

**Testimony Submitted by
Emily Sheketoff, Executive Director
American Library Association Washington Office
Before the
House Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies
April 29, 2015**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, for the opportunity to testify today on the FY 2016 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies bill. On behalf of the American Library Association (ALA), I urge the committee to include in the bill **\$186.6 million for the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA)** under the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and **\$25 million for the Innovative Approaches to Literacy (IAL) program** under the Fund for the Improvement of Education (FIE) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Libraries serve a vital role for communities by annually providing millions of Americans from every walk of life with ready and free access to all types of information, career and skills training, digital and print literacy instruction, and computing services. The demand for such services has grown especially as Americans have been increasingly unable to afford broadband in their homes. Indeed, even as the economy shows signs of improvement, patrons continue to turn to their local library more and more for assistance and access to essential information, guidance, and instruction on a wide range of topics.

Every day, libraries across the country provide no-fee public access to computers and the internet in some of our most distressed communities, both rural and urban. According to a recent ALA report, 65 percent of all libraries nationwide are the only provider of free internet access in their communities. In rural areas, public libraries are even more critical, with 73 percent serving as their community's only free internet provider.

Increasingly, the internet is the only means by which an individual can research job opportunities, take their GED, apply for a job, or submit government forms, such as tax filings or benefit claims. I note, for example, that this Subcommittee will accept public comment *only* by electronic submission.

Libraries, however, provide much more than just internet access. According to another ALA report, more than 92 percent of public libraries offer services that help patrons complete job applications, create resumes, and access job databases and research. Libraries also provide resources and specialized collections for small businesses, which help them create business plans, develop new growth strategies, and research target markets.

Libraries, of course, also expose children to books and information to help them gain and enhance literacy skills. Surveys show that many of our nation's children living in poverty have no books at home. These children depend on their local libraries' story-time and summer reading programs to help them prepare to learn in school and to succeed.

Unfortunately, during this time of increased and increasing demand, many libraries are under severe budget pressure, often leading to their closures and reduced hours. Therefore, support for the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) is critical as this program is the primary source of annual funding for libraries in the federal budget. The bulk of LSTA funds are distributed to each state through IMLS according to a population-based grant formula. Each state must match the federal funds received and determines for itself how it will allocate its LSTA funds, often relying upon this money to provide job searching databases, resume workshops, summer reading projects, creative programming for children, best practices training for local librarians, and so much more. Libraries have used LSTA funding for diverse and innovative programs. For example:

- In Oklahoma’s Fourth Congressional District, LSTA grant funds have supported computer lab classes for scores of students, health literacy activities, and data bases that had nearly 13 million searches in just a year. Also in Norman, Oklahoma, as a result of the STEM emphasis in the summer reading program, LSTA grants were given to purchase LEGO packages to combine computers with the building components. These were wildly popular. One child told the librarians that the Norman Public Schools had the LEGO packages, but that they were only available to the gifted and talented classes, so the library afforded his only opportunity to use them.
- In Connecticut, LSTA support was combined with state funding to serve more than 7,000 patrons of the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. This program distributed over 190,000 talking books and almost 10,000 playback machines.
- A library in Alabama used its grant to create an Autism Resource Center for the community and provided teaching tools, targeted learning pathways, autism information, and expanded hours for families with autistic children.
- In California, pilot programs made possible with LSTA support underwrote development of a Veterans Resource Center to serve the special needs of veterans and their families.

Participants were connected with available federal, state, and local resources and benefits.

In addition, LSTA also funds: the Native American and Native Hawaiian Library Services program to support improved access to library services for those populations; National Leadership Grants to support activities of national significance that enhance the quality of library services nationwide, and provide pilots for coordination between libraries; and the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarians program, used to help develop and promote the next generation of librarians.

I’d also like to highlight, Mr. Chairman, that the President’s FY 2016 budget request included a \$5.6 million increase for the IMLS to create a “national digital platform.” This new

and much needed initiative will connect library users to federal library services and collections online. This NDP will foster new forms of inquiry and exploration, at any time of day or night.

Accordingly, ALA asks that you provide \$186.6 million for LSTA in order to ensure that Americans of all ages have access to libraries, internet, and information services; the resources they need to develop literacy skills and achieve academically; and the services and tools to search for, find, and create jobs. The examples discussed above amply show how libraries are uniquely capable of meeting these services well and with great fiscal efficiency.

In addition to fully supporting LSTA, ALA also asks that you maintain the current modest, but critical, federal investment in the Innovative Approaches to Literacy (IAL) program under the Fund for the Improvement of Education. IAL provides competitive awards to school libraries and national not-for-profit organizations (including partnerships that reach families outside of local educational agencies) to put books into the hands of children and their families in high-need communities. Providing books and childhood literacy activities to such children is crucial to their learning to read. The program also supports parental engagement, and focuses on promoting student literacy from birth through high school.

Congress recognized the importance of this program in FY2012 when \$28.6 million was first appropriated. In successive years, \$25 million has been dedicated to this essential childhood literacy initiative. In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education awarded two-year IAL grants to 46 nonprofit organizations and school districts in 21 states and the District of Columbia. In 2014, the Department made 32 new awards to national non-profits and school libraries. As with LSTA funds, community libraries and others are doing remarkable, valuable work with IAL support as just one example reveals.

The Todd County, Kentucky School District utilized its IAL grant to fund book distribution to help build home libraries for preschool, kindergarten, and first grade students.

During the two-year grant period, 10,303 books were distributed. Care was taken to select books to fit individual students' needs, interests, and reading levels. The books were distributed through each school's library media center. Todd County also was able to use its grant to develop technologically advanced media centers with high-quality, student-friendly digital tools and resources. The centers were designed to engage students to improve reading skills and produce multimedia projects. The program also allowed librarians to work more efficiently from school or at home. Providing current, up-to-date technologies in the media centers helped reduce gaps between Todd County's technology "haves and have-nots."

Ensuring a child's year-round access to books is a critical first-step towards literacy and life-long learning. For American families living in poverty, access to reading materials is severely limited. These children have fewer books in their homes than their peers, which hinders their ability to prepare for school and to stay on track.

Congress has taken an important step in supporting the needs of disadvantaged students by providing IAL funding for book distribution, early literacy services, and effective school library programs. We urge the Subcommittee and full Committee to continue this important work by maintaining a \$25 million investment in IAL in the FY 2016 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies bill.

ALA urges and appreciates the Subcommittee's continued strong support of LSTA and IAL, Mr. Chairman. Finally, and more broadly, ALA urges the Committee and every Member of Congress to support dedicated funding for effective school library programs in the ESEA reauthorization and FY2016 appropriations. Thank you for your commitment to sustaining and strengthening our communities and our nation by sustaining and strengthening America's libraries.