Good morning, Chairman Prieto and Members of the Assembly Budget Committee. I thank you for allowing me to submit testimony discussing the New Jersey State Library and the state’s network of public libraries which we support. I welcome any questions that you may have.

In the past few years, libraries throughout the state have embraced a commitment to serving residents seeking employment and small businesses looking to expand. However keeping up with their communities’ demands for resources and training in addition to all of the other programs and services being offered means that our libraries are stretched more than ever. That is why the State Library, on behalf of the patrons of the state’s public libraries, has two requests this budget season: $2.8 million for funding for information technology infrastructure and workforce development assistance/economic development and restoration funding for our Per Capita aid program at $6 million.

The $7.5 million federal Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) grant that the State Library received in 2010 has been instrumental in helping small businesses, entrepreneurs and jobseekers become and remain competitive in today’s economy through their public libraries. Through this grant, 845 computers were delivered to 124 libraries in need and network and broadband connectivity upgrades were performed at 79 libraries as well. Almost 8,000 residents have taken job readiness and computer training classes in all 21 counties in the state, and the workforce development databases funded by the grant have allowed over 11,000 users to perform more than 104,000 job searches to date. Using a formula developed by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, New Jersey libraries helped over 49,000 residents find jobs last year. In addition, small business owners and entrepreneurs have access to Frost & Sullivan market research reports which provide in-depth information on market trends, industry research and competitors. These reports can cost upwards of $20,000
each if purchased separately and to date New Jersey’s small businesses have accessed reports valued at over $9.4 million for free.

The State Library has requested $2.8 million to further expand what our public libraries can do for New Jersey’s jobseekers, small business owners and entrepreneurs and to sustain the technology infrastructure at the public libraries providing this assistance. While the economy is slowly on the mend, New Jersey’s unemployment rate still lags behind the national average. Workforce assistance and economic development funds would bring additional resources to libraries throughout the state that are providing hands on training to assist the state’s under- and unemployed residents find gainful employment. These funds would also allow more libraries to become Small Business Resource Centers to aid the state’s small businesses. These centers would assist with a variety of small business needs, from research inquiries and competitive intelligence to technology training and meeting space. Relevant trainings would be available to business owners and entrepreneurs, library collections would be expanded to assist the business community and outreach would be done to ensure that the small businesses which employ approximately 80% of New Jersey’s workforce are aware of what their public libraries have to offer. This assistance will in turn help businesses to expand and employ even more of our residents. The State Library has created a partnership with the New Jersey Business Action Center and has been offering programs to New Jersey’s Small Business Development Centers and the state’s Chambers of Commerce. Additional funding will allow us to bring our services to such organizations statewide.

The $2.8 million in funding would also be used to maintain the core technology services including internet access, email hosting and technical expertise provided to more than half of the public libraries across the state who cannot afford it locally. This is a vital service to our residents since so many people use our libraries’ public computer terminals to research new careers, apply for jobs and access government services online.

The State Library and the library community are very appreciative that the Governor’s proposed fiscal year 2013 budget does not include any additional cuts to library funding. However, libraries are still suffering from budget reductions at the state and local level over the past three years. Libraries have reduced hours, laid off or furloughed staff, and closed branch locations throughout the state.
Twenty-six percent (26%) of the state’s public libraries lost funding in 2011 and almost 100 library positions throughout the state were eliminated last year. Trenton closed its four branch locations and now has just one location to serve the entire city. Northvale has closed its only public library and Newark Public Library has seen its funding shrink by over 36% in the last three years, with a $1 million loss just this year. Local tax support for libraries is lower now than it was in 2008. This has had a direct impact on the ability of our residents to compete for job opportunities – if they do not have access to the Internet, librarians and electronic resources, they cannot apply for jobs and remain competitive in today’s job market. In more than 70% of New Jersey’s communities, the public library is the only place offering free internet access to residents.

It is for this reason that the State Library is requesting restoration funding of $6 million to the Per Capita aid program. This program provides direct aid to our libraries to help them meet the ever increasing demand for services. Since FY 2008 the Per Capita program has lost almost $5 million, or 58% of its funding – 50% of which was lost in FY 2011 alone. Restoration of this program to its statutory requirement of $9.6 million would cost just $1.09 per person – about two cents per day. This will allow our libraries to be open and staffed when our residents and small businesses need them.

Thank you for the opportunity today to present the role our state’s libraries have been playing to assist jobseekers, entrepreneurs and small businesses. New Jersey residents depend on to their libraries in these challenging times to use the myriad of services available for basic computer skills, job readiness training, resume building, and small business resources. Funding for these vital services in our public libraries allows us to be a partner in the state’s economic recovery. The State Library and the libraries of New Jersey appreciate your continued support to enable us to deliver these and other high quality library services to residents across the state.