



**HOWARD COUNTY
LIBRARY SYSTEM**
Public Education for All

Howard County Council's Budget Hearing
May 10, 2021

Testimony in support of Howard County Library System

Tonya Aikens

President & CEO, Howard County Library System

Good morning, Chair Walsh and members of the County Council. I am Tonya Aikens, President & CEO, of Howard County Library System and a resident of Columbia. Thank you for the opportunity to again testify on behalf of Howard County's residents who value the lifelong education provided by our library.

In the last two budget hearings and in our work sessions, we have talked about how our team quickly and effectively pivoted to *first*, teaching classes virtually and making more eBooks and other eContent available, and *second*, creating ways to engage with customers and connect people who were isolated. As the year progressed, we added contactless pickup, created Bundle Bags, developed STEM activity kits, transformed popular in-person events (like Evening in the Stacks and Battle of the Books) to virtual experiences, began lending Chromebooks and hotspots, and most recently, opened for limited in-person service.

Tracy, one of our customers, wrote, *"I have always loved HC libraries, but this past year, you have been my lifeline. Online books and contactless pickup kept our family supplied with interesting reads. Thank you for tirelessly working to keep our community supported and cared for!"*

Our dedicated staff has indeed worked tirelessly to adapt to this new way of working in order to meet the needs of our community, while also juggling the effects of the pandemic themselves and taking care of their own families. Some members of our team lost loved ones to COVID while others experienced job loss by a partner or spouse. In addition, our staff took five furlough days this fiscal year. The health and safety of our staff and customers was at the forefront of all decisions, and I'm proud to say that we did not have any workplace-transmitted incidents of COVID.

As we plan for the full reopening of our branches and the new normal, we are analyzing what has worked well and how we can be more effective. We are looking at creative ways to engage both people who are eager to come back for in-person gatherings, and those who choose to participate virtually due to transportation issues, work or school schedules, and/or health issues or concerns. With issues of equity always in mind, we will examine how best to provide inclusive experiences for everyone in our community.

The County Executive's operating budget request for HCLS includes a 2.6 percent increase for FY 22. This modest increase will:

- provide COLA and merit increases for staff in line with what the County will provide to its employees,
- fund FICA and anticipated medical plan increases, and
- replenish funds removed in the current fiscal year for the 5-day furlough, so that our staff would not need to be furloughed again next fiscal year.

As always, we will operate with fiscal prudence and frugality to ensure the best return to taxpayers.

On behalf of our community, I respectfully ask you to invest in our community and fully fund the County Executive's budget request for Howard County Library System. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

Tonya Aikens
President & CEO