

NOVEMBER 2021

Branches to Recovery

Center *for an*
Urban
Future

TAPPING THE POWER
OF NEW YORK'S
PUBLIC LIBRARIES
TO ENSURE AN
INCLUSIVE
RECOVERY AND
REBUILD A MORE
EQUITABLE CITY



Center *for an* Urban Future

Branches to Recovery is a publication of the Center for an Urban Future. Researched and written by John Surico, Eli Dvorkin, and Jonathan Bowles. Edited by Eli Dvorkin and Laird Gallagher. Additional research by Sara Bellan, Michelle Chen Hsia, Charles Shaviro, Guy Mika, Mengyue Sun, Borge Feliz, Mitul Arora, Mingqi Song, Marco Antonio Torres, Isaac Landman, Justin Helmkamp, Devin Borg, Erin Garrett, Julia Farley, and Alyssa Cortez Peralta. Designed by Stislow Design.

Center for an Urban Future (CUF) is a leading New York City-based think tank that generates smart and sustainable public policies to reduce inequality, increase economic mobility, and grow the economy.

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This study was made possible by the Charles H. Revson Foundation.

General operating support for the Center for an Urban Future has been provided by The Clark Foundation, the Bernard F. and Alva B. Gimbel Foundation, and the Altman Foundation.

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Table of Contents

Branches to Recovery

INTRODUCTION

Realizing the Potential: Tapping Public Libraries to Tackle 10 Major Policy Challenges **1**

1. Ensuring Children and Teens Overcome COVID Learning Loss **14**
2. Strengthening Minority- and Immigrant-Owned Businesses **16**
3. Expanding Access to Tablets, Laptops, and High-Speed Internet **19**
4. Helping New Yorkers Get Back to Work **21**
5. Fostering Economic and Civic Inclusion in Immigrant Communities **24**
6. Closing Academic Achievement Gaps Through Early Education **27**
7. Renewing the College and Career Dreams of New York's Teens
and Young Adults **30**
8. Supporting NYC's Fast-Growing and Increasingly Diverse
Older Adult Population **32**
9. Building Pathways to the Well-Paying Tech Jobs of the Future **34**
10. Empowering NYC's Growing Independent Workforce and
Preparing At-Risk Workers for a More Automated Economy **37**

RECOMMENDATIONS

Equipping NYC's Branch Libraries to Rebuild a More Equitable City **41**

Branches to Recovery

IN THE MONTHS AND YEARS AHEAD, NEW YORK CITY'S LEADERS WILL BE TASKED WITH HELPING HARD-HIT communities across all five boroughs recover fully from the social and economic devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic—and chart a course toward a more equitable future. Fortunately, elected officials and policymakers have an incomparable asset and ally in nearly every New York neighborhood: the city's 217 public branch libraries.

Although many other entities will be pivotal to creating a fairer city—including hundreds of community-based nonprofit organizations—no institution is better equipped than the public libraries to make progress toward a more equitable city in so many critical areas, from expanding access to early education and closing the digital divide to strengthening minority-owned businesses and bolstering the language, literacy, and technology skills needed to access the good jobs of tomorrow.

Libraries aren't just on the ground in nearly every community across the city. In many of the neighborhoods hit hardest by the pandemic, libraries are among the only trusted resources for immigrants, teens, older adults, and those on the wrong side of the digital divide. For example, in 64 percent of the city's neighborhoods, branch libraries are the sole public hub for career services and support for jobseekers.¹ Libraries are the only local, public resource for small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs in 67 percent of the city—including many neighborhoods where minority- and immigrant-owned businesses are still reeling from the pandemic—at a time when thousands of lower-income New Yorkers are turning to entrepreneurship out of necessity.² And as the city faces the consequences of widespread learning loss, libraries are the only local, public provider of family literacy programs in over one-third of city neighborhoods—and among the only options for free, drop-in homework help.

While libraries have long served as a go-to resource for New Yorkers seeking opportunity, with more resources and deliberate planning from City Hall, they could be doing so much more. Today, the city's public libraries serve over 35 million visitors annually, with program attendance increasing 178 percent over the past decade and WiFi usage more than tripling.³ But libraries accomplish all this with less than 0.44 percent of the city budget. The city currently allocates about \$432 million annually for public libraries—30 percent less than the Department of Parks and Recreation, 63 percent less than the Department of Corrections, and 92 percent less than the Police Department.⁴

One effect of this underinvestment is that many of the libraries' most popular and successful programs have long waiting lists or have only been rolled out to a small portion of branch locations. For instance, libraries have become the city's largest public provider of technology training in recent years, serving well over 160,000 patrons annually. But new seats in coding classes are filled up within ten minutes of registration opening, and the waitlist for one sought-after course had to be suspended because it had grown to over 6,000 people. A branch library is the only free place to use a computer, borrow a laptop, or access the Internet in many of the city's lowest-income communities, from Soundview to Canarsie. But the city's libraries collectively have just 2,277 laptops available to loan. Similar opportunities exist throughout the system to expand high-demand services in hard-hit communities—for older adults and immigrants, jobseekers and entrepreneurs, families with young children, and teens facing an uncertain future.

It's time to fully harness New York's branch libraries—and make them a centerpiece of the social infrastructure needed to cultivate an inclusive recovery and build a more equitable city.

Libraries are already among the city’s largest and most trusted providers of programs and services aligned with New Yorkers’ greatest needs. **With a clear citywide strategy and a new level of investment, their impact could be even greater.**

This study provides a detailed vision for how policy-makers can harness the full potential of New York’s 217 branch libraries—operated by the city’s three library systems, Brooklyn Public Library (BPL), New York Public Library (NYPL), and Queens Public Library (QPL)—to ensure an inclusive recovery and build a more equitable city for the long term. It was informed by an extensive data analysis and more than 100 interviews with national and local experts on issues ranging from early childhood education and technology training to support for jobseekers and older adult services; library officials and front-line library staff; and leaders in philanthropy, government, and the private sector. Funded by the Charles H. Revson Foundation, the report expands on CUF’s previous research examining the critical role of New York City’s branch libraries as engines of economic mobility and social cohesion, including the 2013 report *Branches of Opportunity* and 2014 report *Re-Envisioning New York’s Branch Libraries*.

Branch libraries are uniquely well-positioned to support an equitable recovery

There is broad consensus among city policymakers, including many of those who won elections earlier this year, that New York City will need to take aggressive steps in 2022 and beyond to address two defining challenges: 1) ensuring that New York’s hardest-hit neighborhoods and residents can fully recover from the coronavirus pandemic; and 2) building a more equitable economy over the long run.

If the city is going to succeed in meeting these dual challenges, New York’s branch libraries will need to play a key role.

This report homes in on ten policy areas that will be critical to ensuring an inclusive recovery and building a more equitable city—and where libraries are uniquely positioned to make a difference. But in nearly every instance, they are doing so with limited resources and meeting only a fraction of the demand.

ENSURING CHILDREN AND TEENS OVERCOME COVID LEARNING LOSS

Although most young people are now back in school in person, experts believe that a large majority of the city’s public school students need significant help catching up academically after a school year in which more than 60 percent of students learned exclusively from home.⁵ With their free drop-in homework help and after-school enrichment programs, libraries present an unmatched opportunity to counter COVID-related learning loss and keep students from falling further behind. Libraries saw enormous demand for homework help even before the pandemic, especially among the many students in lower-income and immigrant communities who aren’t enrolled in after-school programs but spend many of their afternoons in libraries.

But these programs are hardly meeting demand. For example, in early 2020, NYPL offered a drop-in homework help and enrichment program at 4 of its 88 branches. The program is expanding to 20 branches in fall 2021. But with more resources, NYPL officials say they would be able to expand to 30 to 40 sites for the 2022–2023 school year, serving dozens of children per

site and focusing on neighborhoods where the impact of learning loss from the pandemic is especially high. Likewise, the STACKS program at Queens Public Library offered homework help and structured enrichment activities at 23 of its 63 branches in 2019 and rapidly shifted to a virtual model during the pandemic. With more resources, QPL could expand these crucial services and continue running virtual programming alongside in-person offerings.

STRENGTHENING MINORITY- AND IMMIGRANT-OWNED BUSINESSES

Although the city has strong infrastructure to help the thousands of small businesses that are working their way back to profitability after a cataclysmic year, libraries are the only convenient resource for entrepreneurs in many of the communities where small businesses have been hit the hardest during the pandemic. In 37 of the city’s 55 Census-defined neighborhoods—or 67 percent—libraries are the only public provider of support for small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs. Indeed, relatively few communities of color across the city are home to city-run Business Solutions Centers or chambers of commerce, and many also lack business improvement districts.

The lack of small business support infrastructure in these communities is one of the main reasons that so many minority- and immigrant-owned businesses were financially vulnerable heading into the pandemic, with strikingly few of them taking advantage of e-commerce or other technology tools and too many operating with flawed bookkeeping practices.

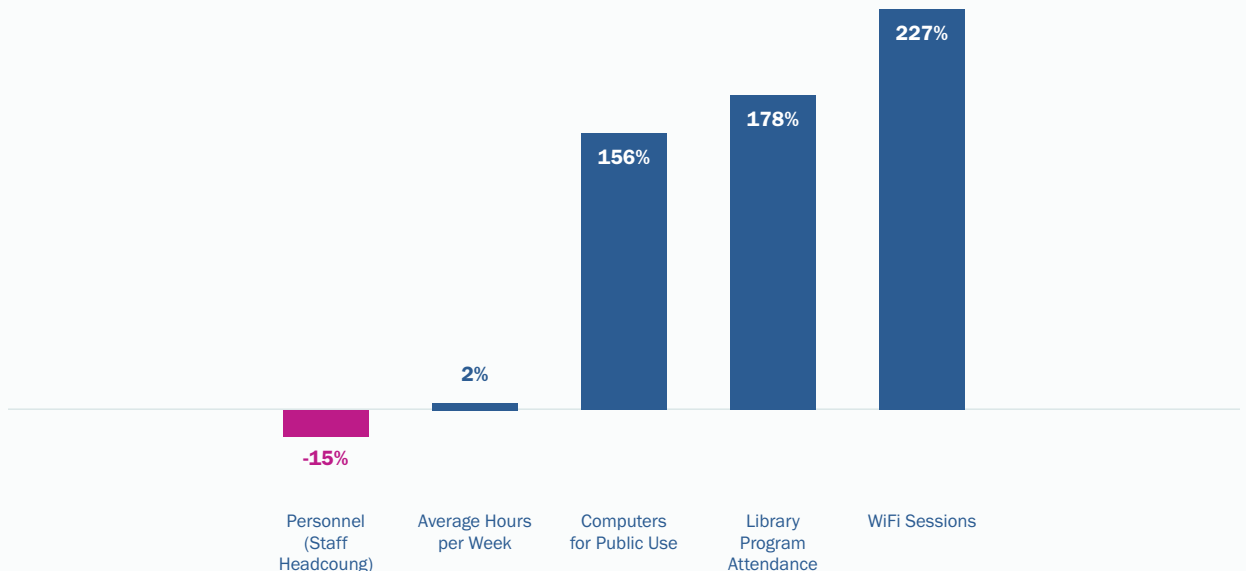
“New York needs to make sure that the Linden Boulevards and Springfield Boulevards all over the city have the same access to small business and entrepreneurial support that places like Bell Boulevard do,” says Dennis Walcott, president and CEO of Queens Public Library. “One of the best ways to scale up that support infrastructure is through the city’s more than 210 branch libraries, including new partnerships between public libraries and other strong community-based organizations providing small business and entrepreneurship assistance.”

EXPANDING ACCESS TO TABLETS, LAPTOPS, AND HIGH-SPEED INTERNET

As it becomes clear that the ability to work and study from home will remain an essential part of life in the city even after most employers, universities, and public schools have resumed in-person operations,

Over the Past Decade

Key Library Programs & Services Surged While Staffing Decreased



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the NYC Mayor’s Management Report (MMR). All figures are comparing FY 2009 and FY 2019.⁶

Libraries have just 18,500 Internet-enabled devices to lend in a city where **777,000 households do not own a computer.**

New York will need to ensure that far more of its residents are equipped with tablets, laptops, and home Internet service. Branch libraries are uniquely positioned to help.

Libraries are already among the largest providers of free Internet-enabled devices and broadband access across the city. In addition to the 15,000 public computers for use at branches across the city, the three library systems have more than 18,500 Internet-enabled devices to lend, including 2,277 laptops and 16,468 tablets. But the demand for these devices is several times greater in a city where nearly 260,000 Black New Yorkers only have home Internet access through a smartphone, more than 777,000 New York City households lack a laptop or desktop computer at home, and over 893,000 households do not have home broadband access.⁷

HELPING NEW YORKERS GET BACK TO WORK

Although employment in most higher-paying occupations has already bounced back to pre-pandemic levels, nearly 350,000 city residents are still out of work, including a disproportionate number of New Yorkers of color.⁸ Branch libraries will be the first place many of these New Yorkers turn for assistance, whether it is help preparing a resume, getting connected to a nonprofit workforce training provider, or upgrading their skills by enrolling in one of the libraries many career-enhancing classes. In fact, in most neighborhoods across the five boroughs, branch libraries are the only public provider of in-person resources for jobseekers. Only 21 of the city's 55 Census-defined neighborhoods are home to a public hub for career services—such as a Workforce1 Center or a Jobs-Plus program site.

Libraries are already a go-to resource for jobseekers, but with additional resources, they could fill a crucial gap in the employment services infrastructure in the months ahead as unemployment benefits run out for many out-of-work New Yorkers and industries that

previously provided ample job opportunities for New Yorkers without college degrees—including restaurants, hotels, retail, and transportation—have been slow to recover. The three systems served over 46,000 adult New Yorkers with job assistance resources in 2019, and that was when the city's unemployment rate was under 4 percent—compared to nearly 9 percent today. But the systems' ability to scale up these crucial services is limited by staffing needs. For instance, Brooklyn Public Library has just four career specialists on staff to serve all 60 branches, and the other systems report similar staffing levels.

BPL has just **4 career specialists** for all **60 branches.**

FOSTERING ECONOMIC AND CIVIC INCLUSION IN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

Any successful effort to ensure an inclusive recovery and create a more equitable economy over the long run will need to incorporate the city's 3 million immigrants, and libraries—the only public institution trusted by most immigrants—arguably offer the best opportunity to help at scale.

Immigrants were among the hardest hit by the pandemic, with as many as half of all immigrant New Yorkers losing their main source of income during the crisis and neighborhoods like Elmhurst and Corona suffering some of the deepest health impacts.⁹ At the same time, even prior to the pandemic, too few of the city's immigrants were earning a living wage—34 percent of employed foreign-born New Yorkers earned less than \$35,000 compared to 18 percent of employed native-born residents.¹⁰

But even as government considers supporting new programs and services to bolster immigrant New Yorkers, it's far from clear that those initiatives will be able to effectively reach them. Libraries have proven they can. A disproportionate number of the branches with the highest circulation and program attendance numbers are in immigrant communities, including Flushing, Sunset Park, Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, and Chinatown.

The problem is that libraries have lacked resources to expand services. For example, the Queens Public Library Adult Learning Center at Flushing library receives approximately six applicants for every available seat in its ESOL programs. Meanwhile, the city offers free legal services to immigrants through the innovative ActionNYC program, but those services are currently only available remotely. (The program’s predecessor, NYCitizenship, which provided citizenship application assistance, ended in June 2020 and was only available at 12 branches citywide.)

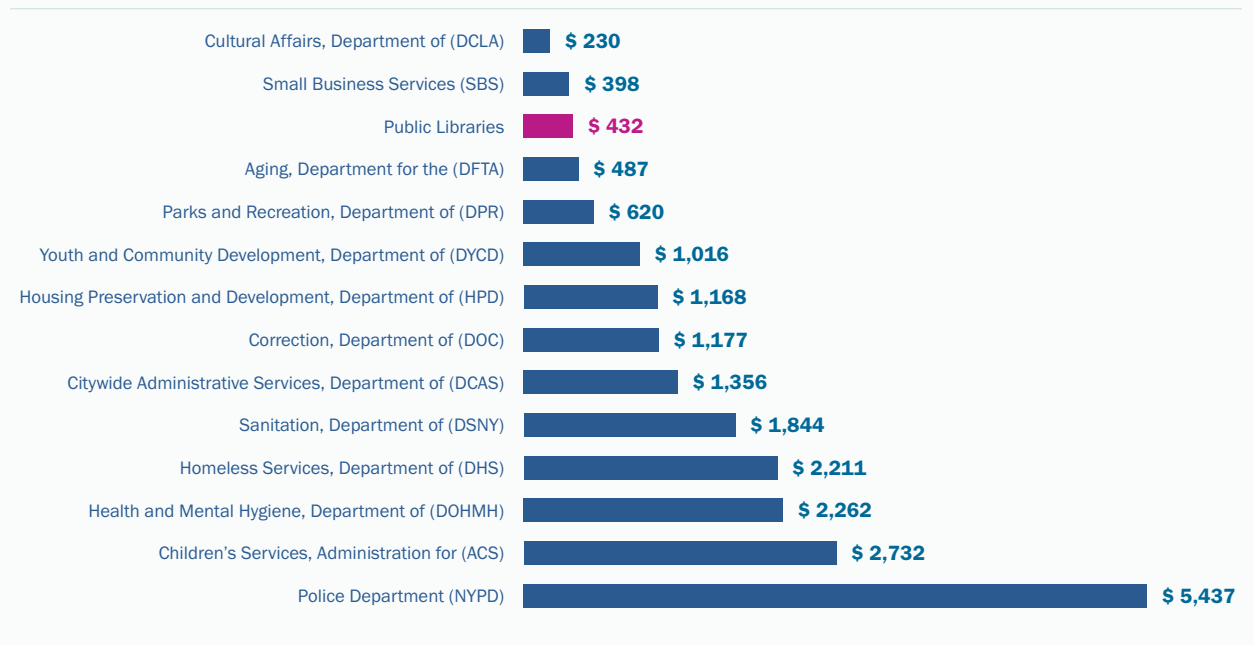
CLOSING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAPS THROUGH EARLY EDUCATION

Creating a more equitable city over the long run will also require dramatic progress in closing racial achievement gaps in education. Libraries present the city with a largely untapped opportunity to help, particularly in the area that research has shown to be the biggest difference-maker: early learning. Although the de Blasio administration deserves enormous credit for its investments in Universal Pre-Kindergarten and 3-K for All, libraries offer a chance to complement those vital classroom efforts with its highly regarded early learning programs offered after school, on weekends, and over the summer.

Libraries are already the largest provider of early literacy programs citywide. But their programs aren’t offered at many branches across the city. Brooklyn Public Library’s early learning programs reached 125,000 toddlers in 2018—but the system has just one part-time employee in charge of coordinating with all informal childcare groups in the borough. Queens Public Library’s Kickoff to Kindergarten (K2K) program, an eight-week, research-based program to improve literacy skills for kids ages 3-5, served 400 families in 2019. However, the program is only in 15 of 63 branches so far and could double its impact with additional funding and staff support.

Although many community-based organizations also provide valuable childhood literacy programming, over a third—19 of 55—of the city’s Census-defined neighborhoods have no dedicated, publicly funded adult or family literacy centers other than branch libraries.¹¹ This includes Norwood, Parkchester, and Wakefield in the Bronx; Brownsville and Canarsie in Brooklyn; and Ridgewood, Richmond Hill, and Cambria Heights in Queens.

NYC Budget Allocations for Select City Agencies, FY 2022 (in millions)



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of FY 2022 Adopted Budget data from NYC Office of Management and Budget.

QPL's Kickoff to Kindergarten is limited to 15 of 63 branches due to limited funding.

RENEWING THE COLLEGE AND CAREER DREAMS OF NEW YORK'S TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS

In 2020, 27 percent of New Yorkers between the ages of 18 and 24 were out of school or out of work—the highest share in more than a decade.¹² At the same time, many young New Yorkers have at least temporarily dropped out of the City University of New York or deferred plans to attend college. Helping these young adults get reconnected will be essential to an inclusive recovery in New York, and libraries undoubtedly have an important role to play.

In the years leading up to the pandemic, libraries demonstrated that by offering spaces and programs that appealed to teens, they could reach young people where others could not. But it's also clear that they were

BPL's Today's Teens Tomorrow's Techies is limited to 100 teens per year

just scratching the surface. At NYPL, there are only ten dedicated teen spaces across 88 branches. Queens boasts the city's only branch library exclusively for teens, the Queens Public Library for Teens in Far Rockaway, but it's open just 17.5 hours a week and closed on weekends. Dedicated teen spaces exist at only four other branches across Queens. BPL has provided a teen space in its recently opened Greenpoint Library with more planned for other new branches and a first-in-the-city teen tech center at the Kings Highway branch, where teens can explore multimedia production and robotics—

but it's open just 20 hours a week. Similarly, Brooklyn's innovative Today's Teens Tomorrow's Techies program can only accommodate 100 teenagers per year.

Additionally, NYPL's College and Career Pathways program has seen its attendance nearly double since launching in 2019. The program offers teens college prep workshops, large-scale college and career events, and one-on-one counseling sessions facilitated by trained young adult librarians. The programming helps high schoolers research and apply to college programs, certificate courses, scholarships, and financial aid and boosts career readiness through resume workshops and job interview prep. Library officials see enough demand to expand from 15 to 30 sites, but the program currently lacks sustained funding.

SUPPORTING NYC'S FAST-GROWING AND INCREASINGLY DIVERSE OLDER ADULT POPULATION

New York's branch libraries are arguably the best-positioned institution to help the city expand services and supports to the fastest-growing segment of New Yorkers living in poverty: older adults. The city is now home to 1.7 million New Yorkers aged 60 and over, roughly half foreign-born and one in five living below the poverty line.¹³ This record-high and increasingly diverse population of older New Yorkers faces an array of challenges—from financial insecurity and social isolation to workplace discrimination and limited digital literacy—but is woefully underserved by the city's senior centers.

While many of the city's 275 senior centers are popular, just 12 percent of the city's older adults make use of these centers, many of which provide meals but not enough of the other activities and services that older New Yorkers want and need today.¹⁴ Libraries already serve large numbers of older adults, offering a wealth of programs, free space to read and socialize, and a sense of community that spans all ages, including thousands of older New Yorkers who don't want to visit senior centers. But the city's libraries could be doing even more to serve this population if they had the resources to expand programming tailored to older adults and increase their hours of operation.

BUILDING PATHWAYS TO THE WELL-PAYING TECH JOBS OF THE FUTURE

Developing a more equitable economy in New York will take more than simply reconnecting New Yorkers to the workforce; it will also require a sustained effort to

significantly expand access to the good jobs being created in fast-growing industries like tech. Here, too, libraries have the potential to fill a glaring gap in services.

Although the city boasts a number of excellent tech training programs, 11 percent of the city’s Census-defined neighborhoods have just one program or none at all. In several lower-income neighborhoods outside of Manhattan—including East Elmhurst, East New York, Parkchester, Wakefield, and Stapleton—libraries are one of the only local providers of free technology training classes for adults.¹⁵

The city’s libraries serve well over 160,000 patrons in tech training classes annually—far more than any other organization in New York. But that’s only scratching the surface of the demand. All seats for NYPL’s TechConnect coding programs are filled up within ten minutes of registration opening, even though the branch system doesn’t do any outreach or promotion. Prior to 2020, NYPL had a waitlist of more than 6,000 for seats in the program—the waitlist has since been suspended because it had grown so long.

EMPOWERING NYC’S GROWING INDEPENDENT WORKFORCE AND PREPARING AT-RISK WORKERS FOR A MORE AUTOMATED ECONOMY

City efforts to build a more equitable economy will almost certainly need to include new resources and supports for the roughly 1.3 million New Yorkers now working as freelancers and gig workers, far too many of whom struggle with financial insecurity but lack a support system to turn to.¹⁶ Libraries have the potential to fill an important gap in the infrastructure for this large and growing population. While some benefit from resources and services offered at coworking spaces, tens of thousands of independent workers either can’t afford membership in a coworking space or don’t have one in their neighborhood. Indeed, our analysis shows that 60 percent of the city—33 out of 55 Census-defined neighborhoods citywide—currently lack any coworking space options other than a library.

Branch libraries already function as the only coworking spaces for lower-income New Yorkers, providing free space to work, including for many who make use of free laptop lending. Importantly, libraries also help independent workers connect to a variety of important free resources, from help with tax preparation to entrepreneurship workshops.

Seats in NYPL’s TechConnect program fill up in 10 minutes

“There are a huge number of New Yorkers working independently today,” says Rafael Espinal, executive director of Freelancers Union, the largest national nonprofit organization representing independent workers. “Libraries are very well positioned to help support their recovery from the pandemic by providing the free resources and coworking opportunities they need to succeed.”

But most libraries lack specialized branches, spaces, or programs dedicated to supporting independent workers. There are just four branches that allow patrons to book soundproof rooms—all in Brooklyn. And few branches are open long enough hours to meet the needs of many independent workers.

In addition to the growth of freelance work, another seismic shift is rippling across the city’s economy: the acceleration of automation. This phenomenon is likely to disproportionately impact many of the same New Yorkers who were hardest hit by the pandemic, as 76 percent of highly automatable jobs in the city are currently held by people of color.¹⁷ Getting ahead of these trends will require major new investments in lifelong learning and upskilling, and few institutions are better positioned to play a role than the city’s public libraries.

Experts say that preparing workers for automation doesn’t necessarily require retraining people for entirely new jobs; more important will be helping those in the workforce to gain new skills that make them “automation-proof” or give them the technological fluency to work alongside machines. Libraries are a good fit. They already function as natural hubs of lifelong learning, providing age-appropriate technology classes for everyone from children to older adults and offering free access to valuable skills-building resources. They’re also well equipped to help New Yorkers assess their current skills and needs—and navigate the city’s complex landscape of free training programs to acquire new industry-recognized credentials.

Tapping branch libraries to build back a more equitable city

New York’s branch libraries offer an unmatched opportunity to help city policymakers succeed in ensuring an inclusive recovery and building a more equitable economy. But realizing this opportunity will not be possible without new city investments in libraries and a new commitment to make libraries a key partner in city plans for tackling a range of policy challenges, from early education to digital literacy.

To unlock the full potential of the city’s public libraries to create and sustain a more equitable city for the long term, city leaders should commit to investing \$1 billion annually—and focus that investment on achieving the following seven priority recommendations:

- 1. Fund a major expansion of libraries’ hours of operation to extend access to far more working New Yorkers.**
- 2. Provide targeted funding for libraries to ramp up their most effective and promising programs and partnerships, reinvent underutilized spaces, and invest in expansion.**
- 3. Create a dedicated maintenance fund enabling libraries to make critical building fixes before problems can grow.**
- 4. Build the future of branch libraries into the city’s 10-year capital plan—and commit to expanding most of the city’s smallest branches by 2033.**
- 5. Integrate libraries into agency plans to tackle key challenges and ensure an inclusive recovery.**
- 6. Increase expense funding to support key staff roles that maximize impact.**
- 7. Help libraries take some of their vital resources on the road—to homeless shelters, laundromats, public housing complexes, senior centers, and playgrounds.**

To support this strategic expansion of library capacity, programs, and infrastructure, the next mayor and City Council should allocate \$1 billion annually to the city’s three library systems—about 1 percent of the city’s annual budget. Absent that level of investment, the current allocation of approximately \$431 million will prove inadequate even to maintain existing levels of virtual programming while integrating the full return of in-person services. But with a new level of sustained investment, policymakers can tap the full potential of this unmatched social infrastructure and ensure a lasting and equitable recovery in communities across New York City.

In addition to these priority recommendations, the report includes 26 issue-specific recommendations that, if implemented, would help libraries make further progress on each of the ten policy opportunities (outlined above) that will be crucial to ensuring an inclusive recovery and building a more equitable city. These ideas include everything from building out the libraries’ free drop-in homework help programs to establishing an NYC Skills Pass that would allow anyone with a library card to attend a tech training class offered by a participating private training provider—essentially, a Culture Pass but for career skills training.

New York City’s public libraries contain nearly limitless potential to help spur a full recovery from the pandemic, strengthen hard-hit communities in a time of immense need, and grow the social infrastructure needed to cultivate a more equitable city. But this vision can only be realized by fully integrating libraries into a comprehensive recovery strategy, investing in their unique ability to meet New Yorkers where they are with the programs and services they need. This report examines the library systems’ greatest strengths, explores where new investment could have the most transformative impact, and lays out a blueprint for harnessing branch libraries to rebuild a more equitable city.

Priority Recommendations to Harness NYC's Public Libraries

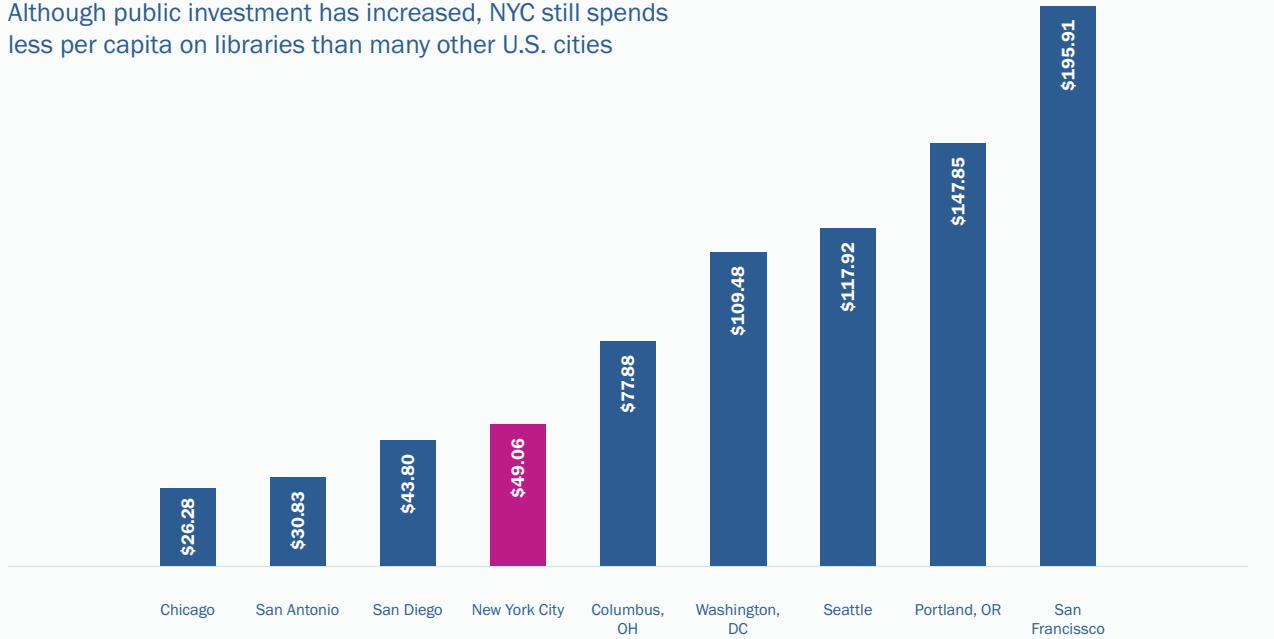
- 1. Fund a major expansion of libraries' hours of operation to extend access to far more working New Yorkers.** Expanding open hours will be essential for reaching many of the New Yorkers in greatest need of library services: working families whose only free hours are at night, early in the morning, or on the weekend. Despite considerable improvement in recent years, New York City's libraries are still open fewer hours than many of the largest library systems in the nation—including Chicago, Dallas, San Diego, and San Antonio—and most of the large counties in New York State. Currently, fewer than 9 percent of the city's branch libraries are open seven days a week. In fact, New York City's branch libraries were open fewer hours per week, on average, in the year before the pandemic hit than they were during the Great Depression.¹⁸ An annual investment of \$1 billion in the city's library systems—about 1 percent of the city's annual budget—can ensure that New York City's branch libraries lead the nation in weekly hours of operation, making these critical spaces and their resources accessible to far more New Yorkers. In addition, we recommend that at least one branch in each borough be opened 24/7, creating continuous access points to a range of vital services.
- 2. Provide targeted funding for libraries to ramp up their most effective and promising programs and partnerships, reinvent underutilized spaces, and invest in expansion.** Policymakers should make targeted investments in specific library programs to keep pace with high need and growing demand—and meet the challenges of the post-pandemic recovery. In addition to keeping libraries open longer, an investment of \$1 billion annually could dramatically expand early literacy programs and digital skills training, create a network of drop-in homework help centers, launch business plan competitions in multiple languages, expand one-on-one support for jobseekers and small business owners, and reconnect thousands of older New Yorkers after more than a year of painful isolation. Sustained public investment could eliminate waitlists for high-demand programs, maintain popular virtual programming even while returning to in-person service, and enable libraries to act quickly when emergencies arise—whether due to a public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic or an environmental catastrophe like a hurricane or flood. This level of investment would also enable the city's three library systems to reimagine underutilized spaces by implementing and expanding the “kit-of-parts” approach piloted successfully at the Flatbush branch and other architectural solutions to maximize the functionality of small and aging branches.
- 3. Create a dedicated maintenance fund enabling libraries to make critical building fixes before problems can grow.** The city's three library systems face nearly \$900 million in repairs and upgrades, including renovations to overhaul heating and cooling systems, fix leaking roofs, patch crumbling masonry, upgrade aging plumbing, and improve accessibility. Capital shortfalls total \$418 million at New York Public Library, \$251 million at Queens Public Library, and \$227 million at Brooklyn Public Library. Although the mayor and City Council have gradually increased capital support for libraries in recent years, libraries are still routinely forced to divert limited public funding away from operations in order to fix leaks, repair boilers, and keep aging branches functioning. The mayor and City Council should create a dedicated maintenance fund to support state-of-good-repair needs across all three systems and help catch smaller problems before they grow.

- 4. Build the future of branch libraries into the city's 10-year capital plan—and commit to expanding most of the city's smallest branches by 2033.** For the city to fully harness the power of branch libraries in every community, capital investment will need to do much more than chip away at the systems' mountain of state-of-good-repair needs. Expanding branch-level capacity to offer everything from early literacy programs and dedicated teen spaces to ESOL programs, business plan competitions, and robotics teams will require far more useable space than exists today. Today, 100 branches across the five boroughs are under 10,000 square feet, severely restricting their capacity and range of use. These branches should be a top priority for rebuilding and expansion in the city's long-term capital plan. But current 10-year capital funding is largely intended to cover state-of-good-repair needs for the existing system and leaves very little room to invest in much-needed branch expansions and replacements. The city should solicit plans from all three systems to expand most of their smallest and most overcrowded branches and commit sufficient funding in the next 10-year capital plan to achieve this.
- 5. Integrate libraries into agency plans to tackle key challenges and ensure an inclusive recovery.** Given libraries' unmatched reach and trust, city agencies should take full advantage of libraries as natural partners to expand uptake for a range of services and develop new programs in high-need communities. But to do so effectively, agency leaders should involve the city's library systems from the beginning of the planning process and treat branches as true partners in addressing the city's major challenges. Prior to the pandemic, this rarely happened. Although many city agencies did seek out libraries to help meet their policy goals, too often libraries were brought in at the end of the planning process, missing critical opportunities for libraries to help craft effective partnership strategies. And rarely were libraries given funds to expand services beyond what they were already doing. The Department of Education should look to libraries as a powerful ally in addressing learning loss caused by the pandemic, with the potential for year-round enrichment programs, teen mentorship for younger children, and drop-in homework help throughout the school year. Likewise, the Department of Small Business Services or NYC Economic Development Corporation should make libraries a key partner in plans to boost entrepreneurship in hard-hit communities—sparking the city's next wave of small business owners and job creators.
- 6. Increase expense funding to support key staff roles that maximize impact.** During the course of our research for this report, one key challenge emerged repeatedly: branches need more librarians and staff resources in order to maximize the impact and reach of their programs and services. But even as demand for key programs has surged, libraries are operating with 15 percent fewer staff members than a decade ago.¹⁹ Additional baselined expense funding can enable libraries to hire dedicated outreach librarians in every community and facilitate more partnerships with local community-based organizations, bringing compassionate, culturally competent programming—from early literacy to entrepreneurship training—directly into the spaces and neighborhoods where the New Yorkers hit hardest by the pandemic live, work, and learn.
- 7. Help libraries take some of their vital resources on the road—to homeless shelters, laundromats, public housing complexes, senior centers, and playgrounds.** While millions of New Yorkers make their way to branches every year, the city's branch libraries can deepen their impact by bringing some of their invaluable services—and community partnerships—into parts of their neighborhoods where there are unmet needs. This might entail regular storytime readings at homeless shelters and in NYCHA playgrounds or book club discussions and digital learning sessions at senior centers and in naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs). New York's libraries had begun to do this on a small scale prior to the pandemic, but there are opportunities to expand these nascent efforts if provided the resources. The mayor and City Council should consider funding a large-scale pilot program to bring library services into community spaces in 2022 as part of efforts to help New Yorkers still reeling from the COVID crisis.

NYC Libraries by the Numbers

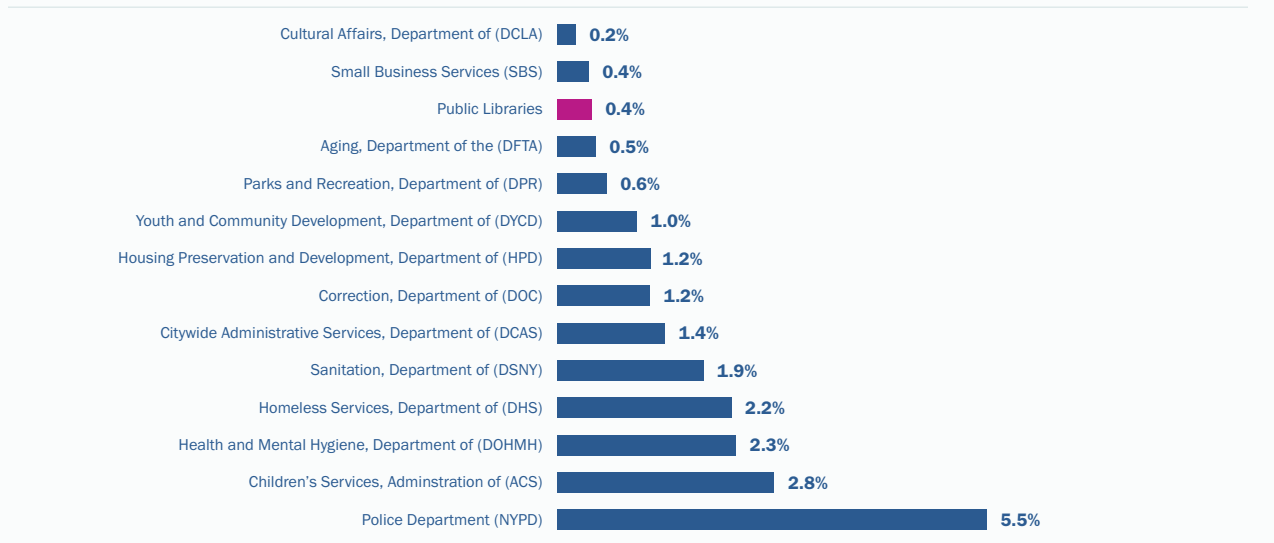
Public Library Spending Per Capita, FY 2022

Although public investment has increased, NYC still spends less per capita on libraries than many other U.S. cities



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of FY 2022 Adopted Budget data from each municipality and data from the 2020 U.S. Census.

Share of NYC Budget for Select City Agencies, FY 2022



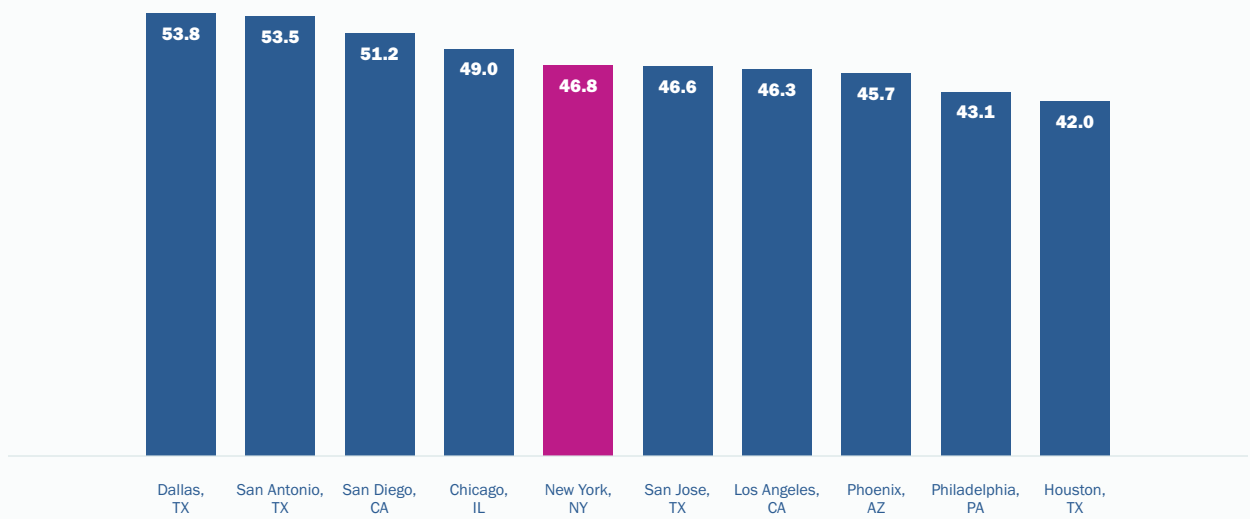
Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of FY 2022 Adopted Budget data from NYC Office of Management and Budget.

Average Hours Open Per Week
 NYC vs Other Urban Systems, 2018



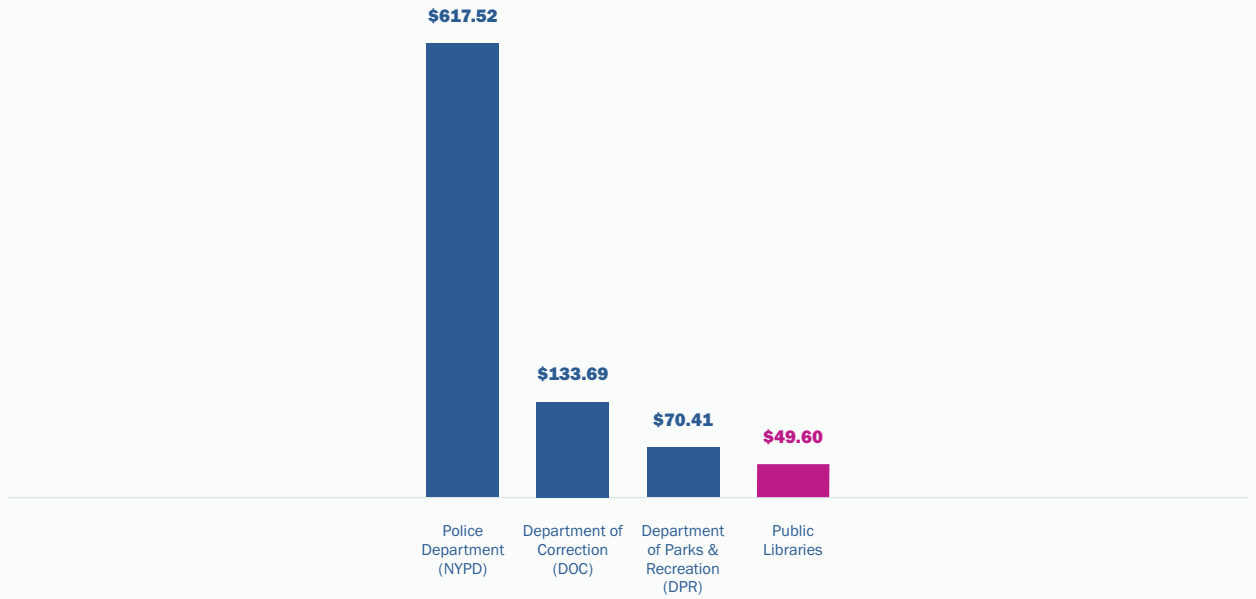
Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) 2018 Public Libraries Survey. Toronto data provided by Toronto Public Library.

Average Hours Libraries Are Open Per Week
 10 Largest U.S. Cities, 2018



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) 2018 Public Libraries Survey. Toronto data provided by Toronto Public Library.

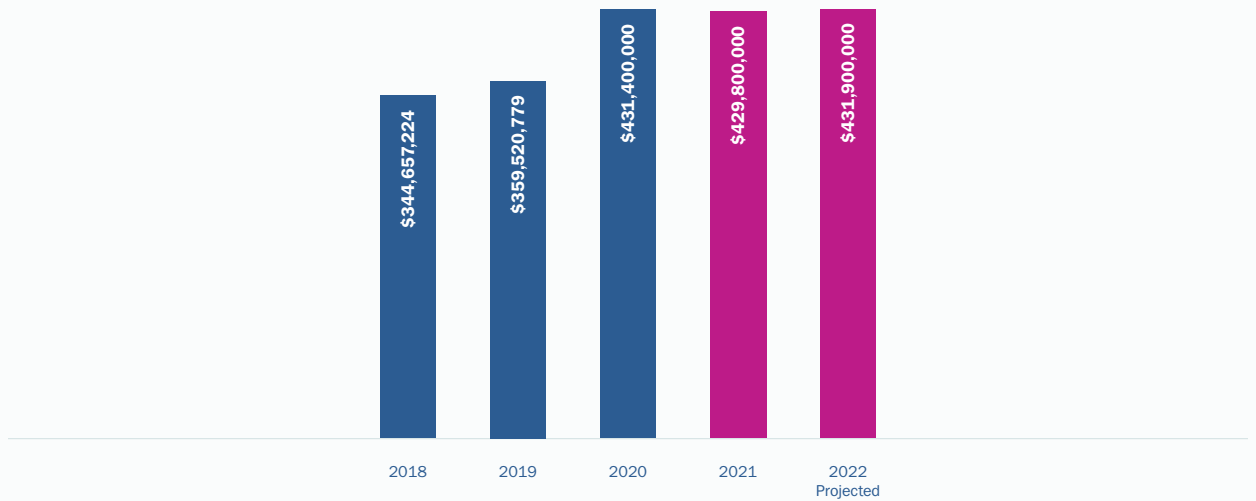
Per Capita Funding for Criminal Justice and Social Infrastructure in NYC, FY 2022



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of FY 2022 Adopted Budget data from NYC Office of Management and Budget and data from the 2020 U.S. Census.

NYC Public Libraries Budget, 2018–2022

Funding has flattened after years of growing investment



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of yearly budget data from the NYC Office of Management and Budget.

1

Ensuring Children and Teens Overcome COVID Learning Loss

Key Findings

NYPL offers a free drop-in homework help program that matches young people with tutors. In fall 2021, it will be offered in 20 branches, but with more resources, NYPL would be able to expand to 30 or more sites for the 2022–2023 school year—focusing on neighborhoods where the impact of learning loss from the pandemic is especially high.

QPL's STACKS program offers free homework help and skills-building activities to children in grades 1–8. In FY19, close to 1,000 children enrolled at 23 branches. Since the pandemic hit, STACKS has shifted to providing homework help and activities virtually, serving close to 2,000 children. With additional funding, STACKS could expand to more branches and continue running virtual programming simultaneously with the reintroduction of in-person offerings.

“There’s huge need across the boroughs for homework help. It’s one of the services that parents ask library managers about every day,” says Siva Ramakrishnan, NYPL’s associate director of young adult services. “A lot of kids whose parents work long hours or multiple jobs show up to branches after school and need this kind of help.”

THERE WAS ALREADY AN ALARMING ACADEMIC achievement gap in New York City before the pandemic, but public school leaders, education advocates, and teachers all believe that a year of remote learning has resulted in significant learning loss and magnified disparities. Although city officials have invested in summer programs to help students recover, there’s little doubt that many if not most of the city’s 1.1 million public school students will be playing catch up throughout the 2021–22 school year and beyond. New York’s public libraries are uniquely positioned to help accelerate students’ academic and social recovery—and ensure that they don’t fall further behind.

Branch libraries have an important instrument in their toolkit that has enormous potential to help students keep up after a challenging year: free drop-in homework programs.

In January 2020, NYPL launched a new drop-in homework help and enrichment program at ten branches. The program matches young people with adult tutors and trained (and paid) teens with younger children. NYPL officials say that they previously had enrollment-based afterschool programs at several branches that required interested students to sign up in advance. But library staff realized that many of the kids using their branches on a regular basis—particularly in lower-income communities—weren’t taking advantage of the program, despite clear interest. It prompted NYPL to shift to a drop-in model, and kids across the system have jumped on it.

In-person, drop-in homework help returned to branch libraries in September 2021, expanding to 20 branches, with half in the Bronx. But with more resources, NYPL officials say they would be able to expand



Even before the pandemic school-age kids’ needs were huge”

BRIAN BANNON, THE MERRYL AND JAMES TISCH DIRECTOR OF BRANCH LIBRARIES AND EDUCATION AT NYPL

BRANCHES TO RECOVERY

to 30 or more sites for the 2022–2023 school year, with an anticipated 20,000 visits for that school year—focusing on neighborhoods where the impact of learning loss from the pandemic is especially high.

Additionally, QPL’s STACKS program, a free homework help and enrichment program for children in grades 1-8, served close to 1,000 children at 23 branches in FY19, close to 740 children in FY20, and over 1,200 children virtually in FY21. With additional funding and support, STACKS could expand to more branches and continue running virtual programming simultaneously with in-person offerings.

“If you visited libraries after school before the pandemic, it was overrun by kids who needed help with homework,” says Brian Bannon, the Meryll and James Tisch director of branch libraries and education at NYPL.

Take Action

- **Build out drop-in homework help at branches in every hard-hit community.** Even before the pandemic, libraries saw exploding demand for their free drop-in homework programs. Today, drop-in help holds even more potential to counter COVID-related learning loss and keep public school students from falling further behind. With city support, this small-scale program should be expanded to branches in every hard-hit community.



Photo: Gregg Richards / Brooklyn Public Library

Strengthening Minority- and Immigrant-Owned Businesses

Key Findings

In 37 of the city's 55 Census-defined neighborhoods—67 percent—libraries are the only public provider of support for small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs.

The three library systems serve more than 3,000 small business owners annually with counseling and other support services, but this is just a fraction of the small businesses—particularly those in communities of color—that could benefit from support. BPL only has three employees focused on small business assistance for the entire system. And its small business services team—mainly comprised of staff librarians and volunteers—reaches only 25 out of the system's 59 branches with business services.

AN INCLUSIVE RECOVERY FROM THE COVID-19 CRISIS will need to ensure that the small businesses hit hardest during the past 18 months—namely, minority- and immigrant-owned businesses in low-income communities of color—have the resources and support to bounce back strong. With their reach, trust, and unique combination of programs and services, libraries are well-positioned to play a larger role.

Our research finds that many communities of color across the five boroughs lack small business support services, such as NYC Business Solutions Centers, Small Business Development Centers, and Business Improvement Districts. In 37 of the city's 55 Census-defined neighborhoods—67 percent—libraries are the only public provider of support for small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs.

In these and other communities, libraries have been filling the gap. In addition to their geographic reach, no other publicly funded institution offers the range of programming available at libraries, including business plan competitions focused on lower-income entrepreneurs, one-on-one business counseling, incubator programs for industries including food and fashion, and a wide range of business workshops delivered in multiple languages.

Prior to the pandemic, the city's three library systems were already serving more than 3,000 small business owners annually with counseling and other support services. But even this was a drop in the bucket. Indeed, our research suggests that one of the reasons so many minority- and immigrant-owned businesses struggled during the pandemic—and faced major difficulties accessing federal PPP loans—is that they were financially fragile heading into the crisis. Too few businesses in communities of color were taking advantage of business assistance services that could have helped them develop e-commerce capabilities, enhance their marketing on Instagram, Facebook, and other platforms, or learn stronger bookkeeping practices.

In the post-pandemic recovery period, libraries are well-positioned to help. But they will need expanded resources. The libraries' small business assistance programs remain small and only available in some of their branches. Due to limited capacity—and limited funding—the libraries are unable to deliver additional programs, scale existing services, or expand current partnerships with nonprofit partners and agencies including the Department of Small Business Services. BPL only has three employees focused on small business assistance for the entire system. And its small business services

Branch Libraries Fill Gaps in Small Business Services

In 67 percent of NYC neighborhoods, libraries are the only public provider of support for small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs.



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of NYC Business Solutions Center, NYC Business Solutions Industrial and Transportation Center, and NYS Entrepreneurship Assistance Center location data.

team—mainly comprised of staff librarians and volunteers—reached only 25 out of the system’s 59 branches with business services.

With additional staff support to provide services and conduct outreach, all three systems say that these programs and services could grow exponentially in the years ahead.

In addition to helping small business owners access relief and navigate back to profitability, libraries can play an essential role in cultivating the city’s next wave

of entrepreneurs. With jobs still scarce, more New Yorkers are turning to entrepreneurship to help put food on the table and build toward a better future for themselves and their communities. Currently, libraries are one of a small number of organizations focusing support on these low-income entrepreneurs—and the one with by far the greatest reach.

In 2019, over 2,600 people attended an entrepreneurship seminar at an NYPL branch, and an additional 1,400 people received small business counseling. NYPL’s

StartUP! business plan competition receives over 500 entrants annually. BPL's PowerUP! competition saw a total of 452 applications in 2019, and the library's Brooklyn Fashion Academy received four applications for each open slot. Likewise, QPL saw 1,544 participants in nearly 150 small business and entrepreneurship workshops, growing to 1,680 participants in 2020, with nearly triple the average signups for each available session.

QPL's Jamaica FEASTS and Queens FEASTS (Food Entrepreneurship and Training) programs offered 12 weeks of combined classroom and hands-on training to educate entrepreneurs on how to start a food business in New York City. QPL's Jamaica FEASTS program, originally a partnership with the New York City Economic Development Corporation (EDC), expanded to other areas of Queens due to its popularity. Over 100 participants have graduated QPL's FEASTS programs, many of whom were women and minorities who have launched successful businesses; participated in prestigious culinary events such as the Vendy Awards, Good Food Awards, and NYC Wine and Food Festival; and vended at Taste of Queens, Queens Night Market, Bronx Night Market, and LIC Flea. QPL's FEASTS programs were suspended when the pandemic affected EDC's ability to continue to provide financial support, but they could be restored or even expanded in the future to meet consistently high demand.

Libraries are already accomplished at reaching New Yorkers who are otherwise underserved with small business and entrepreneurship programs. For instance, among BPL's 2020 business program participants, 25 percent are immigrants, 72 percent are women, and 72 percent have never owned a business. In recent years, BPL created PowerUP! Creole, harnessing local talent to help expand the library's popular business plan competition to reach Haitian entrepreneurs in their own language.

With additional funding, the libraries' business plan competitions could take place multiple times per year—instead of just once annually—and new competitions could launch in multiple languages, including Spanish, Chinese, Bengali, Korean, Russian, and Haitian Creole. A relatively modest investment of about \$500,000 could make this a reality—creating an annual business plan competition in each of the city's official languages.

Given current funding restrictions, the systems are all using limited dollars to try to keep up with demand—but a new level of investment could help make these programs more sustainable. For instance, QPL's small

business and entrepreneurship programs require an investment of about \$166,000 annually just to maintain current services—but have room to grow with additional funding. An investment of about \$1 million annually would secure the continuation of these programs across all three systems while providing room to add new staff to expand services, connecting more small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs in the city's hardest-hit communities to the assistance needed to recover and build something new.

Take Action

- **Grow the libraries' unique business plan competitions.** Libraries are home to most of the city's start-up competitions focused on lower-income entrepreneurs, providing a crucial spark to aspiring business owners in many of the communities hit hardest by the pandemic. With additional funding, the libraries' business plan competitions could take place multiple times per year—instead of just once annually—and new competitions could launch in multiple languages, including Spanish, Chinese, Bengali, Korean, Russian, and Haitian Creole.
- **Hire business services librarians to expand in-branch programming and community outreach.** Each year, thousands of aspiring entrepreneurs from underserved backgrounds—including women, immigrant, minority, and older entrepreneurs—seek out free small business and entrepreneurship counseling at the city's branch libraries. But the library systems are only funded to provide business services at fewer than half of the branch locations citywide. An investment of \$1 million annually could triple the number of business outreach librarians and help bring these vital services to every branch across the city.
- **Partner with NYCEDC to launch new business incubators in branches citywide.** To help spark economic development and new business formation in communities hit hardest by the pandemic, NYCEDC should partner with libraries to launch new small business incubators. EDC should start by launching five library-based business incubator programs in food, fashion, education, wellness, and home services.

Expanding Access to Tablets, Laptops, and High-Speed Internet

Key Findings

As of 2019, the three library systems had more than 18,500 Internet-enabled devices to lend, including 2,277 laptops and 16,468 tablets. But more than 777,000 New York City households do not have a laptop or desktop computer at home, and over 893,000 households do not have home broadband access.

FOLLOWING 18 MONTHS IN WHICH SCHOOLS, COLLEGES, and workplaces operated remotely, it is painfully clear that New York City will need to make significantly more progress in closing the digital divide. The pandemic exposed glaring racial and income gaps in which New Yorkers have a home Internet connection and access to the laptops, tablets and other devices.

Even after the city distributed more than 500,000 tablets with cellular services to children enrolled in public school, major gaps persist. Nearly 893,000 New York City households still don't have broadband Internet access at home, and nearly 260,000 Black New Yorkers only have home Internet access through a smartphone—limiting options for both school and work. More than 236,000 New York households with school-age children do not have a computer at home, including over 22 percent of Brooklyn households and nearly 28 percent in the Bronx.²⁰

While closing the digital divide will require multiple policy interventions, libraries are undoubtedly a big part of the solution. Indeed, prior to the pandemic, they were one of the only institutions in the city making progress towards digital equity. Libraries have long been hubs for digital access. In FY 2019, the three library systems had nearly 15,000 public computers for use, and patrons logged more than 2.6 million computer sessions and more than 3 million WiFi sessions. WiFi sessions alone are up 227 percent over the past decade. But in recent years, the city's libraries have added critical new resources to their toolkit: lending Internet-enabled devices, sharing hotspots, and even boosting WiFi

signals beyond the walls of their branches to provide Internet access to patrons during the pandemic.

After seeing people corralled outside of their branches in the early part of the pandemic, the libraries started using antennas to further project WiFi signals into their neighborhoods. In order to give residents a safe place to sit and access the internet, BPL created outdoor reading rooms at over 25 branches in neighborhoods with low rates of broadband connectivity. But retaining outdoor services and expanding technology lending programs will require a new level of public investment.

When the pandemic forced schools to go remote, the three library systems collaborated with the Department of Education on the ConnectED Library Hotspot Loan Program, which provided 10,000 households with free broadband and ensured thousands of schoolchildren had the internet access they needed to access online classes and complete their homework. But absent ongoing public support, the program will be discontinued next year. With sustained funding, the libraries could build a hotspot program that permanently expands access to library services far beyond branch library walls and hours, say experts like Bill Kolb, a digital strategist at San Francisco Public Library, who helped start their own laptop/hotspot loan program.

“How much of your online experience happens during normal business hours? And how much of the rest of it—doing your taxes, or applying for jobs—happens off hours, when the library isn't open?” asks Kolb. “The expectation that people should meet us where we are is one that we're trying to move farther

away from as an organization. We're trying to meet people where they are."

BPL has been raising awareness about government subsidy programs that require online applications, such as the Emergency Broadband Benefit: a \$50 per month subsidy that qualified residents can use toward home high-speed Internet service. To help patrons apply, BPL set up dedicated computers in ten branches with low rates of broadband connectivity in the surrounding community. This approach could be replicated to help New Yorkers access a range of benefits and should be deployed quickly in the future when new government programs are launched that require online applications.

With current funding, the three library systems do not have enough resources to provide all students with access to the technology they need—especially laptops, which experts say are particularly needed to help students succeed in STEAM classes and produce work that requires project-based collaboration. The city's libraries have just 2,277 laptops available to loan, including just 450 in Queens and 367 in Brooklyn. More than half of Brooklyn's branches lack a laptop loan program—despite growing demand.

"My guess would be that 85 percent of school kids probably need a laptop," says Katy Knight, president and executive director of Siegel Family Endowment.

"Kids are our largest population, and most of them don't have computers at home here," says Jeanine Thomas, head librarian of New York Public Library's Mott Haven branch. "We have students who couldn't do homework at home because they didn't have WiFi."

The COVID-19 crisis has revealed the importance of having access to technology and the internet outside the classroom. And while the city has committed to addressing the digital divide through expanding low-cost, high-speed internet in public housing and lower-income communities, the rollout will likely take years. With increased resources, branch libraries can step up and meet the demand for technology access where it is needed most—like the five communities in the Bronx where at least 37 percent of households lack a laptop or desktop computer: Belmont/Crotona Park East/East Tremont, Morris Heights/Fordham South/Mount Hope, Concourse/Highbridge/Mount Eden, Bedford Park/Fordham North/Norwood, and Castle Hill/Clason Point/Parkchester.²¹

Take Action

- **Expand library capacity to lend laptops and hotspots and provide extended WiFi.** In a city where nearly 780,000 households lack a laptop or desktop computer at home and many more don't have home Internet access, branch libraries can help close the divide. The city should provide libraries with the funding to triple the number of Internet-enabled laptops and tablets available for home lending. In 2019, the three library systems combined had just 18,500 Internet-enabled devices to lend. The city can also help close the broadband gap by investing in libraries to provide expanded WiFi outside the walls of every branch—a resource that fewer than one-quarter of branches across the city are able to provide today.
- **Scale up teen tech training programs.** Branch libraries are one of the only places where New York City teens can learn hands-on tech skills for free—and gain confidence in pursuing tech-related degrees and careers. But capacity is extremely limited: for instance, each year just 100 teens can participate in BPL's innovative Today's Teens, Tomorrow's Techies program, which teaches teens to help library patrons with their tech needs. City leaders should scale up this program from 100 to 1,000 teens annually and help the other systems launch and scale teen tech training programs of their own.
- **Create ten new STEM Centers in branch libraries citywide.** Libraries play a critical role in introducing young New Yorkers of all backgrounds to STEM careers—an essential prerequisite for ensuring greater diversity among STEM graduates and in STEM jobs. But these initiatives have a lot of room to grow. City leaders should replicate the existing STEM Center at the Washington Heights library—in partnership with the nonprofit NYC FIRST—in ten more branches across the city, expanding free, hands-on instruction in digital fabrication, mechanical engineering, and robotics to thousands more young New Yorkers.

Key Findings

Only 36 percent of the city’s neighborhoods are home to a public hub for jobseekers, such as a Workforce1 Career Center or Jobs-Plus program site. In those communities, branch libraries are the only public provider of in-person career support.

In FY19, the three public library systems served over 46,000 adult New Yorkers with job assistance resources. But all three systems have limited capacity to grow their services at a time when hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers remain out of work. For instance, BPL has just four career specialists across its 60 branches.

EVEN MONTHS AFTER THE POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY in New York has begun, hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers are still unemployed. The unemployment rate in June was nearly 10 percent, higher than all but five of the 50 largest cities nationwide. In many of New York’s lower-income communities, estimated unemployment rates are even higher: over 25 percent in West Farms and parts of Jamaica, and as high as 36 percent in Brownsville—compared to about 4 percent in Park Slope and the Upper West Side.²²

Helping New Yorkers get back to work will be a major long-term challenge, with many service sector and hospitality jobs slow to return—and others that may never fully rebound. In the months and years ahead, New York will need to direct new resources to aid jobseekers in the city’s hardest-hit communities by scaling up a range of supportive services, from job search assistance and mock interviews to guided career counseling and skill navigation.

In many communities with staggering levels of unemployment, libraries are one of the only places to go for workforce training and employment services. Just 36 percent of Census-defined neighborhoods citywide are home to a public hub of support for jobseekers, such as a Workforce1 Career Center or Jobs-Plus program site, making branch libraries the only public provider of in-person career support in more than half of the city,

including the eastern Bronx, parts of central Queens, and southern Brooklyn.

The city’s branch libraries are strongly positioned to meet this challenge. In FY19, the three systems served over 46,000 adult New Yorkers with job assistance—second in volume only to the city’s dedicated, full-time Workforce1 Career Centers.

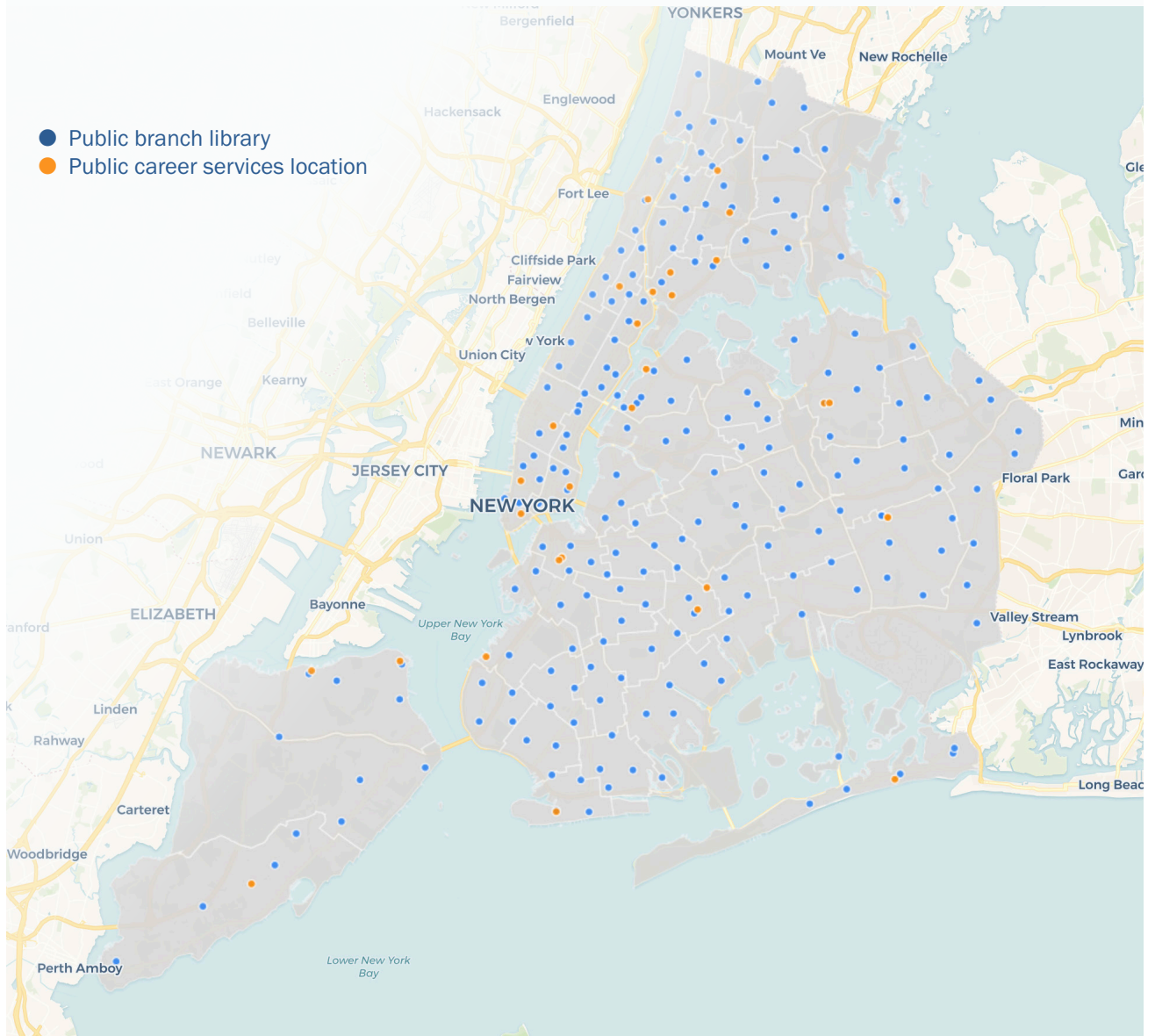
Libraries are already stepping up to meet growing demand for career services as a result of the widespread job losses caused by the pandemic. Between March and December 2020, NYPL alone helped roughly 23,000 New Yorkers impacted by COVID-19 to search and apply for jobs and held nearly 2,000 hour-long coaching sessions. A 1:1 job support program, available online, by phone, and in Spanish, started in November through NYPL, and has since seen over 150 appointments scheduled.

In 2019, Queens Public Library served close to 11,000 participants in group sessions for jobseekers and over 7,000 in one-on-one sessions. During COVID, demand remained strong even as all in-person programming was suspended; online workshop attendance from April to December 2020 was close to 8,000. Likewise, BPL served nearly 8,000 patrons with job assistance programming in 2019 and nearly 4,000 even after shifting to remote during the pandemic.

“Tech-savvy jobseekers have been better able to land on their feet,” says Kerwin Pilgrim, director of

Branch Libraries Fill Gaps in Career Services

In 64 percent of NYC neighborhoods, the only public career services center is a library



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data on public career resources locations—including Workforce1 Career Centers, Employment Work Centers, and JobsPlus program sites.

adult learning at BPL. “But what about the out-of-work busboy? We’re in a position to help people from all walks of life with resumes and cover letters tailored to the type of job they want. And if they’ve never written one before, we teach them how.”

But all three systems have limited capacity to help greater numbers of jobseekers and grow their services to meet increased demand. For instance, BPL has just four career specialists on staff to meet the needs of thousands of jobseekers. And while the systems recruit

staff volunteers to help supplement the ranks of full-time specialists, that’s only enough staff support to service fewer than half of the branches in the system. With additional resources to support increased staffing and outreach, NYPL projects that participation in job assistance programming could more than double.

Take Action

- **Bring career services to every branch and target additional support to communities with the highest rates of unemployment.** Libraries are already among the largest providers of career services, filling major geographic gaps in the city's landscape of public career support services. But libraries are stretched thin even as demand increases. City leaders can help support far more jobseekers by doubling the number of full-time career services staff at the three systems. A modest additional investment could ensure that libraries have the resources to provide onsite career services specialists in all of the neighborhoods citywide experiencing above-average rates of unemployment.
- **Make libraries a central hub in the city's wider network of career services.** With the city's unemployment rate hovering near 10 percent, agency officials should look to libraries as a natural partner in scaling up programming for jobseekers. The next mayor should direct the Department of Small Business Services to launch pop-up Workforce 1 Career Center programs at branches without nearby Centers, greatly expanding the reach of these services. With additional funding to hire staff, branch libraries could host more regular job fairs, expand job search assistance services in multiple languages, and work with industry experts to host intensive career coaching in growing fields like healthcare, tech, construction, and more.



Photo: Queens Public Library

Fostering Economic and Civic Inclusion in Immigrant Communities

Key Findings

Libraries provide ESOL training to more New Yorkers than any other institution—filling more than 238,000 seats annually across all three systems. But demand outstrips availability, especially for intermediate and advanced classes. QPL’s Adult Learning Center at the Flushing library, for instance, receives approximately three applicants for every available seat. At NYPL, nearly every session has a waiting list.

The city offers free legal services to immigrants in partnership with libraries through the innovative ActionNYC program (and its predecessor, NYCitizenship). But ActionNYC is only offered virtually due to the pandemic, and the previous NYCitizenship initiative was only available at 12 branches citywide—just 5 percent of all branches.

In 2019, Queens Public Library had the capacity to enroll only 60 percent of the 2,800 patrons who expressed interest in its New Americans Program’s ESOL classes.

NO INSTITUTION IS BETTER POSITIONED THAN THE libraries to help immigrant New Yorkers recover from the impacts of the pandemic and get on the path to decent-paying jobs.

While many foreign-born New Yorkers are not comfortable seeking services at government offices or even nonprofit organizations outside of their communities, libraries have long been seen as a trusted resource and welcoming space—even for those who only know a few words in English. For years, immigrants have been flocking to libraries across the city in huge numbers. Prior to the pandemic, six of the ten library branches in the city with the highest circulation were in immigrant communities.

All of this puts branch libraries in a unique position to reach immigrant New Yorkers where others cannot.

That support will be needed following a pandemic that has hit the city’s immigrant communities especially hard. Neighborhoods like East Elmhurst and Corona are facing unemployment rates of 25 percent or higher, even as many immigrant families went much of the year without access to any forms of government relief.²³

At the same time, even prior to the pandemic, far too many immigrant New Yorkers struggled to earn a living wage. More than a third of foreign-born New Yorkers in the workforce earned less than \$35,000 in annual income, compared to just 18 percent of employed native-born residents.

For many of the city’s immigrant workers, a lack of English-language proficiency blocks the path to post-secondary education, job training, and higher wages—and could present a barrier to reconnecting to good jobs following the pandemic. According to the Census, more than three-quarters of the city’s 3 million immigrants report speaking a language other than English at home, and nearly half (48.5 percent) speak English “less than very well.”²⁵

The three library systems provide ESOL training to more New Yorkers than any other institution—filling more than 238,000 seats annually. NYPL alone serves more than 71,000 participants in ESOL programs.

But demand outstrips availability, especially for intermediate and advanced classes. The Adult Learning Center at Flushing library, for instance, receives



With the right funding and resources, **libraries can become a real one-stop shop for nearly everything our immigrant communities need**”

BETSY PLUM, FORMER VICE PRESIDENT OF POLICY AT THE NEW YORK IMMIGRATION COALITION

approximately six applicants for every available seat. At NYPL, nearly every session has a waiting list of at least 10 percent above capacity.

Other vital library programs aimed at supporting immigrants are also under-resourced. For example, the city offered free citizenship application assistance to immigrants at branch libraries through the innovative NYCitizenship program, but the initiative ended in 2020 and never expanded beyond 12 branches city-wide. In 2021, the program transitioned to ActionNYC, providing free legal services to immigrants. However, due to the pandemic, the program is currently only available remotely. The supply-demand mismatch is even more notable when it comes to English language learners: In 2019, Queens Public Library had capacity to enroll only 60 percent of the 2,800 patrons who expressed interest in ESOL classes in its New Americans Program.

“With the right funding and resources, libraries can become a real one-stop shop for nearly everything our immigrant communities need,” says Betsy Plum, former vice president of policy at the New York Immigration Coalition and the current executive director of Riders Alliance. “Whether its access to information, legal services, or language classes, we need to help people where they are—and libraries have an incredible level of trust.”

Take Action

- **Make ActionNYC available in person and expand it to 25 branches.** Recent years have inflicted one crisis after another on New York City’s immigrant communities, from increasing anti-immigrant sentiment to the disproportionate toll of the pandemic. One important source of support is the city’s ActionNYC initiative, which offers free legal services and counseling but is currently only available virtually. In order to meet growing demand for these services and better support immigrant New Yorkers, city leaders should maintain virtual services while expanding the program to at least 25 branches citywide.
- **Replicate popular library programs in multiple languages.** Libraries already offer a wide range of programs and services that appeal to many immigrant patrons, from business plan competitions and family literacy workshops to financial aid assistance and career counseling. But the systems have limited resources to offer these programs in multiple languages. City leaders should allocate funding so many of the most popular library programs can be expanded to branches in immigrant communities and provided in languages other than English—and so popular programs already offered in languages from Spanish to Haitian Creole have the capacity to expand.

INNOVATION IN SPOTLIGHT

The Library Law Clinic, Hartford, CT

Nearly a quarter of Hartford, Connecticut's residents are foreign-born, one in six were born in Puerto Rico, and 43 percent speak a language other than English.²⁶ In recent years, Connecticut's capital has opened its doors to a significant West Indian population and thousands of refugees; between 2003 and 2012, 10,000 residents—8 percent of the city's population—obtained green cards.²⁷

That influx inspired The American Place, or TAP, an immigrants-focused program through the Hartford Public Library (HPL) that offers everything from naturalization ceremonies and English-speaking book clubs to volunteer cultural guides and GED completion classes, as well as the pioneering Career Pathways program, which trains and places immigrants in the food, tourism, or hospitality industries.

But in 2013, HPL went a step further with its work, becoming the first library in America to have its librarians certified by the Department of Justice to give legal advice and representation.²⁸ As a result, the library has moved into a more active role, with staff processing naturalization applications and green card renewal forms for residents for a nominal fee.

Homa Naficy, the executive director of TAP, said that library staff who have baseline training in the required documentation support the team of five staff members, which includes a full-time and three part-time legal counselors. Yet even so, the wait time for the next appointment is three months. "A lot of times, people fall into the undocumented category because they don't have the whereabouts to navigate USCIS online to renew their visas and green cards, change their address, check their status, learn about the latest policy changes," says Naficy. "That's something that we can help with."

- **Double the number of seats for intermediate and advanced ESOL and expand opportunities for blended online/in-person learning.** Scaling up free, career-oriented ESOL training will be essential to expanding access to economic opportunity and mitigating the disproportionate harm done by the pandemic to immigrant communities. Today, the three branch systems provide ESOL training to more New Yorkers than any other institution, but demand for seats—especially for intermediate and advanced adult literacy programs—and blended in-person/online programs far exceeds supply. City leaders should make a targeted investment in doubling the seats for these higher-level ESOL classes, expanding access to tech platforms that support blended learning instruction, and ensure that more immigrant New Yorkers who learn English at the library are able to move into more intensive, career-oriented language classes.
- **Extend hours and launch nights and weekends programming in immigrant communities.** The reach of branch library programs and services is hampered by hours that limit the ability of many working New Yorkers—especially immigrants—to visit and participate. City leaders should work with the three systems to fund expanded night and weekend hours, especially for branches located in immigrant-dense communities, and ensure that popular programs like intermediate/advanced ESOL are offered during those times.

Closing Academic Achievement Gaps Through Expanded Early Education

Key Findings

In more than a third of the city's neighborhoods, there are no publicly funded adult or family literacy centers other than branch libraries.

Branch libraries are already the largest provider of early literacy programs citywide, but many of the more intensive early learning programs rolled out by the libraries in recent years operate at a small scale. Queens Public Library's Kickoff to Kindergarten program (K2K), an eight-week, research-based program to improve literacy skills of kids ages 3-5, served 400 families at 15 branches in 2019 and over 200 families virtually in 2020. The program could expand significantly with additional funding and staff support.

Language development starts at birth, long before children reach formal educational settings," says Saroj Ghoting, a nationally recognized leader in early literacy programming at public libraries. "Libraries are in a unique position to supplement and provide this kind of early learning."

IT WILL BE DIFFICULT TO BUILD A MORE EQUITABLE city over the long run without making significant progress in closing persistent academic achievement gaps, and a large body of research suggests that major investments in early education may be singularly effective.²⁹ Although the de Blasio administration has taken a huge step with its Universal Pre-Kindergarten and 3-K for All initiatives, libraries offer a golden opportunity to complement those classroom efforts with their intensive early learning programs offered after school, on weekends, and over the summer.

Branch libraries are already the largest provider of early literacy programs citywide. For example, NYPL's enhanced early literacy sites reached 788,000 children ages five and below and their caregivers in 2018. Many nonprofits also provide childhood literacy programs, but our research shows that in 19 of the city's 55 Census-defined neighborhoods, there are no publicly funded adult or family literacy centers other than branch libraries. Additionally, only 23,841 infants and toddlers were served by the city's EarlyLearn programs in 2019, just 12 percent of the more than 199,000 children under

age three from low-income households eligible for public assistance.³⁰

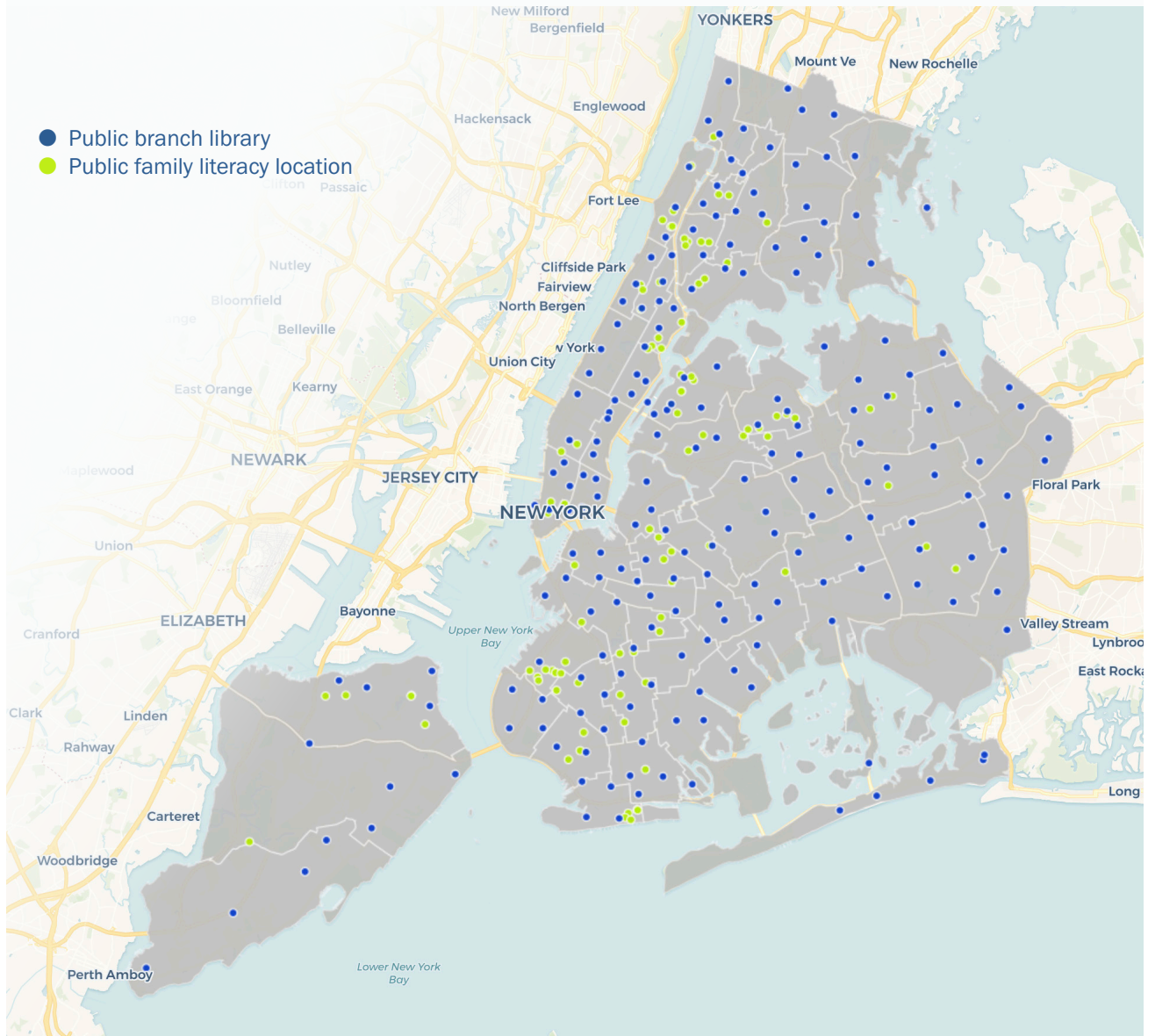
In recent years, each of the city's library systems have introduced more intensive early literacy programs that provide parents and caregivers with tools and best practices to support their young learners' cognitive and social development—including NYPL's Early Literacy Initiative, QPL's Kickoff to Kindergarten (K2K), and BPL's Ready, Set, Kindergarten.

With additional funding, the libraries could provide these and other early literacy services at a much greater scale—and at more branches throughout the city. Queens Public Library's Kickoff to Kindergarten program (K2K), an eight-week, research-based program to lift literacy and writing skills for kids, served 400 families in 2019. However, the program is only in 15 of 63 branches and could expand significantly with additional staff support.

Similarly, only half of all Queens Public Library branches have a Toddler Center—spaces specifically designed to host programs for children under three—due to both budgetary and space constraints. And while Brooklyn Public Library's early learning programs

Branch Libraries Fill Gaps in Family Literacy Services

In 35 percent of NYC neighborhoods, the only public adult/family literacy center is a library



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of NYC Department of Youth and Community Development Family Literacy Center location data.

reached 125,000 toddlers in 2018, the system has just one part-time employee in charge of coordinating with all informal childcare groups in the borough.

Since 2013, NYPL has offered paid teen literacy internships, which train teens to provide literacy-enhancing activities to early elementary students in high-needs neighborhoods. Most years, the program has a waiting list of two applicants for every available slot. With additional funding, NYPL could provide meaningful work experience to hundreds of teenagers while supporting the literacy of hundreds of high-needs elementary school students.

Despite the important strides made by UPK and 3K, significantly more progress is needed in early literacy. More than 206,000 New York City public school children in grades 3 through 8 tested below grade level in reading in 2019, including nearly 69 percent of economically disadvantaged students in the Bronx.³¹

“Language development starts at birth, long before children reach formal educational settings,” says Saroj Ghoting, a nationally recognized leader in early literacy programming at public libraries. “Libraries are in a unique position to supplement and provide this kind of early learning.”

INNOVATION IN SPOTLIGHT

Turn the Page KC, Kansas City, MO

In 2012, only 33 percent of third graders in Kansas City were reading at grade level—12 percent less than the statewide average³³. Labeling the lack of proficiency a “crisis,” then-mayor Sly James launched Turn the Page KC, a citywide campaign that brought together a number of cross-sector partners — including businesses, child care providers, and, importantly, the two library systems in the city — to boost programming and awareness for early education, and learning.

“We recognized that the schools couldn’t do it alone and that our own staff was limited,” said Mike English, the executive director of Turn the Page KC, which is now a registered non-profit organization. “So, to accomplish these goals, we had to ask: who do we need at the table? And then once we have those partners, what can we do to engage them and ensure that our strategies are incorporated into their strategic plans?”

On this end, English said that the libraries have helped collaborate on initiatives to boost attendance, volunteer tutoring, summer learning, and early literacy. Turn the Page has ramped up outreach to childcare centers and implemented training for childcare givers and parents to increase interactive talking and effective reading habits. Since 2012, the percentage of students reading at grade level in the city has risen to 40 percent—a 7 percent increase—and the statewide gap has thinned by 4 percent. The goal is to eliminate the gap entirely by 2022 and get up to 70 percent of third graders reading proficiently, which, English says, is possible³⁴.

Major citywide initiatives like this that include public libraries as a key partner are essential in bringing resources to under-served communities that wealthier neighborhoods have access to, says Jane Park Woo of Too Small to Fail.

Take Action

- **Invest in libraries to help close the gap in early learning for children ages 0–3.** Our report identifies nearly 200,000 children ages 0 to 3 who are at risk of falling behind in early childhood development—with effects that drive inequality into adulthood.³² The Department of Education (DOE) has been tasked with expanding support for early learning, but to date, the DOE has not fully integrated the city’s branch libraries into this effort. The next mayor should make libraries a centerpiece of a citywide early learning campaign and fund the creation and expansion of library programs targeted at children 0–3 and their caregivers.
- **Create enhanced early literacy programs at nearly every branch.** Libraries have seen a surge in demand for early literacy services in recent years. But to ensure equitable access to high-quality early literacy, every branch that regularly serves young children and their families should be equipped with the staff, space, and materials needed to deliver high-quality early literacy programs. A targeted city investment could enable the library systems to scale up baby, toddler, and preschool storytimes to nearly every branch while expanding outreach services to preschools, daycares, NYCHA developments, and homeless shelters.

Renewing the College and Career Dreams of New York’s Teens and Young Adults

Key Findings

Queens Public Library has one branch—in Far Rockaway—solely dedicated to teenagers, but it is open just 17.5 hours per week and not on weekends.

Brooklyn Public Library recently opened a Teen Tech Center at the Kings Highway branch—where teens can produce music and video, make animations, and construct robots, among other innovative programs—but the model could be expanded in more than a dozen other busy branches with sufficient funding.

New York Public Library has dedicated teen spaces in many branch libraries, including five larger Teen Centers, and reached 209,854 teens with programming in FY 2020. But NYPL says demand would support 20 Teen Centers in high-need areas.

IN 2019, WHEN THE CITY’S ECONOMY WAS BOOMING and setting an all-time high for jobs, the unemployment rate for young adults (those aged 20 to 24) was 12 percent—nearly four times the overall city level—and the rate for teens (ages 16 to 19) was 27 percent.³⁵ Although high school graduation rates were on the upswing, too few of the city’s young people were getting on track to succeed in college or careers. The COVID-19 crisis has only magnified the problem. Fully 27 percent of New Yorkers between the ages of 18 and 24 were out of work or out of school in 2020, and a shockingly large number of young people who were studying at CUNY or on track to enroll for the first time, have dropped out or opted not to attend.³⁶

Helping the city’s teens and young adults get back on track will be crucial in the months ahead, and libraries are in a unique position to contribute.

In recent years, the city’s three library systems have rolled out important programs for teens in lower-income communities, in a number of cases providing something rare for teens in New York: public spaces exclusively for teens where they are free to be themselves. The popular “Anti-Prom” at NYPL offers an alternative,

safer space for teens to gather and celebrate, regardless of sexuality, gender identity, or presentation. At BPL, the Youth Debate Council creates a platform for teens to air their opinions on current affairs. In addition, the Far Rockaway branch in Queens is home to the only library in the city solely for teens. The library is staffed with dedicated teen counselors and equipped with a recording studio, virtual reality headsets, computers, and a gaming lounge, offering a warm and welcome respite for teens who may not feel comfortable at home or school.

But despite their promise, because of budgetary and space limitations, these programs are still serving only a small fraction of the city’s teens and young adults.

For example, the Far Rockaway teen library is open just 17.5 hours a week and closed on weekends. Beyond the teen library, dedicated teen spaces exist at only four other branches across Queens. QPL’s Teen Podcasting Program is currently available at four branches but could expand to more locations with additional funding. QPL’s World of Work Program, a partnership with Touro College, provides teens with a seven-week interactive, hands-on online seminar in civic engagement and job

readiness, two college credits from Touro College, and 28 hours of community service. In 2021, 25 rising 10th graders and seniors participated in the program, but with more funding, the program could expand to serve more teens and connect with additional colleges.

BPL recently opened a Teen Tech Center at its Kings Highway branch—where teens can produce music and video, make animations, and construct robots, among other innovative programs—but it’s open just 20 hours a week and closed on weekends. The model could be expanded to more than a dozen other busy branches with sufficient funding.

NYPL has dedicated teen spaces across many of its 88 branch libraries, including five larger Teen Centers, and reached 209,854 teens with programming in FY 2020. But with more funding, NYPL says demand would support 20 Teen Centers in high-need areas.

NYPL’s College and Career Pathways pilot program offers teens one-on-one meetings with specialist librarians who can help them look for college programs, certificate courses, scholarships, and financial aid, as well as find career opportunities, craft a cover letter and resume, and prep for job interviews. Library officials said the number of teenagers in attendance has doubled since the pilot was launched, reaching 4,235 teens in FY 2020. But the program only has funding to operate in ten branches. NYPL hopes to bring the program to 15 branches by the start of the 2021-2022 school year, but with increased support, it could reach even more teens at a time of immense need.

The demand for college readiness programming at QPL has nearly doubled since the pandemic, with services reaching close to 1,000 teens in FY21. With additional funding, QPL could increase the number of college readiness events and workshops offered, cultivate more partnerships with colleges and community-based organizations, and expand capacity to provide one-on-one college preparatory services to teens.

Brooklyn’s innovative Today’s Teens Tomorrow’s Techies program uses cohort training to help young adults become more proficient in digital technology—and then teach their neighbors in turn. Since the program began more than a decade ago, a cohort of several dozen teenagers has participated in the program each year, receiving free technology training in preparation for collaborating with library staff to serve the public.

The participants attend workshops over the course of the summer on Microsoft Office programs, customer service, and library databases and electronic resources. Then, once the school year begins, they are assigned to a local branch, where they answer patrons’ technology-related questions, help troubleshoot the facility’s technology problems, and provide free computer training classes to other teens, adults, seniors, and kids. Though excellent, the program can only accommodate 100 teenagers per year.

By creating new spaces and bolstering college and career resources in dozens of branches, the city’s libraries can play a pivotal role in getting New York’s youth back on track after the major disruptions of the past year.

Take Action

- **Create 10 new Teen Centers in hard-hit communities.** To help address the acute challenges facing teens and young adults resulting from the pandemic and put more young New Yorkers on the path to college and career success, the city should greatly expand spaces exclusively for teens at the city’s libraries. The dedicated teen spaces that exist in libraries today are well-used and in many cases give young people access to invaluable career resources, but there are fewer than 20 of them across the city today. Given pervasive space constraints across all three systems, achieving this may require an influx of capital funding to help expand some of the city’s smallest branches, either by adding floors and additions or developing larger libraries on the same sites.
- **Establish College and Career Pathways programs in all five boroughs.** To create a more equitable economy in New York, the city will have to help many more students get on the path to a postsecondary credential. Fortunately, city leaders have a workable model in the form of NYPL’s College and Career Pathways initiative, which provides one-on-one college and career counseling, financial aid assistance, and resume workshops tailored to teens. City leaders should support the expansion of this program to branches in all five boroughs and grow the number of teens served from about 4,200 to 15,000.

Supporting NYC's Fast-Growing and Increasingly Diverse Older Adult Population

Key Findings

New York City is now home to a record-high 1.7 million older adults, yet only 12 percent of them make use of the city's senior centers.

Many library programs for older New Yorkers see enough demand to grow significantly with additional resources, such as the Creative Aging programs, which currently operate in about 28 of the city's 217 branches. The three library systems serve approximately 18,000 patrons citywide with mail-a-book programs, but with more than 216,000 homebound older adults citywide (in addition to thousands of other homebound New Yorkers), there is significant potential for expansion.

"Libraries are civic anchors for people of all ages and hugely important age-neutral spaces with a unique appeal to older adults," says Lindsay Goldman, CEO of Grantmakers in Aging. "It can feel much easier to enter a library than a senior center. But support for healthy aging programming via the city's libraries is piecemeal today, and we need to change that."

NEW YORK CITY'S OLDER ADULT POPULATION IS larger and more diverse than ever before, with immigrants comprising fully half of the 1.7 million New Yorkers age 60 and over. At the same time, nearly one-in-five older New Yorkers are living below the poverty line, more than 200,000 are homebound, and a growing number are struggling with challenges ranging from social isolation and long-term employment to financial insecurity.³⁷

With the number of older adults expected to spike an additional 20 percent over the next two decades, the city will need to significantly ramp up services and supports to promote healthy aging. Few institutions are better positioned to help than branch libraries.

Only 12 percent of the city's older adults make use of the city's 280 senior centers, and many advocates say that these centers—while hugely important for many older adults, including those who depend on them for meals—don't provide enough of the other activities and opportunities that older adults crave today and which importantly help counter social isolation.³⁸

Libraries serve many of those needs. Branch libraries are one of the few free places where older adults can go to socialize, learn, connect with their community across the age spectrum, and access a full range of supportive services from technology classes to help with benefits enrollment.

"Libraries are civic anchors for people of all ages and hugely important age-neutral spaces with a unique appeal to older adults," says Lindsay Goldman, CEO of Grantmakers in Aging and former director of the Center for Healthy Aging at the New York Academy of Medicine. "It can feel much easier to enter a library than a senior center. But support for healthy aging programming via the city's libraries is piecemeal today, and we need to change that."

Recognizing that older adults are among the most consistent patrons of branch libraries, the three systems have launched or expanded important programs focused on older adults. But there is ample opportunity and growing need to more fully harness libraries to

support healthy aging. With stretched staff and limited funding, the three library systems are serving approximately 18,000 patrons citywide with mail-a-book programs—compared to a total population of more than 216,000 homebound older adults.³⁹ With immigrants comprising a growing share of the city’s homebound older adults, libraries also need support to expand Mail-a-Book programs in multiple languages with dedicated, multilingual library staff. Many programs are popular enough to be operated at a much larger scale, such as the Creative Aging programs, which currently operate in about 28 of the city’s 217 branches.

Libraries are also among the city’s largest providers of technology training for older adults. For instance, 40 percent of participants of the New York Public Library’s Tech Connect program are ages 55 and older. With greater support, libraries could expand access to many more on-site programs using telephone and video conferencing technology and scale up Creative Aging and tech training programs where demand exceeds available slots.

To continue serving older New Yorkers, the city’s libraries will also need to make important accessibility upgrades. In addition to the seven branch libraries that are not yet ADA accessible, our research finds 10 additional branches that are only partially accessible, and more than 44 other branches with identified accessibility improvements—like bathroom grab bars and automated doors—that lack sufficient funding to proceed.

Take Action

- **Invest \$5 million annually to expand programs and services for older adults in public libraries.** Libraries are the most popular and trusted community institution among older adults in neighborhoods citywide, but to date, the city has yet to fully enlist libraries in support of its rapidly growing older adult population. Popular programs like Creative Aging are only available in about 13 percent of branches citywide, and while nearly half of all participants in NYPL’s Tech Connect program are ages 55 and over, the system has little capacity to add more seats as demand among older adults grows. City leaders can realize these missed opportunities by investing \$5 million annually to scale up high-demand in-person programs, make existing programs fully accessible via phone and video, pilot new older adult and intergenerational programming, and make libraries a centerpiece of the Age-Friendly NYC initiative.
- **Invest in greater capacity for homebound outreach.** The pandemic laid bare the challenge posed by social isolation for New York’s rapidly aging population—a public health threat with serious consequences for New Yorkers’ physical and mental well-being. Libraries play an important role in connecting with those residents most at risk of social isolation, including the city’s more than 216,000 homebound older adults. But with stretched staff and limited funding, the three library systems are serving approximately 18,000 patrons citywide with mail-a-book programs today. City leaders should dedicate funding to scale up and expand these and other programs aimed at reaching homebound New Yorkers with books, technology, and opportunities to participate in a wealth of virtual events.
- **Make all branch libraries fully accessible by 2025.** Without new investment in physical accessibility upgrades, the vital programs and services provided by branch libraries will remain inaccessible to hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers with disabilities, including a growing number of older adults. But today seven branch libraries are not ADA compliant, ten more are only partially accessible, and 44 others need new upgrades to improve accessibility. The city should set a goal of funding and implementing all accessibility-related renovations at branch libraries by 2025.

Building Pathways to the Well-Paying Tech Jobs of the Future

Key Findings

11 percent of the city’s neighborhoods have just one tech training program or none at all. In several lower-income neighborhoods outside of Manhattan—including East Elmhurst, East New York, Parkchester, Wakefield, and Stapleton—libraries are one of the only local providers of free technology training classes for adults.

The three systems serve well over 160,000 patrons in tech training classes annually—far more than any other organization.

NYPL’s Project Code series-based coding classes can only accommodate 400 students annually. Prior to 2020, NYPL had a waitlist of more than 6,000 for seats in the program—the waitlist has since been suspended because it had grown so long.

QPL’s We Speak Robotics! program, a robotics league offered at only six branches, served two dozen middle school students in 2020. The program could expand to several more branches with additional funding.

ONE OF THE KEY STEPS IN CREATING A MORE EQUITABLE economy in New York is greatly expanding access to well-paying jobs in the tech sector and other fast-growing industries of the future. Although the tech sector has become one of the fastest-growing parts of the city’s economy and increasingly the most reliable source of new middle- and high-income jobs, far too few of these good jobs have been going to New Yorkers of color. Prior to the pandemic, Black and Hispanic New Yorkers accounted for just 20 percent of all workers in tech industries.⁴⁰

Libraries are uniquely equipped to help catapult more low-income New Yorkers into these careers. In fact, libraries are the largest providers of free computing and digital skills training for New Yorkers across all five boroughs, serving well over 160,000 patrons in tech training classes annually. Although many of these are introductory and beginning digital literacy programs, branch libraries are filling a gap and serving as a

crucial first access point for careers in New York City’s tech sector.

Our research finds that libraries are in the best position to help close geographic gaps in access to tech training and build important new onramps to advanced training so that far more New Yorkers can find opportunities in the industries driving the city’s economic recovery. While New York is home to many tech training programs, 11 percent of the city’s Census-defined neighborhoods have just one program or none at all. In several lower-income neighborhoods outside of Manhattan—including East Elmhurst, East New York, Parkchester, Wakefield, and Stapleton—libraries are one of the only local providers of free technology training classes for adults.

“There’s incredible power in the reach of the libraries to help more New Yorkers bridge into the tech ecosystem,” says Tom Ogletree, director of social impact at General Assembly, a leading provider of technology

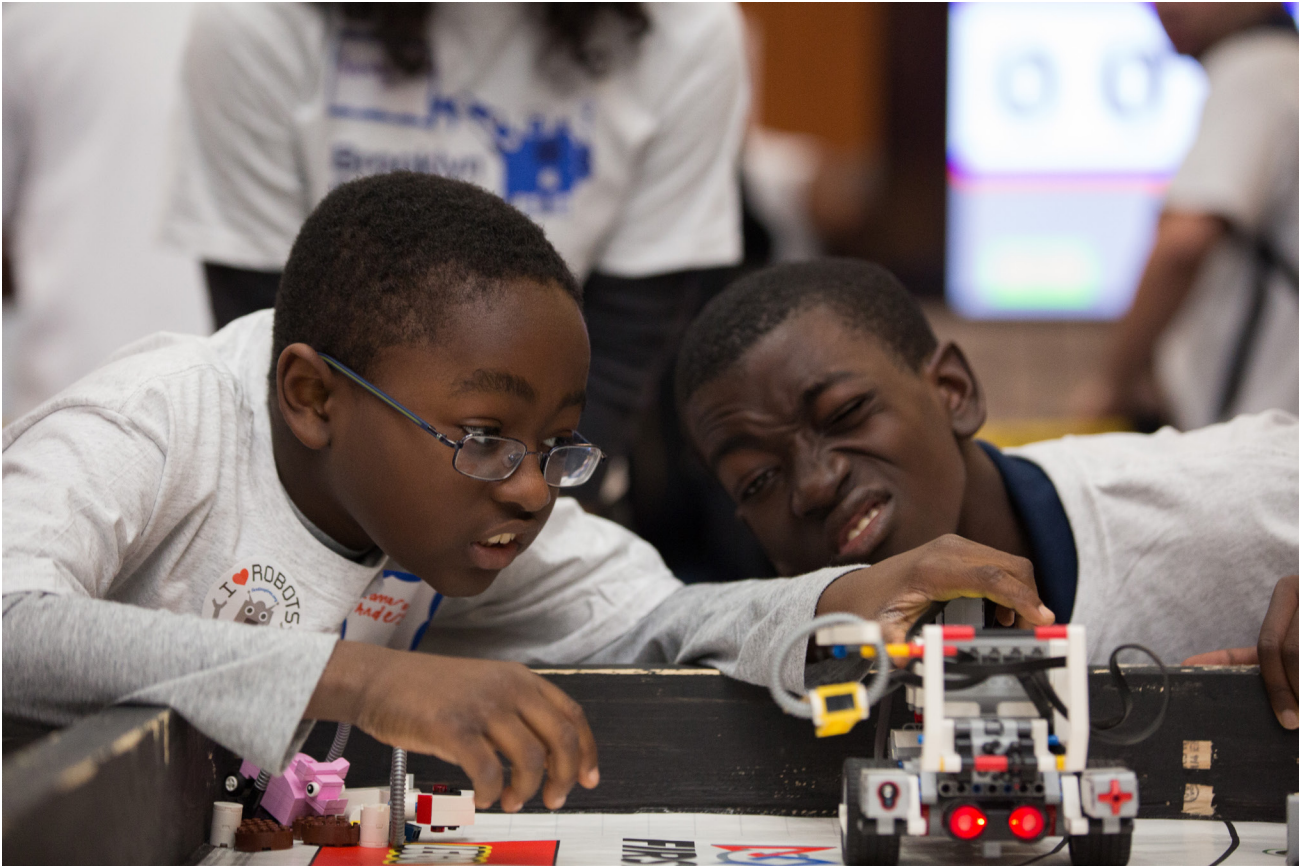


Photo: Gregg Richards / Brooklyn Public Library

training for high-demand careers. “But there’s a broader and deeper investment that needs to happen.”

Indeed, libraries could be making an even bigger difference. While libraries have unparalleled reach and an outsized role in providing introductory tech training, advanced programs are limited, and connections with the city’s broader tech training ecosystem are still nascent.

Due to staff limitations, NYPL’s Project Code series-based coding classes were only able to accommodate 500 students annually. But that’s only scratching the surface of the demand, according to NYPL staff, who say that all seats are filled up within 10 minutes of registration opening, even though the branch system doesn’t do any outreach or promotion. Prior to 2020, NYPL had a waitlist of more than 6,000 for seats in the program—the waitlist has since been suspended because it had grown so long.

QPL’s Queensbridge Tech Lab, which provided roughly 3,000 New Yorkers with hands-on access to hardware and software training in 2019 and served more than 3,400 patrons during Open Lab hours, is the

only center of its kind within a public housing development. QPL does not have funding for space, technology, or staffing to expand the Tech Lab model beyond the current location. However, with a \$400,000 investment, QPL could open another 40-seat Tech Lab offering six-day service, and this model could be expanded to other NYCHA developments citywide.

QPL’s seven Adult Learning Center locations and its Jobs and Business Academy (JBA) teach HTML and Python coding classes, offering specific tracks for teens and new English learners. These programs served 4,283 participants of all ages across 495 coding workshops in 2019.

Brooklyn Public Library offered more than 12,000 tech-related classes and workshops last year, but many of its most innovative programs—from Today’s Teens, Tomorrow’s Techies to the MotherCoders coding workshop series for local moms—are serving from two dozen to about 100 people annually. BPL staff say these in-demand programs could scale up with new resources for instructors and classroom space.

Take Action

- **Build the city’s branch libraries into the Tech Talent Pipeline.** Since 2014, the city’s Tech Talent Pipeline (TTP) has worked to train for and connect New Yorkers to well-paying tech jobs. But while the libraries are the city’s largest provider of basic and intermediate digital skills training, they have yet to be harnessed to grow the reach of the Tech Talent Pipeline into underrepresented communities. Drawing inspiration from Providence Public Library’s Rhode Coders initiative, which prepares library patrons to enroll and succeed in career-oriented tech training boot camps, the next mayor should make public libraries a key partner of the Tech Talent Pipeline and allocate funding to create bridge programs for library patrons into TTP’s existing and future training programs.
- **Incentivize partnerships between libraries and private training programs in the next round of city RFPs for tech training.** In the months ahead, city leaders will almost certainly continue to expand efforts to enroll New Yorkers in tech training programs. In future RFPs, officials should incentivize partnerships between libraries and other training providers focused on basic digital skills and entry-level, career-oriented training programs aligned with employer needs. Although libraries are not known for advanced-level tech training, they are unmatched for providing introductory and beginning-level digital literacy programs—and their unparalleled reach, with branches in every community, make them important entry points into the broader tech training ecosystem.
- **Expand the library-run Queensbridge Tech Lab model to at least one NYCHA development in every other borough.** QPL’s Queensbridge Tech Lab provided roughly 3,000 residents with hands-on access to hardware and software training in 2019 and served more than 3,400 patrons during Open Lab hours. To address the glaring opportunity gap for tech careers, city policymakers should provide the modest funds needed to expand this promising model to other NYCHA developments across the five boroughs.

INNOVATION IN SPOTLIGHT

Rhode Coders and Data Navigators, Providence, RI

After New York, the next northeastern state boasting the fastest growth in tech-related jobs is Rhode Island, with a heavy concentration in the metro area of Providence, where the advanced industries now make up 8 percent of all jobs.⁴¹

With funds from Governor Gina Raimondo’s Tech Hire RI initiative, which aims to expand access to these well-paying jobs statewide, the Providence Public Library (PPL) launched Rhode Coders and Data Navigators, two programs that train patrons with no coding or data experience in HTML and Tableau. It then connects them to “boot camp” partners, which include General Assembly and other Tech Hire partners, who help streamline curricula.⁴²

“We want to build an on-ramp to really widen the funnel,” says Don Gregory, the program’s founder. “There are so many people out there who have great potential, including patrons who are already coming to the library for digital basics.”

Leah Del Giudice was unemployed when she started both programs. “I really didn’t have the job, the opportunities, and the money that I wanted,” she says. After completion, she has been able to enroll in the part-time tech training program Career Devs, which participates in Tech Hire RI, and take a full-time job at a local consulting firm, working with a government agency using Tableau. “These classes were able to teach me skills that made me valuable to employers,” says Del Giudice. “At the same time, I can pursue my creative interests and work on projects that could really wow an employer with my skills.”

Empowering NYC's Growing Independent Workforce and Preparing At-Risk Workers for a More Automated Economy

Key Findings

Tens of thousands of independent workers either can't afford membership in a coworking space or don't have one in their neighborhood. 60 percent of the city—33 out of 55 Census-defined neighborhoods citywide—currently lack any coworking space options other than a library.

Branch libraries lack spaces and programs dedicated to supporting independent workers. There are just four branches that allow patrons to book soundproof rooms—all in Brooklyn. And the 49 hours per week that the average branch library is open is too restrictive to meet the needs of many independent workers.

“You don't need to build a new set of buildings for independent workers to come together and collaborate, and train in new tools and new skills,” says Andrew Rasiej, founder of Civic Hall, a nonprofit community center focused on technology for the public good. “My answer is that they already exist: they're called libraries.”

NEW YORK'S ONGOING ECONOMIC CRISIS IS DRIVING more and more New Yorkers to search for immediate sources of income through freelance, gig-based work. Yet there is little infrastructure and support to help New Yorkers, especially lower-income New Yorkers living in the boroughs outside Manhattan, to take full advantage of independent work.

Libraries have a unique opportunity to fill the gap. They already essentially offer the only coworking spaces in 60 percent of all New York City neighborhoods. Importantly, they also connect independent workers to a variety of important resources from help with tax preparation to entrepreneurship workshops.

“You don't need to build a new set of buildings for independent workers to come together and collaborate, and train in new tools and new skills,” says Andrew Rasiej, founder of Civic Hall, a nonprofit community center focused on technology for the public good. “My answer is that they already exist: they're called libraries.”

This support is needed now more than ever. New York City is now home to more than 1.3 million inde-

pendent workers in industries ranging from software engineering and transportation to housecleaning and childcare.⁴³ Over the past decade, the number of self-employed workers in unincorporated businesses—the category that includes most independent contractors rather than small business owners—increased by 11.3 percent in Queens (from 83,206 to 92,576) and 25 percent in Brooklyn (from 79,183 to 98,836), giving both boroughs a larger self-employed population than Manhattan for the first time.

The growth of independent work is particularly striking in many lower-income neighborhoods. For instance, the number of self-employed unincorporated workers in Elmhurst/Corona surged 105 percent since 2008, from 4,908 to 10,054. Other neighborhoods with similarly striking growth include Bushwick (up 82 percent, from 3,341 to 6,089), Cypress Hills / Woodhaven (up 36 percent, from 5,684 to 7,719), and Castle Hill / Parkchester (up 45 percent, from 3,261 to 4,740). And while these figures reflect only a small portion of the broader independent workforce, they suggest that the

Branch Libraries Fill Gaps in Support for Independent Workers

In 60 percent of NYC neighborhoods, libraries are the only option for coworking space



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of coworking space location data.

city's freelancers are far more economically and geographically diverse than previously thought.

But to support the ever-expanding independent workforce, the city can do much more to harness the potential of libraries.

Even before the pandemic, over one-third of the city's overall workforce and 46 percent of workers ages 20 to 26 earned income through independent work. But with more than 52 percent of freelancers earning less than \$50,000 annually, meeting the needs of the growing on-demand workforce will require new approaches

to job training, expanded access to benefits, and support for financial planning.⁴⁴

Libraries have the potential to help existing independent workers boost their incomes and mitigate risk while ensuring more New Yorkers can take full advantage of flexible, income-generating opportunities at a time when traditional employment opportunities are scarce. Yet today, the library systems lack specialized branches, spaces, or programs dedicated to supporting independent workers. There are just four branches that allow patrons to book soundproof rooms—all in Brooklyn.

And the 49 hours per week that the average branch library is open is too restrictive to meet the needs of many independent workers.

Take Action

- **Open Freelancers Hubs at a branch in each borough.** New York City’s growing independent workforce lacks the infrastructure needed to upskill, boost earnings, and access the benefits typically associated with full-time work. The Department of Small Business Services and the Mayor’s Office of Media

and Entertainment should open satellite locations of the Freelancers Hub, formerly based in DUMBO, at a designated branch library in each borough. These hubs should include a “kit of parts” to help librarians adapt underused spaces to include flexible seating, power supply, and prefabricated meeting rooms; expand training in freelance business skills; and host workshops on accessing benefits, legal assistance, and other topics of growing interest to the city’s freelance workforce. This approach should be coupled with additional capital funding to make the space expansions needed to incorporate dedicated facilities of this kind.

Preparing At-Risk Workers for a More Automated Economy

Key Findings

- 76 percent of highly automatable jobs in New York City are held by people of color.

- Experts believe that the best way to help workers remain in jobs that are vulnerable to automation—or transition into careers with better prospects—is through investments in lifelong learning. Fortunately, branch libraries already function as natural hubs of lifelong learning and could form the foundation of a citywide Automation Preparation Plan.

AS TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION AND THE EFFECTS of the pandemic spur more rapid adoption of automation and artificial intelligence, tens of thousands of New Yorkers are at risk of losing their jobs, with the greatest impacts likely to fall on many of the same individuals that were hardest hit by the pandemic. In fact, more than three-quarters of the positions most vulnerable to automation are currently held by New Yorkers of color.

To ensure that New York’s most economically vulnerable communities are not left behind in the city’s post-pandemic rebound, the next mayor will need to start preparing New York’s workforce for a more automated economy. Libraries should play a leading role.

Automation and artificial intelligence are expected to transform hundreds of thousands of jobs in the city—requiring new levels of computer skills and digital literacy—while causing a smaller number of jobs to disappear altogether. Libraries have the potential to serve as a powerful onramp to a broader ecosystem of

skills-building programs that can help the New Yorkers most vulnerable to automation acquire the skills and competencies needed to land and keep jobs in a more automated economy.

“Automation is changing the types of jobs that are available and the skills that are needed for those jobs,” says Shelly Steward, research manager of the Future of Work Initiative at the Aspen Institute. “The greatest need is for lifelong learning and continual skill acquisition—but from a policy perspective, that means expanding opportunities for training that can be easily accessed by anyone.”

Libraries are already playing an important role as natural hubs of lifelong learning, providing age-appropriate technology classes for everyone from children to older adults and offering free access to valuable skills-building resources—like LinkedIn Learning, which offers more than 5,700 online courses in subjects like web development and IT.

Yet while branch libraries have long contributed to the city's skills-building ecosystem, the growing challenge of a more automated economy will demand significant new investments in upskilling infrastructure. New Yorkers will need ready access to relevant skills training across the entire arc of a career—including industry-recognized credentials, peer-to-peer learning, opportunities to build portfolios and earn digital badges, and other supports.

In several of these areas, other cities have made significant progress in harnessing libraries to strengthen the options available for incumbent worker training. For instance, the nonprofit Peer-to-Peer University facilitates in-person study groups at community libraries in Chicago, Boston, and Providence on topics ranging from design thinking for innovation to an introduction to machine learning, with courses designed by leading institutions like MIT and Stanford.

To help prepare its workforce for a more automated economy, South Bend, Indiana, is working with the Drucker Institute and its local libraries to pilot Bendable, an app-based skills-building program that hosts curated courses and learning materials developed in partnership with local employers.

But while cities have put public libraries at the center of efforts to develop accessible upskilling infrastructure from Toronto to Wichita, this approach has yet to take hold in New York City.

With the right support, libraries can scale up their own technology and digital literacy training while also connecting thousands of New Yorkers to a broader ecosystem of skills-building programs across New York City—expanding access to short-term credential programs offered by nonprofits, CUNY, and other post-secondary institutions just as the libraries' innovative Culture Pass program has connected thousands of New Yorkers to museums and other cultural institutions.

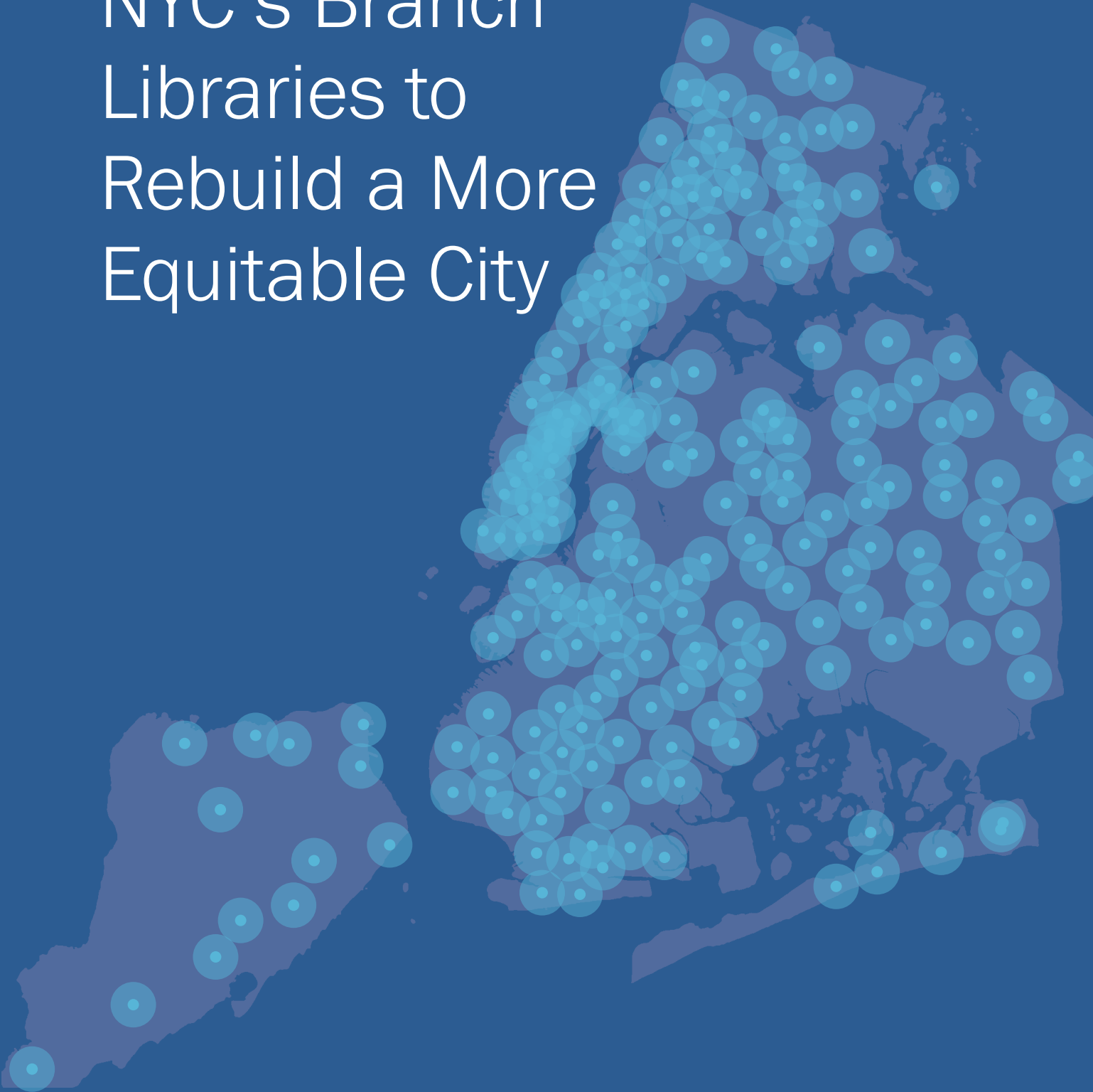
Take Action

- **Establish an NYC Skills Pass to give library cardholders access to private training classes—for free.** Modeled on the successful Culture Pass, which offers anyone with a library card the ability to gain free entry to dozens of participating cultural institutions, our proposed Skills Pass would give library card holders free access to a limited number of career training classes offered—outside the libraries—by nonprofit and for-profit workforce providers. The Skills Pass would greatly expand access to skills building, tech training, and lifelong learning programs that are increasingly important for economic mobility in today's labor market.
- **Tap libraries to help implement an Automation Preparation Plan.** Many of the New Yorkers hit hardest by job losses during the pandemic are also the workers most vulnerable to automation, a process that has only accelerated over the past 18 months. To get ahead of these forces and mitigate the future dislocation of low-income New Yorkers, the next mayor should launch an Automation Preparation Plan: a major new fund to build lifelong learning infrastructure. This plan should leverage the power, reach, and knowledge of the library systems to help accelerate the development of upskilling pathways for at-risk occupations; scale up technology training and digital literacy programs; and guide a major expansion of online and hybrid short-term credentials aligned with industry needs.

Recommendations

Equipping NYC's Branch Libraries to Rebuild a More Equitable City

BRANCHES TO RECOVERY



Priority Recommendations

Over the next five years, **New York’s leaders should harness the unparalleled reach, trust, and capabilities of the city’s branch libraries to tackle the greatest challenges facing New Yorkers.**

To unlock the full potential of the city’s public libraries to create and sustain a more equitable city for the long term, **city leaders should commit to investing \$1 billion annually**—and focus that investment on achieving the following seven priority recommendations:

1 FUND A MAJOR EXPANSION OF LIBRARIES’ HOURS OF OPERATION TO EXTEND ACCESS TO FAR MORE WORKING NEW YORKERS. Expanding open hours will be essential for reaching many of the New Yorkers in greatest need of library services: working families whose only free hours are at night, early in the morning, or on the weekend. Despite considerable improvement in recent years, New York City’s libraries are still open fewer hours than many of the largest library systems in the nation—including Chicago, Dallas, San Diego, and San Antonio—and most of the large counties in New York State. Currently, fewer than 9 percent of the city’s branch libraries are open seven days a week. In fact, New York City’s branch libraries were open fewer hours per week, on average, in the year before the pandemic hit than they were during the Great Depression. An annual investment of \$1 billion in the city’s library systems—about 1 percent of the city’s annual budget—can ensure that New York City’s branch libraries lead the nation in weekly hours of operation, making these critical spaces and their resources accessible to far more New Yorkers. In addition, we recommend that at least one branch in each borough be opened 24/7, creating continuous access points to a range of vital services.

2 PROVIDE TARGETED FUNDING FOR LIBRARIES TO RAMP UP THEIR MOST EFFECTIVE AND PROMISING PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS, REINVENT UNDERUTILIZED SPACES, AND INVEST IN EXPANSION. Policymakers should make targeted investments in specific library programs to keep pace with high need and growing demand. In addition to keeping libraries open longer, an investment of \$1 billion annually could dramatically expand early literacy programs and digital skills training, create a network of drop-in homework help centers, launch business plan competitions in multiple languages, expand one-on-one support for jobseekers and small business owners, and reconnect thousands of older New Yorkers after more than a year of painful isolation. Sustained public investment could eliminate waitlists for high-demand programs, maintain popular virtual programming even while returning to in-person service, and enable libraries to act quickly when emergencies arise—whether due to a public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic or an environmental catastrophe like a hurricane or flood. This level of investment would also enable the city’s three library systems to reimagine underutilized spaces by implementing and expanding the “kit-of-parts” approach piloted successfully at the Flatbush branch and other architectural solutions to maximize the functionality of small and aging branches.

3 CREATE A DEDICATED MAINTENANCE FUND ENABLING LIBRARIES TO MAKE CRITICAL BUILDING FIXES BEFORE PROBLEMS CAN GROW. The city's three library systems face nearly \$900 million in repairs and upgrades, including renovations to overhaul heating and cooling systems, fix leaking roofs, patch crumbling masonry, upgrade aging plumbing, and improve accessibility. Capital shortfalls total \$418 million at New York Public Library, \$251 million at Queens Public Library, and \$227 million at Brooklyn Public Library. Although the mayor and City Council have gradually increased capital support for libraries in recent years, libraries are still routinely forced to divert limited public funding away from operations in order to fix leaks, repair boilers, and keep aging branches functioning. The mayor and City Council should create a dedicated maintenance fund to support state-of-good-repair needs across all three systems and help catch smaller problems before they grow.

4 BUILD THE FUTURE OF BRANCH LIBRARIES INTO THE CITY'S 10-YEAR CAPITAL PLAN—AND COMMIT TO EXPANDING MOST OF THE CITY'S SMALLEST BRANCHES BY 2033. For the city to fully harness the power of branch libraries in every community, capital investment will need to do much more than chip away at the systems' mountain of state-of-good-repair needs. Expanding branch-level capacity to offer everything from early literacy programs and dedicated teen spaces to ESOL programs, business plan competitions, and robotics teams will require far more useable space than exists today. Currently, 100 branches across the five boroughs are under 10,000 square feet, severely restricting their capacity and range of uses. These branches should be a top priority for rebuilding and expansion in the city's long-term capital plan. But current 10-year capital funding is largely intended to cover state-of-good-repair needs for the current system and leaves very little room to invest in much-needed branch expansions and replacements. The city should solicit plans from all three systems to expand most of their smallest and most overcrowded branches and commit sufficient funding in the next 10-year capital plan (FY2024-FY2033) to achieve this.

5 INTEGRATE LIBRARIES INTO AGENCY PLANS TO TACKLE KEY CHALLENGES AND ENSURE AN INCLUSIVE RECOVERY. Given libraries' unmatched reach and trust, city agencies should take full advantage of libraries as natural partners to expand uptake for a range of services and develop new programs in high-need communities. But to do so effectively, agency leaders should involve the city's library systems from the beginning of the planning process and treat branches as true partners in addressing the city's major challenges. Prior to the pandemic, this rarely happened. Although many city agencies did seek out libraries to help meet their policy goals, too often libraries were brought in at the end of the planning process, missing critical opportunities for libraries to help craft effective partnership strategies. And rarely were libraries given funds to expand services beyond what they were already doing. The Department of Education should look to libraries as a powerful ally in addressing learning loss caused by the pandemic, with the potential for year-round enrichment programs, teen mentorship for younger children, and drop-in homework help throughout the school year. Likewise, the Department of Small Business Services or NYC Economic Development Corporation should make libraries a key partner in plans to boost entrepreneurship in hard-hit communities—sparking the city's next wave of small business owners and job creators.

6 INCREASE EXPENSE FUNDING TO SUPPORT KEY STAFF ROLES THAT MAXIMIZE IMPACT. During the course of our research for this report, one key challenge emerged repeatedly: the need to invest in local branch library staff in order to maximize the impact and reach of library programs and services. Even as demand for key programs has surged, libraries are operating with 15 percent fewer staff members than a decade ago. Additional baselined expense funding can enable libraries to hire dedicated outreach librarians in every community and facilitate more partnerships with local community-based organizations, bringing compassionate, culturally competent programming—from early literacy to entrepreneurship training—directly into the spaces and neighborhoods where the New Yorkers hit hardest by the pandemic live, work, and learn.

7 HELP LIBRARIES TAKE SOME OF THEIR VITAL RESOURCES ON THE ROAD—TO HOMELESS SHELTERS, LAUNDROMATS, PUBLIC HOUSING COMPLEXES, SENIOR CENTERS, AND PLAYGROUNDS. While millions of New Yorkers make their way to branches every year, the city’s branch libraries can deepen their impact by bringing some of their invaluable services—and community partnerships—into parts of their neighborhoods where there are unmet needs. This might entail regular storytime readings at homeless shelters and in NYCHA playgrounds, or book club discussions and digital learning sessions at senior centers and in naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs). New York’s libraries had begun to do on a small scale this prior to the pandemic, but there are opportunities to expand these nascent efforts if provided the resources. The mayor and City Council should consider funding a large-scale pilot program to bring library services into community spaces in 2022 as part of efforts to help New Yorkers still reeling from the COVID crisis.

Issue-Specific Recommendations

Ensuring Children & Young Adults Overcome COVID Learning Loss

1 BUILD OUT DROP-IN HOMEWORK HELP AT BRANCHES IN EVERY HARD-HIT COMMUNITY. Even before the pandemic, libraries saw exploding demand for their free drop-in homework programs. Today, drop-in help holds even more potential to counter COVID-related learning loss and keep public school students from falling further behind. With city support, this small-scale program should be expanded to branches in every hard-hit community.

Strengthening Minority- and Immigrant-Owned Businesses

2 GROW THE LIBRARIES’ UNIQUE BUSINESS PLAN COMPETITIONS. Libraries are home to the city’s only start-up competitions focused on lower-income entrepreneurs, providing a crucial spark to aspiring business owners in many of the communities hit hardest by the pandemic. With additional funding, the libraries’ business plan competitions could take place multiple times per year—instead of just once annually—and new competitions could launch in multiple languages, including Spanish, Chinese, Bengali, Korean, Russian, and Haitian Creole.

3 HIRE BUSINESS SERVICES LIBRARIANS TO EXPAND IN-BRANCH PROGRAMMING AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH. Each year, thousands of aspiring entrepreneurs from underserved backgrounds—including women, immigrant, and minority entrepreneurs—seek out free small business and entrepreneurship counseling at the city’s branch libraries. But the library systems are only funded to provide business services at fewer than half of the branch locations citywide. An investment of \$1 million annually could triple the number of business outreach librarians and help bring these vital services to every branch across the city.

4 PARTNER WITH NYCEDC TO LAUNCH NEW BUSINESS INCUBATORS IN BRANCHES CITYWIDE. To help spark economic development and new business formation in the communities hit hardest by the pandemic, NYCEDC should partner with libraries to launch new small business incubators. EDC should start by launching five library-based business incubator programs in food, fashion, education, wellness, and home services.

5 EXPAND LIBRARY CAPACITY TO LEND LAPTOPS AND HOTSPOTS AND PROVIDE EXTENDED WIFI. In a city where nearly 780,000 households lack a desktop or laptop computer at home and many more don't have home Internet access, branch libraries can help close the divide. The city should provide libraries with the funding to triple the number of Internet-enabled laptops and tablets available for home lending. In 2019, the three library systems combined had just 18,500 Internet-enabled devices to lend. The city can also help close the broadband gap by investing in libraries' ability to provide expanded WiFi outside the walls of every branch—a resource that fewer than one-quarter of branches across the city are able to provide today.

6 SCALE UP TEEN TECH TRAINING PROGRAMS. Branch libraries are one of the only places where New York City teens can learn hands-on tech skills for free—and gain confidence in pursuing tech-related degrees and careers. But capacity is extremely limited: for instance, each year just 100 teens can participate in BPL's innovative Today's Teens, Tomorrow's Techies program, which teaches teens to help library patrons with their tech needs. City leaders should scale up this program from 100 to 1,000 teens annually and help the other systems launch and scale teen tech training programs of their own.

7 CREATE TEN NEW STEM CENTERS IN BRANCH LIBRARIES CITYWIDE. Libraries play a critical role in introducing young New Yorkers of all backgrounds to STEM careers—an essential prerequisite for increased diversity among STEM graduates and in STEM jobs. But these initiatives have a lot of room to grow. City leaders should replicate the existing STEM Center at the Washington Heights library—in partnership with the nonprofit NYC FIRST—in ten more branches across the city, expanding free, hands-on instruction in digital fabrication, mechanical engineering, and robotics to thousands more young New Yorkers.

Helping New Yorkers Get Back to Work

8 BRING CAREER SERVICES TO EVERY BRANCH AND TARGET ADDITIONAL SUPPORT TO COMMUNITIES WITH THE HIGHEST RATES OF UNEMPLOYMENT. Libraries are already among the largest providers of career services, filling major geographic gaps in the city's landscape of public career support services. But libraries are stretched thin even as demand increases. City leaders can help support far more jobseekers by doubling the number of full-time career services staff at the three systems. A modest additional investment could ensure that libraries have the resources to provide onsite career services specialists in all of the neighborhoods citywide experiencing above average rates of unemployment.

9 MAKE LIBRARIES A CENTRAL HUB IN THE CITY'S WIDER NETWORK OF CAREER SERVICES. With the city's unemployment rate hovering near 9 percent, agency officials should look to libraries as a natural partner in scaling up programming for jobseekers. The next mayor should direct the Department of Small Business Services to launch pop-up Workforce 1 Career Center programs at branches without nearby Centers, greatly expanding the reach of these services. With additional funding to hire staff, branch libraries could host more regular job fairs, expand job search assistance services in multiple languages, and work with industry experts to host intensive career coaching in growing fields like healthcare, tech, construction, and more.

10 MAKE ACTIONNYC AVAILABLE IN-PERSON AND EXPAND TO 25 BRANCHES. Recent years have inflicted one crisis after another on New York City’s immigrant communities, from increasing anti-immigrant sentiment to the disproportionate toll of the pandemic. One important source of support is the city’s ActionNYC initiative, which offers free legal services and counseling, but is currently only available virtually. In order to meet growing demand for these services and better support immigrant New Yorkers, city leaders should maintain virtual services while expanding the program to at least 25 branches citywide.

11 REPLICATE POPULAR LIBRARY PROGRAMS IN MULTIPLE LANGUAGES. Libraries already offer a wide range of programs and services that appeal to many immigrant patrons, from business plan competitions and family literacy workshops to financial aid assistance and career counseling. But the systems have limited resources to offer these programs in multiple languages. City leaders should allocate funding so many of the most popular library programs can be expanded to branches in immigrant communities and provided in languages other than English—and so popular programs already offered in languages from Spanish to Haitian Creole have the capacity to expand.

12 DOUBLE THE NUMBER OF SEATS FOR INTERMEDIATE AND ADVANCED ESOL AND EXPAND OPPORTUNITIES FOR BLENDED ONLINE/IN-PERSON LEARNING. Scaling up free, career-oriented ESOL training will be essential to expanding access to economic opportunity and mitigating the disproportionate harm done by the pandemic to immigrant communities. Today, the three branch systems provide ESOL training to more New Yorkers than any other institution, but demand for seats—especially for intermediate and advanced adult literacy programs—and blended in-person/online programs far exceeds supply. City leaders should make a targeted investment in doubling the seats for these higher-level ESOL classes, expanding access to tech platforms that support blended learning instruction, and ensure that more immigrant New Yorkers who learn English at the library are able to move into more intensive, career-oriented language classes.

13 EXTEND HOURS AND LAUNCH NIGHTS AND WEEKENDS PROGRAMMING IN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES. The reach of branch library programs and services is hampered by hours that limit the ability of many working New Yorkers—especially immigrants—to visit and participate. City leaders should work with the three systems to fund expanded night and weekend hours, especially for branches located in immigrant-dense communities, and ensure that popular programs like intermediate/advanced ESOL are offered during those times.

Closing Academic Achievement Gaps Through Expanded Early Education

14 INVEST IN LIBRARIES TO HELP CLOSE THE GAP IN EARLY LEARNING FOR CHILDREN AGES 0–3. Our report identifies nearly 200,000 children ages 0 to 3 who are at risk of falling behind in early childhood development—with effects that drive inequality into adulthood. The Department of Education (DOE) has been tasked with expanding support for early learning, but to date, the DOE has not fully integrated the city’s branch libraries into this effort. The next mayor should make libraries a centerpiece of a citywide early learning campaign and fund the creation and expansion of library programs targeted at children 0 to 3 and their caregivers.

15 CREATE ENHANCED EARLY LITERACY PROGRAMS AT NEARLY EVERY BRANCH. Libraries have seen a surge in demand for early literacy services in recent years. But to ensure equitable access to high-quality early literacy, every branch that regularly serves young children and their families should be equipped with the staff, space, and materials needed to deliver high-quality early literacy programs. A targeted city investment could enable the library systems to scale up baby, toddler, and preschool storytimes to nearly every branch while expanding outreach services to preschools, daycares, NYCHA developments, and homeless shelters.

Renewing the College and Career Dreams of New York's Teens & Young Adults

16 CREATE 10 NEW TEEN CENTERS IN HARD-HIT COMMUNITIES. To help address the acute challenges facing teens and young adults resulting from the pandemic and put more young New Yorkers on the path to college and career success, the city should greatly expand spaces exclusively for teens at the city's libraries. The dedicated teen spaces that exist in libraries today are well-used and in many cases give young people access to invaluable career resources, but there are fewer than 20 of them across the city today. Given pervasive space constraints across all three systems, achieving this may require an influx of capital funding to help expand some of the city's smallest branches, either by adding floors and additions or developing larger libraries on the same sites.

17 ESTABLISH COLLEGE AND CAREER PATHWAYS PROGRAMS IN ALL FIVE BOROUGHES. To create a more equitable economy in New York, the city will have to help many more students get on the path to a post-secondary credential. Fortunately, city leaders have a workable model in the form of NYPL's College and Career Pathways initiative, which provides one-on-one college and career counseling, financial aid assistance, and resume workshops tailored to teens. City leaders should support the expansion of this program to branches in all five boroughs and grow the number of teens served from about 4,200 to 15,000.

Supporting NYC's Fast-Growing & Increasingly Diverse Older Adult Population

18 INVEST \$5 MILLION ANNUALLY TO EXPAND PROGRAMS AND SERVICES FOR OLDER ADULTS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES. Libraries are the most popular and trusted community institution among older adults in neighborhoods citywide, but to date, the city has yet to fully enlist libraries in support of its rapidly growing older adult population. Popular programs like Creative Aging are only available in about 13 percent of branches citywide, and while nearly half of all participants in NYPL's Tech Connect program are ages 55 and over, the system has little capacity to add more seats as demand among older adults grows. City leaders can realize these missed opportunities by investing \$5 million annually to scale up high-demand in-person programs, make existing programs fully accessible via phone and video, pilot new older adult and intergenerational programming, and make libraries a centerpiece of the Age-Friendly NYC initiative.

19 INVEST IN GREATER CAPACITY FOR HOMEBOUND OUTREACH. The pandemic laid bare the challenge posed by social isolation for New York's rapidly aging population—a public health threat with serious consequences for New Yorkers' physical and mental wellbeing. Libraries play an important role in connecting with those residents most at risk of social isolation, including the city's more than 216,000 homebound older adults. But with stretched staff and limited funding, the three library systems are serving approximately 18,000 patrons citywide with mail-a-book programs today. City leaders should dedicate funding to scale up and expand these and other programs aimed at reaching homebound New Yorkers with books, technology, and opportunities to participate in a wealth of virtual events.

20 MAKE ALL BRANCH LIBRARIES FULLY ACCESSIBLE BY 2025. Without new investment in physical accessibility upgrades, the vital programs and services provided by branch libraries will remain inaccessible to hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers with disabilities, including a growing number of older adults. But today seven branch libraries are not ADA compliant, ten more are only partially accessible, and 44 others need new upgrades to improve accessibility. The city should set a goal of funding and implementing all accessibility-related renovations at branch libraries by 2025.

Building Pathways to the Well-Paying Tech Jobs of the Future

21 BUILD THE CITY'S BRANCH LIBRARIES INTO THE TECH TALENT PIPELINE. Since 2014, the city's Tech Talent Pipeline (TTP) has worked to train for and connect New Yorkers to well-paying tech jobs. But while the libraries are the city's largest provider of basic and intermediate digital skills training, they have yet to be harnessed to grow the reach of the Tech Talent Pipeline into underrepresented communities. Drawing inspiration from Providence Public Library's Rhode Coders initiative, which prepares library patrons to enroll and succeed in career-oriented tech training boot camps, the next mayor should make public libraries a key partner of the Tech Talent Pipeline and allocate funding to create bridge programs for library patrons into TTP's existing and future training programs.

22 INCENTIVIZE PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN LIBRARIES AND PRIVATE TRAINING PROGRAMS IN THE NEXT ROUND OF CITY RFPs FOR TECH TRAINING. In the months ahead, city leaders will almost certainly continue to expand efforts to enroll New Yorkers in tech training programs. In future RFPs, officials should incentivize partnerships between libraries and other training providers focused on basic digital skills and entry-level, career-oriented training programs aligned with employer needs. Although libraries are not known for advanced level tech training, they are unmatched for providing introductory and beginning-level digital literacy programs—and their unparalleled reach, with branches in every community, make them important entry points into the broader tech training ecosystem.

23 EXPAND THE LIBRARY-RUN QUEENSBRIDGE TECH LAB TO AT LEAST ONE NYCHA DEVELOPMENT IN EVERY OTHER BOROUGH. QPL's Queensbridge Tech Lab provided roughly 3,000 NYCHA residents with hands-on access to hardware and software training in 2019 and served more than 3,400 patrons during Open Lab hours. To address the glaring opportunity gap for tech careers, city policymakers should provide the modest funds needed to expand this promising model to other NYCHA developments across the five boroughs.

24 OPEN FREELANCERS HUBS AT A BRANCH IN EACH BOROUGH. New York City's growing independent workforce lacks the infrastructure needed to upskill, boost earnings, and access the benefits typically associated with full-time work. The Department of Small Business Services and the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment should open satellite locations of the Freelancers Hub, formerly based in DUMBO, at a designated branch library in each borough. These hubs should include a "kit of parts" to help librarians adapt underused spaces to include flexible seating, power supply, and prefabricated meeting rooms; expand training in freelance business skills; and host workshops on accessing benefits, legal assistance, and other topics of growing interest to the city's freelance workforce. This approach should be coupled with additional capital funding to make the space expansions needed to incorporate dedicated facilities of this kind.

25 ESTABLISH AN NYC SKILLS PASS TO GIVE LIBRARY CARDHOLDERS ACCESS TO PRIVATE TRAINING CLASSES—FOR FREE. Modeled on the successful Culture Pass, which offers anyone with a library card the ability to gain free entry to dozens of participating cultural institutions, our proposed Skills Pass would give library card holders free access to a limited number of career training classes offered—outside the libraries—by nonprofit and for-profit workforce providers. The Skills Pass would greatly expand access to skills building, tech training, and lifelong learning programs that are increasingly important for economic mobility in today's labor market.

26 TAP LIBRARIES TO HELP IMPLEMENT AN AUTOMATION PREPARATION PLAN. Many of the New Yorkers hit hardest by job losses during the pandemic are also the workers most vulnerable to automation, a process that has only accelerated over the past 18 months. To get ahead of these forces and mitigate the future dislocation of low-income New Yorkers, the next mayor should launch an Automation Preparation Plan: a major new fund to build lifelong learning infrastructure. This plan should leverage the power, reach, and knowledge of the library systems to help accelerate the development of upskilling pathways for at-risk occupations; scale up technology training and digital literacy programs; and guide a major expansion of online and hybrid short-term credentials aligned with industry needs.

ENDNOTES

1. Center for an Urban Future (CUF) analysis of NYC Department of Small Business Services (SBS) and Department of Social Services (DSS) career services locations and branch library locations. (This and all other location-data derived findings will only be cited on first mention within this report.)
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