May 13, 2016

U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Capitol; H-305  
Washington, DC 20515  

Re: Request to Remove “Library of Congress Classification” Amendment from Legislative Branch Appropriations Legislation

Dear Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Lowey, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Executive Board and general membership of the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM), we write to join the American Library Association (ALA) in respectfully urging the House Appropriations Committee to strike the language adopted by its Legislative Branch Subcommittee that would prevent the Library of Congress from “implementing an appropriate and thoroughly researched change in its subject heading classifications announced in late March of this year.” We share the ALA’s support of the Library of Congress’s long-standing, rigorous, and expert editorial processes, and we urge your committee to halt any effort to countermand the Library’s authority over subject headings.

Founded in 1956, SALALM is the leading U.S. professional organization representing research library collections in Latin American, Caribbean, Iberian, and U.S. Latina and Latino studies. SALALM members are directly responsible for purchasing, curating, and cataloging the materials that support scholarly research in these fields. SALALM currently has a total of 328 members, with 82 institutional members representing some of the foremost research collections in the country, including Brigham Young University, Emory University, the New York Public Library, the Ohio State University, Princeton University, the University of Alabama, the University of California, Berkeley, the University of Florida, the University of Kansas, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of Washington, in addition to the Library of Congress. The size of SALALM’s membership belies the scale of its impact on the library community. As members of SALALM, we interact with a wide array of library users and are responsible for significant acquisitions budgets.¹
To serve our users, we rely on the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) to facilitate access to library resources. Our users, in particular, are directly affected by the outcome of this debate, and we are compelled to defend their interests, values, and ability to retrieve information. In this regard, it is important to emphasize that LCSH is a general list of subject terms used by libraries the world over to organize their online catalogs, categorize their holdings, and make it easier for users to find material on a particular topic. If terms in LCSH were to be limited to the language of the U.S. Legal Code, which itself is subject to change and not necessarily consistent, our ability to serve our users would be greatly undermined. One of the fundamental principles guiding development of LCSH is that it should reflect common usage and employ culturally appropriate language that is familiar to library users.¹

As SALALM members, we support researchers at all levels, from students to internationally recognized experts, and we attest that the subject heading “Illegal aliens,” in specific, is a barrier to providing “accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests,” a core value of librarianship stated in Policy B.1.1 of the ALA.³ Many library users, immigrants and U.S. citizens alike, find this term to be insulting and derogatory, and they are appalled to encounter it when using a library. Its presence in our online catalogs, as language that appears to be endorsed by libraries, librarians, and the professional organizations that represent them, damages our credibility and undermines the trust that is placed in us by our users.

The movement to deprecate the term in question was not initiated by the Library of Congress, or even by librarians themselves. It was the result of grassroots action taken in February 2014 by university students who, as library users, found their ability to use the library and locate information hindered by the use of this outdated and pejorative language. In response to their call for change, and in collaboration with local library staff, a formal proposal was submitted to the Library of Congress calling for the heading “Illegal aliens” to be changed to “Undocumented immigrants,” a term that reflects current usage and does not label an entire class of persons as “illegal.” The proposal included ample evidence from the media and scholarly sources, demonstrating a shift in preferred usage in sources such as the Associated Press Style Book,⁴ the U.S. Department of Education’s Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database, the Sociological Abstracts database, and the Hispanic American Periodicals Index (HAPI).

The Library of Congress initially rejected this proposal in deference to the language of the Legal Code, where the term “illegal aliens” still appears. Its decision sparked another grassroots effort, this time by librarians in ALA, which in January 2016 approved a resolution supporting the original proposal and calling on the Library of Congress to reconsider its decision. In March, the Library of Congress issued its own independent set of changes designed to make LCSH more consistent with current usage. It chose not to adopt the term “Undocumented immigrants,” but rather to replace the broader term “Aliens” with “Noncitizens” and the term “Illegal aliens” with “Unauthorized immigration.”

We strongly support the Library of Congress’s authority to make decisions about changes to LCSH—and specifically its decision to discontinue “Illegal aliens” as a subject heading. We appeal to the House Appropriations Committee not to overrule the library community’s professional judgment or to undermine its capacity for self-governance. Never before, to our
knowledge, has Congress intervened to countermand the carefully considered decisions made by the Library of Congress and its partners in managing changes to LCSH. If Congress were to circumvent the protocols and procedures that the library community has worked to develop since 1898, when the first LCSH terms were established, it would set a troubling precedent.

To conclude, the core values expressed by the ALA Policy on Diversity B.3 state that information professionals have the responsibility to serve all people, regardless of “language or literacy-related barriers; economic distress; cultural or social isolation; physical or attitudinal barriers; racism; discrimination on the basis of appearance, ethnicity, immigrant status, religious background, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression; or barriers to equal education, employment, and housing.” This service requires that librarians remove barriers to information discovery. The action of the Library of Congress to change the subject heading “Illegal aliens” to “Noncitizens” and “Unauthorized immigration” reflects a prolonged process of careful revision and debate. We urge the House Appropriations Committee to demonstrate its continued respect for the Library of Congress’s autonomy and professional expertise by removing the language inserted by the Legislative Branch Subcommittee.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide the Committee with additional information to contextualize this important issue and its impact on our profession and our users. Please contact us should you or your staff have any questions or require further details.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of SALALM and its members,

Daisy Dominguez
SALALM President, 2016-2017


