



**Statement by Dennis M. Walcott, President and CEO, Queens Public Library
New York City Council's Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup
Relations
Oversight - NYC Libraries' Fight Against Banning Books**

February 26, 2024

Good afternoon. I am Dennis Walcott, President and CEO of Queens Public Library (QPL, Library). It is a pleasure to be here today. Thank you, Chair Rivera, Speaker Adams and the members of this esteemed committee for the opportunity to testify on how the Library is fighting against book bans and censorship and protecting the freedom to read. Chair Rivera, congratulations on your recent appointment to Chair of the committee. Queens Public Library looks forward to working with you to amplify the issues facing the city's public libraries. Council Member Ossé, thank you for your passion and tireless efforts in leading the committee over the past two years.

At Queens Public Library, our mission is to transform lives by cultivating personal and intellectual growth and by building strong communities. Throughout the borough, people of all ages and backgrounds continue to rely on their libraries for the support they need, whether it is afterschool homework help, physical and mental wellness workshops, ESOL classes, interview preparation, technology classes, and so much more – in addition to free access to books. Despite the incredible role libraries play in society, attacks against the very fabric of our foundation – the right to seek and access diverse points of view – have been becoming more and more frequent.

Every year, QPL joins the fight against book banning by highlighting the American Library Association's (ALA's) Banned Books Week. To kick off the awareness campaign this past year, we, along with Brooklyn and New York public libraries, partnered with Mayor Adams in declaring "Freedom to Read Day" in New York City, encouraging New Yorkers to not just read targeted books, but to also participate in a city-wide day of digital activism to stand against banned books. Library users shared social media posts about the literary works that made a lasting impression on their lives, such as Margaret Atwood's *Old Babes in the Wood* and graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman.

QPL's initiative featured unique and exciting programming. Our panel conversation with the American LGBTQ+ Museum, *Quieting Queer Reads*, featured speakers from academia, publishing and education discussing the importance of personal storytelling, the history of book banning in the United States and the impact of censorship and erasure for LGBTQ+ youth. At our Forest Hills Library, we hosted a stage performance of *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. Presented by the non-profit Literature to Life, the performance was followed by a group discussion examining the themes of the novel. Our renowned Mail-A-Book program, which serves homebound individuals, dedicated the entire autumn season to reading and discussing popular banned books, including *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *The Storyteller* by Jodi Piccolt, and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. At our Peninsula Library, customers participated in an Open Mic, reading excerpts

from their favorite censored books and sharing why those books were meaningful to them. Over the course of the week, the events garnered an attendance of over 700.

In addition, we curated a list of banned and challenged books for all audiences. From *New Kid* by Jerry Craft to *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, the titles on the list leave their readers with a deeper understanding of different experiences, cultures, and perspectives without shying away from the truth.

We also raised public awareness through large, multilingual “All Books Are Welcome Here” graphics at the entrance of every QPL location, proclaiming our commitment to the protection of free expression and access to information and ideas. We also work to ensure that these values are in the minds of our customers through programming year-round. For example, as part of our ongoing virtual author talk series “Literary Thursday,” each conversation addresses the issue of censorship. In recognition of National Library Week (April 7 – 13), several of our Board members will be hosting banned book storytimes at QPL branches.

The first step in stifling a democracy is limiting opportunities for growth and learning. At Queens Public Library, we firmly believe offering a robust and diverse collection that contains different perspectives is essential. System-wide, we have more than 5.6 million books and materials representing more than 30 languages. This past fiscal year, QPL circulated 7.7 million physical and digital materials, a nearly 15 percent increase from the previous year.

Last month, the Library’s revision of our Collection Development Policy reinforced our opposition to censorship attempts and our goal to offer the widest diversity of views and expressions, including those which may be unorthodox or unpopular with the majority or controversial in nature. The policy also made clear that the Library’s decision to acquire or remove materials from our collections will not be determined by partisan or doctrinal points of view.

The Library’s research collections uplift and amplify voices that have been historically suppressed. Housed at our Langston Hughes Community Library and Cultural Center, our Black Heritage Reference Collection is a testament to the richness and depth of Black history, covering a wide range of subjects, including African history, the African diaspora, slavery, civil rights movements, critical race theory, African American art, and much more. The collection, one of the largest public circulating collections of materials on the Black experience in New York State, includes encyclopedias, primary source documents, and writings by prominent figures such as Malcolm X, Langston Hughes, and Barack Obama.

The Carter G. Woodson Reference Collection has been an integral part of the Central Library since its dedication in 1968. An educator, philosopher and more, Dr. Woodson is referred to as the “father of Black history” and was the founder of the Association of the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), which aims to “promote, research, preserve, interpret and disseminate information about Black life, history and culture to the global community.” The collection does just that. It is comprised of more than 4,000 reference materials covering various aspects of African American culture and life with a focus on slavery, contemporary African American life,

and the papers of the nation's most influential Black leaders, including Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., and Booker T. Washington.

This Black History Month, QPL joined the ASALH in dedicating the celebration to African Americans' immeasurable impact on the arts, including literature, film and design, in our nation, culture and world. Customers are encouraged to learn more about influential Black artists, find a great new read, and participate in one of our more than 100 special programs planned throughout the month. Among the amazing programs was a book discussion with acclaimed author Charmaine Wilkerson on her first novel *Black Cake*, hosted at our South Jamaica Library. Wilkerson's hit novel, which is now an Oprah-produced series of the same name on Hulu, focuses on themes of sexual identity and family connections as it tells a story of a Caribbean family forever changed by the secrets of its matriarch. The discussion will soon be available on our digital channels for anyone interested. At our Central Library, we are honored to host the traveling exhibit "Frederick Douglass: Advocate for Equality," which explores the abolitionist's epic life, beginning from his escape from slavery through his ongoing fight for equality during the Jim Crow Era.

In an effort to guide reflection on Black art and artists, we created the "African Americans and the Arts Journal." This activity-based journal is meant to inspire and shape new behaviors of interpreting art. Through daily prompts, we hope our customers can broaden their knowledge and world-view while learning about Black culture, whether it's highlighting a lesser-known Black artist and their contributions or showing how an artist used their art as a tool for social change.

Serving the most diverse county in the nation, it is vital for QPL to continue our efforts to ensure everyone in the borough is represented in our collections, programs and services. Unfortunately, the Library is facing significant budget cuts, in addition to a PEG we already sustained this year which resulted in the elimination of seven-day service and reduced collections and programming, undermining our ability to provide our communities with the services and resources they deserve.

Public libraries are the last truly democratic institution. Queens Public Library and our all-encompassing services, programs and resources fight against the very notion of censorship, book banning and any activity that upholds ignorance. It is our highest responsibility, as beacons of every neighborhood in the borough, to enable the people we serve to explore their interests and better understand themselves and the world around them. As attempts to limit discovery, growth, and expression continue at unprecedented levels across the country, Queens Public Library is grateful to have our elected leaders, especially the NYC Council, championing the City's public library systems and the work we do on a daily basis.

Chair, thank you for allowing me to provide testimony today.

BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY
TESTIMONY ON THE FIGHT AGAINST BANNING BOOKS

To the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries & International Intergroup Relations
February 26, 2024

Good afternoon. I am Linda Johnson, President & CEO of Brooklyn Public Library. Thank you, Chair Rivera, Speaker Adams and committee members for the opportunity to testify. Thank you, as well, to our Brooklyn delegation and the entire City Council for helping our branches remain safe and inclusive spaces for all.

Overview

Censorship is one of the most important issues in our country today, and I am proud that in the fight against censorship, New Yorkers are at the helm. Our librarians, teens, and teachers — many of whom are here today — are leading a national movement to champion intellectual freedom and end book bans. Together, we are defending the right to read for all. Because limiting access or providing one-sided information is not only antithetical to the mission of a library, it is a threat to democracy itself.

Censorship in the US is a case in which the few aim to govern the many. Regardless of party affiliation, most Americans oppose book bans. But the number of book challenges continues to rise to record-breaking levels, instilling fear in teachers, authors, librarians and young readers alike. Educators worry they'll be fired for their lesson plans. Authors wonder if their titles will even reach the shelves. Students begin to believe that certain stories are not worthy of being told. And our librarians are on the frontlines of this fight day in and day out.

Reading books without fear of reprisal is as fundamental a right as freedom of religion or speech or press. Restricting access to books limits our world — and hinders our ability to prepare the next generation for the duties of citizenship. Books, at once portals into new worlds and reflections of our lives, are now being locked away along with the freedom to read and think freely. Productive classroom discussions lull to a whisper as lessons become rote, not expansive. And while the shelves are being culled and libraries are being defunded, national literacy rates and reading scores have fallen.

What we are witnessing is much more than an attack on intellectual freedom; it is an attempt to silence voices and erase perspectives, particularly those from the LGBTQ+ and BIPOC communities.

The increasingly coordinated and political effort to ban books sends an alarming message to young people — who are just discovering their own identities — that minorities are dangerous and therefore books about them should be removed from the shelves. Protagonists of color and discussions of racism are deemed uncomfortable, while queer characters and relationships are labeled as obscene or pornographic. Instead of being taught great literature, our youth are being taught old, discriminatory tropes.

This past year, the scope of censorship has expanded to include health-related content. Books being challenged often depict teens struggling with mental health, bullying, suicide, substance abuse, grief and puberty. But these stories are no more painful than the realities teens face, and cordoning off these titles further isolates teens and strips them of the potential refuge they might find in hearing stories much like their own.

We task our youth with writing the next chapter of history. We hope they will learn from our errors and pen a more promising future. But how will they write that future if they do not understand the past? Why would they write if they are taught to fear new ideas?

Books Unbanned

Here in New York City, we empower our youth to dream, and we defend access to our books. Over a year ago, Brooklyn Public Library launched Books Unbanned, a privately funded initiative that provides teens all over the country with free and open access to our entire digital collection. In addition to the 32,000 teens in New York with Brooklyn Public Library cards, we've activated thousands of new eCards to young readers across the country who are interested in everything, from the latest news stories to graphic novels and history books. They've borrowed over 200,000 items from our collection and told us over and over that access both protected their privacy and expanded their worlds. One participant said Books Unbanned "may save another kid's life because reading saved my life a few years ago when I was struggling the most with my identity."

Books Unbanned was created to uphold the promise of a public library and indeed of democracy itself: to provide free access to information from all points of view to those who seek it; to protect the books we agree with and those we do not with equal fervor; and to support, uplift and empower librarians, teachers, and students so that books rejected by a few would not be removed from the shelves for all. I am proud of BPL's work and the recognition our librarians have earned — from being named Library Journal's 2023 Librarians of the Year, to winning multiple Anthem Awards, receiving the Freedom Forum's 2023 Free Expression Award, and more. While we are delighted to be leaders in providing this access, we are outraged that this need exists.

Programming

In addition to Books Unbanned, we have several programs that empower teens to take ownership of their own reading and learning. For the past two years, we've run a monthly virtual Intellection Freedom Teen Meetups, where youth in New York and across the country discuss everything from the latest book challenges to their favorite authors and characters. Our Freedom to Read Advocacy Institute teaches students to become ambassadors for intellectual freedom by fighting censorship through civic engagement in their schools, libraries, and communities. Along with our partners at PEN America, we recently hosted our first in-person institute during the Midwinter Recess. Over 80 young New Yorkers ages 14 to 19 applied for the fellowship, and 14 joined us for a four-day summit and training. Participants received a stipend for their time at the institute and their continued work on advocacy projects throughout the year. Later today, you'll hear from one of our tenacious teens.

Brooklyn Public Library also hosts intellectual freedom events across the borough, including: Banned Book Club for Teens, Books Unbanned Storytime for younger patrons, a teen anime club highlighting banned graphic novels, panels and discussions with authors and journalists. And our new podcast, *Borrowed and Banned* features stories from educators, librarians, bookstore owners, teens, and advocates who are fighting for the right to read. The series has been downloaded over 40,000 times, made *The Atlantic's* list of top 25 podcasts of 2023, and was recently nominated by the Ambies for Best Documentary Podcast.

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

Black History Month

Book bans disproportionately affect people of color. They limit possibilities and erase stories of joy and empowerment. At Brooklyn Public Library, we support and celebrate all our readers.

This month, Black History Month, we have hosted events across the library system to commemorate this year's national theme of "African Americans and the Arts." We've hosted book discussions about pivotal Black authors, musical celebrations with The

Harlem Chamber Players, craft hours for young patrons, movie nights, dance workshops and cooking classes, and several community reflection hours for older adults of color to share their experiences with one another. Last year, we celebrated Black excellence through *The Book of HOV*, an immersive exhibit produced by Roc Nation that honored the life and work of Shawn “JAY-Z” Carter. And all year long, at Macon Library’s African American Heritage Center and our Center for Brooklyn History, we work to collect and preserve artifacts related to Black history — from books to manuscripts, letters, diaries, photographs, maps, oral histories, and more.

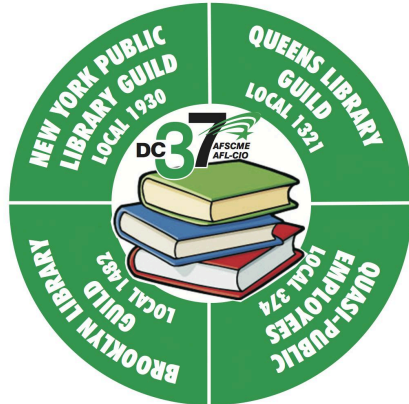
At Brooklyn Public library, we are proud to highlight a diversity of stories and provide our patrons access to books with Black narrators and queer protagonists, books that uplift stories from marginalized identities. From our national Books Unbanned initiative to local story times, Brooklyn Public Library is working not only to protect intellectual freedom and ensure access to information, but also to encourage independent thought and foster the empathy and community that our city needs during these challenging times.

As literacy rates drop and book bans rise, the city ought to be ramping up library services and expanding access to collections. Regrettably, we have had to cut our collections budget, and reduce our operating hours after receiving a devastating mid-year cut of 5% to our operating budget. Budget cuts proposed for the coming year also threaten this progress.

We know this city stands firmly in support of access to information and protecting the right to intellectual freedom. We are proud to work with you, our city leaders, to support millions of library patrons across the city — who depend on us.

We don't have to convince you, our staunchest supporters, that Libraries should be safe havens of knowledge and community, where all residents have free access to information from all points of view and are empowered to grapple with the dilemmas of the day. We hope you will continue to protect Libraries at all costs, as they are a physical representation of the democratic ideals which guide our city and indeed our nation.

Thank you.



**Oversight Hearing on New York City Public Libraries' Fight Against Book Banning
*Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations***

Joint Testimony of

President George Sarah Olken, Brooklyn Public Library Guild, Local 1482

President Deborah Allman, New York Public Library Guild, Local 1930

President Leonard Paul, New York Public Library Quasi-Public Employees, Local 374

President John Hyslop, Queens Public Library Guild, Local 1321

February 26, 2024

I am George Sarah Olken, president of Local 1482 representing workers at Brooklyn Public Library. Chairperson Rivera and fellow committee members, thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify at this hearing on behalf of my fellow library local presidents at New York and Queens Public Libraries and on behalf of the nearly 3,000 library workers we represent.

Banning Books flies in the face of what library workers do every day. We strengthen democracy by providing free, equal access to information about all kinds of people and ideas. The endeavor to cut off that flow of information discriminates and disenfranchises.

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

Every day library union members are fighting back. We have extended our collections, especially to the young people most in need. Brooklyn Public Library has been honored for the BOOKS UNBANNED program that gives digital access to students all over the country,

including in Oklahoma, where a teacher lost her job for sharing our QR code. That teacher is now an advocate for teens across the United States as an employee at Brooklyn Public Library.

Library workers ensure our libraries have the variety of programs our public needs and wants, including last year's celebration of Fifty Years of Hip Hop. That vital art form which New York City gave to the world challenges anti-Black stereotypes and champions empowerment especially for people of color. Make no mistake, cynical campaigns to ban books that address racism and inequality and Black excellence are attempts to roll back the hard-earned rights of African Americans and other people of color.

Library workers ensure our libraries are accessible to everyone across physical and virtual spaces. Our clerical staff provide welcoming services to everyone walking through our doors. Our collection development and programming staff ensure our collections and programs reflect our city's diversity. Our custodians and maintainers provide clean, comfortable, and safe spaces. Our tech staff provide technology and classes for patrons of all ages to find trustworthy information online. Our public safety teams make sure library programs are not interrupted by cynical protesters who would have us believe that someone dressed as a mermaid reading a story to kids about Coney Island's world-famous mermaid parade is anything other than a popular family event.

This might feel like a problem that is elsewhere, but library funding cuts in New York City threaten our ability to fight these bans and support folks on the front line. Cuts threaten our ability to hire the next generation of new voices, who will teach all of us to dream bigger. Cuts limit the digital access we extend to vulnerable teens. Cuts to hours and collections may spare jobs, but we are still limited and understaffed. We need more resources, not just fewer cuts, because budget cuts are a form of banning, too. Defunding libraries cut off the information just as surely as banning books.

If we are serious in this fight for democracy, liberation, and human flourishing, we need more libraries that pay fair wages for library workers. New York City is a beacon. What we say is cool — what we read — changes the world. The powers that be are afraid that young people reading books will ask tough questions and demand answers. Our libraries ensure those questions get asked and that we get the answers we deserve.

Lucy Sexton

New Yorkers for Culture & Arts

City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs hearing on
Amplifying BIPOC and Queer Voices April 20, 2021

Thank you Chair Rivera and members of the City Council for this important and urgent hearing. My name is Lucy Sexton and I am with the cultural advocacy coalition New Yorkers for Culture & Arts.

Banning books is a cultural issue. It is in line with the attacks on Drag Story Hour that we've seen at libraries in Queens and other locations in our city. It is in line with the attacks on educational institutions and cultural organizations that aim to increase inclusion and visibility for Black history, culture, and artists.

I remember the last time that the call to silence queer voices, Black visions, and any artists challenging white male supremacy rocked our country. In the late 80s and early 90s, Senator Jesse Helms led a charge in Congress to defund the National Endowment for the Arts because of the work of queer artists and

artists of color. He talked of it being the work of the devil, and other extreme language.

I bring this up because while it is sometimes easy to think of these attacks, these banning of clearly important books, these fomenting of fear of drag artists, as ridiculous. It is very serious and has very serious consequences. Following the attack on the NEA, that organization as well as the NY State Council on the arts were drastically cut. We have now gone for decades with a seriously underfunded state arts agency because of Helms's hateful language on the senate floor 30 years ago. We need to fight to protect and increase support for libraries and culture now more than ever.

I also want to point out that the extreme right is not incorrect to talk about the power of books and arts to change the minds and lives of young people. That is exactly what books and art are intended to do. When a child enjoys a story read by a drag artist, they not only have a good time with a book, they begin to learn that there are many ways of being an adult. That there are all kinds of people in the world, all deserving of respect. They may

see themselves in that gender non conforming grown up or they may see their friends in them, or they may have never seen a person like that. But now they have. And that will change them and open their minds and the possibilities of their lives.

So may we all acknowledge and protect the power of art, of books, of culture, of difference as if our children's lives depend on it, because they do.

Testimony by Sophia Tkachenko

Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup

Relations “NYC Libraries’ Fight Against Book Banning”

February 26, 2024

Good afternoon Chair Rivera, esteemed Members of the NYC Council Libraries Committee, Library Representatives and all whom it may concern,

My name is Sophia Tkachenko and I am a current junior at the Queens High School for the Sciences. This afternoon I am presenting testimony that enunciates the significance of libraries in the lives of many present-day teenagers, and will also speak about how vital it is to preserve banned books in library offerings to foster a diverse environment that allows teenagers to learn more about themselves and the world around them.

To begin today, I would like to first describe my experience at Queens Public Library and explain why the topic of diversity in books is so important to me as an ambitious junior student in high school. Growing up, QPL provided me and my family with a safe and welcoming space for exploration, learning, and personal growth. As we would visit the library and gaze at the vast myriad of novels, to me, the library served as a sanctuary where I escaped the pressures of school and discovered new, fascinating worlds through books, digital resources, and programs tailored to my ever-evolving interests. Though, what I believe served as the most important aspect of the collections at Queens Public Library was the representation of books from a plethora of diverse perspectives. Specifically, coming from a family who immigrated to the U.S. from the beautiful land of Ukraine, the presence of books from my home country allowed me to see myself and my multicultural identity reflected in the books and resources they encounter, inevitably sending the message that my story mattered, and that I was a highly valued member of my community. Moreover, exposure to further diverse novels allowed me to develop a sense of compassion and empathy for other cultural backgrounds as I came to understand various traditions and intricacies of cultures in my community.

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

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

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

Thank you for your time today and for allowing me to share my story.

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____
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Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Jane Tara Currie

Address: [redacted] BKlyn 11201

I represent: Move the Money - NYC

Address: 388 Atlantic Ave, Bklyn NY 11217

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Name: Christopher Leon Johnson

Address: [redacted] Buffalo Ave [redacted]

I represent: SELF

Address: _____

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Name: Amaya Perez

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I represent: Guys against groomers

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Name: ADELAIDE SENDLENSKI

Address: _____

I represent: BPL - STORY TIME

Address: _____

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Name: DR. JONATHAN FRIEDMAN PhD

Address: _____

I represent: PEN AMERICA CENTER

Address: 588 BROADWAY, SUITE 300, NEW YORK, NY 10012

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I represent: NYPL

Address: _____

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Name: Lauren Comito

Address: [REDACTED] Bklyn NY 11222

I represent: Urban Librarians Unite

Address: 87 Richardson Bklyn

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Name: Deborah Allman

Address: 125 Barclay Street NY NY 10007

I represent: President, L1930, DC37

Address: _____

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Name: George Olken

Address: 125 Barclay Street NY NY 10007

I represent: President, L1482, DC37

Address: _____

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Name: EMILY DEARBINSKI

Address: _____

I represent: AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

Address: 280 Ocean Parkway 3T Brooklyn NY 11218

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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Name: John Hyslop

Address: 125 Barclay Street NY NY 10007

I represent: President, L. 1321, DC37

Address: _____

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Name: Tony Marx

Address: _____

I represent: NYPL

Address: _____

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in favor in opposition

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Name: FCAME

Address: _____

I represent: DRAG STORY HOUR NYC

Address: _____

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(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: CINDA JOHNSON

Address: BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY

I represent: 10 GRAND ARMY PLAZA

Address: 10 GRAND ARMY PLAZA

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(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Dennis Walcott, President

Address: 89-11 Merrick Blvd

I represent: Queens Public Library

Address: _____