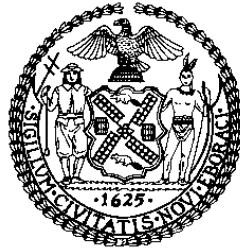


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The Council of the City of New York

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

Hon. Jimmy Van Bramer, *Chair*

December 13, 2021

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

INTRODUCTION

On Monday, December 13, 2021, the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations, chaired by Council Member Jimmy Van Bramer, will conduct an oversight hearing on “The New York City Libraries – Updates and COVID-19 Recovery.” This will be the Council’s second hearing on libraries since the City’s public library system, comprised of the New York Public Library (NYPL),¹ the Queens Public Library (QPL)² and the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL),³ reopened in June 2021 after being closed to patrons on March 13, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Witnesses invited to testify include representatives from the NYPL, QPL and BPL, advocacy groups, community members and other interested stakeholders.

BACKGROUND

Effect of COVID on New York City Public Libraries

The Committee’s oversight hearing on November 17, 2020, provided a real-time snapshot of how the New York Public library system was able to continue offering services despite the challenges of navigating through the early days of the pandemic.⁴ Initially, the complete shuttering of the City’s libraries in March 2020 led to an immediate and unprecedented interest in accessing the library’s extensive inventory of e-books and audiobooks.⁵ While the NYPL negotiated with its vendors to provide free digital access to the archives of the NYT and Wall Street Journal,⁶ the

¹ New York Public Library, *New York Public Library to Temporarily Close All Locations* (Mar. 2020), available at <https://www.nypl.org/press/press-release/march-13-2020/new-york-public-library-temporarily-close-all-locations>

² Queens Public Library, *QPL’s COVID-19 Response* (Mar. 2020), available at <https://www.queenslibrary.org/about-us/news-media/blog/2038#:~:text=Starting%20Monday%2C%20March%2016%20and,and%20the%20public%20we%20serve.>

³ Brooklyn Public Library, *Coronavirus: Updates on the Library’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic* (Mar. 2020), available at <https://www.bklynlibrary.org/coronavirus>.

⁴ New York City Council. (2020) Oversight: The New York City Libraries and COVID-19. Available at <https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/MeetingDetail.aspx?ID=813277&GUID=533D657A-4CF1-40A2-980A-C2628249017D&Options=info|&Search=>

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

pandemic quickly revealed the extent to which all three library systems were able to promote educational services while continuing to provide a reliable sense of community for New Yorkers of all backgrounds.⁷ According to Brian Bannon of the NYPL, “public libraries during times of crisis are the first to raise their hands and find ways to help, so the closing of our physical doors caused us to be creative and open our doors virtually.”⁸

In response to school closures, the libraries quickly offered free online homework assistance, in both English and Spanish, and provided live one-on-one tutoring services through online chat capabilities.⁹ NYPL research librarians offered virtual support to the academic community, scholars and educators,¹⁰ and the NYPL’s research centers began offering limited onsite access to the library’s collections, to allow materials to be requested for pick up through the libraries’ research borrowing programs.¹¹ To further meet the needs of many parents who were quarantined at home with children, the libraries’ educational teams also offered virtual story-times and other online resources for family activities.¹² Meanwhile, the NYPL Virtual Reference Service allowed patrons to send in questions by email or chat with librarians who were available to answer questions online.¹³

In order to bridge the digital divide, all three library systems provided free internet access and kept critical WiFi services on at most of the city’s 217 library branches enabling patrons to

⁷ Gillian Harvey, *It Took COVID Closures to Reveal How Much Libraries Do Beyond Lending Books*, *THE OBSERVER* (Sep. 24, 2020), available at <https://observer.com/2020/09/public-libraries-adapt-to-future-ebooks-digital-community-outreach/>

⁸ WNYC, *All of It: How the New York Public Library is Handling COVID-19* (Mar. 19, 2020), available at (<https://www.wnyc.org/story/how-new-york-public-library-handling-covid-19/>).

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ New York Public Library, *Directory* (last visited Nov. 11, 2020), available at <https://www.nypl.org/locations/directory>; New York Public Library, *Now Available for Research Borrowing Programs: Grab & Go for Researchers* (last visited Nov. 11, 2020), available at <https://www.nypl.org/research/grab-and-go-for-researchers>.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

access online content for free.¹⁴ Additionally, the QPL continued to enroll IDNYC members at registration kiosks and, in partnership with NYPL and BPL, conducted online census outreach as part of “the city’s broader \$40 million investment in NYC Census 2020’s campaign.”¹⁵ In July of 2020, all three branches began to reopen limited locations throughout the city for “grab-and-go pick up” service that continued to expand,¹⁶ until regular, in-person library services could resume safely within regulations and guidelines set forth by the City and State.¹⁷

Updates and COVID-19 Recovery

On July 13, 2021 the City’s three public library systems re-opened their remaining branch locations and began a model of service delivery that brought them “closer to pre-pandemic” services.”¹⁸

New York Public Library

The NYPL’s 92 locations temporarily closed for in-person services from March 14 until July 13, 2020.¹⁹ During that time, NYPL reported²⁰ a 227 percent increase in sign-ups for the Library’s free e-reader app, SimplyE, and by the end of March, daily SimplyE sign-ups had increased by 400 percent.²¹ Collectively, well over two million e-checkouts were conducted in

¹⁴ Rueven Blau, *WiFi Sign of the Times as New Yorkers Gather Outside Libraries for Free Internet* (Sep 15, 2020), available at <https://www.thecity.nyc/2020/9/15/21439065/new-yorkers-gather-outside-libraries-for-free-internet>.

¹⁵ Bill Parry, *Queens Public Library suspends all programs, event and classes due to spread of coronavirus* (Mar. 12, 2020), available at <https://qns.com/2020/03/queens-public-library-suspends-all-programs-event-and-classes-due-to-spread-of-coronavirus/>.

¹⁶ *Supra* notes 1, 2 and 3.

¹⁷ Gannon, *NYC Public Libraries Reopen 22 Branches for Grab-and-Go Service*, 6SQFT.COM (Jul 13,2020), available at <https://www.6sqft.com/nyc-public-libraries-aim-for-july-reopening-will-offer-grab-and-go-service-to-start/>.

¹⁸ NYPL.Org. (2021). NYC Public Libraries to Open All Remaining Available Locations, Begin a Return to Pre-Pandemic Service in July. (July 13, 2021). Available at <https://www.nypl.org/press/press-release/june-24-2021/nyc-public-libraries-open-all-remaining-available-locations-begin>

¹⁹ New York Public Library (2021). The New York Public Library: Year in Impact (March 2020-March 2021). Available at <https://www.nypl.org/help/about-nypl/year-in-impact/2020-2021>

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

2020.²² Additionally, there was a 240 percent increase in online program attendance from April through June of 2020, with 53 thousand virtual attendees reportedly participating in a variety of online programming²³ including services for researchers and job seekers.²⁴ More than two thousand people participated in one-on-one career sessions hosted by the Science, Business and Industry Library (SIBL).²⁵ In September 2020, “Grab and Go” services, where visitors could access a small area of the open branches to pick up holds placed online or by phone using one of the Library’s three socially distant checkout systems, were expanded to 50 branches.²⁶ By the end of 2020, a total of over 323 thousand patrons had been able to continue borrowing electronic and physical materials since the libraries’ temporary closure was first announced on March 13, 2020.²⁷

On October 5, 2021, the New York Public Library system announced it had eliminated all late fees, past, present and future.²⁸ Finally, in addition to the continuation of enhanced cleaning protocols in all branches, NYPL committed to continue to monitor the pandemic, and as circumstances warrant, stands ready to reinstate tighter restrictions if necessary.²⁹ The NYPL’s social media channels are keeping patrons updated, while continuing to provide new content, such as ideas for books, activities and updates on online and in-person services.³⁰

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ NPR.org. (2021). The nation’s largest public library system is ending late fees forever. October, 5, 2021. Available at <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/05/1043412502/library-fees-eliminated-new-york>

²⁹ NYPL.Org. (2021) Get the Best of NYPL in Your Inbox. Available at <https://pages.email.nypl.org/page.aspx?QS=3935619f7de112ef7250fe02b84fb2f9ab74e4ea015814b7>

³⁰ *Id.*

Queens Public Library QPL

In addition to Grab and Go services, the QPL continued to offer career services to job seekers by providing access to resources such as job search and interview skills development throughout the pandemic.³¹ In July of 2021, the 62 branches of the Queens Central and Flushing Libraries began lifting restrictions in order to begin allowing pre-pandemic activities.³² The return to a full complement of services included unlimited in-person browsing and customer seating at QPL branches, computer use and laptop loan programs, and the gradual resumption of indoor programming, all of which follow COVID-19 safety protocols.³³ While virtual programs and resources continued to be offered, notably, in October 2021 the QPL launched its first ever Wellness Tour with the QPL Mobile Library.³⁴ The traveling library makes stops each Wednesday in neighborhoods where vaccination rates are low, to provide library service and share information about health and self-care during the COVID-19 pandemic, and will continue to do so until November 17, 2021.³⁵

Brooklyn Public Library

In addition to Grab and Go services, the 63 branches of the BPL offered a selection of outdoor summer programming including Census Tailgate Parties, Game On videogame challenges

³¹ QPL offers virtual resume assistance through their 'Job & Business Academy.' Assistance is available Monday through Friday, on a first-come first-served basis. See Queens Public Library, *Job Search and Interview Help* (last visited Nov. 10, 2020), available at <https://www.queenslibrary.org/programs-activities/job-business/job-search-interview-help>.

³² NYPL.Org. (2021) NYC Libraries to Open All Remaining Available Locations, Begin a Return to Pre-Pandemic Service in July. Available at <https://www.nypl.org/press/press-release/june-24-2021/nyc-public-libraries-open-all-remaining-available-locations-begin>

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ Pix 11.Com News. (2021) Queens mobile library heads to neighborhoods with low vaccination rates, October 27, 2021. Available at <https://pix11.com/news/local-news/queens/queens-mobile-library-heads-to-neighborhoods-with-low-covid-vaccination-rates/>

³⁵ *Id.*

for teens, the University Open Air free series of classes taught by professors, researcher and academics trained in partnership with the Prospect Park Alliance, and the Cinema Ephemera, “an eclectic mix of short films, concert footage and studio visits” projected on the façade of the Central Library at sunset.³⁶ BPL also continued to provide virtual assistance at their reference desk, daily Dial-A-Story for children, a telephone buddy program for older adults, one-on-one resume services and job search workshops.³⁷ Like the NYPL and QPL, the BPL returned to unlimited browsing and customer seating for its patrons while ensuring COVID-19 safety protocols remain in place. Additionally, resume and career help are available through the BPL,³⁸ along with continued ESOL services and citizenship classes³⁹ and courses in both synchronous and asynchronous formats.⁴⁰

The November 2021 Center for an Urban Future (CUF) report entitled *Branches of Recovery: Tapping the Power of New York’s Public Libraries to Ensure an Inclusive Recovery and Rebuild a More Equitable City* argued:⁴¹

In many of the neighborhoods hit hardest by the pandemic, libraries are among the only trusted resources for immigrants, teens, older adults, and those on the wrong side of the digital divide. For example, in 64 percent of the city’s

³⁶ Brooklyn Public Library, Press Release: *Brooklyn Public Library to Open an Additional Six Branches for Grab-and-Go Service on September 14* (Sep. 10, 2020), available at <https://www.bklynlibrary.org/media/press/brooklyn-public-library-64>.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ BPL offers patrons resume and career help via email through their Business and Career Center. See Brooklyn Public Library, Career Help (last visited Nov. 10, 2020), available at <https://www.bklynlibrary.org/business/career-help>.

³⁹ From the onset of COVID-19, BPL’s ESOL program has assessed and enrolled hundreds of ESOL participants providing virtual instruction in 16 ongoing classes for civics education and digital fluency. We facilitated 13 We Speak NYC sessions virtually and currently have 4 online citizenship classes and 12 virtual conversation groups. *Id.*

⁴⁰ Since March 2020, QPL’s ALP has served over 1,800 students through hosting ESOL, HSE, citizenship, and computer classes, and hosted over 100 virtual courses, as well as one-on-one tutoring.

⁴¹ Center for an Urban Future. (2021). *Branches of Recovery: Tapping the Power of New York’s Public Libraries to Ensure an Inclusive Recovery and Rebuild a More Equitable City*. November, 2021. Available at https://nycfuture.org/pdf/CUF_Libraries_Report_final_11-30.pdf

neighborhoods, branch libraries are the sole public hub for career services and support for jobseekers. Libraries are the only local, public resource for small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs in 67 percent of the city—including many neighborhoods where minority and immigrant-owned businesses are still reeling from the pandemic—at a time when thousands of lower-income New Yorkers are turning to entrepreneurship out of necessity. And as the city faces the consequences of widespread learning loss, libraries are the only local, public provider of family literacy programs in over one-third of city neighborhoods—and among the only options for free, drop-in homework help.⁴²

CUF emphasized that because libraries are a trusted provider of so many programs and services, “New York City’s public libraries contain nearly limitless potential to help spur a full recovery from the pandemic, strengthen hard-hit communities in a time of immense need,” and with continued support, help to “grow the social infrastructure needed to cultivate a more equitable city.”⁴³

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LIBRARY FUNDING AND EXPENSES

City funding accounts for approximately 59 percent of NYPL’s budget, 90.5 percent of QPL’s budget, and 84 percent of BPL’s budget.⁴⁴ Other sources of funding include New York State, the Federal Government, private contributions, endowment drawn for operations and earned revenue.⁴⁵ For NYPL, all sources of funding, with the exception of endowment drawn for operations, had been reduced as a result of the pandemic primarily because of the cancellation of

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ The Council of the City of New York. Report of the Finance Division on the Fiscal 2022 Preliminary Plan and the Fiscal 2021 Preliminary Mayor’s Management Report for the Libraries March 9, 2021. Available at <https://council.nyc.gov/budget/wp-content/uploads/sites/54/2021/03/035-039-Libraries.pdf>

⁴⁵ *Id.*

fundraising events and the impact of the closure on space rentals and retail shop revenues.⁴⁶ Contributions to QPL declined, due to the pandemic.⁴⁷ BPL also saw a reduction in revenue after having waived fines since March 2020, which ultimately impacted the collection budget.⁴⁸ The reduction in earnings happened concurrently with increased spending for PPE, cleaning supplies and building system maintenance as a result of the pandemic.⁴⁹ The systems faced additional expenses meeting all the health and safety protocols with the resumption of expanded in-person service and full-service hours.⁵⁰ Specifically, the system required additional special officers and custodians to support new social distancing and hygiene norms.⁵¹ Meeting the needs of the communities during the public health emergency caused by the pandemic required staff to manage space that extended beyond the walls of the buildings into surrounding exteriors and other outdoor public space.⁵²

CONCLUSION

At this hearing, the Committee aims to learn more about the effects of COVID-19 on the three library networks, including what recovery efforts and what remaining challenges pose the largest risk to the three branches; what will happen to programming that was launched during physical closures and how data will be used to assess who has been taking advantage of programming offered online; and if available, what short or long-term effects the libraries might be facing as a result of the pandemic. The Committee would also seek to understand any anticipated barriers to post-pandemic recovery and explore ways in which the Council might provide support to these vital services.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Id.*