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Literacy - A Lifeline for Hundreds of Westchester and Rockland County Adults

Yonkers, N.Y. – Speaking on the steps of the Yonkers Riverfront Library, dozens gathered to support the literacy program that has helped more than 25,000 Westchester and Rockland County adults learn to read, to write, or to speak English, and provide the basic skills essential to advance in today's workforce.

The Literacy Volunteers of Westchester and Rockland Counties is one of 37 local programs that stand to lose nearly 40 percent of state funding under cuts proposed in Albany. Students, volunteers, officials and advocates organized today's press conference to call on State lawmakers to restore funding to the "Adult Literacy Education" (ALE) program.

"It would be disastrous," said Patricia P. Rajala, President/CEO of Literacy Volunteers of Westchester and Rockland Counties, Inc. "In just our region alone, we teach nearly 500 students every year. Most of our tutors are all volunteers, but with a nearly \$45,000 cut in just one year, we will no longer be able to recruit, train, support and match the most appropriate tutor to each of our adult students."

Budget proposals under consideration in Albany would cut more than \$2 million of all state funding to literacy assistance programs across New York. This cut is in addition to a \$612,000 cut in the 2009-10 Deficit Reduction Plan (DRP). With last year's DRP reduction of funding, literacy programs throughout the state are now looking at a nearly 40 percent cut over last year's funding.

"I don't know what I would have done without this group," said Daniel Hill, a student of Literacy Volunteers. "Literacy volunteers provided me with the education and support I needed not only to read and write, but also to open doors that I never knew existed."

"This is such an important program and one that provides the educational services our community needs," said Michael Levy, Board Chairman of Literacy Volunteers of Westchester and Rockland Counties. "It is unacceptable that the governor and the legislature disproportionately cut this important program by nearly 40%. Our program is sustained by the good will of local volunteers, and this essential program tends to fall below the radar. For those adults who receive the education and support they need to succeed, the philosophy, knowledge and opportunity is then shared with their family, friends and children. The legislature needs to re-examine this untenable cut."

"Twenty-two percent of New Yorkers are below basic literacy level," said Kevin Smith, executive director of Literacy New York. "And every year thousands of New Yorkers volunteer their time to help others learn how to read and become less dependent. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the value of their contributed volunteer time would have been approximately \$6.5 million. We understand these are tough times, but we are not asking for what our program is actually worth, but only enough so our doors don't have to close."

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Since 1977, Literacy New York (LNY) has been a leading advocate for adult literacy in New York State and nationally. Literacy New York provides technical, program, and training assistance and workshops to a network of 37 local, community-based affiliates who annually provide over 400,000 hours of reading and basic skills instruction to adult learners.