

Statement on Public Library Service in Rochester, New York

Public libraries serve many roles in the Rochester community, from community gathering place, to a source of materials for education and recreation, to a place to connect to the digital world. Forty two percent of Rochester's children live in poverty, with less than 45% graduating from high school. Seventy three percent of library users polled in 2011 list the library as their only source for computer and internet access. Our libraries are the destination for people with few options.

Our libraries have become, out of necessity, the place for the jobless, the homeless, and the poor. As more and more government programs and job opportunities rely on computer access and knowledge, the library has become the source for providing both the access and the training to help people out of poverty.

Our librarians have become, out of necessity, social workers, teachers, and counselors. A young librarian recently asked for advice regarding what she should tell users who need help applying for PayDay loans. She was torn between keeping an objective distance and just showing the user how to apply, and following her conscience and informing the user about the exorbitant interest rates associated with these loans.

Our libraries have become, out of necessity, the first place new immigrants and refugees head when they are resettled into urban neighborhoods and need help learning the language and understanding such things as how to read a prescription bottle or a school report card. The books and other materials available with a library card are like gold to people coming to this country for a better life. A young refugee from Burma recently completed his GED and brought his certificate to show the librarian who helped him with his program. He then asked her for a book on calculus so he could teach himself the basics of the subject before he started college.

Our central library has become, out of necessity, a home for the homeless. Lines of people form every morning waiting to get into the library for reasons ranging from warmth, restrooms, newspapers, computer access, and books. A homeless man recently told one of our librarians that he doesn't want, need or use social services, but he couldn't live without the library.

Libraries of 2011 provide far more than just books. One hundred years ago, being disenfranchised meant you couldn't vote. In 2001 in the City of Rochester, it could mean anything from not being able to read to not having a computer. Libraries have become, out of necessity and great purpose, the equalizer in an increasingly digital world, and we have done this in the face of steadily declining support from funders. Don't force our libraries, out of necessity, to stop the services provided to the disenfranchised of 2011. Restore and stabilize funding for public libraries now.