

TESTIMONY ON SENATE BILL 225
LIBRARIES-COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

BY
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BEFORE THE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE

MARCH 4, 2010

Position — Support

Mr. Chairman and members of the Senate Finance Committee.

For the record, my name is Isiah Leggett and I am the Montgomery County Executive.

I am here to support Senate Bill 225 which, if enacted, will give employees of Maryland's library systems a fundamental legal right to organize and establish a process by which they can have a seat at the table to discuss matters directly affecting their salaries, benefits, and working conditions. My support for Senate Bill 225 is rooted in two factors: a belief that all employees, whether employed in the public or private sector, should have the ability to decide if they want to join together and, as the bill states, to "engage in concerted activities with other employees for mutual aid and protection." Many thousands of local government employees in Maryland have the ability to engage in such activities and the passage of Senate Bill 225 would bring the state one step closer to ending a two tiered structure of employee rights in local government.

A second reason for supporting Senate Bill 225 stems from my experience in Montgomery County with collective bargaining, both as a member of County Council and more recently as County Executive. In 1986, Montgomery County recognized Municipal and County Government Employees Organization (MCGEO) as the bargaining agent for most non-public safety and non-management employees. This was done through the signing of authorization cards which were verified by an outside neutral. Since that time, I have seen the positive change and the benefits it has brought about, not just to employees, but to management as well. Engaging the representatives of organized employees on matters dealing with terms and conditions of employment has resulted in smarter decision making and a more efficient delivery of services, thereby benefiting County residents and taxpayers.

Montgomery County's 400+ library employees are part of the broader MCGEO bargaining unit. You may hear that unions will restrict the ability of libraries to expand service, to utilize the latest cost saving technology and limit volunteer service. The ability of our library employees to be represented and to have a structure to be involved in decisions affecting their profession has been positive, and despite rumors to the contrary, service to the public has not been curtailed, but in fact has expanded. We have branches open seven days a week. We engage in Web 2.0 technologies through our Virtual Branch. Programs are offered for all age levels, from babies to senior citizens. Every one of our 20 branches has at least one self charge machine. Volunteers are proactively used; last year over 5,000 volunteers contributed 50,000 hours to our library system.

Does the unionization of libraries result in employees emphasizing wages and benefits over professionalism and customer service? Again, our experience is a resounding no! As part of our collaborative efforts, our director of the County library department, on her own accord, asked representatives of the union to participate in the crafting of a strategic plan for the library. The result was a win/win. Employees had a formal voice in the deliberations and management was able to tap the knowledge and expertise of employees with first hand knowledge of how things really work. A union vice president and library employee were asked to become members of the Director's Advisory Committee, along with selected management employees, thereby having the benefit of the views of direct service providers. Several months ago, I held a county-wide summit on the future of libraries. This one day event brought together all stakeholders to engage in a robust dialogue on the role of libraries as we enter full speed into the digital information age. Union library employees were very much a part of the summit, and spoke passionately about the professionalism and dedication of library employees.

The committee should also take note that Montgomery County's Public Library System has been recognized as a national model. The Library Journal, a national professional trade publication, annually ranks over 7,000 public library systems in the United States on their circulation, visits, program attendance and public Internet use. Montgomery County was among the top 258 libraries identified as delivering exceptional service for calendar year 2009.

The above examples represent a small sample of the overall positive benefits accruing to employees, management, library users, and most importantly, to county residents and taxpayers, from unionization. But the legislation in front of you does not state that a union will represent the employees of your library system. It merely sets up a process by which these employees can decide for themselves if they want to engage in a concerted fashion to have a stronger voice in determining their economic and professional status. As I stated earlier, this is a right that every public employee should have. Should library employees decide to engage in collective bargaining, the bill protects management through a very exhaustive list of rights and responsibilities which cannot be impaired by any collectively bargained agreement. Further, the role of library trustees is also preserved by giving them the authority to reject any agreements which has a present or future impact.

Collective bargaining for library employees is also supported by the American Library Association-Allied Professional Association, which stated that union membership is a path to improved salary and status for library workers.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that Montgomery County employees, including library employees, have had the benefit of collective bargaining for almost 25 years. It may not be a perfect vehicle, but on the whole it has well served the interests of employees, management, and the residents and taxpayers of the County.

Thank you for allowing me to testify on behalf of Senate Bill 225 and I urge the committee to give it a favorable report.