



New York City Council Hearing - Updates and COVID-19 Recovery

Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations
December 13, 2021, 10:00am

NYC Department of Cultural Affairs Testimony Presented by Commissioner Gonzalo Casals

Good morning, Chair van Bramer and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I've only been able to present testimony virtually up until now. Much like cultural programming, there's no substitute for the live experience. So I'm very excited to be here.

While these past two years have in many ways felt like an eternity, I want to begin my update on the cultural community's COVID-19 recovery by looking back even farther to the beginning of this Administration. Much of the groundwork for our collective response to the pandemic was laid during this time, both within the agency and throughout the cultural sector.

When my predecessor, Tom Finkelpearl, joined with hundreds of cultural leaders at the Ford Foundation in 2015 to launch our agency's diversity, equity, and inclusion initiative, let's be honest: it caused a lot of anxiety. While many advocates had been calling for greater racial equity, demographic diversity, and inclusive practices for generations - many more people weren't comfortable speaking about these issues. In part, this came from a lack of understanding of how we could address the profound, systemic problems we faced. But to fix a problem, you need to understand it, and to talk openly about solutions. At that time, I was still working at one of the nonprofits represented in that room. And the agency's work is one of the factors that propelled the seismic shift in the tone and attitude toward DEI work that we've seen around us. When the Black Lives Matter movement gained mainstream momentum last year, New York's cultural community was better prepared to understand where the anguish and calls for change were coming from, and to respond meaningfully.

While these conversations reverberated throughout the cultural community, here at the agency we launched new programs to address the problems. We started with a landmark study that backed up with data what so many of us already observed: the cultural workforce was far less diverse than the city itself. So with programs like the CUNY Cultural Corps, the Leadership Accelerator, and new funding for diversity programs across the sector, DCLA made this work a top priority for the agency in the early years of the Administration. As we'd come to see, we were also laying the foundations for greater equity in our funding and, ultimately, a pandemic response that focused on getting relief funds to the hardest hit communities.

Then came the CreateNYC Cultural Plan. Thanks to legislation sponsored by you, Chair Van Bramer, and your colleagues, the agency embarked on the tremendous task of developing New York's first-ever comprehensive cultural strategy. At the time, I worked as a consultant for the plan, and I saw firsthand the amazing energy residents brought to the public engagement process across the city. Following months of intensive public input, the plan released in 2017 built on the equity work started in the preceding years, and laid out a vision for where it would go next.

While DCLA is so much more than a funder, providing financial support to cultural organizations is one of our core functions. As a result, many of our efforts to foster equity focused on greater equity in funding. For the members of the Cultural Institutions Group, CreateNYC resulted in a requirement for them to adopt DEI plans - among the first anywhere in the country for the cultural sector. We also worked out a deal with the Met Museum, where funds raised through a mandatory admission fee for

non-New Yorkers was re-invested in smaller groups in more underserved areas around the city. These investments drew on the work of the Social Impact of the Arts Project, whose research found a powerful correlation between cultural assets and public health, education, and safety. Based on these findings, we've continued to increase investments steadily in systematically oppressed communities - a strategy we'd come to build on in the wake of COVID-19, with its disproportionate impacts on communities of color.

After the release of CreateNYC, we also re-directed investments and launched new funds intended to focus on particular areas of need in our sector. These included the Mayor's Grant for Cultural Impact, which supported collaborations between arts groups and city agencies. The Disability Forward Fund expanded opportunity for disability access and artistry. The Language Access Fund opened up new pathways for non-English speakers to connect with our cultural sector.

These funds joined the City Council's growing number of cultural initiatives likewise supporting underserved segments of the population. These include the Cultural Immigrant Initiative, the Coalition of Theaters of Color, the Cultural Afterschool Adventures program, and SU-CASA. Together, the Administration and City Council grew City funding for the arts to record levels, with a major emphasis on increasing investments for New Yorkers most often excluded from cultural opportunities and engagement.

The cultural plan also helped to establish something that would become a critical component of the cultural community's response to COVID-19: a sense of solidarity. Culture at 3, a sector-led initiative that's still going strong - the Museum Reopening Taskforce, and many other collective efforts emerged as an essential source of mutual aid and resource sharing. As cultural administrators, we tend to group ourselves together by discipline, by size, by location, by audience - all for understandable reasons. But the truly cross-sector collaborations that emerged in spring 2020 showed that we have more to gain from working together than we do from fighting for resources alone. Of all the terrible things to happen in the last two years, this is one bright spot that I hope we can continue to build on.

In March 2020, we all learned very quickly just how fragile our communities could be. My appointment as commissioner was announced the very same week that all of New York City was shut down. On a weekly group call with my fellow museum leaders - a call that would eventually be absorbed into Culture at 3 - we thought that reopening might be just days away.

As we know now, it would be many months before cultural reopenings would begin in earnest. Successive surveys conducted by DCLA of our constituents showed just how profound the damage was: from a billion dollars in lost revenue, to risks of permanent closure, to layoffs and furloughs that affected arts educators and organizations of color far more than their larger, wealthier counterparts - the damage to our cultural community has been widespread and massive. As I mentioned, cultural groups found support in their collective solidarity. Private philanthropy did what they could to stop the hemorrhaging. And at Cultural Affairs, we leaned on everything we'd learned about investing in and uplifting our historically marginalized communities through the arts to rush support where it was needed most. In last year's budget, we set aside over \$12 million for COVID relief, and made more targeted investments based on our survey data, such as replenishing a relief fund for the hard hit arts educator community.

The role culture has played in these last two years goes far beyond economic recovery. For example, our Public Artist in Residence - or PAIR - with the Commission on Human Rights - Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya, created I Still Believe in our City in fall of 2020. As incidents of anti-Asian bias were on the rise here and across the country, this powerful public art campaign reminded our API neighbors that we were here for them, and called on all New Yorkers to stand in solidarity with our Asian communities. Our PAIR with the Civic Engagement Commission - Yazmany Arboleda - led the transformation of a de-commissioned Corrections bus into a community center on wheels. Called The

People's Bus, it anchored a citywide festival this past summer and continues to drive civic engagement at events around the city. At a time when New Yorkers are suffering from isolation associated with the lockdown, this artist-led effort helped repair our civic fabric and reconnect residents socially has resonated powerfully.

PAIR - which DCLA created in 2015 - is another example of laying the groundwork for cultural connections and relationships that could be relied on in a moment of crisis. It can be a major challenge to start something totally new under the best of circumstances. So doing this work thoughtfully, and deliberately, and over time is work that pays dividends when you need to respond quickly to new, complex challenges, like those created by the pandemic.

Thanks, in part, to this long-term effort to foster a greater understanding of the essential role artists play in the life of New York City, we were able to work with the Mayor to create the City Artist Corps this year. This \$25 million program, funded by federal relief money, showed just how far we've come in helping our civic partners understand the power artists have to heal and to bring people together. Starting this summer, thousands of artists received an infusion of much-needed money, helping make sure they could stay in New York and help drive our recovery. At the same time, it filled our open spaces, classrooms, galleries, and other spaces with the creative energy we'd all missed so dearly, and which is a critical ingredient for healthy communities.

Between these programs and the broader reopening that our collective commitment to public health has permitted, we've been overjoyed to see the return of creative programming to New York City. It's been important both as a potent symbol of recovery, and a very real return of the immense value that culture brings to our communities. The City has worked to support these reopening efforts. For example, our partners in the Mayor's Office created programs like Curtains Up NYC to help groups navigate the federal and state relief funds available to them. And at DCLA, our staff worked tirelessly to process changes to grant applications to make sure that city dollars could continue to flow to the cultural community.

Starting in March of this year, Open Culture NYC, created through legislation sponsored by Chair Van Bramer, was another bright spot for our cultural community. Hundreds of events were permitted since the program began. Alongside other programs that have brought city streets to life with dining and performances, Open Culture gave New Yorkers the chance to engage with arts programming in their neighborhoods. It also gave artists and arts groups the opportunity to earn much needed revenue.

As the Administration draws to a close, we are committed to building on and expanding the work begun during the pandemic. Just last week, DCLA announced a record-high \$51.4 million in grants for more than 1,000 cultural groups distributed from the Cultural Development Fund. Again, we set aside funding for areas of the city hardest hit by the pandemic, and for members of the cultural community who were most affected, like arts educators. Working with Council to adopt our largest-ever budget this year means we were also in a position to include relief funding for all CDF baseline grantees.

Importantly, far from putting it on hold, DCLA staff have used the crisis as an opportunity to advance our ongoing work of fostering greater equity within the sector. For instance, we've expanded multi-year funding to all CDF grantees, something previously only available for larger groups. We're weaving DEI further into our funding application and review process. And they'll be rolling out additional reforms to our funding process to reduce barriers and enhance equity in the months ahead.

How we've been able to rely on our equity work to respond to the pandemic shows, to me, that together, we've been on the right path. While we've come so far and struggled so much - there's much more work to do.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.



Statement by Dennis M. Walcott, President & CEO, Queens Public Library

New York City Council Committee on Libraries & Cultural Affairs

Public Hearing: “The New York City Public Libraries – Updates and COVID-19 Recovery”

December 13, 2021

Good morning. I am Dennis Walcott, President and CEO of Queens Public Library (QPL). It is a pleasure to be here. Thank you, Chair Van Bramer, Speaker Johnson and the members of this esteemed Committee, for the opportunity to discuss how the Library has adapted, is recovering, and has continued to serve during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before I begin my testimony, Chair Van Bramer, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge your 12 years of leading this important committee. Your passionate dedication to advancing the mission of New York City’s public libraries, coupled with the tireless work you put into leading this committee and advocating for libraries’ causes, led to significant advances such as universal six-day service and record amounts of capital funding for libraries. We at Queens Public Library are particularly proud of your years of service at QPL preceding your election to the Council. On behalf of our Trustees, staff and customers, I offer our sincere gratitude for your steadfast partnership and advocacy. I look forward to continuing our work together, as there is indeed still more to be done.

Queens was the epicenter of the nation’s coronavirus outbreak. Communities were devastated, leaving many people confronting the heartbreaking loss of family members, friends, colleagues and neighbors. Throughout this entire ordeal, QPL remained committed to serving the communities of Queens and helping the city recover and rebuild.

In March of 2020, QPL closed our buildings to help slow the spread of COVID-19. Despite the unprecedented disruption to in-person services, we swiftly transitioned from in-person to virtual programming and services, expanded our digital collections, and secured additional education resources for our customers. Within the first two weeks of our closure, QPL established a full calendar of virtual activities featuring very popular programs, such as our beloved children story times, Zumba classes, and weekly Hip-Hop DJ sessions with Ralph McDaniels on Instagram Live. Earlier this

year, we hosted a 24-hour Black Health and Healing Virtual Summit to focus on issues including mental health, health equity, parenting, civil rights and racism, and the disproportionate effects of the virus on different communities. Over 7,000 people viewed the event sessions in real time, with many more viewing when the recordings became available on our website. Our inventive and resourceful staff continue to use their creativity to broadcast unique and diverse programs for customers of all ages and interests. Our specialized services have also transitioned into the digital world. Prior to the pandemic, STACKS, our premier afterschool program, was operating 13 enrichment sites and 11 homework centers in our library network. Staff was able to modify the program to fit a virtual model, offering STEM workshops, art projects and more for children in kindergarten through fifth grade. For our adult learners, we transitioned classes for our customers to take remotely, such as our Basic Education-High School Equivalency, Citizenship classes, as well as case management sessions. In Fiscal Year 2020, our Adult Learning Program hosted more than 760 sessions, totaling 2,700 instructional hours, with an attendance of nearly 8,000—all in a virtual setting.

Since implementing virtual programming, we have hosted over 25,600 virtual programs with 423,000 live attendees. Our archived virtual programs have over 1 million views, as those who could not tune in live watched the content when their schedules permitted. We added over 86,000 items to our digital collections in order to meet the demand of our customers in the virtual world. From July 2020 to June 2021, we circulated over 1.4 million e-books and e-magazines, a more than 68 percent increase when compared to the same period the previous year. As we continue moving towards our full pre-pandemic operations, QPL will continue to offer a hybrid of in-person and virtual programming, as well as continue to enhance all of our e-content and digital resources, to ensure our customers can safely secure what they need in our branches, or via our digital platforms.

The pandemic has highlighted many inequities in our society, one of the most alarming being the lack of broadband access in households across New York City, particularly in Queens. Many homes in our borough do not have the access they need for schoolchildren to complete their homework assignments, for adults to find a job, or for grandparents to stay connected to family members and their peers.

Working to narrow the digital divide, QPL loaned 475 mobile hotspots to students in 2020 through our ongoing collaboration with the New York City Department of Education. In October, QPL announced an initiative funded by Sterling National Bank, National Grid and the Thomas & Jeanne Elmezzi Private Foundation to provide over 250 hotspots and laptops for loan to the public at the Lefrak City, South Jamaica, Astoria and Long Island City libraries. All of our locations provide free Wi-Fi access to individuals even when our buildings are closed, and 20 locations currently have enhanced Wi-Fi capabilities where the signal is available up to 150 yards beyond our physical walls. From July 2020 through June 2021, over 500,000 New Yorkers

accessed QPL's Wi-Fi network, an 11% increase from the same period the previous year.

In response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and many other Black people, and the national reckoning around race and systemic racism in our society, I established a working group at the Library, the President's Council for Racial Equity (PCRE).

The mission of the PCRE is to identify racial barriers in policy, procedure, practice and history that may have a negative impact on Black employees and customers, and to identify solutions to create a more equitable workplace. PCRE members, who total over 50 dedicated employees, are reviewing QPL's recruiting, hiring and promotion practices, culture, learning and growth opportunities, governance, programs and services, collections, and outreach and marketing strategies, which will culminate in a comprehensive plan for lasting change at our institution.

Throughout the pandemic, we collaborated with New York State and New York City on various initiatives. Our Lefferts, Kew Gardens Hills and Windsor Park branches served as COVID-19 testing sites. Our Flushing branch served as a vaccination site, and our Ozone Park branch continues to do so. Additionally, QPL has hosted many mobile testing and vaccination pop-up events at our libraries, including one just last week at our East Elmhurst branch. Moreover, we are collaborating with the City to assist in the effort to vaccinate as many children, aged 5-11, as possible. Thirteen of our sites served as polling locations for Early Voting, primary elections, and Election Day to maximize citizen participation in the democratic process. In the summer months, our libraries served as cooling centers during heat emergencies to protect our most vulnerable populations.

Queens Public Library has emerged from this pandemic like so many of our resilient communities. In July 2020, select branches began serving as to-go sites, offering customers the ability to reserve and pick-up materials. While closely monitoring public health conditions, adhering carefully to health and safety protocols, and adjusting as needed, we gradually began reintroducing additional library services and reopening more buildings to the public. Today, we have 57 libraries open across the borough where customers can browse our collections, access computers, ask reference questions, work, and study. We have gradually been reintroducing in-person story times, programs, and classes. Our customers are happy we are back.

As we welcomed our customers back into our buildings, we knew that some would still face barriers to returning. For too long, our policy of imposing fines for late library materials have discouraged individuals from accessing our services. We temporarily suspended late fines during the pandemic, and in October 2021, Queens Public Library, along with the Brooklyn and New York public library systems, permanently ended the practice of charging late fines on overdue materials and

cleared all existing late fines on customers' accounts. This bold act cleared late fines on 289,000 accounts in Queens, and unblocked 27,900 cards. Since the new policy was enacted on October 5, there has been a ten percent increase in the number of impacted cardholders who borrowed physical materials compared to the month prior, and a 16 percent increase in request activity among impacted cardholders. We hope the new policy continues to encourage more people to return to their libraries or become cardholders, no matter their circumstances.

Our reopening plan includes serving our communities outside our physical locations. Our Outreach staff has been utilizing our mobile libraries for several initiatives, including a borough-wide "Wellness Tour," which kicked off in September. Our staff and mobile library partnered with an activist orchestra, "The Dream Unfinished," to raise awareness and disseminate facts about vaccines and the dangerous consequences of refusing them, at performances they held in Queens. The mobile library is stopping at transportation hubs, laundromats and other high-traffic areas in neighborhoods such as Far Rockaway, Howard Beach, Rosedale and Queens Village, to bring services and information to people. We have also collaborated with various community-based organizations, such as the League of Women Voters and the NAACP, to conduct voter registration drives outside our libraries throughout this election season. These efforts build upon the highly successful civic engagement work we conducted last year to ensure a full and accurate census count.

Despite the magnitude of the challenges they have faced throughout the crisis, QPL staff have responded with professionalism, creativity, and fortitude. Their dedication and resilience have been an inspiring reminder of the Library's enduring commitment to our communities over the past 125 years.

QPL transforms the lives of people of all ages, backgrounds, and circumstances by cultivating intellectual and personal growth. As the center of community life, we build strong neighborhoods through the multitude of free programs and services we provide. In order to be there for those who need us most, we need you and your colleagues in government to continue to stand with and support libraries. A true recovery for all starts with strong libraries.

Thank you once again, Chair Van Bramer, Speaker Johnson, and the members of this committee for your years of outstanding support. I wish you and your loved ones happy and healthy holidays.

BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY

Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries & International Intergroup Relations
Oversight – The New York City Public Libraries – Updates and COVID-19 Recovery
December 13, 2021

Good morning. I am Linda Johnson, President & CEO of Brooklyn Public Library. I'm grateful to the committee for the opportunity to testify this morning and especially grateful to Chair Van Bramer for his unmatched library enthusiasm and unflagging leadership and support over the course of the past 12 years. It's bittersweet to finally be back in the chamber, in person, for our last hearing with you at the helm.

Two weeks ago, Brooklyn Public Library kicked off its 125th birthday. On November 30, 1896, the Brooklyn Common Council passed a resolution to establish Brooklyn Public Library and the first branch opened soon after in a former public school building. I've been thinking about how rare it is to create a legacy that has a meaningful impact on the lives of four, five, even six future generations: people we may never meet, whose realities we can't fully imagine.

Jimmy, I am convinced that your library legacy has had a profound impact on our city, and will continue to touch the lives of New Yorkers for generations to come. From the beginning, you understood the democratic, versatile power of public libraries, and along the way you have brought so many into that understanding. Thank you for so eloquently and persuasively advocating for our systems, the 8 million New Yorkers we currently serve, and generations to come.

Reopening our Branches

Since we testified last November, the way our libraries serve New Yorkers has changed dramatically. In the winter of 2020, Brooklyn Public Library was offering grab-and-go lobby service and producing thousands of virtual programs. In the spring and summer of 2021, we began to gradually reopen our branches for book browsing and computer use. With the partnership of the Department of Transportation, we also created outdoor library spaces where Brooklynites could read, use our free WiFi, listen to a multi-lingual Storytime, or reconnect with their neighbors.

By this July, all three library systems had fully reopened our collective 217 branches to the public, with the exception of those under construction. In Brooklyn, we have already welcomed more than 900,000 patrons of all ages back to their neighborhood library to enjoy a safe, clean, dignified space; browse our collection; use a computer or printer; and enlist the help of our librarians.

We have reopened several refurbished library spaces, including Rugby, Windsor Terrace, and Cortelyou. Our newly renovated flagship, Central Library, has a new Welcome Center named after Brooklyn's own Librarian of Congress, Major Owens; a Civic Commons for community engagement; a New & Noteworthy book gallery; and contemporary Business & Career Center.

BPL also opened its first new branch in nearly four decades. The Adams Street Library serves the communities of DUMBO, Farragut, and Vinegar Hill, and serves as an accessible and inspiring model for 21st-century libraries.

Throughout the borough, our dedicated staff have worked diligently and creatively to restore library services to our communities. In all of our branches, we have implemented safety guidelines in order to gradually restore in-person programming. Brooklyn Public Library librarians and staff have simultaneously continued to produce thousands of virtual programs, from English conversation groups to cooking classes to personalized resume help.

Digital Inclusion

Of course, we are keenly aware of the hundreds of thousands of Brooklynites without access to affordable broadband and have been doing everything in our power to bridge the digital divide—a divide which only grew more extreme during the pandemic.

When we realized, for example, that our Adult Basic Education students could no longer attend virtual classes toward the end of the month, when their cell phone data plans ran out, we teamed up with two organizations—No One Left Offline and Devices for Students—to lend mobile hotspots. No one should be barred from improving their reading skills because they can't afford broadband.

The Emergency Broadband Benefit, which the FCC implemented this spring, offers new subsidies to qualifying households, and the new federal infrastructure bill includes a permanent subsidy. This is meaningful progress toward digital equity only if people successfully enroll in and receive these subsidies. So BPL librarians created a Broadband Benefit guide and are now helping patrons navigate the government application—a powerful example of how public libraries can connect New Yorkers to impactful benefits.

To date, we have installed rooftop antennas at 50 branches, amplifying free, reliable WiFi 300 feet in every direction. And at select outdoor library spaces, we offered laptop loans for patrons without devices to log on.

Center for Brooklyn History

Seeking to fully activate our outdoor spaces, we also created several outdoor exhibitions, including *Brooklyn Resists*, at the new Center for Brooklyn History. In October 2020, Brooklyn Public Library merged with the former Brooklyn Historical Society to create Brooklyn's first public research library and the largest archive of Brooklyn history in the world. *Brooklyn Resists* introduced patrons to the power of that collection with photographs, documents, and ephemera that tell the story of how generations of Black Brooklynites have risen up against racial injustice.

Eliminating Late Fines

Whether it's democratizing Brooklyn's archives or amplifying WiFi from our rooftops, Brooklyn Public Library strives to remove barriers to access. That's why, with our partners at Queens and New York Public Libraries, we permanently eliminated late fines this fall.

Now, patrons are only charged for lost materials more than four weeks overdue, charges which are removed as soon as the materials are returned. In other words, as long as you return your books, you will always be able to check out more. No one will be prevented from using their library because of unpaid late fines.

This is a major milestone in the history of our city's libraries. We have joined several urban library systems across the country in setting a new precedent, one informed by our ideals of access and equity.

Business & Career Services

In the wake of the pandemic, Brooklyn Public Library is especially focused on ensuring our city rebuilds a more equitable economy. Our newly renovated Business and Career Center is offering finance and marketing workshops for small businesses, and our annual PowerUp! competition awarded seed money to aspiring entrepreneurs. This year, 70 percent of our PowerUp! participants had never before owned a business. 68 percent were women and 56 percent were Black—and all are now better equipped to achieve their dreams and enrich their communities.

Pathways to Leadership

If we are to foster equity in our community, we understand that we must foster equity within our organization. This fall, BPL launched a new scholarship program called Pathways to Leadership to support members of our staff from underrepresented groups who wish to earn their Masters in Library Science. In addition to financial support, participants will receive mentorship and leadership training and will eventually have the opportunity to become librarians at BPL. The program is designed to diversify the field of librarianship, which has long been dominated by white women. We're extremely excited for our inaugural class, who will matriculate this January.

Looking Forward

There is much to look forward to. Our Libraries remain committed to helping the City end the pandemic. BPL has continued our partnership with the NYC Test & Trace Corps. We helped older adult patrons make vaccine appointments and hosted vaccine information sessions with partners such as Brooklyn Methodist, and the Caribbean Women's Health Association. We're partnering with the city to offer walk in COVID vaccines to five to eleven year-olds at five of our branches, beginning with Coney Island and New Lots in the coming weeks.

Even if we all manage to vaccinate every last eligible New Yorker, we know our city still faces unprecedented challenges. Learning loss. High unemployment and extreme economic inequity. The effects of social isolation and trauma. But libraries are not powerless in the face of these challenges. We have long known how to support students and jobseekers. How to create more

equitable and more cohesive communities. With the renewed support of this committee and the incoming City Council and administration, we know that public libraries can help our city rebuild. No other institution interacts with every neighborhood on a human scale. No other institution is trusted by teens, immigrants, and older adults alike, and offers such versatile services for them all.

We're grateful to this committee and the entire City Council for recognizing that and consistently championing public libraries as one of our City's most important assets and allies.

Thank you.



NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL

**COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES, AND INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP
RELATIONS**

The New York City Public Libraries - Updates and COVID-19 Recovery

Monday December 13th, 2021

Testimony of The New York Public Library

Good morning, my name is Tony Marx and I am the president of The New York Public Library (NYPL). Founded in 1895, NYPL is our country's largest public library system. We operate through 88 neighborhood branches across three boroughs: The Bronx, Manhattan and Staten Island, as well as four world-class research facilities: The Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Thomas Yoseloff Business Center at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library, and the Library for the Performing Arts. I would like to thank City Council Speaker Corey Johnson, Committee Chair Jimmy Van Bramer, and the members of the committee for your ongoing support of libraries and for the opportunity to testify today on The New York Public Library's efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic and these initial stages of recovery.

As observed in the presence of a new variant of concern, Omicron, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be with us. The health and safety threats stemming from this health crisis remain ongoing and unpredictable, often overlapping with the city's process for recovery. But the Library has adjusted to the erratic and uncertain nature of this crisis since its outset, maintaining its commitment to safe, accessible, and equitable programs and services for all New Yorkers, regardless of the ongoing nature of both the pandemic and its recovery. In March 2020, The

New York Public Library made the unprecedented decision to close all of our branches to the public. While this was a difficult measure to take, it was indicative of our prioritization of the health and safety of our patrons and staff above all else. Immediately after closure in March, we enhanced and expanded our remote services. This quick pivot ensured access to books, information, resources, and programs through webinars, classes, book clubs, live tutoring, and career and financial counseling that support schools, job-seekers, and communities. For branch patrons, we expanded our collection of e-books on platforms such as SimplyE and Overdrive, with a total of ten million lends since March 2020. We also launched ShelfHelp, a service that worked with patrons to personally curate a bundle of books that match their interests. For researchers, we made our materials even more accessible, digitizing many items from our collections and providing a Scan and Deliver service that allows patrons to request selections of books and scholarly journals for digital delivery, scanning close to 900,000 pages from closure in March 2020 to November 2021.

Research libraries also expanded remote access to resources such as databases, digital research books, and academic e-books. For students, we partnered with Brainfuse, an online tutoring company, to make free one-on-one tutoring in English and Spanish available to students of all ages. For job-seekers and those facing financial challenges, we provided online job training courses, one-on-one career and financial counseling, coaching for interviews, and templates for resumes, cover letters, and emails. Many of these courses are part of our TechConnect initiative, which is specifically geared toward the development of professional and technological skill-sets such as advanced proficiency within the Microsoft Office suite, coding, and website development. We also established key virtual resources on health and wellness, food security, and housing/tenant rights to patrons and communities affected by the pandemic. We have maintained many of these digital and remote offerings while making adjustments to others as the nature of the pandemic and recovery have evolved.

The Library has also reached great milestones during this challenging time. In September, we opened our *Treasures* exhibit at our Stephen A. Schwarzman location. The exhibit is a permanent installation which showcases rotating “treasures” from our research collections such as manuscripts, artworks, and letters, among others. Since its opening in September, we have had over 58,000 visitors come through this exhibition. This past summer, we also officially opened our fully-renovated central circulating library, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library (SNFL), a \$200M renovation with eight floors of key amenities for all ages.

Adjusting to the limitations of the COVID-19 crisis is not just about digital offerings. We remained keenly aware of those patrons on the wrong side of the digital divide who relied solely on our physical presence to access information. We began reopening in July 2020, with eight branches for Grab and Go service. This number of sites continued to grow and our service offerings continued to expand until we restored full service, system-wide on July 6th, 2021. The restoration of service in July marked a critical stage in NYPL’s recovery. It was soon followed by an outdoor programming plan with a focus on high needs communities that included 100 outdoor storytimes with 4,300 attendees and the return of a robust Summer Learning initiative (which restored in-branch giveaways). Additional aspects of service restoration included the return of our bookmobile service, which is especially critical to those communities impacted by long-term closures associated with renovations and other capital projects.

The Library has always been cognizant of the way this pandemic has exacerbated existing inequities in our city. That is why we supplemented our virtual 2020 Summer Reading program with the distribution of 40,000 program kits to students in underserved communities in the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island. It is also why we launched services like ShelfHelp and telephone story times in several languages. In the fall, we took another critical step when we eliminated late fines on books and other circulating materials, which removed a barrier to access and ensured that all New Yorkers could freely take advantage of the services and

resources libraries have to offer. Looking ahead, we will maintain our focus on equity in all aspects of our programs and services because we know the integral role this plays in our city's recovery.

In addition to our pivot to digital offerings, swift reopening, and historic achievements, the Library has maintained its commitment to its capital agenda. Almost immediately after the March 2020 closure, we advocated for the ability to safely continue with investments in the physical infrastructure of our branches which we balanced with the needs of our communities. Thankfully, the City restarted priority capital projects such as the renovations slated for Carnegie branches like Melrose, Fort Washington, 125th St, Hunts Point, and Port Richmond. More recently, we have proceeded, along with the City, with our plans to build a new, state of the art library in Inwood in partnership with a 100% affordable housing project, and completed construction at New Amsterdam, Roosevelt Island, and an Inwood temporary space. We have also continued the construction of a brand new Charleston branch on Staten Island, which will be completed early next year. Time and time again, we have seen the impact of your investment in branches like Stapleton, Washington Heights, and Van Cortlandt on circulation, program attendance, and visits.

Amid the pandemic and its ongoing recovery, the Library remained a trusted institution to engender participation in civic initiatives and a reliable partner to the City's efforts to manage the crisis. While our 2020 efforts were confined to activities such as providing voter registration forms for National Voter Registration Day in our open branches and limited participation in Census 2020 outreach, the Library safely expanded these efforts in 2021 with a voter engagement initiative focused on the 2021 municipal elections. During the June primaries, NYPL introduced a number of voter education and civic engagement programs and outreach efforts that included Ranked Choice Voting training sessions and panel discussions targeting low turnout segments of the electorate. Following the primaries, the Library participated in

efforts to encourage voter registration as part of National Voter Registration Day and held a virtual event, “New York City After the Election,” which featured the perspectives of thinkers and activists at the forefront of city politics in a discussion on climate change, police reform, fair elections, and other important issues facing New York’s future. Events leading up to and amid the primaries were coordinated with the help of our co-sponsors and community partners at Queens Public Library, Brooklyn Public Library, the Campaign Finance Board, the Hispanic Federation, Gothamist, and Citizens Union, among others.

Perhaps the most critical of our partnership efforts was our collaboration with the City on initiatives to help manage the impact of the pandemic on New Yorkers. In 2020 and 2021, closed NYPL branches doubled as everything from Covid-testing sites to cooling centers, while others were repurposed as Learning Labs that provided remote learning and after school assistance for K through 8 students. NYPL also worked with city agencies like the Department of Transportation’s City Streets program and the New York City Parks Department to create and establish outdoor programming spaces.

It is difficult to separate the pandemic from recovery, because The NYPL has been simultaneously focused on both since March 2020. This is why digital offerings like Scan and Deliver and outdoor programming overlapped with our reopening plan and the restoration of our services. In the nearly two years since the pandemic began, the Library never endeavored to go “back to normal,” but, rather, to adjust to the new and current normal. Accordingly, we will continue to apply lessons learned and innovative new approaches developed during the pandemic to our programs and services moving forward. But the overlapping nature of the pandemic and its recovery also require our continued focus on in-person services and programs. To that end, NYPL hosted a Welcome Week in October that included a series of open houses across our branches aimed to continue our mission to ensure our communities are

poised to succeed and recover as the city rebuilds. These open houses included giveaways and special programs tailored to individual communities, among other activities. When compared to the previous four-week period, Welcome Week increased both checkouts and visits system-wide by 12% and 14% respectively. More specifically, the initiative yielded a 21% increase in checkouts in high needs areas.

Thanks to activities like Welcome Week, our ability to quickly and safely restore services, and initiatives such as outdoor programming, our in-person circulation and visitation numbers have rebounded to 60 percent of pre-pandemic levels. While this number is encouraging, the Library currently faces a difficult balancing act between digital and physical offerings, as we now provide more programs and services than we did before the pandemic. Increased offerings have further strained our resources, which are also constrained by the same pandemic-related shortages, supply chain disruptions, and labor issues currently faced by all other industries. All of this ultimately puts increased pressure on our staff, who have, since early in the pandemic, worked in uncertain and difficult circumstances. Their dedication to the Library's mission and to serving our communities over the last 20 months is nothing short of extraordinary.

2020 and 2021 have proved to be challenging years for our city. Both the pandemic and its associated recovery remain ongoing, ebbing and flowing within an overall context of unpredictability. But amid this uncertainty -- as with many other times of crisis throughout this city's history -- The New York Public Library has remained consistent, demonstrating its commitment time and time again to meet the ever-evolving nature of the challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery. We innovated new ways to reach our communities and patrons with the same accessible and equitable service we always have, all while staying safe. We are proud to have played an integral role in the city and state's recovery efforts, but we could not have done so without your support. It is only with your continued support that we feel

equipped to take on the next stage of this crisis and maintain our unwavering focus on equal access to books, knowledge, and education for all, regardless of the challenges we face.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I remain available to answer any questions you may have.

Greetings Councilmembers,

I'm grateful for the opportunity to share some words. My name is Amy Schumer and I am a consumer of conscience, a fellow New Yorker, and a supporter of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, the award-winning human rights organization that works to protect farmworkers from abusive conditions in agricultural fields across the East Coast. I'm here to ask that this committee and the chair, Councilmember Miller, set a vote on Res. 1156, a resolution calling on Wendy's to join the Fair Food Program and support farmworkers' human rights.

For years now, I have been a supporter of the Coalition Immokalee Workers, joining my voice with my sisters and brothers in the fields to demand dignity and justice in the fields they harvest. The Coalition and its award-winning Fair Food Program have provided a proven solution to the abuse that has permeated agriculture historically, working to create an industry free from sexual violence against farmworker women. Hundreds of thousands of consumers like myself have heard farmworkers' calls for justice and have witnessed the success of the Coalition's efforts. They have responded by demanding that Wendy's stop standing in the way of progress and join the Fair Food Program. Res. 1156, a resolution urging Wendy's to support farmworkers' human rights by joining the Fair Food Program, is an opportunity for New Yorkers to add their voices to the ever-growing choir.

The resolution has 28 co-sponsors, including a majority of this committee. My fellow New Yorkers and I have done our part, we have made calls, sent emails, and showed up to testify in support of this resolution. Now it's time for this Committee to do its part and bring this resolution to a vote.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amy'.

Amy Schumer

December 14, 2021

EDUCATION
ENVIRONMENT
CONSUMER
TECHNOLOGY
ARTS
PROTECTIONS

THE COUNCIL THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Appearance Card



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in favor in opposition

Date: 12/13/21

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Address: 89-11 MERRICK BLVD

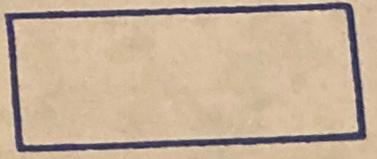
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Name: LINDA JOHNSON

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Name: SHEELAH FEINBERG

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Name: Gonzalo Casals

Address: 31 Chambers Street

I represent: NYC Dept of Cultural Affairs

Address: 11

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in favor in opposition

Date: 12/13/2021

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Name: Tony Maix, President

Address: The New York Public

I represent: Library

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