

**Acting Commissioner Mary Ellen Messner, Chicago Public Library  
2020 Budget Testimony to the City Council**

Good Morning Madam Chair, Vice Chair Silverstein, and honorable members of the City Council. I would like to begin by thanking you and Mayor Lightfoot for your leadership and support in making Chicago Public Library (CPL) a world class leader in designing and delivering equitable, innovative and comprehensive library services to the City and beyond.

Chicago Public Library has always been a place of wonder, exploration, refuge, healing and community at the heart of our city. Today, we have 81 locations that have continually adapted to connect Chicagoans with information, and materials while also responding to community needs with innovative programs and services. Our national and international leadership in the library field stems from our deep commitment to supporting and serving patrons as they learn, play, develop skills and strengthen their communities.

Chicago Public Library is the largest and most visited cultural institution in Chicago year after year, providing free access to all visitors. Our libraries serve as community anchors throughout the city, providing the free library services, information resources, engaging cultural and educational programs, and the technologies and tools that Chicagoans need to reach their goals. Public libraries are truly symbolic beacons of hope and ballasts for democracy itself.

In March 2020, Chicago Public Library was forced to close our doors for the first time in our 150-year history. However, thanks to the hard work and dedication of our staff and partners, we have been able to adapt in meaningful and sustainable ways. We are one of the only library systems in the nation that is physically open to patrons – and we were the first to do so. This should truly be a point of pride for every Chicagoan. Every day, we provide robust services, help people find books, answer research questions, and help patrons use computers and access databases. In addition, we have an inviting and accessible on-line and app-based presence where people can find and use our digital resources from anywhere.

At no time in our history has our service been more needed – or appreciated – than right now; we are providing in-person services in ways that distinguish us among peer agencies and partner organizations.

We have prioritized adding value to the city beyond our walls as well. During the city-wide closure, our staff responded to the needs of Chicagoans in many ways. The Library worked with the city's department of Public Health and Office of Emergency Management and Communications to open an Emergency Food Distribution Center. The center was primarily operated by CPL staff, and library drivers provided emergency food deliveries across the city. These collective efforts served over 1M meals and snacks. Additional library staff members brought home equipment from CPL's Maker Labs and created PPE for distribution. Program staff continue to diligently explore and test new ways to offer traditional library programs and services digitally to all Chicago communities. For example, our mobile STEAM team joined the Mayor's "On the Block" initiative this summer with other City departments to deliver activity kits to youth on residential blocks on the South and West Sides.

**We are guided by the new CPL strategy: CPL 2020-2024**

CPL developed a new 2020-2024 strategy, which will serve Chicago residents and communities across the city. This plan responds to the evolving needs of patrons who wish to learn, thrive and grow, and will guide the Library's work for the next five years. Throughout the strategy development process, CPL engaged our partners and stakeholders, including more than 800 CPL employees and over 16,000 patrons about what they were proud of, what they wanted to improve and, most importantly, what matters most for the future

of our library. We are proud of our accomplishments and look forward to the next phase of our journey as we build on what we do well and thoughtfully explore new ways to serve our city and its residents.

Chicago Public Library was only a week from officially launching this new five-year strategy when we were required to close our doors for nearly three months, starting in March. We delayed releasing the strategy until August so that we could focus on ensuring that our staff and patrons were safe and that we were providing important programs and services to Chicagoans.

Since then, we have reflected on our strategic priorities to ensure they were responsive to our changing world, from a pandemic that forced the library doors to close for the first time to an increased call from communities across the city and nation for racial justice and community engagement. And I am proud to say that our strategy - CPL 2020-2024 - remains relevant, and in some ways even more so than when we completed it 9 months ago.

Chicago Public Library, and public libraries across the country, play an important role in helping to keep our citizens informed. Our strategy process confirmed our signature priorities of **providing free and open access to information and experiences; encouraging exploration and nurturing learning; and creating respectful, safe and welcoming spaces**. We also do this in ways that set us apart. We share **pride and purpose** in our work to strengthen communities, we value **creativity and resourcefulness** to serve patrons effectively, and we recognize our obligation to learn and grow, **broadening the perception of what a library can be**.

CPL will continue working to ensure that programs and services fit with the Library's new strategic priorities. These evaluations will also be informed by 10 years of institutional data, catalogued throughout 2020, on key performance indicators like collection use, holds, branch traffic, and computer use to enable long range trend analysis and power a new dashboard that will help CPL make strategic decisions and investments Library make strategic investments and decisions moving forward.

### **In Closing...**

Each person's future is greatly influenced by the quality of resources in their community, and their access to opportunity. We deeply respect the experiences of all Chicagoans and seek to remove unnecessary barriers to information, and to pave the way for everyone to have equal access and opportunity to achieve their goals. Every day, we work to ensure expanded access to library services, whether through elimination of fine barriers or through expansion of branch hours.

Our library spaces and the skilled librarians and staff help children build early learning skills, enrich their understanding of science, technology, engineering, art and math, and discover the world around them. Teens are introduced to new interests, educational and career opportunities. We help Chicagoans compete in our workforce, guiding them with tools and support to learn basic digital skills and apply for jobs. We create collaborative spaces for community members to share, make and create. Adults keep their love of learning, doing and reading alive through the diverse programs offered by the library.

Chicago Public Library plays an **essential role** in ensuring that every Chicagoan has an opportunity to learn, enjoy and contribute to the success of our great city.

We would like to thank Mayor Lightfoot, the Chicago Public Library Board, the Chicago Public Library Foundation, and the members of the Chicago City Council. Chicago Public Library is a national and international leader in libraries and learning, and with your support, we will continue serving Chicagoans with innovative ideas, impactful programs, enlightening resources and equitable practices. Thank you.