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June 29, 2010

Anna Davlantes
Fox 32 news Chicago
WFLD – TV
205 N. Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60601

Dear Ms. Davlantes:

I am astounded at the lack of understanding of public libraries that your Monday evening story, *Are Libraries Necessary, or a Waste of Tax Money?* revealed. Public libraries are more relevant and heavily used today than ever before, and public libraries are one of the better uses of taxpayers' dollars. Let me speak about the Chicago Public Library which serves **12 million visitors per year**. No other cultural, educational, entertainment or athletic organization in Chicago can make that claim. Those 12 million visitors come to our libraries for free access to books, journals, research materials, online information and computers, reference assistance from trained librarians, early literacy programs, English as a second language assistance, job search assistance, after school homework help from librarians and certified teachers, best sellers in multiple formats (print, audio, downloadable and e-book), movies, music, author events, book clubs, story times, summer reading programs, financial literacy programs or simply a place to learn, dream and reflect.

The Chicago Public Library, through its 74 locations, serves every neighborhood of our city, is open 7 days per week at its three largest locations, 6 days per week at 71 branch libraries and 24/7 on its website which is filled with online research collections, downloadable content, reference help, and access to vast arrays of the Library's holdings and information.

Last year, Chicagoans **checked out nearly 10 million items** from the Chicago Public Library's 74 locations and the majority of those items were books. (Your "undercover camera" shots were taken in a series of stacks devoted to bound periodicals used for reference. Next time, try looking at the circulating collections throughout the building.) Especially in times of economic downturn, smart people turn to the public library as their

Chicago Public Library: READ, LEARN, DISCOVER!

free resource for books, information and entertainment in multiple formats – print, online, in person.

And yes, we proudly provide free access to the Internet because so much information today is found online, something you should know from your own work. In fact, the Chicago Public Library provided **3.8 million free, one hour Internet sessions** to the people of Chicago in 2009. The Internet has made public libraries more relevant, not less as your story suggests. There continues to exist in this country a vast digital divide. It exists along lines of race and class and is only bridged consistently and equitably through the free access provided by the Chicago Public Library and all public libraries in this nation. Some **60 percent** of the individuals who use public computers at Chicago's libraries are searching for and applying for jobs. We're proud to continue to be able to use our resources to help them do so.

The Libraries vs. Schools or other public agencies funding argument posed by your story is a non-starter. The mission of the Chicago Public Library is and always has been to make available to all people from birth through senior citizenship, the resources they need to enjoy a good quality of life, to participate in lifelong learning, and to become and remain civically engaged. If information is power, then the public library is the source of that power.

We devote considerable effort and funding to providing early literacy books, programs, story times and training for parents, caregivers and preschool teachers of infants and toddlers so that those children start kindergarten ready to learn.

Chicago's schools offer the shortest school day in the nation. As schools slash their budgets for school libraries and shorten their classroom teaching time, thousands of children flock to Chicago's public libraries *every day* afterschool, in the evening and on weekends for homework assistance from our librarians and certified teachers hired by the public library.

In 2009, thanks to funding from the MacArthur Foundation, the Chicago Public Library unveiled a new 21st century learning space for teens called YOUmedia, that is heavily used 7 days a week by teens and has been hailed as a groundbreaking learning space that combines books and traditional library collections, digital media, mentors and librarians. YOUmedia fosters civic engagement, creativity, reading, writing, and collaborative learning by teens – and it takes place in the public library, not in a school.

We are at our busiest when schools are not in session. This summer, we will once again welcome some 50,000 children to our summer reading program. As in years past, they will read more than 1.2 million books thereby keeping their reading skills sharp while schools are closed, and this year, they will learn about the collections of the Art Institute and public art throughout our city simply by participating in this free program.

The Chicago Public Library is used heavily throughout the year by college and university students, people moving into second careers, adult learners, small business owners, lawyers and other professionals, and working adults and seniors who simply want to read the latest bestseller, hear an author talk, participate in a book club or in the One Book, One Chicago program, attend a financial literacy class, enjoy a free visit to one of Chicago's museums or the Ravinia Music Festival, or learn how to use a computer. Last week, more than 650 people of all ages attended a lecture by author Anthony Bourdain at the Harold Washington Library Center and that is the norm, not the exception.

The suggestion by one of your interviewees that people do not need or use libraries anymore because of the Internet is simply not true. The Internet is one of many tools that people use to live productive lives, and that tool can be accessed for free, and with free training by our staff, at the public library.

Finally, let me address the argument by the gentleman from the taxpayers' group, that public sector employees make higher salaries than those in the private sector and that Chicago's investment in its public libraries (\$120 million annually) is too high. He is simply wrong. With that budget, we pay the salaries 1150 employees; maintain and operate 74 buildings; purchase new library collections and refresh worn collections; maintain and update 3000 public access computers; provide free Wifi and 24/7 access to millions of dollars of online research collections via our website; operate a citywide distribution system that handles millions of items per year; serve as an essential resource to homeschoolers, public, parochial, charter and private schools, colleges, and universities; operate a Talking Book Center for the blind and physically handicapped; engage in reciprocal borrowing of library materials with 192 other communities in the State of Illinois; provide free access for Library patrons to Chicago's museums and cultural institutions; support Chicago's businesses and entrepreneurs; support Chicago's research community; and enhance quality of life and community in every neighborhood of Chicago.

The public library is supported by taxpayers for the common good of all the people of Chicago – just like public schools. We don't ask our schools to make a profit. Neither should we ask it of the public library. As journalist Walter Cronkite once remarked, "Whatever the cost of our libraries, the price is cheap compared to that of an ignorant nation."

Finally, like thousands of our fellow City employees, the management of the Chicago Public Library is taking 24 unpaid holidays and furlough days this year to help close the budget gap and to keep city services, including libraries, operating for the public. Interestingly, I was on an unpaid furlough day when I watched your story last evening. And I had just returned from the annual library conference in Washington DC, a trip I paid for myself, not with taxpayer dollars.

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to respond to the issues raised in your story.

Sincerely,



Mary A. Dempsey
Commissioner
Chicago Public Library

Cc: Library Board of Directors
Senior Staff
Branch and Regional Team