

FISCAL POLICY INSTITUTE

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. My name is David Dyssegaard Kallick, and I am senior fellow and director of the Immigration Research Initiative at the Fiscal Policy Institute.

Let me start with a little bit of budget context. Since the beginning of the Great Recession, there has been some overall growth in the New York City Budget. But almost all of that growth has gone to offset a decline in state funding for the city's schools—a case of the state reneging on a long-overdue promise. As a result, spending in nearly all other areas has been crowded out. There was an overall decline, in real dollars, of 10 percent in spending for health and human services, and a similar decline in support for libraries.

New York has made a big investment in acquiring land and building libraries (we got a big head start on this with a gift from Andrew Carnegie). Now that we have these great facilities spread throughout the city, to starve them of the money to keep the doors open is penny wise and pound foolish.

What do libraries mean to our city?

One of the pleasures of my work on immigration is to show off our city to foreign visitors who are here looking for lessons about how to integrate immigrants in their own countries. I have brought numerous groups of public officials to see great programs in the city's public schools, in settlement houses, in community organizing projects. And, public libraries are one of my favorite places to bring visitors.

I especially recall a visit I made to the Flushing Library one warm spring day like today. There is great work going on throughout all three of the city's library systems—Queens, Brooklyn, and New York Public Library. But Flushing is an amazing place to bring visitors who are interested in immigration, and the Flushing Library does a wonderful job of keeping up with them. The steps of that library are a lovely welcome to people from all over the world, featuring quotes from literature from dozens of countries—a very nice touch.

So, we got there on a Sunday, just as the library was opening at noon. Crowded around the top of the stairs of the library was an astonishing crowd, maybe 200 people, people with roots all around the world, speaking dozens of different languages, young and old, parents and children and teenagers and single adults and grandparents.

My Danish group couldn't get close to the entrance--as soon as the doors opened, people flooded into the library, making their way quickly to the computer terminals, the business center, the English language classes, the performance space...the amazing variety of resources.

As I looked around at the Danish visitors, I saw that more than one of them literally had tears in their eyes. It was such an astonishing example of how to help integrate immigrants into our city, how to help them to succeed, to learn English, to start a business, to connect with their cultural roots and help people from other cultures share in that too, how to bring up their children in a multicultural city, how to get access to the internet, how to learn to use a computer.

For the library, it was just another day of operation. But, to be honest, I was quite moved, too. When the Danish visitors and I talked afterwards, it was clear that public libraries have two really big things going for them as a place to help people in general, and as a place to help immigrants in particular. First, people trust them: libraries are seen as neutral and welcoming institutions. And, second, they are voluntary: you don't need an ID to get in, you don't have to go if you don't want to, so the people who show up are overwhelmingly people with a thirst for knowledge, people who are there because they want to be there. These two factors—being trusted, and being voluntary—are a big part of what makes libraries so important for the government to support.

Here's a little coda to that story. I was having a hard time believing my notes that the Flushing Library didn't open until noon on Sunday, so I looked at the web site and called the library to confirm it. As it turns out, that was indeed true a few years ago, when I went.

But, today, the Flushing Library is not open at all on Sunday.

What a loss that is to this city.

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