most library funding is local. Local funding has dropped over the past two years. Increased funding for iCONN could be devoted to making additional business resources available statewide to help small businesses and people searching for new job opportunities.

Libraries are also concerned about reductions in the State Library’s budget for books, newspapers, costly online legal resources and other specialized resources. An important role of the State Library is to provide valuable backup to local libraries in the area of law, public policy and history. This year the State Library has had to cope with a 64% holdback in addition to the $50,000 budget cut that the State Library offered to support CCARD and CCAR funding. We are pleased that the Governor’s budget restores nearly 50% of the holdback; however the budget proposal still significantly reduces the library materials budget.

Libraries are where our citizens turn in difficult times. We continue to see increased use as a result of the current economic situation. This year, we also saw significant increases during the two weather events
experienced in our state - Tropical Storm Irene and Winter Storm Alfred. Despite shrinking budgets and staff reductions, many of our libraries successfully met the challenge of providing critical information, warmth, electricity, running water, hot coffee, internet access and day-long entertainment to record numbers of citizens seeking shelter. Our ability to provide free access to information, technology and even the basic necessities are services that cannot and should not be undervalued in any of our communities.

In conclusion, the Connecticut Library Association thanks you for all you have done to support libraries; we know you are weighing difficult budget choices and urge you to offer us the opportunity to define the role libraries can play in education reform, business and job stimulus and emergency preparedness. We want to remind you that 22 million people visited Connecticut’s public libraries last year and borrowed over 31.4 million items. We did this with a total operating income that was $22 million less than the New York Yankees payroll! Libraries are community centers that enlighten, enrich, educate and entertain our citizens.

Submitted by:
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