

Pennsylvania state librarian delivers testimony before Congress

On September 10, Mary Clare Zales, Pennsylvania state librarian, appeared before the House Education and Labor Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities, delivering a strong message on the significant role that libraries play in American communities in the 21st century.

As the Pennsylvania State Librarian and the Deputy Secretary for Libraries, Zales lead the development of library services in Pennsylvania and manages the State Library of Pennsylvania, one of four major research libraries in the state that has recently completed a refocus of its mission, placing emphasis on its historic collections and becoming the destination library for Pennsylvania-related materials and resources. Working most recently with various Commonwealth agencies and stakeholders, Pennsylvania completed the construction of a Rare Collections Library preserving thousands of Commonwealth and national treasures. Among them is the 422-volume *Assembly Collection* purchased in 1745 by Ben Franklin and Franklin's 1754 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, in which he describes his Key and Kite Experiment.

Zales was joined by several other accomplished witnesses, including Anne-Imelda M. Radice, director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services; Suzanne LeBlanc, executive director of the Long Island Children's Museum; fellow librarian Anna Nunez, executive director of the Arizona Health Science Library; and Eric Jolly, president of the Science Museum of Minnesota.

Zales's testimony highlighted the variety of services that libraries provide to their patrons across the nation. Examples of these services included youth literacy programs, e-government services, programs for non-English speakers, information literacy training, and career devel-

opment assistance. Libraries are reaching new populations in new ways, Zales said. Their presence in the community is growing.


The current economic slowdown has produced a swell of activity for libraries. A surge in patron use has provided another example of the invaluable presence of libraries in communities nationwide. The public library plays an even more important role as Americans are facing tough economic times, said Zales.

Library usage is up ten percent from the last economic downturn in 2001.

Zales added, The funding invested in public libraries is a wise and fruitful investment as all aspects of the community benefit. Libraries support the development and care of young children and families, support formal education and strengthen local economies. Libraries add richness and quality to the life of adults, seniors and special populations.

Zales also reported on programs taking place in Pennsylvania, noting that her home state is proud to participate in the national Family Place Program, which builds on the role of the library as the core of the community. Family Place Libraries reserve physical space in the library to conduct programs for young children and their parents, bringing them together with community resources and professionals in child development.

Chairwoman Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY), ranking subcommittee member Congressman Todd Russell Platts (R-PA), and fellow members of the subcommittee demonstrated great interest in Zales's testimony and her fellow witnesses. Subcommittee members noted their support for libraries, asked several important follow-up questions, and set an overall positive tone for LSTA reauthorization in the coming year.

Following the conclusion of the hearing, Zales grabbed the attention McCarthy and Platts to add a personal touch to her testimony. Enthusiasm for the future of the library community was shared by all in attendance, and the hearing was judged to be a great success. 

W. Alston Roberts III is communications director at ALA's Washington Office, e-mail: abridges@alawash.org