

### **ALA seeks \$100 million in stimulus funding as U.S. libraries face critical cutbacks, closures**

ALA is asking Congress for \$100 million in stimulus funding to aid the nation's working families during the current economic crisis. Aid is sought to stem the bleeding of critical library services that help Americans with job searches, small business development, financial literacy, and other essential assistance in hard economic times.

Public libraries are facing the most severe cutbacks in decades as budget shortfalls hit cities, towns, and rural areas across the country, according to ALA. From Los Angeles to Boston, libraries are cutting hours and services; some are even facing the threat of closure at a time when their support is needed most. ALA's recommendation was made the last week of October when Congress held hearings on economic growth and job creation.

Public libraries depend heavily on local property taxes to maintain operations. Across the country, increased foreclosure rates, lower home values, and fewer sales have sharply reduced available funds, forcing libraries to cut services and hours.

"America's free public libraries provide a lifeline for citizens in need across the country," said ALA President Jim Rettig.

"Ensuring Internet access, career workshops, business seminars, and other economic support services are vital links in the nation's financial recovery. This is no time to cut much-needed support, reduce hours, or close library doors."

Rettig pointed to a recent ALA study showing that 73 percent of all libraries nationwide provide the only free Internet access in their communities.

In rural areas the rate rises to 83 percent, according to the 2007–2008 report on public library funding and technology access. Many

libraries are reporting double-digit growth in computer use this year, Rettig said.

The National League of Cities recently estimated that a 3.6 percent decline in property tax revenues is likely to affect city budgets until 2010. In response to these budget shortfalls, libraries are being forced to cut back on hours or even close neighborhood branches.

The Trenton, New Jersey, public library will close its four branches and lose about half of its 57 employees by November 1. The City of Milwaukee is considering closing two of its 12 branch libraries. In Newton, Massachusetts, outside of Boston, four branch libraries closed this summer; four others in nearby areas also closed or are on the chopping block.

Many cities are choosing between cutting staff and reducing hours. Others, such as Fort Worth, Texas, are looking at both, with proposed cuts of more than 100 library jobs along with reduced hours. The city is facing an estimated annual shortfall of more than \$20 million. Additionally, a number of communities are also facing shorter hours and fewer days of operation for libraries in Florida.

ALA's recommendation for stimulus funding seeks support for basic library services across the country as well as specialized assistance to help Americans deal with the current economic crisis. In particular, funds are being requested to:

- expand critical employment activities and services, such as resume development, job bank Web searches, and career planning workshops;
- reinstate or supplement evening and weekend hours of operation at libraries to provide the greatest possible access to services;
- promote financial literacy, housing counseling, and small business development assistance; and
- acquire additional resources and materials to help keep up with increased demand for economic services nationwide. *WR*

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