Funding Florida Public Libraries

Each year during Florida Legislative Session, library advocates travel to Tallahassee to ask for library funding. These past two years have been an unprecedented time for all of us. We are still facing uncertainty with COVID-19 and variants, economic struggles, health issues, political issues and equality and race issues. Throughout this time, the library has been a constant.

Whether providing online services, internet access, curbside service or getting out into our communities, libraries statewide have been on the front-line. With all of these amazing services, Florida public libraries are receiving the same amount of funding from the Legislature in State Aid that they received in 1992. For 2021, the final grant for State Aid to Libraries was $19.4 million.

With an increase in population and inflation, Florida libraries would benefit their communities by receiving additional funding. According to Census estimates, Florida saw the second highest population growth in the nation last year. Florida public libraries that receive State Aid funding invest approximately $559 million annually in delivering library services to the public. Just think what libraries could do with additional funding.

Florida's libraries need continued support from local government and state legislators, as well as community partners to their critical role in response and recovery. Some libraries never closed their facilities during the pandemic and those that did, reopened quickly and reconnected with their communities. Libraries became part of the solution. Almost all, including those that closed their facilities, provided electronic services such as e-books and e-audiobooks, online assistance, curbside service and telephone assistance. And what is even more extraordinary is that 50% of Floridians have library cards.

Libraries found ways to connect with their communities and bridge the digital divide. For example, Alachua County library system has over 200 Wi-Fi hot spots available for patrons to check out. Lake Park Library and Boynton Beach in Palm Beach County have self-serve laptop checkout kiosks for their patrons that can be used in the libraries. And many libraries across the state have free Wi-Fi access inside and outside their buildings along with public internet stations inside. State Library recent data reports that more than 1.5 million users received technology instruction from a Florida public library. All these resources help students, families, job seekers and small businesses.

Florida public libraries have evolved with new technologies and continually reinvent themselves. Library services include so much more than books.

In response to the growing demand for COVID-19 testing, Miami-Dade Public Library System distributed 152,000 take home rapid test kits in 2 days to help their residents stay safe.

U.S. Department of State Passport services have been available at Flagler County Public Libraries since 2008. In fact, libraries across the state of Florida offer this service for citizens along with notary services, adult literacy, job skills, Career Online High School and voter registration.

Online resources like eBooks, audiobooks, digital magazines and educational databases can be accessed anywhere with a library card. Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative customers collectively borrowed over 2 million eBooks, audiobooks and digital magazines in 2021.

Libraries, like Largo Public Library, utilized their bookmobiles to reach their community. For Largo Public Library, patron interaction through the bookmobile increased by 43% in 2021.

A core service of libraries has always been youth literacy. Libraries came up with creative and inspiring ways to continue to reach youth in spite of social distancing constraints. Virtual story times, story times in the park, grab and go literacy bags, free online access to literacy programs, summer break time meals, snack bags to go and online programming for kids and teens. Most recent yearly reports to the State Library show that the total check out of youth materials in the state of Florida was 22 million items.

Libraries are the heart of every community. They provide a true enduring space where everyone is welcome and the focus is on diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility for library users and staff. Libraries are the gateway to information, knowledge, culture, entertainment and so much more! Encourage your legislators to fund libraries. And most importantly, visit your local library and enjoy all the resources that are made available with your library card.

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