

**TESTIMONY OF BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY
ON THE FISCAL YEAR 2027 EXECUTIVE BUDGET
Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Relations
Jointly with the Committee on Finance
May 26, 2026**

Good afternoon, and thank you Speaker Menin, Finance Chair Lee, Deputy Speaker and Library Chair Dr. Williams, members of the committees, our Brooklyn delegation, and the entire City Council. I am Karen Sheehan, Chief Financial Officer and Executive Vice President for Finance and Administration at Brooklyn Public Library.

Brooklyn Public Library is grateful for your steadfast support. Your commitment makes it possible for our dedicated library workers, the over 1,000 members of DC37 Local 1482, to deliver the programs, services, and resources New Yorkers count on every day.

We also appreciate the Council's response to the Fiscal Year 2027 Preliminary Budget, calling for full restoration and baselining of library funding. For too long, the budget process has been defined by an unstable cycle where critical operating funds were granted temporarily, only to be stripped away in the next budget proposal. This made planning impossible, drained staff morale, and ultimately harmed the very communities who rely on consistent library services.

Thanks to our collective advocacy, the council's leadership and the mayor's action, the Fiscal Year 2027 Executive Budget restores and baselines \$31.7 million in operating support for the city's library systems, of which our share is \$8.8 million. We are deeply grateful to Mayor Mamdani and the City Council for working to make this crucial funding permanent and welcome additional conversation about funding libraries at 0.5 percent of the city budget. City support is vital, and it has been far too long since we have had this level of stability. Ensuring our operating funding will be available in future years is a major relief and demonstrates that public libraries are a priority for the city.

We appreciate the end of the annual budget dance. However, we cannot rely on this restoration alone. As it stands now, the library's budget is flat without additional funding to address our remaining operating gap. After years of fighting back cuts, we have struggled to provide service as funding has not kept pace with growing demand and the increased cost of doing business.

Patrons have felt the effects, whether through longer wait times for books, or more frequent service disruptions. In the last calendar year, Brooklyn neighborhoods lost 177 hours in unplanned delays and closures at their libraries due to staffing shortages. The restoration proposed in the Executive Budget will reduce our operating gap from \$17.5 million to \$8.7 million. While extremely helpful, a significant shortfall remains that will continue to erode service across our system if further steps to address it are not taken this year.

Libraries Make NYC Stronger

Libraries are vital to the fabric of our city. Brooklyn Public Library and our dedicated employees are serving more patrons, protecting intellectual freedom, encouraging civic participation and helping New Yorkers thrive. Across our 62 locations, the need for our services is only growing. In the last calendar year, Brooklyn Public Library recorded over 6 million visits, circulated books and digital materials over 10 million times, and welcomed 841,000 attendees to our public programs.

Adult literacy and education programs enrolled over 1,100 learners pursuing High School Equivalency diplomas and career certifications. The workforce development team hosted over 1,600 career workshops and one-on-one counseling sessions, helping close to 16,000 individuals looking to enter or advance in the job market. And just last month, we partnered with the Department of Labor and six elected officials to host a job fair that filled the lobby of Central Library with more than 1,200 job seekers. While heartening to provide this opportunity, it underscores a growing need for these vital services.

Unfunded Operating Needs

We cannot keep doing more with less. As I mentioned earlier, Brooklyn Public Library must contend with \$8.7 million in unavoidable costs in the upcoming fiscal year.

A significant driver of this shortfall comes from mandatory, non-discretionary expenses. This year general health insurance costs grew to \$2.7 million. Including a \$1.2 million unfunded mandate for the PICA (Psychiatry, Injectables, Chemotherapy, and Asthma) prescription drug benefit. Our staff deserve great benefits. However, this benefit was negotiated and implemented by the city without allocating us the corresponding funding. Every dollar we must redirect to cover unfunded mandates impacts our ability to provide core public services.

Beyond healthcare, the cost of basic library operations continues to climb. Our buying power has diminished, as the price of books and materials is up 5%. Book costs increased \$2.5 million this year, including \$400,000 just to maintain the current digital collection. Books are the lifeblood of the library, ideally, we should be expanding our collections, instead we are spending more just to keep them steady.

Keeping our doors open and our facilities safe also requires us to dip into precious operating dollars. Our branches periodically encounter emergencies requiring immediate attention that cannot be addressed through a traditional capital project. The heavy rains that doused the city last Wednesday flooded three of our branches. During the extreme cold snap a few months ago, a sprinkler failure caused flooding that left \$100,000 worth of damage to Sunset Park Library and kept the community out of the branch's lower level for weeks. At Leonard Library, water infiltration in the building required an immediate infusion of \$800,000 to waterproof the lower level and make the building safe for staff and patrons.

The costs for this emergency work and maintenance contracts for heating and cooling systems, fire alarms and elevators have cost us \$4 million this year.

As grateful as we are for restored and baselined funding, we have a significant deficit to manage. The Council has traditionally championed a Library Initiative, crucial expense funding that has helped fund library operations including staff positions, collections and building maintenance. For the past several years that subsidy was \$15.7 million for all three systems. The Council's support has been instrumental in maintaining consistent library service for the city and we hope we can count on it again this year.

Capital Needs

Brooklyn Public Library is the steward of more than 1 million square feet of city-owned buildings, with a burden of over \$400 million to bring them up to a state of good repair. Roughly one-third, or about \$130 million, are considered emergency needs: heating and cooling systems, roofs, and safety enhancements.

Our infrastructure is aging. Brooklyn's library buildings average 74 years, and twenty are over a century old. It's no wonder that we lost over 1,074 hours of public service due to system failures last year. That is the equivalent of 44 days.

It is difficult to overcome this capital crisis without adequate funding. Lacking a source of recurring capital dollars, our team cannot effectively address emerging problems or plan for preventative maintenance through the capital process.

With your partnership, Brooklyn Public Library has made progress. Over the years, the Council's lump sum capital allocation for libraries has been a lifeline, allowing us to address urgent repairs and fill shortfalls in stalled capital projects across the borough. We have \$12.8M in DDC Project shortfalls, and the Council's capital funding has been instrumental in helping us keep projects moving forward. We are very grateful for your support, and this year, once again, we have requested \$10 million in capital funding from the Council through our Brooklyn Delegation.

BPL has also submitted a ten-year capital plan request to the administration for \$276 million to care for our physical plant, address shortfalls and upgrade our technology. Like our fellow library systems, our request includes a transformational \$150 million investment that would enable five comprehensive branch overhauls in Brooklyn. An investment of this scale has only happened once, more than a decade ago, and the results are paying dividends.

Comprehensive branch renovations address multiple improvements in a single project, saving time and money, and reducing interruptions to neighborhood library service. Our experience has shown it to be the most efficient approach to creating inspiring state-of-the-art libraries to serve our current patrons and last for future generations.

We thank the Administration for adding \$15 million in the Executive Budget toward one of our capital projects and urge City Hall to allocate additional capital funding to the library. We thank the Council for your longstanding borough-wide capital support, and our members who have generously funded library projects in their districts.

Conclusion

In a poll at the start of the new year, The New York Times asked readers: "How can we make the city a better, more livable place for all?" and New Yorkers overwhelmingly ranked funding libraries as their top priority.

Libraries are a beloved public good. As a library user named Ketny wrote to us this spring: *"Brooklyn Public Library made it possible for a shy, introverted, little immigrant girl to travel the world and explore magical lands and fantastic creatures, from those pages she learned to be open minded, fearless and become a lifelong learner, a bookworm, committed to social justice ..."* Another Brooklyn patron, Charles, wrote: *"The library is the cultural heart of the community. It provides a sanctuary for children and adults alike."*

Brooklyn Public Library is grateful for the relationship we have with our patrons, our staff and all our city leaders. We look forward to continuing our work together, serving our communities with the investment they deserve.

Thank you.