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Libraries Are the Answer to Difficult Times

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We Love LIBRARIES!

Libraries are the answer to difficult times

by Sally Reed

As Woody Allen said, “Money is better than poverty, if only for financial reasons.”

For libraries, money is definitely better than poverty, but, unfortunately, this all-important commodity is evading them more and more. Instead of spending all their time planning and delivering top-quality services, library directors are often finding that much of their time is being spent trying to stretch a declining budget dollar to cover the costs of services for increasing numbers of patrons.

Directors are also working hard across the country to convince their funders that libraries are even *more* important during tough times and that there is not a greater “bang for the buck” to be found.

Here’s the reality – library directors usually can’t make the case for library funding effectively without the help of those who use, love, support and govern libraries – in other words, friends and trustees.

Increasingly, these library lovers are becoming library advocates. The days of resting on the laurels of the notion that a library is a self-evident good are over. These are the days of competing voices for the tax dollars that citizens are often loathe to increase for any reason.

Enter the “new” division of the American Library Association (ALA) called the Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundations – or ALTAFF for short. This division of ALA is devoted entirely to helping citizens who support libraries maximize their effectiveness at the local and state levels. This means providing trustees and friends with information on best practices in areas such as advocacy, fundraising, governing and promoting libraries.

ALTAFF provides its members with a meaty newsletter that shares these best practices from across the country every other month. We also provide toolkits, consulting services, fact sheets and soon – webinars – to help network and educate these library heroes who are otherwise fairly isolated from other boards and groups across the country.

In this time of economic distress, many communities are watching their libraries reduce hours and services – or close altogether. Yet, for most communities, libraries only expend 2-3 percent of the total tax dollar on the state and local level. In some cases, even less. When we hear our funders say that all budgets have to be cut, we have to ask, how will cutting libraries – a minuscule amount of any city, county or state

budget — bring about the economic recovery we’re all looking for?

Libraries are the answer to difficult times, offering job-seeking opportunities, free continuing education and learning opportunities, and free ways for citizens to find joy and entertainment in a good book or movie.

Citizens who love and use libraries must exercise the power of their voices to ensure that libraries get the funding they need to carry out their critical mission in their communities. They must ensure that funders know the old saw is true, “Libraries can get you through times of no money better than money can get you through times of no libraries.”

ALTAFF is committed to helping turn passive support by library lovers into knowledgeable, powerful action! For more information about ALTAFF, go to ala.org/altaff or call 800-545-2433, ext. 2161. ▶▶

Sally Reed is executive director of the Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundations, a division of the American Library Association. ALTAFF is the result of the merger of Friends of Libraries USA (FOLUSA), which Reed headed, and the former Association of Library Trustees and Advocates (ALTA).