

Communities," is fitting. Every day, our libraries help make our communities stronger and more vibrant, as they innovate and mobilize resources to provide programs and services that meet ever-evolving community needs.

That is why I have been proud to work during my time in the Senate on ways to support our Nation's libraries. Last December, on a bipartisan basis, I secured passage and enactment of my legislation to reauthorize and enhance the Museum and Library Services Act. This law authorizes Federal funding, a relatively modest investment, through the Institute of Museum and Library Services, IMLS, to enable libraries and museums to work in partnership at the State and local levels and with non-profits, universities, businesses, and others to support, educate, enlighten, and enrich our communities. For libraries, this law seeks to ensure they are equipped to serve community needs, in areas such as workforce, economic, and business development; digital and financial literacy; critical thinking; and new and emerging technologies. Critically, this new law ensures that increases in library formula funding will be shared more broadly across States and specifically smaller ones like Rhode Island.

Just last week, I hosted a conversation with our State's library professionals to follow-up on a similar roundtable I held in Rhode Island in 2016 as I began my work on the Museum and Library Services Act. It was inspiring to hear the many ways in which our libraries are hard at work transforming themselves to serve their diverse communities.

I was glad the director of IMLS, Dr. Kathryn Matthew, could join us for this event. We have a special duty in Rhode Island to elevate the work of IMLS, which is one of my predecessor, Senator Pell's, many lasting gifts to our Nation.

While the President's budget proposes to once again eliminate funding for IMLS, I have been able to instead secure an increase of \$11 million for this agency over the last 2 years. There is broad, bipartisan support for the work IMLS does, and I am continuing to work with my colleagues to increase funding so we can advance IMLS's mission.

My work on libraries extends to ones in our schools, which also need our care and attention. Studies show that effective school library programs, staffed by a certified school librarian, have a positive impact on student achievement and educational success. Knowing how to find and use information are essential skills for college, careers, and life in general. A good school library, staffed by a trained school librarian, is where students develop and hone these skills.

Yet, according to the American Library Association, while 91 percent of the over 90,000 public and private elementary and secondary schools in the Nation have a school library, only 61

percent have a full-time librarian. A National Education Association report about trends in school libraries found that students in the highest poverty schools were less likely to have libraries at their schools and there were significant disparities in staffing at schools with high percentages of minority students. Access to an effective school library program, staffed by a certified school librarian, is an issue of educational equity.

In 2015, I was pleased to work with the library community and my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to ensure that our main Federal elementary and secondary education law continued to specifically address the critical equity issue of public school libraries. Since my time in the other body, I have worked hard to ensure Federal support for our school libraries and I continue to fight for increased funding for the Innovative Approaches to Literacy, IAL, grant program authorized in the Every Student Succeeds Act, ESSA. IAL provides competitive awards to school libraries, as well as national not-for-profit organizations to support children and families in high-need, underserved communities. By providing age-appropriate books, supporting parental engagement programs, and reinforcing professional development, the IAL program helps to support literacy skills to ensure children are best positioned for success.

I encourage all of my colleagues to visit their local libraries and school libraries to see firsthand that libraries are no longer quaint and quiet places to find the latest books, although they still offer plenty of that. They are community hubs providing innovative programming and services to spark creativity, boost learning and STEM education, promote the use of emerging technologies, and develop new career pathways. In sum, they are strengthening our communities, our States, and our Nation.

VOLUNTEER RESPONDER INCENTIVE PROTECTION ACT

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, I wish to introduce the Volunteer Responder Incentive Protection Act with my friend and colleague from Maryland, Senator CARDIN, which will benefit the brave women and men who volunteer at our local firehouses.

Across our Nation, volunteer firefighters play a critical role in helping to ensure the safety of our communities and the well-being of our neighbors. The State of Maine, for example, has approximately 9,785 firefighters who serve the State's 1.3 million citizens. Maine is largely a rural State, and more than 90 percent of firefighters are volunteers. Without these public-spirited citizens, many smaller communities would be unable to provide firefighting and other emergency services at all.

Often, communities seek to recruit and retain volunteers by offering mod-

est benefits. The legislation we are introducing today would support these efforts by helping to ensure that these nominal benefits to volunteers are not treated as regular employee compensation.

The Volunteer Responder Incentive Protection Act would allow communities to provide volunteer firefighters and Emergency Medical Service, or EMS workers, with up to \$600 per year of property tax reductions or other incentives, without those benefits being subject to Federal income tax and withholding. This would ease the administrative burden that local departments sometimes face when they reward their volunteers.

We should take care to protect our volunteer firefighters who serve this country with such bravery. Our legislation would help us achieve that goal, and I urge my colleagues to join us in supporting this bill.

ACCESS TO PRIMARY CARE

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that a copy of my opening statement at the Senate Health Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

ACCESS TO PRIMARY CARE

Mr. ALEXANDER. Dr. Lee Gross, of Florida testified last year at this Committee's fifth hearing on the cost of health care. He told us that, after seven years as a primary care doctor, he had an epiphany: too many government mandates and insurance companies were getting between doctors and patients and making primary care more expensive than it needed to be.

So in 2010, Dr. Gross created one of the first Direct Primary Care practices. Instead of working with insurance companies and government programs, Dr. Gross' patients pay him a flat monthly fee directly: \$60 a month per adult, \$25 a month for one child, and \$10 a month for each additional child.

Dr. Gross is one of more than 300,000 primary care doctors in the United States who most of us go to see for day-to-day medical care—receiving vaccines like the flu shot, annual physicals, and help managing chronic conditions, like diabetes. It is also our entry point to coordinate additional medical care, if, for example, we need to get our hip replaced or an MRI to diagnose a problem.

We heard from Dr. Brent James of the National Academies of Medicine at our second hearing that between 30 and 50 percent of what we spend on health care is unnecessary. I have asked for specific suggestions on what the federal government can do to lower the cost of health care for American families, and this year, I am committed to passing legislation based on that input to create better outcomes and better experiences at a lower cost.

Dr. Gross' practice is one of about a thousand similar clinics in the United States, and is a good example of how a primary care doctor can help reduce costs. The first way Dr. Gross does this is by helping with his patients' wellness. For \$60 a month, Dr. Gross can do EKGs and cortisone injections, manage chronic conditions like diabetes, asthma,