



pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Testimony
Senate Education Committee
Pennsylvania Library Code
Mary Clare Zales
Deputy Secretary, Office of Commonwealth Libraries
September 21, 2011

Good morning, Chairman Piccola, Chairman Dinniman and distinguished members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Clare Zales and I am the Deputy Secretary for the Office of Commonwealth Libraries in the Department of Education. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Library Code and to highlight the condition of the greater library community of Pennsylvania – its successes, its struggles and the possibilities that lie ahead as the library community strives to provide services to and meet the needs of Pennsylvania’s citizens.

The current code – Library Code of 1961 – was the outcome of significant academic study, public deliberation and professional assessment in the late 1950s. At the passage of PL24, Pennsylvania was acclaimed as a national leader as we were only the third state to make the legislative connection between literacy and learning – between the role of the book and lifelong education.

The Library Code celebrated its golden anniversary this year – June 14, 2011. The Library Code has served Pennsylvania well during the past 50 years. It established a managerial structure to govern public libraries, the authority for local government support and introduced a comprehensive distribution formula to meet the needs of small struggling libraries, to encourage the development and establishment of new libraries and to provide research resources to every Pennsylvanian.

The thinking of the “founding fathers” of the Library Code was simple and profound: Make public library service available within one-hour of every Pennsylvanian and advanced research resources within a single day’s round-trip. It also charged the state librarian and the Advisory Council on Library Development to develop regulations and thereby establish eligibility standards for state funding. These eligibility standards became part of Pennsylvania Code Title 22. In this way, all Pennsylvanians could expect a common denominator of service from every public library anywhere in the Commonwealth. The standards were challenging for their time pertaining to the number of books, the hours of service, staffing and the composition of a voluntary board of directors.

The Library Code reflected the philosophy and conditions of its day factoring in accessibility to automobiles, public transportation, telephones and the cost of providing a public service to meet the information, education and enrichment needs of a growing Commonwealth. Over the years, amendments were made to expand the reach of state funding, to recognize the development of county-based systems, the contribution of technology, increased accountability, reciprocal borrowing and others.

We appreciate Senator Pileggi and this committee’s interest in our public libraries and for recognizing the positive influence an updated Library Code can have for the Commonwealth. We thank the Joint State Government Commission that, in response to Senate Resolution 343 of 2010, conducted a thorough review of the Library Code and studied the intricacies of public library service.

With emerging technology, changing demographics and historic economic challenges, it is time again for Pennsylvania to have a Library Code that reflects these significant influences and to tap the energy and capacity of the library community.

I would like to offer you a glimpse into the current condition of our libraries. Our libraries are busy community centers. Between 2007 and 2009, library visits increased by 2.5 million, and nearly 850,000 patrons accessed the Internet, an increase of 22 percent. The economic challenges of Pennsylvania have had direct and immediate impacts on Pennsylvania's public libraries. This is most evident in the rapidly increased number of unemployed and underemployed who poured into our libraries.

This has shifted the attention of public library staff as they are spending an increased amount of their time teaching and assisting displaced workers with few or no computer skills on how to complete online job applications, use word processing to write letters of application, develop resumes, research the job market and prepare for interviews using available technology in the library. In a growing number of locations, libraries are partnering with the Department of Labor and Industry's CareerLink staff by offering programs and making their materials more widely available. Our libraries are also able to expand the reach of CareerLink services into evenings and weekends. Since 2008, libraries throughout the state have aided 303,000 individuals in their employment search.

Families also rely on the availability of computer and Internet access at local libraries. Parents often come to the library to seek medical and financial information online, as well as to access e-government services. Students have always used the library to do homework, but now we see increasing numbers of students utilizing the technology available at libraries to complete their homework and assignments.

Additionally, public libraries have redirected their approach to infant, toddler and pre-school programming and resources to provide positive early literacy experiences for children. We can be proud of the work our libraries have done in creating positive early literacy experiences in maximizing our window of opportunity as very young minds are still developing. Programs such as Family Place, Pre-School Connections and Mother Goose on the Loose are making an impact by reaching more and more children, their parents and caregivers.

Services to our seniors have been equally impressive. Study after study recognizes seniors who are engaged in their community and have a strong social network remain physically and mentally healthy longer. Programs such as Senior Spaces are catching the attention of communities across the Commonwealth with glowing reviews from our seniors who are developing friendships and overcoming their apprehensions about technology.

Our public libraries serve the small business and business start-up communities, provide programming and materials of specific interest to teens, serve the visually and physically challenged and continue the time-honored tradition of responding to the curious. In short, our public libraries strive to meet the changing needs of all our residents from infancy throughout their lives.

The Commonwealth's investment in public libraries has a long history of a strong return to the community. The largest investment is made in the form of the Public Library Subsidy which supports all types and levels of library service and reaches libraries through a distribution formula which is detailed and clarified in SB 1225.

Our libraries are rising to the challenge of meeting community need and providing a high level of value. Those of you who know about the workings of your local public libraries also know no public service squeezes more out of every dollar.

Given this context, the administration recognizes the need for a redesign of the Library Code and the benefits to aligning the various components of library management, local funding and the statewide system of service the Commonwealth supports. Furthermore, it would be very constructive to place it into a more logical framework and understandable language.

Additionally, the administration also agrees with the importance of recognizing emerging technologies, the necessity for professional development and inclusion of subsidy language in the Library Code, as well as flexibility in the enforcement of eligibility standards.

We see in this recodification of the Library Code an opportunity to address additional areas of need. There are three in particular:

1. Redesign of the distribution formula of the Public Library Subsidy;
2. Restructuring the hierarchy of library service; and
3. Provide assistance to public library boards of trustees.

Senate Bill 1225 recognizes that the distribution formula for the public library subsidy underwent a redesign beginning in 1999-00. Of the seven categories, five were redesigned. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the General Assembly and the library community in completing this redesign and incorporating the influence of technology, demographics and economics into concepts represented in the formula.

The current hierarchy of library services was based on the road system and communication of the day. Today, many library resources are available online 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This and other factors will allow us to improve upon the traditional hierarchy of county library systems and district library centers with a resulting increase in services and resources and a decrease in administrative costs. There are practical benefits when libraries cooperate in purchasing, programming and resource sharing.

Public libraries' boards of trustees perform better when they are better educated about their role and responsibilities. The agency is developing a voluntary program to help trustees learn more about their role and the resources available to them to maximize the library's contribution to the community.

The Department looks forward to the opportunity to work with the General Assembly to enhance our public library system and better serve Pennsylvanians. Today's generation will see the full capacity of the public library community of Pennsylvania realized to the tangible advantage of our children, students and lifelong learners, parents and seniors, job seekers, small businesses and all those who turn to their public library in need and those who simply seek a comfortable, safe place to enjoy the pleasure of a good book. Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee and I welcome any questions.