

Written Testimony by Suzanne LeBlanc, Long Island Children's Museum  
To the Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities  
Committee on Education and Labor of the U.S. House of Representatives  
Submitted September 4, 2008

I am pleased and honored to offer this written testimony highlighting the role of museums in strengthening communities, on behalf of the Long Island Children's Museum in Garden City, New York.

As someone who has spent her full adult career working in children's museums in Boston, Brooklyn, Las Vegas and now Garden City on Long Island in New York, I have had the opportunity to witness firsthand, participate in, create and direct museum programs and major initiatives that have thoroughly inspired and engaged young people, supported family learning in important ways, and had a deep and lasting impact on families who began to view and use the museum as an important lifelong resource.

Children's museums have a long history of providing resources to children and families in need and of being trusted community institutions. To put our current discussion into context - December 16, 1999 marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the first children's museum in Brooklyn, New York. Anna Billings Gallup, one of the founders of the American Association of Museums in 1906 and a curator-in-chief of the Brooklyn Children's Museum said, in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, "*The Children's Museum idea is Brooklyn's gift to the world.*" In 1917, during World War I, the Children's Museum in Boston (the second oldest children's museum) briefly considered closing its doors because of the challenges of raising funds during wartime. But the museum's trustees "realized that....to close [the museum's] doors when thousands of children were looking to it for mental stimulus and satisfaction would be wrong." Shortly thereafter, during an extremely cold winter in 1918, Boston's schools were closed because of a shortage of coal. Many children had nowhere to go but the streets. The museum responded to this crisis by scheduling a series of daily lectures for young people. (See Appendix 1 - "*The Slender Golden Thread, 100 Years Strong.*")

The Long Island Children's Museum (LICM), was conceived over dinner conversation among three couples in 1989 and first opened to the public in November of 1993 in 5,400 square feet of donated space in an office building that could only accommodate 98 people at one time and was intended to serve a demonstration site. Community response was immediate. LICM's first newsletter ran two headlines: "Museum Opens!" and "Board Begins Search for Larger Quarters." LICM is now housed in a 40,000 square foot former Navy airplane hangar on Nassau County land in Garden City. It has a \$5 million annual budget, 100 employees and 65 volunteers. The Museum welcomes 265,000 visitors per year, including 40,000 schoolchildren. The founders of the Museum, from its inception, had a keen sense of commitment to community and an understanding of the important role the museum could play on Long Island. Robert Lemle, founding board member and current co-chair of the museum's board of trustees, said in a recent interview for the Oberlin Alumni Magazine, "This was a civic contribution that we could make: an

institution that would be accessible to everyone and have an important impact on Long Island and our community.” (See Appendix 2 – “*Child’s Play.*”)

In late 2005 an opportunity presented itself for the Museum to respond in a significant and positive way to the needs of the most vulnerable of families by entering into an innovative partnership with Nassau County’s Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and Family Court. In September 2005 Nassau County opened a new 219,000 square-foot Health and Human Services Welcoming Center across the road and less than a 10-minute walk from LICM. The new facility houses eight agencies under one roof – previously located in five different sites throughout the county. Receiving an average of 1,000 visitors each day, and some days as many as 2,000, the building is bright, positive and welcoming and includes a small staffed children’s playroom and a library where books are given away. Most importantly, the new center provides “a single point of entry into the Health and Human Services system” for individuals and families in Nassau County. This initiative to consolidate the intake process, increase the efficient delivery of services and ensure an “outcome-driven approach to case management” was christened the *No Wrong Door* program. No matter where a client enters the human services system, that person will now have access to any other county or community service they need. (See Appendix 3 – Nassau County Press Release.)

Shortly after this opening, Dr. Louise Skolnik, director of human services for Nassau County, key Department of Health and Human Services department heads and Family Court Judge Hope Zimmerman approached the Museum to meet and discuss ways to work together on behalf of families visiting the new Welcoming Center as well as those engaged with Child Protective Services, Preventative, Foster Care and Adoption Services and Family Court. After this initial meeting it became clear to museum and county staff that several factors were converging that provided an opportunity for a significant and sustained partnership between the county agencies and the Long Island Children’s Museum. The proximity of the Museum and the new Welcoming Center, the mission and core values of the Children’s Museum, the County’s *No Wrong Door* initiative, and the passion and enthusiasm of DHHS, Family Court and Museum staff on behalf of families, formed a perfect situation for something groundbreaking to develop.

As a 501c3 not for profit agency, with 50% of its yearly budget raised from corporate, foundation and individual donations, it was necessary for the Museum to raise funds to launch this kind of staff intensive initiative and partner in such a significant way. The Museum’s Executive Director, Suzanne LeBlanc, was familiar with the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Museums for America program. She approached the county agencies with the idea of developing a long-term, sustained collaboration. The Children’s Museum submitted an application for funding from IMLS in November 2006 and was awarded funding in September of 2007 for the program – *Be Together, Learn Together*. (See Appendix 4 – LICM Community Access Fact Sheet - *Be Together, Learn Together* and Appendix 5 – IMLS Grant Narrative.)

Several decisions and factors have contributed to the success to-date of this collaboration:

an intensive pre-proposal planning process involving museum, social services and family court staff; the establishment of a joint planning committee (county agency and museum staff) that would meet monthly throughout the project, including the participation commitment of Dr. Louise Skolnik and Suzanne LeBlanc; the Children's Museum's hire of a full-time program manager, with substantial community programming experience, to coordinate all aspects of the project; an initial decision that this two-year project would be designed as a planning and prototyping phase, allowing program components to be adequately tested and evaluated, and the formation of a national advisory committee with local representation that would add expertise and national perspective to the project. The development of the collaboration itself is of paramount importance; allowing each partner to contribute talents and expertise that serve their shared audience.

The project components and activities have developed as the project has proceeded and include:

- a re-design of the Welcome Center's supervised visitation rooms by museum exhibit designers with input from caseworker focus groups and welcome center staff administrators, and utilizing prototyping of individual components with families before final design
- supervised visitations at the Children's Museum taking advantage of this positive, non-judgmental setting and fun learning environment
- weekly activities at the Welcome Center, taught by museum staff, for children and families waiting to be seen by Health and Human Services staff
- parent workshops focused on play, childhood development, and supporting pre-and early literacy skills
- Museum-led workshops for children and parents that incorporate activities that enable modeling of positive parent/child interaction skills
- awareness days at the Museum that increase public understanding of the urgent need for more foster care families
- free museum passes distributed at the Welcome Center to families, as well as to case workers
- caseworker appreciation nights at the Museum
- services to preventive providers such as to Long Beach Reach, which among other activities serves pregnant teens and teen parents
- collection days at the Museum for children's books, art and craft supplies, winter coats, back to school supplies and other drives to support resource needs that the Welcome Center identifies

I would like to discuss the re-design of the supervised visitation rooms in more depth as they are illustrative of the advantages of our unique collaboration. There are two rooms in the Welcome Center and while clean, they were small, with bare white walls and sofas that are difficult to clean, and that do little to encourage family interaction. The museum's director of exhibits, the Be Together, Learn Together program manager, and the administrator of the Welcome Center formed the nucleus of a project team to work on this environment. It was decided that before making significant changes it would be important to create a focus group to gather input from caseworkers who use the room for

supervised visitations. The buy-in of caseworkers and cleaning staff would be critical to the success of the room changes.

The Museum donated staff time and some funds for the changes and the Welcome Center accessed a small state grant to supplement the funds that would be needed. With feedback gathered, design drawings were created and prototyped components were developed to try-out with families and caseworkers in the supervised visitation rooms. A final design was approved at a meeting of the Joint Planning Committee, which included a new parent participant. Changes to one room are now being implemented; changes to the second room will follow after observation and feedback from families and caseworkers about the success of the changes to the first room. Training for caseworkers and cleaning staff will be conducted by the Museum. (See Appendix 6 – Floor Plans and Rendering.)

Components of the new supervised visitation room include:

- a big, inviting, fanciful and colorful storytelling chair
- a collection of framed children's art on the walls with a mechanism for installing art done by children who use the room
- a large-size tic tac toe inset in the floor, with giant playing pieces
- a loveseat, kids round table with chairs, and the storytelling chair form the parent/child interaction zone
- Ceiling murals (4) that represent different kinds of skies – starry, cloudy, sunny and stormy with lightning
- A toy bench with a small number of developmentally appropriate toys in good shape
- An art supply cart
- A bookshelf filled with books to use with the storytelling chair
- A food prep counter
- A caseworker chair
- Rooms painted an inviting color
- New linoleum and rugs (with tic tac toe inset)
- Softer, colored lighting
- New furniture colorful, attractive, child-friendly and easy to clean

The redesign of the supervised visitation room is a wonderful example of a contribution that a museum, with exhibit designers on staff who are experienced in designing for children, can make to a social service agency. The redesigned room invites and welcomes families in, naturally encourages parent/child interaction, and communicates respect for the families who must visit with each other in this supervised setting.

There are of course challenges in effectively implementing this collaboration. In particular, caseworkers and administrators are dealing on a daily basis with children and families in great need and often in crisis. It takes enormous commitment on the part of these staff, to make time for meetings with the Museum and to put time and effort into implementing new procedures and programs in the face of their daily challenges. It also takes a strong commitment, tempered with understanding and consistency, on the part of museum's staff to keep moving forward when things get preempted or delayed or move

more slowly than desired. For this reason, the development of the partnership between the two institutions was considered an integral element of the important work of the *Be Together, Learn Together* program. (See Appendix 7, Letter of Support from Dr. Louise Skolnik)

The partners are currently in Year One of a two-year funded project and are committed to continuing to work together. Independent program evaluation, conducted by the Institute for Learning Innovation (see Appendix 8, Quick Response Memo, Year One Evaluation) was designed into the program to guide partners toward their goal of full program implementation and to ensure long-term program sustainability,

*Be Together, Learn Together* is neither the only nor the first major program initiative the Museum implemented to serve low income or otherwise vulnerable children and families. In 2002, with substantial corporate funding, Long Island Children's Museum initiated the *KICKstart* (Kids Ideas Create Knowledge) program, a multi-year initiative developed to deliver museum and outreach programming to all Head Start, second and third grade (and some fourth grade) students and their families in four of Long Island's most high-need school districts – Hempstead, Roosevelt, Central Islip and Wyandanch. This multi-year grant allowed the Museum to build trust in these communities with families, administrators and teachers and to offer consistent staffing, programming and services over several years. (See Appendix 9 – Community Access Fact Sheet – *KICKstart*.) A program evaluation, looking at impact over time, was conducted this year by the Institute of Learning Innovation, who also conducted yearly evaluations of the last few years of the program. (See Appendix 10 – *KICKstart* Critical Review Year 6 Evaluation.)

The Children's Museum has a multi-faceted early childhood program initiative that includes an exhibit for children from birth to five and their families, daily workshops for very young children and their families (Music and Movement, Story and Art, Creative Connections and Messy Afternoons). Parent workshops are offered on such topics as *Parenting a Strong-Willed Child*, and *Living with Autism: A Team Approach*. In addition, the Museum has begun offering a kindergarten readiness program for low-income families, which includes daily classes for children about to enter kindergarten and weekly classes for parents to prepare them for their role as their child's educational advocate.

The Children's Museum has a substantial Access program that subsidizes visits by individuals and community groups unable to afford the admission fee. Relationships have been developed with family shelters, boys and girls clubs, groups that serve children with autism and their families, groups that serve returning veterans and their families and others. This program also subsidizes outreach programs to schools, libraries and community groups in low-income areas. LICM offers museum family passes to all libraries for purchase that provide free admission for library patrons. The passes can be taken out just like books; they have been extremely effective in communities that serve middle and low-income families, sometimes with a waiting list months long.

The Long Island Children's Museum views itself as a community gathering place for important issues involving children and families to be discussed and presented. The Museum has a professional 150-seat theater offering an ideal location to host meetings, training seminars and other types of events. In the last few years, the Museum has hosted the launch of the Early Years Matter campaign, a two-day training for teachers and community workers on bullying, a Department of Health and Human Services county-wide meeting for all school district personnel to provide an update on Child Protective Services Laws and Protocol, the launch of the Long Island Index – an annual report on the state of the communities of Long Island, an annual expo featuring the programs and services of all Nassau County libraries, and recently, an Institute of Museum and Library Services meeting to outline grant opportunities for museums and libraries.

The title of this subcommittee session – *“Examining the Role of Museums and Libraries in Strengthening Communities”* is very relevant to the ways that museums are increasingly viewing themselves – as institutions with much to offer their respective communities in ways that serve the whole family, build partnerships, address community needs and serve as a vehicle for groups to come together and find common ground. Sally Osberg, previously the executive director of the Children's Museum of San Jose, noted “Children's museums speak to a deep desire to be anchored in a community and to see your children anchored in a community.” (See Appendix 1.) Museums and libraries have been and continue to be important institutions that can have great impact on families and communities. The Institute of Museum and Library Services play a key role in enabling these institutions to pilot unique programs, to work together in museum/library partnerships and to take leadership roles in strengthening their communities. As a recipient of IMLS funds, both at the Long Island Children's Museum and at the Lied Discovery Children's Museum in Las Vegas, I am familiar with, and deeply appreciate the impact of IMLS funding toward the creation of strong and vibrant community partnerships.

## **List of Appendices**

- Appendix 1. LeBlanc, Suzanne. "The Slender Golden Thread, 100 Years Strong." *Museum News*, Nov. /Dec. 1999, 49-55, 63.
- Appendix 2. Waleson, Heidi. "Child's Play." *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, Spring 2008, 18-21.
- Appendix 3. "Suozzi Unveils "No Wrong Door" for Nassau County Residents" – Nassau County Press Release, November 29, 2004
- Appendix 4. LICM Community Access Fact Sheet – *Be Together, Learn Together*
- Appendix 5. LICM - 2007 IMLS MFA – Grant Narrative
- Appendix 6. Floor Plans and Rendering for proposed transformation of Nassau County Department of Health and Human Services' Supervised Visitation Rooms.
- Appendix 7. Skolnik, DSW, Louise. Letter of support for *Be Together, Learn Together* 2007 IMLS MFA Grant Request.
- Appendix 8. Institute for Learning Innovation – Quick Response Memo: Year One Evaluation
- Appendix 9. LICM Community Access Fact Sheet – *KICKStart*
- Appendix 10. Kessler, Cheryl and Storksdieck, Ph.D, Martin - KICKstart Critical Review Year 6 Evaluation. *Institute for Learning Innovation*, February 2008.