

Rockville, MD 20854
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Office of Legislative Information Services
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Rockville, MD 20850

Good evening. My name is Gayl Selkin-Gutman and I live in the Horizon Hill subdivision of the City of Rockville. Thank you for the opportunity to speak tonight on behalf of the Rockville Library Advisory Committee and on behalf of our county libraries, in general.

This week I am marking (not celebrating) an anniversary of sorts. A year ago this week, I was informed that the company where I had worked for more than five years had been unable to identify a senior level assignment that suited my skill set. In other words, I was being laid off. That took some getting used to. At that time, I never would have believed that a year later I would still be unemployed. Yes, the employment situation is that bad and I'm living proof. Though, I have to admit, I am one of the lucky ones – since my husband still has his job. I've even been able to devote more time to the Friends of the Library and LAC.

A couple of weeks ago, when I was watching the Oprah Winfrey Show (yes, being unemployed does have its perks). I was interested to hear what her guest, Suze Orman, was recommending for people who have been laid off during the current economic crisis. Interestingly, she has altered some of her longstanding advice. Instead of a six-month emergency fund, she now recommends keeping eight months of expenses on hand. In explaining where a couple who had seemingly done everything according to these rules went wrong, Ms. Orman pointed out that people are not cutting their expenses enough – or as she put it “to the bone.” Among her examples, Ms. Orman suggested cutting either land-line or cell phone service (you don't need both) and cutting out cable and internet service, as well.

Anyone who has conducted a job search in recent years – is keenly aware that internet access is an essential job search tool. Have you looked at the employment section of the Washington Post lately? Barely anything is advertised there anymore – the majority of positions are advertised online. Snail mail is a thing of the past. Many employers no longer accept paper resumes and some only accept applications through their websites.

But Ms. Orman is correct; some bills must be paid while others are non-essential. You can do without internet access at home, as long as you can count on internet service that is available elsewhere, preferably for “free” (paid for by taxes that remain an essential bill, for most of us).

Public libraries are the sole source of no-fee access to the Internet for 73% of Americans without connectivity at home or work.

Accessing the internet at our local public libraries is not frivolous or a luxury – for many it is a necessity. I've spoken with traditionalists who see the role of libraries as primarily providing books and other reading materials, and who complain that our libraries are beginning to look more like computer labs. The truth is that there is a wealth of information that is best or only accessible by internet and our library staff are experts in helping the public access that information. Providing computer and internet access to community members who may not otherwise have it is essential – especially in these trying economic times.

Given my situation, it's hard not to focus on the needs of the increasing number of unemployed in our county. Still, it's important to acknowledge that in this difficult economy, libraries also must meet our day-to-day information needs.

Senior citizens have expressed concerns that any collection, staffing or transportation cuts could impact activities, such as book clubs, that help keep them current and contribute to their quality of life. They worry that such budget cuts might preclude the expenditure of time it takes to assist them with these activities.

School aged children and teens need the resources and a place to do work when school is not in session. During difficult economic times, it is probably unrealistic to ask for increased hours. However, please keep in mind that ideally, the popular Sunday hours should be retained, even during the summer months. Just stand outside of a library during a Sunday in June and watch how many patrons show up – expecting it to be open - only to be disappointed!

When the Rockville FOL held its “Welcome back Sundays!” celebration – the first Sunday that service resumed last September – we were initially concerned that we might not have much of a turnout – being that it was the very first Sunday the library was reopened. We even considered waiting a couple of weeks until the public “got the idea” that Sunday service had resumed. Boy, were we wrong! That first Sunday in September people showed up in droves. Many – if not most – of the people we spoke with said they were unaware that the library hadn't been open on Sundays – it was just a day they showed up expecting service.

It's no surprise that Americans are using libraries more now than ever. In addition to online and digital resources, the demand for traditional services has also increased. Libraries provide the entire community with access to culture: books, film, music etc. When people's personal budgets are restricted due to unemployment, pay freezes, furloughs or efforts to build their cash reserve just in case, the library becomes an efficient way to meet the community's needs while it helps hold the community together. Libraries draw people out of their homes, away from their fears and isolation and reinforce their relationship to the community as a whole. **Library services must be fostered and preserved.**

We are grateful that the County Executive has recommended that Library operating hours remain the same as FY09. **Libraries are a wise use of our tax funds.** Thank you for making wise choices for the people of Montgomery County. In the long run, the people will support a County government that supports them.

Respectfully submitted,

Gayl Selkin-Gutman, President
Rockville Library Advisory Committee