

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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MONDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2024

Start: 1:22 P. M.

Recess: 3:45 P. M.

HELD AT: COMMITTEE ROOM - CITY HALL

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

A P P E A R A N C E S

Linda Johnson—President and CEO, Brooklyn Public Library

Tony Marx—President, The New York Public Library

Dennis Walcott—President and CEO, Queens Public Library

Dr. Jonathan Friedman—Director of Free Expression and Education Programs, PEN America

Emily Drabinski—President, American Library Association

Sophia Tkachenko—Student, representing Queens Public Library

Adelaide Sendlenski—Student, representing Brooklyn Public Library

Nana Adwoa Agyemang—Student, representing The New York Public Library

Flame—Storyteller, representing Drag Story Hour NYC

George Sarah Olken—Brooklyn Library Guild, Local 1482, District Council 37

Deborah Allman—The New York Public Library Guild, Local 1930, District Council 37

John Hyslop—Queens Library Guild, Local 1321, District Council 37

Lauren Comito—Executive Director, Urban Libraries Unite

Amaya Perez—Gays Against Groomers

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS
A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Christopher Leon Johnson—Self

Jane Tara Currie—Move the Money

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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2 SERGEANT WONG: Sound check for the Committee on
3 Cultural Affairs, today's date is February 26, 2024
4 being recorded by Danny Wong in the Committee Room.

5 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good afternoon, ladies and
6 gentlemen, and welcome to this 1:00 p.m. Cultural
7 Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup
8 Relations Committee meeting.

9 If you are here to testify, please sign up with
10 the Sergeant At Arms in the back. If you have any
11 written testimony that you would like to submit, you
12 can also submit it at testimony@council.nyc.gov, that
13 is testimony@council.nyc.gov.

14 From this moment on, at no point in time is
15 anybody allowed to approach the dais. If you have any
16 questions, just get the attention of one of us
17 Sergeant At Arms, and we will address your questions
18 to the best of our ability. Thank you so much.

19 Chair, we are ready to start.

20 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you very much.

21 (GAVELING IN)

22 Good afternoon, I am Council Member Carlina
23 Rivera, Chair of the Committee on Cultural Affairs,
24 Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations.

25

1
2 Welcome to our oversight hearing on New York City's
3 Libraries' Fight Against Banning Books.

4 It is an honor to chair a committee that is
5 dedicated to cultural inclusivity and a vibrant civic
6 society. Today we focus on ensuring that students
7 here in New York City and across the nation have
8 access to diverse educational materials that offer a
9 variety of perspectives.

10 As I am sure you all know, book banning has been
11 an issue our country has faced before - more often,
12 in some parts of the country than others. But,
13 according to many sources, book banning has been on
14 an alarming upswing over the past few years. The
15 American Library Association reports that in 2023
16 there were censorship attempts on almost 2,000 books
17 - the highest number in over two decades.

18 Book banning is a form of censorship that seeks
19 to limit access to certain books, especially in
20 schools and libraries, and reduces young people's
21 educational opportunities and exposure to both
22 complex ideas and the world around them.

23 Books that get banned the most address issues
24 related to race, gender identity, and sexuality; and
25

1
2 many were written by authors who themselves represent
3 those same life experiences.

4 In addition to limiting the range of books in
5 which students can see themselves and their peers
6 represented, this kind of censorship also removes
7 important historical and cultural context from the
8 school curriculum and communities.

9 Though we are fortunate to live in New York City
10 where we rarely encounter book banning efforts, we
11 have seen an increase in protests from the Proud Boys
12 and the Mothers of Liberty against books and story
13 times in our public spaces. And I am proud to say
14 Flame from Drag Story Hour is also here to testify.

15 We have an obligation to protect freedom of
16 speech and expression which is a core value of the
17 United States and New York City's libraries are doing
18 exactly that.

19 The Brooklyn Public Library, the New York Public
20 Library, and the Queens Public Library all have
21 essential programming in place to promote free access
22 to books for readers across the country.

23 I look forward to hearing testimony from the
24 Libraries about their extraordinary efforts, and to
25 discussing ways we can expand them - especially when

1
2 it is clear that LGBTQ+ content is being targeted, as
3 is literature highlighting the Black experience.

4 We want to mention the Queens Public Library's
5 African Americans and The Arts Journal, which
6 includes biographical information on Black icons
7 including some who have had their own work banned -
8 icons like Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison.

9 The Journal, which was designed like a daily
10 diary for recording the participants' own responses
11 to questions about Black artists of all genres, was
12 made available to patrons both in the libraries and
13 electronically as part of Black History Month this
14 year. For example, the February 22nd prompt was "How
15 do Black Artists create public art and engage with
16 local communities?" "How have they inspired you?"
17 It is clear that this programming is essential.

18 As we bring Black History Month to a close, it is
19 important to note that Black students are among those
20 who are most effected by book banning. Black authors
21 share stories of joy, stories of struggle, stories of
22 perseverance, and offer perspectives that can move
23 the country forward to achieve true liberation for
24 all. The ability to tell our stories no matter our
25 background helps us remember what our communities

1
2 have endured, what those on whose students were stand
3 were fighting for, and what we can dream to achieve.

4 Today as we look forward to learning more about
5 this timely issue, the Committee is honored to host a
6 panel of experts who will immediately follow the
7 testimony from the presidents of our three Library
8 systems. Those experts are Jason Reynolds co-author
9 of *All American Boys*, the New Yorker Times
10 bestselling banned book, which is spotlighted this
11 month in activities at the New York Public Library;
12 also Emily Drabinski, President of the American
13 Library Association and professor at Queens College;
14 and Jonathan Friedman, Director of Free Expression at
15 PEN America.

16 I want to thank our Library partners for putting
17 this impressive panel together. Panelists, you have
18 our sincerest thanks for being with us today.

19 Now I want to acknowledge my colleagues on the
20 Committee who are present: Council Member Ung,
21 Council Member Louis, Council Member Ossé, Council
22 Member Hanks, Council Member Carr, and we will be
23 joined by others along the way.

24 I also would like to thank Christina Yellamaty,
25 the Committee's Legislative Counsel; Regina Paul, the

1
2 Committee's Legislative Policy Analyst; and Sandra
3 Gray, the Committees' Financial Analyst.

4 I want to remind everyone that if you would like
5 to testify today, fill out a witness slip, which is
6 located on the desk of the Sergeant At Arms near the
7 entrance of this room. To maintain decorum, we are
8 trying to keep testimony to about three minutes,
9 whether you are in person or on Zoom. And I want ask
10 my colleagues to limit their questions to five
11 minutes if possible.

12 With that, I want to thank everyone for being
13 here, this is a nationally polarizing issue, but New
14 York City is leading the way, and they deserve the
15 City's support. With that, we will call our first
16 panel.

17 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Good afternoon, I'm Linda
18 Johnson, President and CEO of Brooklyn Public
19 Library. Thank you, Chair Rivera, Speaker Adams, and
20 committee members for the opportunity to testify.
21 Thank you as well to our Brooklyn Delegation and the
22 entire City Council for helping our branches remain
23 safe and inclusive spaces for all.

24 Censorship is one of the most important issues in
25 our country today, and I'm proud that in the fight

1
2 against censorship, New Yorkers are at the helm. Our
3 librarians, teens, teachers - many of whom are here
4 today - are leading a national movement to champion
5 intellectual freedom and end book bans. Together, we
6 are defending the right to read for all. Because
7 limiting access or providing one sided information is
8 not only antithetical to the mission of a library,
9 it's a threat to democracy itself.

10 Censorship in the United States is a case in
11 which the few aim to govern the many. Regardless of
12 party affiliation, most American oppose book bans.
13 But the number of book challenges continues to rise
14 to record-breaking levels, instilling fear in
15 teachers, authors, librarians, and young readers
16 alike. Educators worry they will be fired for their
17 lesson plans. Authors wonder if their titles will
18 even reach the shelves. Students begin to believe
19 that certain stories are not worthy of being told.
20 And our librarians are on the front lines of the
21 fight day and day out.

22 Reading books without fear of reprisal is as
23 fundamental a right as freedom of religion or speech
24 or press. Restricting access to books limits our
25

1
2 world - and hinders our ability to prepare the next
3 generation for the duties of citizenship.

4 Books, once portals into new worlds and
5 reflections of our lives, are now being locked away
6 with the freedom to read and think freely. Productive
7 classroom discussions lull to whisper, as lessons
8 become a rote, not expansive. And while the shelves
9 are being culled and libraries are being defunded,
10 national literacy rates and reading scores have
11 fallen.

12 What we are witnessing is much more than an
13 attack on an actual freedom; it is an attempt to
14 silence voices and erase perspectives - particularly
15 those from the LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC communities.

16 The increasingly coordinated and political effort
17 to ban books sends an alarming message to young
18 people - who are just discovering their own
19 identities - that minorities are dangerous, and
20 therefore books about them should be removed from the
21 shelves. Protagonist of color and discussions of
22 racism are deemed uncomfortable, while queer
23 characters and relationships are labeled as obscene
24 or pornographic. Instead of being taught great
25

1 literature, our youth are being taught old,
2 discriminatory tropes.
3

4 This past year, the scope of censorship has
5 expanded to include health related content. Books
6 being called challenged often depict teens struggling
7 with mental health, bullying, suicide, substance
8 abuse, grief, and puberty. But, these stories are no
9 more painful than the realities teens face, and
10 cordoning of these titles further limits further
11 isolates teens and strips them of the potential
12 refuge they might find and hearing stories so much
13 like their own.

14 We tasked our youth with writing the next chapter
15 of history. We hope they will learn from our errors
16 and pen are more promising future. But, how will they
17 write their future if they do not understand the
18 past? Why would they write if they are taught to fear
19 new ideas?

20 Here in New York City, we empower our youth to
21 dream, and we defend access to our books. Over a
22 year ago, Brooklyn Public library launched Books
23 Unbanned, a privately funded initiative that provides
24 teens all over the country with free and open access
25 to our entire digital collection. In addition to the

1
2 32,000 teens in New York with Brooklyn Public Library
3 cards, we've activated thousands of new E-cards to
4 young readers across the country who are interested
5 in everything from the latest new stories to graphic
6 novels and history books. They've borrowed over
7 200,000 items from our collection and told us over
8 and over that access both protected their privacy and
9 expanded their world. One participant said, "Books
10 Unbanned may save another kid's life, because reading
11 saved my life a few years ago when I was struggling
12 the most with my identity."

13 Books Unbanned was created to uphold the promise
14 of a public library - and indeed of democracy itself
15 - to provide free access to information from all
16 points of view to those who seek it to protect the
17 books we agree with, and those we do not, with equal
18 fervor and to support, uplift, and empower,
19 librarians, teachers, and students so that books,
20 rejected by a few would not be removed from the
21 shelves for all. I am proud of Brooklyn Public
22 Library's work and the recognition our libraries have
23 earned - from being named Library Journal's 2023
24 Librarians of the Year, to winning multiple Anthem
25 Awards, receiving the Freedom Forum's 2023 Free

1
2 Expression Award, and more. While we are delighted to
3 be leaders in providing this access, we are outraged
4 that the need exists.

5 In addition to Books Unbanned, we have several
6 programs that empower teens to take ownership of
7 their own reading and learning. For the past two
8 years, we've run a monthly Virtual Intellectual
9 Freedom Team, meetups where youth in New York and
10 across the country discuss everything from the latest
11 book challenges to their favorite authors and
12 characters. Our Freedom To Read Advocacy Institute
13 teaches students to become ambassadors for
14 intellectual freedom by fighting censorship through
15 civic engagement with their schools, libraries, and
16 communities. Along with our partners at PEN America,
17 we recently hosted our first in person institute
18 during the midwinter recess. Over 80 young New
19 Yorkers, aged 14 to 19, applied for the fellowship,
20 and 14 joined us for a four-day summit and training.
21 Participants received a stipend for that their time
22 at the institute and their continued work
23 on Advocacy projects throughout the year. Later
24 today, you'll hear from one of our tenacious teens.
25

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2 Brooklyn Public Library also hosts intellectual
3 freedom events across the borough including Banned
4 Book Club For Teens, Books Unbanned Storytime for
5 younger patrons, a teen anime club highlighting
6 banned graphic novels, panels and discussions with
7 authors and journalist, and our new podcast, Borrowed
8 and Banned, features stories from educators,
9 libraries, bookstore owners, teens, and advocates who
10 are fighting for the right to read. The series has
11 been downloaded over 40,000 times, made The
12 Atlantic's list of top 25 Podcasts of 2023, and was
13 recently nominated by the Ambies® for Best
14 Documentary Podcast.

15 At the beginning of the month, we hosted Young
16 Adult author, Ellen Hopkins, who writes about mental
17 health, drug abuse, and coming of age. Her novel
18 *Tricks* was the most banned book during the 2022-2023
19 school year. With help from Hopkins, we gave away
20 free copies of her books, because young adults should
21 have access to books like they want to read without
22 financial barriers.

23 Book bans disproportionately affect people of
24 color. They limit possibilities and erase stories of
25 joy and empowerment. At Brooklyn Public library, we

1 support and celebrate all of our readers. This month,
2 Black History Month, we have hosted events across the
3 Library system to commemorate this year's national
4 theme of "African-Americans and the Arts." We hosted
5 book discussions about pivotal Black authors, musical
6 celebrations with the Harlem Chamber Players, craft
7 hours for young patrons, movie nights, dance
8 workshops, and cooking classes, and several community
9 reflection hours for older adults of color to share
10 their experiences with one another. Last year, we
11 celebrated Black excellence through The Book of HOV,
12 and immersive exhibition produced by ROC Nation that
13 honored the life and work of Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter.
14 And all year long, at Macon Library African-Americans
15 Heritage Center and our Center for Brooklyn History,
16 we worked to collect and preserve artifacts related
17 to Black history - from books to manuscripts,
18 letters, diaries, photographs, maps, oral histories,
19 and more.

21 At Brooklyn Public library, we are proud to
22 highlight a diversity of stories and provide our
23 patrons access to books with Black narrators and
24 queer protagonists, books that uplift stories from
25 marginalized identities. From our national Books

1
2 Unbanned Initiative to local story times, Brooklyn
3 Public Library is working not only to protect
4 intellectual freedom and ensure access to
5 information, but also to encourage independent
6 thought and foster the empathy and community that our
7 city needs during these challenging times. Thank you
8 very much.

9 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you.

10 PRESIDENT MARX: Thank you, Madam Chair, members
11 of the Council, and colleagues, your support on this
12 issue and on everything around Libraries is so
13 essential, and we are so grateful.

14 I am Tony Marx, I am the President of New York
15 Public Library. It is my privilege to be here today
16 to join my wonderful colleagues. Linda has already
17 been so eloquent. I have submitted a written
18 testimony, I will summarize, if that's alright, Madam
19 Chair.

20 In recent years, as you yourself said, Madam
21 Chair, we have seen book bans and challenges rise to
22 record levels. It is incredible, unthinkable that we
23 are grappling with this issue in the United States in
24 2024. And yet, here we are.

1
2 As we all know public libraries have increasing
3 been targeted, and we are so troubled, as you are, by
4 these trends. Simply put, these efforts to restrict
5 access to books, eliminate choice to whole
6 communities, and take away their freedoms to learn
7 and grow as they wish - the idea that people under a
8 banner of freedom and liberty are arguing for the
9 reverse of that says terrifying things about where
10 this country and its politics and its culture wars
11 have come to.

12 The basic Library mission is part of the founding
13 principles of this country that ensure freedom and
14 liberty, and that is what we are here to defend, and
15 what we do in our daily work. We need to make sure
16 that a wide range of information and viewpoints are
17 available to all - it is bedrock to democracy.

18 One of the most alarming aspects, as Linda has
19 already said so eloquently, is how much these bans
20 are targeting those folks who can least be targeted,
21 who are marginalized already, particularly LGBTQ+
22 Americans and people of colors. In the larger
23 context, these efforts explicitly ban or even
24 criminalize the teaching of such topics as race,
25 gender and identities of LGBTQIA+ people. They are

1 targeted at eliminating these perspectives, these
2 voices, and we know from history, and I say this is a
3 son of descendants of German Jews, who fled Nazi
4 Germany, and someone who worked and lived in South
5 Africa in the 1980's, that those kinds of efforts
6 follow shortly with efforts to eliminate these people
7 fully. We cannot see this proceed, and we are here to
8 fight against it. We need to ensure that these folks
9 - ourselves - see ourselves, see themselves in our
10 country's literature and culture, and we all need to
11 be able to read these books so that we can learn
12 about others and about ourselves, and develop the
13 empathy that is, again, core to democracy. We have to
14 make sure that the effort... that we do not deprive
15 every one of the opportunity to learn and empathize.
16 This goes against everything that Libraries stand
17 for.
18

19 In October 2023 during Banned Books Week, we
20 called books for all and launched a national
21 initiative where we provide regular banned book clubs
22 and a writing contest, and offer copies online and
23 in print, but online to anyone in the country,
24 especially those in the states that I've seen the
25 lead of book banning.

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2 We offer bi-monthly access through the book clubs
3 to titles that have included Jason Reynolds, who we
4 will hear from a shortly, and Brendan Kiely, in their
5 book *All American Boys*. We are continuing with this,
6 again, bi-monthly, because we need to ensure the
7 freedom to read, to learn, and to empathize.

8 In addition to the book clubs, we are having our
9 prize offering competition for essays. The finalist
10 of which... the winner of which will be published in
11 Teen Vogue, and so many others in our own NYPL's Teen
12 Voice Magazine.

13 The Books for All Campaign provides downloadable,
14 not only the books, but also toolkits that provide
15 flyers, images, hashtags, campaign slogans,
16 everything that everyone needs across the country to
17 mobilize against these book bans were proud to have
18 partnered with the American Library Association - and
19 you'll hear from them shortly - to make sure that
20 this is an effort not just for New Yorkers, so that
21 we can join in the efforts, but for all Americans.

22 We've also partnered with the 826 National, a
23 national writing organization, to spread the word
24 about our writing contest. All of these efforts are
25 part of a long-standing tradition that ensure that

1
2 the titles and perspectives of marginalized
3 communities of all communities are available.

4 When the Black Lives Matter protests exploded in
5 the summer of 2020, we expanded our digital
6 collections on Black Heritage, drawing on the great
7 collections of the Schomburg in Harlem. We saw
8 within just weeks - that reading list had 35,000
9 checkouts.

10 In addition, we've always observed Pride, Women's
11 History, and Black History Month. Our commitments to
12 the freedom to read are ongoing - proudly displayed
13 on banners on our iconic building at 42nd and 5th,
14 proclaiming the stand against book banning.

15 While we look forward to continuing our essential
16 work in this campaign, the City's libraries cannot
17 escape - at the same time - the impact of record high
18 potential cuts - of the fiscal year. We see cuts in
19 the neighborhood of \$58. (INAUDIBLE) million - a
20 devastating level of cuts if implemented. Already the
21 5% midyear PEG to Library's current budgets,
22 amounting to \$23.6 million, have seen us forced to
23 reduce library programs and materials, the
24 elimination of Sunday services at all the branches
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1
2 that were offering it; the \$58 (INAUDIBLE) million
3 cuts, we need to see those restored for FY25.

4 With the current cuts Library collections
5 already, NYPL will purchase 20,000 fewer e-books,
6 6,000 fewer downloadable audiobooks, 40,000 fewer
7 books in English, and 6,000 fewer World Language
8 books - so essential to our immigrant communities,
9 and our asylum seekers - to all the descendants of
10 immigrants, as almost all of us are here in New York.

11 I want to close my testimony with a popular
12 refrain, Libraries are for everyone. They are the
13 most visited, the most trusted, the most essential
14 civic institution in this town and throughout this
15 country. And that means we need to stand up, as we
16 are, as you are, at this moment of challenge. We are
17 grateful to the Council for its partnership over
18 these years. We thank you, again, for the opportunity
19 to testify, and look forward to ongoing discussions,
20 and even more importantly, our ongoing work.

21 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you.

22 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Chair Rivera, it is a pleasure
23 to see you, and congratulations on your appointment.
24 Council Member Ossé, thank you for your leadership as
25 well; it is a pleasure to see Council Member Ung

1
2 here; we talked and participated in our Lunar New
3 Year Parades together, it is always a pleasure...
4 and other members of the Council.

5 My name is Dennis Walcott, and I have the honor
6 of being the President of the Queens Public Library.
7 I want to do a summary of the summary, quite frankly
8 (LAUGHTER), since you have already heard Linda and
9 Tony. And I really do applaud both the Brooklyn
10 Public Library and the New York Public Library for
11 all of their outstanding work around this important
12 topic.

13 My summary of the summary, especially since you
14 have my testimony, will just touch on a couple of
15 things, because like my fellow colleagues and Library
16 Systems, we participated Banned Book Week, and also
17 stood with the Mayor, as far as denouncing what has
18 taken place throughout the country, and we will
19 continue to do that.

20 I just want to share a couple of things with you,
21 because I vividly remember standing outside of
22 Jackson Heights Library, with helicopters flying
23 overhead, with police barricades erected in the
24 street, with me in the middle of the street between
25 people pro-library and what we were doing inside, and

1
2 those who were opposed to what was going on inside
3 our Jackson Library. And I never ever want to see a
4 repeat of that again - in New York City or throughout
5 the country - people trying to stop the freedom of
6 expression. Plain and simple. Trying to stop the
7 quiet and the beauty of what was taking place in the
8 library. And as a result of Linda, Tony, Brooklyn and
9 New York Public Library, and what we are doing at the
10 Queens Public Library, our goal is working with you
11 to make sure we, one, we raise this issue, but, two,
12 making sure we defeat the issue - not just here, but
13 as Linda is doing, and others are doing throughout
14 the country as well.

15 One of the things that we're doing at Queens is
16 making sure, one, we articulate the issue, but also
17 we do a lot around publicizing and putting policies
18 in place.

19 Just recently, our board of directors, our board
20 of trustees, really updated our policy around banned
21 books and will be making sure that it's widely
22 distributed, making sure people have a clear
23 understanding of what's going on.

24 We've held forums, we've held book talks. Just
25 recently, we had a great book talk at our South

1
2 Jamaica Library to talk about the issues that are
3 important to our communities.

4 In addition to that, we have had Literary
5 Thursdays throughout the system- talking about the
6 issues of importance, but also making sure we expose
7 our communities to a wide array of books that are
8 available to them, so that way there are all books
9 for all people. We have that ability to do that.

10 System wide, we have more than 5.6 million books
11 and materials representing over 30 languages
12 throughout the Queens Public Library System.

13 This past fiscal year, we circulated 7.7 million
14 physical and digital materials and nearly... which
15 represents a 15% increase.

16 Last month, the Library advised, as I indicated,
17 our Collection Development Policy to reinforce our
18 opposition to censorship attempts and our goal to
19 offer the widest diversity of views and expressions.

20 The policy also made clear that the Library's
21 decision to acquire and remove materials from our
22 collections will not be determined by partisan or
23 doctrinal points of view. We believe in making sure
24 books are available for all.

1 QPL, the Queens Public Library, is a home to
2 research collections - like my colleagues' as well -
3 that uplift and amplify the voices that have been
4 historically suppressed. Add on Langston Hughes
5 Community Library and Cultural Center, our Black
6 Heritage reference collection is a testament to the
7 richness and the depth of Black History - covering a
8 wide range of subjects including African history,
9 slavery, critical race theory, African-American art,
10 and much, much more. This collection is one of the
11 largest circulating collections of materials of the
12 Black experience in New York State and throughout the
13 country - writings by prominent figures such as
14 Malcom X, Barack Obama. Our Central Library's Carter
15 G. Woodson Reference Collection has more than 4,000
16 reference materials covering various aspects of
17 African-American culture and life - and papers on the
18 most influential Black leaders including Martin
19 Luther King, Jr., Booker T. Washington, and others.

21 As you indicated in your introduction, we have
22 our journal collection that really captures Black
23 History Month - and people noting the importance of
24 every day, throughout the month, and beyond, and we
25 are very proud of that as well.

1
2 As many of the amazing programs and book
3 discussions that we've had, as I indicated at our
4 South Jamaica Library, we just had the acclaimed
5 author, Charmaine Wilkinson, on her first novel *Black*
6 *Cake*, uh, which is now an Oprah Winfrey produced
7 series of the same name on Hulu. The library was
8 jampacked - jampacked with people who stayed, and the
9 author who stayed for over four hours really
10 participating with the audience.

11 We are here to work with you, Chair, and the
12 members of the Council, to make sure that we are
13 articulate this issue, and we make sure that we're
14 out front and talking about how we really will focus
15 on, addressing the issue - not just in New York City,
16 but throughout the country as well.

17 I was distracted by my council member who walked in,
18 so I would be remiss and not be able to return home
19 if I didn't say hello to Council Member Nantasha
20 Williams. It's a pleasure to see you, and I'll see
21 you at the Cambria Heights Library at some time in
22 the near future.

23 So as I close, I just want to say again, thank
24 you for your leadership, Chair. Thank you for your
25 leadership, members of the Council, but most

1
2 importantly, we at the Queens Public Library, along
3 with Brooklyn, and New York, are here for you to make
4 sure we serve the public at large. Thank you.

5 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you! I appreciate so
6 much of what you said. I think we're all so very
7 troubled at the direction that this this fight is
8 going. And for those... as mentioned, we're very
9 fortunate to live here in New York City, but do not
10 think that this is too far from our doorstep. It's
11 not just a town an hour north of Albany seeing their
12 library closed when they try to bring in Drag Story
13 Hour. It's here in Jackson Heights. It's bomb threats
14 to libraries in Brooklyn. It's all very, very
15 serious.

16 So, you've heard a little bit about what our
17 systems are doing. So, I just want to ask the
18 panel... I also want to mention that we've been
19 joined by Council Members Hudson, Hanif, and
20 Williams... Do you believe that New Yorkers are
21 sufficiently aware of the threat that stems from
22 banning books, considering that books are not being
23 banned in the City's public libraries?

24 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: I will take that, thank you,
25 for the question.

1
2 I think that inattention is to some extent
3 responsible for what's going on. When you live in New
4 York City, you feel perhaps that it's not our
5 problem. When we started the Books Unbanned program,
6 really the thought was to be sure that students could
7 get the material they wanted that they could no
8 longer find on the shelves of their school or their
9 public libraries. And certainly the program has
10 achieved that, but we have also learned in the
11 process that shining a light on the issue is equally
12 important - that not everybody, of course, runs an
13 institution or a library that can make a sweeping
14 gesture to emphasize the problem and get people
15 talking about it. But, everybody can do something,
16 even if it's a small gesture. So, we are encouraging
17 everybody to participate in whatever way they can to
18 make sure that this issue is at the forefront and
19 that people are being vocal about it. We don't
20 believe - and maybe this is me and my rose-colored
21 glasses, but I do not believe that the majority of
22 Americans think that censorship is a good thing. But,
23 I do think that lack of attention is in part to blame
24 for this.

1
2 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: And also if I may pick up on
3 the subtle forms of censorship as well, because what
4 we experience, and I imagine my colleagues experience
5 as well, even though you may not have people saying,
6 "ban this book", when they come into a library, and
7 they may not be happy with the book, all of a sudden
8 the placement of the book changes as well - so, where
9 you had it placed is no longer there. And we've
10 experienced that, where people actually physically
11 remove a book and try to either put it on the side or
12 do something with it, so it's not visible. We have
13 signage that deals with banned books to make sure
14 people are aware about the issue itself, and people
15 have literally gone and picked up the signs and have
16 torn them up. And those types of issues we face still
17 in New York City area. And we are very conscious of
18 that, so I agree that it may not be as prevalent, but
19 at the same time, there all the subtle - and
20 sometimes not so subtle forms - like helicopters
21 flying overhead and full police details in the
22 street, making sure that people are protected and
23 able to go into the library to participate in a
24 program.

1
2 PRESIDENT MARX: Madam Chair, I'll just add, I
3 think we've learned from history, when you feel safe,
4 because you live in a more open part of a country, or
5 in this great city, that can lead you down a path
6 that allows this kind of inexplicable, unacceptable
7 behavior to gain strength before you even realize it.
8 It's why we are here front and center, because we've
9 seen this in history. Yes, book banning isn't
10 happening in New York City - thank goodness. Let's
11 keep it that way. I remember when the mayor joined us
12 for an event on book banning, he was looking at the
13 books that were banned and just shaking his head in
14 disbelief at these classics - Toni Morrison banned?
15 It's just unthinkable. But, these issues, the culture
16 wars, come to us more directly - in particular the
17 Drag Story Hours that we proudly offer, not huge
18 numbers, I wish it were more - 34 of those last year
19 out of 8,500 book events for youngsters that brought
20 orchestrated protest that almost made it impossible,
21 used by these folks, claiming liberty under a banner
22 of freedom, to stop exactly that. We are resisting.
23 We are continuing, and we all do that together.

24 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Hear, hear. When books are
25 banned in other parts of the country, does it change

1
2 how New Yorkers is able to access books at all -
3 Whether it is digital copies or physical copies?

4 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Not yet.

5 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Have you faced pressure
6 locally to ban books or remove certain books from
7 your bookshelves?

8 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: In Brooklyn we have not, and
9 in fact, uh, on the rare occasion in Brooklyn when a
10 book is challenged and there is a process, typically
11 it is a 180 degree challenge from the ones that we
12 are talking about today - it's a concern over a book
13 maybe from the 1950's or the middle of the century
14 that depicts people of color in a way that is no
15 longer considered acceptable. And, so it becomes a
16 question about whether or not we are being racist
17 ourselves unwittingly - not whether we are proving
18 materials that are too progressive.

19 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: And I think one of the things
20 that we face is the request, as Tony indicated in his
21 testimony, to buy more books. And, I mean, our goal
22 is to have as many books - as diverse a group of
23 books as available for people to choose from.

24 And, then, we have our policies in place where if
25 someone wants to challenge a book, they have the

1
2 right to do that. But, we have received very few
3 challenges, uh, and we have not banned any books at
4 all.

5 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I thought think that it
6 interesting that even places like Florida, school
7 districts are revisiting their own policies being too
8 liberal as removing some of the titles from their
9 shelves, and who can make these recommendations. So,
10 clearly, it has gotten out of hand even in places
11 where it started.

12 Do you believe that New Yorkers are generally
13 aware of the work you all have done in Libraries to
14 fight book banning nationwide? I mean, you all
15 touched... you just hit the surface of the
16 initiatives and the programs that you're running, but
17 do you think New Yorkers are aware?

18 PRESIDENT MARX: I think there is a growing
19 awareness, uh, the publicity of this hearing, of your
20 work of drawing the attention of the city and the
21 country to our efforts, and to the efforts of banning
22 that we are resisting. It is essential. There is
23 always more work to do, sadly.

24
25

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2 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Any strategies you feel have
3 been more effective than anything... That we can help
4 to spread the word?

5 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: I think the raising of the
6 issue, the open discussion around the issue, the more
7 we can really indicate the types of books that other
8 countries or other cities and locals want to ban. It
9 is very helpful to make people think and say,
10 "Really? This is going on?" And, as a result of that,
11 I think it just brings added attention to the
12 discussion. But, any type of dialogue that we can
13 have - and I think any type of programs, like the
14 excellent programs that Brooklyn and New York are
15 doing, and the things that we are doing, I think
16 makes it more aware... makes people more aware of
17 what's happening outside of New York City.

18 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And I want to ,you know, you
19 all mentioned your work with young people
20 specifically, which I think is probably at the core
21 here of our discussion, and how can we expect our
22 young people and students to write or create, when
23 they are being taught to fear? I thought that was a
24 very powerful statement. You all have done a lot of
25 work with teens in your anti-banning initiatives, and

1
2 you have also done a lot of work more focused on
3 supporting teens generally with your teen centers and
4 more. Why are teens especially important in your
5 anti-banning efforts?

6 PRESIDENT MARX: Teens and their literature are
7 being targeted by trying to close voices. That means
8 we have to target and resist and make those options
9 more available. Teens are at a moment of growth and a
10 vulnerability. They need to be able to see
11 themselves. They need to learn about each other. I'll
12 put it simply, as an author said at a panel on this
13 topic that I think we co-hosted with PEN America and
14 The Atlantic, teens are at this vulnerable place, and
15 we need to make sure that their effort... that they
16 are not foreclosed from learning. The fact that books
17 are being banned says something about those trying to
18 ban them seeing how powerful books are. Those folks
19 are scared of that power and of teens, others and
20 their own, learning and expanding their world, and
21 that is the business we are in to ensure.

22 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: One of the beauties of
23 libraries, and Linda and Tony talked about this, and
24 we all know this, is that we are truly the only open
25 democratic institution in the world where people can

1
2 walk in the door, we don't ask you your background,
3 we don't ask you for any identification, we don't ask
4 you for anything. And with teenagers, we want
5 teenagers to come in, come in, come in. We want to
6 have material available for them to take a look at -
7 too read, to discuss - to debate! - to know how to
8 engage. And having a variety of types of books allows
9 that type of development and energy, and intellectual
10 discussion to take place. And that's who we are. And
11 that's what we have done. And that is what we
12 continue to do as a Library System. We want more
13 people to have library cards here in New York City,
14 throughout the country, we want them to use those
15 cards - take advantage of whether it's e-books, or
16 those books that are on the shelves, and having that
17 diversity, to us, is extremely important as far as
18 how we increase the social awareness and involvement,
19 the intellectual development of our teenagers as far
20 as people who are different - people who have
21 different ideas and thought processes. That is what
22 we are about as a library.

23 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: I would just add that, it is
24 not an accident that teens are ,you know, being
25 targeted. It is of course because they're at the most

1
2 impressionable moments of their lives, and they are
3 at a time when they are searching to make sense of
4 their own identity, their own place in the world.
5 Long before this started, the three library systems
6 were very focused on the notion of doing more with
7 teenagers, because the sort of traditional cycle of
8 library usage has always been to kind of loose teens
9 when they are exciting, maybe not so healthy, things
10 out on the streets that are more interesting than
11 coming to your local library. And, so, over the past
12 five years, I would say that we have really stepped
13 this up with technology and sort of trying to meet
14 teens in places that they find engaging - recording
15 studios, music, gaming - as a way to learn more about
16 technology. And all of these things were in place
17 when these book bans really started to proliferate.
18 And the moment is important, because teens have been
19 put at the center of the battle - because these folks
20 who are so fearful of what might be contained in
21 these books, uh, and fearful of what understanding
22 these stories can mean to this country - they are in
23 fact putting teens at risk.

24 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: So, tomorrow, we at the Queens
25 Public Library we will be celebrating our Sweet 16

1
2 Party for our Far Rockaway Teen Library. It has been
3 in existence for 16 years. And it is the beauty of
4 having teenagers being able to go to their own
5 library, not just their own program, but their own
6 library, to feel safe, to feel the comfort of being
7 able to express themselves, and trying to make sure
8 that others understand how they are respecting
9 themselves, and respecting that ability for them to
10 be teenagers. And that is what we are about with the
11 Teen Centers, with what the mayor did with the
12 investment in teen centers and expanding our capacity
13 to do that. Focusing on teenagers to us is really so
14 key as far as the development of our future society
15 and what it means. And I think all of us, in a
16 variety of different ways, really thrive on that,
17 because book banning is, as Tony and Linda indicated,
18 really is going to the heart of cutting off that
19 lifeline, cutting out that lifeline from our
20 teenagers.

21 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I mean, I will just say of
22 my own personal experience of being a teenager, the
23 first time I read the *House on Mango Street*, the
24 first time I read *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Bluest Eye*,
25 *Song of Solomon*, these were all life changing

1
2 experiences. And I actually got them from my library
3 ,you know, (INAUDIBLE) or...

4 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: We had Sandra Cisneros, I
5 think just a week or two ago, come to the library for
6 the...

7 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Incredible...

8 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: The 40th anniversary of the
9 publication of *The House on Mango Street*, and the
10 crowds were as fierce and dense as they were back
11 when the book came out. I think there was a line that
12 took two hours for her to sign all the copies that
13 people wanted signed. So, it is... The work is
14 happening.

15 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Amazing. Alright, well, I am
16 just going to... Before I turn it over to my
17 colleagues, because I see they have questions, of
18 course, I want to ask the multimillion dollar
19 question, how do you anticipate that City budget
20 cuts, in the immediate future, will effect your
21 ability to continue this fight? What will the public
22 be losing on this front as a result of any cuts?

23 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: This may sound somewhat
24 inflamed, but I believe that by cutting the budget we
25 are doing to New Yorkers exactly what some of these

1 right-wing groups are doing to communities across the
2 country. It's not for the same reason; we're not
3 being targeted for the material that we're providing,
4 but by forcing us to be in a position where we need
5 to reduce the number of books that we are able to buy
6 in a given year, we essentially are depriving teens,
7 and everybody else, of the material that they need to
8 grow and to learn.

10 PRESIDENT MARX: Let me just add, if the libraries
11 are closed than having the books in the library
12 available doesn't work. All the education programs
13 that we have worked with you and with the
14 administration to build, in record numbers, that meet
15 so many needs - we can't offer those programs if the
16 libraries are closed. Even if they're closed because
17 of the lack of capital investments, so that we have
18 to close them for repairs. We are so proud, as Linda
19 and Dennis have talked about, of our teen centers, so
20 that we can really welcome the teens to their own
21 spaces in the things that they are looking for, and
22 welcome them into our other programs, and to more
23 reading. We've had plans where close to 20 of those
24 opened in our most needy neighborhoods. We are now
25 seeing the need to not open those because of the

1
2 budget cuts - or to have them closed. That is tragic
3 for everyone involved.

4 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: So, already, we suffering as a
5 result of the cuts. I mean, we're not open on Sunday.
6 There's only one, maybe two, but one that's open on
7 Sunday. I take a look at Flushing Library, which has
8 tremendous volume of people going into the library -
9 those people are not going in on Sunday, because the
10 library is not open on Sunday. They don't have access
11 to the books, the new teen center that we put in
12 place there... or the upgraded teen center that we
13 put there, not available at all. So, that is one
14 direct impact already with us as a result of the
15 November PEG, that is still in effect, that will
16 carry over to the next fiscal year. We have already
17 cut back on our collections already. We had to absorb
18 a cut and deal with the collections, and that means
19 fewer books that we are buying, fewer e-books that
20 are available - not just with teenagers, but for the
21 public at large. And, then when you combine the three
22 of us and the resources that are taken away as a
23 result of the cuts and the inability of having hours
24 open on books and materials available - or programs,
25 because we are talking about banned books, but it

1
2 also really impacted banned programs, programs that
3 are not available as a result of the Library doors
4 not being open anymore at a particular time. And with
5 the cuts carrying forward, that will happen even more
6 so. And that impacts not just the teenagers but the
7 adults; the most vulnerable, our immigrant
8 population. And we have to address that, and the only
9 way to address that is the restoration of money,
10 plain and simple. It money that is worthwhile, long
11 term investment in the future of New York City, plain
12 and simple. And is not about a fight here, a fight
13 there, it is really looking at the vision of New York
14 City. What does it mean for the population at large?
15 I know both with Linda and Tony, with the Brooklyn
16 system, the New York system definitely, with the
17 Queens system, we see the new immigrants coming
18 through our door on a regular basis. They are lining
19 up in front of Central and our other libraries before
20 we open. Those doors will not be able to open as
21 frequently. So, even if we keep the days of the weeks
22 the same, we may have to shrink hours as a result of
23 the budget cuts. And each of us may handle it
24 differently, but still it means fewer hours, fewer
25 days available for the people most in need and the

1
2 people who want to take advantage of the books, the
3 materials, programs, and services that we provide.

4 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you. Well, with that, I
5 will turn it over to my colleagues, Council Member
6 Ossé, Council Member Hudson, Council Member Hanif,
7 and then Council Member Williams.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER OSSÉ: Good afternoon, uhm, yeah, I
9 mean this topic hits close to home and our Brower
10 branch, there were a couple protest against Drag
11 Queen Story Hour, uh, related to the topics that
12 we're discussing today. You know, we've heard about
13 many of the programs that you provide and pushing
14 back against the relative fascism that we're seeing
15 in this country, but what worth are those programs if
16 the funding for those programs exist, right? So, I
17 want to ask for each of the three systems, how much
18 does it relatively cost to run and operate the
19 programs that you were operating in response to the
20 book bans that we are seeing in this country?

21 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: The work that we're doing on
22 Books Unbanned, which is providing service to people
23 across the country, is being 100% with private money.
24 And we're doing it very deliberately, because we
25 understand that we're providing service outside of

1
2 New York City, and so it's not effecting the city
3 budget at all.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER OSSÉ: Okay.

5 PRESIDENT MARX: Can I just add that that is true;
6 all private funds including anonymous ones, people
7 rallying to us to help us raise the national profile
8 around this issue. In addition, we've seen publishers
9 step up and give us books for free to lend
10 electronically, to anyone in the country, books that
11 have been banned that we can offer online when
12 localities have blocked them physically.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER OSSÉ: And how will the proposed...
14 and I know you touched on the last answer, but the
15 \$20.3 million in cuts in the Fiscal Year 2025 Budget
16 impacts the three systems of abilities, uh, not
17 necessarily to implement these programs, but just to
18 rehash in terms of the Sunday closures and operating
19 hours, if these cut to come in to fruition in the
20 next fiscal year, how will that impact these programs
21 as well as future hours for the three systems?

22 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: As has been said, the issue
23 with Libraries is there are very few levers for us to
24 pull when we have a budget cut. There are materials
25 and there's wages in personnel, and that translates

1
2 to the number of hours that were able to be open. And
3 we tend to go to the book budget, because it doesn't
4 cost anybody their jobs, and we also are able to keep
5 doors open longer. But, you know, we're right now at
6 that sort of teetering point with the cut that we
7 sustained in the fall where any additional cut will
8 require us to close doors.

9 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Plus, we have not talked about
10 wage increases, the minimum wage requirements that we
11 all face as far as that price going up. So, even with
12 full restoration, it is still behind where we were,
13 because we are factoring in those inflationary
14 factors that are part of it. And just to reinforce
15 the point, because it's so important for people to
16 understand this, that our basic core are based on the
17 great librarians and staff that we have in place -
18 and the materials we provide - and now also the
19 programs. When we take a look, probably at all of our
20 census data, you will see significant increases in
21 our programs services, because people rely on what we
22 do day, evening, weekend. And I always tell one just
23 quick story, when I went out to our Peninsula Library
24 on a Saturday a couple of months ago, and I was
25 shocked at the number of people - not that I just saw

1
2 there, but who were there for adult learning
3 services. And folks who are the new migrants and just
4 immigrants overall who are here and have been
5 basically housed out in the Rockaways and they're
6 coming to Peninsula. I mean, it's those types of
7 services that the money from the City helps us
8 provide the core basic foundation for peoples'
9 livelihood. And that's what people I think don't
10 understand a lot, that we're not fat at all - we're
11 lean and providing key services. And then the other
12 piece, just to pick up on the point if I may, is
13 that when the City calls us, we respond. We respond
14 just like that (snaps), and there's no if and or buts
15 about it. Whether it was around variants and the
16 changing variants, whether it's the inoculations,
17 whatever the case may be... (CROSS-TALK)

18 COUNCIL MEMBER OSSÉ: IDNYC...

19 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: IDNYC... My always true story
20 to talk about how we respond, it was one hot fourth
21 of July, and the City said, "We need cooling centers
22 open," and we turned around just like that and opened
23 up our cooling centers. And, again, going back to
24 Flushing, without any real prior notification, we had
25 3,000 people who came through our door, that fourth

1
2 of July, who got cooling services as a result of City
3 calling us. This who we are as the library system. We
4 are there to serve that need. (TIMER CHIMES)

5 PRESIDENT MARX: Can I just say that those are
6 life changing efforts and lifesaving efforts. And I
7 also want to shoutout to you, Council Member Ossé,
8 for your leadership, ongoing leadership, on this
9 subject for us.

10 I will add more piece that we've all talked
11 about, and we have more of a chance to talk about in
12 our March Budget Hearing - when we see these budget
13 cuts, in addition to closing hours and material, we
14 have less expendable monies for capital emergency
15 supplies, so that when the air-conditioning or heat
16 goes out, we have to close.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER OSSÉ: Sure.

18 PRESIDENT MARX: And we are currently facing an
19 unprecedented cut in the ongoing long-term
20 investments in our capital. If we don't have those
21 funds, it isn't just a matter of providing great and
22 inspiring spaces - which we need to - it's opening
23 the spaces, even though we have renovated to date and
24 are eager to open.

1
2 COUNCIL MEMBER OSSÉ: I am so sorry, just one more
3 question, I think you... It was a perfect segue from
4 both presidents, but I know the \$20.3 million
5 restoration is definitely an ask, and I know that
6 you're working on... with the overall ask of the
7 Council and pushing for refunding the Libraries, but
8 with wage increases and what not, what's a better
9 idea, in terms of what the Council should be pushing
10 for, in terms of a complete restoration and the
11 additional balance, and making sure that our
12 libraries are providing to all of our communities and
13 the programs that that you're speaking about today?

14 PRESIDENT MARX: I would just say we need the
15 full restoration. And it is... You know, it's tragic
16 that we are... and the baseline funding from the City
17 Council, thank you very much. And the fact that we're
18 here trying to get back to where we were at a moment
19 when, as you mentioned, costs have gone up on all
20 fronts; we should be talking about increases and not
21 just restorations to Library. We look forward to that
22 conversation with the councilman.

23 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: The challenge these midyear
24 PEGs have caused, is that it diverts the conversation
25 away from what we should be talking about, which is

1
2 how much our budget should increase, given the cost
3 of doing business, and frankly the work that we could
4 be doing if we were better funded to a point where we
5 are just looking for scraps to get back to where we
6 were.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER OSSÉ: Thank you, Madam, and
8 Misters Presidents.

9 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you. Council Member
10 Hudson?

11 COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: Thank you so much, and
12 thank you all for your testimony.

13 While we know, of course, that everyone benefits
14 from having access to all types of books, no matter
15 who they're written by or the specific communities,
16 they may know more specifically be serving or
17 speaking to, I am curious just for from a data
18 perspective, if you have disaggregated data in terms
19 of your visitors regarding, you know, race,
20 ethnicity, LGBTQ, anything like that that you might
21 collect? I know the LGBTQ stuff is a little more...

22 (CROSS-TALK)

23 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Yeah, we actually are pretty
24 careful not to retain anything about our patrons,
25 other than their names and addresses. We don't keep

1
2 track of what people are reading. But I do appreciate
3 the groundwork that you put into the question, which
4 is we're not just about telling people they should
5 read books that are being banned...

6 COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: Right...

7 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: that's really not the point.
8 The point is really that people have the freedom to
9 read whatever they want to read.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: Absolutely.

11 PRESIDENT MARX: I'd like to just add, as Linda
12 noted, we may be the last institution standing that
13 defends people's privacy. And that means we are
14 careful to not have information which we would
15 otherwise like to have.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: Yes.

17 PRESIDENT MARX: The simple fact is, we are the
18 institutions that the folks most needing of help, in
19 the poorest neighborhoods of New York, rely on more
20 than any, and they often don't have any alternatives.
21 So, those numbers speak for themselves. We're sorry -
22 sort of (LAUGHTER) - that we don't have more
23 aggregated data, though we keep track of ,you know,
24 sort of totals, so that we can make sure that we're
25 targeting those that needed more.

1
2 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: And I just want to add one
3 thing, we are, in addition to being the most
4 democratic institution in our society, probably the
5 best trusted one as well, and that is because people
6 understand that we do respect their privacy - It's
7 why people who are coming into this country make
8 their first stop the library to get, you know,
9 whatever kind of information they need - whether it's
10 something as sophisticated as an IDNYC card or just
11 learning about where certain resources are in the
12 city.

13 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: I was at... at, uh, the
14 opening Central of this morning, and the connection
15 of our librarians to our customers is truly amazing.
16 They know the folks from the community, the
17 connection of the need, and why they're there, or
18 what may have happened in their lives last week. And
19 that connection of our community with the Library is
20 just tremendous. So, I totally agree with Tony and
21 Linda as far as the data and disaggregating it. It's
22 the connection to the lives of the individuals and
23 that's who our folks represent as far as having that
24 ability to understand that need.

1
2 COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: Absolutely. And I very
3 much appreciate your answers. We want you all to
4 remain the most democratic and trusted institutions.

5 You know, sometimes us as legislators it is
6 helpful to have some specifics, but I get it, and if
7 anyone doesn't have it, I'm glad it's you all.

8 Can you just tell us about the people who staff
9 the anti-banning initiatives? I know you said you
10 all use private funding for the book banning programs
11 or anti book banning programs, but I'm just curious
12 to know about staff specifically, and where they may
13 fall in terms of being able to keep them in the face
14 of budget cuts?

15 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Thank you for that question.

16 A lot of them on my team are here if they would
17 like to stand, come on guys...

18 COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: Don't be shy.

19 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Don't be shy. (APPLAUSE) I
20 know Amy's here, Virginia, many of these folks are...

21 COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: Brooklyn's in the house...

22 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Brooklyn's in the house...

23 PRESIDENT MARX: Brooklyn is in the house...

24 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: (LAUGHTER) many of them work
25 in our Outreach Department, some of them in our

1
2 Collections Departments, uhm, on our podcast. It's an
3 all hands on deck effort, and it's something that
4 kind of got layered on top of everything else we were
5 already doing.

6 PRESIDENT MARX: I'll just add to that, yes, it
7 all depends on our amazing colleagues. Many of mine
8 are here, (INAUDIBLE) who leads our teen effort...

9 COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: Yours can stand, too.

10 PRESIDENT MARX: (LAUGHTER) (APPLAUSE) And, they
11 are, for instance, the folks we depend upon for
12 judging, they are the experts...

13 COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: Mm-hmm

14 PRESIDENT MARX: They are unbiased, and they are
15 committed, and they are, for instance, the judges for
16 our contests for the essay writing, and so much more.
17 Let me just be clear, we are under grave threat in
18 terms of budgets. We have always resisted layoffs, we
19 will continue to resist layoffs. It is the last thing
20 we want to see, (TIMER CHIMES) because we know how
21 essential these colleagues are. They are the ones
22 doing the real work. We have to ensure that they have
23 enough funding and bandwidth to do this increasing
24 work.

1
2 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: I just want to add, uh, I just
3 lost my train of thought... but...

4 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I can just mention that I
5 know you also had librarians acknowledged as Library
6 Journals' 2023 Librarians of the year...

7 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Exactly. But what I was going
8 to say about the librarians who are doing this work,
9 they are, in fact, experts. They are the people who
10 are deciding what books to buy for our collections.
11 It is not up to legislators, or school
12 administrators, or, you know, Moms against... Moms
13 for Liberty or whatever, you know? I mean, the people
14 who stood here in this room are the people who have
15 gone to school, and who have dedicated their lives to
16 making sure that their communities are getting the
17 books that they would like to read and deserve to
18 read. And that's who we should be paying attention
19 to.

20 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: And knowing the communities
21 that they are a part of. And, so, bringing that
22 diversity to the table as far as the types of books
23 and materials that they order and have available for
24 the community.

1
2 COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: Before I get to my very
3 last question, did you want your Queens folks to
4 stand up?

5 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Of course! (LAUGHTER)
6 (APPLAUSE) I always get poked over here, so if our
7 Queens folks can stand who are also here...
8 (APPLAUSE) And, thank you, Council Member, I
9 appreciate that.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: Absolutely, absolutely,
11 spreading love is the Brooklyn way after all...

12 PRESIDENT MARX: Spreading love... (LAUGHTER)

13 COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: And my last question is,
14 how could the City Council better support your work?

15 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: We will be sure to be calling
16 you as this budget unfolds. This is the very
17 beginning, it is a long haul, I think especially
18 difficult this year, and we have appreciated all of
19 your support over past cycles, and I am sure that
20 this one will be as arduous as ever.

21 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: I want to reflect back to what
22 the Chair asked us around, are people aware about
23 banning throughout basic society? There is a word
24 that we use internally that I think a lot of people
25 don't have a clear understanding about, and that is

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2 *baselining*. I think baselining is so key as far as
3 the discussion and debate moving forward. Because,
4 you, we, all of us are tired of going through this up
5 and down, back and forth battle all the time. And,
6 then, the erosion of the dollar - so, Linda talked
7 about ,you know, we should not even be talking about
8 restoration, we should be talking beyond that - how
9 we baseline your money, how we baseline the
10 Administration's money that benefit us, and, then,
11 also, as Tony indicated, and I think we will be
12 talking about it more in March, the capital and what
13 it actually means. When we talk about getting into
14 the weeds of the discussion, we are talking about
15 getting into the weeds of the Capital Budget and how
16 it impacts your money, and how it impacts the
17 Administration, the Executive side of the
18 government's money as far as what we are doing. And
19 people don't have a clear understanding of what
20 capital actually means to benefit the communities in
21 having great institutions, in having visionary
22 institutions, and having buildings that stand up to
23 the test of time. And that to me is an important part
24 of the discussion as well.

1
2 PRESIDENT MARX: Look, we know that there have
3 been challenges. There will continue to be
4 challenges. Hopefully we're seeing some relief in
5 those challenges. We know that the Administration is
6 working hard. We are partnering with them. We have
7 partnered with them on the Teen Center and so much
8 more. You all have been essential partners in the
9 funding, in the baselining. This kind of event, which
10 has drawn a great deal of publicity already -
11 nationally just this morning's testimony - is also an
12 essential part of getting the message out.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: Thank you all. Thank you,
14 Chair.

15 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Council Member Hanif?

16 COUNCIL MEMBER HANIF: Thank you. This is been a
17 very hopeful conversation for our democracy. Thank
18 you, Chair Rivera, in a time of political
19 divisiveness, I really urged that we air today's
20 hearing widely.

21 I appreciate your commitment to Books Unbanned,
22 the Freedom to Read Advocacy Institute, and against
23 book bans broadly. Uh, and I want to extend my love
24 to librarians who make our city better every day.

25

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2 Thank you every Library worker in our city. Libraries
3 are so, so important for our democracy.

4 At this moment, Palestinian authors and books are
5 grappling with the heightened wave of censorship and
6 threats - like Hannah Moushabeck, who published
7 *Homeland: My Father Dreams of Palestine* - and, in
8 particular, December last year, the New York Public
9 Library made some headlines about an arrangement of
10 books that included books about Native Americans and
11 Palestinians.

12 What steps have you taken to ensure that New
13 Yorkers have access to these books? And how did the
14 Library respond to that issue in particular? And what
15 conversations are happening now?

16 PRESIDENT MARX: We are committed to providing
17 books across the spectrum, to ensuring that the folks
18 who want to learn more and need to learn more about
19 what's happening in the Middle East, have every
20 opportunity to do so - from every perspective. We
21 will not present... not allow Islamophobia or anti-
22 Palestinian efforts or antisemitism to get in our
23 way. It's very simple, Council Member, we protect the
24 right of everyone to make a choice. Parents should
25 help make the choice for their children. We want

1
2 everyone to be inclusive in that, but parents do have
3 a role in this. Parents can say, I want to encourage,
4 particularly our youngsters, what to read. We want to
5 make sure they have every possibility. What we cannot
6 allow is other people's parents telling me what my
7 kids can read or I can read. That is fundamentally
8 un-American.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER HANIF: I really appreciate hearing
10 that, and I would love to hear from the other
11 president, uh, what steps your libraries are taking
12 and how the creation process takes place,
13 particularly for these specific weeks for particular
14 communities, and particular subject areas, and
15 particular types of literature.

16 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: First, I will say for the
17 three of us, that after October 7th, you'll notice
18 that not one of our institutions made a statement,
19 uh, despite some pressure to the contrary. But, uh,
20 for the very reason that Tony just laid out, we serve
21 people of every community; we serve diverse
22 communities, it's not our place to make a statement
23 about what's happening in the Middle East or any
24 other conflict that may be waged in our world these
25 days.

1
2 In terms of how we decide what collections to
3 acquire, it's a complicated process, and there are
4 people whose job - I always think this must be the
5 best job in the library - it's their jobs to decide
6 what books to buy. It's based on many, many
7 components, including algorithms, but also input from
8 branch libraries about what the communities are
9 looking to read it'; it's from education experts, and
10 as I said, people who are trained in this very field.
11 So it's not a simple process, and we buy an
12 extraordinary amount of books even in a bad budget
13 cycle. They're not many institutions or organizations
14 that acquire the number of titles that the three of
15 us, especially when you put us together, that the
16 three of us acquire.

17 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Just to add to that. I mean,
18 we, like New York and Brooklyn, really don't get
19 involved in the political aspect of life. Our goal is
20 what we're talking about today - to make sure that
21 books are available for individuals who choose from,
22 and that's what we do.

23 We have a team of people who are more expert than
24 I am, as far as who form our Review Committee, as far
25 as the purchasing of books. And as, I think Linda

1
2 just indicated, reflecting the local demographics of
3 a community as well. And I'll use Langston Hughes as
4 proxy, and that's part of the discussion, and when
5 Langston Hughes first started, the community was
6 predominately Black, now heavy Hispanic population
7 and variety of different groups have moved into the
8 East Elmhurst/Corona area, and you've seen the
9 reflection of our books change as a result of the
10 changing demographics of the community - making sure
11 we continue the history and the balancing of what
12 Langston Hughes was about. (TIMER CHIMES) But, at the
13 same time, making sure that books and materials
14 reflect the demographics of the community itself. And
15 we do that throughout all different types of groups,
16 uh, making sure those types of books and materials
17 are available for people to choose from. And it has
18 not been an issue at QPL and imagine as well as my
19 colleagues'... (CROSS-TALK)

20 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: I would just add one thing,
21 which is, in addition to diversity of thought, we
22 also are working hard with World Language
23 collections to make sure that we're serving
24 populations - not only on whatever platform their
25

1
2 most comfortable, but also in whatever language that
3 (INAUDIBLE).... (CROSS-TALK)

4 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Great point, excellent point,
5 because we are seeing new languages come through our
6 door every day. And how we then have to make sure the
7 material reflects the new groups of individuals who
8 are moving into the most dynamic, diverse city in the
9 world and making sure our material and books reflect
10 that.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER HANIF: Thank you so much.

12 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you. And I just want to
13 add, the way that you all have responded to new New
14 Yorkers, families that are seeking asylum, I have
15 seen it in my own local libraries, an entire wall of
16 sections for ethnic groups from West Africa, who have
17 arrived here, it has been incredible, and we are very
18 thankful.

19 Council Member Williams?

20 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Thank you, Chair. I had
21 a whole bunch of questions, but you've answered a lot
22 of them in testimony, so I'm going attempt to
23 reframe.

24 So, I know you did your mailing book program
25 where you focused on the often books; I know your

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2 Black History Month programming, you also sort of
3 focused on this, and so do you intend to continue
4 those programs and focusing on books that are banned?
5 And this is specifically for the Queens Public
6 Library.

7 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: We will continue with our
8 programs and getting the feedback from the community
9 on how we even improve on the programs. So, yes, we
10 plan to continue the diverse programs that you're
11 talking about and expand them.

12 Also, I think with all of us - give the power to
13 our local branch managers to have the programs in
14 their libraries that the community said is a high
15 need - as well and provide the support, but to tie it
16 into the other part of the conversation, that may be
17 more difficult without having full restoration of the
18 budget. I mean there's only but so much we can do. I
19 mean, we're doing a lot, we will continue to do a lot
20 - and some have the ability to raise a ton of private
21 money to do that - which is great, but reality is,
22 having the money from the City allows us expand... I
23 mean, I... Linda to talked to earlier about her rose-
24 colored glasses, I continually wear rose-colored
25 glasses thinking of what's possible, and,

1
2 unfortunately, what's not possible as result of
3 budget cuts.

4 I want us to do so many different things out
5 there... this is true... The power of Library is just
6 so, so important as far as the leveling of the
7 playing field for individuals and having those
8 services and programs available. And I don't think
9 people understand the direct impact that budget cuts
10 have. It is not, like I said earlier about just
11 complaining, and "Oh, we don't have enough money,"
12 and all that, it's to provide that opportunity - so
13 going to your question, Council Member, our goal is
14 to always increase and maintain the programs that we
15 have. And those programs that don't work, then move
16 them out of the system. But, how do we improve and
17 make sure there are more creative programs that Linda
18 and Tony have talked about, and we talked about, is
19 always our goal.

20 PRESIDENT MARX: Council Member, our commitment to
21 diversity, to inclusion, to respect, to ensuring
22 everyone has the chance to learn and to advance
23 themselves and their communities is not a fad of the
24 day. It's not something we took up and will abandon.
25 It has been our bread and butter for over a century,

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2 and we are here to ensure, with your help, with the
3 mayor's help, that that will continue for decades and
4 generations to come.

5 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: One of the things, Council
6 Member, just quick point, I'm sorry, is that in April
7 we will be having a number of our board of trustee
8 members reading banned books. And they'll be going to
9 their local library, and we invite you to join us,
10 because it just brings more attention, and our
11 trustees have signed up to be a part of this. So, we
12 would love to have that connection as well.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Absolutely. I can tell
14 from your responses how passionate you all are.

15 I guess similar to that vein, what broader
16 activities have you engaged in? This is specific to
17 Queens, but anyone can feel free to answer - that
18 includes local schools, community organizations, and
19 actually raising awareness. I think a part of this
20 hearing is talking about the lack of awareness,
21 especially in New York Cit - because we're a little
22 bit more privileged in that way the other states -
23 and promoting this sort of intellectual freedom that
24 you all have been talking about? And how do you all
25

1
2 engage with the City initiative and nationwide
3 initiative?

4 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: So, just taking a quick stab.

5 In your district, uh, we've had a partnership
6 with District 29, and we've hosted a number of
7 meetings with the parent coordinators, the
8 superintendent in District 29, talking about a
9 variety of reading initiatives, and supporting the
10 district, and getting their feedback as well. We've
11 hosted the parent coordinators at - the Cambria
12 Heights Library matter of fact - and we continue to
13 do that. And I know we were part of the announcement
14 with the Mayor and the Chancellor around the new
15 reading initiative and looking forward to investing
16 in that even more so. And, then... what Tony and
17 Linda love to talk about, is our programs with the
18 Department of Education as well.

19 PRESIDENT MARX: We are proud and depend upon the
20 partnership of the City Council- of you - of so many
21 agencies in the City, of so many nonprofits. We are
22 proud to take the lead where we can, but we know we
23 have to work with our colleagues. But, my
24 MyLibraryNYC Program, for instance, where we are in
25 effect the circulating library for close to half of

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2 the public libraries in New York is essential. We've
3 been...

4 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Public schools...

5 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Public schools...

6 PRESIDENT MARX: Public schools, sorry... and why
7 we have ,you know, we've been working closely with
8 the Chancellor to protect that program even under
9 difficult circumstances. (TIMER CHIMES)

10 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Okay, and just one more
11 question, in specific to Brooklyn. I attended a
12 program, I think maybe like a year or so ago, and I
13 got a Books Unbanned hoodie, it's very comfortable.
14 So, I just wanted to know a little bit more detail,
15 like what type of organizations you're partnering
16 with, like, how do people in other areas where books
17 are being banned learn about this initiative?

18 PRESIDENT MARX: The American Library Association,
19 which you are going to hear from shortly, our various
20 local organizations of librarians, our neighborhood
21 organizations, the citizenry at large, all essential
22 partners - PEN American, donors, everyone is stepping
23 up to the plate, because this is so outrageous as a
24 threat to democracy.

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2 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Okay, yeah, because I
3 didn't know, I mean, like, I knew that was happening,
4 but I didn't know that the initiative was happening
5 at your library. I didn't know you even had an
6 initiative. And, so I was, like, how are people
7 learning about this? (CROSS-TALK)

8 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: So, it started as a nationwide
9 press release, and that sort of began picking up
10 steam, and that's really how the program was
11 launched. And, then, since then, we continue to add
12 partners. There are in fact, other libraries that are
13 now falling under the Books Unbanned umbrella,
14 including San Diego, Seattle, LA County, so we're
15 hoping to get more large urban library systems
16 involved in hopes of sort of having them help us
17 shoulder the burden.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Thank you.

19 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Well, thank you all for your
20 testimony. It's... your passion for the work is truly
21 infectious, thank you. We look forward to supporting
22 whatever your plans are - short term or long-term -
23 and to continue the fight.

24 PANEL: Thank you, Chair.
25

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2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: We will now turn to our expert
3 panel. For those testifying in person, please come up
4 to the table once your name has been called: Jason
5 Reynolds (*not in attendance), Emily Drabinsky, and
6 Jonathan Friedman?

7 (PAUSE)

8 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: You may begin when ready.

9 JONATHAN FRIEDMAN: Thank you.

10 Chair Rivera, good afternoon, and distinguished
11 council members, thank you for the opportunity to
12 testify today.

13 My name is Jonathan Friedman, and I serve as
14 Director of Free Expression and Education Programs at
15 PEN America. We are a nonprofit, nonpartisan
16 organization that stands at the intersection of
17 literature and human rights to protect free
18 expression in the United States and worldwide. We
19 view free expression as an underpinning of democracy
20 and a cause above politics.

21 For three years, we have been at the forefront of
22 documenting an alarming attack on the freedom to
23 read, learn, and think. We are living through a tidal
24 wave of state laws to advance educational censorship,
25 who spirit mirrors, but also dwarfs the worst

1
2 impulses of McCarthyism. This is a campaign to exert
3 ideological control over schools, libraries,
4 colleges, universities, even museums - institutions
5 that anchor of free society and informed citizenry.

6 Among the more pernicious aspects of this
7 movement has been its concerted focus on banning
8 books.

9 Our research at PEN America has documented nearly
10 6,000 book bans, across 41 states, at 247 school
11 districts in the past two school years.

12 Today, books are being pulled from shelves in
13 some districts by the hundreds, even thousands. Mass
14 lists circulate online of which books to target;
15 vaguely worded state laws are turning education
16 totally on its head, turning teachers and librarians
17 into agents of censorship.

18 Again and again, we see efforts to ban books with
19 protagonist of color, books about African-American
20 history, books about LGBTQ identities, efforts to
21 take away the very books that many students,
22 families, and educators say they want to access -
23 books that many say save lives.

24 Not every book is for every kid, not every book
25 is for every family, but the unifying principle is

1
2 that a variety of choice means kids and families can
3 determine what's relevant to them.

4 Now, we are frequently told if books are banned
5 in schools people can, "just get them at the public
6 library," we expect public libraries to step into any
7 such breach, reliable, ever present institutions of
8 democratic civil society. But, we cannot treat
9 libraries as a failsafe mechanism for public
10 education on the one hand, and undercut their
11 operations with the other.

12 In the national fight against bans, New York
13 City's libraries have risen to the occasion,
14 launching innovative programs to grant ready access
15 to books for youth across the country, and working to
16 raise public awareness of this crisis. They have set
17 the bar high, serving as a model for how public
18 libraries can stand unflinchingly to facilitate an
19 equitable and inclusive democracy for all.

20 In this, our libraries mirrored the values of our
21 city. New Yorkers know that we stand for something
22 universal and what we decide matters.

23 My hope is the New York will continue to be
24 citadel books and learning at a time when they are so
25 profoundly under siege elsewhere. Thank you

1
2 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you.

3 EMILY DRABINSKI: Hi, I am Emily Drabinsky,
4 President of the American Library Association and
5 constituent of Council Member Hanif.

6 The American Library Association was founded in
7 1876 with the mission that continues to guide us
8 today - to provide leadership for the development,
9 promotion, and improvement of library and information
10 services - and the profession of librarianship in
11 order to enhance learning and ensure access to
12 information for all.

13 As librarians, we take *all* very seriously. All
14 includes me; all includes you; all includes people
15 who disagree with me, which is a handful I'll admit;
16 and people who are my kindred spirits; people who
17 live in my neighborhood; and people who live at the
18 other end of the G train; and people who live in the
19 worlds that I can only imagine. This is what makes
20 our public libraries great - the belief that public
21 institutions and public goods belong to all of us - a
22 belief made reality by the dedication and commitment
23 of library workers.

24 Two fundamental things are necessary to secure
25 the right to read: First, the autonomy and authority

1
2 of library workers must be protected... respected. We
3 are trained professionals grounded in commitments to
4 intellectual freedom, equity of access, and respect
5 for our patrons' privacy. Since 2021, ALA has
6 documented alarming and record setting increases in
7 attempts to restrict access to books and programming
8 that reflect the lives and experiences of Black,
9 Indigenous, and people of color, as well as those
10 about human sexuality and LGBTQ+ experience. Such
11 efforts are antithetical to building broad
12 collections for broad publics. This is what
13 librarians do, and we must be protected and supported
14 in these efforts. Second, libraries must be funded
15 such that they can fulfill this crucial mission.

16 Book banning is one way to limit access to the
17 stuff of human imagination. Another, is to cut public
18 funding for public institutions in ways that
19 eliminate evening and weekend hours, reduce the
20 materials available to the public, prevent the basic
21 maintenance and upkeep of public buildings, and
22 undercut our capacity to offer a wide range of
23 relevant programs and services to our communities.

24 In 1953, ALA's governing council affirmed the
25 Freedom to Read Statement, developed with the

1
2 American Book Publishers Council, an in in response
3 to the McCarthy hearings, for claiming that the
4 freedom to read is crucial to our democracy.

5 Just as we did then, ALA is on the front lines of
6 the fight for the right to read. Our Unite Against
7 Book Bans Campaign invites partners to join our
8 organized efforts to combat attempts to restrict
9 access. We would welcome New York City Council as our
10 partners.

11 Our Book Résumés, launched last week, put
12 essential selection tools in the hands of librarians,
13 educators, and parents, all of whom play role in
14 expanding access to reading. And, last year we
15 reaffirmed the Freedom to Read Statement, reminding
16 all of us the quote, "There is no place in our
17 society for efforts to coerce the taste of others, or
18 to inhibit the efforts of writers, to achieve
19 artistic expression." Conditions on who people can be
20 as readers are conditions on who they can be as
21 people, such restrictions are antithetical to the
22 American project.

23 (TIMER CHIMES) Thank you for the opportunity to
24 share with you today and to do our shared work
25 together.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you very much. The
3 ideological control over our democratic institutions,
4 I think is very well put. And I hope that the Council
5 today also really underlined that, but also our
6 respect for the autonomy of library workers.

7 What are some of the most common tactics you see
8 to banning books? Do you see any signs of those
9 tactics here in New York City? I mean and I just want
10 thank you for your work and and for your testimony
11 today, because you have really collected and put
12 together these incredibly prestigious organizations
13 that are very accessible in terms of information and
14 data, and so we are grateful.

15 So, any of those tactics you see here in New York
16 City?

17 JONATHAN FRIEDMAN: So, book banning takes place
18 in a lot of different ways and at a lot of different
19 levels. When we're talking usually about the kinds of
20 book banning that we've seen spread across the
21 country in the past three years, we are talking first
22 about school boards and local activists - sometimes
23 parents, sometimes people who are parents are not,
24 but maybe they don't have kids in public schools
25 (BACKGROUND NOISE) and frequently just a very vocal,

1
2 but relatively modest number of people, who are
3 trying to kind of extend their views on everybody
4 else.

5 Now, the systems surrounding schools are designed
6 so that parents can play a role in children's
7 education. And many schools have policies that allow
8 people to file challenges, you know, to say, *I don't*
9 *want my kid to read this book for a class or would*
10 *prefer that the library restrict, you know, some*
11 *segment books for my own child.*

12 Now, a lot of that happens all the time on a
13 very micro individual level, and I remember a
14 Virginia librarians - school librarian - told me in
15 20 years of teaching she had two parents asked for
16 those kinds of recommendations. But, then in the past
17 two years, she's had hundreds of books challenged by
18 a small number of people who clearly want to kind of
19 remove and prohibit from the library all kinds of
20 books that they haven't personally read, and it's
21 quite obvious when you see the same books challenged
22 everywhere.

23 So, is some of that kind of microlevel
24 challenging to school books taken place in New York?
25 I think there are some stories of that happening but

1
2 I haven't seen the kind of bending to that will that
3 we have seen in other states happen in New York City.

4 And, at present, New York State has not seen a
5 law the likes of which we are seeing in Florida, Iowa
6 moving forward today, in Idaho in, West Virginia, in
7 Tennessee, in Oklahoma, uh, Missouri. I'm sure I'm
8 forgetting a number, but there are many laws that
9 have been put forward. They work in different ways,
10 and a lot of them exert pressures on librarians to
11 remove books.

12 We haven't seen that in New York, but that
13 doesn't mean we never could. And we haven't seen any
14 of those laws yet advance federally, but that also is
15 something that could be on the horizon. And so what
16 we have to be alert to is this sort of multifaceted
17 effort that isn't really just one phenomenon, it has
18 a lot of different elements going on at once. And,
19 although; none of that is directly happening today in
20 Manhattan, in Brooklyn let's say, the influence of
21 this on the culture surrounding schools, school
22 libraries, and really the entire publishing industry
23 - on authors. It can be felt in the air in the ways
24 that people are saying they know might not publish a
25 story they thought of writing a certain way, might

1
2 not circulate that book the same way, or librarians
3 are sort of looking over their shoulders at the same
4 list of books that are being banned, and wondering,
5 you know, maybe they shouldn't bring them into
6 library.

7 So, a lot of that is much harder to track, but
8 the reports that I hear is about this basically
9 impacting the culture of education and learning
10 through books and libraries everywhere.

11 EMILY DRABINSKI: And I talk to dozens of
12 librarians every week, dozens, and the school
13 librarians in New York City will absolutely tell you
14 that efforts to ban and censor materials in school
15 libraries is a problem in New York City.

16 And I would also add to what Jonathan said, the
17 pervasive sense of fear is something that... it's
18 difficult to quantify, but it's very real. I am
19 myself an out and proud New York City lesbian, and
20 the attacks on books about lesbians are attacks on
21 people like me. And I was just in Alaska visiting
22 with librarians there, and some of them were
23 literally too afraid to be seen with me. They did not
24 want me to even enter their libraries and take a look
25 - they're so afraid of what these forces can bring

1
2 down. And we're not safe or immune from that in New
3 York.

4 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: So, on a scale of one to ten
5 with one being not at a crisis, to ten being
6 extremely serious, how would you rate the book
7 banning that is taking place across the US?

8 EMILY DRABINSKI: I think it's absolutely a
9 crisis, and we see it... I... When we think of it as
10 one prong of an attack on our public institutions and
11 on our democracy, and perhaps the most ,you know, I
12 was listening to the librarians talk earlier, the
13 heads of the New York City Library Systems, and we
14 are the only public building that anyone can just
15 walk into and ask for anything. That makes us quite
16 an open site for kind of organizing against us and
17 our interests. And, so, thinking, too, about the
18 relationship between that and underfunding the
19 Library, you know, if you weaken the institution such
20 that it can't fulfill its mission, you open it up as
21 a target for exactly the kind of crisis we're
22 experiencing now.

23 JONATHAN FRIEDMAN: I can't stress enough that we
24 are already living through something that is
25 multifaceted and quite unprecedented. Nobody... we

1
2 have never seen so many bills in so many states all
3 at once trying to control education, and the
4 ideology... kind of effort to exert ideological
5 control in so many different ways. And, it's critical
6 that people understand that this isn't just about...
7 a lot of times people say, oh, this just about school
8 libraries, or maybe it's about school libraries and
9 public libraries, but this is also academic
10 libraries. It's also about universities. In a lot of
11 parts of the country right now it's pivoting to
12 include museums, and we have also seen laws against
13 bookstores or online retail or online databases in
14 libraries. So, this is the entire infrastructure that
15 is used to organize and circulate information and
16 ideas. And in that sense, a crisis of this level
17 attacking that in so many different ways, is, you
18 know, it doesn't necessarily impact any of us, maybe
19 in New York City, day-to-day in tangible ways, but it
20 is all around us, and it is getting worse.

21 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And I thank you for sharing
22 your experience in Alaska. It might seem far away,
23 but it's... it's really not. I would never want you
24 to do that again, especially not here in New York
25 City.

1
2 And, so, the role of these tax funded
3 institutions, which is really... one of the things
4 we're focusing on today you, heard the Library
5 Systems, their testimony, what is your opinion of the
6 work being done by our three public library systems?
7 Can they do more? How are they doing?

8 EMILY DRABINSKI: Every Mother's Day, Nicole
9 Bryan, the branch manager at the Macon branch of the
10 Brooklyn Public Library, holds a "Mom-A-Thon" where
11 she invites members of the community to come in and
12 celebrate moms. She works with local vendors, and
13 local restaurants, local businesses brings them in to
14 pamper the moms. I attended last year, and there
15 were... you could get a massage, you could paint
16 pottery. It was just extraordinary, and it was one
17 program that Nicole holds in her branch on that one
18 day. But, she holds programs like that every day. And
19 every library in New York City is doing something
20 like that. My kid - I have a teenager, guess what?
21 He doesn't want to talk to me, (LAUGHTER) but I
22 managed to rope him in to coming with me to my local
23 branch of the Brooklyn Public library, which is the
24 Windsor Terrace Branch, and the Youth Services
25 Librarian helped him figure out how to put his résumé

1
2 together. And we left the library, and he said to me,
3 "I'm glad I came," and those four words were the
4 first four words of real joy and pleasure I had heard
5 from him in about a year! (LAUGHTER) So, it was
6 pretty great. And every day, library workers across
7 the City are producing those kinds of experiences for
8 the public and they are unmatched. Could those
9 librarians do more if they were better supported, if
10 there were more staff that made the branches feel
11 safer, that people felt like they had a chance to
12 take a rest during the day? I think absolutely, and
13 the loss of Sunday services and what that has meant
14 for people in my community has... it's devastating.

15 JONATHAN FRIEDMAN: I have spent much of the past
16 few years speaking about libraries and educational
17 institutions. And New York City's libraries have been
18 vital partners to us in getting our message out, in
19 getting our research to be made aware of by a much
20 larger public. And it is astounding that in New York
21 City, uh, this conversation about the state and
22 future of our libraries would seem to hang in the
23 balance at the same time as we are seeing them under
24 siege all around the country. On the one hand,
25 talking about Sunday hours, and Sunday services, and

1
2 budget cuts, feels nothing like prohibition and
3 censorship of the kind that we're seeing all over the
4 country. But, it really is two sides of the same coin
5 - it is fundamentally related, and is an opportunity
6 for New York to continue to follow the lead that the
7 libraries have begun, to really set a... to continue
8 to set this bar high for what a public library does -
9 what a public library means, how it can stand up for
10 fundamental American values in the face of this just
11 ,you know, authoritarian threat that we are seeing.

12 The libraries in New York don't serve New York
13 primarily, they also, in that sense of being a model,
14 have worked to help support libraries in other parts
15 of the country to stand up to some of these threats.
16 Books Unbanned, for example, was mirrored in Seattle,
17 following Brooklyn Public Library's efforts here. So,
18 there is a real moment right now, where our
19 libraries, and where New York, can continue to stand
20 up and be a model.

21 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And that was... I... I had a
22 question, and you have touched on it a few times, but
23 is it appropriate for the City Council to play a role
24 in this fight against banning books? And if so, what
25 more do you think we could be doing? I mean,

1
2 certainly the funding is instrumental, right? Less
3 access is less access, period. I would love to know
4 your thoughts on the Council's role.

5 EMILY DRABINSKI: I'm grateful for this hearing;
6 when I travel around the country people say, "Oh,
7 you're from New York, that's not a problem in New
8 York," and it is in fact a problem in New York. I
9 think paying attention to what's happening in our
10 school libraries is very important and very crucial
11 in the conversation. Every time I talk to a school
12 librarian, they'll tell me about another one that
13 quit, and now they haven't been replaced in school -
14 and, "My kid didn't have a library in his middle
15 school, and did that have something to do with the
16 fact that he's not a reader?" Absolutely. So, I think
17 the City Council can take seriously the crisis of
18 school librarians and the Department of Education
19 here in the in the City, I think that's important.
20 But, making sure that the rest of the country knows
21 that New York City is a place that values reading,
22 that values books, and that will promote access in
23 every way that we can as a national leader - I'm from
24 Boise, Idaho, and my mom watches my weather on TV,
25 and for her to see that New York City is taking book

1
2 banning as seriously as we are here today, I have a
3 lot of gratitude for that.

4 JONATHAN FRIEDMAN: I cannot second that enough.

5 I guess what I would just add is, the public
6 awareness is so vital, and helping people to
7 understand just what it is that the librarian does -
8 part and parcel of this effort to pass laws and
9 intimidate librarians has been an effort to smear the
10 work of librarians - to call them, you know, peddlers
11 of sexual content to young children, and other vile
12 commentary. We've seen librarians and teachers leave
13 the profession because of the heightened and
14 harassment that is being sent their way. And there is
15 never a bad time for all of us to care about
16 fundamental freedoms, freedom to read, the freedom to
17 learn, and to stand up for professions like that of
18 librarians. Every librarian that I have met in doing
19 this work has told me about books they don't like,
20 books that they shelved one time or another, and
21 really kind of wish that they weren't; and then
22 librarians will tell you that, and then I'll tell
23 you, that the reason that they did it is because they
24 believed in the overarching values of the freedom to
25 read - that is a core part of their profession, and

1
2 we have to do something right now. New York City
3 Council, as any municipal body, can be doing more to
4 help the public image and the public understanding of
5 what schools and libraries are meant to do.

6 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Well, thank you very, very
7 much to both of you for your testimony. I Appreciate
8 you very, very much, and again I just wanted to
9 express how grateful we are for the work that you're
10 doing. The information, the data, and really how you
11 have ensured that you've highlighted the Library's
12 role, valuing personnel, you know, in our New York
13 City values, and how we add to that public image of
14 what's important, thank you.

15 JONATHAN FRIEDMAN: Thank you.

16 EMILY DRABINSKI: Thank you so much.

17 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you to this panel. We
18 will now turn to our student panel: Sophia Tkachenko,
19 Adelaide Sendlenski, Nana Adwoa Agyemang. I apologize
20 if I have mispronounced any names.

21 We will start with Sophia, who is testifying
22 remotely.

23 SOPHIA TKACHENKO: Hi, everyone, my name is
24 Sophia, I am testifying on behalf of Queens Public
25 Library, and I will begin shortly.

1

2

(PAUSE)

3

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Sophia, we...

4

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Sophia, you can begin.

5

SOPHIA TKACHENKO: All right.

6

Good afternoon Chair Rivera, esteemed members of

7

the New York City Council Library Committee, Library

8

representatives, and all whom it may concern. My name

9

is Sophia Tkachenko, and I am a current junior at the

10

Queens High School for the Sciences. This afternoon I

11

am presenting testimony that enunciates the

12

significance of libraries in the lives of many

13

present-day teenagers, and will also speak about how

14

vital it is to preserve banned books in library

15

offerings to foster a diverse environment that allows

16

teenagers to learn more about themselves and the

17

world around them.

18

To begin today, I would like to first describe my

19

experience at Queens Public Library and explain why

20

the topic of diversity in books is so important to me

21

as an ambitious junior student in high school.

22

Growing up, QPL provided me and my family with a

23

safe and welcoming space for exploration, learning,

24

and personal growth. As we would visit the library

25

and gaze at the vast myriad of novels, to me, the

1
2 library served as a sanctuary where I escaped the
3 pressures of school and discovered new, fascinating
4 worlds through books, digital resources, and programs
5 tailored to my ever-evolving interests. Though, what
6 I believe served as the most important aspect of the
7 collections at Queens Public Library was the
8 representation of books from a plethora of diverse
9 perspectives. Specifically, coming from a family who
10 immigrated to the U.S. from the beautiful land of
11 Ukraine, the presence of books from my home country
12 allowed me to see myself and my multicultural
13 identity reflected in the books and resources they
14 encounter, inevitably sending the message that my
15 story mattered, and that I was a highly valued member
16 of my diverse community. Moreover, the exposure to
17 further diverse novels allowed me to develop a sense
18 of compassion and empathy for other cultural
19 backgrounds as I came to understand various
20 traditions and intricacies of cultures in my
21 community.

22 As such, on the note of diversity, I believe that
23 banned books, despite their controversial nature,
24 play a crucial role in helping teens learn about
25 themselves and the world around them.

1
2 Since these books often tackle sensitive topics
3 and address issues that are relevant to teenagers,
4 such as identity, sexuality, mental health, and
5 social justice, by engaging with such material, teens
6 are exposed to different perspectives and are
7 encouraged to think critically about the world they
8 live in. Moreover, banned books provide an
9 opportunity for young adults to grapple with complex
10 ideas, and form their own opinions, which are all
11 vital qualities to develop for their future academic
12 and professional ambitions. Therefore, since they
13 play a important role in the lives of teenagers by
14 exposing them to diverse perspectives, challenging
15 societal norms, and fostering intellectual and
16 emotional growth, I strongly believe in the value of
17 preserving such works for public accessibility.

18 In closing, Queens Public Library has played a
19 pivotal role in my personal growth and understanding
20 of the world through its diverse book collections.
21 The representation of my cultural background and the
22 exploration of banned books have not only fostered a
23 sense of identity and empathy, but also nurtured
24 critical thinking skills that will undoubtedly shape
25

1
2 my future endeavors. Thank you for your time today
3 and for allowing me to share my story.

4 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your testimony.

5 You may begin.

6 ADELAIDE SENDLENSKI: Good afternoon, thank you
7 members of the New York City Council, for the
8 opportunity to speak today.

9 My name is Adelaide Sendlenski, I'm a sophomore
10 in high school at Saint Ann's in Brooklyn and a
11 participant in the Brooklyn Public Library's
12 StoryTeen Program. Through StoryTeen, I've had the
13 opportunity to learn how important early childhood
14 literacy is. The foundations laid from birth to three
15 years, impacts a child's learning for their entire
16 life. And through StoryTeen, I've had the opportunity
17 to witness firsthand how the Brooklyn Public
18 Library's children's programs foster literacy and a
19 love of learning.

20 Being part of this program inspires me, because I
21 love to read. That's why I'm here today, because I
22 love reading. I relish having the freedom to read
23 books that take me far and wide through worlds of
24 endless possibility where I may wear the cloak of
25

1
2 another's culture, religion, race, challenges, and
3 triumphs.

4 At the end of every book, I'm inevitably a
5 different person, a better one. My heart is larger,
6 and my mind is sharper. I'm better equipped to
7 confront my own fears and challenges, too.

8 Being a teenager is fraught with challenges. The
9 feeling of being different, unworthy, or just plain
10 uninvited, is more prevalent now than ever thanks to
11 social media.

12 For me, the usual teen challenges were compounded
13 by my parents separating last year. It was the
14 hardest year of my life. Only now, upon reflection,
15 do I realize that reading single-handedly got me
16 through that year. I never felt alone, because I
17 always had another world between my palms. Angie
18 Thomas' *The Hate You Give* and Margaret Atwood's *The*
19 *Handmaid's Tale* are just two of the 90 books that
20 kept me company through that time - each a dependable
21 reminder of endless possibility and human connection.

22 To my surprise, many of the books that saved me
23 that year, have been banned. As I read through list
24 of hundreds of banned books, I feel mixed emotions
25 that range from shock and dismay to outrage. But,

1
2 ultimately, I'm left with fear. Fear that one person,
3 or a small group, has the power to deprive us all of
4 all the knowledge and experience contained on the
5 pages of any book.

6 The freedom to read is under attack in this
7 country.

8 Thank you.

9 NANA ADWOA AGYEMANG: Good afternoon, my name is
10 Nana Adwoa Agyemang, and I'm honored to stand before
11 you today as a teen reading ambassador with the New
12 York Public Library.

13 Today, I'm going to talk about the Library's
14 initiatives to bring awareness about banned books and
15 to highlight the importance of free and unrestricted
16 access to education.

17 Over the past several years, there has been an
18 increase in book bans across the US in an attempt to
19 censor certain content from schools and different
20 establishments.

21 This is incredibly disheartening, because kids in
22 schools are being prevented from reading books that
23 may be important to them, and they're seeing less of
24 themselves and their schools and libraries. But, the
25 majority of students, parents, and librarians are

1
2 against book censorship. So, why is it still
3 happening?

4 This is why I believe that banned book
5 initiatives are important. They challenge censorship,
6 promote intellectual freedom, and foster dialogue
7 among other things.

8 The New York Public Library is very dedicated to
9 increasing awareness about this growing issue through
10 the Books For All Initiative. They have invited
11 banned book authors to participate and offer
12 discussions, created the Banned Book Club for teens
13 to encourage reading those books, and hosted many
14 other programs surrounding this topic - for all ages.

15 I have had the opportunity to be involved in the
16 Books For All Initiative by cohosting an author talk
17 with banned book author of Mark Oshiro, and
18 discussing his book *Each of Us a Desert*. I was also
19 honored to assist in the grand opening of the Teen
20 Center at the Mott Haven Library alongside Mayor
21 Adams.

22 These experiences were important to me, because I
23 know having the freedom to read shouldn't be a
24 privilege but a right. I am originally from Ghana,
25 and I live in the Ghanaian household. I remember

1
2 reading this book called *Love Radio*, and one of the
3 characters names was Akosia (phonetic). She was from
4 Ghana like me. I don't think I have ever felt so seen
5 in any book. I felt like a little girl again, and it
6 was then that I realized, Wow! Representation in a
7 book is very important and has a big role in the
8 development of kids and teens like me. That's when I
9 decided that I shouldn't wait for someone else to
10 bring more diversity and inclusivity in books; I
11 should be the change, I should help bring the change.

12 From participating in story time at two to three
13 years old, to hosting story time to some of my
14 students at 17 years old, I have witnessed firsthand
15 the importance of the library from different levels
16 of involvement at the library.

17 The library has always been a safe space for me,
18 a welcoming place where I could go to study, to read
19 all sorts of books, and also to meet different people
20 who love books like I do. That's why I'm glad that
21 the New York Public Library is taking such a huge
22 stance on this. Everyone should have access to all
23 books, on multiple perspectives, from people from
24 different walks of life. It is emblematic of our
25 commitment to inclusivity and diversity within our

1 schools and libraries. It defends authors, who
2 bravely speak their truth, even when faced with
3 suppression; and it affirms that every voice, (TIMER
4 CHIMES) every story, and every person deserves
5 recognition and respect. Thank you for your time.
6

7 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you. And thank you to
8 Sophia on Zoom for your comments on personal growth
9 and, of course, companionship. Empathy, critical
10 thinking skills, I think we have all experienced
11 shock and dismay and outrage and certainly fear. And
12 I want to thank you all for being ambassadors and
13 great youth representatives. We will need you
14 alongside us in the next few months in this fight,
15 and I am glad that you are here. We are honored to
16 have you, thank you.

17 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you to this panel.

18 We will now turn to public testimony. Our first
19 panel will be Flame, Deborah Allman, John Hyslop, and
20 George Olken.

21 FLAME: Well, hello, and good afternoon, my name
22 is Flame, and in case you can't tell from my
23 ensemble, I am a storyteller with Drag Story Hour
24 NYC. I want to thank you for this opportunity to
25 submit my testimony.

1
2 Drag Story Hour NYC's mission is to produce
3 storytelling and create arts programming for
4 children, teens, and represented by local drag
5 artist, like, myself, in libraries, in schools, and
6 other community spaces - in all five boroughs of New
7 York City - and virtually as well.

8 Our programs celebrate gender diversity in all
9 forms and all differences. It helps to build empathy
10 for kids and gives them the confidence to express
11 themselves how ever they are most comfortable.

12 Banning books at public libraries serves
13 absolutely no purpose for progress in our world.
14 Banning ideas and information does not ban
15 experience, but it does create a decontextualized
16 experience, which is harmful in building true
17 empathy, forward movement, and supportive networks.

18 Much of the contents of books banned continues to
19 circle around LGBTQIA+ issues and identities of
20 Black, Indigenous, and people of color.

21 In 2023, over 1,500 books - 1,500+ books, were
22 banned across America, with an increasing number of
23 them on the docket for review now as we speak.

24 As an organization, we continue to stand with our
25 local libraries against book banning. At Drag Story

1
2 Hour NYC, we will stand firm in continuing to read
3 and offer banned books in our programing, work with
4 libraries in offering readings of banned books, and
5 working with community based organizations, local
6 groups, and publishers to ensure access to and
7 circulation of banned books.

8 Drag Story Hour NYC requests that the City honor
9 the request of the public libraries, which include
10 allowing for libraries to serve as facilitators, a
11 free and open exchange, asserting the tradition of
12 showcasing the stories and perspectives of
13 marginalized communities, and restoration of all
14 Library funding.

15 As an organization, we stand righteous with the
16 libraries, including New York Public Library,
17 Brooklyn Public Library, and Queens Public Library.

18 Thank you for your time and consideration on
19 behalf of Drag Story Hour NYC.

20 GEORGE SARAH OLKEN: Good afternoon, I am George
21 Sarah Olken, I am the Bookmobile Driver, and I am
22 president of Local 1482 representing workers at
23 Brooklyn Public Library.

24 Chairperson Rivera and committee members, thank
25 you for giving me the opportunity to testify on

1
2 behalf of my fellow library local presidents, and on
3 behalf of the nearly 3,000 library workers we
4 represent.

5 Banning Books flies in the face of what library
6 workers do every day. Our work strengthens democracy
7 by building free, equal access to information about
8 all kinds of people and ideas. The endeavor to cut
9 off that flow of information discriminates and
10 disenfranchises.

11 The stakes could not be higher. This latest wave
12 of censorship includes books about the health and
13 well-being of children and teens, about grief and
14 dying, about race and racism. One of the most
15 challenged books in our libraries is *Gender Queer* by
16 Maia Kobabe, an informative and wholesome graphic
17 memoir about the artist's experience of gender from
18 adolescence to adulthood. We have seen the tragic
19 effects of anti-queer and anti-trans rhetoric and
20 legislation. Just last week, we learned of the death
21 of a nonbinary teenager after persistent bullying in
22 Oklahoma following that state's bathroom ban.

23 Every day, library union members are fighting
24 back. We have extended our collections, especially to
25 the young people most in need. Today you have heard

1
2 about Brooklyn Public Library Books Unbanned program
3 that gives digital access to students all over the
4 country, including in Oklahoma, where a teacher lost
5 her job for sharing the Library's QR code. That
6 teacher is now a defiant advocate for teens across
7 the United States as an employee at Brooklyn Public
8 Library.

9 Last year, the Library celebrated Fifty Years of
10 Hip Hop, that vital artform - which New York City
11 gave to the world - challenges anti-Black stereotypes
12 and champions empowerment.

13 Make no mistake, cynical campaigns to ban books
14 that address racism, and inequality, and Black
15 excellence are attempts to roll back the hard-earned
16 rights of African Americans, Indigenous folks, and
17 other people of color.

18 Library workers ensure our libraries are
19 accessible to patrons across physical and virtual
20 spaces. Our clerical staff provide welcoming services
21 to everyone walking through our doors. Our collection
22 development and programming staff ensure our
23 collections and programs reflect our city's
24 diversity. Our custodians are maintainers provide
25 clean, comfortable, and safe spaces. Our tech staff

1
2 provide technology and classes for patrons of all
3 ages to find trustworthy information online. Our
4 public safety teams make sure library programs are
5 not interrupted by cynical protesters who would have
6 us believe that someone dressed as a mermaid reading
7 a story to kids about Coney Island's world-famous
8 mermaid parade is anything other than a popular
9 family event.

10 This might feel like a problem that is elsewhere,
11 but library funding cuts in New York City threaten
12 our ability to fight these bans and support (TIMER
13 CHIMES) folks here and across the country. Cuts
14 threaten our ability to hire the next generation of
15 new voices who will teach all of us to dream bigger.
16 Cuts limit the digital access we extend to vulnerable
17 teens. Cuts to hours and collections may spare jobs,
18 but we are still limited and understaffed. We need
19 more resources, not just fewer cuts, because budget
20 cuts are a form of banning, too. Defunding libraries
21 cuts off information just as surely as banning books.

22 If we are serious about this fight for democracy,
23 liberation, and human flourishing, we need more
24 access to libraries and fair wages for library
25 workers.

1
2 New York City is a beacon. Who we say is cool –
3 Jay-Z, Shirley Chisholm, what we read – changed the
4 world. Some among the powers that be, are afraid that
5 young people reading books will ask tough questions
6 and demand answers. Our library workers ensure those
7 questions get asked, and that we get the answers we
8 deserve. Thank you.

9 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Well, thank you all for being
10 here. I heard this in your testimony, but I just
11 wanted to ask, do you believe that the Library's
12 activities can make any real difference in a
13 nationwide fight against book banning?

14 GEORGE SARAH OLKEN: Definitely, I mean, we are a
15 model, what we do here, the folks follow. As we have
16 already heard, people are taking up some of the
17 programs that we have done. And I think that the same
18 goes for wages and the rights of workers. This is
19 what we fight for as union, uh, members. And, so, we
20 believe that a fully funded library that respects all
21 of its workers sets a model that throughout the
22 country we library workers should be treated with
23 that respect.

24 DEBORAH ALLMAN: Hi, I am Deborah Allman,
25 President of Local 1930, New York Public Library

1
2 Guild. And as a children's librarian for over 20
3 years in the Bronx. I have seen what these services
4 have done to the community. I still... Even though I
5 go in the neighborhood, I still see people that reach
6 out to me and they still remember me. And they
7 remember what the Library has done for them. And to
8 cut these vital services... the Bronx is one of the
9 most underserved areas, and we need these programs in
10 the libraries and underserved areas, and they look
11 forward to these programs. And to see 20-year-olds
12 who still remember what the Library has done for
13 them, and reach out and have jobs, we need these
14 services, and we need these restorations. Because my
15 slogan is, A cut to the Library's budget is a cut to
16 you.

17 JOHN HYSLOP: And to piggyback on everything that
18 everybody has said prior to me, we are a model - the
19 three systems are a model for our diversity of
20 collections, the amount of material we buy, and
21 catalogs we make available in foreign languages - in
22 languages other than English - is impressive. And the
23 contributions that we make to catalogs around the
24 world, and what we catalog and buy is impressive. So,

1
2 yes, we are a model for diversity. And I think
3 libraires look to us for what we do, definitely.

4 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And I agree, I am very
5 thankful to you all, and also respecting the workers
6 and ensuring that all you feel valued.

7 I just want to ask one last question, Flame, if
8 you don't mind, you know, you have heard that heard
9 that New York is leading the way, that we are a
10 model, and we have to continue that. But, there
11 still are fights that happened right here in New York
12 City, in Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, in the Bronx,
13 and Staten Island, so can you tell us why do you do
14 this work?

15 FLAME: I do the work that I do, because I was one
16 of those self-aware, queer children that saw
17 absolutely no representation. And like the lovely
18 young person from Ghana, who just spoke said,
19 representation matters so much. I grew up feeling
20 absolutely so isolated, so alone, so disconnected
21 from the rest of the world, that I think absolutely
22 no child deserves to grow up that way. And I want to
23 be that representation that was lacking for me when I
24 was a child. And it is so important to have the
25 backing of everyone here, including the New Public

1
2 Library, thank you all for having us. It's so
3 heartwarming for me to see that we are striving for a
4 change. So, thank you so, so much for the continuous
5 support of Drag Story Hour NYC, from the bottom of my
6 heart thank you.

7 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you, and thank you for
8 helping us process so much through these... this is a
9 protest in of itself, joy in reading - and whether
10 it's through our feelings of grief and that feeling
11 of representation - it's so important.

12 So, I just want to thank you all; thank you to
13 this panel, we will continue the fight alongside you,
14 and we're very, very grateful.

15 PANEL: Thank you.

16 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, our next panel will
17 be Lauren Comito, Christopher Leon Johnson, and Amaya
18 Perez.

19 LAUREN COMITO: I'm happy to begin if we're still
20 waiting for...

21 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Well, I think the beauty
22 about the room is that everyone can hear when they're
23 being called, right?

24 LAUREN COMITO: Excellent, thank you.
25

1
2 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you, you can start
3 whenever you'd like.

4 LAUREN COMITO: So, thank you so much, Chair
5 Rivera, and all the members, for the opportunity to
6 speak on this really important topic today.

7 My name is Loren Camito, I am a librarian here in
8 New York City, and the Executive Director of Urban
9 Librarians Unite - a 501(c)(3) professional
10 organization based in Brooklyn which focuses on
11 supporting library workers in urban areas across the
12 US.

13 One of main focuses at Urban Librarians Unite,
14 right now particularly, is helping library workers
15 deal with the stress and trauma of their work - from
16 the ramifications of Library budget cuts, to
17 contending with workplace harassment or protests,
18 where people scream at you.

19 The work we do that is most relevant to today's
20 topic is our 2022 Urban Librarian Trauma Study, which
21 I have a copy of, our Drag Story Hour Safety Planning
22 Guide, and our Library Worker Support Network, which
23 will be a series of peer-led support groups around
24 trauma and urban public library or urban library work
25 in general.

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2 Book bans are not about the books at all. Books
3 are just containers for the stories of humanity, they
4 are how we share and communicate the human experience
5 across different life experiences. The people who
6 want to ban and limit books aren't... it's not about
7 the paper, it's about denying that shared humanity of
8 the groups that they don't want you to read about.
9 They don't think that those people's stories deserve
10 to be heard or recorded. Because, if it's not what
11 it's about, then why do these book ban lists not have
12 all of the Bridgerton novels - and I've read all of
13 them like three times - they are absolutely the same
14 sorts of things that are in the books that are on the
15 ban lists - It's just that they're super white
16 romance novels written by white a lady. They're not
17 about gay people, so that's fine, that kind of sex in
18 a book in the library is fine - It's when people see
19 something they don't understand or think is icky,
20 that they want it out of their lives, and out of the
21 lives of their neighbors. Because, this is about
22 denying the humanity of our neighbors. This is a
23 moral panic. It's akin to the Red Scare, or when we
24 all thought that Dungeons and Dragons was going to
25 turn all of our kids into demon summoning Satanists.

1
2 My dad wouldn't let me play D&D, which is absolutely
3 absurd, my daughter plays every Sunday.

4 Libraries and library workers are collateral
5 damage in this culture war. We're being targeted,
6 sometimes personally targeted and accused of things
7 like child abuse or worse. And if anybody expects
8 that this abuse will make library workers back down,
9 they are wrong, we will not. We will organize and
10 support each other, so that we can continue to
11 support (TIMER CHIMES) our neighbors as they access
12 information - freely - in all of our public
13 libraries.

14 New York City is a place where people come to
15 find themselves and free themselves, our values are
16 those of acceptance and inclusion. There's more than
17 one way to ban a book - as my friend Emily says so
18 eloquently. If a community can't enter the library
19 because it's closed due to budget cuts, they can't
20 read the stories of their neighbors. The proposed
21 cuts will have a chilling effect on the right to
22 read, because when you don't have the staff to take
23 the time to really recommend a book for an individual
24 person, because you're too busy trying to make sure
25 that all the books get shelved - because we haven't

1
2 been able to hire, and we don't have enough staff -
3 that's also limiting access to the books that are on
4 the shelves.

5 I'm deeply grateful for the support of this
6 committee for calling this hearing and listening to
7 the dangers book bans pose to frontline Library
8 workers. We look forward to working with you this
9 spring to address the cuts and restore full access to
10 libraries for everyone.

11 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you.

12 AMAYA PEREZ: Hi, okay, my name is Amaya Perez. I
13 am a co-chapter leader for New York... for an
14 organization called Gays Against Groomers. We are an
15 organization of gay people and others in a community
16 who oppose the sexualization, indoctrination, and
17 medicalization of children under the guise of
18 LGBTQIA+ inclusion. I'm here to discuss two books
19 that are currently on the banned list for New York:
20 *Genderqueer* and *This Book Is Gay*. I remember someone
21 mentioning that this is a wholesome book for children
22 to have access to. This is an example of a picture of
23 inside the book itself *Genderqueer*, and I'm gonna
24 read a quick expert of *This Book Is Gay*, and in this
25 section, it describes how to have sex, so, "a good

1
2 handy is all about the wrist action rub the head of
3 his cock back-and-forth in your hand try different
4 speeds and pressures until he's positive... he
5 responds positively." As you can see these materials
6 are extremely sexually explicit and graphic. I've
7 heard testimony on that this is discriminating
8 against LGBTQ people and how it's limiting
9 information that is overly graphic and sexual to
10 children, discriminating against anybody don't think
11 that is discriminating against anybody for limiting
12 and having standards for children and protecting them
13 against sexual explicit material. If anything, it is
14 safeguarding children as well as protecting my
15 community's image that is already under fire. As you
16 saw the material is extremely graphic and sexual in
17 nature. Having books that show them how to give
18 blowjobs and normalize part of gay... gay culture as
19 a promiscuous culture is not being mindful of
20 teaching kids of how to be mindful of their sexual
21 activities, but it's supporting promiscuity, which
22 has been at lethal problem in our community. Books
23 describing identity to the point of normalizing
24 hating one's body and natural processes are
25 detrimental to the mental health of teenagers,

1
2 especially young girls. In a culture with a major
3 mental health crisis, we must be careful of the
4 material we are giving them. As a bi-sexual woman, I
5 never had to read a book to discover who I was. I
6 never needed a book to teach me how to give oral sex
7 to a girl. It was meant... It was also mentioned that
8 everyone should have the freedom to read what they
9 want. It is not a right or need for a child to have
10 free access to sexual material, the rights and
11 freedoms of kids to read whatever they want to not
12 supersede our duty as an adult to protect them from
13 age inappropriate material. Parents who want their
14 child to have access to these materials can very well
15 buy these books or visit school libraries or public
16 libraries, but those... But putting these books on
17 school shelves supersede the rights of the parents
18 who want to protect their child from this material. I
19 ask the Council to consider what the content of these
20 books are telling young adults. Consider the material
21 I read in these books. Consider the impact it's
22 having on both the schools, the community, and the
23 community it's claiming to help. (TIMER CHIMES)

24 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Alright, what's up
25 everybody? My name is Christopher Johnson. So, I was

1
2 busy in another hearing with a zoning... So, I came
3 here. I'm kind of tired but, I will say this right
4 now, you know, this is a big problem, and, you know,
5 I support Gays Against Groomers with their fight
6 against making sure... banning the drag queens from
7 these schools. Now the problem I see with this stuff
8 is, you have a lot of perverts that are reading to
9 our kids, and the thing is the city council has
10 allowed this to happen, because you have these
11 corrupt directors of these libraries who only care
12 about being appointed to the Met Museum and these
13 other cultures associated by the governor (sic). They
14 allow the woke crap to happen inside these liberries
15 (sic). Now all this stuff that you see with drag
16 queen story hour and, uh, putting the most degenerate
17 books inside these liberries (sic) that our tax...
18 that our taxpayer dollars paid for, it's about the
19 woke crap. All this is about woke... it's a woke
20 agenda that's going on with the help of the city...
21 with the help of the mayor's office in the city
22 council through David... through Daniel Dromm who
23 used to represent 25th District in the city council.
24 A lot of this stuff needs to stop. You know, don't
25 get me wrong, if you want to teach your kids to be

1
2 sexualized do it on your... do it on your thing, but
3 don't use our tax dollars to allow this to go down
4 while we can't say thing about this. It's disgusting
5 that the way to city council does it, and these they,
6 uhm... they let all these woke people, all these woke
7 agendas speak first, and all the real stuff gets
8 spoken last. It's crazy. Uhm, what need (sic) to
9 happen more, we have the defund the drag queen story
10 hour for the 2025... FY 2025 budget under just
11 Justin Brannan aka fester. He needs to ban drag queen
12 story hour spending. He can easily do it, because the
13 drag queen story hours gets discretionary funding for
14 the city council. Fester needs to ban
15 discretionary... fester need to ban, uhm, drag queen
16 story hour from getting funding in the city council.
17 The city council needs a lot of... needs a lot of
18 support to get this cut. I know, Carlina, you're term
19 limited, you don't really... you're out of here in
20 two years... like in a year and a half. So, you don't
21 really have much... that much power. But, I hope you
22 do the right thing, because you're a mother, you have
23 a kid, and you tell the next chair of the committee
24 to defund the funding for FY27-FY28. But, it's a lot
25 things that's going on, and thank God that Chi Ossé

1
2 is no longer on that panel, because Chi Ossé the
3 epitone (sic) of the agenda. He's the epitone (sic)
4 of the woke agenda, and they got... got rid of,
5 because he don't care... only he cares about the
6 getting the nights (sic)... the next position in
7 the... the mayor's office. So, we have to stop this
8 spending. We have to stop the woke crap. I support
9 Gays Against Groomers. I mean, that's all I got to
10 say, thank you. (TIMER CHIMES)

11 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: So, let me just say a couple
12 of things here. I want to thank every one for their
13 testimony. We are all here as elected by the people
14 of New York City to represent interests, dreams,
15 values, aspirations, and futures. I will say, though
16 I... Everyone is entitled to give their own free
17 testimony. I will tell you that my colleagues were
18 elected by the people - including Chi Ossé, including
19 Justin Brannan, including the pioneer and advocate,
20 Danny Dromm.

21 With that I am grateful for the conversation that
22 has happened today. I feel gender expression,
23 identify, discussions on sexual expression are
24 absolutely critical to the future of our city and the
25 future of humanity. Our libraries, our cultural

1 institutions and groups, and our librarians
2 specifically are tasked with the responsibility of
3 elevating humanity, and I am thankful to all of them.

4 I do want to ask Lauren a question, if that's
5 okay. It is just about, you work directly with
6 librarians, we're are talking about libraries today.

7 LAUREN COMITO: Yes, absolutely.

8 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: They are on the frontlines of
9 protecting books from threats of violence and angry
10 protests. These tactics are designed to create fear
11 around books and libraries. How can we support
12 librarians without giving into these fear tactics?

13 LAUREN COMITO: Well, I think everyone who came
14 before me said funding, so I'm actually not going to
15 say funding. I'm am going say, it's always good when
16 we see you guys out there with us when we're at an
17 event or holding a Drag Story Hour. And I know
18 council members come out to these events with us and
19 stand with us as people scream at us that we're
20 pedophiles. We appreciate it when you're there with
21 us. And I appreciate every time an elected official
22 comes and stands with us, and funds these programs,
23 and then stands with us as we deal with the
24 ramifications of making sure that we are providing
25

1
2 services to everyone in our community, regardless of
3 whether some people would prefer that we didn't.

4 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And I thank you for that.
5 Every year I proudly fund Drag Story Hour, and I've
6 been to their events. I think that that sort of
7 conversation and that critical thinking, discussion,
8 and also the joy that these events bring are
9 absolutely critical to our survival as people.

10 So, with that, I want to thank this panel for
11 their work. I am looking forward to the fight for the
12 next few months to ensure that funding is continued,
13 and for all that you bring, thank you.

14 LAUREN COMITO: Thank you.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Our last panel will
16 be Jane Tara Currie.

17 JANE TARA CURRIE: Thank you very much for this
18 opportunity to testify before the Committee. I grew
19 up in New York City on the Upper West Side in the
20 50's and 60's when it was still West Side Story. And
21 every week, I went to a Carnegie Library, and the
22 library was a very important part of my growing up.

23 Before I retired, I spent decades working for a
24 major publisher in New York City, and I was an
25 executive producer of a large website for teachers

1
2 and librarians. I got to know a lot of librarians
3 professionally; I would attend ALA every year, and I
4 have a lot of respect for librarians. I know the work
5 that they do. They were at the forefront in fighting
6 back against the Patriot Act, which required
7 librarians to turn over to the government the things
8 that people were reading, and the ALA stood up and
9 told libraries - public libraries - throughout the
10 country that they should purge their lists as soon as
11 the book was returned - that they were not going to.
12 They were required to turn it over, so they said,
13 well, we will just get rid of those records -
14 because they believed in privacy, and they believed
15 in the right to read whatever you want to read
16 without repercussions. They are also important in
17 teaching people how to research - both teens who come
18 in, and new arrivals in the United States - to
19 research in the library, in the library stacks
20 themselves, and how do use all online databases. They
21 are really crucial in the education of our populus.

22 It is heartbreaking to hear about the programs
23 that are being cut and will continue to be cut as the
24 budgets for public libraries are cut.

1
2 So, I want to mention that we want to see our
3 Move the Money Resolution re-introduced to the
4 Council, to say that this country has the money to
5 fully fund our libraries; and our schools; and our
6 transit systems; and our public housing. The money is
7 there, but the federal government is spending it on
8 the military. It is spending it to enrich weapon
9 manufacturers. It is spending it to wage war against
10 civilians in many parts of this world. So, I am fully
11 in support of librarians and fully in support of
12 getting the Council to reintroduce the Move the Money
13 Resolution, and stand up and say to the feds, to
14 congress, and to the president, cut the money to the
15 Pentagon, spend it on what our people need. I thank
16 you very much for this opportunity. (APPLAUSE)

17 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you, thank you. Thank
18 you for your advocacy. I just want to make sure if
19 there is anyone else...

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: We have now heard from
21 everyone has was signed up to testify. If we missed
22 anyone who would like to testify virtually, please us
23 the Zoom Raise Hand Function, and I will call on you
24 in the order in which you have raised your hand.

1
2 Additionally, I will call those who registered to
3 testify remotely to see if they are online at this
4 time: Lucy Sexton and Alex Hayden? Okay, seeing no
5 one else, I would like to note that written
6 testimony, which will be reviewed in full by
7 committee staff, may be submitted to the record for
8 up to 72 hours after the close of this hearing by
9 emailing it to testimony@council.nyc.gov.

10 And I will turn to the chair for closing
11 statements.

12 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you to everyone who
13 came to testify. The dramatic rise in censorship
14 attempts on books in libraries systems across the
15 country is deeply concerning. Today, I hope the
16 Council stressed and underlined that representation
17 is important, freedom of speech, freedom of
18 expression, really how we flourish as a society, as
19 human beings. We are fighting here for cultural
20 inclusivity and liberation of all people. To know
21 that LGBTQIA+ content is being targeted, that
22 literature by Black, Indigenous, and people of color
23 is being disproportionately targeted for bans, we
24 will not stand for that. And we will continue to
25 fight to ensure that representation continues in

1
2 literature, that it is absolutely critical that we
3 protect freedom of expression.

4 Thank you very, very much, and with that, we
5 adjourn.

6 [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 March 8, 2024