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Rockland
LD 1404

I am writing in strong support of LD 1404, a tremendous legislative effort to investigate and quantify the value of libraries to Maine citizens and municipalities!

COMMUNITY HEALTH & WELLNESS

“Libraries are not about books, they’re about people,” declares Skye Patrick, the director of the Los Angeles County Library system.

Public library systems offer a staggering array of programming that goes well beyond the “books-and-story-time” model many of us remember from our childhoods. They are the only remaining public spaces where Americans can access trusted information, community, and connection. Unlike a community center, town hall, or public park, libraries connect their municipalities in a way that benefits everyone. Libraries pool local resources — from educational offerings to job training to homeless outreach to ESOL learning — and put them all under one welcoming roof for everyone to share!

Libraries everywhere are adapting to meet new challenges. Librarians have long helped users navigate life challenges like finding a job, studying for an exam, or applying to school. More and more they play a crucial role in connecting patrons in need of social or mental health services with relevant agencies.

When we think of a library, we probably don't think of it as a center for health and wellbeing, but in many cases, it is exactly that. Through their community programs, direct librarian assistance, fitness classes, and basic internet access, libraries provide important equal access opportunities to those seeking health information and services.

And despite what we keep hearing about the death of print books and the lack of interest in libraries, there are actually more public libraries in the U.S. than there are Starbucks. More than just storage spaces for books, local libraries are important community focus points that serve as centers of learning, professional development, and healthcare.

FREE INTERNET ACCESS

For many Maine teens and adults, especially those without computer access at home, the local library also functions as an on-ramp to the internet. Public libraries allow patrons to learn and experiment with new digital resources without having to invest in them at home.

The explosion of information online hasn't sidelined librarians. To keep up with changing technology and user expectations, our public libraries become tech hubs by investing in more computer terminals and Wi-Fi capability. They have upgraded and expanded facilities to provide more outlets, meeting rooms, study spaces, and seating that patrons can use for extended periods of time as they take advantage of free Wi-Fi. Public libraries are part of the original sharing economy!

SOMETHING FOR (ALMOST) EVERYONE

There's something for pretty much everyone at their local library, whether they're a parent who needs literacy support for their preschooler, an immigrant working on language skills or bureaucratic forms, a mystery fan in search of the latest whodunit by a favorite author, or someone experiencing homelessness who needs assistance with social services or access to a computer and the internet.

Here's a non-exhaustive list of public library services: checking out and returning books; borrowing music and “things” like laptops, musical instruments, exercise equipment; museum passes and activity kits; offering Inter-Library Loan services, providing a quiet place to study and do research; furnishing a pleasant environment for reading and relaxing, maintaining Wi-Fi, computers, printers, and/or copiers for patrons' use; screening films; hosting classes, lectures, poetry readings, and concerts; helping patrons find health insurance resources; connecting patrons with free tax services; bringing in healthcare providers to offer free limited screening services; providing job search assistance and parenting materials; supplying a space for free

fitness classes; accessing art, culture, sports, games, and technology; getting support for lifelong learning; offering after-school activities; developing summer reading programs that benefit local schools; providing access to newspapers on microfiche and many other historical and genealogical resources!

ECONOMIC BENEFITS & BUDGETS

Because they are free for patrons, not many people consider the role public libraries play in the Maine State economy. Libraries are essential to financially strengthening our local communities. They provide a space for those who work from home, supply free internet access for people looking for employment opportunities, and may offer job and interview training for those in need.

Libraries almost never have enough money available for all the services that they hope to provide! There are consistent calls from voters for more and longer open hours. Please be aware that public libraries are always ready to help their patrons. Even an institution as resourceful, flexible, and resilient as the local library, however, has its limits. Federal funding cuts will reduce what our libraries can accomplish. Any additional funding that the Maine Legislature can provide libraries will help our citizens immensely!

PUBLIC SPACE

There aren't many truly public places left in America. Most of our shared spaces require money or a certain social status to access. Shopping centers exist to sell people things. Museums discourage loiterers. Coffee shops expect visitors to purchase a drink or snack if they want to enjoy the premises.

One place, though, remains open to everybody. The public library requires nothing of its patrons: no purchases, no membership fees, no dress code. You can stay all day, and you don't have to buy anything. You don't need money or a library card to access a multitude of on-site resources that includes books, e-books and magazines, job-hunting assistance, computer stations, free Wi-Fi, and much more. Local libraries create sanctuaries for patrons who have few safe spaces in their lives!

EVERYONE WELCOME

Although the USA is divided along racial, ethnic, political, and socioeconomic lines, libraries still welcome everyone. Along with nurses and firefighters, libraries and librarians are among the few groups and institutions Americans still trust. Confidence in librarians has remained high because of their proven ability to curate and share reliable knowledge, according to a series of Pew studies from 2011-2016.

"We are open spaces," says Susan Benton, the president and CEO of the Urban Libraries Council, whose members include public-library systems serving cities large and small across the United States. "We certainly are without judgment about anybody's characteristics." Young people, folks experiencing homelessness, and families are among the many Mainers who consistently benefit.

FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Having a child under the age of six is the biggest predictor of library use. Parents of young children like the family-friendly programs libraries run. Being able to read well gives kids a leg up in schooling and in life, but many Maine children lack the resources—books at home, parents with time and literacy skills and good child care—to help them master that skill. Librarians know that traditional story time is actually "school readiness time." More and more kids see their local libraries as fun places to visit, not as stuffy and rule-bound!

CONCLUSION

Thank you for taking my testimony into consideration. I have loved libraries all of my life, including stints working in my local library through high school and college and volunteering at my town library later in life. Thank you for recognizing the value these essential institutions bring to Maine!