March 19, 2021

Governor Tim Walz
State of Minnesota
130 State Capitol
75 Rev Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
St. Paul, MN 55155

Jan Malcolm, Commissioner
Minnesota Department of Health
Commissioner's Office
625 N. Robert St.
St. Paul, MN 55155-2538

Dr. Heather Mueller, Commissioner
Minnesota Department of Education
1500 Hwy 36 W
Roseville, MN 55113

To the Honorable Governor Tim Walz, Commissioner Jan Malcolm, and Commissioner Heather Mueller,

In our role as leader and advocate for Minnesota’s more than 1,600 libraries, the Minnesota Library Association (MLA) urges you to prioritize Minnesota library workers and request that they be included in statewide and local Phase 1c of COVID-19 vaccine distribution. Libraries are a part of essential community infrastructure and critical to our state’s and our nation’s recovery efforts. Prioritizing Minnesota library workers in the vaccine rollout ensures the protection of library staff, minimizes further risk and exposure of COVID-19 spread to library users, and allows library workers to safely return to providing access and key services to all Minnesotans.

On January 19, 2021, the CDC released recommendations for prioritization of essential workers, with libraries in priority category 1c. Since March 2020, city and county governments around the state have confirmed their support of libraries as essential. Library staff work directly with Minnesotans to provide access to physical materials and/or special collections and to computers and the internet, assist with government applications, and support job search activities.

Throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, libraries have been grateful for the state’s initiative in implementing new library funding options. For example, thanks to the expansion of Regional Library Telecommunications Aid in April 2020, public libraries statewide enhanced eBook collections, purchased hotspots for public checkout, and upgraded technology infrastructure to make it easier for library users to access high-speed library Wi-Fi 24/7. Libraries also leveraged additional Arts & Cultural Heritage Funds to engage Minnesotans of all ages in virtual craft programs, documentary screenings, conversations about racial justice, music performances, and more. Prioritizing vaccination of library workers will ensure libraries can build on these successes safely as the state strives to reopen.
However, through these innovations, libraries are still serving at limited capacity with abbreviated hours and reduced in-person services. MLA supports a safe working environment for all library workers. Vaccinating library workers will provide opportunity for libraries to restore services and reopen, while reducing community spread. Staff that feel safe and supported are more capable to serve the needs of Minnesotans and ensure the freedom of access to information that is essential to our democracy.

The work of library staff statewide embodies the vision of One Minnesota as library workers provide all Minnesotans with equitable access to information, essential technology services, and opportunities to learn, create, and stay connected to the community during this challenging time. We want Minnesota libraries to return to full access and full service as soon as possible. We want to do so safely and as key partners to Minnesota’s recovery efforts. In order to do this, we are asking you to prioritize Minnesota library workers for vaccine distribution—-not just for the health and safety of library workers and their families, but also to prevent libraries from becoming epicenters of community spread. Help libraries build stronger communities. By prioritizing Minnesota library workers for vaccine rollout, you will help us impact the lives of all ages, all abilities, all Minnesotans.

Sincerely,

Stacey R. Hendren
President, Minnesota Library Association

cc: Minnesota Library Association Board of Directors, Minnesota Library Association Membership, American Library Association Advocacy and Public Policy