

Libraries are an Essential Service, Too

For nearly 250 years [public libraries] have afforded patrons, regardless of economic circumstance, a mind-boggling collection of materials representing 50 centuries of human thought. Plato and Santayana, Shakespeare and Hemingway, Bacon and Darwin stand shoulder to shoulder on its shelves. The library is also a place to learn English, look for a job, read to children, do a term paper, or simply to oil a squeaky day.

The public library - an American institution older than the flag, envy of other nations, cradle of literacy, bootstrap for generations of immigrants, storehouse of fuel for the imagination, hotbed of adventure and romance, and one of the greatest democratic institutions ever created - is struggling to survive. This is nothing less than a national calamity.

No one's life is in danger because they can't get their hands on one of Shakespeare's plays, and so libraries are often undervalued by local officials bent on preserving "essential services."

But in fact, libraries are essential. Reading is still the most basic survival skill in today's information-driven society. Moreover, the gap between rich and poor is widening, and the libraries level the playing field.

A danger greater than closing is that if we keep pauperizing libraries, they will deteriorate to the point that it will not be worth going at all. For children from homes where the only book is the telephone directory, the library is their one great hope. But if they go and find nothing to read, they will soon be watching television instead.

If anything we ought to be increasing library hours and services. This is no time to be locking up the books. What in the name of Ben Franklin is going on here?

*The text above is excerpted from commentary by William Ecenbarger, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, in the March 11, 2005 edition of the Christian Science Monitor:
<http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0311/p09s01-coop.html>*

Iowa public libraries are essential to Iowans

**Visits to IA public libraries are up 30% in the past ten years -
Iowans made more than 16 million visits to their public libraries last year**

**Checkouts from IA public libraries are up 10% in the past ten years -
Iowans checked out more than 27 million items last year**

**Iowa public library card holders are up 15% in the past ten years -
Nearly 63% of Iowans now hold public library cards**