

# In Tough Economic Times

Making the case for libraries

by Keith Michael Fiels

**I**t's time to beat our plowshares into swords.

It's no secret. The tough economy is already having an impact on library budgets.

For those of us who have been through multiple recessions, the stories of budget cuts and branch closings are all too familiar. We know that libraries provide essential services, but we are also aware that libraries don't necessarily receive



the recognition they deserve. All too often, the library is the first to be cut or is disproportionately cut, regarded as a "nonessential" service.

What is also familiar is the increased usage that libraries are experiencing as users come for help in finding new jobs or skills, accessing information on government assistance programs, or simply because libraries are the best deal in town when it comes to stretching a shrinking dollar. All across the country, public libraries are reporting increases in usage of 10%, 20%, or even 30%.

However, some things are different this time. This time, the increase in library usage is being widely reported in newspapers and magazines and on radio and television. This time we also know a lot more about how to fight impending budget cuts.

We know that:

■ We can no longer afford to be passive victims; we have to be outspo-

ken advocates and encourage the public to advocate on behalf of libraries as well.

■ If we do make the case for our libraries, we are much more likely to receive needed funding or avoid budget cuts.

■ There are skills and resources that can help anyone become a more

persuasive and effective library advocate.

We also have a secret weapon: the energy and enthusiasm of 67,000 ALA

members and the millions of people that use and love libraries. So how are the Association and its members working to make the case?

Here are some of the ways:

■ A new Office for Library Advocacy (OLA) devoted to helping library supporters make the case locally.

■ Increased advocacy efforts and tools available from the Washington Office.

■ A growing network of state chapters linked by shared legislative action software.

■ Two new online toolkits—"Advocating in a Tough Economy" and "Add it up: Libraries Make the Difference in Youth Development and Education."

■ More library trustees, Friends, and the public involved in library advocacy, thanks to ALA's new Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends, and Foundations and the "I love libraries" website.

■ A new national radio public awareness campaign, "En tu biblioteca," targeted to our growing Latino population.

■ Nonstop media outreach to get the library story in national and local newspapers and magazines, on radio and television, and via internet news sources.

■ Up-to-date and in-depth breaking news on library budgets and library success stories through *American Libraries*, *AL Direct*, and *AL Focus*.

■ Examples of and statistics on the increases in library usage.

■ A growing body of research and stories documenting the impact and value of libraries.

■ Case studies and how-to tips from libraries that are successfully making their case.

■ New advocacy training opportunities from OLA as well as ALA's Public Library Association, Association of College and Research Libraries, American Association of School Librarians, and others.

■ A wide range of practical how-to programs at Midwinter Meetings and Annual Conferences.

■ A growing network of peer-to-peer mentoring and help for library advocates.

■ ALA President Jim Rettig's "Building Statewide Coalitions" initiative.

Times may be tough—and getting tougher—but we do have a whole new set of tools to help us do the job. So let's all roll our sleeves up. We've got some libraries to save. ■

American Libraries (Contributor). American Libraries (Volume 40, Issue 3, March 2009).

Chicago, IL, USA: American Libraries, 2009. p 8.

<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/ala/Doc?id=10275610&ppg=10>

Copyright © 2009. American Libraries. All rights reserved.

May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.