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Alabama Library Association Offers Support and Clarifies Issues Related to Birmingham Public Library Furlough Decisions

BACKGROUND: ALLA responds to recent press conference regarding BPL furloughs.

OFFICIAL STATEMENT: We of the Alabama Library Association, whose mission is to provide leadership for the development, advocacy, and improvement of library and information services in this state, are compelled to address the recent misrepresentation of what libraries do for our communities put forth recently to the media, elected officials, and the general public.

Additionally, we acknowledge the devastating decision that the Birmingham Public Board of Trustees was forced to make to furlough 158 employees. We encourage library leadership to engage in advocacy activities, build productive relationships with elected officials, and represent their libraries accurately to the public.

Libraries are experiencing the complexity of our time like any other industry. We are facing issues from COVID-19, fiscal shortfalls, and an uncertain future. Therefore, when public figures misrepresent libraries, we are compelled to clarify. As librarians, we are dedicated to serving and protecting our communities during this challenging time, and we are fully supportive of innovative and virtual strategies. The results of these strategies are online programming events, the orchestration of socially distanced in-person library services and curbside pickup. However, the suggestion that any library can successfully perform these services without an appropriate staff is simply false. Virtual resources and services do not reduce the need for library staff; they are needed now more than ever. These do not magically appear on your personal device to bring you entertainment and knowledge – there are dozens and dozens of library employees who work hard to provide that content in a curated and easy to access form.

While one group of library employees spends hours planning and organizing virtual events, another group works to market and implement them, while another handles the technological aspects of making it work. Other employees review library resource usage and purchase print and online library materials. Another group processes and catalogs the materials so users can quickly access them, while others negotiate vendor agreements and set-up online access points so library users can use first-class databases and software. Another organizes material check-out, curbside pick-up and ensures that library resources are processed and delivered to other BPL branches and Jefferson County Public Libraries. While this is all occurring, staff members assist library users through virtual assistance methods, scan research

items to assist researchers across the country and create online resources that aid users in their learning.

In a time of uncertainty and confusion, the BPL system employees have worked tirelessly to meet the needs of their patrons. Since they closed to the public due to COVID-19, they have gained over 1,600 new library cardholders, loaned 18,408 items through curbside pick-up, electronically delivered over 12,000 items and had over 74,000 e-book/audiobook activities. All of this required the indispensable library staff.

While we understand the difficult situation facing the Birmingham City officials and the Birmingham Public Library leadership, these 158 furloughed employees are not expendable. They deserve better, and the City of Birmingham deserves better.

About ALLA

The Alabama Library Association (ALLA) is a non-profit corporation formed to encourage and promote the welfare of libraries and professional interests of librarians in the State of Alabama. The Mission of the Alabama Library Association is to provide leadership for the development, advocacy, and improvement of library and information services and to promote the profession of librarianship, in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all.