

HB 785 Support**Freedom to Read Act****House of Delegates Ways and Means Committee**

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins and members of the Committee:

I am the Chief Executive Officer of Baltimore County Public Library. I am also the President of the Public Library Association, the largest association dedicated to supporting the unique and evolving needs of public library professionals. PLA serves nearly 9,000 members in public libraries across the United States and Canada. I'm speaking today in support of HB 785.

The freedom to read is a basic and fundamental right that all Marylanders enjoy: the freedom to access information, to learn about and explore ideas and perspectives that might be different from one's own, and to think critically. It is through this access that people can explore what it means to be human and can gain both self-awareness and respect for others. Through the lenses of history and context readers can gain knowledge about the world and their place in it. Further, reading and having unfettered access to information help people be better informed as citizens, which is essential for healthy and thriving democracies.

Recently, however, Marylanders' right to the freedom to read has been threatened. There are efforts within our own state that undermine the freedom to read and threaten libraries and librarians for upholding the right to read. Public libraries are trusted educational and cultural assets that unite communities and yet have been caught in the pernicious culture wars that seek to divide us all.

Libraries have trained staff who carefully and thoughtfully curate collections for their communities based on established professional standards. Public libraries provide access to a broad range of materials from diverse voices and perspectives. Libraries don't tell people how to think. Instead, libraries provide access to a marketplace of ideas and information so that people can think for themselves.

In Maryland, internal data shows that the number of formal book challenges in public libraries has increased by 133% between 2019 and 2023, with a peak of 233% in 2022. The number of individuals submitting book challenges to Maryland public libraries increased by 245% in the past year. This is mirrored nationwide where in the first 9 months of 2023, 49% of all book challenges were aimed at public libraries and public librarians, a dramatic increase from 16% the year prior¹.

In addition, there are attempts by governments, local and state, and well-funded book banning groups to dictate what books the majority may find in our public libraries, based on the personal biases and beliefs of a vocal minority. And yet, data shows that 71% of voters oppose efforts to

¹ Banned and Challenged Books: 2023 Preliminary Data; <https://uniteagainstbookbans.org/ala-releases-preliminary-2023-book-ban-data/>



remove books from public libraries². Attempts to censor books are assaults on our American democracy and are fundamentally unpatriotic. Free people read freely.

Public libraries are integral to the quality of life of any community. We are open and welcoming to everyone, providing all a safe space to learn, explore, create and connect. We serve the public good by providing a wealth of resources and services that strengthen individuals and families and uplift the most vulnerable among us. Many public libraries, like BCPL, have social workers and other support specialists on staff to help those in crisis. We partner with other agencies to provide access to free tax help during tax season, free legal help via Lawyer at the Library clinics, free vaccines and COVID test kits via local public health departments, food distribution to children facing food insecurity, free eye examinations and eyeglasses for kids K-12, and so much more. We are actively bridging the digital divide by providing access to computers and the Internet and building digital literacy skills. While the role of public libraries continues to evolve to meet changing community needs, providing access to books and building print literacy remain core to our mission as trusted community assets. When libraries and librarians are undermined because of the books they carry on their shelves, everything else that libraries do to support their communities is imperiled.

The freedom to read for all Marylanders and the work that we do at public libraries should be protected.

I urge a favorable report on HB 785.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Sonia Alcantara-Antoine'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Sonia' being the most prominent.

Sonia Alcantara-Antoine

² Voters Oppose Book Bans in Libraries; <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/voters-oppose-book-bans-libraries>