

Chicago Public Library Commissioner Chris Brown, 2024 Budget Statement – 10/19/2023

Good morning, Chairman Ervin, Vice Chair Lee, and honorable City Council. I would like to thank you and Mayor Johnson for your steadfast commitment to ensuring that Chicago Public Library (CPL), fulfills our mission of providing equitable access and learning opportunities for all Chicagoans.

150 Years of Leading from the Library

For a century and a half, CPL has led the way, serving as a trusted and invaluable resource. With a presence in all 77 neighborhoods, CPL leads through connection, empowerment, inspiration, and imagination. We are on pace to reach 60 million touchpoints this year, which is a combination of in-person visits, website visits, borrowed materials, and programming.

Our dedicated staff helps ensure that our services reflect the interests and needs of each neighborhood, collectively reflecting the vibrant diversity of our city. To that end, we have made substantial strides in reducing our vacancy rate by 26%, hiring directly from our neighborhoods into our library locations.

CPL's programs empower our next generation, particularly our most vulnerable, including the youngest, oldest and newest arrivals. As an integral part of our neighborhoods, the library is the largest provider of free early literacy programs and internet access and is an essential partner in connecting residents to needed services like broadband. We advocate for the growth and development of all Chicagoans by providing opportunities to improve lives through resources and learning.

Supporting Education Milestones

Our dedicated workforce and 81 locations have allowed us to launch strategic educational initiatives. Our *81 Club initiative* removes barriers for students seeking library cards and ensures every youth can easily access our collection. Over the summer, we witnessed a 12% increase in students engaged in reading and literacy activities, collectively reading nearly 21 million minutes during "Summer at CPL." Our branches offered twice as many programs, with participation tripling from the previous year. CPL's Teacher in the Library homework help program provided a 69% increase for in-person and virtual sessions to Chicago students and families.

Through CPL's 29 YOUmedia spaces, we empower the next generation to discover their passions through youth-focused activities and programs. We have also prioritized adding teen-focused staff in libraries, particularly in neighborhoods with the most challenging safety beats. During the summer, we provide over 36,000 meals to young visitors through our partnership with the Greater Chicago Food Depository. Our collaboration with After School Matters allowed us to offer summer employment opportunities to 119 young people in 2023, in addition to the 340 junior ambassador volunteers.

Neighborhood Social and Wellness Support

CPL plays a crucial role in providing information about health and wellness services, particularly for our most vulnerable populations dealing with housing, substance use and mental health challenges. In collaboration with the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH), we integrate behavioral health support into CPL locations citywide. We've distributed over 10,000 units of Narcan, the overdose reversal medication, and coordinated additional services around CPL branches, including mental health clinicians, mobile crisis vans, and public health vending machines. To support our new arrivals, we collaborate with

the Department of Family & Support Services (DFSS) to bring bilingual story times and activities to children and families in shelters, along with information on housing and jobs.

Celebration of Diversity

CPL takes pride in its leadership in staff diversity within the library industry. Our community-based hiring model, which leverages existing community relationships and partnerships, has increased visibility of job opportunities, youth employment opportunities, and programming. The Library also offers numerous growth and promotion opportunities within CPL and tuition reimbursement for becoming a librarian.

We are proud of our history of removing barriers to access for all Chicagoans and are explicitly committed to being a more racially equitable library system. We commit to upholding our mission by advancing equity as an outcome *and* a process that results in fair and just access to opportunity and resources that provide everyone with the ability to thrive.

This year, and into next, CPL will conduct an Equity Assessment, informed by community engagement, to establish a strategy and action plan that will advance CPL's mission of providing access to information and knowledge. As the largest provider of free internet access in Chicago and a member of the City's Digital Equity Council, CPL is central to providing digital access and essential modern skills. We also received a \$2 million Mellon Foundation grant to digitize Black history archival materials in the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection, which will further our mission of protecting and empowering educators with inclusive narratives, knowledge, and ideas.

With the freedom to read under attack, with book bans on the rise across the United States, and most of these challenges targeting BIPOC and LGBTQIA writers and readers, CPL declared our 81 libraries as book sanctuaries. This movement continues to lead efforts to protect banned and challenged books, serving as a model for other cities. We want to thank our Alderpersons who have been supportive of our workforce at this challenging time.

Vibrant Neighborhood Cultural Hub

The success of CPL in delivering much needed services hinges on communities seeing themselves represented in our spaces and programming, fostering empowerment and participation. We create this connection through storytelling, programming and art. This year, CPL and a coalition of creative and civic communities, named Avery R. Young the inaugural Chicago Poet Laureate. We also announced our first Native American *One Book, One Chicago* author, Pulitzer Prize Finalist Tommy Orange, with the selection of *There, There*. In celebration of CPL's 150th anniversary, we launched our "Library for the People," podcast this summer, reflecting on CPL's rich history and vibrant community. This budget allows us to maintain our cultural efforts.

Capital Investments

As an international library leader, CPL continuously reimagines what a library can be, designing community-centered spaces that profoundly impact Chicagoans. To provide the best programs and services, we are collaborating with communities to co-create new libraries at North & Pulaski, in Woodlawn, and in the Back of the Yards community. We are also working closely with the Obama Presidential Center to create the first-ever public library in a presidential center. However, we recognize the need for a dedicated capital budget and have secured funding for a capital strategies master plan in

2024. This plan will inform our future investments in new and enhanced spaces, enabling us to design the libraries of the future and reinvest in Chicago neighborhoods. These capital developments are critical to our impact as research has shown library capital investments result in double-digit increase in use for a full decade.

Looking Ahead

Chicago Public Library remains committed to democratizing access to information and learning for every Chicagoan. Our skilled librarians and staff help children build early literacy and learning skills, while teens explore new interests and access educational and career opportunities. We assist adult Chicagoans in competing in the workforce by teaching basic digital skills and how to apply for jobs. Our programs encourage people of all ages to share, play, and create.

With your support, we will continue serving Chicagoans with innovative ideas, impactful programs, enlightening resources, and equitable practices. Thank you for helping us redefine the possibilities of what a library can be.