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White House Conference on Library and Information Services: Early Stages (1979-1985): Report 12

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Senate

A WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON LIBRARIES—OVERDUE, URGENTLY NEEDED

Mr. PELL. Mr. President, Congress, which has been extending certain forms of aid to libraries for more than a century, has been relatively generous in recent years. For decades, Federal assistance was limited to the bibliographic and other services of the Library of Congress, the depository library program, talking books and a few other programs that were severely restricted in scope. This pattern was broken in 1956 with the first Federal legislation providing grants to States for the expansion of public library services.

Although limited at first only to support of library services in rural areas, the law was broadened by successive enactments, the most recent of which, the Library Services and Construction Amendments of 1970, I authored to encompass construction as well as library services, urban as well as rural areas, and research, training and interlibrary cooperation.

The annual appropriation of funds for the Library Services and Construction Act may be taken as an index of congressional support for public libraries. From an initial appropriation of \$2.5 million, congressional appreciation of the vital part libraries play in community life can be shown by its present appropriation level of more than \$80 million.

Nor has Congress neglected libraries in the historic laws extending very substantial aid to education that have been enacted in the past decade and a half. Title III of the National Defense Education Act represented a breakthrough by authorizing Federal grants to public schools for purchase of classroom instructional equipment and loans to private schools for the same purpose. This provision of the NDEA permitted many

schools to institute instructional media centers, while title XI of the act supported short-term and regular session institutes attended by many school librarians.

Enactment of the National Defense Education Act in 1958 was followed in 1963 by passage of the Higher Education Facilities Act which, when signed by President Johnson, extended construction grants to build libraries in institutions of higher education. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 then provided substantial assistance for school libraries, both public and private, and the Higher Education Act that became law the same year provided grants for acquisition of materials by libraries in institutions of higher education, supported graduate training in librarianship and information science, and financed many research and demonstration projects.

These laws, and several others aiding libraries, were the handiwork, in part, of the Senate Subcommittee on Education, of which I am chairman. I am particularly proud of the important role I played in securing enactment of the Education Amendments of 1972. This legislation reaffirmed congressional support of title III of the NDEA and of library construction grants and loans to institutions of higher education.

The 1972 amendments also expanded and improved the college library programs for training, research, and acquisition of materials. In addition, the new law assures that library programs will be included in vocational education at the elementary and secondary level, in occupational preparation programs offered by 2-year postsecondary institutions, in the education of American Indians,

and in several other vital provisions of the statute.

We have made remarkable progress with the assistance authorized by the laws I have enumerated. Last year, for example, 15 million books, filmstrips, and other instructional materials were provided to over 43 million students in public and private elementary and secondary schools. Grants for acquisition of books and other materials were made to more than 700 institutions of higher education. A promising start was made in the effort to extend public library services to remote communities lacking them, to disadvantaged persons in urban ghettos and elsewhere, and to physically handicapped persons and those living in institutions, which all too often lack library facilities, staff, or services.

In Rhode Island alone, we now have an impressive variety of library services throughout our State. For example, Westerly Regional Library Center runs a program on drug abuse for youth, and Providence Public Library's Fox Point Branch provides assistance to cities and towns for library service to Portuguese-speaking and other bilingual Rhode Islanders. We have a statewide network for inter-library loans, which enables anyone in the State to receive from his or her local library whatever materials he or she needs. Our libraries all over the State are providing both traditional and innovative library services of high quality to better serve the people of Rhode Island.

Despite this progress, many needs for library service remain unmet, in Rhode Island and in the Nation as a whole. There are still an estimated 20 million Americans without access to libraries. Almost 34,000 elementary schools lack libraries. Less than half the Nation's institutions of higher education received Federal grants last year to permit them to expand their library resources. Far too many Americans are living in residential schools, hospitals, homes for the elderly, reformatories and other institutions and without access to libraries where they could bolster their morale, self-respect, dignity, and skills.

Concerned about these problems, Congress has established the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, which was established by my first bill as chairman of the Subcommittee on Education. This 15-member independent agency, five members of which are professional librarians or information specialists, is reviewing the situation confronting libraries and developing recommendations that can assure, at last, universal access to library services by all Americans.

The Commission is giving special attention to relationships among libraries, present and potential, that can expand their services through greater cooperation and clearer delineation of function. It is drawing up authoritative estimates of the funds that will be required by local governments, school systems, and institutions of higher education in order to enable their libraries to meet the growing needs of their many users.

As the National Commission produces its various analyses and recommendations, I believe these should receive the attention of the tens of thousands of public-spirited citizens and professional librarians who are primarily responsible for the support and guidance of American libraries. To assure widespread and thorough consideration of the recommendations of the National Commission, I am preparing legislation that would authorize the President of the United States to call a White House Conference on Library and Information Services—the first in our history—to be held in Washington in 1976, the centennial anniversary of the American Library Association as well as the bicentennial of the United States of America.

This legislation is responsive to a resolution adopted by the Council of the American Library Association at the 1972 midwinter meeting. I agree fully with the position of the Council that the White House Conference should "be based upon conferences in every State and territory which involve the lay leadership of the States' communities and the library leadership from their libraries of all types." It is essential that there be the widest possible base of support for the continued growth and further development of all types of libraries and this can be achieved only through the understanding and endorsement of representative citizens throughout the entire country.

I am confident that a White House Conference on Library and Information Services will promote greater appreciation and support for libraries. It will forcefully acquaint legislators, public officials, the news media, and the public with the abiding concerns of librarians, educators, library trustees, and the governing boards of school systems and institutions of higher education. A White House Conference can review the accomplishments, the unmet needs, and, above all, the magnificent potentialities of our libraries, and I am sure that, once they are made aware of the facts, the American people will see the wisdom of enlarging their support for their libraries.