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Commentary: Your library – We need each other

Mary Ellen Icaza Special to the Canton Repository

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"You have the best library system in the state. You are so informative and always so helpful. I am so happy I live in Canton and can use your library. Thank you so much, and keep up the good work!"

Across Stark County, our dedicated library staff hear statements like this every day, and I couldn't agree more. I am proud of the important services that we provide to our community. Throughout the past year, your Stark Library stepped up and met the needs of our community as we all tried to navigate living through a pandemic. It hasn't been easy for any of us, but together we have persevered.

You may not know that Ohio's public libraries have the highest use per capita of any state in the country. This, in part, is due to the importance that our elected officials put on investing in public libraries through the Public Library Fund. Right now, conversations are taking place at the Statehouse to decrease state funding for public libraries. Now is not the time to cut public library funds, when the community needs our library services more than ever.

I always refer to our libraries as the community living room. However, just as the pandemic changed how we meet together as families, it also changed how we as a library meet our patrons.

As we re-opened our buildings last summer for browsing, borrowing, and computer access, we also began alternative ways to offer library services. When you couldn't come to us, we came to you — often right in your living room — through Library-to-Go services, online resources, virtual programs and the digital library.

Children and families read with their favorite librarians virtually with Storytime LIVE! Job-seekers learned important interview and resumé-writing skills online. Our tech trainers pivoted to use Zoom to instruct individuals in critical technical skills. In 2020, usage of our eResources — such as eBooks, eMagazines and eAudiobooks — skyrocketed.

We know that students, parents, and teachers were most heavily impacted during the pandemic — and the library has been here for them.

Did you know that more than 17% of the households in Stark County don't have access to internet services? The library provided free WiFi hotspots and data to many families and teachers who otherwise would not have been able to connect with their classes from their homes. Others used the WiFi services from our branches — which is available at all our locations 24/7.

During school closures, many children were faced with food insecurity because they could no longer access free meals at school. Through our partnerships with several community organizations, we served Grab-and-Go meals to thousands of children and families right in their neighborhoods.

First Lady Fran DeWine has invested heavily in bringing Dolly Parton's Imagination Library to every county in Ohio. This program provides one book a month for children under 5 — at no charge to the families. In Stark County, we have almost 8,000 children enrolled in the program.

One parent says, "It has given my two youngest something to look forward to each month. It's been such a blessing to have something like this to light them up during the crazy year we have had!"

The Public Library Fund represents almost 40% of Stark Library's revenue. The proposed cut in the state budget would mean a decrease in revenue for Stark Library of about \$463,000 over the next three years, negatively impacting our ability to serve the community.

I am hopeful that our state leaders will reaffirm their commitment to the 251 public libraries in Ohio by maintaining the Public Library Fund at 1.7% and ensure that current library funding levels are maintained, even if there are overall tax cuts.

I am so grateful to our staff, administrators, and board who support us and enable the library to continue to serve our community. Now, more than ever, we need each other, and Stark Library is here for you.

Mary Ellen Icaza is CEO and executive director of Stark Library.