

Libraries in danger

Like public education, public libraries are also being threatened by budget cuts. In every town and city in our country, public libraries are facing severe cutbacks due to decreased funding. Many small branch libraries have downsized staff as they compete for local funds with other municipal services such as police and fire departments.

Here's a sampling of how libraries are being affected around the country:

The Franklin, Mass., Public Library, one of the nation's oldest, has already reduced its hours to 32 per week and may be forced to close.

Several major California cities are suffering from cuts. Oakland's library book budget is frozen, and the city council is again considering closing seven of its 15 branches. In Lake Tahoe, magazines wear jackets printed with a request for someone to adopt them. Otherwise, the library will have to drop its subscription. The Los Angeles County library system may have to close 15 libraries and reduce hours by 50 percent at those that remain open.

When Columbus, Ohio, state legislators announced a plan to trim \$450 million or more from the Library and Local Government Support Fund, 350 library staff and supporters rallied outside their offices. Legislators decided to leave the library part of the fund intact, relieving fears that the libraries would have to close. And budget cuts may close up to eight of Houston's branches to help the city's budget shortfall.

When library usage is at an all-time high, we need libraries to safeguard our freedom and keep democracy healthy. The ability to

WOMEN'S AMERICAN



quORTerly briefing:
issues and trends

- Haya Varon, Community Chair
- Lucille Brotman, Writer/Editor



read and use the Internet, research and dream, use resources and create, are what libraries offer to us all. For our children, libraries create literacy programs that assist our schools and offer children an opportunity to compete on a level playing field.

✓WHAT YOUR CHAPTER CAN DO

■ **Refer** to the American Library Association web site, www.ala.org, and check out "12 Ways Libraries Are Good for the Country." Produce a bulletin article on the problems affecting libraries across the country.

■ **Research** the effects the budget problems are having on your local libraries. Are they open fewer hours? Do they have a smaller selection of books? Does your library no longer subscribe to many magazines that you and your children enjoy reading? Give a report to your members and ask them to discuss the situation.

■ **Voice** your concerns to your city and state legislators. They have the ultimate control over funding for libraries. Join with other members to visit these legislators.

■ **Make** your voice heard. Most public libraries have groups known as "friends." Be a "friend" to your library.

■ **Write** a letter to the editor of your local paper supporting your

community libraries. Do it jointly with another member of your chapter and sign both names.

Decline of written expression

Despite hours spent Instant-Messaging their friends, many high school students are unable to write clearly and entertainingly, according to The National Commission on Writing's report on how writing is being neglected in our schools.

Writing skills have deteriorated so greatly that 50 percent of first-year college students are unable to produce writing assignments without errors. The problems, however, begin much earlier. Our nation's fourth graders spend 85 percent more time watching television than they do writing. Scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress, known as the nation's

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report card, show one in five students in grades four, eight and 12 write unsatisfactory prose, and only one in five are considered proficient.

To reverse this trend, the National Commission on Writing's report calls on schools, parents and policy makers to double the amount of writing time for all students, increase teacher training and focus public attention on the importance of this skill. The commission is advocating a change in a society which it said regards writing as a frill, not a necessity. Commissioners have recommended funding for a national task force on writing. The five-year effort will focus on implementing the commission's recommendations to improve writing.

✓WHAT YOUR CHAPTER CAN DO

■ **Take a look at** the report at www.writingcommission.org. Other sites that address this aspect of public education are www.writingproject.org and the National Assessment Governing Board site, www.nagb.org. Also see the "Nation's Report Card" at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>, the site of the National Center for Education Statistics.

■ **Have** a program on teacher training for your members. Contact a local college or university for an appropriate speaker.

■ **Scan** your local papers for articles on teacher training and the Writing Commission's findings. Ask a member to report on the information at a meeting.

■ **Hold** a discussion at a meeting, "Are our children watching too much television? And what can we do as mothers and grandmothers?"



SARS and schools

With many people worried about SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), it is reassuring to know that the Federal Center for Disease Control has published guidelines for the management of students exposed to SARS. (Although, fortunately, at this writing, no cases have been reported.)

✓WHAT YOUR CHAPTER CAN DO

■ **Inform** your members of the guidelines by publishing the web site address, www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars/exposurestudents.htm, in your chapter bulletin.

Church-State issues update

Vouchers: Last year's U.S. Supreme Court decision in favor of Cleveland's voucher system is not really the last word. Many states have language in their constitutions that is far more explicit in prohibiting funds from being used to aid sectarian institutions. For this reason, many voucher proponents are now arguing that the Cleveland ruling should be compared to the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education*. However, it is clear that where *Brown* advanced the proposition of equal education for all, voucher programs do not serve all or even most students.

Houses of Worship: The "Houses of Worship Free Speech Restoration Act" (HR-235) would allow houses of worship to engage in partisan politics. This dangerous legislation permits houses of worship to endorse candidates and distribute partisan voting material while maintaining their 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status. Televangelists could then use their treasury funds

to broadcast political endorsements to millions of viewers.

Federally-sponsored job discrimination: By Executive Order, religious organizations receiving taxpayer dollars are allowed to discriminate in hiring based on religion and sexual orientation. The President's faith-based order will also allow Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to subsidize a percentage of the construction of religious buildings that will be used in part for federally sponsored, faith-based programs.

✓WHAT YOUR CHAPTER CAN DO

■ **Research** the three issues on the following web sites: The Interfaith Alliance, www.interfaithalliance.org; the American Jewish Committee, www.ajc.org; and People for the American Way, www.pfaw.org.

■ **Inform** your members of these issues and discuss Women's American ORT's policies as stated in our Public Policy Resolutions, available on our web site at www.waort.org/about_top.html.

■ **Ask** your members to contact their legislators and state their reasons for opposing these proposals becoming law.

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