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# TESTIMONY

BY

## LITERACY NEW YORK

PRESENTED TO

FISCAL COMMITTEES OF THE NEW YORK STATE LEGISLATURE

HEARING ON

THE FY 2015-2016 EXECUTIVE BUDGET

ON

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2015

ALBANY, NEW YORK

My name is Janice Cuddahee. As the Executive Director of Literacy New York (LNY) I am proud to represent our network of 35 local, community-based affiliates. LNY serves more than 6,000 low-reading level adult learners in 54 counties across the state, from Buffalo to Long Island and the North Country to the Southern Tier. I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am accompanied by Sue Hensley Cushing, Director of Instruction for LNY.

## **Adult Literacy Education Program**

To begin, I want to thank members of the Legislature for your continued support of Adult Literacy Education funding. This competitive grant program is instrumental in enabling adult literacy education providers across the state to offer professional and accountable literacy services.

In 2014-15, with your support, the Adult Literacy Education Program was funded at \$6.293 million. While still below 2008-09 funding levels (\$7.04 million), the \$1 million legislative add kept the program level from the year prior. Unfortunately, the 2015-16 Executive budget once again eliminates the \$1 million add on, funding the program at \$5.293 million. **LNY recommends restoration of the \$1 million in the 2015-16 budget.**

There is no shortage of adult literacy needs. LNY and programs similar to ours in New York City exist because there is a need to foster and strengthen literate communities throughout NYS. For over 40 years, since 1974, the LNY network has been building literate communities in urban centers like Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Binghamton, Albany, Middletown, Yonkers and Hempstead – and in rural areas of Chenango, Essex, Franklin, Wayne and Wyoming counties. 54 counties – where many of you know the affiliates, their programs and the important services they provide.

At each affiliate, and in every corner of NY, we say “Literacy Leads.” Literacy Leads to employment, to independence, to opportunity. The lack of literacy skills is the thread that weaves through so many of today’s societal issues; poverty, incarceration, high dropout rates in schools, and low skills are a real barrier to understanding basic health, financial and consumer and digital literacy concepts that we all in this room take for granted. Literacy is the foundation of education. A child who goes home to a parent that struggles with literacy is 5 times more likely not to succeed in school than a child whose parent(s) are literate. We know that the largest single indicator of a child’s success in school is the education level of his or her mother. And far too many mothers (and fathers and caregivers) in NY and throughout the nation, need help.

Today more than 6,500 volunteers across the LNY network provide basic literacy and English Language Learning to a diverse cross-section of learners at the lowest NYSED/federal National Reporting Standards (NRS) literacy levels. And although we take great pride in New York State having the only NRS compliant statewide volunteer-based network in the nation – the numbers of learners we serve do not meet the needs that exist in New York State. LNY’s goal is to recruit more volunteer tutors and serve many more adult learners. **However, to build the capacity of adult literacy providers, LNY recommends an additional investment in the Adult Literacy**

**Education program of \$3.7 million for total funding in 2015-16 of \$10 million to support the entire state.** It can be without question that Literacy Leads to employment, to independence, and to opportunity. Literacy changes lives and communities. A statewide volunteer-based network already exists in NYS – with great potential for growth. We know that well-trained, well-supported volunteers in literacy are cost-effective, accountable and a largely untapped resource across NYS. We encourage your support of the Adult Literacy Education program.

## Literacy Leads

Introduction - Sue Hensley Cushing, Director of Instruction for LNY

### Literacy Leads to **Employment.**

When individuals gain literacy, numeracy and computer skills, the more likely they are to find and keep sustainable employment. Nationally, the effect of low literacy costs the U.S. more than \$225 billion each year in non-productivity and loss of tax revenue due to unemployment. Those at the lowest literacy levels have a higher rate of unemployment than the national average, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. If employed, hourly wages are lower. Poor literacy skills severely limit a person's access to being hired, and getting better-paying and more rewarding jobs.

*My name is Stephanie. I learned about literacy from my son's Head Start Teacher. I dropped out of High School because I had a baby and didn't have a babysitter. I wanted my HS diploma so I could get a good job to support my son and go to college. I worked hard with my tutor. And I practiced! I passed all 5 parts of the TASC after only 3 months. And I got a job at Kmart. I want to make a better life for me and my son.*

### Literacy Leads to **Independence.**

Without adequate literacy skills, adults must follow others, wait for answers and hope for opportunities. According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (2003), 14% of US adults read at or below a 5<sup>th</sup> grade level. 29% only read at an 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. And among those with the lowest literacy levels, 43% live in poverty.

In NYS, the statistics are even more grim. Statewide, including NY City, 22% scored "Below Basic". Upstate urban and rural areas ranged between 14% and 20% "Below Basic" literacy levels. Those statistics not only impact individuals – but their families and their communities. Literacy is critical to building strong communities across NYS.

*My name is Debra. I am from Brooklyn and came to Troy to better my life. I wanted so much more in life than what I was getting. I moved to the YWCA and joined the Ready for Work program with Literacy Volunteers. They helped me in so many ways not only helping me get a well paying job, but also helped me to bring up my math scores. They helped me with saving my money and long and short term goals that I am*



*still working on. I have obtained 2 out of 3 things in my goals list. I'm still working hard. Anybody can have a hard life and still be somebody. I came from nothing. Now I am something.*

### Literacy Leads to **Opportunity**.

Without adequate literacy skills, adults cannot take advantage of opportunities that may present themselves. Opportunities are closely tied to individual educational attainment. Without basic literacy skills there is little opportunity for an individual or a family to move out of poverty.

Without basic literacy skills there is little opportunity to help a child succeed in school. Without basic literacy skills there is little opportunity for an individual to transition to post-secondary or higher education.

*My name is Meliha and I am from Sarajevo. In 1992 I saw life there I could not imagine. I made a decision: make life bearable for my family. I remembered what my father told me when I was a child: "America embraces all people from all faiths." I left my country, and my family and I came in US. My story is common told by millions of Americans. I live everyday with the thought this is my home. America is a big, open and charitable heart. Americans sometimes seems confused and always noisy. That noise has a name. It is called democracy.*

## **Volunteer Tutors: Support Professional Development**

**Literacy New York supports the Board of Regent's recommendation for \$5 million in professional development of adult educators.**

LNY network has worked effectively with tens of thousands of adults lacking basic literacy and English Language Learning skills, but there are many more who may not know where to look, or find themselves waiting for services. Highly trained volunteer tutors are cost-effective resources in adult literacy education. New York State could be in the national forefront of engaging volunteers in improving literacy skills for countless adults and their families.

A framework exists across NYS for volunteers to be recruited, trained, assessed and supported. With additional support, the existing collaborative framework could be expanded to ensure that volunteers whether tutors, trainers, assessors, could be available in communities throughout the state to help individuals, families and communities become stronger.

With quality training, support and professional development, so many more could be volunteer tutors. Imagine mobilizing countless college students preparing to be teachers, social workers or human service workers – and giving them the opportunity to work directly with low-literate adults. They could use their expertise and help adults improve the most basic skills, prepare for their high school equivalency exams, and help prepare them for the transition to post-secondary education. Imagine mobilizing recently retired teachers – with their expertise in instruction, training, testing, and having these educators help other volunteers in literacy.

Imagine mobilizing countless potential volunteers across NYS by offering the opportunity to take a professional, research-based, online tutor training – at home, in their dorm room, when convenient. LNY recently completed its online training (Intake to Outcomes) and more than 100 volunteers are currently taking the training. The potential is enormous.

But it doesn't stop there. We know more about the volunteers themselves. The #1 reason they volunteered to tutor is simply to help others. But they gain so much more. We know in almost every demographic respect, the volunteer tutors differ greatly from their students. This does not detract from the learning partnership but may, in fact, be what makes them work. LNY has endless examples by tutors' own accounts, that tutoring has broadened their perspectives, increased their awareness, contributed to their learning and enriched their own lives. In many cases it is multi-generational – and powerful.

## Conclusion

In New York, there are 2.7 million adults – or 14% of the total state population – without a high school credential. There are 1.2 million adults or 6% of the total state population who do not speak English well or at all. Our goal has been, and continues to be, to help individuals, families and communities succeed: *to build literate communities*. There is a tremendous amount of work to be done – and with your **support of the Adult Literacy Education Program with an investment \$10 million for 2015-16**, many more adults and families can be served. Literacy transforms lives and literacy benefits New York State.

As always, please consider LNY and our 35 local community based providers of adult literacy services a resource to you and your communities. Thank you.

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