



HOWARD COUNTY
LIBRARY SYSTEM

Learn. Grow. Connect.

Howard County Council's Budget Hearing
April 27, 2026

Testimony in support of Howard County Library System

Liz Banach

Howard County Library System Board of Trustees

Good evening, Chair Jones, Vice Chair Rigby, and members of the County Council. My name is Liz Banach. I'm a Howard County resident and the immediate past chair of Howard County Library System's Board of Trustees. Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of the County Executive's proposed FY27 budget for HCLS, including the \$1.7 million to cover wage increases for our team and resources for our community.

Tonight I want to focus on an essential role the library plays in our county: connecting people—across neighborhoods, generations, languages, income levels, and life circumstances—so that everyone can find a place to belong.

HCLS advances connection in many ways. Programs like The Longest Table invite residents to sit down with people they've never met, discover common ground, and build real relationships. One attendee said, "I have more in common with a stranger than I thought." And we're intentional about welcoming everyone: survey results from the 2025 Longest Table showed participants from across income brackets—from under \$35,000 to over \$200,000 a year.

Connection also means crossing cultures and languages. HCLS staff taught 932 bilingual classes and world language programs to 13,830 attendees—creating welcoming spaces where neighbors practice language, share stories, and form friendships through activities like *World Languages Café*.

The library is also a hub for thoughtful civic conversation—through author events, film discussions, salons, and book groups. For example, an author talk with Scott Shigeoka drew attendees who described it as an "eye-opening experience" with "meaningful discussion," and said they felt encouraged to be more curious about others.

This work is increasingly important because Howard County is aging. The number of residents age 65 and older has grown by almost 20% since 2015. Today, seniors make up about 16.3% of our County population. That growth means more neighbors are looking for places to stay engaged, keep learning, and avoid isolation.

HCLS meets seniors where they are. One person told us that borrowing art helped him connect during visits with his aging parents. A retired teacher shared how adult art classes, one-on-one tech consultations, and crochet meet-ups gives her community. Another recently retired participant said the crafting classes give her a reason to get out of the house, meet new people, and learn new things.

And connection can be life-changing when people are struggling. HCLS hosts staff from Grassroots as well as Certified Peer Recovery Specialists from the Howard County Health Department so residents can ask questions and connect to behavioral health supports and crisis care services.

The library also connects and supports veterans and their families. Through events and programs like the Veterans Book Group, veterans find a respectful space to share, listen, and honor lived experiences. Additionally, monthly visits from a social worker with the Baltimore VA Community Resource & Referral Center give veterans a trusted place to drop in, ask questions, and get connected to services.

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The library is one of the few public spaces designed for everyone—and it delivers connection that strengthens our county’s social fabric. I respectfully ask you to invest in Howard County residents of every age by fully funding the County Executive’s proposed FY27 budget for the Howard County Library System.

Respectfully submitted,

Liz Banach
HCLS Board of Trustees



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Tonya Aikens

President & CEO, Howard County Library System

Good evening, Chair Jones, Vice Chair Rigby, and members of the County Council. I am Tonya Aikens, President and CEO of the Howard County Library System. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the residents who find joy at the Library.

Last week we celebrated National Library Week, which culminated in 367 teams of fifth graders filling Merriweather Post Pavilion for Battle of the Books. I am grateful to our team, our partners at Howard County Public School System and Merriweather Arts and Culture Center, and our generous sponsors for working together to create such an impactful event for our community. How many places can you find a major concert venue that hosts an event celebrating books and reading?

We are grateful for the County Executive's proposed budget which helps us continue this work. I respectfully urge you to fully fund Dr. Ball's proposal. It includes \$1.7M to cover the negotiated 7% wage increase for unionized staff and equitable increases for non-union staff. It also provides support for our collections, classes, technology, and professional development.

These investments advance our strategic plan—especially our first two focus areas: (1) all children enter school ready to learn and (2) teens and young adults feel agency and belonging. Trustee Liz Banach will address our third focus area.

First: **all children enter school ready to learn**. HCLS supports families from birth through preschool with early learning classes, strong early learner collections, bilingual programming, and trained instructors—helping more children start kindergarten with the skills and confidence they need. For caregivers, these classes are often their first trusted learning community, offering practical ideas they can use at home.

Last year, nearly 81,000 parents and young children attended our preschool classes. In FY25, our On the Road to Kindergarten! team taught 112 classes to 3,020 children—about one in six of our county's 0–4 population. And because quality matters, 98% of children's instructional staff have completed our in-house training aligned to the Maryland Early Learning Standards.

One of our staff members shared that, *“Parents/caregivers [in our Hatchling classes] are spending more time connecting and sharing with each other during and at the end of class. All parents thanked me individually for this class describing it as ‘wonderful,’ ‘so helpful,’ and ‘impactful’ providing a better understanding of infant development and a variety of stimulating activities that they can engage in together at home.”*

Our second key area focuses on creating environments where **teens and young adults feel agency and belonging**. The Library provides welcoming spaces, caring staff, and teen-led opportunities—including programs like Teen Action Boards, creative and STEM workshops, fun

events like Teen Live, and academic support—that help young people feel seen, safe, and connected.

We are halfway through the teen internship project at our Elkridge Branch, with more than 100 teens working together to co-design a new teen space. According to a midpoint survey, teens are building connections with other teens and with adults, getting outside their comfort zones, learning skills, and gaining knowledge in areas ranging from libraries and leadership to public speaking. They feel respected and believe their contributions are valued. One teen told us: *“I love how student-led everything is – it's not just a bunch of adults talking at us.”*

Sustaining these outcomes depends on retaining and supporting staff, maintaining welcoming spaces, and keeping pace with demand for materials and classes—priorities funded in the County Executive’s proposed budget. It also means continuing teen-led groups and programs that build connection, skills, and a sense of belonging.

I know you face tough choices. Libraries serve everyone in our community—from babies building early literacy to teens looking for belonging to adults looking for connection. **I respectfully ask you to fully fund the County Executive’s proposed FY27 budget** so HCLS can continue delivering these results. Thank you for your time and for your support of Howard County Library System.

Respectfully submitted,

Tonya Aikens