

Testimony in Support of Fair Access to Electronic Library Materials

Access to information is a fundamental right, and our public libraries play a critical role in ensuring that right is realized for all District residents. As reading habits continue to evolve, demand for electronic materials such as eBooks and audiobooks has grown significantly. In the District, usage increased by 18 percent between FY23 and FY24, outpacing national trends. This shift underscores the importance of ensuring our libraries are equipped to meet residents where they are.

Unfortunately, current publisher licensing practices have made it increasingly difficult for libraries to keep up with this demand. Escalating costs, time-limited licenses, and restrictions on circulation mean libraries are paying more while providing access to fewer books. These practices have led to longer wait times, reduced availability, and difficult trade-offs between maintaining print collections and expanding digital access. Ultimately, it is residents—students, seniors, and lifelong learners—who bear the burden.

This legislation offers a thoughtful and necessary solution. By requiring publishers to negotiate in good faith and prohibiting licensing agreements that restrict public access, the bill helps ensure that public funds are used efficiently and that libraries can place more electronic materials into circulation at fairer prices. It also protects the library's ability to preserve electronic materials for future generations.

Importantly, the bill is structured to take effect only as part of a coordinated national effort, requiring adoption by other jurisdictions with a significant combined population. This approach strengthens the district's position, minimizes legal risk, and signals a collective commitment to fair access in the digital age.

For these reasons, I strongly support this legislation and urge its adoption to protect equitable access to information and to empower our libraries to continue serving the needs of our community.

Here are three clear, positive points drawn from the content you shared:

Protects equitable access to information for all residents

The legislation reinforces access to information as a fundamental right by ensuring libraries can meet growing demand for eBooks and audiobooks without unreasonable restrictions, helping residents avoid long wait times and reduced availability.

Promotes fair pricing and responsible publisher practices

By requiring publishers to negotiate in good faith and prohibiting restrictive licensing terms, the bill helps control escalating costs, allowing libraries to place more materials in circulation and use public funds more efficiently.

Aligns the District with a strong national effort while reducing risk

The delayed implementation tied to adoption by other jurisdictions ensures the district participates in a coordinated, nationwide approach to fair digital access, strengthening its position while minimizing legal and market risks.