

**NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL**

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

**OVERSIGHT - NYC's Public Library's and COVID-19**

**Tuesday November 17, 2020**

Good morning, my name is Tony Marx and I am the president and CEO of The New York Public Library (NYPL). I am joined by Iris Weinshall, NYPL's Chief Operating Officer. I would like to thank City Council Speaker Corey Johnson, Committee Chair Jimmy Van Bramer, and the members of the committee for their support of libraries at a challenging time and the opportunity to testify today on the impact of COVID-19 to NYPL.

As evidenced by the difficult decision we made in March of this year to close all of our branches, the New York Public Library has prioritized the health and safety of our patrons and staff since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. But in spite of physical closure and unprecedented challenges, we have found a way to maintain our commitments to equitable, safe, and accessible service for all New Yorkers. Almost immediately after closure, we expanded our remote services. The aim of these offerings was not just to make our existing programs and services available remotely, but to serve those members of our communities most impacted by the pandemic. This quick pivot ensured access to information, resources, and programs for New Yorkers through webinars, classes, book clubs, live tutoring, and career and financial counseling that support schools, job-seekers, and communities. For branch patrons, we launched ShelfHelp, a service that works with them to personally curate a bundle of books that match their interests. For researchers, we expanded our materials and made them more accessible, digitizing our collections and providing a Scan and Deliver service that allows patrons to request selections of books and scholarly journals for digital delivery. 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 specifically geared toward the development of professional 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.

The impact of this swift adjustment to online platforms to our patrons is substantiated by our data. We gained over 100,000 new e-readers through our SimplyE app during closure, with another 26,000 since we reopened. E-checkouts are up 40% from FY18 to FY20 and we've seen a 25% increase in database sessions and a 156% increase in digital research book sessions during the same period. There were also close to 40,000 content interactions on Brainfuse during closure, with an additional 10,000 since reopening. We also circulated nearly 350,000 physical and e-books to children and teens as part of our Summer Reading initiative. But numbers only tell part of the story, I have appended a spreadsheet that includes additional anecdotes from patrons around the city, expressed through an NYPL survey, which shows their appreciation for a wide array of remote services. I have also included various feedback we have received on remote research offerings and Phase 1 service via a wide range of communication mediums.

During closure, we learned a great deal about the value of remote programming, which has informed our decision to maintain these digital offerings moving forward. At the same time, and

with our continued prioritization of health and safety in mind, we knew that many of our patrons still relied solely on our physical presence, which is why we launched Phase 1 of our reopening plan as quickly as possible in July. In Phase 1, eight branches opened for Grab and Go Service; in the following months, this number expanded to 50. Just last week, after satisfying the necessary health and safety requirements, we made the decision to move to Phase 2, which began on November 9th, before reversing it on Monday the 16th due to rising Covid infection rates. On the research side, Phase 2 allowed patrons to request 1-on-1 appointments to consult collections in-person at all of our centers. Scan and Deliver services continued, and patrons could pick up materials through a Grab and Go model at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and Library for the Performing Arts. On the branch side, Phase 2 restored the usage of desktop computers and browsing at 14 branches. This expanded service is key for patrons without internet access who have been unable to use our remote services and rely on our branches to address needs like filling out and printing forms associated with affordable housing, healthcare, and unemployment.

All of our reopening plans have been, and continue to be contingent upon our ability to guarantee the health and safety of our patrons and staff, which is why we have introduced a new set of health and safety protocols and accommodations. Masks must be worn by patrons and staff at all times. Ventilation at all open locations has been inspected and optimized by our health and safety teams. Physical distancing measures, enhanced cleaning protocols, and protective equipment such as sneeze guards are in place, and all returned materials must be quarantined for 96 hours. To accommodate our patrons at this time, we are also freezing existing fines on all items through January 1st, allowing digital cardholders to check out physical materials, and temporarily removing any fine-based blocks on patrons' accounts.

Prioritizing health and safety also means constantly assessing and reassessing our reopening plan, and being ready to make swift adjustments as needed. Within a few days of launching Phase 2, we rolled it back in all branches on Staten Island due to increasing cases in the borough, leading to the Governor's designation as a "Yellow Zone." We made this decision in spite of being counseled by our safety experts that we can safely operate Phase 2 level service within a Yellow Zone. In fact, seeing rising cases in other parts of our service areas, in particular the Bronx, we made the decision to roll back to Phase 1 system-wide. We continue to monitor all of the guidance, the trends, and our own operations in weighing these decisions carefully. We have had an excellent track record to date, and while we are confident in our protocols and City and State Guidance, we are willing to make adjustments and our own decisions if deemed necessary to keep staff and the public safe.

While the Library's ultimate goal is to provide as much service as possible during this difficult moment, it needs to work within its capacity and resources. Under current conditions, the costs associated with operating branches have increased. At the same time, there has been a decline in available staff (due to necessary accommodations, including health and child care issues). The decisions on which branches to open in Phases 1 and 2 were not easy ones but made based on a variety of factors including, size, physical layout, proximity to other libraries, staff availability, systems functionality (HVAC, etc), ability to implement safety protocols, among others.

But even with an expanded online presence and a limited reopening plan, we know that plenty of New Yorkers are still falling through the cracks, unable to access our services or participate in important national initiatives due to barriers like the digital divide or branch closure. With this and our commitment to equitable service in mind, we have engaged directly with our communities to bring services and initiatives to them whenever possible. While our summer

reading 2020 program provided eBook access to our younger patrons, we also distributed 40,000 summer reading book kits to students in underserved communities in the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island. These books were distributed thanks to our cooperation and partnership with the Department of Education and elected officials across the City, including several members of the City Council. In September, all three of our systems participated in National Voter Registration Day, a national, non-partisan, civic holiday celebrating democracy on the fourth Tuesday of September every year. As part of this effort, we ensured that all of our open branches were supplied with paper voter registration forms. As New York City reopened, Census Navigators, along with library partners and volunteers, safely expanded Census outreach outdoors, and adapted with our neighbors to the new normal. Recognizing that one in five New York City residents does not have reliable broadband access, the three library systems worked together to bring Census messaging to people's doorsteps. In collaboration with NYC Census, the Library placed multilingual posters in high-priority zip codes, conducted billboard campaigns in high-traffic hard-to-count neighborhoods, in-person outreach in partnership with the U.S. Census Bureau, and hosted virtual programming for all New Yorkers. We also worked with the New York City Board of Elections to host four Election Day sites at our branches.

But equity doesn't just mean overcoming challenges like the digital divide. When Black Lives Matter protests took place across the city over the summer months, we reaffirmed our commitment to social equity and fighting ignorance by expanding our digital collections on Black heritage, Black liberation, and anti-racism through our Schomburg Center for Black Culture. Within the first few weeks of its availability, our Black Liberation reading list had 35,000 checkouts.

Amid our efforts to maintain accessible and equitable service and reach communities, we have served as a valuable partner to the City in its efforts to stop the spread of the coronavirus and

look out for New Yorkers through repurposing our closed branches. Over the past several months, closed branches have doubled as everything from Covid-testing sites to cooling centers, and we are currently in discussions with the City on repurposing others as Learning Labs that will provide remote learning and after school assistance for K through 8 students.

On the capital front, due to the Covid crisis, the city stopped all capital projects in March, including the entirety of the NYPL's 54 active projects. Since March, the City has released 19 of these projects, leaving 35 on hold. Only projects that were nearly completed or already in construction were given the green light to continue, including the new Charleston library on Staten Island and a new Roosevelt Island Library. We continue to have regular conversations with the City's Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the Department of Design and Construction (DDC) and the Economic Development Corp (EDC) about restarting additional projects and await their direction. We know that a significant delay in the capital process will more than likely result in increased project costs and timelines and stand ready to work with the City to get these projects moving again.

2020 has been a difficult year for our City. But I hope you will find that -- as with many other times of crisis throughout this city's history -- the New York Public Library has been there for New Yorkers. We have innovated new ways to reach our communities and patrons with the same accessible and equitable service we always have, all while staying safe. We have also reached communities disproportionately impacted by this pandemic and evolved as the nature of this challenge has changed. We are proud to have played an integral role in New York City's recovery efforts, but we could not have done so without your support, which I hope we can count on as we continue to work together through these unprecedented times. With this continued support, we believe that regardless of the challenges this city faces, the New York Public Library will always prioritize equal access to books, knowledge, and education.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. We remain available to answer any questions you have.

## APPENDIX 1 - Patron Survey Results

OFFERING	PATRON COMMENT
<b>Overall</b>	"The Library has had a positive impact in our kids' education even under these circumstances. Even though it doesn't compare to being in a library atmosphere surrounded by books & great staff, my kids have found very important information for their school projects. Thanks for being an inspiration during these difficult times and not allowing this crisis stopping you from contributing with the best resource that libraries give to our communities which is KNOWLEDGE and other great services to improve our society."
<b>Remote Library Card Registration</b>	You are my connection and great resource; I believe my library card expired (!) and I was unable to get to a physical library location to renew before the 14th. NYPL seems to have graciously honored it since closing. I deeply appreciate this.
<b>Remote Library Card Registration</b>	I was able to re-register for a new library card online after discovering my current card was expired. The process took a minute, and I was immediately able to begin checking out e-books and audiobooks, which I did not know how to do previously. I have been able to organize a zoom book club with friends, using e-books available on Overdrive through NYPL. The book club has added structure to my totally structureless quarantine life, and has been very positive. Thanks so much!
<b>Circulating eBooks &amp; Audiobooks</b>	"I am a graduate student. Because I typically access resources through my library (most often physical books), I had not yet explored NYPL's online resources. Since quarantine started, I have been delighted to find my favorite non-fiction books available for free (!!!); most of these, published by Verso Books or popular presses, are not available digitally from my research library's database. I had been planning to dip into savings to purchase physical copies of new releases, and then found them online (meaning I can save that money and use it to support my out-of-work immediate family members)."
<b>Databases and eResources</b>	"I have always used your digital research material. The fact that some databases previously non available are now consultable from home has been truly wonderful. My research is usually based on historical data, that you are providing these days in an even better way."

<b>Databases and eResources</b>	I am a librarian at another NYC institution, currently doing research for an exhibition project. Before my workplace closed to the public on March 13, I was using the small group of commercial databases we can afford to subscribe to. I feared I would fall dangerously behind on my work, without my library's paper collections and onsite-only electronic resources. Being able to access ProQuest and Readex products from home is a godsend. Really incredible! It's definitely a very positive development in what is a very difficult time. THANK YOU!
<b>Databases and eResources</b>	I'm EXTREMELY grateful to NYPL for allowing me home access to Proquest Historical Newspapers, America's Historical Newspapers, American Antiquarian Periodicals and Ancestry. Without them I couldn't do my work. I'm the author of several nonfiction books, working on two book proposals.
<b>Digitized Research Collections</b>	My local academic and public libraries are closed, and NYPL holds an online archive I need to verify a citation
<b>Digitized Research Collections</b>	As a school librarian at a small school, I have relied on the Digital Collections to help my students with research
<b>NYPL.org &amp; Library Content</b>	I'm really enjoying the Book Club collaboration with Alison Stewart and WNYC. I appreciated that they made more electronic copies of Deacon King Kong available so I was able to get a copy quickly and read in time to enjoy the interview. I loved the interview with James McBride and any opportunity to hear from authors. I also have been personally loving the book recommendations that come to my inbox each day this year. I really appreciate the Book Club or any kind of opportunity to dive deeper into discussion (even more Book Club podcast episodes maybe) as an opportunity to discuss aspects of the book and listen to perspectives from those in the community and from the author!
<b>NYPL.org &amp; Library Content</b>	I enjoy the readings, blogs and lectures. I've been motivated to access more available resources. While I am very aware of the online services, received an email from Emblem that included NYPL's link.
<b>Reference and Educational Services</b>	The Shakespeare reading group that I participated in at my branch for a few years asked the librarian for help. We got online and are meeting weekly during the sequestration.
<b>Reference and Educational Services</b>	Brainfuse really helps - thank u



<b>Programming</b>	The TechConnect online classes are wonderful. Please offer more and open up the number of spaces available. They are often closed since they are so popular. The instructors are very patient, organized in their presentation and knowledgeable. I appreciate that they don't just talk in generalities about a topic (for example on Shopping Online; Intro to Twitter) but go to the specific site and show exactly how to use it. They truly aim to address the questions of attendees. I wish NYPL could offer the recorded sessions later, but it appears this may not be feasible.
<b>Programming</b>	My toddler LOVES going to story time. Although it's remote, it's a delight to see him light up when he sees our librarian (we've rewatched her story time several times already :) Plus, we get to see other story times we wouldn't go to because of location.
<b>Programming</b>	Online Storytime has been a wonderful resource to share with Pre-K families with whom I work. Also, it has been a lovely way to get to know other Children's Librarians throughout the City.

## **APPENDIX 2 - Feedback on Remote Research Offerings and Phase 1 Service**

### On Research Rooms Reopening

- *Hi [name removed for privacy], I just wanted to thank you and the whole library staff for opening the research rooms back up. It made a huge difference to my work to be in the Wertheim Study yesterday. I really appreciate it! I've also been extremely impressed with and grateful for the incredible research assistance that the NYPL has provided during the pandemic. The electronic delivery of scans from the Shared Collection and the Marli by mail programs have been life-savers for me and my work. Thank you so much! Take care, [name removed for privacy]*
- *Dear [name removed for privacy], I just sat down at a table in room 217 and before I do anything else, I want to thank you. I feel overwhelmed with gratitude at the opportunity to be here. I was here the day before the Library closed, and I am here now, and I am practically weeping with the emotion of it, and thinking of all that has happened between then and now. I am so, so, so thankful! Being able to come here today is wonderful, and it's the first thing that's really made me feel hopeful again that we might be able to return to normalcy one day, and leave the pandemic in the past. Finding a shelf full of books I'd requested waiting for me means it's not just like Thanksgiving, it's also like Christmas coming early, too--all the celebratory holidays rolled into one. Thank you so much for all that you and your colleagues are doing to allow research and scholarship to flourish in*

*this difficult time. I understand very well how challenging it is for the Library to reopen, and I appreciate very much the courage and generosity of spirit of the NYPL staff members who've made it possible for scholars to return. Librarianship is a noble profession, and you are all among the city's heroes, for sure. [name removed for privacy]*

- *Dear [name removed for privacy], I have just came back from the library, and am thrilled about the opportunity to once again have a worthy research environment. Given the fact that only recently my partner and I returned to the US after a long medical treatment he underwent due to his illness, returning to the library today was wrapped up with even greater importance.*



**Statement by Dennis Walcott, President & CEO, Queens Public Library**

**New York City Council Committee Cultural Affairs, Libraries & International  
Intergroup Relations**

**Oversight - The New York City Public Libraries and COVID-19**

**November 17, 2020**

Good morning. I am Dennis Walcott, President & CEO at Queens Public Library (QPL). It is a pleasure to be here today. On behalf of everyone at QPL, thank you, Chair Van Bramer, Speaker Johnson and the members of the committee for holding this hearing and providing me the opportunity to testify on this important topic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every citizen, business and government in the world. It has changed the way we interact with one another and has forced us to reconsider all the things we take for granted as “normal.” I had to make the difficult decision to close all of our locations and shut our doors to the public on March 16, 2020, to serve the greater good and try to mitigate the spread of this disease.

It was a difficult decision because I know that hundreds of thousands of people rely on our collections and free programs and services on a daily basis. However, it was a decision that had to be made in order to save lives. As the City began to shut down, with schools closing and all non-essential business shuttering, we at Queens Public Library knew that we had to rapidly alter our service delivery mechanisms in order to serve a public now confined to their homes and unable to visit our physical locations.

Our world-class staff swiftly adapted our in-person programming to fit the virtual world. Within the first two weeks of our closure, QPL established an online calendar offering a range of virtual activities, including our instantly popular children’s story times, Zumba and a Facebook Live “Ask the Census Bureau” session, and established a weekly Hip-Hop DJ session with Ralph McDaniels on Instagram Live. Over time, our virtual offerings became even more diverse and expansive and allowed our staff to try new and innovative initiatives, such as QPL@NIGHT, a virtual nightlife hotspot for entertainment, civic engagement and learning geared towards a millennial audience. In August, as part of our work towards racial equity, I led a panel discussion “To Be Black in America: A Conversation on Racism” with Attorney General Letitia James and Dr. Wayne Riley, President of SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University. This vital and necessary conversation addressed racial disparities in regard to COVID-19, but also in the daily lives of black and brown people living in this country. We partnered with Brainfuse, one of the nation’s leading online tutoring providers, to provide access to free homework help, including live, online tutoring and test prep in a wide range of subjects for K-12 students and adult learners. From April through October, QPL hosted over 5,700 programs that were attended by over 100,000 customers. Since our closure, our Adult Learner Program has hosted over 100 virtual courses serving over 1,800

students, while 700 individuals registered for the New Americans Program's ESOL 2020 virtual Fall semester.

With everyone at home, the Library swiftly added over 25,000 eBooks, eMagazines, audiobooks and videos to our digital platform. Within the first six weeks of our closure, eBooks and eMagazines had a circulation increase of 104 percent.

As we moved to a more virtual world, however, it laid bare the disparities that exist in regard to broadband connectivity in the local communities we serve. In certain areas, such as Southeast Queens, approximately 43% of households are without broadband access. QPL serves as a critical lifeline for individuals who do not have these services and technology at home. Our customers rely on our free Wi-Fi service for a plethora of reasons, such as to stay connected with families and friends, pay bills and, more recently, to attend school remotely and satisfy other educational needs. In an effort to increase digital access, QPL has extended Wi-Fi available at twenty of our locations, allowing anyone, whether they have a library card or not, to access our broadband service using their personal device (up to 150 yards from our buildings). This extended Wi-Fi is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and the public is taking advantage of it. During the first quarter of this fiscal year, we recorded nearly 118,000 Wi-Fi sessions. Last week, QPL launched our newly redesigned mobile app with an improved user-friendly interface, allowing customers to navigate with ease. Features include the ability to search or scan books, find nearby locations, and read, watch and listen to content directly from the app.

As all of us confronted the COVID-19 pandemic and the manifestations of racial injustice across the country and here at home, New York City endured unprecedented heartache, economic hardship, and turmoil. In developing our reopening plans, there was one thing we all knew: the world would now need and demand more from libraries than ever before. This understanding strengthened our resolve to meet our mission, delivering critical services and resources remotely and offering everyone, no matter who they are or where they come from, the chance to achieve their full potential.

After thoughtfully and carefully formulating a plan for our locations' eventual reopening, QPL set that plan into motion with our first branches reopening on July 13. We reopened seven libraries for "to-go" service and returns six days a week, and nine locations as fulfillment centers accepting returns twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. From the outset, the health and safety of the public and our staff have been paramount.

We established new protocols based on the latest public health guidance. Before a library is reopened, the building undergoes extensive disinfecting and cleaning, and our spaces are reconfigured to promote social distancing and support a new service model. All returned materials are quarantined in compliance with national standards before they are put back into circulation. We require all staff and customers to wear masks, and we provide masks to people who do not have them. We provide all Queens Public Library staff with masks, hand sanitizer and other personal protective equipment (PPE), as well as making hand sanitizer available to the public at all open branches. We held virtual trainings for staff on how to stay safe and provided counseling and support services to promote good mental health. I care deeply about the safety and health of everyone at QPL and ensured that we had the measures in place to face the new challenges posed by a COVID-19 world.

On August 10, we opened eight additional libraries for to-go service, and on September 28, we opened eight more and extended our fines and fees exemption on all materials through January 2021. Yesterday, on November 16, we reopened our two largest libraries – Central and Flushing – bringing the total number of locations reopened since July to 25 (currently, two previously opened branches are closed: Sunnyside, which is undergoing capital improvements, and Kew Gardens Hills, which is a H+H COVID test site). On November 30, barring unforeseen circumstances, we will reopen 12 more branches.

While we had been planning to begin offering public computer appointments next week, in light of the rising number of COVID-19 cases in and around the City, we will postpone computer service until the appropriate time. We are continually monitoring and assessing internal and external factors and remain nimble and responsive to the evolving public health situation.

While undergoing the arduous task of safely reopening, we have remained engaged with the City and continued our excellent partnership with the de Blasio administration. We have always been there for the City when it has needed us, and as stated earlier, we knew we would be needed now more than ever. Operating under the stress of a global pandemic, we successfully conducted Early Voting at our Jackson Heights location in June and November, operated 13 other polling locations on Primary and Election Day, served as cooling centers for the public, have had five of our locations serving as COVID-19 testing sites, and hope to have three locations serve as NYC Learning Lab sites. Arguably, our most notable accomplishment with the City was achieving a historic census self-response. Despite the innumerable obstacles, our dedicated census team, along with staff throughout the Library, mobilized to convey the importance of the census to the public and help ensure completion, which contributed to a 2 percentage point increase in the Queens self-response rate when compared to the 2010 census. We always stand ready to serve the public and will continue to do so for as long as we have the capacity and resources.

Libraries are trusted entities, which people turn to when in need. As we strive towards building a vibrant, informed, cohesive, and empowered society, it starts with making sure that our most vulnerable populations receive the care and services they need. We appreciate the recognition and support we receive from this City Council, Mayor de Blasio and the members of his Administration, as well as the acknowledgement that strong libraries are essential to communities and indispensable in this recovery effort. Please continue to support and fight for us because there is no institution as dynamic and impactful as libraries.

Thank you again, Council Member Van Bramer, for the opportunity to testify today on this important topic. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

**Brooklyn Public Library Testimony**  
Covid-19 and Libraries  
Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries & International Intergroup Relations  
November 17, 2020

Thank you, Chair Van Bramer, members of the committee, Majority Leader Cumbo, our Brooklyn delegation, and the entire City Council for supporting New York City's libraries throughout this extremely challenging year. We deeply appreciate your efforts to ensure that Brooklyn Public Library can continue to deliver services to the 2.6 million residents of our borough.

**I. Becoming a Digital Library**

This March, we realized anew just how essential those services are. For the first time in Brooklyn Public Library's 124-year history, we were forced to close our doors. Knowing how many patrons depend on us and how desperately they needed us, we found new ways to deliver services. With extraordinary speed and solidarity, our librarians and staff—in particular, our IT team—transformed BPL into a largely digital institution.

Between mid-March and September, we hosted more than **4,000 public programs online** with the same breadth as our in-person programming and the same aim: to foster literacy, civic engagement, and social justice. Energized by the Black Lives Matter movement, the Library has made a concerted effort to produce programs for all ages that foster dialogue about race and social equity, and that center Black and Indigenous writers and thinkers.

Over 700,000 people have tuned in to programs such as Ready, Set, Kindergarten!, tutoring and Homework Help for remote students, ESOL and HSE classes, Know Your Rights workshops, grief support groups, and personalized job assistance for those who found themselves suddenly unemployed. Our free, high-quality virtual content—featured by MOMA and NBC Today—has been in high demand. In the first four months of the pandemic, 146,000 children tuned into our multi-lingual storytimes.

The demand for programming has been matched by the demand for books. Between March and June, e-checkouts for young adult materials increased by 80 percent compared to the previous year, and nearly tripled for children's materials. To keep pace, we **dramatically expanded our digital collection**, which now contains more than 400,000 e-books, audio books, videos, and subscriptions. We also pledged to ensure that our collection, as a whole, reflects more Black and Indigenous viewpoints.

As proud as we are of meeting so many needs so quickly, we remain painfully aware that we are leaving behind hundreds of thousands of Brooklynites without access to the internet. The pandemic has made the digital divide in our city even more acute.

Before March, Brooklyn Public Library was the largest provider of free internet service in the borough, and even as we closed our doors, we decided to keep the WiFi on at all of

our branches throughout the pandemic. With more than one thousand people gathering outside on a single day to try and catch the signal coming through our windows and doors, we became more committed than ever to acting and advocating for more equitable access to broadband.

Last month, with the support of several private funders, Brooklyn Public Library launched the **Bklyn Reach project**, which will extend free, unlimited WiFi 300 feet from our branches via new rooftop antennas. Antennas have already been installed in neighborhoods with the highest need: Brownsville, Bushwick, Coney Island, and Fort Greene, as well as Red Hook and Flatbush, where we have been able to configure outdoor library spaces with furniture loaned from the Department of Transportation. The antennas will ultimately be installed on 44 branches across the borough, enabling more Brooklynites to submit online job applications, complete their schoolwork, check out library books, and much more.

## **II. Safely Reopening Our Doors**

Alongside the dramatic expansion of the Library's digital services and WiFi signal, Brooklyn Public Library has begun to gradually reopen our branches. The safety of our patrons and staff are paramount to us, and we followed the guidelines and recommendations of leading public health authorities, as well as other urban library systems and our TriLi partners, to develop a comprehensive, multiphase **Reopening Plan**. In June, our Capital Planning and Facilities Management team and custodial staff worked together to reconfigure workspaces and implement new cleaning, ventilation, PPE, and workspace distancing protocols. All BPL locations (apart from those under construction) are now open to our staff, so that they can perform inventory, collections, and reference work, and produce on-site virtual programming.

As of this moment, 27 of our libraries, including Central, are now open to the public for **grab-and-go lobby service**: one individual or family at a time can enter the library to return and pick up books. Since reopening, we've welcomed nearly 200,000 Brooklynites back into our branches and helped patrons check out more than 120,000 books, with far more on hold.

We have also hosted limited outdoor programming. Our Open Air Ask a Tech sessions provide free tech assistance in multiple languages outside branches, which has been especially important as the pandemic has forced so many of us to adapt to new technologies. Our University Open Air offered free classes in Prospect Park. And every week in October, our Open Streets initiative at Macon Library in Bedford Stuyvesant offered children's programs and a small browsing collection.

While closely monitoring the number of COVID cases in Brooklyn and across our city, we are preparing to open seven branches for further services including first-floor browsing, limited computer and printer use, and reference assistance.



Of course, we will continue to adapt as necessary. We have temporarily suspended public service at three of our libraries located in “Orange Zones” as designated by the state.

### III. A Reliable Partner for the City

In those zones and elsewhere in Brooklyn, the Library has partnered with the New York City Health & Hospitals **Test & Trace Corps**. A Test & Trace grant has allowed library staff to distribute **270,000 masks** and reach more than 19,000 Brooklynites with information about essential resources such as free testing sites and emergency food relief. We have begun to hold weekly **virtual health fairs** in order to help our patrons navigate the constantly evolving information regarding testing sites, insurance coverage, and more.

The Test & Trace Corps used our Williamsburgh and Borough Park libraries as **PPE and information distribution sites** and offered outdoor **pop-up COVID testing** at Paedergat and Brighton Beach libraries, and we are ready to leverage more of our branches as needed.

Throughout the crises, the Library has endeavored to be a reliable partner to the City. Early in the pandemic, when PPE was scarce, we worked in partnership with Columbia University to **print face shields** for healthcare workers using the 3D printers from our branches. We partnered with NYC Emergency Management and mobilized staff to offer five branches to act as **cooling centers** over the summer. On primary day in June and Election Day in November, 18 of our branches served as safe **polling sites** for Brooklynites exercising their right to vote.

In partnership with the city’s Anti-Gun Violence Employment Program, Brooklyn Public Library hosted a six-week intensive virtual summer program for 14-24 year-olds residing in Brooklyn-specific NYCHA developments. We delivered more than 13,000 summer reading books and activity booklets for children and teens to the Department of Education, as well as schools, homeless shelters, and childcare centers.

We recently partnered with the Department of Corrections to provide incarcerated New Yorkers with a **virtual library** via tablets, and with the City’s Department of Youth and Community Development to host **Learning Labs**. At six of our branches, K-8 students will be able to access remote learning and enjoy an enriching environment when they cannot be in school.

### IV. Milestones

As you know, the vast majority of our branches sorely need capital improvement. We are extremely grateful for the Council’s support on that front, and hope to make progress as soon as these construction projects are again underway. Fortunately, we have managed to forge ahead with a few self-managed projects, including the new **Greenpoint Library and Environmental Education Center**, a stunning model for the

libraries we are working to revitalize across Brooklyn and for 21<sup>st</sup> century libraries across the country.

We also recently launched the **Center for Brooklyn History at Brooklyn Public Library**, which will allow all New Yorkers free and open access to the most expansive collection of Brooklyn history in the world, as well as the former Brooklyn Historical Society building in Brooklyn Heights, which will soon open for grab-and-go lobby service. Despite the myriad challenges of the pandemic, I could not think of a timelier milestone for Brooklyn Public Library. There is a real hunger in our city and our country to better understand our past, so that we might build a better future.

## **V. Recovery**

As we build that future—more equitable, more cohesive, more sustainable— libraries stand to play a vital role.

After New York City was devastated by Hurricane Sandy, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development launched an initiative called Rebuild by Design, to research how cities might better respond and recover from future disasters. Eric Klinenberg, a sociologist at NYU and Director of the initiative, identified public libraries as a city's 'resiliency centers.' "Libraries," he writes, "are essential to promoting stronger social ties... and communities with stronger social ties are, time and again, proven to be safer, healthier, and more resilient."

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant months of unprecedented social isolation for New Yorkers, as well as economic and educational deprivation. It has laid bare and exacerbated so many of our city's and our country's inequities. Public libraries—trusted by every generation, in every neighborhood—are uniquely suited to help rebuild our social and civic infrastructure and ensure that infrastructure serves all of us.

At a time when we need our fellow New Yorkers to feel connected to and invested in their communities, we are grateful that this committee, the City Council, and the Administration recognize the essential work of libraries.