



**Senate Finance Committee
House Bill 96
Interested Party Testimony
May 27, 2025**

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill (HB) 96 on behalf of Ohio's public libraries.

My name is Michelle Francis, and I am the Executive Director of the Ohio Library Council (OLC). Joining me today for testimony is Jay Smith, OLC's Director of Government and Legal Services. The Ohio Library Council is the statewide association representing Ohio's 251 public library systems (rural, urban, and suburban) and the 7.4 million library cardholders they serve. We appreciate the opportunity to share our thoughts on HB 96, the Public Library Fund (PLF), and the important services provided by Ohio's public libraries.

Public Library Fund

We would like to begin by thanking Governor DeWine for making public libraries a priority in his executive budget proposal by changing the PLF percentage to 1.75% of the General Revenue Fund (GRF).

Every two years we come before the Ohio House and the Ohio Senate during the state budget deliberations to thank the legislature for supporting Ohio's public libraries and to share information about what is happening inside and outside of our buildings. We have had a long-standing partnership with the state to deliver services at the local level for almost 100 years. Under current law, the Public Library Fund (PLF) is similar to the Local Government Fund (LGF) and is a set percentage of the state's monthly tax receipts. The PLF is currently set at 1.7% and the Governor's proposal changes the percentage to 1.75%. The House proposal eliminates the percentage and creates a line-item appropriation. According to the Legislative Service Commission spreadsheet, the House proposal reduces state funding for Ohio's public libraries by more than \$90 million over the biennium as compared to the Governor's proposal.

In 2024, Ohio's public libraries experienced a \$27 million loss in state funding through the PLF as compared to 2023 (see attachment A). This resulted in libraries being funded at the same level they were 25 years ago. At the local level, this is already having an extreme impact when the demand for library services is expanding, usage is increasing, and the rising cost of inflation can no longer be absorbed or ignored. In 2023, Ohioans visited their local libraries more than 44.6 million times (see attachment B). That is the equivalent of 434 sold-out Buckeye football games at Ohio Stadium

(102,780 capacity). We just recently received data for 2024, and the number of library visits increased by 3.4 million to 48 million last year.

Furthermore, public libraries are doing and buying things today that they were not buying 25 years ago – namely ebooks and audiobooks. According to OverDrive, we are 2nd in the nation for digital library usage with approximately 40 million public library checkouts in 2024. That is a 90% increase in digital book usage in the past 5 years (see attachment C). Keeping up with the growing demand for services is only possible with adequate funding.

We are respectfully asking the Ohio Senate to restore Governor DeWine's proposal to set the PLF percentage at 1.75% of the GRF (amendment number SC1236).

Libraries in Ohio are Separate Political Subdivisions

As a reminder, Ohio's public libraries are separate political subdivisions. In other states, libraries are a division under city or county government. Unlike other states, in Ohio we are responsible for the maintenance of our own buildings. This means our members are continuously addressing expensive repairs to roofs, elevators, flooring, boilers, HVAC systems and security systems.

As separate political subdivisions in Ohio, we are more like our local government partners, but we do not have taxing authority, and we do not benefit from:

- County Sales Tax
- City Income Tax
- Casino Revenue
- Funding for Facilities in the Capital Budget
- ARPA Funds
- Inside Millage

Therefore, our reliance on the PLF is even greater than our partners who benefit from the LGF.

Why State Funding?

State funding through the PLF is critically important because it remains a primary source of revenue for libraries. Overall, more than 51% of the total funding for Ohio's public libraries comes from the state through the PLF. In addition, 19% of our public library systems (48 of 251) do not have a local property tax levy and rely solely on their state funding as their main source of revenue for day-to-day operations.

State funding through the PLF means all Ohioans can use any public library in the state regardless of where they live. This is not the case in other states. In other states, library patrons are restricted to their local jurisdiction or may have to pay a fee to utilize library services. Also, the PLF ensures that Ohio provides a minimum level of library services to its citizens in all counties regardless of economic factors. Finally, the PLF encourages

shared services and resource sharing among libraries across the state and across county lines. This collaboration increases efficiency and serves as a national model.

Based on state and national data, we know that Ohio's public libraries are extremely popular and in high demand with some of the highest usage in the nation. Our success is dependent on the strong partnership between the State and the local library systems.

Science of Reading

Literacy and education are at the heart of what we do as public libraries. We agree with Governor DeWine and Director Dackin that reading is simply the key to everything. It's the key to success in school and it's the key to success in life. Last year, we partnered with the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (ODEW) to provide training for our libraries on the Science of Reading. Our libraries support students, parents and their communities by providing homework help centers, high dosage tutoring, lending early childhood literacy and Science of Reading kits to families, and providing information to parents on the Science of Reading.

In addition, we are strong supporters of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library of Ohio as many of our public libraries, their Friends groups and their Foundations have taken over local affiliate responsibilities to support the program. As public libraries, we know the importance of early childhood literacy and laying the foundation for future success. Our members have both sponsored and promoted this program at the local level and we continue to support its efforts.

Collection Development Policies

Every public library system is a reflection of the community it serves and, in some cases, different branches within a single system may offer different services and programs based on the needs of the local neighborhood. When it comes to the books on the shelves or materials in the collection, Ohio's public libraries are open to all and serve everyone. Therefore, each system has a collection development policy and a process in place for purchasing materials. With that comes a process for feedback and input from the local community through various means.

The House proposal requires public libraries to place materials related to sexual orientation or gender identity or expression in a portion of the library that is not primarily open to the view of minors. We believe this language is overly broad, vague and may be extremely difficult to administer. As stated above, libraries already have policies in place to address this issue.

While libraries do provide access to information, we do not act "in loco parentis." We do not act in the place of the parent or guardian. Parents and guardians play a vital role in determining what their children are reading and have a right to determine what is best for their child.

We are respectfully asking the Ohio Senate to remove the proposed language on library materials (amendment number SC1542).

Library Services & Helping Ohioans Save Money

Public library services are essential to the communities we serve. Our members will always have books on the shelves, but our services today go far beyond books. Libraries today provide a wide range of services and partner with multiple state agencies to not only deliver services at the local level, but to save taxpayers, families and businesses money as well. Below are just a few examples:

- America 250-Ohio – Local public libraries across the state are partnering with our friends at the state level to celebrate America’s 250th Birthday. They have been asked to sponsor and host various free local events including “Ohio Goes to the Movies” to celebrate Ohio related films.
- Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD) – We are partnering with DODD to highlight services and programs in public libraries for disabled patrons such as Next Chapter Book Clubs, Sensory Storytime, pen readers, sensory kits/bags, adaptive equipment and toys, universal changing tables, noise canceling headphones, large print keyboards, American Sign Language classes, wheelchair charging stations, and home delivery are just a few.
- Ohio Department of Aging (ODA) – Public libraries have been asked by ODA to help share information and resources on long-term care options through the Ohio Long-Term Care Quality Navigator. The new free online tool helps Ohioans explore and compare more than 1,700 licensed nursing homes and assisted living facilities.
- Broadband Ohio – Public libraries have been providing internet access to Ohioans through their buildings for 29 years. Since 2020, we have partnered with Broadband Ohio to support the state’s overall plan for broadband expansion to ensure all Ohioans have access to connectivity. In addition to computers for personal, employment and student use, libraries provide computer training and Tech Tutor one-on-one appointments. Many lend Wi-Fi hotspots which are extremely popular with families.
- Ohio Department of Health (ODH) – Over the past 5 years ODH has worked with public libraries to distribute more than 5 million at-home COVID test kits through local library locations across the state. Even though this program is ending, it is a great example of state services being delivered through libraries at the local level efficiently to reach a larger population when needed.
- Small Business & Nonprofit Services – Public libraries provide multiple services to help small businesses, nonprofits, and entrepreneurs—everything from classes on grant writing and MakerSpace equipment to research services and training. In 2024, the Toledo Lucas County Public Library Small Business and Nonprofit Services Team provided more than \$3.1 million in value to entrepreneurs and businesses through:
 - Training and Education Value: \$404,802
 - Research Services Value: \$2,407,106
 - Physical Space Value: \$83,814

- Technology and Equipment: \$234,482
- Tax Services – Public libraries partner with other local organizations to provide free tax assistance and forms. In 2024, the Cincinnati and Hamilton County Public Library helped 1,200 patrons file taxes and saved them \$300,000 in filing fees. This resulted in just over \$1 million in refunds.
- Museum/Cultural Passes – Numerous public libraries across the state lend museum/activity passes to everything from zoos, art museums and science centers to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. This is extremely popular with families, encourages in-state tourism and provides savings to taxpayers.

Conclusion

Ohio is a local control state, and every library delivers services at the local level based on the needs of their individual community. In your local communities, we serve as a critical resource for young people, students, families, adults, seniors, entrepreneurs, and small businesses. We educate, connect, and provide lifelong learning opportunities for success. Some have said that we serve cradle to grave or birth to death. None of this would be possible without our state funding through the PLF.

We are urging the Ohio Senate to make public libraries and the services we provide to 7.4 million Ohioans a priority in this budget by restoring the Governor's proposal to set the PLF at 1.75% of the GRF (amendment number SC1236).

The PLF represents an extremely small fraction of the state budget, but it is invaluable to Ohio's excellent public libraries and the citizens we serve. At a time when our services are needed more than ever, this funding is also needed more than ever. We have always been good stewards of public dollars, and we hope we can count on your support.

Thank you for your time. We are happy to answer any questions you may have.